F. Chopin: Piano Concerto No. 2 & F. Schubert: Symphony 'The Great' in C major, D. 944

aud 95.640

EAN: 4022143956408

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Gramophone (2012.02.01)

GRAMOPHONE

Contrasting maestros

Mahler from a Russian in Germany, a pair of German conductors and a British band in Dvořák

At the opposite end of the interpretative spectrum from Böhm's temperate Beethoven is Kyrill Kondrashin's combustible Mahler, the Sixth having recently been released on Hänssler Classic based on performances given with the SWR SO Baden-Baden in January 1981. Frenetic, superfast and yet occasionally light – even delicate – in texture, it resembles in its overall profile a recording that Kondrashin made for Melodiya but that never gained commercial currency in the UK. I liked its eagerness to excite but Hänssler should investigate a performance that Hans Rosbaud gave with the same orchestra in 1960 and that many years ago Stradivarius put out in a flawed CD transfer. Broader than Kondrashin by many minutes, it's perhaps the most imposing account of the work that I've ever heard.

More musically compelling by far, and surprisingly individualistic, is a performance of Schubert's 'Great' C major Symphony that Leo Blech conducted in Berlin (with the Berlin RIAS SO) in 1950. I expected something fairly traditional, but right from the Andante opening Blech's wide range of tempi renders even Furtwängler straitlaced by comparison, the first movement flying off at a real lick then broadening significantly for the coda until the movement grinds to a halt for the final bars. The welcome coupling features the underrated Hungarian pianist Julian von Károlyi in a supple and sensitive performance of Chopin's Second Piano Concerto, the opening tutti immediately arresting one's attention on account of its sensitive phrasing. This is a peach of a disc, and the sound quality is excellent.

A concert recording of Carl Schuricht conducting the Suisse Romande Orchestra in Brahms's Fourth Symphony also has an engaging freshness about it, especially the finale, where the assortment of tempi is almost as varied as Blech's is for Schubert. But it works, and so, oddly enough given one's expectations, does Schuricht's old-world but animated way with Bach's Second Orchestral Suite, where the flute soloist is Andre Pepin. I had no doubt whatever that Nikolai Malko's 1954 Philharmonia set of Dvořák's Slavonic Dances would prove satisfying and thanks to the Magdalen label we're once again able to enjoy Malko's impeccable musical judgement and the liveliness of the Philharmonia's playing. I'd say that viewed overall this is the finest complete set of the Dances to emerge from within these shores, even in view of fine versions under Dorati, Rodzinski and Schwarz. The vinyl-based transfers are more than acceptable.

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