



Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works

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Fanfare (Jim Svejda - 01.08.2016)

The fourth and fifth volumes of Audite's Schumann series with Heinz Holliger and the West German Radio Symphony are in many ways the most fascinating so far and the toughest sell. The difficulty is obvious from a glance at the repertoire list: one masterpiece, one quasi-masterpiece, and four conspicuous examples of less than top-drawer Schumann.

The version of the Piano Concerto is all we've come to expect from this excellent series, including alert, rhythmically flexible playing from a first-class radio orchestra (people who play to microphones for a living), a conductor who knows his business in Schumann (a firm grasp of the long line, an ability to clarify the occasionally dense inner voicing, a total lack of fear when it comes to punching the telling accent, an uncanny knack for pointing out the previously overlooked—but deeply important—detail), together with superbly realistic recorded sound that nonetheless bathes everything in an early-Romantic glow. The young Hungarian pianist Dénes Várjon takes a wonderfully fresh and unaffected approach to this familiar music; while everything feels perfectly controlled, he bends the bar line in a way that recalls the great Schumann pianists of the past (Cortot and Rubinstein especially) but nothing feels willful or self-aggrandizing. If the finale lacks the head-long excitement of Fleisher, Janis, Richter, and others, then overall it's an immensely satisfying outing that makes you want to hear some of the solo piano music from this source. (There's already an excellent version of the violin sonatas with Carolin Widmann on ECM 1902 and an even finer recording of the cello music with Steven Isserlis on Hyperion 67661.)

Wild child Patricia Kopatchinskaja's presence guarantees an immensely individual look at the problematic Violin Concerto, and, as usual, she doesn't disappoint. From her first entrance, it's a startlingly original interpretation, with a seemingly endless variety of tone color—insured by her endless types of vibrato—down to that chilling moment in the heart of the first movement where the line is so drained of life it sounds like someone keening at a funeral. (There are other moments where the sound is so intense at the lower range of audibility that you wonder if she heard of Leonard Bernstein's extraordinary instruction to a string section: "Play triple piano, but use the kind of vibrato you use playing triple forte.") Holliger adds as much point and thrust as he possibly can to the outer movements—especially the opening movement, which for once never seems to drag—and although the slow movement seems less a premature anticlimax than usual, things never quite add up (as they never quite have, at least on records).

Kopatchinskaja is just as committed and persuasive in the violin Fantasie, whose gypsy-like opening flourishes are a reminder that it was written for the Hungarian-born Joseph Joachim, who actually played the piece (he refused to touch

the concerto). Like the late Concert Allegro with Introduction which Schumann began writing only three days after the Fantasie was finished, it's a work whose thematic inspiration is pretty thin gruel, as is the working out of the basic material. Like Kopatchinskaja, pianist Alexander Lonquich does everything he can to invest his part with life and interest, though well before the Concert Allegro begins you realize why—after a certain point—the composer's widow stopped playing it in public.

All concerned are on far firmer footing in the earlier Introduction and Allegro appassionato, written well before Schumann was beginning to lose his grip on things. Lonquich responds admirably to the work's impetuosity and high romance, though not with quite the same magical fusion of freshness and knowing finesse Jan Lisiecki achieves in his recent recording with Antonio Pappano (DG 479 5327).

The orchestra's horn section turns in a spectacular account of the op. 86 Konzertstück, which still gets recorded far more frequently than it's actually performed, given that its often stratospheric writing for the first horn is an endless series of clams just waiting to happen. Holliger and the soloists' colleagues give them rousing support, though the closing bars lack the visceral excitement of Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle Symphony's madcap dash to the end (Naxos 8.572770).

Collectors of this fine series will have snatched up both installments by now; others can proceed with minimal caution, as anything Kopatchinskaja does these days is mandatory listening.