Orchestral

Edward Seckerson enjoys
Marin Alsop’s Bernstein:
The Age of Anxiety is a cracker of a piece
and this excellent performance amplifies
that view in every way ★ REVIEW ON PAGE 30

Andrew Achenbach is swept away
by the NYO’s Holst Planets:
I love the string timbre in “Venus”, and how
giddily delicious are the xylophone’s madcap
antics during “Uranus” ★ REVIEW ON PAGE 36

Alnæs
Piano Concerto, Op 27, Symphony No 1, Op 7
*Håvard Gimse of
Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra / Eivind Aaaland
LAWO Classics © LINCH12 (2Y • DDD)

Eyvind Alnæs’s Piano Concerto (1915) has
crackling aplenty. The Norwegian composer’s
score is tuneful and opulently orchestrated,
and the virtuoso piano-writing is often
dazzling. It’s impressive for its
craftsmanship, too, the myriad ideas
developed and interwoven with a sure
hand. What’s disconcerting is an
occasionally jarring juxtaposition of mood
and emotion. Listen to the end of the first
movement’s central development section
(beginning around 815”), for example, and
how Alnæs screws the tension tighter and
tighter, building a climax of Tchaikovksian
intensity that leads to nothing more than
a flippant recapitulation of the opening
theme. Or take the end of the darkly
lyrical slow movement, where an even
more gripping climax this time subsides
into eerie stillness – a spell that’s rudely
broken by the ditzy waltz theme of the
finale. The result of these ill-fitting joints
is a patchwork effect that undermines
the work’s structural integrity and
narrative coherence.

This is the second recording of Alnæs’s
concerto, and while excellent, it’s perhaps
a touch sober in comparison with the joyous
exuberance of Piers Lane and Andrew
Litton (Hyperion). Håvard Gimse conveys
a delightfully sensitive improvisatory freedom
in some passages but Lane makes
the complex piano part flow more easily,
giving the music a much-needed feeling
of inevitability.

Alnæs’s First Symphony (1897),
composed following his studies with
Reinecke in Leipzig, is less characterful
but more cohesive than the concerto. The two
inner movements are very fine, particularly
the solemnly expressive Adagio with its
aching harmonies and inventive
orchestration (try at 615”), where the upper
strings are divided into delicate strands.
Certainly Eivind Aaaland and the Oslo
Philharmonic make a more compelling case
for this work than Terje Mikkelson and the
Latvian National Symphony (Sterling), and
LAWO’s close-up recording adds to the
musical impact. Andrew Farach-Colton
Piano Concerto = comparative version:
Lone, Bergen PO, Linton (697) (HYPER) CDA67515
Symphony No 1 = comparative version:
Latvian Nat SO, Mikkelson (610) (STEEL) CD51084-2

Alwyn
*The Film Music of William Alwyn, Vol 4
Music From The Black Tent, A City Speaks,
Fortune is a Woman, The Master of Ballantrae,
Miranda, On Approval, Saturday Island, Shake
Hands With the Devil, The Ship that Died of
Shame and They Flew Alone (*ed Philip Lane)
*Charlotte Trepassard
BBC Philharmonic Orchestra / Rumon Gamba
Chandos © CHAN10980 (2Y • DDD)

William Alwyn composed these film
scores between 1941 and 1959, when a visit
to the cinema was a twice-weekly event for
many UK citizens, with attendance levels
that have never been surpassed.

In The Black Tent (1956), filmed in
Technicolor and VistaVision, the audience
could be whisked from suburbia to a
foreign location like Libya, where shooting
took place. Alwyn’s score was typical of his
cinematic craft. Escewing the flamboyant
approach of a Tchekino, Alwyn devised
music that portrayed events on screen
in a pithy, no-nonsense fashion without
resorting to cliché. In this Suite his cues,
often carrying a dense narrative, proceed in
a cogent fashion, as with the Nocturne and
Finale, where the drama and romance of
the desert are inspired by Arabic music.

Adventure films dominate this fourth CD
of Alwyn’s music, The Master of Ballantrae
(1953), from the novel by Robert Louis
Stevenson, is in a Scottish idiom, while
Shake Hands With the Devil, a dramatic
tale of the Black and Tans and the IRA,
contains a little idyll for strings alone,
‘People of Erin’. A sombre, fully scored
funeral march (‘Trouble’) rounds off
this Suite. ‘The Mermaid’s Song’ from
Miranda, a vocalise sung by the soprano
Charlotte Trepass, with full-bodied tone,
provides an apt contrast, along with a
Chopin-style Nocturne, played by pianist
Paul James, in Alwyn’s They Flew Alone,
a biopic of Amy Johnson. The sweeping
Prelude from Saturday Island (1952)
demonstrates again how the change
from major to minor is such an effective
musical device, while Fortune is a Woman
is dominated by a three-bar motif at the start.

Philip Lane has once again reconstructed
and arranged much of this music, with the
notable exception of the ‘Manchester Suite’
from A City Speaks. In this instance Alwyn
presented his five-movement score to
the film-makers in advance of the production,
directed by Philip Rotha and commissioned
by Manchester City Council. It was
conducted on the original soundtrack
by Barbirolli with the Hallé Orchestra.
Alwyn’s score illustrates Manchester’s
citizens at work and at play. There’s an
aspirational vision of a better life
to come in the Alla marcia and a gritty
determination to put it into practice in the
Interlude. A fleeting Scherzo depicts their
leisure activities.

The BBC Philharmonic under Rumon
Gamba have a ball playing this music,
no more so than in the dance cues from
On Approval (1944), the film version of
Frederick Lonsdale’s stage comedy, where
the action was moved back from the 1920s
to the 1890s. The film was described by
director Lindsay Anderson as ‘the funniest
light British comedy ever made’, A Waltz,
Polka and a Lancers’ medley testify to
Alwyn’s versatility on any cinematic
subject. Artwork, picture stills,
comprehensive music notes and a fine
comprehensive recording add their own allure to this
significant addition to Alwyn’s cinematic
output. Adrian Edwards