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### **Alexander SCRIBIN (1872-1915)**

Symphony No. 3 in C minor, *Le Divin Poème*, Op. 43 (1902-1904) [48:19]

*Poème de l'extase*, Op. 54 (Symphony No. 4) (1905-1908) [20:22]

Oslo Philharmonic/Vasily Petrenko

rec. 2-7 February 2015, Oslo Concert Hall, Oslo, Norway

**LAWO CLASSICS LWC1088 SACD** [68:41]

All too often record labels see composer anniversaries as an excuse to dredge their back catalogues rather than release new recordings. The Scriabin centenary is no exception, with a number of reissues including an 18-CD box of mainly recycled items from [Decca Universal](#). There have been some new releases too, among them splendid accounts of his piano music from [Garrick Ohlsson](#) and [Alessio Bax](#). Even more glorious is Mikhail Pletnev and the Russian National Orchestra's coupling of Scriabin's First and Fourth symphonies on [Pentatone](#). All three recordings are of such a high artistic and technical calibre that they demand a wider reappraisal of this much-maligned composer.

Speaking of reputations I don't rate the young Russian conductor Vasily Petrenko as highly as many of my colleagues do. His Rachmaninov ([Warner](#)) and especially his Shostakovich ([Naxos](#)) left me with the distinct impression that he's a relative lightweight, more prone to superficial gestures than to probing intensity. However, Petrenko's appointment as chief conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic could change all that. To mark the start of this new partnership the Lawo Classics have just issued the first in a projected cycle of Scriabin symphonies. I'm pleased to see it's an SACD as well.

The key competitors here are Riccardo Muti and the Philadelphia Orchestra ([Warner](#) and [Brilliant](#)) and Leif Segerstam and the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic on [BIS](#). That said, Pletnev's Pentatone Fourth is in a class of its own; indeed, I doubt you'll hear a more transported version, or a better sounding one, this side of the Last Trump. Segerstam's cycle is certainly well recorded and Muti's – set down between 1985 and 1990 – is still something of a sonic *tour de force*. Incidentally, LSO Live have just announced the first instalment of Valery Gergiev's new Scriabin series. I plan to review that as soon as it's released.

Scriabin's Third Symphony, subtitled *Le Divin Poème*, is made up of three continuous movements: *Lento - Luttés, Voluptés* and *Jeu divin*. It's one of the highlights of Muti's set; the Philadelphians are in refulgent form and their conductor is unfailingly dramatic throughout. Segerstam and his Swedish band are at their sonorous and imposing best as well; indeed, the latter's climaxes are simply hair-raising. Petrenko, comparatively plain, certainly impresses at the outset. Not only is he less volatile than either of his rivals, he also underlines the symphony's debts to Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky rather more than they do. The downside is that much of the music's passion and power is lost.

Petrenko's more affectionate reading does have its merits though, not least because it brings out the composer's gentler, more lyrical side. There are some lovely things here and the playing is decent enough, but one just has to revisit Muti or Segerstam to realise that the dark, elemental pull of this music – its visionary or mystical character – is what makes it so striking, so memorable. For all his virtues Petrenko simply doesn't dig deep enough, and as committed as the Oslo Phil undoubtedly are they're no match for the heft and blend of their American or Swedish counterparts. As for the recording it's good, but it doesn't have the depth or sonic subtleties I'd expect from a top-notch SACD.

Petrenko's reading of the *Poème de l'extase* is rather more problematic. This is a work that can so easily seem excessive – vulgar, even – a trap that both Muti and Pletnev manage to avoid. At 25:06 Segerstam's version rambles somewhat; also, he opts for a rather opaque, *faux* orientalism that's not to my taste. Petrenko certainly conjures some lovely sounds at the start, but thereafter his performance becomes fitful and fragmented. I really missed the long, unbroken lines of Pletnev's performance, not to mention his big, orgiastic finale.

Other aspects of Petrenko's Op. 54 troubled me too. The solo trumpet – so very present in Pletnev's account – is all but inaudible here. Then again, the Lawo recording is not as detailed or as thrillingly three-dimensional as Pentatone's; in fact, it comes close to a perspective-flattening 'wall of sound' in the closing pages. Oh, and if you're expecting an organ at this point you'll be sorely disappointed. I assume Petrenko chose the optional harmonium instead; if he did it's not terribly effective. Goodness, a less ecstatic account of the Fourth would be hard to imagine. All of which suggests this new Scriabin cycle is not likely to challenge – let alone displace – the best in the catalogue.

An average Third and a failing Fourth; must do better.

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