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 Leonard Bernstein
Sibelius

Complete Recordings
on Deutsche Grammophon

■ COLLECTORS EDITION

Bernstein's "Late-Style" Sibelius and Elgar

By the 1980s, the last decade of his life, Leonard Bernstein had become a towering musical and public figure. During those years he conducted a series of extraordinary recordings for Deutsche Grammophon, many of which displayed breathtakingly slow tempos and, in other ways as well, revisited from a more radicalized perspective well-known works that he had recorded earlier in his career. It has always been hard to remain indifferent to these later performances, and among the most astonishing have been those in the present collection: Elgar, Britten and four installments of a never-completed "new" cycle of Sibelius symphonies. They span a period of about eight years, from the "Enigma" Variations, recorded at Watford Town Hall, outside of London, in April 1982, to the "Sea Interludes" from *Peter Grimes*, led by a frail Bernstein in his final concert, at Tanglewood on 19 August 1990, only two months before his death. All except the Elgar are live recordings.

As many commentators have noted, their sonorous impact and interpretive risk seem to set Bernstein's "late-style" recordings apart from both his own preceding work and that of other conductors of the time. While some of his colleagues in the 1980s were moving toward a reconstructed historical accuracy, ever tighter technical and emotional control, and pinpoint-precise execution, Bernstein waded forthrightly into a full-blown personalism. Defying his critics and at times puzzling his admirers, he luxuriated in sonic sensuousness, as though seeking to cut free from the "normal" performance traditions of the pieces he conducted in order to pursue new revelations in sound. These were performances for believers. They sought to compel primarily through the magnetic force of the conductor's virtually sacramental, personal identification with the music.

Alternately flamboyant and dreamlike, Bernstein's interpretations were now cultivating a heightened perception of orchestral sound and

activity in the inner voices. At their core was what might be called purposefully expressive distortion. That these were commanding readings of the works was indisputable, but how was one to respond to them? For those caught in their grip, the impact was astonishing. Some reviewers reacted with unbridled enthusiasm to the live Sibelius First of February 1990 with the Vienna Philharmonic – another recording from Bernstein's last year – describing it as "high-voltage," capturing a "magical presence," "epic and primal," the most "rewarding" performance of the piece ever committed to disc, a demonstration by Bernstein of "the commitment of his being." Other critics, however, continued to object to what they perceived as "overwrought," "sentimental," "self-indulgent," or a mannered "italianization" of content, which deviated from the explicit instructions in the composer's score.

That Bernstein was moving into provocative territory in the 1980s was already clear from the earliest and perhaps still most controversial of these recordings – the "Enigma" Variations with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Here the textures throughout are of an uncommon transparency, but what is most striking is the unusually measured pacing, often markedly departing

from the normal range of tempo-variation encountered in the work's performing tradition. Bernstein's exceptionally slow tempo for the opening theme immediately announces a radical approach to this music. Elgar's Andante, marked at 63 quarter-notes (crotchets) per minute, becomes a Lento of half that speed (quarter-note = 36), as if to ponder the emotional connotation of every interval of the minor-mode theme and its harmony, the depiction of a brooding, melancholic and self-reflective Elgar. This treatment isolates the theme even more than usual from the subsequent variations – the "friends pictured within" – into which, beginning with the first variation, representing "C.A.E." (Elgar's wife), the composer's theme now seems to be pulled by means of a world-weary, but deeply moving, *accelerando*.

But it is Bernstein's treatment of the ninth variation, "Nimrod," the defining heart of the work and a musical icon of Edwardian England, that will always attract the most commentary. Elgar marked it Adagio and indicated in the score a seemingly "fast" 52 quarter-notes to the minute, which is the tempo adopted by the composer himself in his 1920 recording. The later interpretive tradition has been to take "Nimrod" – as the work's centerpiece – much more slowly

than that, somewhere in the 30–40 range. But even this Bernstein slashes in half, beginning at an unprecedentedly measured pace of about 18 quarters per minute and thereafter increasing the tempo only slightly. This results in a six-minute-plus “Nimrod,” more than half again as long as most other recorded performances, one that unfolds as an uncanny, slow-motion dream-escape, seemingly processing something familiar and well-loved through a filter of experiential timelessness. The point, surely, could not have been to recreate the variation “as Elgar intended it” but rather to draw us, at least this once, into what the conductor perceived as the music’s sonic immensities.

The first release in the Sibelius cycle with the Vienna Philharmonic, the Second Symphony recorded in the Musikverein in October 1986 – another “slow” interpretation – was similarly arraigned by some critics for its “expressive excesses” and “exaggeration,” but, once again, Bernstein seemed to be placing himself beyond such assessment through the dedication of his quest for an enhanced presence of orchestral sound and for producing moments of sonorous ecstasy. The oldest recordings of the symphony, dating from the 1930s, had already established two diametrically opposed

traditions of interpretation, either of which tends to announce itself immediately at the outset of any performance. One is the brisk, pushed, matter-of-fact approach heard in the work’s 1930 first recording, conducted by Robert Kajanus, Sibelius’s associate and erstwhile teacher. The other is much more deliberate, exemplified in 1935 by another early champion of the composer, the Boston Symphony’s Serge Koussevitzky, mentor of the young Leonard Bernstein. For the most part – in all of the movements except the second – the tempos in Bernstein’s 1986 recording recall those of Koussevitzky’s made half a century earlier. But the second movement – another essay in “exceptional” slow motion – could hardly be more different. What had taken Koussevitzky just under twelve minutes to perform is extended by Bernstein to a full eighteen.

The live Vienna Philharmonic performances of Sibelius’s Fifth (from September 1987) and Seventh (October 1988), as well as that of the First (February 1990), were generally received more favorably than that of the Second. This was surely in part because the “late Bernstein” conducting style was growing more familiar. But it may also have been because the conductor’s approach, his attempt to create an

arrestingly vivid orchestral sound, was peculiarly appropriate to Sibelius, especially the later, quasi-pantheistic works, in which the composer’s elemental sound-sheets and unique orchestral textures were conceived as something spiritually allied with the fundamental manifestations of nature – the grand “swan hymn” theme of the finale of the Fifth, for example, or the night-sky-contemplative Adagio near the beginning of the Seventh. Bern-

stein’s purposeful disconnection with traditional modes of performance in favor of bringing about “special-access” sonic revelations, coupled with his penchant for establishing a sense of slow-motion timelessness, resonate particularly well with the stillness and stasis that are so often present in Sibelius’s works. This is music-making of the highest order.

James Hepokoski