



S. Prokofiev: Symphony No. 5 & P.
Tchaikovsky: Romeo and Juliet

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Audiophile Audition (Gary Lemco - 2007.02.13)

The huge orchestral forces and diverse coloration of Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony (1944) make it a natural vehicle for the surround-sound medium. Thomas Sanderling, an East German who has made a strong reputation with the Russian Philharmonic Orchestra, leads his Siberian ensemble, the Novosibirsk Academic Symphony Orchestra, in a June 2005 rendition of this wartime work, moody and expansive at once. The low strings and basses, the low horns, the snare drum juxtaposed against the high violins, clarinet, and cymbal, let us savor splendid effects out of the Russian steppe, a retreating landscape whose horizons could never be subdued by the invading Nazi horde. Like the Fifth Symphony of Shostakovich, the music was to embody a hymn to a developing personality, "a free and happy human being, his great power, his noble-mindedness and spiritual beauty."

Sanderling's performance is, for the most part, intense but emotionally restrained. Other conductors bring us more abandon--think of Mitropoulos, Koussevitzky, Stokowski, Celibidache, Mravinsky--Sanderling, for instance, takes the "marcato" indication quite literally for the second movement scherzo. The percussion, the snaps, snare, piano, along with bassoons and violas, create a relatively delicate fiber in this realization, coolly objective. If I did not know better, I would attribute this smooth, directly literalist interpretation to Eugene Ormandy. The orchestral lines remain perfectly clear; they just lack that bit of divine madness that makes some classic renditions shattering. Sanderling's forces do a fine job in the graduated accelerando for the da capo of the Scherzo; but while testifying to a great discipline, it simply isn't insane enough.

The Adagio provides Sanderling an opportunity to shine, and many of the musical figures correspond to textures and themes from the ballet Romeo and Juliet. Woodwinds and low strings glow in this thoughtful, even staid realization, and the homogeneity of orchestral tone captures one's attention. The music does move with the clarinet entry in the Allegro giocoso finale, the strings and battery now engaged in what must be construed as a comedic ending, the forces of light triumphant. The flute and clarinet emerge much as they do in Peter and the Wolf. Almost metronomic precision in the woodwind entries, the evenness of the ostinati. Some mighty, albeit controlled, cacophony at the symphony's conclusion. A finesse ensemble; if only Sanderling would cut it loose.

The most Russian performance I have ever heard of the Tchaikovsky Romeo and Juliet Overture came from Dimitri Kitaenko leading the Moscow Philharmonic in Atlanta in 1975. One of the best recorded performances I know comes from Rostropovich on EMI. This performance by Sanderling comes pretty darn close, from the gorgeous opening bars with strings and harps, to the impassioned love theme we all know all too well. A rendition neither too leisurely a la Celibidache nor too rushed

a la Toscanini, the Sanderling nobly balances the balletic with the dramatic impulses of this luscious score. Nice horn and tympani riffs from the poles of my listening space. The editing and sound production, courtesy of Pyotr Kondrashin, warrants our applause for the sonic warmth and lulling ambiance in the flute, horns, and strings. The structural working-out of the sonata-form elements of the score proceeds naturally and gracefully, the tragic struggle quite epic, resulting in an exquisite tour de force more suited to Sanderling's temperament than the Prokofiev, it appears.

