



Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works

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Gramophone (Rob Cowan - 01.12.2014)

GRAMOPHONE

The Mantovani-style fanned chords at the start of Arthur H Lilienthal's all-strings rewrite of the Cello Concerto does not augur well, though Raphael Wallfisch rises from his freshly retextured orchestral bed determined not to allow the missing wind lines with their absent acerbities to compromise the strength of Schumann's message. He offers a convincing performance, phrasing with warmth and agility, while at the transition into the slow movement (at the start of tr 2) he achieves an affecting level of poignancy. But compare the close of the movement with Oren Shevlin's recording of Schumann's original with the Cologne WDR Symphony under Heinz Holliger, where the sting of brass and rocketing winds intensify the drama, and you soon realise what's missing in Lilienthal's rewrite, even though the arrangement was prompted by Schumann's own unrealised plan to prepare a version for string quintet. Had he done so I rather suspect it would have involved a certain amount of re-composition, not the blanket softening that we have here. And good as Wallfisch is, Shevlin suggests more of the fragile resolve that underlies the piece, fighting the dying light in a way that only Schumann could. Shevlin's tone is more subtly variegated than Wallfisch's, while his attack in the finale is toughened and springy. Holliger too keeps things stripped to the bone, sweetening the line where necessary, though never to excess, and with a level of clarity that others aim for but achieve only at a price of compromised expressivity. As to rivals, among older recordings I would especially recommend Janos Starker's Cologne version under Rafael Kubelik, recently issued by Orfeo as part of a three-disc Kubelik collection (all first-release material), probably the best we've had from Starker, simultaneously tender-hearted and tough-grained.

Most of Wallfisch's Schumann extras with piano are nicely done, the Fünf Stücke im Volkston delivered in the main with a light touch both by Wallfisch and by his fine pianist John York, the Three Romances, Op 94, and the Op 73 Fantasy Pieces similarly eloquent in a relaxed, unassuming way (barring the fiery last movement of Op 73), the Adagio and Allegro, Op 70, in many respects the disc's highlight. I wasn't too keen on the two Lieder transcriptions (both taken from the Op 39 Liederkreis collection), certainly not the start of 'Mondnacht', where the cello's presence spoils the music's solitary atmosphere, and in 'Frühlingsnacht', where the soloist ideally needs to project with greater presence.

Holliger's account of the 1851 Fourth Symphony has all the qualities that make his accompaniment to the Cello Concerto so distinctive, namely flow, transparency, and character (note the subtle but dramatic diminuendo among the horns at 4'42"). The expressive Romanze follows close on the heels of the first movement, surely as it should, the Scherzo asserts a virile presence, while the fast-paced finale is breezy and exhilarating, with plenty of light and shade. Altogether a worthy continuation of Holliger's Schumann series, with excellent playing and well-balanced sound.