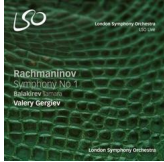


Sergei Rachmaninov – Symphony No. 1 Mily Balakirev – Tamara (2016)

Written by bluesever

Friday, 08 December 2017 14:33 -

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01 Symphony No 1 in D minor, Op 13 i. Grave – Allegro non troppo 02 Symphony No 1 in D minor, Op 13 ii. Allegro animato 03 Symphony No 1 in D minor, Op 13 iii. Larghetto 04 Symphony No 1 in D minor, Op 13 iv. Allegro con fuoco 05 Tamara London Symphony Orchestra Valery Gergiev – conductor

This new release in the LSO Live cycle of Rachmaninov's complete symphonies features his Symphony No. 1. The piece was composed in 1895 at his Ivanovka estate in Tambov, Russia. The premiere was a disaster due to poor conductor performance and under-rehearsal, but the score was rediscovered after the composer's death and has since been frequently performed. English composer and professor Robert Simpson calls the First Symphony "a powerful work in its own right... convinced, individual, finely constructed, and achieving a genuinely tragic and heroic expression." Valery Gergiev is able to shine with this work, displaying his impeccable transparent interpretation. Also included on this release is Balakirev's Tamara. A member of Russia's "Mighty Handful," this work is considered by most scholars to be Balakirev's best work. The score drips with exotic and oriental influences, which were popular in nineteenth century Russia. This concert received extraordinary reviews: "Full blooded and engrossing... the performance revealed the genius of this strange, haunted piece." (The Telegraph) "This is music Gergiev clearly believes in and that translated itself to his players... Here was Gergiev at his best." (Bachtrack) --- arkivmusic.com

The première of Rachmaninov's First Symphony was a disaster, with a probably drunken Glazunov creating havoc on the podium. The resulting nervous breakdown meant that Rachmaninov composed nothing of note until the Second Piano Concerto, dedicated to the analyst who had treated him. The work has, nevertheless, been much recorded in recent years,

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with 39 versions to its credit.

I'm sorry to have to report that once again Valery Gergiev seems to be trying too hard to play down a reputation for over-the-top performances. Right from the first movement there's a sense that he is holding back, a feeling which persists until the blazing outburst at the start of the finale and that could hardly fail to come off. Of course it's a patchy work but listen to Nosedá and right from the start the music comes more to life. Moreover he holds my attention through the less assured passages.

By comparison with Nosedá the first movement outstays its welcome a little from Gergiev, though Ormandy makes a similar timing to Gergiev, around 13.30 overall, work well. By comparison with Ormandy and Nosedá, who each take around nine minutes, Gergiev's second movement at 7.03 sounds a little hurried and uninvolved. After the powerful opening the finale tends to tail off a little in any performance but Ormandy and Nosedá maintain the interest better than Gergiev.

Most LSO Live recordings which have come my way have needed a volume boost, often a considerable boost, and this is no exception. Even so, however, the recording doesn't have the punch which Chandos give to Nosedá, but the BBC Studios in Manchester are a much more amenable recording base than the Barbican.

I played the Gergiev finale again, with a considerable volume boost, just to make sure that it really doesn't have quite the oomph of the other recordings that I've mentioned. Admittedly it does sound livelier at an even higher volume than I had been using, but it's still aurally and musically a shade or two less exciting than Nosedá or Ormandy. Though I don't always think 'Building a Library' comparisons helpful, I also listened to and much admired Mikhail Pletnev with the Russian National Orchestra. On the single CD the coupling is an account of *Isle of the Dead* to rival Nosedá's.

If I had been at the LSO concert I might well have gone home satisfied. It may also well be that those who have enjoyed earlier releases in this series will find Gergiev's Rachmaninov more amenable than I do, especially as one reviewer has already declared this new recording to be 'taut and gripping'. I recommend that you try to hear it for yourself. Subscribers to Naxos Music Library and Qobuz can compare it with Ormandy, Pletnev, Petrenko and Nosedá. Subscribers to classicsonline.com can compare Gergiev with Ormandy and Nosedá. ---Brian Wilson, musicweb-international.com

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