

NAXOS

Johan
SVENDSEN

Norwegian Rhapsodies
Romeo and Juliet • Zorahayda

South Jutland Symphony Orchestra • Bjarte Engeset



Johan Svendsen (1840-1911)

Norwegian Rhapsodies • Romeo and Juliet • Zorahayda

Born in Christiania (now Oslo) on 30th September 1840, Johan Svendsen learned several instruments and played in his father's regimental band before concentrating on the violin and becoming a pupil of Carl Arnold. In 1863, though he had professional experience as a musician as well as several works behind him, Svendsen began to study at the Leipzig Conservatory where he focused on composition and conducting. Returning to Norway in 1867, he directed a concert of his music that drew positive notices (not least from his contemporary Edvard Grieg), but public response was less forthcoming. After two years in Paris, he returned to Leipzig where, after the hiatus caused by the Franco-Prussian war, he became leader and assistant director of the Euterpe orchestra then, in 1872, played in the orchestra assembled to mark the laying of the foundation stone for the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth.

That year, Svendsen returned to Christiania as joint conductor, along with Grieg, of the Music Society concerts. The next five years saw his most significant achievements as a composer, after which, he wrote only a handful of new works and conducting became dominant in his career. Aside from guest engagements, he remained in Norway until 1883 when he became principal conductor of the Royal Opera in Copenhagen. While this was at first a controversial appointment, his quarter-century there raised orchestral standards to a new level and many younger musicians (not least Carl Nielsen, who played in the orchestra between 1889 and 1905) benefited from his example; his standing, meanwhile, was reflected in the guest engagements he received throughout Europe. Ill-health forced his retirement in 1908, though he continued to live in Copenhagen until his death on 14th June 1911.

Svendsen's reputation as a composer rests on a relatively small output (apart from occasional pieces and arrangements, his catalogue runs to only 33 works), but he remains pre-eminent among those nineteenth-century Norwegian composers who actively sought to harness

the potential of a Romantic Nationalism with that of established classical forms. Although chamber music was to bring him his earliest notable successes, his lasting achievement lies in the orchestral domain. Aside from two symphonies [Naxos 8.553898], he also wrote a number of shorter pieces, several of which are featured on this disc.

Nowhere is the Classical-Romantic fusion of Svendsen's thinking better illustrated than with his four *Norwegian Rhapsodies*. The first three of these emerged toward the end of 1876, with the final one appearing early the following year. Inspired by the *Hungarian Rhapsodies* of Liszt, the ways in which folk- and art-music are combined owe more to Austro-German principles, to the extent that the material drawn from Ludvig Lindeman's *Older and Newer Melodies from the Norwegian Mountains* becomes little more than the starting-point for Svendsen's creations.

The *First Norwegian Rhapsody* opens with string chords and horn calls, before a stealthy pizzicato motion supports an atmospheric theme on upper strings. This leads to a lively theme on woodwind (more familiar as the third of Grieg's *Norwegian Dances*), one that retains its defining rhythm even when heard in a slower and more expressive version on strings. In contrast comes an eloquent melody, initially heard on the viola, that soon works its way across the orchestra before the return of the lively theme on strings. All is now set for a peroration that draws on both of these main themes on its way to a triumphal conclusion.

The *Second Norwegian Rhapsody* heads straight into a forcefully syncopated theme that makes way, via a subdued transition, to an elegiac melody on the upper strings which continues on solo woodwind against the imaginative backdrop of muted strings. Gaining in ardour, this builds to a brief climax before a further theme, one whose rustic quality is emphasized by recourse to a 'drone bass', takes over. Entering quietly, the initial theme once more assumes the limelight, albeit

in harness with elements of those that followed, as the piece heads towards its close with a breathless good humour.

The *Third Norwegian Rhapsody* starts with lively gestures on strings before the first theme, robust and suave by turns, enters on woodwind and is taken up by the strings. A hushed transition on the timpani prepares for the rapt second theme, initially on upper strings before being developed by solo horn then by the lower strings, offset by pert woodwind chords. Reaching an eloquent climax, it makes way for a more energetic theme that shares its predecessor's pathos, and whose ebullience brings about a decisive close to the piece as a whole.

The *Fourth Norwegian Rhapsody* begins with a moody opening theme, complemented by a livelier theme whose harmonies suggest the influence of Hardanger fiddle music from southern Norway. This, in turn, is contrasted with a soulful melody on lower strings and these two themes alternate in an unforced yet disciplined manner that teases out a fair degree of motivic development. At length the soulful one effects the work's motional apex, but the livelier theme is not to be denied and draws in the whole orchestra as it sees the way to a triumphal close.

Romeo and Juliet enjoyed only a muted reception at its première in October 1876, though it is unlikely that early reviewers were any more familiar than was the composer with Tchaikovsky's fantasy-overture on Shakespeare's play, which did not reach definitive form until four years later. Svendsen's piece begins with a

musical idea for strings that gains in expansiveness until reaching a brief climax. This slow introduction makes way for a more energetic and impulsive theme that brings the full orchestra into play. Its successor is a plaintive melody first heard on oboe then transferred to strings before tailing off into silence. The development centres on the energetic theme, heralding a heightened return of the oboe melody, before its predecessor reappears in what seems set for a triumphal close. What follows, however, is a notably subdued coda, fatalistic rather than tragic in its underlying calm.

Svendsen enjoyed greater success with *Zorahayda* in October 1874, which retained its popularity during his lifetime. Inspired by Washington Irving's *Legend of the Rose of the Alhambra*, it recounts the love of a Moorish princess for a Christian knight, and of how her soul is freed when she is baptized with water from the Alhambra fountain. Searching gestures on the lower strings alternate with a distant horn-call over pizzicato strings, prior to the arrival of a thoughtful melody that draws in woodwind and upper strings. This is imaginatively rendered by solo violin over a deft *pizzicato* accompaniment, with brief orchestral interjections, that continues until the oboe sets in motion a more impulsive theme which seems intent on bringing about the climax. Instead, the main theme sees the work through to its close in a mood of dreamy resignation, lower strings and horn-calls prominent as at the beginning.

Richard Whitehouse

South Jutland Symphony Orchestra



Photo: Claus Thorsted

Brown, former musical director of the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields, succeeded in 2003 by Niklas Willén and from 2006 by the Russian conductor Vladimir Ziva. The orchestra has toured in Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, France and the Faroe Islands and played at the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival. From 2007 the orchestra has rehearsed and played in the Alslon Concert Hall in Denmark, currently one of the best concert halls in Europe for symphonic music.

For more information, please visit www.sdsjymfoni.dk.

Bjarte Engeset



Photo: Ulf Palm

When Norwegian conductor Bjarte Engeset graduated in conducting from the Sibelius Academy in 1989, he did so with flair. With the highest possible score from the panel of jurors, he was acclaimed as one of the Academy's best students of all time. Several years later he was invited to the eminent Conductor's Seminar at the Tanglewood Music Center, Boston University, renowned as one of the world's leading centres for higher education in music. Bjarte Engeset can boast many successes. His début with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London in 1997 was very well received, and his recordings of Norwegian orchestral music by Grieg and Tveitt have placed him high up Naxos's sales charts. He has been chief conductor and artistic director for the Tromsø Symphony Orchestra, and artistic director for the Northern Light Festival and Opera Nord. He has directed orchestras in most European countries, conducted opera and made guest appearances at orchestra houses in Mexico, the United States and Japan. He has also been guest conductor of the Flemish Radio Orchestra. In 2006 he was guest conductor of the Moscow Radio Orchestra at the prestigious Wörthersee Classics Festival in Klagenfurt, Austria. Since 2007 Bjarte Engeset has been artistic director of DalaSinfonietta symphony orchestra in Sweden. As the regional orchestra of Dalarna county it is a common sight around the region, giving concerts at Dalhalla and at the Music at Lake Siljan festival each summer.

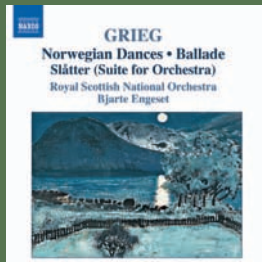
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8.553898



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Johan Svendsen remains pre-eminent among those 19th-century Norwegians who harnessed Romantic Nationalism to Classical musical forms. Inspired by Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies* (8.554480 and 8.554481) the four *Norwegian Rhapsodies* spin traditional melodies into expansive orchestral essays whose eloquence, ebullience and energy has ensured them wide appeal. His *Romeo and Juliet*, completed prior to Tchaikovsky's fantasy-overture, and *Zorahayda*, based on Washington Irving's tale of a Moorish princess and a Christian knight, are dreamy musical evocations of two classic love stories. Svendsen's two symphonies are also available on 8.553898.

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(1840-1911)

Norwegian Rhapsodies Nos. 1-4

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|---|-------------------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | Romeo og Julie (Romeo and Juliet), Op. 18 | 12:17 |
| 2 | Norwegian Rhapsody No. 1, Op. 17 | 9:13 |
| 3 | Norwegian Rhapsody No. 2, Op. 19 | 8:51 |
| 4 | Norwegian Rhapsody No. 3, Op. 21 | 9:54 |
| 5 | Norwegian Rhapsody No. 4, Op. 22 | 12:18 |
| 6 | Zorahayda, Op. 11 | 12:21 |

South Jutland Symphony Orchestra
Bjarte Engeset

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8.570322

Playing Time
64:55



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