

One gathers from the numbering of this album that it's a first release for the newly established home label of the Basel Symphony Orchestra. Dennis Russell Davies is perhaps best remembered by American audiences for his work with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and the Orchestra of St. Luke's. But he's moved around a lot since then, occupying numerous conducting posts here and abroad. Currently, he is chief conductor of both the Bruckner Orchestra Linz and the Basel Symphony Orchestra.

Who can fail to be enchanted by the spring-like freshness and innocence of those opening bars to Schubert's Fifth Symphony, an artlessness that barely hints at the composer's cleverness and sophistication in the pages to come? In its modification of strict sonata-allegro form and its expressive lyricism, the Fifth is Schubert's first truly romantic symphony, more so than the "Tragic" Fourth, which storms about a great deal but is actually quite classical in statement and structure. The Fifth is also distinguished by its chamber-sized orchestra—one flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings—the smallest ensemble for any of Schubert's symphonies. The breezy Third Symphony has a French feel about it, almost as if it could be a precursor to Bizet's Symphony in C. The conductor Günter Wand is quoted as having said the score reflects the influence of Rossini.

If these early works by Schubert in modern instrument performances are to your taste, I can't imagine them being done any better than they are here. The orchestra sounds augmented by a few more players than Schubert would probably have had at his disposal, but this is not the big-band, heavy-footed Schubert we've heard in the past from conductors like Rudolf Kempe and Bruno Walter. Davies maintains lightness of texture and buoyancy of rhythm, shapes phrases with attention to dynamics and harmonic flow, scales back on string vibrato, and observes repeats. I don't know what more one could ask. There's no indication that this is the first release in a Schubert symphony cycle, but whether it is or not, it's a lovely recording and definitely recommended. © 2013 Fanfare