

CD REVIEW 68

SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony no 5 in D minor Op 47

Piano Concerto no 2 in F Op 102

New York Philharmonic Orchestra,

Leonard Bernstein conductor and pianist.

Regis RRC 1377

(65.09)

Recording first released in 1960.



I am glad that this CD has come to me for review.

In my presence, Shostakovich said that Bernstein's performance of the Fifth Symphony was the best he had heard. He also went on to say which versions were disappointing and not faithful to the score but I will not mention these details here.

Suffice it to say that the composer preferred this performance above all others.

There are a few tempi issues in the second movement which I cannot reconcile with the score but, that apart, this is very fine performance. The slow movement, to quote one example, is sheer magic and glows with a profound intensity. It is very profound but never mawkish or slush.

Shostakovich is either liked or disliked. Some regard him as a master; others regard him as a composer of empty and often vulgar music. He is said to have liked Mahler and perhaps this is why some of his symphonies are rather long and, yes, sometimes they do give a feeling of emptiness.

But his orchestration is excellent and, in my view, his writing for woodwind cannot be bettered.

The symphonies vary in quality. The Symphony no. 1 does not work for me and many others.

Walton who wrote that Shostakovich was the greatest composer of the 20th century hated this symphony complaining that it was a mish mash of styles including vaudeville and the rest was in F... minor.

Walton was very perceptive in many matters. He repented that he ever admired Elgar and now put him at the other end of the spectrum from Shostakovich. Walton was furious when some idiot of a musicologist said that Elgar's mantle had fallen on him. Elgar could not write an allegro or a sequence and yet listen to Shostakovich Symphony no 7 and hear a real sequence.

There is nothing wrong with vaudeville; the amazing finale of the Symphony no 6 is a burlesque. Listen to Fritz Reiner's performance of sheer exuberance and infectious fun. The Symphony no 8 is the finest war symphony of them all complete with two angry scherzos depicting Nazi's both marching and invading and there is the innocent childlike/ freedom finale. The Symphony no. 10 is admired, although the third movement presents some continuity problems. The Symphony no 11 is rapturous and simply marvellous while the Symphony no. 12 was the favourite of both John Veale and myself.

I have often wondered about the relationship between Shostakovich and Bernstein. Bernstein was Jewish and Shostakovich was very sympathetic to the Jewish cause.

But to return to the Symphony no. 5, Bernstein's finale may surprise you. It is really quick and the

finale pages do not let up. They are also quick, rather than being grandiose or pompous and the only other conductor to take this speed is Kertesz. Some of you may not prefer this tempo.

The other Bernstein quality is the orchestral detail that he brings to this terrific symphony. The timpani accords with the score and you have probably not heard the timpani like this before. The xylophone may be too prominent at one stage but absolute perfection does not exist.

The composer loved this performance and told us so without any prompting.

Bernstein was an excellent conductor, composer and pianist. He was often criticised for writing musicals and banal music as if it were a capital offence. But the film/musical *On The Town* of 1949 is still my favourite.

The Piano Concerto no 2 has the most beautiful slow movement Shostakovich ever wrote. Two other piano concertos has gorgeous slow movements namely Ravel in G major and the concerto of Samuel Barber.

At times, the Shostakovich concerto sounds like a few exercises, and the reasons for this is known, but the music sparkles in the outer movements and Bernstein is simply magnificent with his playing and control: he makes the music live. Occasionally some solo piano notes seem distorted, but the recording is 51 years old. And, for its time, the sound is good. The performance is very exciting; it is like a good book that you cannot put down.

I cannot stress how good Bernstein is!

This has got to be the definitive version of this darling piano concerto. It gives that indescribable joy that even great music rarely gives!

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