

This inventive programme results from a chamber recital of players of the Oslo Philharmonic, led in this case by bassist Erling Sunnarvik. The double bass has a relative dearth of original pieces, so we must expect some arrangements, done skilfully in this case by pianist Nils Lundström. Add a string quintet of Vegard Johnsen (violin), Aslak Juva (violin), Stig Ove Ose (viola), Hans Jans Groh (cello) and Kenneth Ryland (double bass) and the guest mezzo of world renowned Annika Skoglund, and we have the makings of a sort of Philharmonic "Schubertiad" chamber concert.

Ever since the landmark recordings of the Eccles Sonata by Gary Karr (a former teacher of Sunnarvik), this work stirred audiences who liked the similarly false Adagio in G minor for strings (not!) by Albinoni. Henry Eccles (c.1670-c.1742) was an English Baroque composer and violinist, one of a family of musicians from the generation following Henry Purcell. He was a Musician to William and Queen Mary, then Musician to Queen Anne (1701-1714), after which he moved to Paris and became a member of the band of Louis XIV. Eccles was a bold plagiarist, a not uncommon artistic habit in the Baroque - Handel frequently borrowed material from other composers. In 1720 Eccles published Twelve Solos for the Violin in two books of which 18 movements are actually from Giuseppe Valentini's *Allettamenti per camera* Op. 8 and one movement is from F.A. Bonporti's *Invenzioni* Op. 10; the rest are composed by Eccles. In the case of the G minor sonata, only the fast movements are by Eccles. It is now frequently transcribed for other strings, but mostly the bass as here.

Erling Sunnarvik largely dispenses with Baroque playing practice and invests the Sonata with full-blooded Romanticism of the "noblemente" style, particularly in the two slow movements where we find ample vibrato, discreet rubato and slowing before cadences. The Allegro and Vivace, however, are crisply articulated; the former is amusingly gruff and the latter scurries along with bravura.

Singing Russian art songs accompanied by a double bass might seem to be an oddity, but the pairs of Glinka's and Tchaikovsky's songs are delightfully rendered by international mezzo-soprano Annika 'Skogland. Most listeners will be familiar with Tchaikovsky's 'Non but the lonely heart', delivered sympathetically with a nicely-paired mellow mezzo voice and the rich resonance of the double bass.

Franz Anton Hoffmeister (1754-1812) is hardly a household name these days. In 1785, he established one of Vienna's first music publishing businesses, where he, for a number of years, would publish music by the most prominent Viennese composers. His own copious list of compositions includes at least eight operas (composed during the 1790s), over 60 symphonies, numerous concertos (many for the flute, probably due to his friendship with the Flautist Franz Thurner), more than 40 flute quartets, a large amount of string chamber music, piano music, and several collections of songs.

Hoffmeister's Solo Quartet no. 2 stretches the classical sonata form by granting leadership to the double bass, accompanied by violin, viola and cello. The Oslo players give a very stylish Viennese sound to this inventive piece, despite their notably slower pace in each movement, compared to Gerhard Dzwiza and friend's recording for Christophorus (RBCD).

Returning to the Romantic era, Lundström's adroit arrangement of Ernst Bloch's 'Prayer' from his Suite 'From Jewish Life' for five strings and double bass is presented. This intense and passionate movement could well be considered as the apex of the Oslo "Schubertiad".

The recital's finale is clearly of significance to Sunnarvik. Arne Hellan (1963-2002) began his career as a bassoonist, then a full-time composer. 'Excursion for double bass and piano' was commissioned from him by Sunnarvik and is a significant modern addition to the repertoire of the double bass. There are three movements, called 'Promenade' 1,2 and 3. The music is discursive, and suggests (to me) two companions talking to one another about journeys they have had. There are subtle changes in mood and interactive energy, with plenty of Webern-like dissonance. One feels like one is eave-dropping on quite intimate conversations, such is the rapport between Sunnarvik and Lundström.

It's a pity that the recording doesn't stretch to a 5.0 multichannel format, where the different acoustics of the Sofienburg and Ris Churches in Oslo would be more obvious. The stereo sound stage is more or less 2-dimensional, but the instrumental and vocal timbres are very well captured in a recording which carefully takes consideration of the number of instruments.

Arrayed in its attractively-produced Digipak (confusingly without any visible mention of SA-CD, Hybrid or Stereo), the slip-booklet is in Norwegian and English in parallel columns. The programme brings some unusual instrumental/vocal mixes, and little-known music mixed with devoted favourites. There is no doubt that Sunnarvik and his double bass are the stars. Orchestral bassists are well used to making jokes referring to the perennial problems of tuning (suggesting that a few cm each way doesn't matter). However, be assured that Sunnarvik is, for a bassist, very good at tuning his notes - apart from the inevitable slight bending into or out of a note from time to time.

Overall, this is an unusual and attractive entertainment from the dedicated Oslo Philharmonic players, and is well-worth giving audience to.