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Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Parthia Es-Dur Op. 103 (1792-93) [20:28]

Rondo Es-Dur, WoO 25 [7:23]

Symphonie No 7, Op. 92 (1812) [34:01]

Oslo Kammerakademi

rec. 3-6 October 2011, Bragernes Church, Drammen

LAWO CLASSICS LWC1036 SACD [61:55]

I grew up with the distinctive and inimitable sound of the Netherlands Wind Ensemble in the 1970s, but have been rather neglecting my wind repertoire of late. The Oslo Kammerakademi in SACD sound with some favourite Beethoven was such an enticing prospect that I hesitated not in adding this title to my review list, and the results have exceeded even my highest of expectations.

The Oslo Kammerakademi has superb character in their playing, the contrast and layering of colour in their sound apparent the outset with this disc, from mellow clarinets and bassoons to the nasal rasp of natural horns in full flight. This is a recording which makes you sit up and take note, and every time I put it on my spirits are raised.

The *Parthia* or *Octet Op. 103* is one of the young Beethoven's most joyous pieces, bouncing in with that opening *Allegro* with its arresting cadences, and plaintive winks from the oboe in the following *Andante*, all supported by the most exquisitely voiced and tuned harmonies. The recorded balance and resonance in the Bragernes Church is perfect for winds, with no loss of detail, plenty of sonority and depth, the SACD surround mix creating solidity and involvement which is a dream come true for these middle-aged ears. I'll come to comparisons later, but this is a performance and recording which inspires and has certainly revived my affinity and affection for well-played wind ensemble music. The sense of irrepressible fun in the *Finale* of *Op. 103* is an infectious display of marvellous technique and musicianship which I can imagine restoring the spirits of even the most jaded of souls. The *Rondo Andante* fits nicely as a divider between the *Octet* and the *Symphony*, intended as it was as a movement attached to the *Octet* but finally replaced by that final *Presto*. This is by no means a filler track. The horn duet in the *Rondo* sounds hauntingly gorgeous in this performance, the notes squeezed out of those valve-less natural horns with as much elegance as the players can muster, though I always have the feeling of something animal in the sound from these instruments.

Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7* was arranged for winds along with other

transcriptions when published in 1816, though the original edition was full of printing errors and this recording has been made with the Oslo Kammerakademi's own corrections using the 2007 Bärenreiter Urtext. One of the first things you will notice is an unashamed use of timpani, and to my ears this makes all the difference to this version against others I have heard. It makes you realise how important these drums are to the effect of the symphony in its full orchestral form, and though the absence of strings is a compromise of sorts it is amazing to hear with how much clarity the music is communicated in this form. The funereal tread of the second movement *Allegretto* is ably filled by bassoons and double bass, the gathering strength of the music with its counter-melodies and organically rising dynamics, and the little formal gardens of counterpoint later on are all extremely effective.

The most serious movement negotiated, the effectiveness of the dancing rhythms of the penultimate *Presto* are guaranteed, the rasp of the horns adding to the percussive notes of the timpani and the sheer sense of drive and contrast almost making you happy to drop all your orchestral versions off at the nearest charity shop. The same is almost true of the final *Allegro con brio*, though you do miss the texture of the strings sustaining those extended chords in the tutti passages. This is all still very exciting and effective however, and the sound of only 10 players is remarkable enough, Beethoven's powerful statements in very safe hands indeed.

There are quite a few recordings of the *Octet Op. 103*, but even the lively vibrancy of the Melos ensemble on their classic recording for EMI is a fair few notches lower on the energy and excitement stakes than with the Oslo Kammerakademi. The Melos Ensemble can be found on an EMI Gemini 2 CD set and also appears in a mammoth Beethoven Box (see [review](#)). Chandos duplicates both the *Octet Op. 103* and the *Symphony No. 7* in their Netherlands Wind Ensemble recording CHAN9470. These recordings are set in a large acoustic and have a more fluid feel, but the symphony is less convincing, a lack of timpani weight in the first movement resulting in loss of impact at crucial moments though this instrument does make a more rousing appearance in the final *Allegro con brio*. The Sabine Meyer Wind Ensemble has both the *Seventh* and *Eighth* symphonies on EMI 50930852 if you can find it, and these are very fine performances though a little clarinet-heavy in the recorded mix. Once again one laments the lack of drum thwacks after experiencing the Oslo Kammerakademi version.

This Beethoven programme from the Oslo Kammerakademi is praiseworthy on all levels. If you have yet to test your musical taste-buds on the wind ensemble sound this is a tremendous place to start, and if your Beethoven collection needs filling out there is no better option for extending your experience.

Dominy Clements

Stylish, surprising, and sensational.