

Presto interview - Vasily Petrenko on Scriabin



by David Smith. 5th November 2015

In the wake of his acclaimed Shostakovich symphony cycle – which came to fruition with No. 13 in B flat minor last year – Russian conductor Vasily Petrenko has now set his sights on another composer from his homeland, the esoteric genius Alexander Scriabin.

His latest disc, with the Oslo Philharmonic, comprises Scriabin's 3rd and 4th symphonies, and represents the first instalment in a projected complete cycle.

I caught up with Vasily earlier in the week to talk about this project...

You mentioned in an interview with *BBC Music Magazine* earlier this year that 'At first the orchestra was a little unsure about his music' - what aspects of Scriabin do you think are especially challenging or forbidding, and how did you win them over?

I wouldn't say they were uncomfortable with the music. They were not so familiar with it, would be more precise! They also felt that at first look, Scriabin's symphonies are really difficult, and challenging from the technical side. And also, unless you're really clear in the details, unless it's really transparent, something like the *Divine Poem* may sound very long at the first look. But once you go into detail – once you rehearse the piece, as well! - once you've found all the transparency in his music as well as these almighty moments, then the music starts to shine.

So it is a very unique world he has, harmonically. It's actually a branch which never grew further. Of course there's early Szymanowski, and all these other composers who were trying to follow his path, but then they changed their language. Those ultra-Romantic harmonies I think are perhaps the most complex harmonic language until the dodecaphonic system started. So in a tonal system that's the ultimate expressionistic taste in harmony. And also... absorbing his ideas – about the Universe, about why he's writing the music, what the purpose of music is and the philosophical ideas behind it – that of course takes a little bit of time with any orchestra.

I've done the *Divine Poem* around the world several times – I've done it in St Louis, and I've also done it in Melbourne, and I would say that this is the piece which – ask any orchestra – at the beginning, it's very difficult. And most of the orchestras, after one or two days of rehearsal, start to adore this music. And actually most of the orchestras ask me 'can we play some more like that?' That was also the case here in Oslo!

How did you first encounter Scriabin's music and get the "bug"?

Of course I was listening to it when I was a child and a little bit later, in the Soviet Union and then in Russia; I was playing some of his piano music, which is absolutely amazing – his piano solo pieces – and then it came to me through... well, there are a lot of connections. He was one of the first Wagnerians in Russia, so, there's a connection through Wagner and also the French school. So that would also play a major role, especially in his orchestration. And for me, to do such a project, of course, was very natural, because I'd done quite a lot of Wagner and Liszt, and then there was also the French music, and also Mahler... so that somehow made a connection.

Plus, I've just finished a cycle of Tchaikovsky symphonies which will be released quite soon – with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra – so for that, it's a combination of composers which then unifies in one particular heritage – the symphonies of Scriabin.

Also looking into the various recordings of Scriabin, I was never quite satisfied with them *as cycles*. The thing – which I've said many times about the Shostakovich cycle which I've done – is that there are plenty of great recordings of the various symphonies by various great conductors, but there's never been a great *cycle*. The purpose is to feel it like a big heritage where every symphony is recorded at its best.

As you're probably well aware, Valery Gergiev is releasing these same two symphonies almost simultaneously with yours. Have you heard his take on them, and if so how do you think his approach differs from your own?

I certainly haven't yet had a chance to listen to his record, but I think it's very different, because what we are doing here in Oslo is a "proper" recording. We used very little material from the concert, and we had three or four full sessions to complete the disc. What Valery did with the LSO was a live recording. It's a different genre. Of course it has its benefits, because nothing can replace the feeling of the live performance (and economically, live recordings

are much cheaper!), so... I think for me I can dig a little bit deeper into his music, to find the special colours in the sessions – it makes more sense.

Scriabin was known for having a strong belief in the mystical side of things – his unfinished *Mysterium*, his interest in Theosophy and so on. Did you immerse yourself in these texts as you were preparing to record the symphonies?

I was reading a little bit of Blavatsky, Chicherin, Berdyaev, Steiner and later Heidegger, there's a lot of various philosophies of that time. But we studied this whole school of philosophy in the Conservatoire in St Petersburg – so I was already quite prepared! From Ancient Greek philosophy, right through to the end of the twentieth century.

Much has also been written about his synaesthesia – as it has of Messiaen. Opinions differ but surely the acid test has to be what the listener hears. Do you think it feeds into his music in any obvious way?

Well, to be honest I myself, in my experience...for me it's not just the colours. There's a whole visual picture. It can be pictures of nature, it can be pictures of personalities, it can be pictures of some happening – it depends on the music and it depends on the symphony. Whenever I am conducting these – or any pieces – I have such strong visual images in my mind, as well, not just the colours.

But coming to this synaesthesia and Scriabin – you know he changed his vision about the colours of the keys several times! And it's a rather less-known fact that he actually had a discussion with Rimsky-Korsakov about such things, and they disagreed with each other – and that's why they became, not enemies, but their relationship became a little bit colder.

How helpful do you think the titles (official or otherwise) of the symphonies are in thinking about them? Are they programmatic works to you, or absolute, or something in-between?

In-between of course! There's aspects of divine ideas, there's aspects of the Universe, but there's also the personal touch, the personal approach of Scriabin, of his struggles – his struggles in private life, his struggles in heritage, his struggles in relation with Moscow society, because it wasn't easy. So it's more of a combination to be honest.

Why did you decide to start your complete symphony cycle with Nos. 3 and 4 – and is there any particular work you're especially looking forward to?

Well, we're doing a recording of No. 2 towards the end of this season, and the Piano Concerto, then next year will be No. 1 and No. 5. The reason... well, there are several reasons. I think, to be honest, No. 4 and No. 3 are perhaps the easiest for the audience to accept and get into this kind of music. And then after that you can go into things that are a bit more challenging. But they're also great, and very different – no less ingenious than No. 4 and No. 3, but then the audience has at least more understanding of the language and of the philosophy.

For many people here, the concerts where we played No. 4 and No. 3 – a couple of concerts when we played them last season – were the best concerts of the year from the orchestra. He's still very poorly known in the West, but, well, let's see...!



Scriabin: Symphonies Nos. 3 & 4

Vasily Petrenko's recording of Scriabin's Symphonies Nos. 3 & 4 was released on 23rd October by LAWO.

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