



RECORDING OF THE MONTH

Alexander SCRIBIN (1872-1915)

Symphony No. 3, Op. 43 *Le Divin Poème (The Divine Poem)* (1902/04) [44.23]
Symphony No. 4, Op. 54 *Poème de l'extase (Poem of Ecstasy)* (1905/08) [20.35]
London Symphony Orchestra/Valery Gergiev
rec. live, March (Op. 54) and April (Op. 43) 2014, Barbican, London, UK
LSO LIVE SACD LSO0771 [64.58]

Symphony No. 3, Op. 43 *Le Divin Poème (The Divine Poem)* (1902/04) [47.14]
Symphony No. 4, Op. 54 *Poème de l'extase (Poem of Ecstasy)* (1905/08) [20.21]
Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra/Vasily Petrenko
rec. 2-7 February 2015, Konserthus, Oslo, Norway
LAWO CLASSICS SACD LWC1088 [68.44]

A number of recordings are being issued in 2015 to mark the hundredth anniversary year of the death of Alexander Scriabin. Here are two outstanding new identically coupled releases from two renowned Russian conductors who each studied at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory.

On Lawo Classics the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra is conducted by its chief conductor Vasily Petrenko who gave his inaugural concert with the orchestra at the start of the 2013/14 season. This album is Petrenko's first release with the Oslo PO and the first in the partnership's series of Scriabin symphonies for this label.

On the other hand the recording from the London Symphony Orchestra has been released just as Valery Gergiev has given his final concerts as the orchestra's principal. Gergiev's release is the first album in a new cycle of Scriabin symphonies on LSO Live.

Scriabin's music bridged the Great Russian romantic era of Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky into the twentieth-century. The Moscow-born composer was an enigma and perhaps is still a mystery to many today. It is easy to consign Scriabin's music into the background and focus on his unconventional lifestyle which included passions such as theology, philosophy, mysticism, the occult, theosophy and pantheism. Valery Gergiev has a firm belief that "Scriabin is a Great Russian composer ... He's clearly a composer with his own voice, from his own world. Scriabin came up with very much his own sonority and his ability to hear different colours was legendary."

Scriabin devised his *Symphony No. 3, Op. 43 Le Divin Poème (The Divine Poem)* with a very short prologue and three sections to which he gave the descriptive titles. Scriabin's muse, his mistress Tatiana Schloezer produced the programme notes for *The Divine Poem* writing of "the evolution of the human spirit". With its evocative title and played without a break this work could be described as a tone-poem. It is conceived on a massive scale and calls for large orchestral forces. This is thrilling music of awe-inspiring passion that surges forward in great waves. In the first section *Luttes (Struggles)* there is also a strong undercurrent searching underlying the colourful sounds of nature. The atmosphere of the second section *Voluptés (Delights/Pleasures)* increases intensely and achieves an enthralling passion. If it were possible the mood of the third section *Jeu divin (Divine Play/Joy)* is even more sensual producing an ecstatic fervour which feels almost too much to bear. Throughout the impressive playing of the Oslo PO under Petrenko's baton is stunningly rich in texture and detail. In Gergiev's reading one soon feels a sense of total involvement by the LSO. Without loss of focus the exquisite playing is colourful and intensely passionate with the strings displaying a ravishing opulence. Gergiev's *Jeu divin* conveys a sensuous tenderness and tremendous sweep.

The symphonic poem evocatively titled *Poème de l'extase (Poem of Ecstasy)*, Op. 54 is also known as the *Symphony No. 4*. To accompany the work Scriabin published a text which he called a "philosophical

programme". Here Scriabin uses motifs played by specific instruments to represent actions and feelings. In addition he utilises themes to symbolise various scenes and states. Henry Miller said of the *Poem of Ecstasy* "It was like a bath of ice, cocaine and rainbows". Scriabin's sumptuously heady orchestral writing overflows with dazzling orchestral colour concluding with a shattering orchestral climax. In what feels like a joyous voyage of discovery for the Oslo PO its playing under Petrenko is strikingly consistent, capturing that often indefinable creative spirit, so essential to the score's success. Gergiev directs a ripely voluptuous account that feels seductively compelling. The sumptuous body of tone from the LSO strings is remarkable as is the overall cohesive quality of the playing.

These two new Scriabin releases face fiercely strong competition. The alternative recordings I am most familiar with that include both *The Divine Poem* and *Poem of Ecstasy* are headed by the now 'classic' Scriabin set from Riccardo Muti with the Philadelphia Orchestra and recorded in 1986/91 at Memorial Hall, Philadelphia on [EMI Classics](#) (re-issued [Brilliant Classics](#)). Additionally there are stirring accounts from the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin under Vladimir Ashkenazy recorded in 1990 at Jesus Christus Kirche, Berlin/Dahlem on [Decca](#). Probably Scriabin's most admired orchestral score the *Poem of Ecstasy* has proved the most popular in the recording studio receiving a number of fine versions. Leading the way is the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Claudio Abbado recorded at Symphony Hall, Boston in 1971 on Deutsche Grammophon. Lorin Maazel in 1978 recorded a persuasive account with the Cleveland Orchestra at the Masonic Auditorium, Cleveland on [Decca](#). Receiving acclaim is the committed account from the Russian National Orchestra under Mikhail Pletnev recorded in 2014 at DZZ Studio 5, Moscow on [Pentatone](#).

The sound team for Lawo Classics excel on this SACD with satisfying sonics that on my standard player are clear with a satisfying balance. The overall presentation is admirable featuring a fascinating essay by Christian Kjelstrup titled *Scriabin's Revolution* and reproductions of art works by four of Scriabin's Russian contemporaries. Under Petrenko the Oslo Philharmonic is in outstanding form and its playing of these Scriabin scores feels like a labour of love.

Using my standard player for this SACD the LSO Live engineering team has achieved excellent sonics that are extremely vivid and expertly balanced. On this attractively presented release the programme notes written by Andrew Huth are an interesting and informative read. Gergiev and the LSO give thrilling live performances and one senses the rarely achieved, special connection between performers and Scriabin's enigmatic sound-world.

In *The Divine Poem* and *Poem of Ecstasy* I can't imagine too many people being disappointed by the steadfast playing of the Oslo PO under Petrenko. It will win that partnership many admirers. Strikingly Gergiev and the LSO provide remarkably perceptive, awe-inspiring performances of an elevated quality and that disc becomes my premier recommendation in both works.

Michael Cookson

Previous reviews: (Gergiev) [Dan Morgan](#) ~ (Petrenko) [Dan Morgan](#)