Great Conductors of The 20th Century Vol.30 - Evgeny Mravinsky

CD1 *1. Mozart - Don Giovanni K527: Overture 6:02* Bruckner: Symphony no 7 in E major, WAB 107 *2. I. Allegro moderato 21:27 3. II. Adagio (Sehr feierlich und sehr langsam) 19:04 4. III. Scherzo (Sehr schnell) & Trio (Etwas langsamer) 9:14 5. IV. Finale (Bewegt, doch nicht schnell) 11:35*
CD2 Haydn:Symphony no 88 in G major, H 1 no 88
1. First movement: Adagio - Allegro 6:59 2. Second movement: Largo 5:26 3. Third movement: Menuetto (Allegretto) & Trio 4:20 4. Fourth movement: Finale (Allegro con spirito) 3:40 5. Tchaikovsky - Francesca da Rimini Op. 32 24:33
Glazunov: Symphony no 5 in B flat major, Op. 5
6. Symphony No.5 in B flat major, Op. 55: I Moderato - Maestoso - Allegro 11:03 7. Symphony No.5 in B flat major, Op. 55: II Scherzo. Moderato 5:23 8. Symphony No.5 in B flat major, Op. 55: III Andante 8:57 9. Symphony No.5 in B flat major, Op. 55: IV Allegro maestoso 7:03
Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra Evgeny Mravinsky – conductor

Evgeny Mravinsky was a remarkable man. His leadership of the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra from 1938 to 1988, a full half-century, enabled him to build the ensemble into one of the great orchestras. His knowledge of and special relationship with Shostakovich is the stuff of legend, and he premiered no less that six of that composer's symphonies. Alas, no Shostakovich on this occasion, rather a fascinating selection of composers ranging from Haydn to Bruckner and Glazunov.

The performance of the Don Giovanni Overture that opens proceedings is typical of Mravinsky's art: drilled to within an inch of its life (some really sensational string articulation), it nevertheless holds the drama so strongly it is easy to believe the opera will follow. That Mozart came from November 1968 – in the previous February, Mravinsky and his Leningrad forces gave the Bruckner Seventh given here (both were previously available on Russian Disc RDCD10911, 1995).

The Seventh is glorious on many counts. The pacing of the first movement is natural, the whole unfolding beautifully and inevitably. How lovely to hear the authentically Russian acidic oboe and the vibrato-ed trumpets. Contrasts are stark, and Mravinsky's control of his instrument (the Leningrad Phil) is extraordinary. Listen to the way that crescendi are layered, each making its effect viscerally and yet each realising its place within the whole. Admittedly there is very little sunshine coming through the clouds in this first movement, and there are some problems with ensemble and tuning (especially form the flutes), but there is no denying the intensity. Neither is there any denying the depth of emotion of the mighty Adagio, which flows with just the right amount of plasticity. There is plenty of sensitivity to the phrasing (especially from the strings), but unfortunately the whole is marred by an unrelenting climax, with speed picking up as the intensity rises.

The Scherzo is, admittedly, marked, 'Sehr schnell,' which for Mravinsky means taking the listener on a fast ride in a fast machine, with a Trio that tends towards over-indulgence. The qualities that distinguished the first movement return in the finale, however: there is more give and take here, more wonderfully intense string playing and the brass section positively glows. The speed takes little heed of Bruckner's own warning 'doch nicht schnell', though: fast this certainly is. The closing pages are resplendent. In fact, why is the applause not more enthusiastic?.

Mravinsky's Haydn could hardly be expected to hail from the authenticist school, and so it is. The Allegro is serious and accurate, the Largo slow and notable primarily for a tremulous oboe. The Minuetto, no dance here, is almost martial, while the trio needs a strong injection of lilt. I think the finale is Mravinsky trying to be jovial, but it is difficult to tell!.

Tchaikovsky's Francesca da Rimini comes across as a masterpiece in Mravinsky's hands, right from its highly dramatic beginning, with its huge, grey shadows, all the way through its stormy, gestural world. Here is the highlight of the set, a performance which justifies the financial outlay of both discs. The piece does not sound at all diffuse in Mravinsky's hands (his Tchaikovsky is legendary) and the virtuoso excitement as the piece moves towards its climax is almost unbearable.

Glazunov's Fifth Symphony is a wonderful work. Take Glazunov on his own terms, and a world of wonders awaits you, and that is exactly what Mravinsky does. In programming these discs, maybe EMI took a risk in placing this piece last, but it certainly paid off hugely. Mravinsky sits inside Glazunov's conservative romanticism most convincingly.

The Scherzo, placed second, is sparkling, glittering music which is played with as much affection as Mravinsky could probably muster. Glazunov's witty, balletic side is to the fore here. The Andante's more serious undertones are highlighted by Mravinsky, so that the movement threatens to turn into Wagner (c5'30), but the music turns and the Russian ballet soon returns to dispel this idea. The glittering, jubilant finale is the perfect end to this set that contains so many gems of this master's art. Recommended.--- Colin Clarke, MusicWeb International

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