



# November



*'Perhaps the best of Petrenko's much-praised Shostakovich cycle and a strong contender for best in catalogue'*

## Edward Seckerson is wowed by the RLPO's Shostakovich

### Shostakovich

Symphony No 4, Op 43

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra /

Vasily Petrenko

Naxos © 8 573188 (65' • DDD)

The opening goes off like a cartoon alarm clock, shrill and insistent, the ensuing march more satirical, almost more Prokofiev than Shostakovich in Vasily Petrenko's hands. This is less the child of Mahler's Third, more death takes a holiday than summer marches in. Significantly, Petrenko comes to this piece – or appears to – without even scant acknowledgement of its structural anomalies, its weird and wonderful digressions, transformations and mutations. It's a work teetering between the rational and irrational, the comic and tragic, the real and the imagined. Just when you think it's slipping into abstraction, something happens to make you think otherwise. Petrenko makes following its thought processes, its phantasmagorical journeying between worlds, so much easier. He makes perfect sense of the seemingly senseless.

The question is how? Shostakovich knew all too well that it wasn't enough to believe

in the integrity of every bar of his most ambitious symphony to date – his creative thinking had to have shape and purpose. Which, of course, is where sonata form came back into the equation. My allusion to the first movement of Mahler's Third Symphony is an obvious one because the great originality of that epic movement, both in terms of sound and of shape, is nonetheless rooted in traditional symphonic form. In Shostakovich's Fourth the form may seem more elusive, more 'disguised', but it binds the ingredients in extraordinary ways and gives even the uninformed listener a subliminal sense of order. Not that Stalin and his naysayers would have seen it that way. His edict of 'chaos instead of music', directed at the time to Shostakovich's opera *The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, would most certainly have been reapplied to the Fourth Symphony had the composer not withdrawn it from performance. And given that this was undoubtedly the piece in which Shostakovich truly found his voice, it was better, he thought, to shelve it than subject it to yet more state-sponsored derision. Between 1935 and 1961 it languished unheard, until Kondrashin in the Soviet Union and Ormandy in the

United States brought it in from the cold. Even today it's as if the ink is still not dry on the page. Confident and uncompromising, and still somehow work in progress, it's the symphony, one feels, that Shostakovich always wanted to write.

Petrenko certainly conveys that. The overriding effect of his performance is one of liberation and inevitability. The proximity of Mahler – a kindred spirit in so many respects – is a constant source of inspiration. The mysterious departure into uncharted regions at what might loosely be called the start of the first-movement development is like regressing into the childhood reveries of the wayfarer from Mahler's First Symphony – but with a darker, more unearthly purpose: the solo horn brings solace but the cuckoo's familiar call is distorted in the E flat clarinet.

Then there is that madcap string fugue which Shostakovich seems to fling down like a gauntlet. You don't know where it came from or why it's there but it's taking you somewhere you may or may not want to go, and at Petrenko's devil-may-care tempo you fasten your seat belt. The speed beggars belief but the articulation is a step up from even that. The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic