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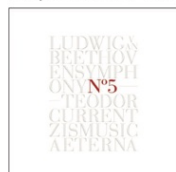
Orchestral

Beethoven

Symphony No 5, Op 67

MusicAeterna / Teodor Currentzis

Sony Classical © 19075 88497-2 (31' • DDD)



To make Beethoven's Fifth sound fresh seems a Herculean task, yet that's what

Teodor Currentzis accomplishes here in a relentlessly intense performance that will likely keep you on the edge of your seat from the first note to the last. Such extremity comes at a cost, however.

The first movement is a juggernaut. Even in the momentum-stopping fermatas of the opening bars, Currentzis seems anxious to press forwards, and from there the trajectory remains precipitous. Despite the breathless phrasing and breakneck pace (hitting Beethoven's metronome marking squarely on the nose), his MusicAeterna orchestra play with astonishing rhythmic security and poise, revealing how much care has been lavished on detail. Yet, while the conductor is generally scrupulous in following the composer's markings, he's not shy about being free with the text. Listen to the unwritten diminuendos at 3'08", say, or to the vertiginous swells he adds at 5'38". At times, his attention to detail spills over into fussiness – the laboured phrasing at the opening of the *Andante con moto*, for instance. Andrew Manze, in his recent recording (Pentatone, 3/20), demonstrates how it's possible to highlight the melody's shifting metric emphases while maintaining a *dolce*, singing line.

Currentzis seizes upon the slow movement's contrasts, giving the martial C major music a hard edge – at times it takes on a mechanistic character – that throws the lyrical moments into greater relief, and there's some really lovely, tender playing, particularly near the movement's end. I very much like the prickly off-beat accents and proto-Mahlerian creepiness of the Scherzo's return, but not the oddly joyless, machine-gun-like rat-a-tat of the Trio section. And while I appreciate the finale's drive, rhythmic snap and lack of bombast, there's a brutality to it that by the end feels quite pugilistic.

Certainly, Currentzis's interpretation is worth hearing, although for all its ferocity, his is a fairly narrow view of the Fifth. Of recent releases, the aforementioned Manze or Blomstedt (Accentus, A/17) provide us with a fuller – and far more humane – vision. **Andrew Farach-Colton**

Berlioz

Symphonie fantastique, Op 14.

Les francs-juges – Overture

Les Siècles / François-Xavier Roth

Harmonia Mundi © HMM90 2644 (66' • DDD)



You're attending a grand ball. A beautiful young lady has caught your eye. Dare you?

Nervously, you inch towards her to request the next waltz. What if she turns you down? That frisson of nervous excitement is palpable from the agitated string shudders, swelling to *sforzando*, in the introduction to 'Un bal' in Les Siècles's outstanding new recording of the *Symphonie fantastique* – the aural equivalent to butterflies in the stomach. Once the invitation is accepted and you both take to the floor, whirling deliriously, violins sigh with swooning portamentos. Bliss. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, everything. As Leonard Bernstein once warned us, in Berlioz's opium-fuelled *Fantastique*, 'You take a trip, you wind up screaming at your own funeral'. François-Xavier Roth and his period-instrument orchestra have taken the trip from rêveries and passions to witches' sabbath before, a live recording on their own label, performed at the festival in the composer's hometown of La Côte-Saint-André in 2009.

But there is a touch of La Côte-Saint-André on this new Harmonia Mundi disc, which is rounded out with a rousing *Francs-juges* Overture. Among the meticulous orchestral listing in the booklet – everything from Frédéric Triébert oboe to Guatrot ophicleide – there's one strictly non-period entry: church bells cast for the 2013 Berlioz festival ... authenticity of another kind.

Much as I enjoyed Les Siècles's earlier recording, this new disc sweeps that, and the rest of the competition, firmly aside.

Its sound – recorded in the Maison de l'Orchestre National d'Île-de-France in Alfortville, just outside Paris – is clean and much more closely recorded, revealing much instrumental detail.

The success of this account is not just through the conductor's close study of the autograph manuscript. Roth seems to have an emotional hotline to Berlioz, alive to every twist and turn of the composer's fevered passions. Double basses judder so hard in the first movement (8'54") you can feel the rosin flying. 'Un bal' has a wonderful tingle factor, cooing clarinet recalling the *idée fixe* motif (4'56") associated with the object of our hero's passion. The only movement where Roth is less expansive, a decade on, is the 'Scène aux champs'. The engineers have perfectly judged the distant oboe (the older recording suffered a lot with extramusical hum at this point) and the woodwinds display bags of character. The string tremolando (6'53") bristles while the clarinet echo at 9'12" is exquisite, followed by a *quasi niente* which acts as a ghostly reminiscence. There are great thundering timpani as the poor cor anglais's cries go unanswered, the oboe having long since abandoned her lover.

Bassoons sit in gruff judgement over Roth's 'March to the Scaffold', a purposeful tread with heavy accenting from cellos and basses. If the orchestral guillotine that slices off the clarinet solo at the end is a bit messy, then I suppose that's the nature of public executions. The 'Songe d'une nuit du sabbat' is pungently psychedelic, flutes and oboes playing their eerie octave glissandos with devilish glee, woodwinds cackling and the bassoon and ophicleide 'Dies irae' chants chilling the marrow. The tremolando violins and viola at 6'16" are far fiercer than on other recordings, one of a number of occasions I darted to check the score, but Roth is always right.

There have been several period-instrument recordings over the decades, many of them wonderful, although some suffer fatal flaws. The quest for historical authenticity took John Eliot Gardiner and the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique (Philips) to the old hall of the Paris Conservatoire, where the work premiered in 1830, a horrible, dead

acoustic. Jos van Immerseel chose to have the bells played as piano chords on his *Anima Eterna* disc, on the flimsy basis that Berlioz once conducted a performance this way in St Petersburg. Marc Minkowski's *Les Musiciens du Louvre* now sound pallid (DG). Interestingly, only Gardiner and Immerseel include the obbligato cornet à pistons in the Ball.

Roger Norrington and the London Classical Players have long been my HIP benchmark, a peppery reading, but Roth and *Les Siècles* surpass them for colour and characterisation. Indeed, this is not just my favourite 'historically authentic' recording. I strongly believe this is the finest account of the *Fantastique* to emerge from France since Charles Munch and the newly formed *Orchestre de Paris* in 1967 ... and it probably trumps that too. **Mark Pullinger**

Symphonie fantastique – selected comparisons:

London Classical Physx, Norrington

(4/89*) (VIRG/ERAT) 363286-2 or 628579-2

ORR, Gardiner (6/93) (PHIL) 434 402-2PH

Musiciens du Louvre, Mabler CO, Minkowski

(10/03) (DG) 474 209-2GH

Anima Eterna, Immerseel (5/10) (ZZT) ZZT100101

Siècles, Roth (ACTE) ASM02

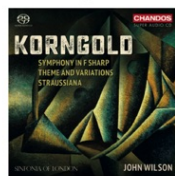
Korngold

Straussiana. Symphony, Op 40.

Theme and Variations, Op 42

Sinfonia of London / John Wilson

Chandos ④ CHSA5220 (59' • DDD/DSD)



Rumours have been circling for a while of a hush-hush project from John Wilson;

of a new super-orchestra hand-picked from the cream of the UK's orchestral players. Now here it is: a radiant new recording of Korngold's orchestral music with an all-new Sinfonia of London, led by Andrew Haveron.

And? Well, for starters, put aside any expectation of the Technicolor studio sound that Wilson draws from his other orchestra (the one that carries his name). Wilson has always been clear that he's interested primarily in the appropriate colour for any given repertoire, and for this Austrian-American exile symphony he evokes a great post-war US orchestra – the weighty, satin string tone, the skyscraping brass and questioning woodwinds that you might find on a 1950s Chicago or Philadelphia disc, though Chandos captures a much mellower general ambience.

And then Wilson runs with it, in one of the most athletic performances of this

symphony on record – closer in spirit to Kempe than Previn, but considerably faster than either (even without Kempe's cuts). Rhythms are springy and purposeful; the great *Adagio* really strives, as well as sings, and I've rarely heard it probe deeper. Every phrase speaks; textures are translucent and detailed (even at the dizzying speed of the Scherzo), and the string sound glows from within, with portamento very much at the service of expression. Wilson clearly sees Korngold's Symphony (rightly) as part of the Viennese classical tradition.

The result is both gripping and sincerely moving; and the two short, sad-sweet late works that follow the symphony – written by Korngold for amateur orchestras – receive the same whole-hearted commitment and loving care for colour and style. Stirring, thought-provoking and superbly played, this disc is a tonic. Let's hope it's not a one-off.

Richard Bratby

Symphony – selected comparisons:

Munich PO, Kempe (8/74*, 6/92) (VARE) VSD5346

LSO, Previn (8/97) (DG) 453 436-2GH

Suk

Asrael, Op 27. *Fairy Tale* (Pohádka), Op 16

Czech Philharmonic Orchestra / Jiří Bělohlávek

Decca ④ (two discs for the price of one)

483 4781DH2 (88' • DDD)



How gratifying that Jiří Bělohlávek was able to re-record Suk's *Asrael* in his

second tenure at the helm of the Czech Philharmonic. His first version had no lack of eloquence or fervour, but also a tendency to hold back during climactic passages; something later redressed in his live reading with the BBC Symphony, with its passing flaws in ensemble and vagaries of balance.

Neither of these is an issue here, as witness a first movement that emerges purposefully from its sombre introduction into an *allegro* of trenchant resolve, maintained throughout an impulsive development and culminating in an anguished apotheosis. The Intermezzo wears its Mahlerian overtones discreetly, not least that mesmeric passage where the funeral-march theme dissolves into overlapping pizzicatos, while the Scherzo compensates for an initial (and marginal) lack of impetus with its raptly expressive Trio then coursing surge towards an implacable close. Nor is the slow movement unduly over-weighted – so enabling its episodes of bittersweet

evocation to register as fully as the wearied resignation into which it subsides. The finale duly caps this performance with a visceral onward drive (as in the central fugato) that leads inexorably to a powerful culmination, then an epilogue whose relative expanse is justified through its arrival at a benediction the more enduring for having been so methodically and affectingly achieved.

Bělohlávek's association with *Fairy Tale* goes back even further. He recorded it with the Prague Symphony near the outset of his career (8/80), while his second account had a greater sophistication but less character. This new version brings an inspired synthesis with its ravishing love music (Jiří Vodička's violin solos effortless in their pathos), succeeded by a playful Intermezzo and plangent Funeral Music, then the finale strives heroically toward its ultimate transcendence.

The Czech Philharmonic give their collective all; with the best sound Decca has yet achieved at the Rudolfinum, this can be placed next to Charles Mackerras as the finest modern *Asrael*. If these are indeed Bělohlávek's last studio recordings, a plea for the commercial release of the Barbican performance of Dvořák's Requiem, which was also his final concert appearance. **Richard Whitehouse**

Selected comparison – coupled as above:

Czech PO, Bělohlávek (5/92) (CHAN) CHAN9640

Asrael – selected comparisons:

Czech PO, Mackerras (6/11) (SUPR) SU4043-2

BBCSO, Bělohlávek (10/12) (SUPR) SU4095-2

Tchaikovsky

Symphony No 6, 'Pathétique', Op 74

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra / Kirill Petrenko

Berliner Philharmoniker ④ BPHR190261

(44' • DDD/DSD)

Recorded live at the Philharmonie, Berlin, March 22 & 23, 2017



Pierre Boulez – no conductor of Tchaikovsky – used to give performances

that rendered a pocket score redundant. There was no need to peer into the texture for hard-to-hear or often-overlooked details. There they all were, especially in the Stravinsky/Diaghilev ballets, registered not for the sake of score-bound pedantry or picaresque charm or virtuoso baton-twirling but because they made telling contributions to the story.

So it is with this *Pathétique*, the first preserved fruit of the Berlin Philharmonic's relationship with its new music director.