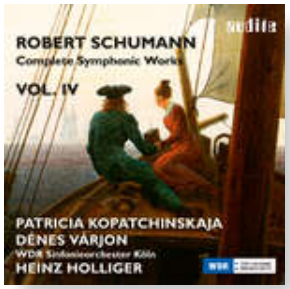

Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works, Vol. IV

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Gramophone (David Threasher - 2016.05.03)

GRAMOPHONE

Schumann's Violin Concerto has one of the strangest histories of all great Romantic works. His last piece for orchestral forces, it was inspired by a meeting with the young Joseph Joachim in 1853. 'May Beethoven's example incite you, O wondrous guardian of the richest treasures,' wrote the 22-year-old virtuoso, 'to carve out a work from your deep quarry and bring something to light for us poor violinists.'

This coincided with a particularly stressful period in Schumann's personal and professional life, not least the fallout from his deficiencies as a conductor with the Düsseldorf Musikverein. He was plagued by illness; but work on music for Joachim—two sonatas, the Phantasie, Op 131, and the Concerto—invigorated him and he remarked often on his ability to concentrate diligently on the music for his young new fiddler friend.
Joachim never performed the concerto, though. With Schumann's decline and suicide attempt, the violinist considered the work to be 'morbid' and the product of a failing mind; he wrote that it betrayed 'a certain exhaustion, which attempts to wring out the last resources of spiritual energy'. This attitude evidently rubbed off on Clara and Brahms, who omitted it from the complete edition of Schumann's works. Joachim retained the manuscript and bequeathed it to the Prussian State Library in Berlin upon his death in 1907, stating in his will that it should be neither played nor published until 1956, 100 years after Schumann's death.

It was in 1933, however, that it came to light. This is where the story turns very peculiar. The violinist sisters Jelly d'Arányi and Adila Fachiri held a séance in which the shade of Schumann asked that they recover and perform a lost piece of his; then Joachim's ghost handily popped up to mention that they might look in the Prussian State Library. A copy of the score was sent to Yehudi Menuhin, who pronounced it the 'missing link' in the violin literature between Beethoven and Brahms, and announced he would give its premiere in October 1937. D'Arányi claimed precedence on account of Schumann's imprimatur (albeit from the other side), and the German State invoked their copyright on the work and demanded a German soloist have the honour. Georg Kulenkampff was eventually entrusted with the world premiere; Menuhin introduced it in the US and d'Arányi in the UK.
It's long been considered a problematic work, owing partly to Joachim's opinion of it, partly to some supposedly heavy scoring and partly to the awkward gait of the polonaise finale, which can too easily become a graveyard for dogged soloists. Nevertheless, it's something of a rite of passage for recording violinists, and two of the finest present it on new discs, as Patricia Kopatchinskaja goes head-to-head with Thomas Zehetmair. Kopatchinskaja (with the Cologne WDR SO under Heinz Holliger in Vol 4 of his series of Schumann's 'Complete Symphonic Works') displays the full range of sounds she is able to draw from her instrument, spinning something almost hallucinatory in the slow movement. The tone employed by Zehetmair (directing the

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Orchestre de Chambre de Paris) is more focused, more centred, as would appear to be his outlook on the work: all three movements are 40 seconds to a minute faster than Kopatchinskaja. Nevertheless, her concentration and imagination sustain the performance, and Holliger and his players follow her lead in creating some wondrous sounds, demonstrating yet again that Schumann's orchestration isn't as leaden as it's often made out to be.

On first hearing, I wasn't sure if I'd wish to revisit Kopatchinskaja's disc in a hurry. But there's something magnetic about her vision of the work, about the abandon with which she plays, never shunning an ugly tone when it's called for. Zehetmair's tidier, more dapper performance avoids such ugliness and makes choosing between the two an invidious choice. Holliger couples an energetic performance of the Piano Concerto with Dénes Várjon, incorporating in the first movement some features of the earlier Phantasie on which it was based, and which some might prefer to the self-conciously individual recent readings by Ingrid Fliter (reviewed on page 40) or Stephen Hough (Hyperion, 4/16). Zehetmair offers a lithe, spontaneous Spring Symphony and the fiddle Phantasie that Joachim did play.

Pat Kop also offers this latter work, on Vol 5 of Holliger's series. Again, she takes a more spacious, more reactive approach than Zehetmair; elsewhere on the disc, Alexander Lonquich is similarly more inclined to let the music breathe in Schumann's two single-movement concertante piano works than, say, the tauter Jan Lisiecki (DG, 1/16). The real draw here, though, is the Konzertstück for four horns and orchestra, in a performance that makes a truly joyful noise, even if it's perhaps less sleek than Barenboim in Chicago or less steampunk than John Eliot Gardiner with a quartet of period piston horns.

These days, you're as likely to find—on disc, at least—the Cello Concerto co-opted by violinists. Jean-Guihen Queyras returns it to the bass clef, though, completing the series of the three concertos and piano trios with Isabelle Faust, Alexander Melnikov and the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra under Pablo Heras-Casado. Queyras gives the best possible case for the concerto, making a virtue of the relative short-windedness of period instruments but exploiting their greater ensemble clarity. Where the gut strings really tell, though, is in the First Piano Trio—especially at those points at which Schumann asks for new sounds, such as in the first-movement development, where he tells the string players to play at the bridge for an eerie, glassy sound. I've enjoyed all the discs in this series without necessarily preferring them to certain older (modern-instrument) favourites. The combination of Queyras's concerto and the wonderful, driven D minor Trio, though, leads me to suspect that this is the most persuasive of the three.