

**SCRIBIN** **Symphony No. 2. Piano Concerto** • Vasily Petrenko, cond; Kirill Gerstein (pn); Oslo PO • LAWO 1139 (76:30)



Symphony 2 / Piano Concerto 220

Audio CD

Lawo Classics

Lagging way behind Scriabin's two later symphonies in numbers of recordings, the composer's Second Symphony will probably never catch on like the Third and Fourth Symphonies have—after all, it has no nickname to popularize it. Still, the Second has racked up approximately a dozen recordings, not least of which is a practically coeval version by Petrenko's conational, Valery Gergiev, leading live performances of the Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2 with the London Symphony Orchestra.

I'm afraid I'm not enough of a Scriabin buff to be able to dismiss virtually every recording of Scriabin's Second Symphony as a "disappointment," as Jim Svejda did in his review of the Gergiev release in 40:2. In fact, honesty compels me to state that I've only reviewed a performance of the composer's Symphony No. 1, and that was with another Russian conductor, Mikhail Pletnev, leading the Russian National Orchestra on Pentatone. However, I do have recordings of the Second Symphony by Neeme Järvi and the Scottish National Orchestra on Chandos, and by Ashkenazy and the Deutsches Symphonie Orchester Berlin on Decca. In fact, the latter is the one I've compared to this new version because it's coupled exactly the same way, with Scriabin's Piano Concerto played by Peter Jablonski under Ashkenazy and here by Kirill Gerstein under Petrenko.

I think it's fair to say that Scriabin's Second Symphony, composed in 1901, only one year after his First, is a more modest affair than the earlier effort. In his second attempt at a symphony, Scriabin seems to be trying to rein in some of the excesses and extravagances that marked his previous score, though it should be stipulated that one could easily empty the salt shaker using terms such as "modest" and "reining in" to describe this work of perhaps music's most delusional megalomaniac.

It is true, though that Scriabin did scale things back considerably in his Second Symphony. With respect to the orchestra, the only difference in instrumentation is the addition of tam-tam but the omission of bells and harp. More significant, however, is the elimination of vocal soloists and chorus. In the matter of form and duration as well, Scriabin seems to have downsized. There are now five movements instead of six, and, also more significantly, the movements now seem to belong together as a coherent whole, as opposed to the impression one receives of the patch-quilt of unrelated tone poems strung together that make up the First Symphony. The time dimension of the Second Symphony is more normal as well, the whole lasting around 50 minutes, compared to the First Symphony, which clocks in at around 75

minutes. Evidence suggests that the Second Symphony was Scriabin's attempt to write a work that would more or less satisfy the conventional definition of a symphony, as it was understood in the late 19th century.

Ironically, it may be the very constraints Scriabin imposed on himself that led the Second Symphony to its current state of relative disfavor, for it lacks some of the white-hot inspiration, lurid sensuality, and Romantic hyperbole and decadence one tends to associate with the composer's music. Understand, though, that Scriabin has not taken a vow of chastity; the self-denial is one high in relativity and low in degrees. This is still a sumptuous score filled with sweeping soundscapes, enveloping sonorities, and enough yearning and drama to satisfy just about anyone.

The central *Andante* is the longest movement in the work—18 minutes in this performance—and its heart. We are ushered into a magical realm by the chirping of a songbird (piccolo) and led to a Technicolor cartoon-like Arcadia in which friendly chipmunks scamper about and speckled fawns gambol in the grass, all in slow motion. Improbable as the connection might seem, there's a strong resemblance between this movement and the nature tone poems the English pastoralists were writing around this same time.

Until I heard this recording by Petrenko, I guess I never realized the degree to which Ashkenazy misses the point in the *Andante*. He races through it in just under 12 minutes, six minutes faster than Petrenko, completely losing the timeless atmosphere of the movement. I don't have the Gergiev that Svejda reviewed, but I looked it up online and found that Gergiev leads the movement even faster by a few seconds than Ashkenazy. I do also have, however, Muti's recording with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and while he takes about two minutes longer with the *Andante* than either Ashkenazy or Gergiev, he's still four and a half minutes faster than Petrenko. So, based on this less than comprehensive comparison, it would seem that Petrenko's reading of the movement is the most unconventional and extreme, yet I find myself quite mesmerized by it.

In the other four movements, Petrenko, Ashkenazy, and Muti are essentially in agreement. Based on the timings, however, with the exception of the finale, Gergiev's tempos are the fastest. I'm guessing that is probably what led Svejda to say, "Perhaps Gergiev was growing understandably impatient with the far less inspired material, but in general he seems to have returned to the let's-get-this-over-with form that made his earlier recording (LSO 771) of the Third and Fourth Symphonies so disappointing." If you find Petrenko's 18-minute suspended animation reading of the *Andante* as spellbinding as I do, I would venture that this performance of Scriabin's Symphony No. 2 with the Oslo Philharmonic may be your best bet for a recording of the work.

That brings us to the Piano Concerto. Again, I find myself at a disadvantage here because I haven't heard the recent BIS recording of the piece with pianist Yevgeny Sudbin, Andrew Litton, and the Bergen Philharmonic. Just given that winning combination, I would fully expect that performance to deserve the urgent recommendation it received from Phillip Scott in 38:6. This is Scriabin's one and only concerto; the medium was not a comfortable fit for him and he never returned to it again, though if one were unaware of the direction his music was soon to take, one might well wonder why, for his Piano Concerto in F# Minor is a real beauty. Composed in 1897, four years before the Second Symphony, the score reverberates with echoes of Scriabin's beloved Chopin and, to no small degree, captures the Russian spirit and style, if not quite the same pianistic brilliance and flamboyance, of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff.

Between Gerstein and Petrenko on the current release and Jablonski with Ashkenazy on my comparison version, I don't hear a difference that would persuade me to change my recommendation for this new recording. The Oslo Philharmonic has really bloomed under Petrenko into one of the world's top-flight orchestras, Gerstein is dazzling in the concerto, and this new LAWO CD is sonically superior to the now nearly 25-year-old Decca recording. You won't go wrong with this one. **Jerry Dubins**

**This article originally appeared in Issue 41:5 (May/June 2018) of *Fanfare Magazine*.**