Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works, Vol. I

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RECORD REVIEW

Is there a group of orchestral works in the Romantic canon more vexed than the Schumann symphonies? Indisputably lovely works that have long since won the affection of musicians and audiences, the symphonies' supposed deficiencies and inadequacies are nevertheless routinely, almost reflexively rehearsed. Authorities like Tovey, Lang and Dahlhaus have variously described their perceptions of the symphonies' shortcomings, while a later generation, John Daverio, Linda Correll Roesner and Scott Burnham among them, have insisted that Schumann be considered on his own merits, not Beethoven's. A similar long-standing ambivalence is discernible in recordings of the works. When Bernstein's first set was released with the New York Philharmonic in the early 1960s, its use of Schumann's unaltered scores was widely touted. Yet as recently as 2008 Riccardo Chailly's recording with the Leipzig Gewandhaus used Mahler's reorchestrations and a more recent set by Rozhdestvensky with the Estonian Symphony Orchestra on Melodiya uses George Szell's revisions of Schumann.

A new project which aims to record all of Schumann's orchestral music, including the concertante works and overtures , is now under way with the West German Radio Symphony Orchestra of Cologne under the Swiss oboist, composer and conductor Heinz Holliger. The first instalment, recorded in January and March of 2012, presents the 'Spring' Symphony, the first version of what would become the Fourth Symphony, and the Overture, Scherzo and Finale, Op. 52. While the performances are unquestionably earnest and dutiful throughout, one yearns for moments that seem insightful or inspired. The playing is never less than highly competent without being particularly exciting. A rather contained and old-fashioned recorded sound is not helpful though, in and of itself, more lifelike sound reproduction could scarcely create compelling Schumann. Sad to say it is unlikely that this recording will be a stand-out in the Cologne West German Radio Symphony Orchestra's modest discography or, for that matter, in Holliger's more extensive one.

Fortunately there are many, many other choices. Furtwängler, always much admired as a Schumann exponent, recorded only the First and Fourth Symphonies, but these are available on several labels. Of more modern interpretations, few have garnered the enthusiastic accolades of the set by John Eliot Gardiner and the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique. Though already 16 years old, for cutting-edge interpretative insights, brilliant sound and appropriately sized forces, these recordings have not been surpassed.

»audite« Ludger Böckenhoff • Tel.: +49 (0)5231-870320 • Fax: +49 (0)5231-870321 • info@audite.de • www.audite.de