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Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works, Vol. I

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Gramophone (Rob Cowan - 1970.01.01)

GRAMOPHONE

Holliger launches Schumann symphonic cycle in Cologne

Right from the off, things augur well. The Spring Symphony's opening Andante un poco maestoso is also, usefully, con moto, which means a refreshing lack of portentousness. A marked relaxation of tempo before the excited acceleration into the fast main body of the movement accentuates the dramatic effect of Schumann's writing. Holliger is one of those musicians who hears what he conducts from the inside, a crucial virtue in Schumann and a neat way to disqualify curmudgeonly commentators who wrongly accuse Schumann of ineptitude in orchestration. Nonsense, I say – as this disc proves. The Larghetto expresses itself fluently and without unwarranted indulgence, the Scherzo wears its accents lightly and the finale takes the dance as its starting point.

Aside from its Faustian opening, the wonderful symphony in three movements that goes by the name of Overture, Scherzo and Finale breathes Mendelssohnian fresh air, even though the Scherzo seems to suggest infant Valkyries. The Finale's coda blazes triumphantly, which leaves what's called in this context the Symphony in D minor, in reality the Fourth in its original 1841 incarnation, leaner, lighter and more abrupt than the familiar revision and with some different thematic material. It's useful to have, though there can be little doubt that Schumann's later thoughts were his best, and by some considerable distance. Precise playing and fine, detailed sound guarantee a generous pleasure quota. Other excellent Schumann conductors on disc such as Rafael Kubelik (DG), Fabio Luisi (Orfeo), Paavo Järvi (RCA or C Major on DVD), David Zinman (Arte Nova) and Thomas Dausgaard (BIS) remain on hand as viable alternatives; but, as Holliger is en route to a complete cycle, I'd hold on to your shekels, at least for the moment. His may well be the one to go for.

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