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Ippolitov-Ivanov – Symphony No.1, Turkish Fragments (1984)



Symphony No. 1 In E Minor, Op. 46 *A1 Adagio - Allegro Risoluto A2 Scherzo: Allegro A3 Elegia: Larghetto B1 Finale: Allegro Moderato*
Turkish Fragments, Op. 62
B2 Caravan B3 At Rest B4 Night B5 Festival
Turkish March, Op. 55
B6 Turkish March
Singapore Symphony Orchestra Choo Hoey – conductor

Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov falls firmly into the category of what are generally described as 'one-work' composers, one of a surprisingly large contingent whose whole output is represented by a single popular work which comprehensively puts everything else they wrote into shadow. In his case that is one movement from his first suite of Caucasian Sketches, the Procession of the Sardar which leads a life as an independent piece hovering on the fringes of the general repertoire. He is also marginally remembered for his re-orchestration of the St Basil scene in Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov, a re-working of the original in the style of Rimsky-Korsakov. This was intended to form part of the performing edition prepared by the latter for use in opera houses which at the time neglected what was then regarded as the 'problems' of Mussorgsky's original. It can still be heard in Karajan's Decca set of the opera, as well as in Bolshoi video and audio representations. All of this has led to Ippolitov-Ivanov being categorised as a sort of 'picture-postcard' composer, writing in the vein of 'Soviet realism' as espoused by Stalin; although, as a glance at his dates will show, he was active in this style long before it received the official approval of the Bolsheviks.

This is not really the whole picture. Ippolitov-Ivanov had a solid compositional grounding as a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, and in his youth was a friend of both Tchaikovsky and Taneiev. His settings of Russian orthodox liturgy, following in the footsteps of Tchaikovsky, parallel the choral writing of Rachmaninov's Vespers (they can be heard on a deleted Warner Apex release originally issued on Sony St Petersburg Classics). By and large his representation in the current

catalogues is limited to the Procession of the Sardar or the complete suite of Caucasian Sketches from which that movement is drawn, comprising well over half of the available recordings of his music. Thirty years ago the enterprising Marco Polo label attempted to address the neglect of his other works with this release, now reissued on their sister label Naxos, and the results were surprisingly interesting. The First Symphony comes from the Tsarist period, premièred in Moscow in the year of Rimsky-Korsakov's death; the other two works here come from the early Stalinist era and are more predictably picturesque in the manner of the ubiquitous Sardar.

Indeed the First Symphony is a thoroughly conventional piece of symphonic writing, with plenty of atmospheric Russian touches to enliven the scoring. Although it is described as "Symphony No 1" the composer never in fact wrote a second. Its musical content is tuneful, if never with quite the catchiness of the Sardar written fourteen years earlier, and there is much to enjoy here – as indeed there is in the 'Turkish' works written more than twenty years later. Ippolitov-Ivanov spent much of his life in Georgia, and his interest in the oriental style of native music in the region of the Caucasus is clearly demonstrated in the melodic turns of his writing, although it is clear that his general idiom changed relatively little over the years.

It has to be said, though, that the Singapore Symphony Orchestra at the time of this recording was not the crack ensemble that it has subsequently become. The string tone here is at times thin, and the playing is not entirely assured in music that requires considerable panache, virtuosity and agility. Naxos themselves have subsequently made a new recording of the two Turkish works with the Ukrainian National Symphony Orchestra under Arthur Fagen; perhaps more appropriately coupled with both the Caucasian suites, and making a more substantial programme. There is also another recording of the symphony by Gary Brain and the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra, originally issued on Conifer and now available from Archiv, which was reviewed with some enthusiasm by Rob Barnett. The latter expressed a wish to hear some of the composer's operas, and in particular The last barricade based on the historical subject of the Paris Commune of 1871, but unless Melodiya hold a recording in their archives I don't suppose we need to hold our breath. ASV had a generously timed disc of this composer's orchetsral music which has just returned to circulation courtesy of Presto Classics.

As recordings of this music go - and that isn't very far at all - Hoey's pioneering performances are probably better served by the alternative versions in the catalogue; but purchase of those will involve the listener in a duplication of one movement from the second suite of Caucasian Sketches. Those who enjoy the music of Ippolitov-Ivanov (and it is very enjoyable) will not object to this. Those who wish to dip their toes in the water first will find this unique coupling of works a worthwhile investment. The recording is fine, if not outstanding, in its treatment of a large romantic orchestra; and the performances, if not the last word in sophistication, give a good impression of the music. --- Paul Corfield Godfrey, musicweb-international.com

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