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## CD review

By Bradley Winterton / Contributing reporter



### STRAUSS, RACHMANINOFF, SIBELIUS

#### Highlights of Shao-chia Lu & Taiwan Philharmonic Live

#### 2-CDs

#### MU 150001/ NSO 025

This pair of CDs contains three items that are more or less negligible, and one that is a superb masterpiece by any standards.

Taiwan Philharmonic Live is the name by which Taipei's National

Symphony Orchestra (NSO) goes in the international market place when issuing live recordings of its frequently striking performances. We'll review some of the earlier samples in the coming months, but here we have the latest to appear, two CDs packaged together and issued under the title of the main work included, Strauss's Symphonia Domestica.

The NSO is one of Asia's great orchestras. It's been conducted by such illustrious names as Lorin Maazel, Leonard Slatkin and Christopher Hogwood, performed with soloists of the caliber of Mischa Maisky, Hilary Hahn and Yo-Yo Ma (馬友友), and collaborated with world-class opera houses such as Opera Australia and Deutsche Oper am Rhein. Most of all, it's the cream of Taiwan's enormously prolific classical music scene, without parallel anywhere in the region.

These new CDs, published in October, contain Rachmaninov's symphonic poem *Isle of the Dead* and Sibelius's *Symphony No. 2*, as well as Richard Strauss's 45-minute symphony and the short string sextet from his opera *Capriccio*.

Rachmaninov's *Isle of the Dead* has never, unlike his four piano concertos, established itself as a major work. It remains a concert-filler, something that, based as it is on the 19th century Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin's series of paintings, has the promise of mystery and foreboding, but only ever achieves the latter. Lu Shao-chia (呂紹嘉) gives of his best, but as a work it's not something anyone will buy these CDs for in its own right.

Sibelius's first two symphonies have always been more attractive than his later ones. They summon up the romantic aspect of the frozen north of his native Finland, and are endlessly melodic and evocative, while the subsequent five symphonies toyed with modernism in ways that were only intermittently successful.

I first heard this symphony when I was a teenager. I was sick, and it was the only music I had. I therefore tend to associate it with lemon and honey, and a solitary test pilot high up in a wintry English sky. At first I thought I rather liked it, but then I changed my mind. It

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was only later that I discovered critics who thought his music heavy-handed and repetitive. But even then, how I longed for Mozart!

Nonetheless, Symphony No 2 is Sibelius's most popular symphony. There are apparently 138 recordings of it in existence. For decades Colin Davis's version with the Boston Symphony Orchestra was considered incomparable — maybe it was the one I listened to from my sick-bed all those years ago. Anyway, it's now available on a bargain label (Decca Duo 4461572). Several other versions appeared last year, the 150th anniversary of Sibelius's birth, including one from the Halle under Mark Elder (CDHLL7516) and an acclaimed version of all the symphonies on three CDS from the Lahti Symphony Orchestra (BIS — BIS2076).

The Taiwan version is dynamic and vividly recorded — it is greeted at the end by shouts and screams — but it's the Strauss symphony that will appeal to true connoisseurs.

Strauss is the true heir of Mozart (though anyone happening to stumble on his Elektra will understandably disagree), and this outstanding performance shows the NSO at their very best. It brought tears to my eyes and joy to my heart over and over again. It's not really a symphony at all but a tone-poem, like Don Juan or Death and Transfiguration, only longer and more virtuosic. As for the "domestica" part, this is best forgotten altogether, along with jokes like the fall of the gods in Wagner's Ring being less of an orchestral sensation than a baby in its bath in Strauss. This is a major musical masterpiece, and there's no need to say anything further, let alone anything demeaning, about it.

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