



Sergei Prokofiev: Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution

aud 97.754

EAN: 4022143977540



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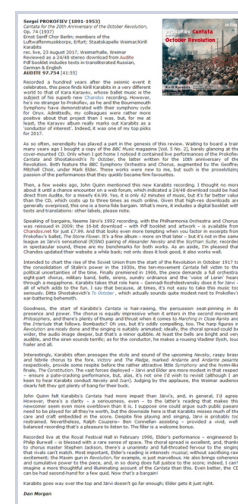
Recorded a hundred years after the seismic event it celebrates, this piece finds Kirill Karabits in a very different world to that of Kara Karayev, whose ballet music is the subject of his superb new Chandos recording. However, he's no stranger to Prokofiev, as he and the Bournemouth Symphony have demonstrated with their symphony cycle for Onyx. Admittedly, my colleagues were rather more positive about that project than I was, but, for me at least, the Karayev album really marks out Karabits as a 'conductor of interest'. Indeed, it was one of my top picks for 2017.

As so often, serendipity has played a part in the genesis of this review. Waiting to board a train many years ago I bought a copy of the BBC Music magazine [Vol. 5 No. 2], barely glancing at the cover-mounted CD. Only when I got home I noticed it contained live performances of the Prokofiev Cantata and Shostakovich's To October, the latter written for the 10th anniversary of the Revolution. Both feature the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, augmented by the Geoffrey Mitchell Choir, under Mark Elder. These works were new to me, but such is the proselytizing passion of the performances that they quickly became firm favourites.

Then, a few weeks ago, John Quinn mentioned this new Karabits recording. I thought no more about it until a chance encounter on a web forum, which indicated a 24/48 download could be had, direct from Audite, for a miserly €4.99. Yes, it is only 42 minutes of music, but it's far better value than the CD, which costs up to three times as much online. Given that high-res downloads are generally overpriced, this one is a bona fide bargain. What's more, it includes a digital booklet with texts and translations: other labels, please note.

Speaking of bargains, Neeme Järvi's 1992 recording, with the Philharmonia Orchestra and Chorus, was reissued in 2009; the 16-bit download – with Pdf booklet and artwork – is available from Chandos.net for just £7.99. And that looks even more tempting when you factor in excerpts from Prokofiev's ballet, The Stone Flower. It's a fine album – more on that later – but it's not in the same league as Järvi's sensational (R)SNO pairing of Alexander Nevsky and the Scythian Suite; recorded in spectacular sound, these are my benchmarks for both works. As an aside, I'm pleased that Chandos updated their website a while back; not only does it look good, it also works well.

Intended to chart the rise of the Soviet Union from the start of the Revolution in October 1917 to the consolidation of Stalin's power in the 1930s, this ten-movement Cantata fell victim to the political uncertainties of the time. Finally premiered in 1966,



the piece demands a full orchestra, eight-part chorus, military band, bells, sirens, sundry ordnance and the 'voice of Lenin' heard through a megaphone. Karabits takes that role here – Gennadi Rozhdestvensky does it for Järvi – all of which adds to the fun. I say that because, at times, it's not easy to take this music too seriously. Ditto Shostakovich's *To October*, which actually sounds quite modest next to Prokofiev's ear-battering behemoth.

Goodness, the start of Karabits's Cantata is hair-raising, the percussion seat-pinning in its presence and power. The chorus is equally impressive when it enters in the second movement, *Philosophers*, and there's plenty of thump and thrust when it comes to *Marching in Close Ranks* and the Interlude that follows. Bombastic? Oh yes, but it's oddly compelling, too. The harp figures in *Revolution* are nicely done and the singing is suitably animated; ideally, the choral spread could be wider, the audio image deeper, but that's a minor quibble. At least the bells are bright and very audible, and the siren sounds terrific; as for the conductor, he makes a rousing Vladimir Ilyich, loud hailer and all.

Interestingly, Karabits often presages the style and sound of the upcoming Nevsky, raspy brass and febrile chorus to the fore. *Victory* and *The Pledge*, marked *Andante* and *Andante pesante* respectively, provide some respite before the rather attractive little *Symphony* and the hymn-like finale, *The Constitution*. The vast forces deployed – Järvi and Elder are more modest in that respect – ensure a pate-cracking performance, but, alas, it's not one I'd wish to revisit (although I am keen to hear Karabits conduct Nevsky and Ivan). Judging by the applause, the Weimar audience clearly felt they got plenty of bang for their buck.

John Quinn felt Karabits's Cantata had more impact than Järvi's, and, in general, I'd agree. However, there's a clarity – a seriousness, even – to the latter's reading that makes this newcomer seem even more overblown than it is. I suppose one could argue such public paeans need to be played for all they're worth, but the downside here is that Karabits misses much of the care and craft embedded in the score. Despite fine playing and singing, Järvi is probably too restrained. Nevertheless, Ralph Couzens– Ben Connellan assisting – provided a vivid, well-balanced recording that's a pleasure to listen to. The filler is a welcome bonus.

Recorded live at the Royal Festival Hall in February 1996, Elder's performance – engineered by Philip Burwell – is blessed with a rare sense of space. The choral spread is excellent, and, thanks to chorus master Stephen Jackson, there's a unanimity and full-throated fervour to the singing that rivals can't match. Most important, Elder's reading is intensely musical, without sacrificing raw excitement; the Maxim gun in *Revolution*, for example, is just marvellous. He also brings coherence and cumulative power to the piece, and, in so doing does full justice to the score; indeed, I can't imagine a more thoughtful and illuminating account of the Cantata than this. Even better, the CD can be had second-hand for a few quid. Now that's a bargain!

Karabits goes way over the top and Järvi doesn't go far enough; Elder gets it just right.

Sergei PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution,
Op. 74 (1937)

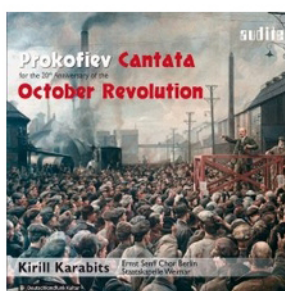
Ernst Senff Chor Berlin; members of the
Luftwaffenmusikcorps, Erfurt; Staatskapelle Weimar/Kirill
Karabits

rec. live, 23 August 2017, Weimarahalle, Weimar

Reviewed as a 24/48 stereo download from Audite

Pdf booklet includes texts in transliterated Russian,
German & English

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