

# Clear Signals

## A Requiem for Stereo

I've just spent 16 pretty remarkable minutes reveling in the sensory spectacle of a new DVD—and I didn't even turn on my video monitor. What captured my imagination was a recording of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, on one of the first audio-only DVDs to reach the consumer market.

This magnificent production (Delos DV-7001, \$25), utilizing Dolby Digital 5-channel discrete surround sound, signals the great leap forward that proponents of the audio DVD have promised it would be. As a classical music critic and record reviewer, I've tracked the art and the triumphs of recording technology for 30 years, and I have never heard anything like this. For my money, the 2-channel stereo era is herewith superseded.

What I find so auspicious, so downright exciting about this recording is its completeness as a musical event. To begin with, it is a beautiful, stylish, disciplined performance by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Andrew Litton. So natural is the embrace of sound that one doesn't think "recording" at all, but "performance."

My benchmark for the sound of classical recordings has always been the sound I hear in the best concert halls—the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, the Berlin Philharmonie, Symphony Hall in Boston, and Carnegie Hall in New York. Two-channel stereo could never evoke the resonance of instruments and voices in those grand spaces. For that matter, the pioneers of stereo never preferred a 2-channel format. The physical limitations of a stylus tracking a groove determined the opening chapter of stereo sound.

But that was then. The page has just been turned, and we have been plunged into a brave and splendid new chapter.

I'm doubly impressed—and encouraged—by this DVD because I was already

quite familiar with the recording in its earlier CD release (Delos DE 3196), mixed down to matrix Dolby Surround from the 5-channel master. I reviewed that incarnation some months ago for *The New York Times* and was struck even then by the engaging, you-are-there warmth of the surround channel (monaural in the Dolby matrix).

I wondered whether the full 5-channel treatment could meaningfully enhance the Dolby Surround version; and, in the back of my mind, I feared what might really lurk in the 5-channel recording. Would the unfettered digital surround turn the Dallas Symphony's smartly integrated effort into a hi-fi Ping-Pong match?

Shame on me for having even considered such a possibility—the masterly hand behind this *1812* was that of none other than recording engineer John Eargle, whose musical sensitivity and taste stamp recording after recording in Delos' superbly produced catalog. And the *1812* on DVD well may be his finest achievement.

The advantage of those discrete "stereo" channels at the rear is huge. Not only does the size of the listening space seem to increase, but the instruments and voices resonate and interact in relationships distinctly characteristic of the concert hall rather than of one's living room. Just as in a well-designed concert hall, one has very little sense of sound planes, or indeed of the sound coming from "up there."

In Eargle's recording setup for the *1812*, the chorus—which sings the old hymns in Russian whose tunes Tchaikovsky borrowed for his "solemn overture"—was placed behind and to the sides of the orchestra. That aura of encirclement rings true here, as does the ethereal quality of voices rising above the instrumental forces arrayed across the stage.



Not the least amazing aspect of this recording is the texture and color of instruments and voices. I would not have believed such sound could be derived from standard Dolby Digital AC-3 encoding, the same compression scheme used for movie soundtracks. (By the way, Eargle uses no low-frequency effects channel for his classical recordings; the music simply doesn't require it.) And I was listening through a credible system: the Faroudja DV1000 DVD player connected to the Meridian 565 processor and a full suite of Meridian digital speakers.

When I told Eargle how impressed I was with the performance of AC-3 (the 16-bit recording was made at a 48 kHz sampling rate, compared with the 44.1 kHz used for CDs), he crowed a bit: "This is a point I've been trying to make to a lot of people for a long time. I've listened to my own five-channel recordings played back using various compression schemes, as well as uncompressed, and I can't hear any differences."

Eargle, who records the Seattle and New Jersey Symphonies as well as the Dallas, says he has been compiling 5-channel digital masters for the last four years. Some of these treasures will begin trickling into the DVD market in the coming months, he says, probably on discs generously laden to lure early adopters.

The *1812* disc presents more of a demo format. Tchaikovsky's 16-minute work appears twice, in both 5-channel and Dolby Surround formats, with only an artist's sketch to occupy the screen. The disc is filled out with four Dolby Digital signature videos and an extensive array of audio and video test tracks.

Solemn overture, indeed. Tchaikovsky might have written the piece for this occasion.

# ステレオへの鎮魂歌

ロレンス・ジョンソン

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☺☺☺ 抄訳 ☺☺☺

クラシック音楽の批評家・レコード評論家として私はこれまで 30 年間、録音技術の研鑽と勝利を眺めてきたが、これほどまでの経験はしたことがない。

音の抱擁感が極めて自然で、『録音』だとはとても思えず、『演奏』そのものだった。

この録音で少なからず驚異的な面は、楽器や声の質感・色彩である。これほどの音質が映画のサウンドトラックに使われている標準ドルビーデジタル (AC-3) から再生されているといわれても、信じなかったろう。

私がいかに AC-3 の性能に驚いたか (48k サンプルングでの 16 ビット録音) について、このレコーディングを担当したジョン・アーグルに話したところ、彼は勝ち誇ったように、「そこだよ、私が長年いろんな人たちに説いていたのも。自分の 5ch 録音を非圧縮と圧縮で聴き比べたけど、違いなんて聞こえなかったんだから。」

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