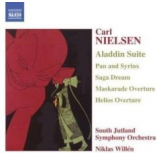


Carl Nielsen - Aladdin Suite etc. (2005)

Written by bluesever

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Aladdin Suite, Op. 34, FS 89: 01. I- The Festival March 2:59 02. II- Aladdin's Dream and Dance of the Morning Mist 3:06 03. III- Hindu Dance 3:05 04. IV- Chinese Dance 3:15 05. V- The Marketplace in Isaphan 3:56 06. VI- Dance of the Prisoners 4:30 07. VII- Negro Dance 4:06 08. Cupid and the Poet (Amor og Digteren), Op. 54, FS 150 5:36 09. Saga-Dream (Saga-drom), Op. 39, FS 46 9:48 10. Helios, Op. 17, FS 32 : Helios Overture, Op. 17, FS 32 9:52 11. Maskarade (Masquerade), FS 39: Overture 4:31 12. Maskarade (Masquerade), FS 39: Act II: Prelude 3:52 13. Pan and Syrinx (Pan og Syrinx), Op. 49, FS 87 9:03
South Jutland Symphony Orchestra Niklas Willén – conductor

Willén's Nielsen is very adroitly paced. In fact overall this is a better than pleasing collection recorded by a conductor and orchestra familiar with the idiom.

While I have a reservation about a tendency towards congested sound when the music is loud - as in the crackingly driven Festival March from the Aladdin Suite - this is prime Nielsen. The souk and drone tones of the Marketplace of Ispahan are fascinating. As with the Sixth Symphony they show Nielsen embracing a gamey dissonance which here works perfectly. At 2:03 forwards we hear echoes of The Rite. In the same piece and the dancing galanterie of the strings might perhaps have caught the attention of the young Alan Hovhaness because that is exactly what that strand of the score sounds like. I recall the Svend Christian Felumb recording once coupled with the Menuhin version of the Violin Concerto of a Classics for Pleasure LP circa 1970. Felumb was not as animated as Willén. Tamas Veto on Regis RRC 1134 (originally Unicorn) is extremely well recorded and it's a fine reading too but is less manic than Willén nor is the coupling as generous (the wonderful Fynsk Forar and three motets). Speaking of manic, Willén makes whirling dervishes of the Negro Dance clearly shaping the music to match the wild-eyed garishness of the Ballets Russes - a sort of Polovtsian Dances transplanted. I have not heard Ulf Schirmer's recording on Decca-Universal. In any event Willén's is a great performance.

Cupid and the Poet is not commonly encountered. Apart from containing some fairly candid memories of the Fifth Symphony (1:10 forwards) its peppery harmonies recall the more enigmatic Sinfonia Semplice written five year earlier.

Saga-Drøm plants its feet squarely in rustling pregnant Brucknerian mystery on one hand and on the other in Allan Pettersson in that persistent woodwind figure at 1:52. It also looks forward a couple of years to the Sinfonia Espansiva. Its delicate textures are limpidly put across by orchestra and recording team. A lovely performance of a gentle work that alludes to majesty without actually stating it explicitly.

Then comes a classic Helios Overture - from the multi-parted horns to the rustling dialogue of the strings to the barely contained Brucknerian excitement of it all. It's all sable and clarity. Here Nielsen allows the piece to evolve to a sustained peak of majesty (3:00 rising to 3:50) and then has it dancing off to a joyous optimism typical of the Second Symphony. It finally curves down into a sunset carolled and cosseted by the horns.

As expected the wild, frilly and woolly Maskarade overture is taken at a brisk pace - though not as Golovanov-rapid as I had expected from the Aladdin suite. The overture is not quite up there with Donna Diana or the Bartered Bride or Foulds Le Cabaret but it's not far behind. The baritonal Act II Prelude with its amber singing tones provides a warm contrast with the overture.

Lastly there's Pan and Syrinx which for me carries echoes of Frank Bridge's There is a Willow and Bantock's Pierrot of the Minute as well as Delius's Cuckoo. There are some pretty Sibelian moments including something from the Finn's Fourth Symphony at 1:10.

I sense that a great deal of preparation went into this recording. It has paid off in alert and sensitive performances that rival any in the current catalogue.

Those curious about Nielsen but wanting for now to steer clear of the symphonies could hardly start in a better place. Nielsen fans need this disc even if they pass others by. As essential to the Nielsen collection as Chung's Bis symphonies (1, 2, 3, 5), Ole Schmidt's splendid symphony cycle on Regis, Bernstein's BMG-Sony recordings of numbers 3 and 5 and Ormandy of No. 6.

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---Rob Barnett www.musicweb-international.com

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