



P. I. Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto & Symphony No. 4

aud 95.490

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This concert from 24 April 1969 demonstrates how the concerto should be—but often is not—done. The relaxed, sinuous entry of the violin in the first movement immediately tells us we're about to be treated to some great musicmaking. The 21-year-old Zukerman's unforced, sweet-toned playing has all the fresh, vibrant, unaffected honesty of an astonishingly gifted young performer riding the great wave of confidence and energy that comes with first arriving at artistic maturity. His grasp of the solo part is masterly and completely self-contained. Nothing is wanting.

Zukerman tackles the first movement cadenza with no apologies for its virtuoso-showpiece qualities, but he also brings to it nuanced expressiveness. He links it organically to the rest of the movement, rather than treating it as a tacked-on party piece. As it is through the entire performance, his tone is firm but never forced, harsh, squeaky, or abrasive. There is polish without blandness, and a wonderful silvery quality to it, like nicely patined fine silver.

The slow movement starts off shakily in the orchestra, with some untidy ensemble and sour playing from the clarinet. Then Zukerman enters and all becomes sweetness and expressive light again. Despite his brilliant handling of the first movement's keen technical demands, his playing in II is tinged with just the right gentle Tchaikovskian melancholy. It is neither heavy and tragic nor sentimental. The finale is remarkable for its freshness, vitality, and breathtaking, crisp articulation from the soloist, despite the brisk pace he and Kubelik take. The atmosphere of these proceedings is anything but "ho-hum, we're doing the Tchaikovsky again".

Kubelik was not a great Tchaikovsky conductor, but here he leads a solid, sensitive accompaniment and he doesn't fight the soloist for control. They work together, and we—and the audience at the concert—are the beneficiaries. Nevertheless, there is some inconsistency to his handling of the orchestra.

For example, the two waltz-like orchestral climaxes in I are superb—noble, spacious, elegant—but the transitional passages directly afterward are slack and directionless. The Bavarian Radio Symphony, then as now, is clearly not one of the world's first-rank orchestras, but the unfortunate moments from the orchestra pass fairly quickly.

Zukerman's playing binds the proceedings together with a superb concentration and focus that are all too rare even in concerts. One question: Is the solo work as beautiful as Repin's on the new Philips disc I reviewed last issue? Oh, yes—much more so. It approaches the level of the classic Szeryng/Munch RCA recording. Even in an outrageously overcrowded field, this performance stands out, though patches of scrappy orchestral work prevent me from making an unqualified recommendation.

Rather than serve as one's only recording of the piece, this is a good supplement for a collection that already contains the Szeryng, Heifetz/Reiner (RCA), Stern/Rostropovich (Sony), and Mutter/Karajan (DG). After all, who can get by with only one copy of the Tchaikovsky concerto?

Kubelik's take on the symphony is clean and professional but nothing special. The trumpets in the ominous first movement fanfares are strident and shrill, but the woodwind playing is better than in the concerto. Kubelik churns up some fury in the big, gangly first movement, but he lets it become episodic, lacking the dramatic build this music should have. The conviction and frisson of the great performances just isn't anywhere to be heard. Kubelik is serviceable, not incandescent, and efficient rather than moving, despite his audible stomping during some of the high-stress passages. At least the Munich audience is pleasantly quiet, despite the April date of the concert.

There are many better recordings out there, starting with Kubelik's own earlier Chicago Symphony account. Even there, his take on the work is rather driven, hard-edged, and forced--and not helped by Mercury's glassy LP sonics (which would undoubtedly benefit from modern digital remastering). I certainly would turn to Bernstein (Sony, rather than the later DG), Karajan (preferably EMI), Muti (EMI), Ormandy (Sony), and Monteux (RCA) first. Those interpretations differ widely in character, but they all have far more to say than Kubelik.

Audite's sound is good FM-quality stereo, with a natural balance between soloist and orchestra and no distortion. There is some hail ambiance, a sense of air around the instruments, and a touch of reverb (added in the remastering?). The lower bass is a bit muddy. The sound is not dry but also not lush and tropical. Tape hiss is minimal--almost inaudible on speakers, though I could hear it when I put on some high-end headphones and boosted the treble unnaturally high. The packaging doesn't indicate if the recording has been put through No Noise or a similar noise-reduction process. Under normal playback, the treble is clean and clear but not brittle.