BERNSTEIN: *Symphony 1; Jubilee Games*

Helen Medlyn, mz; Nathan Gunn, bar; New Zealand Symphony/ James Judd

Naxos 559100—55 minutes

In the past I've found that few, if any of today's conductors can even begin to compete with Bernstein's classic recordings of his own compositions. Here, however, James Judd gives the old maestro quite a run for his money. The New Zealand Symphony may not be the New York (or even the Israel) Philharmonic, but they play quite splendidly for their young leader. More strings would have been welcome—especially in the soaring theme at the heart of the *Jeremiah* Symphony's second movement. The sound is clear and honest, if not quite as plush or colorful as Bernstein's Sony and DG recordings.

In the *Jeremiah*, Judd's tempos are nearly identical to Bernstein's on Sony, and they serve the music extraordinarily well. I ("Prophecy") is a deeply serious essay, and it is presented here with appropriate authority and conviction. In the wild and boisterous orgy of II ("Profanation") Bernstein makes the lyrical episodes soar in a way that Judd can't quite match, though Judd's energy and enthusiasm are quite contagious. Judd's III ("Lamentation") begins with great drama and intensity, though once the prophet's rage has been spent, he brings the work to an appropriately soothing and peaceful conclusion. Ms Medlyn will never be mistaken for the incomparable Jennie Tourel, the soloist for Bernstein on Sony. Indeed, she seems tentative at first, though she gains courage and strength along the way, eventually becoming a commanding presence.

The coupling is odd. Since Naxos has already released Judd's less-than-satisfactory rendition of Bernstein's Symphony 2, they fill out this program with his last orchestral score, *Jubilee Games* (also known as the Concerto for Orchestra). Whereas Symphony 1 remains as fresh and bracing as the day it was written, this music already seems dated. In I Bernstein desperately tries to show that he's "hip" by incorporating aleatoric elements into his score—a technique that was already passe by that time. The result is noisy and annoying. II is a set of variations scored for pairs of instruments a la Bartok, though without the Hungarian master's wit and invention. The 'Diaspora Dances' (III) are also derivative, though this time Bernstein stole from himself. The result sounds like a rehash of material from *West Side Story*. The finale is a touching benediction—perhaps the most sincere and compelling moment in the entire score—in the tradition of the closing pages of the *Jeremiah* Symphony and Mass.

Bernstein recorded this mish-mash with the Israel Philharmonic on DG. He tears into the opening movement, making the most of its violence and manic energy. His rhythms are more incisive than Judd's, and the bluesy brass chorales and lonely solos for flute and piccolo are quite touching. Judd's variations are bland, especially compared to the grace, mystery, and beauty of the composer's recording. But Judd shines in the final two movements. His 'Dances' are more playful and lively than Lenny's, and he replaces Bernstein's bombast with joyous good humor. His finale is slower than Bernstein's, allowing the music to unfold majestically. The wind and brass solos are magnificent, and baritone Nathan Gunn is deeply moving in his brief appearance. The final bars float serenely into the hereafter.

Anyone who would like to get to know the alpha and omega of Bernstein's orchestral compositions will not be disappointed with this splendid and inexpensive release.