Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works

aud 21.450
EAN: 4022143214508

Gramophone (David Threasher - 2016.05.03)

Schumann's Violin Concerto has one of the strangest histories of all great Romantic works. His last piece for orchestral forces, it was inspired by a meeting with the young Joseph Joachim in 1853. 'May Beethoven's example incite you, O wondrous guardian of the richest treasures,' wrote the 22-year-old virtuoso, 'to carve out a work from your deep quarry and bring something to light for us poor violinists.'

This coincided with a particularly stressful period in Schumann's personal and professional life, not least the fallout from his deficiencies as a conductor with the Düsseldorf Musikverein. He was plagued by illness; but work on music for Joachim—two sonatas, the Phantasie, Op 131, and the Concerto—in­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­�
Orchestre de Chambre de Paris) is more focused, more centred, as would appear to be his outlook on the work: all three movements are 40 seconds to a minute faster than Kopatchinskaja. Nevertheless, her concentration and imagination sustain the performance, and Holliger and his players follow her lead in creating some wondrous sounds, demonstrating yet again that Schumann’s orchestration isn’t as leaden as it’s often made out to be.

On first hearing, I wasn’t sure if I’d wish to revisit Kopatchinskaja’s disc in a hurry. But there’s something magnetic about her vision of the work, about the abandon with which she plays, never shunning an ugly tone when it’s called for. Zehetmair’s tidier, more dapper performance avoids such ugliness and makes choosing between the two an invidious choice. Holliger couples an energetic performance of the Piano Concerto with Dénes Várjon, incorporating in the first movement some features of the earlier Phantasie on which it was based, and which some might prefer to the self-consciously individual recent readings by Ingrid Fliter (reviewed on page 40) or Stephen Hough (Hyperion, 4/16). Zehetmair offers a lithe, spontaneous Spring Symphony and the fiddle Phantasie that Joachim did play.

Pat Kop also offers this latter work, on Vol 5 of Holliger’s series. Again, she takes a more spacious, more reactive approach than Zehetmair; elsewhere on the disc, Alexander Lonquich is similarly more inclined to let the music breathe in Schumann’s two single-movement concertante piano works than, say, the tauter Jan Lisiecki (DG, 1/16). The real draw here, though, is the Konzertstück for four horns and orchestra, in a performance that makes a truly joyful noise, even if it’s perhaps less sleek than Barenboim in Chicago or less steampunk than John Eliot Gardiner with a quartet of period piston horns.

These days, you’re as likely to find—on disc, at least—the Cello Concerto co-opted by violinists. Jean-Guihen Queyras returns it to the bass clef, though, completing the series of the three concertos and piano trios with Isabelle Faust, Alexander Melnikov and the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra under Pablo Heras-Casado. Queyras gives the best possible case for the concerto, making a virtue of the relative short-windedness of period instruments but exploiting their greater ensemble clarity. Where the gut strings really tell, though, is in the First Piano Trio—especially at those points at which Schumann asks for new sounds, such as in the first-movement development, where he tells the string players to play at the bridge for an eerie, glassy sound. I’ve enjoyed all the discs in this series without necessarily preferring them to certain older (modern-instrument) favourites. The combination of Queyras’s concerto and the wonderful, driven D minor Trio, though, leads me to suspect that this is the most persuasive of the three.