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Performance: Sonics (S/MC): /

Ensemble Allegria is a Norwegian string chamber orchestra which look like a strong competitor for Finland's world-famous Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra, based on this, their first SA-CD. A group of music students launched the orchestra in 2007, and it now comprises around 20 members between the age of 20-26. "Allegria" (Italian for merriment and enjoyment) is very much applicable to the players, who manage their own affairs with the help of the Norwegian Academy of Music. Maria Angelica Carlsen is their concert-master and artistic director. Their youthful enthusiasm, hard work in rehearsal and commitment in performance has been noted by reviewers, as has their obvious joy in playing. The sheer physicality of the ensemble is encouraged by the players' freedom of movement, as they play standing (except for the cellists, of course).

This intelligently planned recording of some of Allegria's core repertoire explores some of Norway's string music, led by Grieg's C19th Holberg Suite (converted by him from its solo piano original form) and followed by three important C20th composers, Johan Kvandal (1919-1999), Odd Grüner-Hegge (1899-1973) and Knut Nystedt (b.1915), all well-known in Norway. The readings of these pieces are fresh and often revelatory, and one immediately sits up and takes notice on first hearing, to be captivated right up to the programme's final notes.

Despite its familiarity, the Allegria's rendering of the pioneer Grieg's piece is up with the best. Its Prelude is zesty, beautifully nuanced rhythmically and dynamically. There are surprising little details, a secondary fragment of melody here, a superbly timed cadence there, which make one feel that this is one's first hearing of the piece. The Ensemble are thankfully superb at playing very softly (not a common skill shown by a number of contemporary orchestras), for example in the Air, marked *Andante religioso*. This is accompanied by softly repeated chordal rhythms subtly voiced, so that I could hear the succession of Grieg's quite dissonant harmonic progressions for the first time. The Final Rigaudon leads off with countrified zest, demonstrating virtuosity, perfect ensemble and clear articulation. There are spicy string slaps which convincingly evoke the sassy country style of Norwegian fiddlers.

Johan Kvandal strongly believed in the tonal principle. "But each individual mode of expression is however more connected to instinct - a kind of a voice of the heart - than to the external intellect", he asserted. He worked to develop his tonal system, rather than abandoning it, as did most of his peers. His Sonata for Strings Op. 79 (1994) is in two movements. The first is deeply felt and uses characteristically abrupt mood shifts, for which Ensemble Allegria have a good sense. At times aggressive and attention-catching, it drops into sorrowful soliloquies, torn into by more slashing chords. The orchestra broodily maintains the interior tension of this through-composed discourse, including the breathtaking moment when its last chord slips into a softly radiant peaceful major chord. The Sonata's second movement scurries about but is more amicable, with the piercing ironic humour of Shostakovich not far away. Allegria's wonderful control of the dark colours of this Sonata is exemplary and reflects their enjoyment of playing it.

Kvandal's powerful intensity is muted by the next piece, one of several short Elegiac Melodies for Strings by Odd Grüner-Hegge, a conductor (of the Oslo Philharmonic for many years) as well as a composer. His music

leans heavily on the late Romantic style. Ensemble Allegria's solo viola player initiates it, and the orchestra invests it with the soft, sustained playing which they do so well, until it expands into a fervent swelling climax which is passionate and desolate at the same time.

The heart of this programme is Knut Nystedt's *Concerto Arctandriae* for Strings, Op.128). Nystedt was born in Kristiania (now Oslo) to a religious family, which pointed him into playing the organ and writing choral and sacred music for most of his career as a composer. He used a lyrical classical style for his religious works, and adopted 12-note schemes in the mid 1950's. Nystedt has followed new challenges in modern music over the years, but always manages to incorporate them into his own voice and is adamant that listeners should not be ignored and displeased by modern music.

The four movements of this "Concerto" are full of timbral colours and textures for the strings to get their bows into. The outer movements are generally fast (the abrasive fourth is marked *Allegro feroce*), the second movement is a kind of scherzo with scampering pizzicato from the upper strings, interrupted peremptorily by assertive plucks from the lower strings. Such a balance between humorous delicacy and stern questioning is delightful, especially when so spontaneously played by Allegria. The Third movement is the "slow" movement, lyrically anguished, slowly progressing with shifting registers and solemn airs, expressing loneliness and loss until the movement's central eruption.

Lawo's recording in Jar Church, just to the south-west of Oslo, is of demonstration quality. Despite the warm reverberance of the church (with decay times up to 5 seconds), there is no smudging or obscuring of interior detail. Listening room walls simply melt away and there is the orchestra before you, very sharply focussed in the broad sound stage, almost tangible in their presence. One of the best captures of a string orchestra and its environment I've heard.

The only complaint I have about the Digipak is lack of information about the composers - important in this case for international sales. The booklet is mostly a publicity vehicle for the Ensemble itself, apparently written by some of its members. I look forward very much to some more SA-CD discs from Ensemble Allegria, covering more of their core repertoire, and hopefully these would have some information about the music.

A splendid acquisition for lovers of string music, in a programme which, given the popular Grieg work, is very approachable, with the Kvandal and Nystedt pieces digging deep into the psyche. Highly recommended.