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CLASSICS

NORWEGIAN SAXOPHONE

ROMBERG | AAGAARD-NILSEN | HABBESTAD

OLA ASDAHL ROKKONES-SAXOPHONE

THE ST. PETERSBURG NORTHERN SINFONIA

FABIO MASTRANGELO-CONDUCTOR

FOLLOWING A LONG AND TWISTED PATH...

...this recording is the result of a process that has taken many years. It started as I entered high school, when I decided to become a classical saxophonist. Already conscious of the sparse amount of classical repertoire for my instrument, I started to wonder how I could contribute. Could I commission a new concerto? Who might be interested in writing a (presumably) timeless piece of music for saxophone and orchestra? If I managed to convince a composer, would I be able to play the finished work? Surely I could find an orchestra to perform it! How hard could it be?

These questions, and many others, never stopped spinning in my head. At least they could be answered, if I only dared to try. Now, looking back, I can say without a doubt that I didn't really know what it would take, or *where* it would take me. I didn't really know what I had gotten myself into!

With this recording of three Norwegian saxophone concertos finally realized, I am truly grateful for my youthful ignorance.

From my current perspective, it started half a lifetime ago. It was the autumn of 2000 when I was 17 that I first approached Kjell Habbestad to propose that he write a saxophone concerto. For many years, Kjell's music, and how he combined the folkloristic elements within a modern orchestral treatment had fascinated me. My idea was to bring my saxophone teacher at the time, Jean-Yves Fourmeau, to Norway to perform it. Both Kjell and Jean-Yves loved the idea, and so did The Composers' Remuneration Fund who supported the commission. In December of 2002, the creation of *Un rêve Norvégien* took place at the University Aula in Oslo, together with the Staff Band of the Norwegian Armed Forces led by Bjarte Engeset – a beautiful moment, and a great achievement! Nevertheless it would take another thirteen years before Kjell and I had the opportunity to premiere the version for saxophone and symphonic orchestra, together with the Orchestre Régional de Normandie and conductor Jean Deroyer in Caen, France. And then again half a year later in St. Petersburg with the Mariinsky Symphonic Orchestra and the conductor Ivan Stolbov in a sold-out concert hall – what a dream!

My first encounter with Martin Romberg was in 2007. Both of us were participants at the "Young Peoples Concert," where we were given the opportunity to play with the Bergen Philharmonic

Orchestra, led by Terje Boye Hansen. It was a fantastic experience for everybody involved! We were a handful of young soloists, while Martin contributed with his own composition *Vettir*. I was captivated by his sound and melodic sense, and boldly suggested a saxophone concerto. Would he be interested? The first seed was sown of what would later become *The Tale of Taliesin*. But although the music fell into place and we saw the contours of a large and beautiful symphonic poem, it was impossible to get any Norwegian orchestra to believe in our project. To our rescue came instead the Akademische Orchestervereinigung Göttingen in Germany – a very good and ambitious amateur orchestra, led by Lorenz Nordmeyer. In June 2010, we performed the concerto three times in a row, and it was a huge success. The live recording of the concert was later broadcast on Norwegian radio, and the largest publisher of sheet music in France, Gérard Billaudot, decided to include the work in their catalogue. It is surreal to think that Martin's and my project is now available to saxophonists all over the world!

Four years later, in 2014, I jumped into what would be my most ambitious project so far: bringing the Archangel State Chamber Orchestra and Vladimir Onufriev on tour to Norway and Russia. With Odd-Halvdan Jakobsen of the Arvid Hanssen Festival to facilitate, and with the support of both the Norwegian Barents Secretariat and Arts Council Norway, we presented nine concerts in a row: Archangelsk, Svolveær, Sortland, Narvik, Finnsnes, Tromsø, Oslo (2x), and Saint Petersburg. It was perhaps complete

chaos, as we did not bring a stage manager! Also included in the repertoire was the brand new work *Bør* by Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen, commissioned by me for the occasion. I had become acquainted with his orchestral music some years earlier, and its impressionistic, poetic layers made a strong impression. The work *Bør* exceeded my expectations – quite complex to perform, yet lyrical in expression.

Over the years since my initial dream was conceived, I have experienced many obstacles and many successes. Luckily life does not follow a straight path! After all, the great works of Kjell Habbestad, Martin Romberg, and Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen had been realized – albeit with various orchestras in several countries. With different grant programs from INTRO/Tromsø Municipality, SpareBank 1 Nord-Norge's Cultural Business Development Foundation, and Innovation Norway, many possibilities were opened. Engaging Ulf Jensen, former director of the Northern Lights Festival in Tromsø, as my manager and coach, was to become the real game changer. With his tireless efforts, inspirational attitude, visionary thinking, creativity, and large network, the music and I are now on our way to many new adventures. But most important, this project could not have been possible without the support and understanding of my wife and family.

Thank you, all!

OLA ASDAHL ROKKONES



NORWEGIAN SAXOPHONE

The three compositions presented on this CD are scored for alto saxophone and orchestra. All three were composed for and dedicated to Ola Asdahl Rokkones, one of Scandinavia's most noteworthy saxophonists of his generation. The works belong to three contemporary Norwegian composers: Kjell Habbestad (b. 1955), Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen (b. 1964), and Martin Romberg (b. 1978).

The same genre and country of origin are not the only things these masterpieces have in common. All are also based on literary works, be it the Celtic legend that brought Martin Romberg inspiration, the Scandinavian epic on which Kjell Habbestad based his work, or the contemporary Norwegian poem that touched Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen. These compositions realize the saxophone not only as a solo instrument, but a bard, a minstrel.

TALE OF TALIESIN

The works of Norwegian composer Martin Romberg are mainly inspired by myths and legends from both folklore and literature. His symphonic poems are based on such works as J.R.R. Tolkien's *Silmarillion* and the ancient Indian epic poem *Ramayana*. Another one of his tone poems, a concerto for alto saxophone and orchestra, is titled *The Tale of Taliesin*. Dedicated to Ola Asdahl Rokkones, it was written in 2008 and has become one of Romberg's most popular works, performed all over the world.

Taliesin is both a character from Welsh mythology and a real historical figure: he was one of the first poets to write in Welsh. The mythological Taliesin is a wizard and bard, the first human blessed with the gift of prophecy. He was the adopted son and servant to Ceridwen the Witch. According to the intricate legend, Ceridwen gave birth to Afagddu, the most hideous man in the world. She was planning to give him wisdom with the aid of a magic potion brewed in a cauldron. The mixture had to be boiled for a year and one day. She tasked her second son, Gwion, to watch the cauldron. The first three drops of the brew from this cauldron would give wisdom, the remainder a deadly poison. As Gwion stirred the potion, three drops landed on his thumb and he licked them off, immediately gaining great wisdom and knowledge. Furious, Ceridwen rushed to chase Gwion: he turned himself into a hare and she became a greyhound. Then he transformed into a fish and jumped into a river while she turned into an otter. He shapeshifted into a bird, she a hawk. Finally, he changed into a grain, as she became a hen and ate him. However, Gwion was re-

born in Ceridwen's body as Taliesin. The witch threw him into the ocean but he survived and found refuge on the coast of Wales. Soon he became one of the greatest Welsh bards of all time and made a name for himself at King Arthur's court.

The concerto consists of 8 parts, thread together by this tale: *Taliesin's Theme*, *The Cauldron of Ceridwen*, *The Escape of Taliesin*, *In Ceridwen's Womb*, *On the Sea*, *Taliesin at the King's Court*, *The Horse Race*, and *Coda – The End*. The tone poem is composed in the tradition of French and Russian programmatic symphonic music from the beginning of the 20th century. From the very first sounds, the listener is filled with anticipation and wonder. Ample exchanges between cellos and flutes together with the open fifths in the strings paint an epic landscape. Soon enters the saxophone, our protagonist, Taliesin. Romberg's writing here brings a new perspective to the unique tone quality of the alto saxophone; in this section, the sound becomes almost pastoral in nature, mimicking that of a bagpipe or a horn. The sound grows, the theme becomes more dynamic, and the orchestral texture is like a painting of the landscape. The celesta, the second most prominent color in this work, joined by the harp, adds a mythical element to this orchestration.

Welsh folklore permeates the concerto: distinctive triplet divisions, dotted rhythms, diatonic modal chords – all of these give the poem an easily recognizable national charm. The themes interact and intertwine, turning and transforming. The orchestra first reveals Taliesin's theme in stark fifths only to later have Taliesin himself announce his theme

based on the interval of a fourth. Bubbling triplet passages gradually emerge, making the listeners' heads spin as if they were dancing a fast jig. All is vague and hazy, and the real magic begins as we lead into the second part, *The Cauldron of Ceridwen*. Just like the potion brewing in Ceridwen's legendary pot, the structured themes swirl about, disintegrating and forming together again.

Based on the same triplet passages, the third part, *The Escape of Taliesin*, represents a traditional orchestral scherzo corresponding to the first climax in the poem. The fourth part, *In Ceridwen's Womb*, seems to almost mock the beginning of the concerto. It has the same deserted droning landscape, the same cello exchanges, however this time it is punctuated with chromaticism and glissando cries. The protagonist dominates this part, and nothing shall interrupt his story. The texture becomes more diverse only by the next section, *On the Sea*. This marks another transformation of the familiar main theme of the work. Although it sounds almost the same as in the beginning, it has lost all of its bucolic charm. Even the sound of the solo violin, which before was rustic in nature, just barely elicits memories of the beginning of the piece. The story flies by, elements from the historic part of the poem follow one another. They show Taliesin at the King's Court (a solemn fanfare) and *The Horse Race* (with its distinctive string accompaniment). The saxophone groans and laughs, sometimes ironically and sometimes even sarcastically. It seems like the main theme is slowly coming back. However, the main characters' voice, altered by Ceridwen's spell, does not return in its epic strength before the end.

BØR

*Vi bærer demringen i oss
Vekten av det lys
som mørket styrter gjennom*

*Lyset, et rom i tiden
med et uendelig antall vegger
som alle begynner å glitre*

*Gåten er ikke tid og rom
Men tilstedeværelsen. At det er
noen her, noen som ser det*

Stein Mehren *Det andre lyset*, 1989

The name of Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen's concerto for alto saxophone and strings can be translated differently, depending on the context. "Bør" can be translated from Norwegian as "burden," "rainfall," or the verb "ought to." Just like the other two compositions on this CD, Aagaard-Nilsen's opus is based on a literary work. However, it is not based on an epic or legend, but a contemporary poem. Stein Mehren (1935–2017) was one of the greatest modernist poets of the twentieth century and his works are well known far beyond the borders of Norway. It was his poem from *Det andre lyset* (*The Other Light*) cycle that inspired Aagaard-Nilsen to compose this triptych or three études. To the composer, these études (meaning "a study" in French) study both the poem and the saxophone.

*We carry the dawn in ourselves
The weight of that light
of which the darkness penetrates in torrents*

*That light, a room in the time
with an infinite number of walls
that all starts to glitter*

*The enigma is not time and space
But the presence. That there be
someone here, someone that sees it*

(English translation: Ola Asdahl Rokkones)

The poem is written as one statement, but divided into three stanzas. Each movement of the work takes its title from a phrase in the poem. When I composed the music, I "rhymed" the music over the poem, as a free form association around the words.

But music will always be something more than words, as it can be less specific or tangible. Nevertheless, we may sometimes call the music we hear "poetic." Which quality is present when we perceive music as such? I wanted to grasp this, I wanted to write poetic music. (Aagaard-Nilsen)

The first part, corresponding to the first verse, is titled "...vekten av det lys..." / "...the weight of that light..." The music begins with and grows from one sound – a uni-

son. And using the author's terminology, one may feel that this work is indeed a "study," an analysis of "the weight of that light." This unison is not completely homogeneous though; it expands and retracts. Occasionally during the moments of expansion, we hear glimpses of improvisation in the saxophone part, however, the unison once again takes over.

The second part, the second verse, is titled "...som alle begynner å glitre..." / "...that all starts to glitter..." This is the shortest section of the work and it truly sparkles and glitters.

The third part contains the densest orchestration. It is preceded by an epigraph "...gåten er ikke tid og rom..." / "...the enigma is not time and space..." The tone suddenly shifts from neutral and inquisitive to the dramatic. However, this shift does not last long and soon everything is carried away and all dissolves into the calmness of an impartial observer.

The second object studied by this piece is the saxophone itself, namely its ability to produce multiphonics. Moreover, the composer is equally interested in the saxophone from a philosophical point of view:

Everything around the solo part does not live its own life, but rather is dependent on the presence of the saxophone – that someone hears what the soloist does, and responds to it. As it says in the poem: "That there be someone here, someone that sees it." (Aagaard-Nilsen)

UN RÊVE NORVÉGIEN

Un rêve Norvégien – A Norwegian Dream... The title and concept of this work is based on the medieval Norwegian ballad with the same name, *Draumkvedet* ("The Dream Poem"). This well-known masterpiece of Norwegian folklore dates back to the 13th century. The tremendous 60-verse ballad tells the tale of Olav Åteson's dream about his journey through the after-life ("Olav" translates to "heir" in Scandinavian languages). In his dream, the protagonist visits Heaven, the Last Judgment, and Hell. Technically, *Draumkvedet* is not purely a ballad, but a "visionary poem," a traditional medieval genre of literature.

There's a Norwegian saying that goes something like: "No Norwegian is educated enough to remember *Draumkvedet* by heart, just as none is ignorant enough not to remember at least a few verses from it." Indeed, in Norway this work is akin to the *Kalevala*, Finland's national epic. The ballad had been sung over the years to various tunes, which were later compiled by folklorist and composer Ludvig Mathias Lindeman in his three-volume work "Earlier and more recent Norwegian mountain melodies."

However, the work of the famous Norwegian composer Kjell Habbestad for alto saxophone and orchestra is based on the original literary opus. The score consists of three parts: *Insomnium*, (Latin for "Dream") which corresponds to the first 32 verses of the poem; *Beatitudo*, ("Bliss") which follows verses 33 through 37; and *Visio* ("Vision"), based on verses 38–60. The composer follows the text closely, verse by verse, and includes countless repetitions, binding the form

together like the strains of a passacaglia or chaconne. The solo saxophone becomes a bard, telling the story through its marvelous stylings.

The otherworldly nature of this journey is emphasized by the multitude of exotic tonalities found throughout. Locrian, Lydian, Gypsy, Neapolitan, double harmonic major and minor, twelve-tone and overtone scales and modes pepper the work. In the second part, *Bliss*, the words “He who is generous will be blessed/For he gives some of his food to the poor” even introduces the ostensible second Messiaen mode (diminished scale).

The three-part structure of this piece reproduces the three-part structure of a classical instrumental concerto.

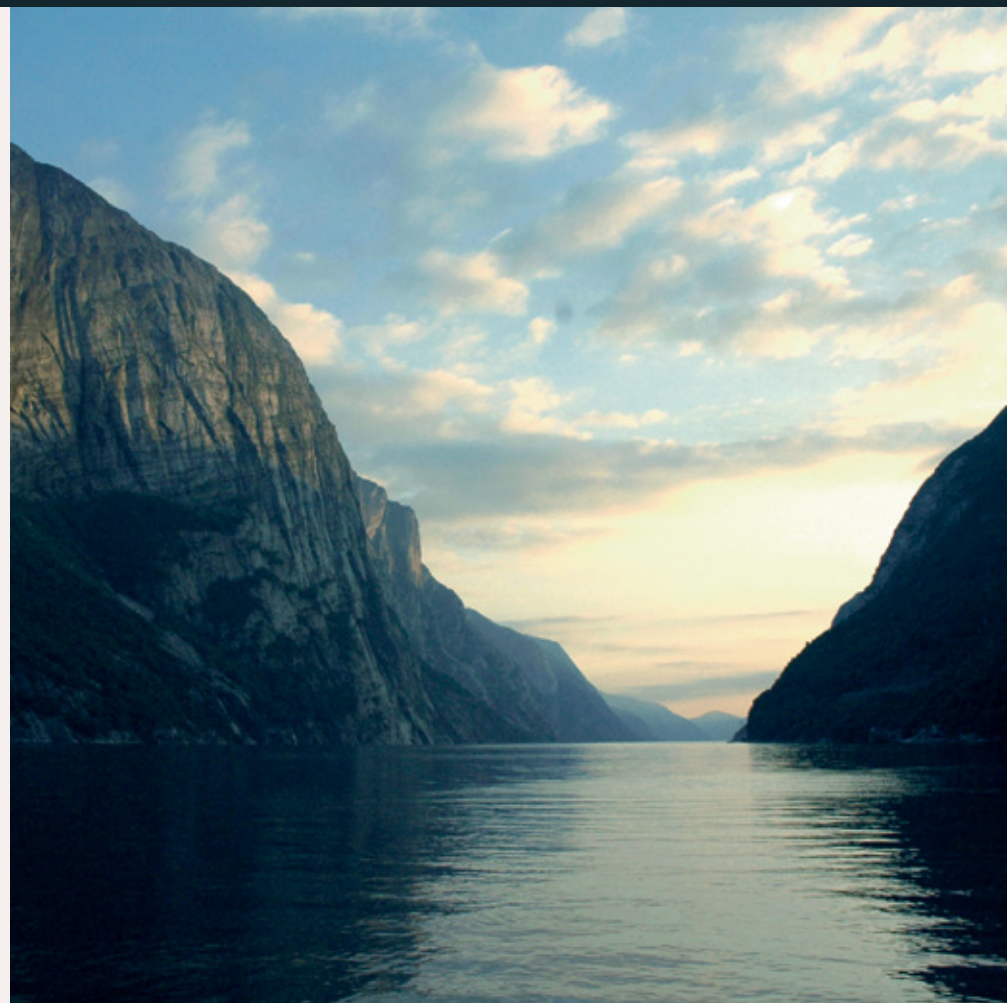
The first part, *Dream*, is written in the Late-Romantic style. The breathtaking orchestration is complemented by quasi-improvisational sections in the saxophone, which are almost jazz-like in nature and showcase the incredible range of this instrument. None of the themes are fully written out – they are no more than hints and ideas. Just like a dream, they can almost be felt rather than seen. However, they are still very profound and the solo voice always maintains a presence in the music. This part ends with a magnificent cadence.

Bliss, the second, slower part of the work finds the solo voice almost completely merged with the orchestra. In contrast, the third part, *Vision*, opens with a very clear solo statement. It conjures up memories of the first part, but makes the impression more tangible, noticeable, and rhythmically structured. A realistic vi-

sion replaces the hazy dream. The ballad ends with a chain of such visions that demonstrate the foundations of Norwegian folklore altered by Christianity. We hear Gjallarbrú, the bridge over the river Gjöll, guarded by a dog, a snake, and an ox, a sort of Nordic version of a sphinx; there’s Brokksvalin, the Purgatory where souls face the Last Judgment; the Heaven and the spirit world... All of this dreamt up while the protagonist slept for 12 days straight, from Christmas Eve until the day of Epiphany. *Draumkvedet* tells a story of secret knowledge and mystery and Habbestad’s music brings these impressive and enigmatic visions to life, dazzling and mesmerizing the listener.

JULIA VLADIMIROVNA BROIDO
Music critic and producer, head of production of the Mariinsky Theatre.

Translated by Natalia Sklemina





OLA ASDAHL ROKKONES - SAXOPHONE

Ola Asdahl Rokkones (b. 1983) lives in Tromsø in the north of Norway, and is one of the few saxophonists working within both jazz and classical music. As a classical musician, he has appeared as a soloist with several renowned orchestras in Norway, Russia, Germany, and France, among them the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra. He has commissioned and premiered music by various composers, such as Helge Iberg, Håvard Lund, Kjell Habbestad, Martin Romberg, Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen, Erik Stifjell, Lars Skoglund, Bodvar Drotninghaug Moe, Alexander Manotskov, and Bjørn Breimo. As a jazz musician he performs with several bands and ensembles, such as Marit Sandvik & Nova Onda, Treskatresk, Mike del Ferro Quintet, Mean Steel, and Magyar Hot Club. In 2010 he was selected as the Norwegian representative for the prestigious European Jazz Orchestra. Ola has released six albums: *Pirate Bay* with DripP (2010), *Son del Ecuador* with Sonora Cimarrón (2012), *JazzPoetry* with Cats vs. Kitchen Utensils (2013), *I denne søte juletid* with Terje Baugerød (2017), *Flor* with Marit Sandvik & Nova Onda (2018), and *Autumn Sessions* with Mike del Ferro Quintet (2018). He also works with various dance- and theatre ensembles.

Rokkones studied with several acclaimed teachers including Vibeke Breian, Jean-Yves Fourmeau, and John-Pål Inderberg, and completed his musical education at the Music Conservatory of Tromsø in 2007. In 2012 he received the culture prize of Tromsø Municipality.

FABIO MASTRANGELO – CONDUCTOR

In September 2018, he was named Principal Conductor of the Moscow Symphony Orchestra-Russian Philharmonic.

He also currently holds the position of Principal Guest Conductor of the Novosibirsk Symphony Orchestra. Additional positions include those of Music Director of the St. Petersburg International Festival – Opera Vsem (“opera all together”) and Artistic Director of the City of Togliatti Summer Music Festival – Classics on the Volga.

Mastrangelo frequently collaborates with Russia's most prestigious orchestras and for a number of years has been a guest conductor at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, where he made his 2007 debut with *Tosca*. In 2008, he made his first Stars of the White Nights Festival appearance replacing Valery Gergiev on short notice and has been invited back since. In 2016, he conducted premiere performances of Andrea de Rosa's newest production of Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*, while in 2017 he conducted a new production of Verdi's *I vespri siciliani*.

Fabio Mastrangelo (b. 1965) is Russia's most sought after Italian-born conductor. Since 2013, he has been the Artistic Director of the St. Petersburg Music Hall Theater as well as Principal Conductor & Music Director of its two orchestras, the St. Petersburg Northern Sinfonia and St. Petersburg Northern Sinfonietta Chamber Orchestra. In addition, he serves as Principal Conductor of Sinfonica ARTica of the Yakutsk State Philharmonic, which he helped establish in 2012, and as Artistic Director of the Camerata Soloists Chamber Orchestra of the Novosibirsk State Philharmonic.

In recent years, he has made appearances with the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra, Belgrade Radio Symphony Orchestra, Czech National Symphony Orchestra, the Bolshoi Theater Symphony Orchestra, Bruckner Orchestra Linz, Budapest MAV Symphony Orchestra (at Vienna's Musikverein), Thüringer Symphoniker Saalfeld-Rudolstadt (Germany), Baden-Baden Philharmonic, Hamilton Philharmonic (Canada), the Latvian National Orchestra, and the OSI (Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana).





THE ST. PETERSBURG NORTHERN SINFONIA

well as Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre frequently collaborate with the ensemble. In addition, young talented artists of the Elena Obraztsova International Academy of Music have often participated in various projects. Aside from traditional orchestral concerts, the orchestra also offers literary and family oriented programs together with popular actors and personalities such as Sati Spivakova, Vladimir Koshevoj, Gosha Kutsenko, Yuriy Galtsev, Andrey Noskov, Mikhail Morozov, and Sergey Migitsko.

The Northern Sinfonia is a preferred guest of the St. Petersburg International Cultural Forum, presenting each year original musical and cultural programs. The project *1917 Accord – Revolution and Music*, performed in November 2017, attracted the attention and praise of numerous international guests at the sixth forum. At home, the orchestra is featured at the popular St. Petersburg International Festival – Opera Vsem (“opera all together”) where each year they showcase four different operatic titles. Furthermore, the orchestra often performs at prestigious concert venues in both St. Petersburg and Moscow, in halls all over Russia, as well as on tour in Italy, Europe, and the Middle East.

Fulfilling the planned expansion of The St. Petersburg Music Hall Theatre's existing Northern Sinfonietta Chamber Orchestra into a full-time symphony orchestra, the Northern Sinfonia was established in spring of 2016, under the leadership of Fabio Mastrangelo.

Since its inception, the Northern Sinfonia has taken part in numerous prestigious city events while continuing to present a regular concert series within the theatre's season. Notable guest artists include Ekaterina Mechetina, Polina Osetinskaya, Giuseppe Albanese, Shlomo Mintz, Miroslav Kultyshev, Daniil Kramer, Dmitry Sitkovetsky, Ola Asdahl Rokkones, Giampiero Sobrino, Larisa Dolina, and Goran Bregovich. Soloists of both the Mariinsky and Mikhailovsky theaters, as

The orchestra's repertoire includes both Russian and foreign classics, in addition to works by the most diverse contemporary composers. The exceptional artistry of the orchestra's musicians, together with the collaboration with talented young artists and the desire to augment the repertoire through presenting contemporary works, is all enhanced by the expertise and undeniable charisma of leader Fabio Mastrangelo.

RECORDED IN: LENDOK STUDIOS, ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA, 17–19 NOVEMBER 2016

PRODUCED, RECORDED, MIXED AND MASTERED BY: SEAN LEWIS

BOOKLET NOTES: JULIA VLADIMIROVNA BROIDO

ENGLISH TRANSLATION: NATALIA SKLEMINA

BOOKLET EDITOR: HEGE WOLLENG

COVER DESIGN: ANETTE L'ORANGE | BLUNDERBUSS.NO

COVER PHOTO: JAN OVE IVERSEN | OVERPARI.NO

ARTIST PHOTO (ROKKONES): MARIUS FISKUM

ARTIST PHOTO (ROKKONES AND MASTRANGELO): YULIA TCHOPOROVA

CONCERT PHOTOS: ANASTASYA EROFEEVA

ILLUSTRATION PHOTOS: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

THE POEM *BØR* BY STEIN MEHREN IS TAKEN FROM THE COLLECTION

DET ANDRE LYSET, ASCHÉHOUG, OSLO 1989.

MARTIN ROMBERG *THE TALE OF TALIESIN* © 2010 BY GERARD BILLAUDOT EDEITEUR

THIS RECORDING HAS BEEN MADE POSSIBLE WITH SUPPORT FROM:

THE COMPOSERS' REMUNERATION FUND

THE ST. PETERSBURG MUSIC HALL THEATRE

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NORWEGIAN SAXOPHONE _____

OLA ASDAHL ROKKONES – SAXOPHONE
THE ST. PETERSBURG NORTHERN SINFONIA
FABIO MASTRANGELO – CONDUCTOR

MARTIN ROMBERG (*1978)

01. THE TALE OF TALIESIN (2009) 24:57

TORSTEIN AAGAARD-NILSEN (*1964)

BØR (2014)

02. "...VEKTEN AV DET LYS..." 09:34

03. "...SOM ALLE BEGYNNER Å GLITRE..." 03:56

04. "...GÅTEN ER IKKE TID OG ROM..." 04:29

KJELL HABBESTAD (*1955)

UN RÊVE NORVÉGIEN (2002/2015)

05. INSOMNIUM 14:29

06. BEATITUDO 05:15

07. VISIO 08:54

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