



RECORDING OF THE MONTH

Ensemble Allegria

rec. Jar Church, Bærum (near Oslo), Norway, 6-9 August 2012

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I've always loved Grieg's *Holberg Suite* and was surprised to note I've never owned a copy. I jumped at the chance of reviewing this disc which has it on and I'm so glad I did. This is a particularly fine account of it by the nineteen members of the young Norwegian Ensemble Allegria. Theirs is a wonderfully nuanced account and thoroughly enjoyable as a result.

The suite was written by Edvard Grieg in 1884 following a commission made to several Scandinavian composers to write something to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Danish-Norwegian humanist playwright Ludvig Holberg, known as "the Molière of the North. Grieg's work which he originally called *From Holberg's Time* and subtitled *Suite in Olden Style* uses eighteenth century dance forms for its five movements. A perfect example of neo-classicism it was originally written for the piano being arranged for string orchestra a year later. While it may not be as well known as his music for *Peer Gynt*, which is also usually heard as a pair of suites, it is equally highly regarded and rightly so. Even the famously hard to please critic Hanslick who seemed to dislike any music written in his own time was complimentary about it writing that it was "a refined, well conceived work, less exotic than the compositions of the Norwegians often are. The antique style is cleverly reproduced, yet it is filled with modern spirit."

The booklet explains how the Ensemble came to be formed. In 2007, several members of the former Junior Orchestra of the Barratt Due Institute of Music in Oslo were asked if they would like to reform to play at the Arendal Grieg festival, which they did. They chose the *Holberg Suite* as one of their performance pieces. The review they received in a local paper called that performance "Vigorous, but with a scruffy sound". The word "scruffy" could not be used to describe this one however though the word 'vigorous' certainly still stands as a hallmark of everything they play on this disc.

The ensemble's enthusiasm for the music comes over strongly and continues with the *Sonata for Strings* by Johan Kvandal which is lovingly played here. Kvandal, whose father was the composer David Monrad Johansen, was profoundly affected by his country's landscape which is something that seems to have exerted an influence on almost all composers from Scandinavia. All these composers have a unique ability to express bleakness and beauty at the same time and in equal measure and that is also a feature of this work, especially towards the conclusion of the first movement. The second movement marked *Allegro* is shorter but has at its core an extremely catchy theme and the writing at times reminded me of Swedish composer Dag Wirén's *Serenade for Strings*, both of them having a joyous 'spring in their step'.

The third work on this engaging disc is Odd Gruner-Hegge's *Elegiac Melody for Strings* a beautifully poignant piece which is gorgeously melodious and which fades to a wonderfully effective silence.

It seems typical of the honesty of this ensemble that it is happy to recount that their first performance was described as having a "scruffy" sound and that they should explain that the final work on the disc, Knut Nystedt's *Concerto Arctandriae for Strings* is here because of a misunderstanding with their order for the sheet music since they had meant to order his *Symphony for Strings*. That immediately made me want to listen even more intently to their performance since that degree of honesty is attractively charming and deserves reward. This work is an especially atmospheric one that conjures up mental pictures of towering icebergs and the vastness of an ice-cold landscape that seems to stretch into a limitless distance. If music can make you feel cold then this is a perfect example of its descriptive power. It certainly did that for me and I was happy to seek the comfort of a centrally heated lounge after listening in my music room that I keep on the cool side so as to keep my faculties sharper.

This is a marvellous disc of brilliant music that introduced me to three new composers for which I am extremely grateful. The Ensemble Allegria is well named since 'Allegria' translates as 'merriment' and the overwhelming impression one gets while listening to these superb young musicians is that they're all having a really enjoyable time making music together. This is communicated very powerfully in these performances.

Steve Arloff