



December



'This is one of those rare occasions when one is left with a feeling of having been in the presence of the thing itself'

Richard Osborne listens to an exceptional Beethoven symphony cycle

Beethoven

'The Symphonies and Reflections'

Beethoven Symphonies Nos 1-9 Staud Maniai

Mochizuki Nirai Shchedrin Beethovens

Heiligenstädter Testament **Šerkšnytė** Fires **Kancheli**

Dixi **Widmann** Con brio

Christiane Karg sop **Mihoko Fujimura** contr

Michael Schade ten **Michael Volle** bar **Bavarian Radio**

Symphony Chorus and Orchestra / Mariss Jansons

BR-Klassik ⑧ ⑥ 900119 (6h 57' • DDD); Symphonies:

ArtHaus Musik ④ ③ DVD 107 537; ④ ③ ② 107 536 (6h

24' • 44' • NTSC • 16:9 • 1080i • DTS-HD MA5.0, DD5.0 &

PCM stereo • 0 • s). Recorded in Munich and Tokyo, 2012

This is an exceptional realisation of Beethoven's nine symphonies, one of those rare occasions when one is left with a feeling of having been in the presence of the thing itself. The key to the cycle's success is the quality of the musicianship. Thanks to Mariss Jansons's expert schooling of his superb Bavarian musicians in works which continue to enthral, move and entertain him, the dramatic and expressive elements are derived from within rather than – as is often the case with lesser conductors – imposed from without.

The project comes to us in two distinct forms. The ArtHaus DVDs give us the nine symphonies luminously and unfussily filmed live in Tokyo's Suntory Hall. By contrast, Bavarian Radio's six-CD set intermingles the

symphonies (also mainly recorded live in Tokyo) with six newly commissioned 'reflections' on them by living composers.

From the information provided by ArtHaus it's impossible to say to what extent the different versions overlap. The Tokyo performances on CD and DVD are self-evidently from the same cycle, though not I suspect from the same performances. To complicate matters further, two performances on the CD set – the *Eroica* and the *Pastoral* – were recorded live in Munich's Herkulessaal shortly before the Japanese tour.

Despite all this chopping and changing, the technical quality of the recordings is consistently superb. If there are caveats to be entered for the CD set, they would concern evidence of the odd 'patch' (in the finale of the Eighth, for instance, which doesn't flow quite as well as its DVD equivalent) and an occasional moment when the sound of one or other of the orchestra's two outstanding principal oboes is less than ideally present.

At the heart of the cycle's success is Jansons's flawless command of rhythm. You can hear this in the opening bars of the Fifth Symphony, which are 'right' in precisely the same way that they were whenever Klemperer conducted the work. You hear it too throughout what is by any reckoning a gloriously purposeful account of the Seventh Symphony.

Quality of articulation is also key. How this is achieved is revealed in a 45-minute documentary on the rehearsing of the *Eroica* Symphony which is included in the DVD set. As the documentary shows, this is an exacting business involving matters as various as how best to realise the sudden juxtaposition of *pianissimo* and *fortissimo* chords that Beethoven frequently asks for, and what reserves of concentration, energy and aural imagination are required to realise the electric 'charge' which courses through the many pages of *pianissimo* writing that inform even the most extrovert of Beethoven's symphonic movements. 'Jansons is very strict on technique,' observes one player, 'but that doesn't affect expression.' It's a point confirmed by the Bavarians' very disciplined yet at the same time imaginatively fluid realisation of the first movement of the Ninth Symphony.

In matters of rhythm and articulation, Jansons and his players don't put a foot wrong. Where Riccardo Chailly in his widely praised Leipzig set (Decca, A/11) reduces the start of the Eighth to an unseemly blur, Jansons bides his time, giving Beethoven's ideas room to register and breathe before getting down to the business of conjuring forth a performance of wit, charm and gathering power.

Orchestral texturing is more transparent here than it tended to be under the old German