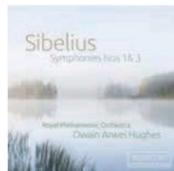


Sibelius

Symphonies – No 1, Op 39; No 3, Op 52

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra /
Owain Arwel Hughes

Rubicon © RCD1055 (73' • DDD)



Like Edward Seckerson, I was greatly impressed by the recent recording

of Sibelius's First Symphony conducted by Santtu-Matias Rouvali. Here is a performance of similar grip, vitality and communicative power. Although slightly slower than most conductors in the first movement, Owain Arwel Hughes maintains tension at a high level and the return of the *Allegro energico* theme in the recapitulation is absolutely thrilling. Like Rouvali, Hughes also provides an interpretation that's splendidly articulate and vivid, the symphony sounding more original and forward-looking than usual as a result, an effect especially pronounced in the faster passages of the *Andante*. There's even a brief anticipation of the opening of the Fourth Symphony in the writing for bassoons, cellos and double basses just after fig I (5'30") in the first movement. Unlike Rouvali, whose management of dynamics occasionally draws attention to itself, Hughes gives us a very direct performance of the score, free of any interpretative exaggeration. The playing of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra is first class in all departments, with yearningly expressive strings in the finale's big theme and a notably propulsive contribution from the timpani.

Hughes's account of the Third Symphony is equally compelling, clarity and expression once again hallmarks of the interpretation. There's a strong sense of exhilaration in the first movement and poignancy in the second, aided by the deeply felt playing of the woodwinds. In the finale, Hughes builds the movement to a stirring conclusion, the pace slightly more measured than the otherwise similarly lucid account by Osmo Vänskä, but also more powerful, underpinned by some standout playing from the brass. With the recording in the experienced hands of producer Andrew Keener and engineer Phil Rowlands, it's no surprise that the sound quality is as commendable as the musicianship. Altogether a terrific start to Rubicon's new cycle of the Sibelius symphonies. **Christian Hoskins**

Symphony No 1 – selected comparison:

Gothenburg SO, Rouvali (3/19) (ALPH) ALPHA440

Symphony No 3 – selected comparison:

Minnesota Orch, Vänskä (9/16) (BIS) BIS2006

G

Tavener

The Death of Ivan Ilyich^a, Mahāmātar^b.
No longer mourn for me^c. Popule meus^d.
Præces and Responses^e

Steven Isserlis vc

with ^aMatthew Rose bass ^bAbi Sampa Sufi sngr

^cCaroline Dearnley, ^cChiara Enderle, ^cMatthew

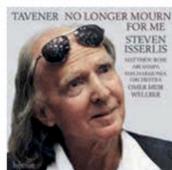
Huber, ^cVashti Hunter, ^cBartholomew LaFollette,

^cAmy Norrington, ^cDavid Waterman vcs

^bTrinity Boys Choir; ^{abd}Philharmonia Orchestra /

Omer Meir Wellber

Hyperion © CDA68246 (72' • DDD • T)



Here is a disc that proves to be much more than the sum of its parts. At first

sight, it appears to be something of a patchwork, with arrangements for cello ensemble of two of Tavener's choral works (the *Præces and Responses* and *No longer mourn for me*) surrounding three more substantial compositions. But in fact Steven Isserlis has understood how to draw out the vocal quality in both those pieces and adapt it superbly for the eight cellos, to the extent that even the instrumental performance of what would be the precentor's intonations in the first sounds extraordinarily natural and 'breathed'.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich is certainly the most challenging piece here. It is based on a short story by Tolstoy and is a 'monodrama' in the line of *The Immurement of Antigone* and *Eis Thanaton* (though the latter is not so described). Like them, it is austere in the extreme, highly concentrated and uncompromising, with moments of luminous beauty breaking through the darkness; the effort is worth making. The piece that really stands out, however, is *Mahāmātar*, which features the Sufi singer Abi Sampa, who improvises in her own tradition above music derived from the received Byzantine chant for the Great Litany from the Eucharistic Liturgy (any Greek chanter will pick this up immediately). The cumulative effect is overwhelming. *Popule meus*, an entirely instrumental work, is hardly less impressive, however.

This beautifully recorded disc is enriched enormously by Steven Isserlis's very personal booklet notes – it is very important to have this kind of testimony, and makes of this release a genuinely historical document as well as a vibrant new contribution to the Tavener discography.

Ivan Moody

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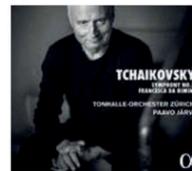
Tchaikovsky

Symphony No 5, Op 64.

Francesca da Rimini, Op 32

Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra / Paavo Järvi

Alpha © ALPHA659 (74' • DDD)



On the cover of this Tchaikovsky Fifth, a smiling Paavo Järvi seems to indicate

that all will be well. And his words in the promo for this first disc in his Tchaikovsky cycle with his new charges, the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, are sanguine: 'I think of vulnerability and hope. It looks directly into our soul ... Unlike the Sixth, the Fifth still holds out hope for life.' The Fifth doesn't stare into the abyss and sink to its knees like the *Pathétique*, but Fate dogs every movement and I find the finale, stoically marching onward, taking adversity on the chin, as unbearably moving as anything in Tchaikovsky's final symphony. So does Järvi's Fifth offer hope or does it all end in tears?

For the most part, this is a dry-eyed, disciplined account. Järvi sets a moderate tempo for the first movement, meticulously observing hairpin dynamics, the strings using the occasional – tasteful – portamento. Indeed, it's the strings that make the telling impression here, big sighs not of emotion but of wistful remembrance amid the woodwind chatter. And there's a lovely moment in the recap of the *Molto più tranquillo* (from 12'57") where Järvi gets the violins to play even softer (bar 432) than the preceding one – a magical moment, as if they're fearful, catching their breath. There's a touch of doom in the lower string swells of the closing bars, a hint of drama to come.

The horn solo in the *Andante cantabile* glows, displaying superb dynamic control. Järvi lets the music flow but builds up a nice head of steam without allowing the Tonhalle brass to obliterate the music. By largely playing the score straight, it helps Tchaikovsky's ritenutos to really tell. Järvi keeps the third-movement Valse on the move, too.

But it's the finale where the drama catches alight. The *Allegro vivace* erupts vigorously but the overall mood seems buoyant. Could we be about to snatch triumph from the jaws of defeat? But Järvi turns the screw hard so the *Molto vivace* (9'15") really lets rip. There's stoicism, yes, in the *molto maestoso* theme but it heralds a headlong rush into the coda's *Presto*, hurtling along until Järvi wrings out the final bars. It's not a Fifth that's as histrionic



Sharing Chinese culture with audiences around the world: guitarist Xuefei Yang and guzheng player Sha Yuan bring boldness and delicacy to *Sketches of China*

as either of Valery Gergiev's recordings (the live Vienna Philharmonic wilder than his more lugubrious, drawn-out Mariinsky account), but it certainly hits the emotional spot and marks an auspicious start to Järvi's Tonhalle Tchaikovsky cycle.

Just when you need to cool off after that sizzling coda of the Fifth, though, it's a case of out of the emotional frying pan and into ... the raging furnace that is the symphonic poem *Francesca da Rimini*. This isn't, in truth, the fieriest *Francesca* out there. It's moderately paced and smoothly balanced – I'd have liked greater brass impact here – but, again, Järvi wrenches the drama from the closing pages, the final bars held for all their worth. **Mark Pullinger**

Symphony No 5 – selected comparisons:

VPO, Gergiev (6/99) (PHIL) 462 905-2PH

Mariinsky Orch, Gergiev (MARI) MAR0017

'Sketches of China'

Anonymous Everlasting Longing **Changjun Xu** Sword Dance **Chen Yi Shuo Chang Guang Ren** Silver Clouds Chasing the Moon **Qing Xi Weng** The Moon Represents My Heart **Renchang Fu** A Lovely Rose. Dreams of Gulangyu Island **Tan Dun** Seven Desires **Tieshan Liu** Yao Dance **Traditional** A Moonlit Night on the Spring River. Fisherman's Song by Moonlight. Hujia. Three Variations on a Plum Blossom. White Snow in the Spring Sunlight **Wei Qu** Flower Drum

Wen-Chung Chou Three Folk Songs

Yong Ning Camel Bells Along the Silk Road

Xuefei Yang *gtr* with **Weiliang Zhang** *xiao*

Sha Yuan *guzheng* **Xiamen Philharmonic**

Orchestra / Renchang Fu

Decca/Universal © 2 481 9139 (101' • DDD)



Truth, fantasy, boldness and delicacy. Listening to Chinese classical guitarist

Xuefei Yang's latest album is like watching a parade of exquisitely rendered beasts on a silk handscroll. 'Sketches of China' (a nod to Miles Davis?) features Chinese classical, folk and modern music from the Han Dynasty to today in orchestral, chamber and solo arrangements, transcriptions or original compositions. Some are the result of commissions; others are by Xuefei herself; all are brought together by 'a desire to share more of my own culture with audiences around the world'.

On two tracks – the opening *A Lovely Rose* and *Dreams of Gulangyu Island* – Xuefei is accompanied by the Xiamen Philharmonic Orchestra under Renchang Fu, who also arranged the former and composed the latter work. In a handful of others, she is joined by masters Weiliang

Zhang on xiao (a variety of flute) and Sha Yuan on guzheng (plucked zither). Yet while the majority of the pieces are performed on solo guitar, Xuefei possesses an imagination as fluid and expansive as her technique. Such that Xuefei's improvised cadenzas in *A Lovely Rose* capture much of the orchestra's colour and sonority. And the haunting *Hujia* (with xiao) and nostalgia-drenched *Everlasting Longing* (with guzheng) find their echoes in *White Snow in the Spring Sunlight*, *The Moon Represents My Heart* and even Tan Dun's *Seven Desires*.

This despite the all-pervasive spirit of the pipa, which informs Xuefei's near-total mastery of her own instrument. If this gorgeous recording finds its ideal pictorial analogue in a painted scroll, Xuefei Yang's playing can best be compared to the spontaneity and control of a master calligrapher. **William Yeoman**

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