

## *More than an object of desire*

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The Berlin Philharmonic introduced its in-house record label in the summer of 2014 with an attractively packaged box-set of Schumann's symphonies, but it has taken almost a full year for the label to follow up on the promise of that initial release. However their newest offering, a substantial box featuring Schubert's eight numbered symphonies, the two late *Latin masses*, and the relatively obscure opera *Alfonso und Estrella*, all conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt, was very much worth the wait.

Schubert: The Eight Symphonies; Masses 5 and 6; *Alfonso und Estrella*. Dorothea Röschmann, Bernarda Fink, Jonas Kaufmann, Christian Elsner and Christian Gerhaher, vocal soloists. Rundfunkchor Berlin. Berlin Philharmonic. Nikolaus Harnoncourt. 8 CDs / 1 Blu-Ray. Berliner Philharmoniker Recordings (BPHR 150061)

Mr Harnoncourt has, in various interviews, made no secret of his affinity for Schubert, and his 1992 recordings of the symphonies with the Royal Concertgebouw are still highly regarded. In the booklet notes that accompany this new Berlin set, Mr Harnoncourt has continued in his role as apologist, making claims for the dramatic value of the neglected operas and challenging the long-held consensus that the earlier symphonies are merely youthful studies in form; this balanced commitment to works both early and late, celebrated and neglected, has resulted in a series of recordings that are genial, often persuasive and consistently inspired.

The performances in this set were recorded live at the Philharmonie during a series of guest appearances between 2003 and 2006 and, as with the earlier Concertgebouw set, Mr Harnoncourt has consulted the autograph manuscripts rather than relying solely on printed editions (Claudio Abbado did the same for his 1988 cycle with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe). However if Mr Harnoncourt has experienced any grand revelations in the decade or so between recordings, they have manifested themselves in subtle ways. His tempi have remained remarkably consistent and his sense of each symphony's unique form has not changed dramatically.

Choosing between the two sets may thus be a matter of orchestral preference. While Mr Harnoncourt has not attempted to fashion the Berlin Philharmonic into a period ensemble, he is able to achieve a consistent balance between the lean, highly detailed sound of a smaller orchestra and the sonic depth that one might expect from a more romantic reading. The thunderous intrusions in the final movement of the *Fourth Symphony* are no less

stirring than the lusty basses that power the Scherzo of the *Great C Major Symphony* (here given the number 8, in accordance with recent practice), yet the slow movement of the *Fifth Symphony* achieves a considerable majesty through its modest scale and classical proportions.

Whether summoning the ebullient melodies of the *Third Symphony* or feeling their way through the darkness of the unfinished *B minor Symphony*'s first movement – which, at over seventeen minutes, is perhaps the slowest, most searching interpretation on record – the orchestra seem fully attuned to Mr Harnoncourt's intentions; and while the acoustics of the Philharmonie is not always ideal for live recordings, the performances captured on these discs do justice to the orchestra's rich, burnished sound. The older Concertgebouw set may boast a more immediate high-end presence, but these Berlin recordings offer greater detail in the low strings and slightly more warmth in the brass.

What makes this set special is the enthusiasm brought to each piece. The *Fourth Symphony* (here given a taut, urgent and rather wonderful performance) has captured the imagination of numerous conductors, and even the *Third* has had its adherents; but who else has made such a convincing case for the *Second*? Of course the later symphonies are all given solid, intelligent performances that will reward as many listens as one may care to give them – the *Fifth*, especially, comes close to matching Böhm's magnificent Dresden recording – but it is the earlier symphonies that provide this set with some of its most revealing moments. And the symphonies are only the beginning.

Of the eight discs in the box, four are dedicated to the symphonies while the remaining four contain vocal works. Mr Harnoncourt has previously recorded the two late *Latin masses* – in *A flat major* and *E flat major* – but these new versions have much to recommend them. The *E-flat major Mass*, especially, benefits from the impressive vocal quintet of Dorothea Röschmann, Bernarda Fink, Jonas Kaufmann, Christian Elsner and Christian Gerhaher, as well as a strong performance from the Rundfunkchor Berlin; under Mr Harnoncourt's direction, the sublime 'Et incarnatus est' that forms the centrepiece of the *Credo* is given a reading of almost operatic grandeur.

Indeed, the melodic sensibility on display in the masses suggest that Schubert should have been well-suited to the stage; yet the handful of operas he completed in his lifetime have remained firmly on the margins. In 1978, Otmar Suitner attempted to resuscitate *Alfonso und Estrella* – arguably Schubert's most ambitious opera – with a high-profile studio recording; while the work has not since managed to gain a foothold in the standard repertoire, the appearance of a new recording as part of this set is an intriguing and welcome addition.

The recording, drawn from a series of concert performances, demonstrates a high level of commitment from Mr Harnoncourt and the Berlin players, who bolster Schubert's natural melodicism with clarity and depth. Although the principals of the cast are generally strong, the two finest performances belong to Christian Gerhaher, who brings a rapt nobility and sparkling phrasing to the deposed king Froila, and Dorothea Röschmann, whose *Estrella* is charismatic and lyrical in equal measure.

*Alfonso und Estrella* may ultimately remain a difficult work to stage: the narrative is less than tidy, the action somewhat vague and, even on record, one can sense the potential for dramatic longueurs. However it is not without its delights and, while Mr Harnoncourt's arguments for musical quality may occasionally come at the expense of a more focused operatic pacing, the present recording – which is reasonably different from Suitner's in conception, but similar in the quality of its performances – offers an engaging reassessment of an aspect of Schubert's output that has been largely neglected.

The Berlin Philharmonic's Schubert set – as with the Schumann set that preceded it – comes packaged in a long box, and the eight discs (plus a Blu Ray, featuring uncompressed digital audio of all the music on the CDs, if you're into that sort of thing) are housed in individual card-sleeves hinged together within a magnetically sealed compartment; the generous booklet contains extensive notes about each work (in German and English) as well as the complete libretto of *Alfonso und Estrella*. But while the packaging may transform this box into an object of desire, it is the quality of the interpretations that make this set a worthy addition to the corpus of Schubert recordings.