



Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works, Vol. II

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Heinz Holliger's cycle of Schumann's symphonic works continues in Volume 2 (the first was reviewed in January) with Symphonies Nos. 2 and 3, preserving the rather lighter approach he cultivates compared with that of many distinguished interpreters. There is much to be said for this. In the first place, it confronts head-on the charge of Schumann's poor orchestration, which continues to dog him. It is an ancient one, going back at least to Mahler, whose own beautifully lucid orchestration is in the line of Weber and Berlioz rather than what Schumann had in mind (those who want to hear what Mahler did for, or to, Schumann, may be interested in Riccardo Chailly's set of the symphonies). Perhaps Schumann's orchestration really did seem of 'incredible clumsiness' to the original conductor of the first two symphonies, Mendelssohn, as Donald Tovey surmises in the course of several paragraphs in his essay on the First Symphony, referring to listeners who have 'tried to hear Schumann's orchestra in its native fog'. But Schumann had an orchestra with a substantially smaller body of strings, and time and again it has been shown, as by John Eliot Gardiner, that a conductor following this practice, and with a careful ear to balance, can make Schumann's orchestra sound as if it is doing the job of presenting the musical ideas well, which is its purpose. Hans Gál, in many ways the successor to Tovey as Edinburgh's musical sage, and a man with deep understanding of the German musical tradition, wrote of the opening of the Third Symphony that, 'the conductor has to keep a thick quilt of harmony, that covers and dampens the soaring tune, under strict control, and let the melody flow with a large phrasing, free from narrow bar accents to give it the sweeping swing it demands'.

This kind of scrupulousness guides Holliger's performances, together with a naturally light touch in style that suits the works well, and does not treat them as if Brahms had already arrived upon the German scene. He does not take the opening of the Second Symphony too majestically, playing it quite brightly, which suits a movement in which the themes are not developmental but dangerously repetitious. The Scherzo is played swiftly, but with a certain eeriness in the main scherzo, which expresses it well: the swift, apparently dancing theme is actually based on a discord (the ubiquitous Romantic chord of spookiness, the diminished seventh), and the more lyrical elements must lie, as in this performance, with the two Trios which Schumann provides as its counter. The Adagio is marked by length of melodic line in the wind, led by a beautifully played oboe (as no doubt Holliger, one of the great oboists of his time, would have appreciated). Both with this Symphony's finale and that of the other Symphony here, the 'Rhenish', matters are kept bright and quite swift-moving, no attempt being made at a grand climatic summing up.

The Rhine Symphony itself is vividly presented, with the Ländler of the second movement absorbed into the work's lyrical elements, as is suggested by the movement's intricate treatment of it, rather than played as a splash of local colour;

and the movement, really an interlude, is gracefully and elegantly handled. The are problems for the interpreter in the fourth movement, marked feierlich ('solemn' or 'ceremonial'), with its subtle invocations (as Gál again points out) of the length of tradition manifest in the Rhine's great cathedral at Cologne, with motives that have ecclesiastical associations and even of Bach himself, no Rhinelanders but a figure in whose shadow so much stood.

These are intelligent interpretations, decently recorded, original but drawing their nature from what lies to be found in the music itself.

