

CD REVIEW 74

SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony no 6;

Symphony no 12.

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Vasily Petrenko.

Naxos 8.572658 (DDD)

69.38

I was disappointed with Petrenko's performance of Shostakovich Symphony no. 11 and I eagerly awaited to hear my two favourite Shostakovich symphonies as represented on this CD.

I was again disappointed.

The opening largo of the Symphony no 6 was a little too slow, very cautious and somewhat hesitant. The first horn solo was so careful as to suggest a first rehearsal. With a movement lasting about 20 minutes it is essential to make it hang together.

The second movement Allegro was also lacking. The spirit of the fun of this movement was not captured and often the orchestral balance was doubtful.

The final is a burlesque of driving panache that must generate excitement right up to the final bars. It starts cautiously and therefore the momentum is not there. For the final bars the conductor decides to increase the tempo and, as a result, the music is muddy and there is some distortion.

Without doubt, the finest performance of this work is that by Fritz Reiner and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra which I understand is still available on a Sony CD. It shows up the greatest of Shostakovich and the deficiencies in this Petrenko performance.

The Symphony no 12 is seldom played but it is a really great work. Yes, it is somewhat repetitive but in the context of the politics of the year 1917 it makes sense. It has memorable and therefore unforgettable material, superbly orchestrated and a satisfyingly work of tremendous expression and significance.

This performance misses the mark. However, I do not wish to rubbish this orchestra which Sir Charles Groves turned into a fine ensemble. Nor do I wish to dismiss the conductor for I am sure he has a lot to give. I feel that a conductor of more experience and insight will fare better in the glory of this magnificent symphony. And there is no better conductor for this towering masterpiece than Eugene Mravinsky and I believe his two CDs of Symphonies 11, 12 and 15 are still available on a Melodiya CD. Mravinsky was THE Shostakovich conductor.

Shostakovich's symphonies are of varying quality. The First is badly constructed and, as Walton said, a bore. Yes, he was only 19 when he wrote this but listen to Leif Kayser Symphony no 1 written when he was 19, and available on Da Capo 8.224709, and hear what a vastly superior work it is. Shostakovich's Symphonies 2 and 3 are too political for some tastes. The Symphony no 4 succeeds in its originality and requires a really good performance. It is his first successful symphony. Symphony no. 5 is the most popular and deservedly so, The Sixth has slow movement of unsullied joy and the Seventh (Leningrad) shows us how to write a sequence, something Elgar could not do. The Symphony no 8 is a tremendous work but, perhaps, suffers from different styles from the Nazi marches to the childlike innocence of the finale. Symphony no 9 is unpretentious and the Tenth is the second most popular although the third movement is fragmentary. The Symphony no 11 is sublime and the Twelfth is



mentioned here. The last three symphonies have been called acquired tastes. The last Symphony makes little sense to many of us.

I do recommend the Reiner and Mravinsky of these two wonderful symphonies. All other performances pale into insignificance.

Incidentally, Boult make a good recording of the Sixth. I am not convinced that Shostakovich adored Mahler judging from the interviews I have recorded of what he said. Walton regarded Shostakovich as the greatest composer of the last 150 years. I will not tell you what composer he thought was the worst!

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