

Violin Concertos

New CD/SACD/DVD-A

Sibelius Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47. Serenade No. 2 in G minor, Op. 69.

Sinding Violin Concerto in A, Op. 45. Romance in D, Op. 100.

Henning Kraggerud (violin); **Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra/Bjarte Engeset**.

Naxos 8.557266/6.110056/5.110056 (super-budget/medium price, 1 hour 11 minutes). Website www.naxos.com. Producer Tim Handley. Engineer Phil Rowlands. Dates June 24th-26th, 2003.

Comparisons:

Sibelius:

Bell, Los Angeles PO/Salonen (Sony) SK65949 (1999)

Chang, BPO/Jansons (EMI) 5 56418-2 (1996)

Chung, LSO/Previn (Decca) 425 080-2 (1970)

Kavakos, Lahti SO/Vänskä (BIS) CD500 (1991)

With almost 90 competing recordings of the Sibelius Violin Concerto in the catalogue, Henning Kraggerud's account of the work had better be pretty good to stand any chance, even at Naxos's knock-down price. Unfortunately, it doesn't make the running, on purely technical grounds: his playing simply isn't clean enough, with some scrappy bow-work and imprecise intonation,

underlined by close miking. In spite of Bjarte Engeset's feisty handling of the orchestra (and transparent recorded sound), it's just not enough when set against classic accounts such as Kyung-Wha Chung on Decca, Leonidas Kavakos's ground-breaking coupling of the first and final versions on BIS, and fresher readings from his near-contemporaries, such as the stylish Joshua Bell on Sony and spirited Sarah Chang on EMI.

The interest then focuses on the accompanying material, and here Kraggerud redeems himself, with a relative rarity, Sibelius's elusive 1913 *Serenade*, Op. 69, and two works where he has no competition at all, the first of Christian Sinding's two violin concertos, available on a Philips LP once upon a time, and a *Romance* in D, receiving its first recording (Keith Anderson's booklet tally of three concertos presumably includes the *Suite Im alten Stil*). Neither work betrays the composer's Norwegian nationality; instead, each has the firm stamp and expert craftsmanship of his Leipzig training.

The Concerto opens with a theme lifted boldly from the finale of Brahms's Violin Concerto and then storms around, *Allegro energico*, for six minutes of Romantic, Bruch-like swagger. The *Andante* middle movement is considerably subtler, opening with an extended theme for the basses, drawn out by the solo violin into a gentle introspection, with a proud, dark and dignified central section. The rondo finale opens with a cheekily unpredictable theme, which bolsters episodes of varying quality; one particularly noble passage suggests Elgar. I would have preferred a firmer tone from the skittish Kraggerud here: he barely holds his own against the orchestra. The ten-minute *Romance* (1910) is lovely – not particularly distinguished in its melodic material, perhaps, but an end-to-end lyrical outpouring, beautifully scored, with particularly effective use of the harp.

Naxos piles Ossa upon Pelion with concurrent releases on CD, SACD and DVD Audio. The enhanced formats may encourage you to explore this recording, but it won't tidy up Kraggerud's playing, which would – let's be fair – more than pass muster in the excitement of a live concert but which here faces too crowded a field to earn a recommendation for the Sibelius Concerto. Of course, you can look on it the other way around: buy it for the Sinding and the *Serenade* and you get one free with every pack.

Martin Anderson