

EUGENIY SVETLANOV

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After Mravinsky, the next great Russian conductor is Eugeniy Svetlanov who was born in Moscow on 6 September 1928. His father was both a Bolshoi actor and mime artist and the theatre was in the family's blood.

Svetlanov graduated from the Moscow Conservatory as a pianist having studied with Heinrich Neuhaus and having studied conducting with Alexander Gauk. He developed into an excellent conductor where the majority of his fame lies. But he was also an excellent pianist and a very good singer. In addition, he was a first rate composer.

As a conductor he was meticulous and very clear. From 1956, he conducted the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra and was made their principal conductor in 1962. From 1965, he was appointed principal conductor of the USSR State Symphony Orchestra. In 1979, he was made principal guest conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra. 1982 to 2000 saw him as director of the Residente Orchestra of Le Hague and in 2000 he was fired from the Russian Orchestra because he spent too much time conducting abroad.



He was not a showman or show off as were and are Karajan and Rattle. Nor was he self-opinionated as was Barbirolli. Svetlanov was not restricted with repertoire and, among many things, we are grateful to him for recording all the Miaskovsky symphonies.

His most admired work is his Symphony in B minor of 1956, set in four movements and lasting just under 50 minutes. The first movement opens in a longing melancholic and very Russian style and is in unison. A flute melody is over a string accompaniment and is very engaging. It is taken up by the violins in an unashamed romantic and tuneful way. The music becomes more agitated and the orchestration is flawless. The second theme is given to the cor anglais and this 14 minute movement ends with a slow section.

The second movement is really a scherzo and trio. It is often very exciting and truly impressive. There is a slower middle section before the drama lights up the music again with sparking orchestration.

The slow movement may present a few problems to some listeners. It begins with a powerful brass opening but then it becomes a sensitive slow movement. There is a gorgeous horn solo over a harp accompaniment. Perhaps the music becomes a little over sentimentalised. There a great amount of harp playing. He liked the harp and, in 1975, wrote his Russian Variations for harp and orchestra.

The finale of Symphony opens slowly and ponderously but the music builds up into a sparkling drama. It is terrific stuff. But when the music becomes leisurely the momentum is sadly gone After about 40 minutes into this work, there is a quote, accidentally or otherwise, of Shostakovich's DSCH four note theme. The other feature is the sumptuous quality of the slow music. The works ends as a quiet epilogue.

His Piano Concerto in C minor of 1976 lasts about 20 minutes and opens with warm romantic music sometimes perhaps with a salon flavour. It may be lightweight but it is very beautiful particularly in the performance by Vladimir Orchinnikov. Later it tends to meander but it is still a convincing and beautiful work.

Not only was Svetlanov an excellent pianist but among his pupils was Sviatoslav Richter (1915-1997).

Lest it be thought that Svetlanov understood the orchestra, which he did, he did not only write for the orchestra.

As an example there is a String Quartet of 1948 lasting about half an hour and is in four movements. The opening movement is sprightly and delightful; the slow movement is quite touching; the third is moderately paced and the finale starts well but is episodic, what we call stop and start music. There is some piano music and two sonatinas for violin and piano

There is a touching Poem for violin and orchestra of 1995 written in memory of David Oistrakh.

Surprisingly, he was often very harsh about his own music.

He died in Moscow on 3 May 2002. He was 73.

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