Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works, Vol. III

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Fanfare (Steven Kruger - 2015.03.26)

I wish I could be more enthusiastic about these performances. But I'm afraid sympathy is in order—for the continuing tendency of German orchestras to inflict HIP revisionists upon themselves. The RSO Stuttgart was eccentric enough a few years ago, recording Elgar with what sounded like a string section assembled at Williams-Sonoma. That was Roger Norrington's not very convincing take on history. Now, in Schumann's Cologne, we waste the talents of the WDR on a perversely reduced "expanded version" of the Fourth Symphony.

About a year ago, I had more favorable things to say about Heinz Holliger's CD of the "Spring" Symphony and early version of the Fourth. He seemed to bring a joyous bounce to the fanfares in the young work, and his foreshortening of things went well with notions of impetuous ardor. Similarly, the early Fourth, whose holes in orchestration are the aural equivalent of Swiss cheese, benefitted from a tight and virtuosic zest, clipping virtually everything to its benefit. It sounded demoted to piano suite status—but brought off well. Small consolation for admirers of original versions….

The CD here records the 1850 revision and expansion of the score. Schumann's reworking fleshes out all the gaps which existed earlier and encourages grand, blazing, and sweeping phrases. In the right performance, the work lands nearly within reach of the Brahms Second Symphony in terms of impact—27 years before the fact. But in the wrong hands?

The performance here is perversely scrawny and metallic on top, tubby on the bottom from an uninspired timpanist, and discombobulated beyond prediction. Every phrase is too short, in a sort of Baroque manner, except for the ones which should be short. Every syncopation seems to have its own syncopation. And worse, there is considerable energy, only it never soars. Such electricity as there is, is wasted on aggression. It is like being rabbit-punched by Handel.

One of the persistent and poorly supported ideas about the Mendelssohn/Schumann era is the notion that these composers only experienced small orchestras. Even if this were true, it wouldn't mean composers were necessarily happy with the resources before them. Schumann and Mendelssohn were friends and participated in numerous music festivals together during the 1840s. I don't imagine the early music purists like to be reminded that the orchestras were enormous. The premieres of Paulus and Elijah had orchestras of 176 and 172 musicians respectively. Berlioz managed to conduct the Fantastique at the Crystal Palace with 150 (and his score demands 250). I cannot quote similar chapter and verse about Schumann, but he was well aware that music was getting really "big" and probably had conducted his own symphonies with large orchestras.

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I shouldn't fail to mention the cello concerto, the other late work included on this CD. It is always fascinating structurally, demonstrating how powerful an example the influence of Mendelssohn, in general and his violin concerto, in particular, had been. One could argue, though, that the themes are not so memorable as they should be, nor the textures sufficiently varied. Without the lively finale, the piece would languish away from the repertory. I refreshed my ears for this review with the Jacqueline du Pré performance and was struck by how alive, beautiful, and somehow sweepingly "upward" her phrasing manner always was. Oren Shevlin is the principal cellist of the Cologne orchestra and an accurate and musicianly player. But his manner is far too even. It doesn't help that the orchestra avoids vibrato. This is the Schumann Concerto on Sominex.

I cannot really recommend the CD, despite good sound and scholarly notes. Schumann's music is surely somewhere to be found between Handel's Water Music and the Delius Cello Concerto. But Holliger's HIP divining rod didn't work.

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