



Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works

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Gramophone (David Threasher - 2014.10.01)

GRAMOPHONE

Rob Cowan reviewed the first volume of Heinz Holliger's Schumann symphony cycle last December and concluded that, as it continued, this 'may well be the one to go for'. Since then, however, we've had sets of the four symphonies (with one or other version of the Fourth) from Yannick Nezet-Seguin, Simon Rattle and Robin Ticciati, joining other recent contenders including Fabio Luisi, Paavo Jarvi and Thomas Dausgaard. If these are indeed blessed times for Schumannistas, the water isn't being made any less muddy.

In the Second, Holliger demurs from the darkness-to-light trajectory divined by Ticciati and perhaps views the work as primarily derived from a Beethovenian aesthetic rather than a Mendelssohnian one, the notable intensity of the opening movement yielding to a businesslike central pair and a finale that feels more episodic than needs be. It's a similar story in the Rhenish: the 'Cologne Cathedral' movement is amply monumental but short on the mystery distilled by Nezet-Seguin or Ticciati, and again the first movement is the best, if not as ideally detailed as other recent readings.

In its favour, this disc is beautifully recorded, the woodwind favoured just a degree over the strings, allowing their solos to sing out. Brass, too, are given their head, which is especially important in both these works. The WDR SO is a full-size Romantic orchestra with slightly reduced strings for these performances, as opposed to the chamber bands that are increasingly claiming this music as their own; so the direct comparison is to Rattle, sumptuous-sounding if hampered by certain mannerisms, as against Holliger's coolness. You pay your money and you take your choice: Holliger's cycle will ultimately be on three full-price SACDs, whereas many of the smaller-scale (and commensurately more athletic) performances come in handily priced two-disc slimline packs. Regular readers will already know where my preferences lie.