

PROKOFIEFF:Romeo and Juliet

Oslo Philharmonic/ Vasily Petrenko
LAWO 1105 [2CD] 2:25

Some readers might remember the series of very exciting recordings this orchestra made with Mariss Jansons in the late 1980s and early 90s for Chandos and EMI. Those records were notable for superb sound, excellent playing, and thrilling, if not always particularly deep, interpretations. The good news is that all those virtues are on display here under Petrenko, the Oslo Philharmonic's current chief conductor. And he digs a bit more deeply into the underlying emotional core of *Romeo and Juliet* than Jansons did in his exciting, superbly recorded EMI disc of excerpts. I'm not sure I'm ready to agree entirely with the observation in the album notes that Petrenko is "one of the most significant and galvanizing musicians alive", but he does seem to know his way around Prokofieff's large, ambitious ballet score. The only problem with this new *Romeo* is that it's not quite exceptional enough. I will say that when I compared it to the old Cleveland Orchestra/Maazel (Decca) complete recording, Petrenko and his band hold their own. Maazel's players—essentially the orchestra selected, drilled, and honed to perfection by George Szell—play with exceptional alertness and sensitivity to detail. But I can't say the Oslo Phil of 2015 is really inferior to the Cleveland Orchestra of 1972. Maybe it's an indication of how much the standard of orchestra playing has risen worldwide in the last 50 or so years. What would have been a second- or third-rank ensemble in those days now rivals the best of that era in technical precision and polish. It's harder to compare the recorded sound because my copy of the Maazel is on LP. I'll say that both recordings represent the pinnacle of what their reproduction technologies have to offer. LAWO's sound pretty much squeezes everything you can from the format—and reminds me that many of the complaints we had about the hard, tiring, rather constricted nature of CD sound back in the early days was more a matter of the people making the recordings and mastering them—they did not have the experience to extract its full potential. The London LPs hold up well in comparison, though of course, they don't have the dynamic range or the same punch in the bass as the present set. Petrenko brings more energy and drive to the score than Muti in his recent Chicago Symphony recording (Mar/Apr 2015) of excerpts. When I want to hear the high points of the score, minus the less interesting connective music, the other Chicago Symphony set, Solti's (Decca), is my first choice. Petrenko does not convey the same kinetic energy and visceral punch in the dramatic music that Solti does.

Anti-Soltians will probably say that's a good thing, but by the time he made his *Romeo and Juliet* Solti was settling down and could relax enough to indulge in the sensuous, lyrical side of the score, too. Petrenko is mellower but also doesn't draw as much lyrical fervor from movements like the Balcony Scene or the scene in the tomb at the end of the ballet. Solti's late-analog sound transferred to CD is almost on par with what LAWO gives Petrenko. The very best sound may well be BIS's for the Bergen Philharmonic under Litton (J/A 2007—about half the score), but Litton's tempos are stodgy in some places, and the order of the numbers makes the performance slow to heat up. Petrenko ticks all the boxes in the big dramatic moments, so there's plenty of bite to the death of Tybalt and a lot of unrepressed youthful energy to the scene leading up to it. But on the whole there are no revelations here. The lighter, more playful numbers aren't particularly light-hearted; and the harrowing moments of tragedy seem a bit emotionally detached. This is a competent interpretation of the complete score, but I think I'll stick with Maazel and Solti.

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