

REPLAY

Rob Cowan's monthly survey of reissues and archive recordings

CD premieres and opera thrills

A Brilliant Barshai bargain and a revelation from a Koussevitzky relative

Among the many Russian-born musicians to have been embraced by the West, **Rudolf Barshai** is rather special. His reputation seems to have grown in direct relation to the musical forces he has been involved with, initially as founder-violinist of what would become the Borodin Quartet, then as founder-conductor of the Moscow Chamber Orchestra and most recently as conductor on some memorable large orchestra recordings, notably the complete Shostakovich symphonies. My guess is that posterity will judge Barshai's Moscow Chamber legacy as his greatest recording achievement, and if so Brilliant Classics' 10-CD "Rudolf Barshai Edition" could well provide much of the evidence.

Barshai's approach combines svelte lines and textures with an exceptionally wide range of dynamics and a lacerating attack from the strings (witness some of Prokofiev's *Visions fugitives* in the present set). Many though not all of the recordings on offer here are "first releases" (at least outside of Russia); most are live and in acceptable mono sound, and for much of the time the intensity absolutely never lets up, certainly not in Shostakovich's Symphony No 14, a performance given less than a fortnight after the world premiere (with Galina Vishnevskaya and Mark Reshetin), where the second and eighth movements are positively ferocious. In the studio Barshai's Mozart, though invariably shaped with a caring hand, could sound chilly and over-prepared, but the performance of the big D major Divertimento, K334, is anything but that, a reading notable for its liveliness and sensitive nuancing. Bartok's Divertimento is significantly swifter than Barshai's Decca recording from two years later (now out on Australian Eloquence), and it's good to have Leo Weiner's charming transcriptions of 10 miniatures from Bartok's *For Children*. There are piano concertos with Arthur Moreira Lima (Haydn G major) and John Lill (Beethoven's Second), as well as Bach's *Art of Fugue* (a reading that at times reminded me of Scherchen), symphonies by Beethoven (No 8) and Mozart (No 29), and much else including music by Britten, Bunin, Debussy, Gluck, Hindemith, Karen Khachaturian, Lokshin, Marais, Martinu, Meerovich, Poulenc, Purcell, Raats, Rameau, Stravinsky, Boris Tchaikovsky and Weinberg. Ates Orga provides expert annotation, and considered overall this musically varied and ludicrously inexpensive production convincingly substantiates Sviatoslav Richter's claim that Rudolf Barshai is "a magnificent musician... a true master".

Two historic recordings of a Romantic Russian perennial provide fascinating opportunities for comparison. **Leo Blech's** 1930 Tchaikovsky Fifth with the Berlin State Opera Orchestra is relatively straight, fitfully exciting and musically cut. Its finest moments are in the middle movements where the string lines are beautifully drawn. The fill-ups are a cut *Capriccio italiano* and two movements from the String Serenade. **Sir Landon Ronald's** 1929 "Tchaik Five" with the LSO is heavier than Blech's, hugely excitable (tempo shift virtually by the bar), uncut and chock-full of personality. Neither version is exactly immaculate, execution-wise, certainly not in comparison with, say, Stokowski in Philadelphia, Stock in Chicago or Mengelberg in Amsterdam, but Ronald's principal fill-up, a pin-you-to-the-wall account of the theme and variations from the Third Orchestral Suite, swings the balance in his favour. Blech's recording is skilfully transferred by Mark Obert-Thorn for Pristine Classics, whereas Ronald's Fifth, which sounds much as it did



on 78s, is the work of Bill Anderson for www.historic-recordings.co.uk. The same source has also come up with a minor revelation in **Fabien Sevitzky's** 1942 Indianapolis recording of Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony*, a thoughtfully considered performance (well transferred by Damian Rogan), much of it slower than we're used to nowadays, but musically convincing, especially in the outer

movements. Incidentally, Sevitzky was a nephew of Koussevitzky – the change of name was suggested by uncle Serge and Fabien complied to avoid a family quarrel! Other reissues on the same label include a fine Paul van Kempen disc, and selections of recordings by Albert Coates and Constant Lambert. The site is well worth a visit: there's a whole stack of fascinating material on offer, most of it otherwise unavailable on CD.

Lovers of great Russian singing may well have already obtained Guild's four-CD collection devoted to recordings by the great tenor **Georgi Vinogradov**, an invaluable miscellany made up of operatic excerpts and songs (GHCD2250/3). Happily the recently launched "Immortal Performances" label has come up with an equally desirable second volume, again combining opera and song, the voice, as in Vol 1, seductively honeyed, the recorded sound quality mostly very good. Although Russian opera is a prominent feature we're also given music from Massenet's *Manon* and Gounod's *Philemon et Baucis*, but for me the songs are the star attractions, especially those with chorus where you feel that the warmly communicative Vinogradov is truly in his element. Two other "Immortal Performances" warrant serious consideration, the first featuring Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* in a Met performance from December 1939 with Friedrich Schorr as Hans Sachs. Schorr himself is on mostly excellent form and where one crucial passage is cut, producer Richard Caniell has painstakingly edited the same music in from another Schorr recording. Oddly enough it's more the shift in orchestral playing style that gives the game away rather than Schorr's singing. The role of Eva is sung by Irene Jessner, Charles Kullman sings Walther and Emanuel List, Pogner. A young **Erich Leinsdorf** ensures nifty tempos and consistently animated action. As to Jussi Bjorling in his vocal prime, you could hardly do better than a live Met *Romeo et Juliette* (Gounod) from 1947 under **Emil Cooper** with Bidu Sayao, John Brownlee and Nicola Moscona. The fill-up is a sonically challenged but theatrically gripping 1934 La Scala recording of the opera's second act with Gigli and Mafalda Favero, sung in Italian.

The Recordings

- **Various Cpsrs** Orch Wks **Barshai**
Brilliant Classics © 10 9010
- **Tchaikovsky** Sym No 5, etc **Blech**
Pristine Audio © PASC181
- **Tchaikovsky** Sym No 5, etc **Ronald**
Historic Recordings © HR05
- **Tchaikovsky** Manfred Sym **Sevitzky**
Historic Recordings © HR17
- **Various Cpsrs** Russian Op Excs,
Vol 2 **Vinogradov**
Immortal Performances © IPCD1008-1
- **Wagner** Die Meistersinger von
Nurnberg **Leinsdorf**
Immortal Perfs © 3 IPCD1001-3
- **Gounod** Romeo et Juliette **Cooper**
Immortal Perfs © 2 IPCD 1003-2