

# GRAMOPHONE *Focus*

## BRUCKNER FROM BEIJING

**Christian Hoskins** reports on a distinctive new cycle of the Austrian's symphonies from China's NCPA Orchestra with their conductor Jia Lü



Jia Lü leads the NCPA Orchestra in expansive Bruckner, the playing expressive and refulgent

East Asia might be geographically and culturally far removed from the 19th-century environment in which Bruckner lived but the composer's symphonies have long been performed and appreciated in the region. No fewer than three sets of the symphonies were recorded under the baton of Takashi Asahina in Japan between 1976 and 1995 and a complete cycle conducted by Hun-Joung Lim was released in South Korea in 2017. These versions have now been joined by a cycle from a Chinese conductor and orchestra with the additional benefit, denied to the earlier versions, of being given an international release.

The China NCPA Orchestra, resident in Beijing's National Centre for the Performing Arts, was founded in 2010 and Jia Lü appointed its Principal Conductor in 2012. Lü's previous roles include music directorships of the Verona Opera and the Norrköping Symphony Orchestra, where he recorded several discs for BIS, although as far as I can tell these are his first recordings of Bruckner. Given the performers' lack of track record in this repertoire, one might not therefore know what to expect, but the interpretations here are distinctive

and compelling if not always entirely mainstream in their approach.

In terms of editions, Lü uses the final versions of Symphonies Nos 1, 2, 3 and 8, and the second of the three versions of No 4. The performance of the First Symphony, recorded live, is perhaps the finest of the cycle. I'm not enamoured of the unmarked crescendo and slowing that Lü adopts on the approach to the climax of the *Adagio* but this is otherwise one of the most impressive recordings of the 1891 version of the symphony now available. The recording of the Second Symphony also derives from live concerts, although the performance here is not quite as involving. Both feature some occasional audience noise, and the Second also retains the applause at the end.

The remainder of the symphonies were recorded under studio conditions. Of these, the least controversial is the performance of the Sixth Symphony, which benefits from a luminous and deeply felt interpretation of the *Adagio* as well as an exciting account of the finale. The remainder of the recordings are notable for the very slow tempos that Lü adopts. This is especially so in the case of the Eighth Symphony,

which extends to 100 minutes. Such timings bring us into the territory of the recordings made by Sergiu Celibidache in the 1980s and '90s and the more recent cycle by his pupil Rémy Ballot. It's to Lü's credit that, in most cases, I find his performances more persuasive than the equivalent versions by Celibidache and Ballot. The Seventh Symphony, which features an unusually sensitive and moving performance of the *Adagio*, is especially successful, while the Fifth is distinguished by a firmly controlled account of the final movement that builds to an immensely stirring coda.

None of the performances in the set is less than good, although the finale of the Eighth Symphony, which surprisingly starts faster than Bruckner's indicated metronome marking of *minim=69*, suffers from a performance of the coda that manages to sound considerably protracted. Following the recordings against the score also reveals a rather variable attention to dynamics. In some cases, such as the build-up from *pp* to *fff* at the end of the opening movement of the Sixth Symphony, the rendering is exemplary, but at other times, including much of the opening movement of the Fourth, adherence to markings is less well observed and contrasts underplayed. This is a pity as otherwise the orchestral playing is notably expressive and refulgent. Anyone listening to these recordings without knowing the identity of the orchestra would be hard pressed to tell from both the solo and ensemble playing that this is not one of the major European or American ensembles.

The recording quality suggests a rather reverberant acoustic, which occasionally blurs detail in louder passages, but is otherwise warm and well balanced. In summary, this a distinctive and generally rewarding cycle, despite the unusually slow tempos that feature in many of the symphonies.

The recordings are widely available on streaming services but if you want physical copies – the symphonies are available individually – they may be found with a little hunting around online. Those interested in exploring the individual releases should start with the excellent accounts of the First, Sixth and Seventh symphonies. **G**

### THE RECORDINGS



**Bruckner Symphonies Nos 1-9**  
China NCPA Orchestra / Jia Lü  
NCPA Classics