

## AAGAARD-NILSEN *Bør. M. ROMBERG* *The Tale of*

*Taliesin. HABBESTAD* *Un rêve norvégien* • Ola Asdahl Rokkones (sax);  
Fabio Mastrangelo, cond; St. Petersburg Northern Snf • LAWO 1162 (71:39)



**The editors of *Fanfare* should ignore this first paragraph since I have to confess I engaged in a bit of sleight of hand in the headnote to this review. The composer under which the headnote is listed is Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen, whose work actually appears second on the disc. However, because my schedule this cycle permitted me to write only about half the number of reviews that is my wont, I wanted to assure readers that I haven't jumped ship as a reviewer here. Thus my rearrangement of the names likely insures that this review will appear first in the main section of reviews in the magazine.**

Now on to business: The disc in hand brings together the music of three composers who share a number of things in common. First, they're all Norwegian (presuming the title of the CD—*Norwegian Saxophone*—can be believed). Second, they've each written at least one saxophone work (i.e., those heard here). Third, I've never remotely heard of any of the three prior to encountering this disc. This would seem to be true for most of my colleagues, too, since only two of them have reviewed a work or two by Aagaard-Nilsen, with Romberg and Habbestad apparently making their debut in these pages. Fourth, each of the works by the three men has a literary connection. Fifth, each composer wrote and dedicated his work to saxophonist Ola Asdahl Rokkones, who also hails from Norway (as—I kid you not—I once heard Norway referred to by some politician). Finally, and most importantly, each of these concertos is a terrific piece.

Since the CD actually begins with Martin Romberg (b. 1978) and his *The Tale of Taliesin*, so shall I. My only previous acquaintance with the name Taliesin was in conjunction with Frank Lloyd Wright's residences (I once purchased a record collection that was located at Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona), so I had to explore Wikipedia to find out why a Norwegian composer was interested in Wright. Well, it turns out I was wrong about Wright, who didn't—after all—invent the name. Taliesin was originally a bard from sixth-century Wales, and one of the first poets to write in the Welsh language. Most of Romberg's works are inspired by myths and legends from folklore and literature, so this subject (who was both a character from Welsh mythology and a historical person who was associated with the court of King Arthur) appealed to the composer as the basis for a musical setting. The concerto is cast in eight connected sections, with the saxophone soloist filling the role of the protagonist Taliesin. The work opens with a mysterious introduction, effectively evoking an era shrouded by the mists of time, but it is not long before the saxophone makes its entrance with a surprisingly jocular and playful tune. The style of the music is quite Romantic—no more modern than that of Vaughan Williams, and in fact bearing some resemblance to the more folk-inspired works of the English master. I also hear a bit of Eastern influence in certain portions, an impression amplified by Romberg's use of the interval of the augmented second. Beyond the mellifluous turns of phrase and pleasing harmonic palette of this composer, I was quite taken with his imaginative orchestration with its subtle flutterings in

the winds, use of pedal point, and great variety of orchestral color. This is an immediately attractive work, which the notes accurately describe as more of a tone poem for saxophone and orchestra than a concerto. Given that it also displays the soloist to excellent advantage, I cannot imagine that it will not eventually work its way into the standard repertory of the saxophone. By itself, this masterful work is worth the price of admission to acquiring this disc.

But there's more! The name, *Bør*, of Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen's three-movement concerto can be translated as "burden," "rainfall," or even the verb "ought to." For this work, the literary connection comes in the fact that it is based on a contemporary poem by Norwegian poet Stein Mehren (1935–2007). Aagaard-Nilsen (b. 1964) intends his piece to be not only a "study" of the poem that inspired the work, but also of the saxophone itself. As a result, the concerto is replete with effects, both subtle and overt, that conjure up an atmosphere of mystery—much more, I may say, than that of the preceding work. The piece, given its static nature and its use of wide trills, multiphonics, astringent sonorities, and advanced techniques, inhabits a completely different world from that of *Taliesin*, but is equally effective in its grip upon the auditor. Its first movement employs wide use of the unison, alternating between expansion away from and contraction back to that interval. The second section (or movement) sparkles and glitters throughout its course, and the third resumes the ambience of the first, albeit with denser textures. The piece demands a good bit more from the listener, but will offer plenty of rewards to anyone willing to give it the attention it requires.

The closing *Un rêve norvégien* (A Norwegian Dream) by Kjell (pronounced, as I recall, approximately "shell") Habbestad (b. 1955) sits stylistically somewhere between the goalposts formed by the two preceding works. Its harmonic language is quite free, and sometimes seems to veer precariously closely to the Expressionism of Schoenberg and his circle (albeit sans the dodecaphony). The music often has an improvisatory feel: It is anything but predictable in its twists and turns, but quite satisfying once the listener allows himself to be carried along in the direction the composer is going. In the concerto's slower middle movement, the saxophone soloist is almost submerged as a part of the texture of the orchestra, only occasionally rising to the prominence one would expect in a concerted work. The final movement is suffused with images from Norwegian folklore, including a bridge guarded by a polymorphic being combining a dog, a snake, and an ox—a sort of Scandinavian sphinx, if you will. This very effective work, almost a half-hour in duration, constitutes a major addition to the contemporary saxophone concerto literature.

Saxophonist Ola Asdahl Rokkones clearly has the chops to bring off these works, but beyond that, he plays with a suavity that falls most graciously upon the ear, and an instinctive feel for the art of making music that makes him one of today's leading exponents of the saxophone. His performances of these three works will go a long way towards making them known in the saxophone community. Conductor Fabio Mastrangelo and his St. Petersburg Northern Sinfonia keep everything well paced and sensitively rendered, making this a disc simply not to be missed by aficionados of fine saxophone playing.

**David DeBoor Canfield**

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