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SERGE PROKOFIEV – Fiftieth Anniversary Edition
Volume 1: Symphonies
CD1: Symphony No. 4 Op. 47; Symphony No. 4 Op. 112
CD2: Symphony No. 6 Op. 111; Symphony No. 1 Op. 25 "Classical"
CD3: Symphony No. 2 Op. 40; Symphony No. 3 Op. 44
CD4: Symphony No. 7 Op. 131; Symphony No. 5 Op. 100
Orchestre National de France, conducted by Mstislav Rostropovich

Volume 2: Concertos
CD1: Concerto for violin and orchestra No, 1 Op. 19 – Maxim Venegerov – violin, London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Mstislav Rostropovich
Symphony-Concerto for cello and orchestra Op. 125 – Mstislav Rostropovich – cello, London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Seiji Ozawa
CD2: Concerto for violin and orchestra No. 2 Op. 63 – Vadim Repin – violin, Hallé Orchestra, conducted by Kent Nagano
Concerto for piano and orchestra No. 4 (for left hand) Op. 53
CD3: Concerto for piano and orchestra No. 1 Op. 10
Concerto for piano and orchestra No. 5 Op. 55
CD4: Concerto for piano and orchestra No. 2 Op. 16
Concerto for piano and orchestra No. 3 Op. 26
Vladimir Kraniev – piano, Radio-Sinfonie-Orchester Frankfurt, conducted by Dmitri Kitaenko

Volume 3: Stage Works and Film Scores

CD1: Romeo & Juliet, Op. 64 – concert suites from the ballet: Suite No. 2 Op. 64c; Suite No. 1 Op. 64b; Suite No. 3 Op. 101
Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, conducted by Armin Jordan
CD2: Peter and the Wolf, Op. 67/Peter und der Wolf Op. 67
Patrick Stewart, narrator (English version), Marius Müller_Westernhagen, narrator (German version)
Orchestre de L'opéra de Lyon, conducted by Kent Nagano
CD3: Pierre et le Loup Op. 67, Pedro y el Lobo Op. 67
Jacques Martin, narrator (French version), Miquel Bosé (Spanish version)
Orchestre de L'opéra de Lyon, conducted by Kent Nagano
CD4: Alexander Nevsky, Op, 78 – cantat after film score; Scythian Suite Op. 20
Carolyn Watkinson, mezzo-soprano, Latvija Choir, Chorus Master: Imants Cepitis
Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, conducted by Kurt Masur
CD5: The Prodigal Son, Op. 46b – concert suite from the ballet
Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carol, conducted by Lawrence Foster
Cinderella Op. 107/108/109 – concert suites from the ballet
Orchestre Philarmonique de Strasbourg, conducted by Alain Lombard
The Steel Step, Op. 41b – concert suite from the ballet
Philharmonia Orchestra, conducted by Igor Markevich
CD6: The Love of Three Oranges, Op 33b – concert suite from the opera
Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carol, conducted by Lawrence Foster
Lieutenant Kijé, Op. 60 – concert suite from the film score
London Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Klaus Tennstedt

Volume 4: Instrumental and Chamber Works

CD1: Sonata for violin and piano No. 1, Op. 80; Sonata for violin and piano No. 2, Op. 94b; Five melodies for violin and piano, Op. 35b
Vadim Repin, violin, Boris Berezovsky, piano
CD2: Sonata for two violins, Op. 56 – Anton Barachovsky, Vadim Repin, violins
Sonata for flute and piano, Op. 94 – Jean-Pierre Rampal, flute, Robert Veyron-Lacroix, piano
Sonata for cello and piano, Op. 119 – Arto Noras, cello, Eero Heinonen, piano
CD3: Sonata for piano No. 2, Op. 14 – Pascal Devoyon, piano
Piano sonata No. 7, Op. 83 – Alexei Sultanov, piano
Piano sonata No, 8, Op. 84 – Steven De Groote, piano
CD4: Music for Children, Op. 56 – György Sebok, piano
Prelude from 10 Pieces for piano, Op. 12 – Cyprien Katsaris, piano
Romeo & Juliet, Op. 75, Suite for piano – Steven De Groote, piano
Toccata for piano, Op. 11 – Cyprien Katsaris, piano
CD5: Quintet in G minor, Op. 39; Overture on Hebrew themes, Op. 34
Berlin Soloists
Overture on Hebrew Themes, Op. 34b (arrangement for orchestra)
Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo, conducted by Lawrence Foster
The tales for the old grandmother, Op. 31 (arranged Nathan Milstein)
Nathan Milstein, violin, Georges Pludermacher, piano

Volume 5: War and Peace (4 CDs)
Galina Vichnievskaïa, Lajos Miller, Wieslaw Ochman, Nicolaï Gedda, Nicola Ghiuselev, Maria Paunova, Stefania Toczyska, Romauld Tesarowicz, Eduard Tumagian, Misha Raitzin, Dimiter Petkov, Michel Senechal
Choeurs de Radio France
Orchestre National de France, conducted by Mstislav Rostropovitch

Bonus CD: Prokofiev Archive Recordings

Piano Rolls: Prokofiev - March from 'Ten Pieces for Piano' Op. 12, Intermezzo and March from 'The Love of Three Oranges' Op. 33, Tales of Old Grandmother Op. 31, Toccata Op. 11; Rachmaninov – Prelude Op. 23 No. 5 in G minor; Scriabin – Prelude Op. 45 No. 3, Winged poem Op. 51, No. 3; Mussorgsky - Bydlo, Ballet des pousins dans leur coques, Promenade, The Old Castle, from 'Pictures at an Exhibition'; Rimsky-Korsakov/Prokofiev – Fantasia (improvisation) on themes from the symphonic suite "Sheherezade"
Prokofiev singing "Song of Praise" and "Canon Founders" from 'Ivan the Terrible'
American and Russian radio interviews.

For the fiftieth anniversary of Prokofiev's death, Warner Classics have assembled a series of pre-existing recordings into a large boxed set which presents a substantial proportion of his oeuvre, whilst in no sense the 'complete works'. All the symphonies and concertos are included, as well as a decent cross-section of the scores written for stage and film, and a fair amount of the chamber music. The sample of the piano music is more meagre (though this is perhaps the section of Prokofiev's output , over and above pot-boilers such as *Romeo and Juliet, Lieutenant Kije,* and *Peter and the Wolf* most generously served elsewhere on CD), whilst Prokofiev's eleven completed operas are represented solely by *War and Peace*. The recordings are consistently of a

high standard; some are particularly special, others are more average, but only a very few are particularly disappointing. As such, the set is ideal for anyone wanting a overview of Prokofiev's music.

Amongst the most consistently satisfying of the enclosed sets is that of the concertos, which is also the one that can also lay claim to relative completeness. In the First Violin Concerto, Maxim Venegerov sustains an ideal balance between a searching lyricism and a more objective structural sense, without either usurping the other, as well as his characteristic verve in the more virtuosic sections. The level of interaction between Venegrov, Rostropovitch and the LSO are always fresh and enlivening (though one must take on board the rather over-prominent miking of the violin, all so common today but in truth implausible as a manifestation of a genuine sonic balance). The sound in many of these recordings is vivid and highly projected, but sometimes so much so as to preclude the last degree of intimacy. Vladimir Kraniev's recordings of the five piano concertos are equally fine, with consistently vivid characterization, though again the too-closely miked piano has a rather metallic quality that can mask some of the essential lyricism of the music. Nonetheless, in the mighty cadenza of the first movement of the second concerto Kraniev's attainment of measured grandeur, resisting the temptation to descend into melodramatics, is commanding.

The set of the complete symphonies with the Orchestre National de France under Rostropovich is certainly satisfactory in many ways, and the orchestral playing has fine polish and balance, but throughout a vital quality seems to be lacking which makes this set suffer in comparison with some of its various rivals (Järvi, Weller, etc.). Rostropovich's approach is always earnest, even dutiful, but as such sometimes fails to capture the more biting quality of Prokofiev's penetrating ironic stance towards much of his material and its development (this quality is present in the 'Classical' Symphony but here rarely absorbed into the understanding of his more mature works). On another level, the more searching, or passionate, moments of the music lack that final degree of musical insight. This is clearest in the 5th symphony, whose clarity of focus is not of the level that Järvi achieves in his fabulous recording with the Scottish National Orchestra (CHAN 8450). However, Rostropovich's version of the later version 4th symphony has some genuine heartfelt pathos. As a reference set of the symphonies this is fine, if not my own first choice in this repertoire.

Amongst the six-disc set of stage works and film scores is a mixed selection, varied and comprehensive in the choice of works presented, but somewhat variable in performance. The Romeo and Juliet recordings present a kaleidoscopic range of colour but more importantly a perceptive and not-overstated realization of the hugely subtle emotional underpinnings. No less fine are the recordings of Peter and the Wolf (given in four different languages, doubtless to help sell the set internationally), and The Prodigal Son, but on the other hand that warhouse Lieutenant Kije receives a very workaday performance – I find it very hard to believe that many of the orchestral players would have been remotely moved when going through the motions for the usually moving final movement, nor felt any of the aloof charm of the third movement or the immense joy of the fourth. The Scythian Suite is not an easy piece to bring off without banality; Masur and the Gewandhausorchester do a reasonable job, but hardly electrifying in the manner of Abbado and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (DG 435-151-2)

The set of instrumental and chamber works contains a number of recordings that every serious Prokofiev lover should have. Most breathtaking of all are the incandescent performances of the works for violin and piano by Vadim Repin and Bors Berezovsky, which have a level of passion, subtlety, and zest, not to mention an illuminating approach to timbre and balance, that even outshines the excellent recordings by Shlomo Mintz and Yefim Bronfman (DG 445-557-2).

Alexei Sultanov's highly rhetorical approach to the Seventh Sonata, with more measured tempi than is customary, will come as quite a shock to some people (not least with his addition of a few octave doublings and spread chords), but is undeniably distinctive and springs from conviction. There are some similarities to be found here with the Prokofiev performances of Alexander Toradze that have recently attracted considerable interest. György Sebok also plays the Music for Children with a level of refinement and elegance that can be bewitching, Cyprien Katsaris's wild performance of the Toccata is simply stunning, while Steven De Groote's performances of the Eighth Sonata and Romeo and Juliet suite demonstrate a formidable dynamic and articulative range, as well as a strong harmonic sense.

Which leaves Rostropovich's landmark recording of War and Peace, which remains striking seventeen years after its recording. Lajos Miller brings a youthful vulnerability to the character of the Prince, while Galina Vichnievskaïa creates a very highly-strung Natacha, though with some moments of introspection; overall however, perhaps a little too self-consciously 'operatic' for my own tastes at least. The multidimensionality of Prokofiev's characterisation can so easily be diminished by over-statement. Nicolaï Gedda, as Anatole, is more interesting – he is able to add a degree of vulnerability himself, as well as a genuine passion, to temper the natural arrogance that the part requires, creating a character more sympathetic than might have been imagined. A true assembly of grotesques is provided by many of the bit-part players (as for example in the party scene in the second tableaux). Comparisons are inevitable with the rival Kirov recording under Gergiev, made five years later. The questions these recordings raise are similar to those involved in Rostropovitch's recordings of the symphonies; the language of the detached, the sardonic, even estranged, are rarely to be found in Rostropovitch's musical vocabulary, while Gergiev's more worldly approach brings out more subtle depths in the music, as do some of his cast. There is a level of digestion and perspective that are so particular to the later recording, with absolutely no need of hyperbole or hackneyed musical or vocal over-characterization.

The bonus disc with the set is also very worth having, containing a range of piano rolls of Prokofiev playing his own music as well as that of Rachmaninoff, Mussorgsky and Scriabin (illuminating performances continually, harkening back to other stylistic eras of pianism, though the technique in his own works can seem a bit dodgy – this may be simply a product of the rolls themselves, though).. Also included are rare issues of Prokofiev singing numbers from 'Ivan the Terrible', and a couple of very short interviews. This disc ideally compliments the Pearl disc 'Prokofiev plays Prokofiev' (GEMM CD 9470).

The liner notes are always excellently written and informative, whilst the booklets are generously supplied with historic photographs of the composer. One complaint is that

the libretto for War and Peace declines to offer the Russian in which the opera is sung, unlike in Gergiev's set. Anyone buying this very reasonably-priced set so as to gain a reasonably broad knowledge of Prokofiev's output will not be disappointed, while very discerning collectors might prefer to buy some of the individual components (in particular the concertos and instrumental/chamber works) and fill in the rest from alternative recordings.