

doesn't have much to recommend it on its own terms. The album is available digitally only; don't expect any documentation.

Hugo Shirley

## Tchaikovsky · Liszt

**Liszt** Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este, S163 No 4. Réminiscences de Don Juan, S418. Sonetto 104 del Petrarca, S161 No 5 **Tchaikovsky** Piano Concerto No 1, Op 23<sup>a</sup>

**George Li** *pf* **London Philharmonic Orchestra** / **Vasily Petrenko**

Warner Classics © 9029 53795-7 (65' • DDD)

<sup>a</sup>Recorded live at the Royal Festival Hall, London, March 27, 2019



George Li's first disc for Warner Classics (10/17) was one which, with a few

reservations, I felt marked an impressive debut. This is its strange successor. Why the ubiquitous, over-recorded Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto followed by three solo works by Liszt? What kind of a programme is that?

Furthermore, I'm afraid this traversal of the B flat minor Concerto does not set the pulse racing, the tempo of the famous opening section being nearer to *Andante non troppo* (which was what the work's dedicatee von Bülow changed it to in this score) than the composer's *Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso*. There's a feeling, though surely unintended, of a task reluctantly undertaken. Only in the closing pages of the first movement does the performance truly catch fire.

The Liszt works are studio recordings made in Boston four months later. 'Jeux d'eau' and the Petrarch Sonnet 104 provoke the same reaction as the Tchaikovsky: fine but unremarkable. However, when we come to the *Réminiscences de Don Juan* it is a different story. Here is a mesmerising and masterly rendition out of the top drawer, with long phrases and cascading, scintillating filigree passagework. Disappointment turns to admiration. Li is thrilling, and in the many places where his peers are inclined to put on the brakes, he surges headlong onwards without losing the line, shape or clarity. He makes an unusual (but judicious) cut of c40 bars before the much longer 'ad libitum cut' suggested by Liszt, just before the final 'Champagne aria' section, which is played at a true *presto* and *scintillante*.

Still, the disc makes me wonder if Warner Classics have a coherent marketing strategy for their young star. **Jeremy Nicholas**

## Vaughan Williams

G

Symphonies - No 3, 'Pastoral'; No 4.

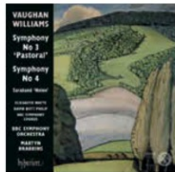
Saraband 'Helen'<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Elizabeth Watts *sop* <sup>b</sup>David Butt Philip *ten*

**BBC Symphony** <sup>b</sup>Chorus and Orchestra /

**Martyn Brabbins**

Hyperion © CDA68280 (81' • DDD • T)



The rediscovery of Vaughan Williams's symphonies seems to be going from strength

to strength these days – and with Andrew Manze's recent cycle with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and now Brabbins's cycle on Hyperion, one feels spoilt for choice. What is more, with the array of new interpretations becoming available, one senses more and more the towering stature of this extraordinary music and of Vaughan Williams's eminence as one of the 20th century's greatest symphonists.

One immediately feels Brabbins's special affinity for this music in the numinous pacing of the first movement of the *Pastoral* Symphony, which, inch by inch, moves towards its climax in the development. Besides the steady tempo, one is coaxed along by the gradual accumulation of weight as the brooding counterpoint of the composer's themes moves ominously on. The slow movement has a real sense of elegiac rumination and the solo trumpet cadenza, played at a distance, is unsettling as much as it is haunting. Anyone who has witnessed the landscape of Flanders will find this vivid *Stimmungsbild* disquieting. Brabbins and the Hyperion recording team bring a thrilling clarity to the heavier timbres of the Scherzo and the diaphanous, mercurial (even Holst-like) coda with its almost neoclassical fugal music and exhilarating scoring. But it is in the finale, with its unforgettable, benevolent wind chorale (and in this recording the invigorating climactic countermelody in horns and cellos in the recapitulation), and the anxious transformation of the solo soprano's wordless monody in the development that one feels the true pathos of this extraordinary work.

Brabbins's reading of the first movement of the Fourth Symphony has much of the familiar violence and ferocity that we know from this work, and one is unavoidably gripped by the B-A-C-H motif and the superimposition of fourths which adds so much to the language of this imposing canvas; but I was most moved by the space, shape and tone Brabbins gives to the lyrical second subject that then contrasts so vividly

with the mechanistic theme (so redolent of *Job*) which follows. Brabbins's attention to dynamic detail is also striking, both in the first movement (note the really hushed level of the development before the recapitulation really erupts) and the troubling demeanour of the slow movement. Again the demonic Scherzo has a clarity typified by the splendidly crisp bassoon- and string-playing from the BBC SO, and the sense of ensemble, engendered by the composer's fascination for counterpoint and fugue, is hugely energising, not least in the powerful transition that links the Scherzo to the last movement, the bracing 'oompah' of the last movement's opening march and the overwhelming density of the closing pages marked appropriately *epilogo fugato*.

*Saraband 'Helen'* (1913-14), which Brabbins has realised from the surviving draft vocal score, comes as a gentle, sonorous respite and a taste of that pre-war Vaughan Williams captured so powerfully in the *Five Mystical Songs* and *A London Symphony*. It is a heart-warming gem.

**Jeremy Dibble**

## Vivaldi

'Vivaldi con amore'

Concertos - RV93; 'L'Amoroso', RV271; RV481; RV534; RV553; RV564a; 'Amato bene', RV761.

Ottone in villa - Sinfonia

**Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra** / **Elisa Citterio**

Tafelmusik Media © TMK1039CD (75' • DDD)



Beyond reissues, the Canadian period-instrument orchestra Tafelmusik have been conspicuously quiet in the recordings domain in recent years, despite having been downright prolific and indeed highly acclaimed during the 1990s and early 2000s. However, here they are now with their first new recording since the violinist Elisa Citterio took over as music director in 2017: eight Vivaldi works, featuring just their 17 permanent players, which in the context of their last major recording project having been a Beethoven cycle feels like a conscious return to their Baroque roots.

It's a strong return, too. In general terms, the tempos all feel right, faster movements sounding upbeat but never breakneck, and slower movements given space to breathe but not enough to drag. Metrically, meanwhile, it's precise but also far from rigid-sounding, thanks to sensitively shaped and coloured phrases and inventive ornamentation. Then there's the determined beauty to their sweetly rich,