



Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works

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This is Volume 6 of Audite's Complete Symphonic Works edition and contains Schumann's earliest and latest pieces for orchestra, including all his overtures. As with his hero, Beethoven, Schumann's overtures are better known than any of the stage or operatic music they precede. And, like Beethoven, Schumann had a gift for writing exciting, memorable overtures.

Beethoven's influence is also obvious in the only non-overture here, the unfinished Zwickau Symphony of 1833; this is Schumann's third and final revision of the first movement, so it lacks the slow intro of John Gardiner's 1998 recording (DG 457591). Gardiner's orchestra has 40 strings where Holliger's has 60, plus Holliger's accents are tempered and his pace relaxed, so I heard for the first time the influence of Louis Spohr—another hero of the young Schumann—in the wilting chromaticism of the string figures.

Before the two-movement symphony, Holliger raises the curtain on the concert with the mature sonata-form Manfred Overture. In it we hear Holliger's approach to all the overtures: warm, genial, and flowing. He lets the dramatic tension build up slowly, free of histrionics, with subtle orchestral flexibility to broaden tempos for grand climaxes and lyrical passages. The violins are split left and right as they were in Schumann's time and they play cleanly, without vibrato, and this clarifies Schumann's allegedly thick and clumsy orchestrations. There's no mention anywhere of period instruments or gut strings, so I assume they're modern, but at 60 strong they don't sound shrill, nor do they indulge any supposed historic practice like swelling on long notes.

The sound quality matches interpretation: warm, full, and detailed, especially the surround-sound recording, right now available only as a download from Audite's website (mentioned on the back of the digipak). The improvement in three-dimensional depth and presence is unmistakable in the five overtures recorded in 2010 but subtle in the symphony and Manfred recorded in 2015. Considering the high quality of both performance and surround-sound recording, I hope Audite issues a boxed set of this complete series on SACD (or Blu-Ray).

The booklet is informative, recounting the circumstances of each piece's composition. This is an attractive and rewarding survey of Schumann's overtures and makes me want to hear the other volumes in the series.