

chord in the whole history of music ... and that A, the tip of the needle: isn't it like a heart seizure? The band goes for a seedy vibrato-less effect which is odd but undeniably striking. An admirer of the Mahler interpretations of Walter, Kondrashin and Bernstein, Kremer here achieves something of the same compulsive quality for our post-modern times.

There can be few composers in history with a reception history as peculiar as that of Dmitri Shostakovich. At a time when many Western musicians avoided him, only to embrace the *oeuvre* when satisfied that it encoded 'dissent', young radicals within the Soviet bloc were shunning him as an inescapably Establishment figure. After his own initial scepticism, Kremer has emerged as an ardent champion of the late work in particular, albeit in arrangements which would have surprised (and possibly delighted) the composer. The Fourteenth, however, is performed straight, though there are several unusual elements. For one thing this is a warts-and-all live performance which includes a fair amount of audience noise, thus placing it at odds with the usual squeaky-clean ECM aesthetic. The group first rehearsed the Fourteenth with Kremer's lifelong friend, the late Woldemar Nelsson, but this live relay has Kremer directing from the concertmaster's desk. The singers are not big personalities, which you may or may not see as a problem. The soprano Yulia Korpacheva initially studied violin. This background does not prevent her from going astray in the setting of Apollinaire's *Le Suicide*, the same song in which Galina Vishnevskaya went off the rails in the sensational near-première cited above. It may be the singers as much as the orchestral members who would have benefited from the presence of a conductor.

How to sum up? This odd coupling may be justified on the grounds that Shostakovich drew much of his technique from Mahler and must have expected the Fourteenth to be his last symphonic utterance, given the parlous state of his health at the time of composition. Its darkness, famously deep, is well realized here, even if the urgency of the earliest Russian performances is lacking. This is music that needs to rage against the dying of the light. There are full texts and translations for the Shostakovich, but you should consider acquiring the disc for the sake of the Mahler.

David Gutman

The Romantic Piano Concerto 44

Melcer Piano Concertos – No. 1 in E minor; No. 2 in C minor.

Jonathan Plowright (piano); **BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra/Christoph König.**

Hyperion CDA67630 (full price, 1 hour 8 minutes).

Website www.hyperion-records.co.uk. Producer Jeremy Hayes. Engineer Tony Faulkner. Date March 7th and 8th, 2007.

Comparisons:

Piano Concerto No. 1:

Ponti, Warsaw Nat PO/Strugała (Capella) 76.44242 (1980)

The first commercially produced recording of the Piano Concerto No. 1 in E minor by the Polish composer Henryk Melcer (1869-1928) was made in 1980 by Michael Ponti under the baton of Tadeusz Strugała and the Warsaw National Philharmonic Orchestra, although early performances of note came from the illustrious Ignacy Friedman, as well as from Jerzy Lalewicz and Helena Ottawowa, between 1907 and 1931. Since all of the above performances featured Polish or German orchestras, one can confidently assume that the work's early performance history acquired a sturdy basis for further interpretative insights; indeed, Melcer himself gave the warmly received inaugural performance in 1895. In Great Britain, however, it seems the Concerto's reception was rather cool, a pre-war review in *The Musical Times* referring to the work as having 'no exceptional value', even if the critic grudgingly accepted that it 'was quite worth hearing once'. Soon after its inception the Concerto underwent a structural paring-down in order for it to qualify as a *Koncertstück* and hence become admissible for the second Anton Rubinstein Competition. Here Melcer achieved a resounding success for his pragmatic reworking, which must have thrilled his teacher at the time, Theodor Leschetizky.

An equally auspicious launch for the Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor occurred in 1898 when the work triumphed in the concerto section of the Jan Paderewski Competition, the entry to which was exclusive to Polish composers. Teresa Rutkowska recorded the Concerto in 1980, once again sharing inspiration with the Warsaw National Philharmonic, although a 1999 reissue of Józef Smidowicz's 1952 recording with the Polish Radio National Symphony under Jan Krenz would certainly be worth tracking down.

Undoubtedly, both works sport a palpable muscularity and vision for the 'high-romantic', although the piano writing progresses beyond mere gymnastics, calling for a consummate facility and ear for the overview – what Aaron Copland referred to as *la grande ligne*. It is not easy to avoid glib comparisons with Chopin, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Litolff, Mendelssohn – or even Mahler and Richard Strauss occasionally – and yet the Polish spirit wins through unswervingly, not just in the 'mazurka' finale to the First Concerto but especially, perhaps, in the all-pervading perfumed themes of the Second.

This Hyperion release is simply stunning. Jonathan Plowright taps into the Polish vein with the required vision and power, never resorting to unscheduled catnaps in the more strenuous sections, which snowball to avalanche proportions throughout the Second Concerto especially. Yet still he

allows the music to smile in the more whimsical moments, which actually keep the music from collapsing too far into less satisfying derivative territory. Plowright's *leggiere* touch nudges the listener onto a knife-edge in the *Allegro Moderato* of the Second Concerto, which at times draws from the pianistic accoutrements of Mendelssohn and Rachmaninov, while in the *Andante non troppo lento* the pianist keeps his emotional distance from the opening sinewy tenor melody so that it permits Melcer's sense of the poetic to seep through.

While the composer may miss that inexpressible quality of Polish 'torment' that is perhaps in any case lost to us forever, he could hardly wish for greater consistency of approach or dignified musicianship in the performances, and the BBC Scottish Symphony with Christoph König work as one to paint a unified picture. The plaudits for Plowright, in particular for his Paderewski piano solos and Constant Lambert piano concerto recordings (both for Hyperion – the Lambert was reviewed in November 2005), confirm a colossal musical mind and matching technical ease.

Mark Tanner

Poulenc

Les animaux modèles^a. Concert champêtre^b. 15 Improvisations – No. 13 in A minor; No. 15 in C minor, 'Hommage à Edith Piaf' (arr. Bollani)^c.

^{b,c}Stefano Bollani (piano); ^{ab}Filarmonica '900 del Teatro Regio di Torino/Jan-Latham Koenig.

Avie AV2135 (full price, 1 hour 14 minutes).

Website www.avirecords.com. Producer Mario Bertodo. Engineers Renato Campajola, Daniele Sajeva. Dates March 6th-9th, 2007.

Poulenc's *Concert champêtre* for harpsichord and orchestra was first performed in Paris on May 3rd, 1929 by its dedicatee, the legendary harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, with the Paris Symphony Orchestra under Pierre Monteux. On this recording, Stefano Bollani uses a piano – an idea at which we shouldn't balk, as Poulenc himself played it on a piano. It's a charming work and it receives a charming performance by Bollani and the Filarmonica '900 del Teatro Regio di Torino under its principal guest conductor Jan Latham-Koenig.

The Stravinsky-esque opening winds are finely balanced, preparing the way for Bollani's gentle entry before grander statements ensue. Bollani's sparkling piano part at the start of the *Allegro* is well judged, recalling both the delicate nature of the harpsichord and the air of the French *clavecinistes* in general, while throughout the remainder of the movement there's a nice tension between this attitude in the quieter moments and a more robust approach that aligns well with the orchestra at its most rumbustious. One wonders at