

Fanfare Magazine USA, Sept 2025 by Dominic Hartley ©

This is a fascinating release documenting the remaking of a composer's reputation. At the start of the 1930s Rued Langgaard's deeply original music was simply no longer being programmed at public concerts. He perceptively sensed that better chances of performance lay with broadcast radio and the newly formed orchestra of what became Danmarks Radio (DR). He adopted a strategy of assailing DR with letters and scores. The DR archive apparently holds 358 such letters from Langgaard exhorting performance or furiously criticizing rejections. Whether it was because DR's administrators and music department were worn down or won over, Langgaard's tactics had some success and some 35 compositions were performed in the 20 years before the composer's death in 1952. There followed a lull when Langgaard was no longer around to advocate for his music and his early champion, Launy Grøndahl, the founding conductor of DR's orchestra, the Danish National SO, had retired. This two-disc set is mostly comprised of recordings which came after that period. With the exception of a few performances from the late 1950s and early 1960s, the majority are taken from the time when a renewed interest in Langgaard's music was taken by DR, from the mid-1960s onwards.

Disc 1 contains three symphonies presented in order of composition rather than recording. The Symphony No. 4 is in fact the most modern recording in the album, taken from a 1981 broadcast with John Frandsen conducting the DNSO. Subtitled "Leaf fall," it's an extended and atmospheric single movement depiction of the natural world with each section having a programmatic title. It works very well. We are very much in fall; E ♭ Minor predominates and Langgaard's exploration of various physical and psychological phenomena is beautifully rendered by Frandsen and the orchestra. This is one of Langgaard's most-recorded symphonies and if I have a slight preference for Thomas Dausgaard's 2002 recording on Dacapo (8224215), there's nevertheless much to enjoy in this characterful account.

The Symphony No. 6, "The Heaven-Rending," another one-movement work, is an imaginatively conceived working out of the contrast between two themes, one harmonious and reflective, the other more dissonant and disturbed. It's a tour de force of invention in a pretty uncompromising style tonally. Langgaard's somewhat enigmatic comment about the work, "It sounds like modern music, but it is not," is not wholly borne out by the spiky contrapuntal writing and the rather bleak, unrelentingly percussive final section. The work's drama and innovation led to a number of recordings after this 1961 performance by the DNSO and Martellius Lundquist. Even if you know some of those (my favorite being Neeme Järvi's on Chandos (CHAN9064)), this early account has a real sense of discovery: one can hear the orchestra coming to terms with an essentially unfamiliar grammar and vocabulary and reveling in it, which makes for compelling listening.

The most interesting of the symphony recordings, I think, is that of No. 16, "Deluge of Sun." This is Langgaard's last symphony, and he apparently being aware of this rendered it as a testament. Not unlike another last symphony, Shostakovich's 15th, it's laced with allusions to other pieces. One hears Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony, for example, and particularly Strauss's Till Eulenspiegel. Again, the performance on this set feels like an essential discovery. It was recorded at one of DR's prestigious "Thursday Concerts" in 1966 and marks the renaissance of interest in Langgaard's music at DR and then more widely. Francesco Cristofoli and the DNSO give a riveting performance of this extraordinary work, and there is a palpable frisson and sense of occasion captured on the recording. I found the conjunction of the movements at the heart of the work entitled Punishment Dance and Elegy overwhelming. The very threatening element of the former is apparently combated effectively and then washed away with the almost unbearable poignancy of Elegy, beautifully played here by the DNSO. I know this work from another fine Dacapo recording by Dausgaard released in 2008 (6220519), coupled with Langgaard's 15th, but again this historic release has a huge amount to offer.

Disc 2 has more riches. First comes Langgaard's lament for Grieg, whom the Langgaard family knew, Drapa (On the Death of Edvard Grieg). If you know the performance of the work from that same Dausgaard Dacapo release I've just mentioned, then this 1957 performance by the DNSO and Launy Grøndahl might surprise you. It has a striking immediacy and emotional force which really hit home, and Grøndahl's insistence on the maintenance of momentum give it a tremendous power. Another lament follows, Hvidbjerg-Drapa, inspired by a historic murder of a bishop in a church in Jutland in the 13th century. It's a work of almost demented intensity for most of its duration, more an expression of outrage than grief, which becomes almost completely

becalmed toward the conclusion. It's quite an abrupt piece of musical collaging, which I don't find entirely convincing, but nevertheless it's enlightening to hear what Ernst Hye-Knudsen and the DNSO made of it in 1958.

Next is the Concerto in one movement for violin and orchestra which dates from 1943, a few years before Hvidbjerg-Drapa. The Concerto projects an entirely different mood from the lament and pretty much everything else that precedes it on the set. Written as a form of escapism against the hardships inflicted by the occupying German forces, it's a lovely, sometimes wistful piece, played with exuberance and elegance by Kai Laursen, accompanied by the Odense SO and Aksel Wellejus in 1968. The Suite from the play *A Poet's Dream* by Julius Magnussen which follows is a much earlier piece than the Violin Concerto, but it shares a similar lightness of touch and generally sunny mood and belies the compositional difficulties the piece gave Langgaard. It receives an appropriately vibrant and agile performance from the Aalborg Symphony Orchestra conducted by Alf Sjøen in 1969. The same forces with the organist Grethe Krogh were behind the tremendous performance a year later of another piece inspired by 13th-century murder, *Interdict*. The contrast between the sound of the vibrant, highly theatrical drama of the orchestral music and the utterly different Lisztian writing for organ makes for memorable listening.

The set concludes with arguably Langgaard's most striking and innovative work, *The Music of the Spheres*. This dates from 1919, so comparatively early in Langgaard's career, and still sounds futuristic in 2025. Langgaard dispenses with traditional musical trappings in the work and instead we are confronted with what feels like a set of tableaux populated by differing blocks of sound with sparse melodies emerging over repetitive rhythmic patterns. An eerie overriding sense of stasis predominates. Langgaard's prefaces the score with a text talking of "the celestial and earthly chaotic music from red glowing chords with which life plays," which gives as good an idea as any of what he was after. Each of the work's 15 sections concentrates on a different aspect of sound and space. It's unsurprising that when György Ligeti saw the score in 1968 he approved, remarking that Langgaard had been 50 years ahead of his time. The performance here from the combined forces of the DNSO, the Danish National Choir, and the soprano soloist Margrethe Danielsen conducted by John Frandsen in 1971 is special. Frandsen somehow manages to sustain the spectral atmosphere, despite the gigantic forces he has to direct at an extraordinarily low volume for the vast majority of the work. He takes some interesting decisions for the performance, all of which feel vindicated. For example, he uses the Kyrie eleison as the choral text in Section VIII rather than Langgaard's seemingly nonsensical "Do-re-mi." Interpretatively his tempo is slower than Langgaard's metronome markings in the final movement, and the concluding timpani roll is held for a much shorter time than Langgaard wanted (about 10 seconds compared to Langgaard's desired minute!). But the whole effect of this final "Antichrist-Christ" section is shattering: first, chaos released to highly dramatic effect, and then the profoundly peaceful ending which successfully evokes a higher spiritual dimension. It makes for a resoundingly affirmative conclusion to the performance, as well as the perfect ending for this vital and carefully curated two-CD set as a whole. That care is manifested in the exceptional quality of the remastering and transfers carried out by Claus Byrith and the exemplary liner notes by Bendt Viinholt Nielsen. My only minor disappointment is the lack of the text and translation of Ida Lock's words for *The Music of the Spheres*. If you know Langgaard's music and any of the works on the album, you will need to listen to this. There's a thrilling narrative around the recognition of Langgaard as a major composer and a real sense of the palpable exhilaration that comes with rediscovery. All of the performances are first releases with the exception of *Drapa (On the Death of Edvard Grieg)* and the Violin Concerto.

© 2025 Fanfare