Pyotr Tchaikovsky – Symphonies Nos. 1 – 3 (Svetlanov) [1990]



Symphony No.1 in G minor, op.19 *1. I. Allegro tranquillo 2. II. Adagio cantabile ma non tanto 3. III. Scherzo (Allegro scherzando giocoso) 4. IV. Finale (Andante lugubre-Allegro maestoso)*
Symphony No.2 in C Minor Op.17 'Little Russian'
5. I. Andante sostenuto-Allegro vivo 6. II. Andantino marziale, quasi moderato 7. III. Scherzo & Trio (Allegro molto vivace) 8. IV. Finale. Moderato assai—Allegro vivo
Symphony No. 3 in D major, Op. 29
9. I. Introduzione e Allegro: Moderato assai - Allegro brillante 10. II. Alla tedesca. Allegro moderato e semplice 11. III. Andante. Andante elegiac 12. IV. Scherzo. Allegro vivo 13. V. Finale. Allegro con fuoco (Tempo di Polacca)
Russian Federation Symphony Orchestra Evgeny Svetlanov - conductor

Performing and listening to Tchaikovsky is never a homogenous, black and white experience. Of course that is stating the obvious, since his music means different things to different people, whether as performers, or as listeners. I suppose that applies to every composers and musicians then and now (Wagner, Bruckner, Mozart, Mahler, Schubert, John Coltrane, Alton Ellis, the Beatles, to name just more than a few). Hence, there is not really a simple right or wrong answer in dealing with a composer whose music is as honest, complex and multi-faceted, yet as far-reaching like Tchaikovsky. And when another symphony cycle props up, it will inevitably elicit a variety of responses for a variety of reasons, whether you agree with them or not. Indeed, music appreciation is ever a complex, dynamic, evolving phenomenon: the question of validity ever so elusive.

It appears that this cycle of the Tchaikovsky symphonies, Yevgeny Svetlanov's second with the Russian Federation Symphony Orchestra, is the same one that was originally recorded live in Tokyo, Japan, by Canyon Classics in the spring of 1990 (the Manfred Symphony was recorded in 1992 and the set was released in 1993 at full price-at about one-hundred dollars if memory serves me correctly). The Manfred Symphony, with severe cuts by the way, is not included here, though it is available individually by Warner Classics. And although Svetlanov and his

orchestra had evolved into arguably the premiere conductor-orchestra team in Russia since their first cycle (recorded by Melodiya in 1967), their music makings remained expressive and spontaneous in the best and in the most gripping of Russia's performing traditions. They were never afraid to let themselves go emotionally speaking, and yet they offered the most sublimity and poetic of expressions where warranted. Then, and in this series, was the orchestra (back then the USSR State Symphony) that became truly an immensely impressive body. The strings, until the early 1990s where it slacked off noticeably (in the Myaskovsky cycle for example), was nonetheless the orchestra's glory, able to maintain its expressiveness, richness, fervor, and blend (the reprise of the second theme of the First Symphony's adagio movement is the most dreamily done in my estimation). The brass, less intrusive and nasal than in the earlier cycle, is still a force to be reckoned with: virtuosic, very deep, and penetrating, though not always with upmost polish and finesse. The woodwinds still have a nice singing quality to it, if at times overwhelmed in loud passages (issue of recording balance props up here and there). But for the most part, the winds are characterful and sparkling (like, for example, in the Pathétique's Allegro molto vivace third movement). The percussion, though, is a spotlight in and of itself. There are many instances where the timpanist(s) is mesmeric and gripping: like in the recapitulation of the Fourth Symphony's first movement where the timpani roll and crescendo is transfixing and also in the first movement's heated development of the Pathétique where the sense of theatrics is absolutely inescapable. However, there are instances where the percussion (cymbals and bass drums not excluded), has a bit too much of a prominence like in the coda of the First Symphony or in the finale of the Fourth (again, recording balance is partially to blame here). Nevertheless, what we are witnessing in this set are by and large mesmerizing performances by a great orchestra, with its own versatility and down to earth expressiveness: to me the orchestra more suited than any in performing the music of Russia's greatest composer at its most authentic, sentimentality, sincerity, and boldness, in Russian terms.

As far as the overall approach, phraseology, and shapings are concerned, Svetlanov offers no radical departures from his 1967 Melodiya classic recordings of the symphonies: in essence rather more direct and less probing, pliant, and stylish than many of his contemporaries (Temirkanov, Bernstein, Mravinsky, Rostropovich, to name a few). But Svetlanov is as musical as they, and like Rostropovich with the London Philharmonic (EMI), he remains thoroughly Slavic in zeal. Except in the Third Symphony, curiously enough, his readings are dramatically driven and fever-pitched in intensity, if rather too hard-pressed for some tastes (for instances, the outer movements of the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the first movement of the Second, the finale of the First). And generally speaking, Svetlanov is not always the most poetic of conductors in the slow movements, though never short of eloquence and warmth in feel: the sentamentality that is heavy but not heart-wrenching. Indeed, he reminds me of Konstantin Ivanov, himself a worthwhile though obscured Tchaikovskian (record labels should really look into his recordings). If one is to compare Svetlanov and Leonard Bernstein in the Fifth Symphony (1988 Deutsche Grammophon (DG) recording), for example, one will surely note how different their approaches are. Both maestros are striking in bringing the pathos and drama well to the fore (I swear I thought at times that the New York Philharmonic is the more Russian sounding of the two). Svetlanov's take, like Karajan's in DG, flows more naturally, with less tempo manipulations than Bernstein's. But Bernstein's the more measured, dignified, yet liberal,

revelatory, and transcending. His ways with the introductions of the first movement and the finale are cases in point: how he takes his time in unfolding them and then just let go once he reaches the main, animated tempi of those movements. It is a very arresting approach, with Bernstein's fluctuations of tempi that pay enormous dividends. His finishing of that symphony is that of triumph (Brucknerian in scope), Svetlanov's is that of exultation. In the Sixth Symphony, Svetlanov's way with the first movement is both frenzied and angst-ridden (as in Myaskovsky's Sixth he was to record in 1993). Even the third movement is done faster than in his Melodiya account, but as in that recording, with dignity and (perhaps) defiance. However, with a conductor like, say, Mikko Franck (with the Swedish Radio Symphony under the Ondine label), the work can have a whole different meaning. His view of the work is much more personal than most: excruciatingly painful, brooding, and tragic, the end of the world type of prophesy and feel. Franck's timing is 55 minutes to Svetlanov's 46, and yet the penetration into the inner world of Tchaikovsky during his bleakest moments of despair could never have been more convincingly and fascinatingly done. The third movement under Franck's direction is very hard-earned indeed.

The composer's first three symphonies are likewise very well done, and noticeably more measured and deliberate. As I alluded above, Svetlanov sounds very caressing and balletic in the Third, where tempi do broaden noticeably especially in the outer movements, and yet with the pacing that never sounds languorous. With Muti and the Philharmonia (EMI), the performance is ever so brilliant and exhilarating (their take in the coda is still the best on record). With Svetlanov and the Russian Federation, the journey is more conscious, dignified, and in its andante elegiac movement, more heartfelt in its sentimentality. The brass players are excellent in this symphony and especially in its coda: wondrously blended and majestic. And just how rewardingly picturesque Svetlanov and the orchestra are in the "Winter Daydreams." I swear I cannot recall a more dreamier like painting of the cold yet welcoming landscape of this work than here; the underlying warmth in the playing is spellbinding. The strings department is the star here: with its upmost blend, firm, and focus in expression and the accentuation that is awe-inspiring. Can anyone think of a better articulated adagio cantibile ma non troppo movement than here? I honestly cannot. The finale is enlivening, even if the coda is a bit overdone and ponderous. I have no qualms, though, in Svetlanov's rendition of the Second Symphony "The Little Russian", except in the andantino marziale movement where the pacing does indeed feel ploding. Nevertheless, his overall take in the work is rewardingly invigorating , enough so to remind me how valid the revised version is, even though my greater affinity still rest with the original.

These live recordings are more spacious and encompassing than Melodiya's studio-bound ones, despite balancing issues and a bit overload on the bass (accompanied by the background humming sound that is noticeable throughout the set). But the sound is more than acceptable. Also, with the exception of the first disc, which has the first two symphonies, each of the remaining four CDs contains only one symphony per disc (Svetlanov's hair-raising renditions of Francesca da Rimini, Romeo & Juliet, and the Coronation March also recorded by Canyon in

the early 90s should have been included here). Lastly, other than Nina Svetlanova's personal note on her late husband's performing and recording legacies, there are no program notes of any kind.

In summary, despite limitations in the presentation (a chronic issue it seems in this anthology), and few orchestral accidents, these propulsive yet eloquent performances by this great team, itself already of legendary stature by then, is without a doubt one of the kind. The proximity of these performances (of the First and Sixth Symphonies on May 21st, 1990, the Third, Fourth, and Fifth on May 24th, and the Second on June 3rd according to the booklet) is eye-catching and may explain the less than pinpoint executions in places. Nevertheless, to my mind, such shortcomings, however slight, belie just how much the music is in their artistic history and developments, in their blood, and ultimately in their hearts. ---David Anthony Hollingsworth, amazon.com

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