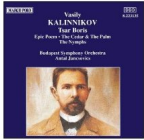


Kalinnikov: Tsar Boris – Epic Poem – Nymphs (1989)

Written by bluesever

Monday, 18 January 2016 17:05 -

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1. *Tsar Boris: Overture: Moderato assai - Allegro* (12:23) 2. *Tsar Boris: Entr'acte to Act 2: Andante con moto* (5:27) 3. *Tsar Boris: Entr'acte to Act 3* (6:26) 4. *Tsar Boris: Entr'acte to Act 4: Andante* (6:07) 5. *Tsar Boris: Entr'acte to Act 5: Allegro* (7:35) 6. *Bilina (Epic Poem)* (11:13) 7. *The Cedar and The Palm* (12:44) 8. *The Nymphs* (9:32) Budapest Symphony Orchestra
Antal Jancsovcics – conductor

I've been a great fan of Kalinnikov ever since I heard Svetlanov's old recording of Symphony No.1. What a crime that it remains so little known, as melodically it rivals so much of the 'warhorses' of the Russian school, and is the equal of any of Tchaikovsky's early symphonies, to say nothing of Balakirev's or Rimsky's (save 'Antar,' perhaps). Kalinnikov died early and in poverty, so he undoubtedly had little time or composure to do serious work. Nevertheless, what remains is a handful of wonderful pieces, full of memorable, and often ingenious melodies, sure-fire orchestration, and a Russian mastery of form (which no Russian composer of the late 19th century was without). Though Kalinnikov is usually lumped with those 'lesser masters' such as Glazunov, Lyapunov, Arensky, Gliere, and Ippolitov-Ivanov, I believe he might have been the best of the lot, had he not died so prematurely. Only Glazunov can match him for tunes, but Glazunov (much as I adore him) can tend to sound too Rimsky or Borodin; Kalinnikov, though composing in the shadow of the Five, still manages to sound distinct. I think if he had lived he might have snatched the title of Tchaikovsky's heir from Rachmaninov, whose early works (Prince Rostislav, Capriccio on Bohemian Themes, The Rock) sound an awful lot like Kalinnikov.

But to this recording: to be honest, the Budapest Symphony Orchestra plays quite well, though the old Marco Polo recording is far from ideal. Tempos are sometimes slow, as in the Overture to Tsar Boris, though I really only have Jarvi to compare it to, and he's famous for taking things at brake-neck speeds. Still, it's a strong performance and among the better Marco Polo recordings I own (some offer horrific sound). I have no qualms whatever about the music--it's priceless. I know the previous reviewer found nothing to recommend them, which I find baffling;

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the Overture to Tsar Boris is a stunner. Unison strings and winds introduce a grim theme which is quickly swept aside by the brass. The dark theme returns again and again, but Kalinnikov is more interested in exploring other aspects of the play, including a rousing march and gorgeous, Borodin-esque melodies. The other pieces in the suite are equally compelling; the second movement is a grim, minor-key piece that gains in power until the entire orchestra chimes in. A march and a slow movement follow before the rousing--and very Rimsky-esque--conclusion. Again, everything is memorable, tuneful, and always unique without being truly original.

The Epic Poem ('Bylina' in Russian) is just that, a piece cut from the same cloth as Rimsky's Skazka, though somewhat less eventful. This is more of a prelude to a legendary ballad, a simple framework to showcase more of Kalinnikov's trademark melodies. The true highlight of the disc is 'The Cedar and the Palm,' which contrasts a 'Russian' theme (the Cedar) with a sinuous, exotic Oriental melody (the Palm). It's almost as direct as Borodin's In the Steppes as Central Asia, and equally appealing; any orchestra would get an ovation from this piece if it were played occasionally to give Tchaikovsky's 'Romeo and Juliet', say, a rest. 'The Nymphs' is a more fiery piece, attempting to evoke a mythical drama that, while not exactly Kalinnikov's strong suit, still offers his command of musical structure and gorgeous melodies.

This is a disc for anyone who enjoys Rimsky, Borodin, Balakirev, and Tchaikovsky's more nationalist works. While at first blush it might sound very much like Borodin (whom Kalinnikov greatly admired), further listening will reveal his musical thumbprint, which I believe was the beginning of a major composer. Imagine if Tchaikovsky had died before composing his Fourth? Would he, too, have languished on Marco Polo as a forgotten master? Though these works are not quite in the same league as his major utterances, the First and Second Symphonies, they offer a much fuller portrait of his aesthetic, and I never tire of listening to it. A pity Naxos never reissued it with improved sound to reach a new generation of listeners... ---Joshua Grasso, amazon.com

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