



RECORDING OF THE MONTH

Alexander SCRIBIN (1872-1915)

Symphony No. 1 in E major, Op. 26 (1899-1900) [57:25]

Poème de l'extase, Op. 54 (1905-1908) [21:22]

Svetlana Shilova (soprano), Mikhail Gubsky (tenor), Vladislav Lavrik (trumpet), Norbert Gembaczka (organ)

Chamber Choir of the Moscow Conservatory

Russian National Orchestra/Mikhail Pletnev

rec. March 2014, DZZ Studio 5, Moscow, Russia

Reviewed as a 24/96 download

Pdf booklet includes sung texts (Cyrillic and English)

PENTATONE PTC5186514 SACD [78:00]

The Scriabin centenary got off to a good start with Garrick Ohlsson's top-notch traversal of the [Poèmes](#). No doubt there will be many more tributes to this complex and enigmatic composer, including well-priced compendia such as the 18-CD Scriabin Edition from Decca Universal. Buried in that box, which boasts 64 newly recorded items, are Vladimir Ashkenazy's recordings of Symphonies 1 and 3, Elisha Inbal's No. 2 and Valery Gergiev's *Poème de l'extase*. Rob Barnett welcomed the [Ashkenazy](#) set, recorded in the 1990s, adding that it would suit those who find Scriabin 'consistently hysterical'. Not that I ever do, but I can understand why others might think differently.

Mikhail Pletnev's new Pentatone recording of Symphony No. 1 and the *Poème de l'extase* also has to compete with Riccardo Muti's celebrated Philadelphia set for Warner ([review](#)) and Leif Segerstam's, with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, for BIS ([review](#)). In his favour Pletnev has at his fingertips the Russian National Orchestra, which he founded in 1990. These splendid players are in peak form, having just recorded a revelatory account of Shostakovich's [Leningrad](#) with Paavo Järvi. **That recording and this one also benefit from Polyhymnia's impressive engineering skills.**

Scriabin's First Symphony, in six movements with a vocal finale in praise of the supremacy of Art, is a remarkably sensual piece that really does demand dedicated interpreters. There's no doubt that Muti – not always the most subtle of conductors – is one of them; he's blessed with the legendary Philadelphia sound – Ormandy stepped down in 1980, just a few years before these recordings were made – not to mention a full-bodied recording. Listening to Segerstam after that is instructive, for while there is much detail to be found in his Scriabin performances there's not much of the hypnotic, sense-stroking beauty that I associate with these pieces. As a result, I must exclude his set from my list of comparisons.

In Pletnev's hands the opening bars of the first *Lento* waft into one's consciousness as if borne on a gentle, perfumed zephyr. It's clear this is going to be a finely calibrated and highly poetic performance; also, the music has a certain, seamless flow, and the micrometer-like precision of the orchestral playing is just right for this score. Goodness, what stupendous playing and exemplary sonics. Indeed, Muti's performance seems almost garish by comparison, his recording almost crude.

Make no mistake, Pletnev's reading is not a self-indulgent wallow, as his sharply characterised *Allegro drammatico* so amply demonstrates. Once again the level of detail that emerges from this recording is extraordinary, as is the range and sophistication of Scriabin's colour palette. Such is Pletnev's authoritative/intuitive way with this music that I don't hear any of the *longueurs* that often plague the piece. And lest one think this symphony is all about flutters and fibrillations, there's thrilling weight and amplitude as well. Moreover, Pletnev integrates these elements rather more effectively than Muti, who's rather impulsive at times...

No one, and I mean no one, delivers the second *Lento* more beautifully than Pletnev and the

RNO. Together they create an air of delicious intoxication that seduced me from the start; indeed, it's as if they've unlatched and unleashed all one's dormant senses. From the music's languid caresses to its precipitous teasings, this is the most erotically charged performance of the piece I can recall. No wonder the literary satyr Henry Miller extolled Scriabin's oeuvre. The *Vivace*, played here with unparalleled delicacy and point, is a reminder of Scriabin's - and Pletnev's - attention to even the smallest of details. Not even Muti comes close to such levels of excavation and insight.

Pletnev's grasp of the work's architecture is beyond doubt - there are no weak spots, even in the sometimes rhetoric-prone *Allegro* - and his soloists in the finale are much better than Muti's. Soprano Svetlana Shilova is creamy and secure, and tenor Mikhail Gubsky adds ringing ardour to the mix. The Pentatone balance is preferable too, so we get warm, very communicative soloists rather than bright, somewhat excitable ones. The chorus sing with unalloyed passion and purpose while, unerring as always, Pletnev guides the work to its all-consuming close. The moment of release, when it comes, is almost indescribable in its intensity and impact.

Heavens, what an experience. In fact I'm certain you won't hear a more powerful or persuasive account of this piece any time soon. As so often with 'difficult' composers - mavericks such as Havergal Brian and Rued Langgaard spring to mind - it takes a proselytizing zeal to unlock these seemingly abstruse scores. It's a measure of Pletnev's skill that Scriabin's First Symphony is finally revealed for the masterpiece it is. One mustn't forget the contributing talents of the Polyhymnia team, especially those of producer, balance engineer and editor Erdo Groot. His name may be incorrect at one point in the credits, but otherwise there's not a single blemish in this splendid recording.

After all that unbridled passion one might be tempted to recover in a darkened room before tackling Scriabin's so-called 'Symphony No. 4', the *Poème de l'extase*. With the composer's talk of mystic chords and the Cosmos/Spirit, newcomers to the work might expect a grand musical séance; nothing could be further from the truth, for this is a robust and clear-eyed score laced with moments of colossal grandeur. Muti certainly plays it that way, and Warner's ultra-vivid recording really stokes up the fires. As before the Philadelphians respond to the music with great enthusiasm and energy.

That's not the only way to play the *Poème*, as Pletnev proceeds to demonstrate. The discreet harp figures and gold-threaded trumpet at the start point to a refined, highly nuanced reading. So it proves, for whereas Muti succumbs to the big gestures, Pletnev exercises a degree of control that builds tension rather than releases it too soon. Also, there's a greater sense of the mystic and mysterious in the Pentatone performance; even the trumpet rises from the mix in a most atmospheric way. Muti's percussionists are suitably thunderous - Pletnev's are much better defined though, the bass drum especially - and there are times when Muti's *Poème* sounds more like Respighi's Roman carnivals than a contemplation of loftier things.

Interestingly, Pletnev's Scriabin was recorded in a studio, so the organ of St Ludwig-Kirche has been spliced in. It too makes a mighty noise, along with all those pealing bells. Once again the recording pushes the envelope, with overwhelming results. I imagine this would be even more immersive in its multi-channel form.

I hope this is just the start of a Scriabin series from Pletnev and the RNO, for we desperately need strong, redefining accounts of these underrated works. It goes without saying that Pentatone/Polyhymnia are the right team for such a project. Will I be ditching Muti any time soon? Not just yet, but if Pletnev *does* give us a new cycle it will surely sweep the board.

Incandescent Scriabin, superbly recorded; Muti has met his match at last.

Dan Morgan

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