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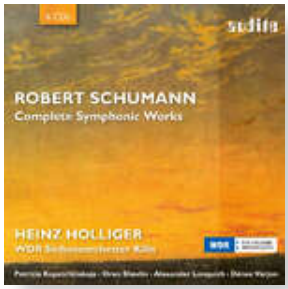

Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works

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Fanfare (Steven Kruger - 2014.02.12)

There is often some trepidation to experience at the arrival of a new Schumann CD. Few composers sound so different from performance to performance as Schumann does – just in general – and early music practices are at their most controversial when they confront the traditions of Romantic music in the 1840s. This release contains the Spring Symphony, the Overture, Scherzo, and Finale, and the original version of the Symphony No. 4. I must say I was worried. Last fall, I reviewed Holliger's CD of the Mendelssohn Third and Fourth symphonies with the Musikkollegium Winterthur and found no special insights in the performance. Such interpretive points as there were faded into the flat acoustic supplied by the engineers. The notes talked a good game but […]

This CD represents a doubly happy surprise, then. The music simply leaps from the loudspeakers, full of energy, joy, originality, and sound of remarkable warmth. So far as I can determine, the WDR SO is playing in substantial numbers, if not perhaps full strength. But no Norrington twang invades the string passages. Nor do I hear melodies chopped up into Baroque bits and pieces. Although the notes are more informative about Schumann's psychology than the conductor's performance practice, Holliger clearly favors a fruitier, more original sound from the brasses than usual – and the occasional harder impact from timpani.

What struck me foremost is how the introduction to the Spring Symphony leaps off the page. Holliger takes it fast and explosively. He begins with the fanfare voiced down a harmonic third, where it avoids blattiness. (Otherwise, this is the usual version of the work.) As the Symphony proceeds, it strikes me Holliger has found a way of integrating tempos in the music as though it were a piano piece. The actual thrust and velocity we hear are quite normal, but contrasting passages seem more vivid and, where appropriate, more mercurial. Textures become magical in places you might not expect. Plodding boredom is avoided. And traditional criticism of Schumann's orchestration is dealt a serious blow yet again.

Performances of this work can rise or fall with the great fanfare climax in the middle of the first movement. There is nothing worse than just letting it go by stiffly. It can be a litmus test for time-beaters. Here, I'm happy to say Holliger gives us a beautifully judged ritard, and the extra champagne fizz from his brasses makes it a joyous and triumphant experience. I couldn't resist playing it over several times. The slow movement is the other standout here, flowing along more swiftly than we might expect but losing no sentiment along the way – and avoiding boredom in places where we might have been reluctant to admit its existence in the past.

The rest of the Symphony unfolds in the same lively manner, as does the remainder of the CD. The Overture, Scherzo, and Finale is given a traditional but zesty account.

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The slightly smaller scale of the piece reinforces the notion of piano music, beautifully orchestrated and performed. But if there is another revelation, I'd say it is to be found in the original version of the Fourth Symphony, which rounds out the CD. Holliger has discovered that the key to this work is to let the textures dictate the tempo. Other conductors often give the impression of trying to make a big piece out of it – whereupon they fall prey to bizarre holes in the orchestration and the many places where Schumann doesn't support this idea with appropriate weight. But take the music on its own terms, the way Holliger does here, play a good bit of it for deft movement, and suddenly this early version leaps forth with charm. Ultimately, for sheer power, I favor the reorchestrated, nearly Brahmsian version we have all come to know and love. But here, for the first time, I understand how Brahms could have preferred the original.[…]

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