

American Record Guide

November/December 1999

GRIEG: *Holberg Suite*

BRITTEN: *Simple Symphony*

MAURER: *Sinfonia Concertante*

Starling Chamber Orchestra/ Kurt Sassmannshaus-55 minutes
Starling Project (513-421-4404 or starling@fuse.net)

In January/February I reviewed the earlier Starling release of Holst's *St. Paul's Suite* and the Tchaikovsky Serenade. It is a superb disc, and I recommend it strongly. Now we have another from the same source, and it is even better. The first disc was an in-concert recording, but this one is studio made. The sound is again very fine, and the performances could hardly be better.

Just about everyone has had a go at the *Holberg Suite* at one time or another. Sassmannshaus and his players compare favorably with my previous favorite version by Münchinger and his Stuttgart players on an ancient London LP, and with a much newer Bis version by the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra. The string playing is clean, clear and warm. Ensemble is superb, and the conductor's tempos and dynamic shading are near-ideal. The result is a remarkably good performance, beautifully recorded.

Britten's *Simple Symphony* was composed in 1934, based on short pieces written in his early teens. It is a bright, happy, witty piece, and the players make the most of it. Their version compares well with the composer's own on London. Again, the sound is excellent.

The surprise of the package is the *Sinfonia Concertante* by Ludwig Wilhelm Maurer (1789-1878), a first recording. Maurer was born in Potsdam but spent most of his life in St. Petersburg, where he was music director for the Imperial family for many years and later a respected pedagogue. The work was published in 1831, probably written a few years earlier. It has romantic moments, but mostly harkens back to Mozart and Haydn. It is a charming and lively piece, originally for four violins and orchestra, here played in an arrangement by JR Cassidy for string ensemble and four violins. The four soloists acquit themselves superbly. (They range in age from 14 to 19!) The ensemble plays handsomely, with superb tone, excellent dynamic contrasts, lively phrasing.

Starling Project is based at the University of Cincinnati, where its director is head of the String Department. Kurt Sassmannshaus is a pupil of Dorothy DeLay and a respected teacher in his own right. His orchestra consists of young musicians ages 11-21. He has certainly trained them well: their tone and ensemble should be the envy of many

an experienced professional group. And what is more, he knows exactly what to do with them. His interpretations are intelligent, balanced, and appealing. This is an attractive disc by any standard. Profits from it help support Starling Project, which is more than deserving of support. The title of the disc is “Simply Brilliant”, and for once the hyperbole is deserved. I recommend it to anyone who wants to encourage a young string player, and to anyone who simply wants to enjoy a fine string ensemble. The four soloists in the Maurer, by the way, are Tania Davison, Jessica Park, Eun-Mee Jeong, and Timothy O’Neill. The disc is attractively packaged, program notes brief but informative.

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