

**WALTON Viola Concerto.** **SINDING Suite in the Old Style** • Eivind Holtsmark Ringstad (va); <sup>2</sup>Arvid Engegård, <sup>1</sup>Joshua Weilerstein, cond; Oslo P • LAWO 1133 (41:27)



Viola Concertos  
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Given the relative scarcity of neo-Romantic viola concertos, you would think that violists would be eager to pick the late-blooming, lush fruit of William Walton's concerto, but for some reason they don't seem to be and never really have been since it was written in 1929. Not only has the piece not been recorded that often, but to add a bit of irony to it, among the recordings that have been made over the years, a number of the better-known ones are by violinists who have temporarily switched to the viola for the occasion, for example Yehudi Menuhin, Nigel Kennedy, and Maxim Vengerov. That is not to say that violists of note haven't been heard from. Two recordings I have and take pleasure in feature violists Nobuko Imai and Lawrence Power; and though unfortunately it's not a recording I have, there is quite possibly the definitive version of the work with William Primrose under the baton of Walton himself conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra.

Norwegian-born (1994) violist Eivind Holtsmark Ringstad is a rising young Scandinavian artist who made his debut with the Oslo Philharmonic in 2013, launching him on an international career. Based on this new release, which I take to be Ringstad's first commercial recording, I can attest that he is very, very talented, indeed. If you are unfamiliar with Walton's concerto, or you do know it but have never warmed to it, I would strongly urge you to hear this performance of it. To be perfectly honest, as much as I appreciate the Imai and Power versions, until I heard Ringstad in this recording with Joshua Weilerstein and the Oslo Philharmonic, I don't think I realized what a really beautiful score Walton's concerto is. Ringstad plays the bravura passages with swashbuckling panache, which is what I would expect, but the real heart of the work is in its moments of emotional intimacy, as in the closing pages of the finale, and it's

here that Ringstad plays with a tenderness and poignancy that takes my breath away. Simply gorgeous!

Turnabout is fair play. If violinists can appropriate Walton's Viola Concerto unto themselves, then violists should be equally justified in appropriating Sinding's *Suite in the Old Style* unto themselves, and that is exactly what Ringstad has done, performing the piece in an arrangement for viola by Thore Røsth, a violinist in the Orchestra of the Norwegian Opera and Ballet.

I suppose it's not really funny, but something about Andrew Mellor's album note caught my warped sense of humor. He explains how during World War II, "Walton, in his 40s, drove ambulances and wrote a series of film scores" in support of the British war effort, while "Sinding, in his late eighties and suffering from dementia, joined the Nazi Party." So now, we're trying out a legal defense of incompetency to absolve Sinding of his Nazi sympathies. The dotty octogenarian must not have known what he was doing. Well, sorry, but the judge of this court isn't buying it. You can be old and a fool and still be a Fascist, but some bad deeds go unpunished too. Sinding croaked barely two months later, before his own compatriots could shun him the way other Quislings were ostracized after the War.

The first movement of Sinding's *Suite in the Old Style* is justly famous in its own right as an encore piece and as a test of a violinist's (or in this case, a violist's) motoric velocity and endurance. At 1:45, Ringstad comes within six seconds of Heifetz, who crosses the finish line in 1:39. It reminds me that stunt by a pianist who played Chopin's "Minute" Waltz with a stick of dynamite strapped to his back and a 60-second fuse burning away. He had to finish in less than a minute, leaving enough time to put out the fuse. I'm also sure that there has to be a joke somewhere about the first movement of Sinding's suite being Rimsky-Korsakov's bumblebee on steroids.

As for the remaining two movements, they're probably not as well known for the fact that the first movement is so often heard as a stand-alone piece. The second movement is a nostalgic idyll, while the finale is a fast, Norwegian-flavored driving dance that has elements of Hardanger fiddling in it. The whole suite works exceptionally well on viola, no small credit to Eivind Holtmark Ringstad who plays magnificently. His modernized 1768 ex-Vieuxtemps G. B. Guadagnini is not as large in size and dark in tone as some violas are, but it has a beguiling sweetness to it, and its ability to "speak" quickly facilitates Ringstad's impressive agility.

My sole disappointment in this album is that there isn't more to it. Forty-one minutes of music leaves half the disc empty, and leaves us wanting to hear more from this brilliant young player. Still, for the Walton alone, it's worth it and strongly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

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