

Contemporary

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Dean • Francesconi

Dean *Dramatis personae*Francesconi *Hard Pace*

Håkan Hardenberger *tp†* Gothenburg
Symphony Orchestra / John Storgårds
BIS (P) (S) BIS2067 (59' • DDD/DSD)



I can't find any evidence to corroborate the booklet note's

suggestion that Brett Dean's trumpet concerto *Dramatis personae* is a preparatory work for the opera *Hamlet*, which opened two weeks after this disc landed on my desk. But the idea is a fertile one nonetheless. Not only is Dean's piece as theatrical as its title would suggest, it also has a compelling downwards trajectory right from the ominous, Dohnányi-like bass melody that takes over soon after the concerto has pattered its way into being, rather like Dean's Viola Concerto does.

The first movement, 'Fall of a Superhero', maintains a rhythmic groove pretty much throughout its 13-minute span. Hardenberger's trumpet moans, whines and cries with uncannily human qualities in the following 'Soliloquy' and seems haunted by responsibilities it doesn't want in the final 'The Accidental Revolutionary'. *Hamlet* undertones there, for sure. But just as interesting is how the trumpet – the lonely prince or not – pursues or abandons flawed relationships with *dramatis personae* from the orchestra.

Luca Francesconi's concerto *Hard Pace* couldn't be more different but is just as special, perhaps even more so. The composer himself talks in the booklet about Miles Davis, which rings alarm bells, but it needn't: his love for Davis delivers the very opposite of musical tokenism but, instead, extreme care with Francesconi's own sort of poetry, in which the trumpet dare only speak, during some exquisite passages, in isolated notes like faltering lines drawn on a wall. Textures are spare, harmonies are rich, tension is high – not least as the trumpet is pressured into a treacherous ascent at the end of the first movement (the mirror image of Dean's fallen hero). The piece's distilled atmosphere and harmonic calligraphy reminds me of

Henze's Requiem, but it might just be that I've not heard trumpet-playing like it since Hardenberger's recording of that piece. With Storgårds and the GSO, it's a dream team. **Andrew Mellor (8/17)**

Dusapin

String Quartets – No 6, 'Hinterland'^a,
No 7, 'OpenTime'

Arditti Quartet;

^aRadio France Philharmonic Orchestra

Aeon (P) (S) AECD1753 (57' • DDD)

originally reviewed with:

Dusapin

'Item'

If^a. Imago^b. Immer^b. Incisa^b. Invece^b.Iota^b. Ipso^a. Item^b. Laps^c. Ohé^c^aBenjamin Dieltjens *cl*/^bArne DeForce *vc*

Aeon (P) (S) AECD1756 (102' • DDD)



He may have limited presence in UK concert halls but Pascal Dusapin (*b1955*) continues to be among the most recorded of contemporary composers. These new Aeon releases focus on chamber music, including a follow-up to the Arditti set of his first five string quartets (9/10).

Both the latest instalments were written in 2009, but here similarities end. The Sixth Quartet features orchestra in what is less a concerto concept than an extension of the quartet's sound world on to a larger expressive canvas, the first movement setting up harmonic and rhythmic premises which its four successors build on in a visceral yet ultimately inconclusive manner, the discourse running down to an uneasy stasis. By contrast, the Seventh Quartet consists of 21 brief movements – each a variation on the motivic fragment heard at the outset – that can be heard as falling into three larger groups whose impetus is channelled towards increasingly stable and cohesive effect, the music reaching a calm which is audibly devoid of exhaustion. Both pieces reaffirm Dusapin's quartet cycle as among the most significant now emerging.

The other release brings together Dusapin's music for cello and/or clarinet,

a substantial body of work which extends across almost two decades of his output. Earlier pieces tend to reflect the influence of those composers (notably Xenakis) who shaped Dusapin's attitude to timbre and texture, though even here an emphasis on gestural continuity points towards the organic formal designs of his maturity. Such is evident in *Laps*, where the two instruments unfold a dialogue that takes on greater emotional import as surely as it gains in momentum; qualities no less to the fore in *Ipso*, where solo clarinet focuses on spiralling arcs of sound that build to a heady culmination. The highlights, though, come with two major works for cello on the second disc. *Immer* makes inventive play with non-standard tuning in music whose melodic contours evince subtle overtones of folk music. *Imago* is more overt in its recourse to admittedly 'false' popular songs – its three pieces become unexpected and intriguing variations on each other in music that is among this composer's most engaging and approachable.

Both discs enjoy spacious and lifelike sound, notably in the frequently intricate textures of the quartets, with detailed though occasionally abstruse booklet notes (some knowledge of post-war French philosophy and aesthetics would not go amiss). Anyone new to Dusapin's music might start with the collection of orchestral works from Myung-Whun Chung (DG, 6/14) or the atmospheric and wide-ranging opera *Perelà – Uoma di fumo* (Naïve, 6/05), but the present discs are no less representative of this composer and as such can be warmly recommended. **Richard Whitehouse**

Pickard

Monteverdi *Orfeo* – Toccata (transcr Pickard)Pickard *Symphony No 5. Concertante*Variations^a. Sixteen Sunrises^aMatthew Featherstone *fl*/^aGeoffrey Cox *ob*^aNicholas Cox *cl*/^aJarosław Augustyniak *bn*^aIan Fisher *trn* BBC National Orchestra of Wales /

Martyn Brabbins

BIS (P) (S) BIS2261 (63' • DDD/DSD)



The chief work on BIS's fourth CD devoted to the music of John Pickard



Colin Currie (right) in discussion with composer Steve Reich

(b1963) is his Fifth and most recent Symphony, composed in an intense burst of creativity in the early months of 2014. (Its predecessor, the *Gaia Symphony* for brass band – 11/14 – took 13 years to achieve its final form!) Pickard's five symphonies cover his entire career to date, the still-unperformed First written in 1983-84; like it and the eruptive Second (1985-87), No 5 is in one continuous movement lasting around half an hour. The music fair kidnaps the listener's attention at the outset and does not ransom it until the gripping, wholly satisfying close. The structure alternates fast and slow episodes, shortening or lengthening like some vast process of respiration, pivoting around the main central slow section, the tempos phasing and overlapping as the movement progresses. Those knowing McCabe's *Of Time and the River* will recognise a kindred spirit here, even if the result is quite different.

The performance by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales is stunning in its virtuosity (especially the three timpanists) and Brabbins shapes the whole edifice grippingly, as in the couplings. The tone poem *Sixteen Sunrises* (2013) – premiered by Brabbins in Nagoya, Japan, and dedicated to the late composer and author Malcolm MacDonald (1948-2014) – is more relaxed, an essay on light, while the delightful *Concertante Variations* for wind quintet, timpani and strings (2011), with Tippett-like freshness, spotlights Pickard's superb handling of medium-size forces.

The music throughout is in this composer's dynamic, driving, 21st-century tonal idiom, recognisably British but Pickard's own. The final track sidesteps expectations a touch with a witty reworking of Monteverdi for Scelsi-esque ensemble: what would Claudio have made of the saxophone? A superb disc, great sound: my disc of the year so far.

Guy Rickards (A/17)

Reich

Pulse^a. Quartet^b

^bColin Currie Group;

^aInternational Contemporary Ensemble

Nonesuch © 7559 79324-3 (31' • DDD)



From the funky maracas in *Four Organs* to the famous pulsing chords that are heard at the beginning of *Music for 18 Musicians*, pulse (or, more accurately, the plural 'pulses'), has become one of the most distinguishing features of Steve Reich's music. Perhaps it's surprising that he took so long to compose a piece directly inspired by it.

In fact, *Pulse*, composed in 2015 for winds, strings, piano and electric bass, is as far removed from generic pulse-based Reich music as one could imagine. It begins not with a pulse but with an undulating melodic line in flute, clarinet and violins, almost Copland-esque in its

wide-open intervals and subtle blending of major triads. This melody stretches out across two octaves in its opening statement, cushioned by soft chords in lower strings, before gradually reshaping and regenerating itself in various ways throughout the work's 15-minute span.

Soon enough, pulsing patterns are introduced on piano followed by electric bass, and the bright opening becomes increasingly darker and more intense as the opening melody takes on more intense chromatic inflections. The pulse momentarily drops out of the electric bass for a brief middle section that moves to the minor key before the introduction of a final section, which sees a variation of the opening melody heard in augmentation.

Pulse exudes a restrained, valedictory quality that partly stems from the way in which it briefly journeys through the main elements of Reich's language – pulse combined with interlocking and interweaving patterns, melodies that kaleidoscopically reflect each other through canon and imitation, lines that stretch and contract through augmentation and diminution – yet remains at its core a brilliantly conceived and organically self-sufficient work: Reich at his imperious best.

The other work on this recording, *Quartet*, for pairs of pianos and vibraphones, composed in 2013, also looks back in its opening reference to the composer's much earlier *Violin Phase*, but in all other respects is a very different composition to *Pulse*: rhythmically