

2009 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARDS!

STEREO • MULTICHANNEL AUDIO • MUSIC

the absolute sound

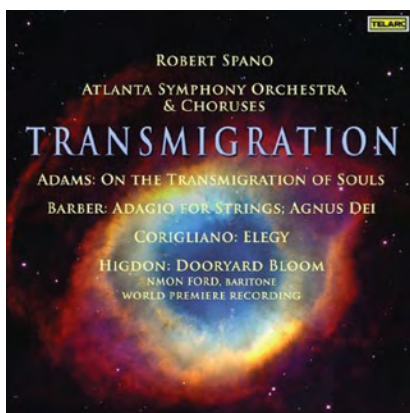
SWEET SOUND, SWEET DEAL PRIMALUNA'S NEW TUBE AMP



**YG ACOUSTICS'
KIPOD SPEAKER
WORLD'S
BEST?**

**SOULUTION'S
AMP & PREAMP
ULTIMATE
TRANSPARENCY**

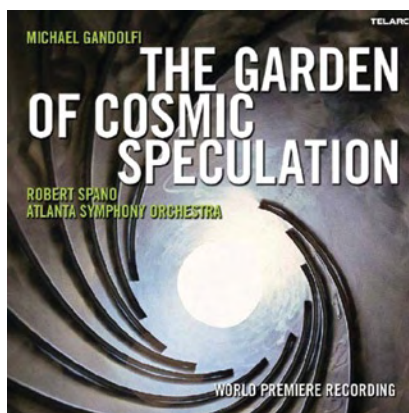
**BOULDER'S
CD PLAYER
TECHNOLOGY
MARVEL**



State-of-the-Art Multichannel

Adams: *On the Transmigration of Souls*. Barber: *Agnus Dei* (choral version of the Adagio for Strings). Full surround. Spano, Atlanta Symphony. Telarc SACD 60673

Gandolfi: *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation*. Spano. Atlanta Symphony. Full surround. Telarc SACD 60656



John Adams' commissioned work (by the New York Philharmonic) to commemorate the 9/11 atrocity at the World Trade Center is surely one that might have given serious pause to less adventurous men. Yet Adams rose to the occasion with a piece that I find heart-breaking, and maybe the best demonstration of what full surround sound can do. Ghostly voices and footsteps haunt the back channels, with

a subtle ambient capturing of street noises (that sound mighty like those you'd hear in New York). "I miss you. I love you" are some of the words that kept being repeated—all from notes left by survivors of the cataclysm, often more intimate ones than that, while the orchestra and chorus, mostly up front, provide an aural portrait (with extreme dynamics) of aspects of the disaster itself. I think this a great work, but I cannot be objective about it. Adams gets our collective feel of the day right.

It is a shame that we find, on the last two "official" Telarc readings, a new maturity in the use of multichannel sound, and engineering bordering on genius from Michael Bishop. The Gandolfi is plain and simple fun, a musical portrait of a very unusual garden, a sort of New Age tone poem, captured in some of the purest, cleanest sound ever from Telarc without that company's usual sonic "character" or coloration. As for the other pieces on the Adams disc, except

HP's WORKSHOP

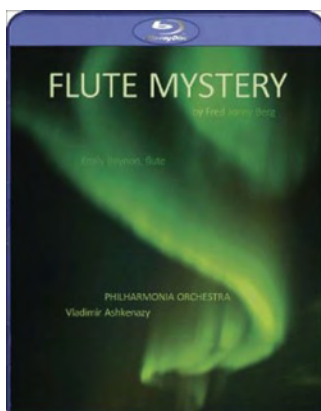
for Samuel Barber's revision of the Adagio for Strings into a religious choral work, the *Agnus Dei*, they are of marginal interest sonically and musically. There is a piece by Jennifer Higdon that doesn't work (she stumbles over Walt Whitman's lilacs); an orchestral-only reading of the Adagio, conducted indifferently by Spano, sounds as if it were recorded in a separate session in a different acoustic (it wasn't; the Higdon was). There are five pieces on the disc; the Adams is the one you have to have and hear.



Beethoven: Symphony No. 5. Paavo Jarvi, Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie. RCA 33835

I gave this recording a Golden Ear in Issue 193. Jarvi's reading of the Fifth was not only electrifying in its power and swiftness, but in his ability to delineate the textures that shocked the audiences of Beethoven's time. The engineering, in multichannel sound, is as good as it comes. The orchestra has a three-dimensional depth, which further allows us, the listeners, to hear what Beethoven was up to, and shows the potential of the multichannel medium to give us musical insights we might not otherwise, outside of a live performance, have, unless you occupy the best seats in the house.

It is Everett Porter's engineering, by the way. See his name on a record and you know you've got one of the best. (By the way, the two-channel DSD version sounds like bad digital. Go figure. Keep it in full-surround SACD.) Oh yes, you might want to try the "Eroica" in this series. It's just about as good sonically, and equal to Beethoven's intent.

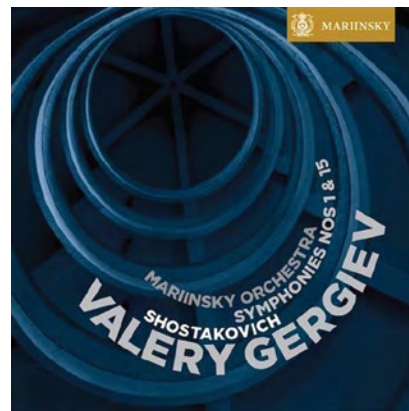


F.J. Berg: Flute Mystery. Flute Concerto No. 1. Ashkenazy, Philharmonia Orchestra. Emily Beynon (flute). Full surround. 2L58 SACD

Just a brief word about the Norwegian 2L label, some of whose best-sounding surround sound can be heard on this quite accessible tone poem. Their releases come with two discs, one in SACD, the other in Blu-ray (guess which sounds better). They offer diagrams of the placement of the instruments in surround so you know how to tune your back-channel speakers for maximum effect. And they almost always record in a church or some other suitably vast acoustic space so that you are placed in an ambient field (the *raison d'être* for more channels). In this instance, 2L recorded in Watford Town Hall, where Mercury did some of its most famous Dorati/LSO tapings. Need I say more?

Shostakovich: Symphonies 1 and 15. Gergiev, Mariinsky Orchestra. Mariinsky MAR SACD 0502

Mariinsky is a brand-new independent label, founded by Valery Gergiev, the Russian conductor, who told the *New York Times* he started it because he was fed up with Philips. "Do they want to do a Mahler cycle. . . No. Beethoven. No. They didn't even want all of Tchaikovsky. I am committed to the history of Mariinsky more than Philips is committed to making serious recordings." (Mariinsky is the pre-eminent orchestra in Saint Petersburg, Russia.) Armed with a hefty grant from the Russian government, Gergiev set up a distribution and technical arrangement with the London Symphony



Orchestra's LSO label and hired James Mallison to produce and America's John Newton to be the engineer. For his first two orchestral works, he chose the first and last symphonies of Shostakovich. These were recorded last summer in the refurbished Mariinsky concert hall, and the results are a spectacular demonstration of why Shostakovich's works gain so much from multichannel sound. From start to finish, the Russian's symphonies are so complex that they are impossible to hear through and into in normal two-channel stereophony (oh, the prospect of an 11th from these forces has me hoping). In this instance Newton has given us that kind of three-dimensional soundstage that seemingly individualizes, front to back, the players and the spaces around them, and all this done in some of the smoothest yet most widely dynamic sonics you can imagine. There is a life here absent from most modern classical recordings. The 15th is particularly interesting, with all of its percussive transient flourishes, and witty (sarcastic?) quotes from other composers, e.g., Rossini and the *William Tell* Overture.

Shostakovich: Symphony No 4. Mark Wigglesworth. Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra. BIS SACD 1553.

The same three-dimensional clarity abounds in this recording from BIS (whose multichannel productions are among the best from abroad). The sound is not as dark in overall coloration as that given to the Mariinsky players, but it is, if anything, more transparent if cooler in tonality. The Fourth is not the easiest of Shostakovich's works to make friends with, and I can't