Igor Markevitch conducts Ravel, Stravinsky and Honegger

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Fanfare (Jerry Dubins - 01.07.2010)

Igor Markevitch (1912–83) was born in Kiev into a family of Ukrainian, French, and Italian lineage. At 14, living with his family in Switzerland, the teenaged Markevitch was discovered by Alfred Cortot, who took the boy with him to Paris and enrolled him in the Ecole Normale. It was there that he trained under Cortot and Nadia Boulanger for a career as a pianist and composer. His first break in the latter capacity came in 1929, when the 17-year-old was commissioned by Serge Diaghilev to write a piano concerto and to collaborate on a ballet. The ballet project came to naught when Diaghilev died later that year, but the young Markevitch completed the concerto, which was subsequently published by Schott.

For the next dozen years, between 1929 and 1941, Markevitch dedicated himself to composing, averaging two works per year in a variety of musical genres and forms. But after the onset of a serious illness late in 1941, he decided to abandon his career as a composer and turned his attention to conducting. He was not, however, a neophyte to the order, as this sudden occupational change might suggest. He had made his conducting debut at the age of 18 leading the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra; in subsequent appearances with various ensembles, he had already distinguished himself as a recognized exponent of French, Russian, and 20th-century repertoire. As a point of passing interest, it might be mentioned that the conductor Oleg Caetani—currently director of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra—is Markevitch's son by his second wife, Donna Topazia Caetani, herself a distant descendant of the Roman family of 14th-century Pope Boniface VII.

Markevitch's discography is by no means negligible, but unlike those of other more widely celebrated media darlings (the roughly contemporaneous Karajan comes to mind), his recordings have yet to be cataloged and collected together systematically in a way that makes it easy to grasp the full measure of his contribution. Record labels devoted to restoring historical material, such as Archipel, Tahra, Testament, and Urania, have made a few random stabs at it, but the fact remains that Markevitch's recordings are scattered far and wide, and some, still available only on LPs selling for eye-popping prices, are difficult to come by, assuming you can afford them. I found, for example, a vinyl copy of what claimed to be a 1955 Rite of Spring with the Philharmonia on an RCA Red Seal LP posted on eBay for an asking price of $145.99. Curiously, this is the only reference I've come across to a 1955 Rite, and one to boot on RCA. I'm guessing it was originally pressed in the U.K. by HMV, and I suspect that the actual recording is the 1952 version, 1955 probably being the date of the RCA pressing. What do these eBay sellers know?

Markevitch did make commercial recordings of all three of the works on this disc, in some cases more than once. In 1954, he recorded the Ravel with the Philharmonia; with the same orchestra he led The Rite of Spring twice, in mono in 1952 and in a

stereo remake in 1959. Yet another late recording of the Stravinsky with the Suisse Romande Orchestra dates from 1982, one year before the conductor's death. And for Deutsche Grammophon, in 1950s mono, he recorded Honegger's Symphony No. 5 with the Lamoureux Orchestra. To the best of my knowledge, all of these are now, or at one time have been, available on CD.

Like another, slightly earlier conductor I can think of, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Igor Markevitch is, I believe, vastly underrated. The recording at hand, however, should go several miles toward boosting his reputation. To begin with, whatever audio engineer Ludger Böckenhoff and the Audite team have done to remaster the original source material, it qualifies as a latter-day miracle. The sound on this disc—its dynamic range, frequency response, and depth of stage—is simply phenomenal. At nine seconds into the Rite of Spring's "Dances of the Young Girls," for instance, a cross-rhythm pops out in the bassoon that I don't believe I've ever heard before, even in the latest state-of-the-art SACD recordings.

But let's not shortchange Markevitch's role in this. His take on Stravinsky's still shocking pagan ritual is bracing and determinedly defiant. In his hands, the composer's score is not one for the lithe, acrobatically inclined danseur, but for the toned, hard-bodied gymnast. For Markevitch, it's all about the interplay of complex, unyielding rhythms and sudden, explosive gamma ray bursts. The ear-shattering blast that introduces the "Ritual of Abduction" gave me a real start; it was like a Molotov cocktail being lobbed through a plate glass window. Not for Markevitch the toning down or smoothing out of Stravinsky's heinous hosanna to the cult of ritualistic human sacrifice, a kind of musical prequel, if you will, to Shirley Jackson's 1948 short story The Lottery. Interestingly, that story stirred up as much outrage as had Stravinsky's Rite 35 years earlier. The music is a study in primitivism; it should, and was meant to, sound barbaric. Too many modern recordings I've heard, like a recent and highly touted one by Jonathan Nott and the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra on Tudor, transform the score into something gentrified, as if it has now earned a place in the orchestral canon alongside Mozart and Haydn. Markevitch had it right, and he delivers the goods on this recording in one of the most heart-pounding performances of The Rite of Spring you will ever hear.

Ravel's Daphnis et Chloé too was one of the conductor's specialties, and just as sensationalized as his portrayal of Stravinsky's tribal blood-letting is, with equal artistry does Markevitch sensualize Ravel's French goatherd and shepherdess. No gauzy Impressionistic veil can conceal the amorous passion and sexual tension between the two lovers, whose shyness and innocence are eventually overcome by the chemistry of raging hormones in Markevitch's pitch-perfect performance.

I was rather surprised to find no reviews of Honegger's Symphony No. 5, subtitled "Di Tre Re," in the Fanfare Archive. It's one of the composer's more widely recorded works, with a number of fine versions available, including classics by Michel Plasson and Charles Munch. The current live recording with Markevitch is in direct competition with the aforementioned slightly later but still mono Markevitch effort with the Lamoureux Orchestra on Deutsche Grammophon. Unfortunately, I do not have that recording for comparison purposes, but I can tell you that the one at hand is every bit as good, performance-wise, interpretively, and sonically as the Munch with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on RCA, which I do have, and better performance-wise and interpretively, if not quite as sonically wide-spectrum, as the Neeme Järvi with the Danish National Radio Symphony Orchestra on Chandos, which I also have. The piece is worth getting to know, if you don't already know it. It's quite a magnificent score (the "tre re" refers to the three Ds struck on the timpani at the end of each movement), and Markevitch's reading is deeply satisfying.

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More often than not, I end up recommending releases of archival recordings such as this mainly to those who have a particular interest in the conductor or featured artist, but this one is different. The performances are fantastic, and the sound is as good as, if not better than, any number of newly minted recordings I've heard. This is an urgent buy recommendation.

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