

## Reviews - Christina Bjørkøe

### **Beethoven Diabelli Variations CD review**

"Stylish, tonally sensitive, highly individual playing from gifted danish virtuoso Christina Bjørkøe, who finds a Schumannesque poetic intimacy in this piece"

- *BBC Music Magazine, 2014*

### **Niels Gade, Piano Sonata in E Minor, 2010**

"Christina Bjørkøe has made some terrific Danish recordings for Dacapo of Holmboe, Riisager, Bentzon, Koppel and others. Here she gives an account that is both romantically impassioned (Sonata) and wonderfully sensitive (Akvareller), allowing Gade's mellisonant invention to speak through her fingers. With pretty good recorded sound, this is a recital to savour, one that will appeal to anyone who, regardless of critical tutting, likes their music 'old-fashioned'."

- *Musicweb-international.com, 13 Dec 2013*

### **Carl Nielsen Complete Piano Works, 2008**

"By random selection, this just happened to be my next assignment after I'd dispatched my review of a Zig-Zag Territories disc of Janáček's solo piano music with Hélène Couvert. I mention this not because I intend to draw parallels between the lives or music of these two very different composers (though they were closely contemporaneous in time, their cultural

and musical backgrounds, not to mention their personalities and life experiences, were poles apart), but because certain parallels exist for me relative to my own knowledge and appreciation of these two very important figures that bridge the start of the 20th century. In both cases, I can claim fair familiarity with their orchestral works and chamber music. Yet I

can claim far less familiarity with their works for solo piano. Also, I confess that my discovery of Nielsen was overdue, delayed by the notion—not uncommon, I think, to many of my generation—that he was Sibelius's weak sister. That perception was instantly dispelled the first time I heard Nielsen's *Maskarade*, an unusual avenue of revelation for me, since

opera is not my first love. But that led me to his symphonies, string quartets, and his concertos for clarinet and for violin. His works for solo piano, however, remained for me uncharted territory.

One thing that both Nielsen and Janáček did have in common is that neither of them wrote copiously for piano. Here on two discs is Nielsen's complete output for the instrument, spanning a period of four decades from 1890 to 1931, the year of his death. Quite unlike Janáček's pieces for piano, however, those of Nielsen's that venture into the descriptive,

depictive, or programmatic are the exception to the rule. Though he wrote no work designated a sonata, it can be seen from most of the pieces' titles that Nielsen was concerned to express himself musically within the boundaries of Baroque and Classical forms. Even movement designations within multimovement works are stated mainly as fairly basic tempo indications. The exceptions of course are the *Humoresque-Bagatelles*, which have titles like "The Spinning Top," "The Doll's March," and the "Musical Clock," and the early *Five Pieces*, op. 3, with titles like "Elf Dance" and "Mignon," both works somewhat reminiscent of Schumann's *Album for the Young* and *Kinderszenen*.

The *Suite*, op. 45, continues to carry the nickname "Luciferian," given by Nielsen himself, but later withdrawn by the composer due to its unintended satanic association. An original sketch for the work refers to the elements of fire and water. The composer's use of the adjective "Luciferian" arose from his misunderstanding and misappropriation of the original Hebrew, Greek, and Latin in which Lucifer, the Morning Star, came to be translated as "the bringer of light," not "fire," as Nielsen imagined. The Lucifer-into-Satan transformation was a later Christian contribution.

The collection is arranged in chronological order, so that most of the material on disc 1—up through the *Dream of a Merry Christmas* of 1905, or approximately the halfway point in Nielsen's 40-year output of piano pieces—will be of a familiarity to you even if you've never heard it before, because it seems to have been strongly influenced by Schumann, with perhaps a bit of Chopin thrown in for good measure. Between 1905 and 1916, there was a hiatus. What comes next, the *Chaconne*, op. 32, represents a tectonic shift. Beginning with a Bach-like aria reminiscent of the *Goldberg Variations*, Nielsen quickly departs on a phantasmagoric journey of strange harmonies and even stranger sonorities that run the gamut from Beethoven's late piano sonatas to Alkan and Busoni. Much the same can be said of the 1917 *Theme and Variations*, op. 40, and the 1919/20 *Suite*, op. 45, that follow it. Another hiatus of seven years follows. Then, between 1927 and 1931, come Nielsen's last three works in the medium, the *Three Pieces*, op. 59, the



Piano Music for Young and Old, and a 34-second etude titled simply Piano Piece. In these late works, Nielsen has synthesized his Romantic impulses with his modernist leanings. Bach again comes to the fore in the 20th movement of the Piano Music for Young and Old in a piece appropriately titled "Alla Bach." Echoes of Couperin, Scarlatti, Handel, and others are heard, too, throughout this cycle, but with unexpected twists and turns that are Nielsen's unique stamp. This is a wonderful set that has enlarged my knowledge of Nielsen and increased my already considerable appreciation of his music. There's not a piece in this collection that I did not enjoy listening to, some of them multiple times. Having already admitted that Nielsen's piano music has been largely terra incognita to me, I'm not able to tell you how Christina Bjørkøe's performances stack up to competing versions, of which I'm sure Martin Roscoe's on Hyperion and Elisabeth Westenhof's on BIS—two well-known artists I would expect to

excel in this repertoire—are equally fine. However, Bjørkøe is fully up to the task technically, and she plays with a great deal of finesse and genuine feeling for the content and style of Nielsen's music. Recorded between July and August 2007 in Copenhagen's The Black Diamond studio, Bjørkøe's unidentified piano is beautifully captured in full detail and pristine clarity. Strongly recommended."

- Jerry Dubins, *Fanfare Magazine*, Issue 32:5, May/June 2009

### **Carl Nielsen Complete Piano Works, 2008**

"The photo of Christina Bjørkøe in the booklet for this release has been placed next to one of Carl Nielsen at the piano – not by chance, I feel, since they both share the same impish grin and impression of lively curiosity and creativity. Having recently looked into the same music played by Martin Roscoe on the Hyperion label, I still felt quite in tune with Nielsen's piano work when approaching this new release from CPO.

I very much liked Roscoe's recording, and set it above Hyperion's earlier outing in this repertoire with Mina Miller, but only by an increasingly dwindling margin when I started re-adjusting to Miller's sense of drama and contrast. Having placed Roscoe as top dog mere months ago, I now however find myself faced with a new release which seems to push the boundaries even further. Christina Bjørkøe takes a good 15 minutes longer than Roscoe over the entire programme, and

takes a consistently broader view of much of the music. This is often not so much the result of significantly slower tempi, but a willingness to allow light and breathing space through at certain moments or for extended passages, at other times building up monumental strength, in a similar way to that notable recording of Nielsen's 5th Symphony conducted by Rafael Kubelik. Bjørkøe has poetry and lightness of touch in the Five Piano Pieces Op.3, throwing more rubato than Roscoe in

movements such as the Humoreske. I'm not always a guaranteed fan of pulling music around in this way, but Bjørkøe does it in such a winning and stylish way that I was sold immediately. There is a 'way' with this kind of music which feels right, and while there might be dances which take on a different meaning with this kind of playing one can sense the spirit of Grieg and other Nordic composers nodding in sage approval. Unlike both Hyperion artists, Bjørkøe does play these pieces in chronological order, the booklet notes pointing out that in the span of Nielsen's career he was able to present his first symphony to Brahms, and was working on his sixth as Shostakovich was on his first. The Symphonic Suite Op.8

followed on from Nielsen's successful first symphony, but while sharing some thematic relations with that work it also inhabits a closer-knit and more intense, nervy world. Bjørkøe does linger over some moments more than other players, but does maintain a natural, narrative feel to the music, bringing out themes and lyrical lines and often giving the piece greater appeal than I had previously given it credit. Listening to the penultimate Andante and final Allegro you get a feel for the orchestral nature of the music – Nielsen's ears still ringing with the sound of his symphony and reluctant to leave it behind entirely. Bjørkøe allows the music to develop in much the same way you can imagine a conductor handling and orchestral score – taking and giving back, reinforcing tension and scattering resolved tonalities like seeds on a ploughed field.

Bjørkøe's view of the Humoresque-Bagatelles is that they are hardly bagatelles at all, throwing in technical fireworks and emphasising the emotive extremes in even the most simple sounding of pieces. The Dukke-Marsch is arguably taken too slow to be a proper march, but if you can imagine this as the over-emphatic, preening walk of a highly decorated martinet on full public view then this can work as well as any other interpretation. There's not much you can do with the Festival Prelude for the New Century than blast it out like an orchestral tutti, and that's what Bjørkøe does.



Paired with the Dream about 'Silent Night', it heightens the gentle poetry of the latter.

The remarkable Chaconne Op.32 sees Nielsen at first having fun with the ideas, and then as the span of the work becomes more serious, getting more and more involved in the working out of solutions both pianistic and compositionally technical. Bjørnkøe hears all of this, and gives the music all of the space it deserves, layering textures, presenting thematic relationships without labouring the point, and urging us to see the humour in the piece as well as its wild excesses and magnificent single span. The upward runs towards the end create a quite magical effect.

The Theme and variations Op.40 followed closely on the heels of the Chaconne in terms of its creation, and after its Brahmsian opening takes off almost immediately into improbable realms. Weaving through the twists and turns of this labyrinth of a piece is once again a joy of intense contrast and verdant wonder under Bjørnkøe's fingers. It's hard work, as the music is constantly demanding out attention, never letting us relax and feel we can 'switch off' for a few moments. I

love Bjørnkøe's contrasting articulation in this piece, and while she can give the most penetrating staccato her touch is always controlled – the all important dynamic outer limits held for just a very few significant notes. The depths of funereal gloom in the central variations really are deep – dark through understatement, the notes being allowed to say it all and in their own good time. Without wanting to labour the point, this is a magnificent recording and certainly the best performance of this piece I've ever heard, right up to the carefully weighed final notes and chords.

Disc 2 opens with the Suite Op.45. Bjørnkøe takes seriously Nielsen's own description of the first movement, that it should be "cold and brittle in tone and in a peacefully flowing tempo..." The alliance of cold and warmth, even that of leaping flames, can be traced to an original sketch which is headed 'Ild og Vand', or 'Fire and Water.' The second movement is taken at a slower pace than I've heard it done elsewhere, but the mixture of colours and sonorities works equally well; played

"with the tenderest tone and subtlest pedalling, as though listening." The Molto adagio e patetico opens and continues very molto, stretching some of the rhythmic relationships to the limit – but it works, and keeps you on the edge of your seat. This is one movement where timings are of interest, with Roscoe coming in at 4:45 and Bjørnkøe at 7:17. Make of this what you will, but I find she makes this one of Nielsen's most memorable fifth movements is marvellous, and demonic and

moving in the final Allegro non troppo ma vigoroso, though never losing that attractive transparency of touch which makes me want to hear movements, certainly in terms of the piano works. Bjørnkøe's touch in the restrained fourth and her in all kinds of other repertoire.

The Three Piano Pieces Op.59 are in places more overtly pianistic than many of Nielsen's other piano pieces, and Bjørnkøe takes the opportunity to flex her chops while keeping true to her fellow countryman's style and idiom. The mixture of Debussy-esque colour, quasi traditional piano writing and temptingly avant-garde moments are a heady mixture which Bjørnkøe relishes. This is a potent work hiding under the cover of a very innocent title, and this pianist brings out the best of it from start to finish.

The Piano Pieces for Young and Old are as much part of Nielsen's own self declared credo of 'clarity, simplicity and strength' as any of his other works. Again, Bjørnkøe takes each miniature as a jewel in its own right, not imposing artificial significance on straightforward exercises, but nonetheless imbuing each with its own musical power and expressive weight in an unfussy, unmannered, but entirely compelling fashion. The same goes for the little Piano Piece, a minor flourish, but genuine Nielsen for all that.

For those interested, the cover art for this release is a painting from around 1898/1902 by Vilhelm Hammershøi, whose atmospheric, silent interiors are most certainly worth further investigation. As if you hadn't guessed already, I am entirely sold on this new set of Nielsen's piano music, and would recommend it to anyone wanting to explore beyond the symphonies. The recording is rich and full, the piano sound of demonstration quality, and captured close enough to reveal a whiff the felt dampers rising with the pedal, but also with a sympathetic spaciousness and a pleasant, nonintrusive resonance. I would also recommend this recording to anyone who has tried Nielsen's piano works and found them 'hard going'. No, they are not always the easiest of works, but listeners should find they get out of the pieces as much as they invest in terms of their own efforts, and Christina Bjørnkøe rewards us at every turn. Do I prefer this to Martin Roscoe's Hyperion set? Yes, but, as I found Mina Miller's set to be complimentary to Roscoe's, I also find

complimentary to Bjørnkøe's in many ways and certainly won't want to be without it in the future. You may not always want the real extremes which Bjørnkøe gives to the music, and some may not find these aspects of her playing entirely convincing. I do however, and find going back to other players that I miss the intensity and variety of expression Bjørnkøe finds in the music. She has Nielsen under her skin in a way I've never heard before, and it's been a real revelation. Sorry guys

– but I urge you, buy Danish."

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### **Carl Nielsen Complete Piano Works, 2008**

“Christina Bjørkøe's complete Carl Nielsen piano music cycle arrives on the heels of Martin Roscoe's edition for Hyperion. In general, Bjørkøe is a freer, more impulsive player who does not always follow Nielsen's tempo markings by the book, in contrast to Roscoe's more literal interpretations. Her attitude especially lends itself well to shorter character works, such as the delightful teaching pieces that make up Piano Music for the Young and Old Op. 53, or the Op. 11 Bagatelles. In the latter's "Spinning Top", for example, compare Bjørkøe's capricious accents and detached articulation to Roscoe's suave dispatch, and you'll find both convincing. On the other hand, more tightly-knit tempo relationships and cumulative unity emerge from Roscoe's steadier, more disciplined shaping of the Chaconne, the Op. 8 Symphonic Suite's Andante, and the large-scale Theme and Variations Op. 40 (arguably Nielsen's greatest piano work). For overall consistency, choose Roscoe's Nielsen as a point of reference, yet CPO's closer, warmer sonics help make the case for Bjørkøe's finest playing.”

- *Jed Distler, Classics Today*

### **Carl Nielsen Complete Piano Works, 2008**

*"Følsomme klaverhænder forløser Carl Nielsen.*

Intimt og eftertænksomt, men også med overblik og overskud. Ny indspilning af Carl Niensens klavermusik overvinder alle forhindringer.

I 1926, på højden af sin karriere og kun fem år inden sin død, er Carl Nielsen hædersgæst ved en festkoncert i Paris. Danskeren skal slås til ridder af Æreslegionen. Foruden franske ministre er flere betydelige franske komponistkolleger til stede. Ved sammenkomsten efter festkoncerten opfordres komponisterne til at spille på flyglet.

### *Et vidunderligt stykke*

Carl Niensens datter fortæller: "Bedst husker jeg Ravel, som på en henrivende og teknisk dygtig måde spillede sine egne ting." Derefter spillede Roussel også smukt, og nu kom turen til fader, som først trykkede sig lidt. Han var bestemt ikke klaverspiller. Det mærkværdige skete imidlertid, han sad lidt i tanker og begyndte så at spille en stor fantasi af Mozart ... Men pludselig gik han i stå, vendte sig om og sagde med et udtryk, jeg aldrig kan glemme: Ak ja, det er et vidunderligt stykke, men nu kan jeg ikke huske mere". Klaveret var ikke spillemandssønnen Carl Niensens instrument, og ved den lejlighed havde en mere selvsikker komponist sikkert holdt sig smilende tilbage og nøjedes med at modtage sin hyldelse.

Halm i træskoene. Men Carl Nielsen var ikke selvsikker. Og han kom ikke fra et hjem med klaver. Han kom fra et hjem med violin og halm i træskoene. Fynboen med strithåret duperede og scorede sin første ungdomskæreste med sit violinspil, men når han satte sig til tangenterne, var han ingen verdensmand. Det var som symfoniker, operakomponist og ophavsmand til geniale danske sangmelodier, han brændte igennem.

Ligesom resten af Carl Niensens værker for klaver er hans fem tidlige småstykker opus 3 gået i arv fra komponisten via disciplen, komponistkollegaen og pianisten Herman D. Koppel, der blev optaget på Konservatoriet med Carl Niensens velvillige kommentarer som vind i musiksejlene. Op i en anden sfære Herman D. Koppel døde for ti år siden. En dobbelt-cd fra pladeselskabet Dacapo lader os – i lidt bleg gengivelse, ganske vist – høre det friske og ligefremme billede af klavermusikken, Koppel med nøgterne fingre fremstillede. På en helt ny indspilning af Carl Niensens samlede klaverværker løfter pianisten Christina Bjørkøe musikken op i en anden sfære. Bjørkøe spiller ikke Nielsen, som Koppel gjorde det, og som det siden har været god tone. Men musikken ånder varmere og klarere end nogensinde. Den finder ikke bare en fortolker, men en forløser. En pianist, der elsker den også for dens fejl.

### *Beåndet*

Tag Carl Niensens 'Chaconne'. Et værk på beskedne ti minutter, der ikke desto mindre tæller som et hovedværk i Carl Niensens klaverproduktion. Hvor Koppel er perkussiv, klar og atletisk i sin formning af chaconnen, er Bjørkøe beåndet. Poetisk. Og – frem for alt – velklingende i et omfang, som Koppels indspilning med dens karske klaverbehandling ret

beset aldrig kommer i nærheden af at være. Man skal over 50 år tilbage i tiden til en indspilning af den i dag glemte, men fremragende danske pianistinde France Ellegaard på Danacord for at finde noget, der matcher. Den køligere, om end superklare Leif Ove Andsnes holder længe musikken tilbage på sit Nielsen-udvalg fra Virgin Classics. Han støber indledningen ind i glas.

#### *Klingrende dissonanser*

Christina Bjørke forløser. Tager straks musikken til sig. Alle spændende ideer til trods kan der være noget kantet i Carl Nielsens musik, og kritikere, der elsker ham for det, vil løfte pegefingern i frygt for, at romantisk creme nu igen skal smøres hen over musikkens ujævnheder, som det skete, da Danacord for ti år siden udgav en samlet amerikansk indspilning med den først og fremmest storladne pianist Mina Miller.

Men de klingrende dissonanser er ikke retoucheret væk hos Bjørkøe. Det er hendes klaverbehandling og hendes omfavnende sans for musikken, der får tingene til at falde i hak. Intime bekendelser deler hun med lytteren, så man nærmest ikke kan få sig til at berette om det til tredjepart. I forlængelse heraf lægger hun stor eftertanke, ja ligefrem romantisk smerte i den beskedne folketone, som indleder de fem små klaverstykker opus 3.

#### *Vingefang*

Her mærkes alvoren og traditionen som udgangspunkt for Nielsens første stykker i det lille format. Den Brahms-inspirerede 'Symfonisk suite', skrevet kun et par år efter opus 3, får pianistisk vingefang under Bjørkøes stærke hænder. Her overkommes alle de tekniske vanskeligheder og svagheder, der måtte være i musikken. Med det, der lyder som lethed, klars Carl Nielsens til tider klodsede bud på den store gestus. Den ambitiøse, glasklingrende suite opus 45 har Bjørkøe gjort helt til sin.

#### *Rum til vemod*

Med eftertanke og klaverteknik som de nøgler, der åbner for oplevelsen af Carl Nielsen som tankekomponist. Her er rum til vemod. Uagtet musikkens modernistiske udfald. Og guderne skal vide, det flyger med forpinte dissonanser i et værk, Nielsen lige efter Første Verdenskrig kaldte »luciferisk«, og som Bjørkøe spiller bedre end Leif Ove Andsnes. Så er det sagt.

#### *Følger Nielsen ind i ilden*

Carl Nielsen tænkte på ildens rå magt, og Bjørkøe følger ham ind i ilden. Men hun tager også Nielsens pompøse festpræludium til et nyt århundrede, offentliggjort på forsiden af Politiken nytårsdag 1901, og hans sukkersøde 'Drømmen om 'Glade Jul'' i forsvar, så man smiler. Men uden at le. De tre sene klaverstykker opus 59 malkes, mens de skrøbeligt femtonige stykker opus 53 – måske de mest nielsenske stykker på hele cd'en – bringes til blomstring helt uden tvang.

Christina Bjørkøes cd er en musikhistorisk bedrift."

- Thomas Michelsen, Politiken, 20 Nov 2008