

December *Gramophone* Choices

masters, and slow movements are less heavily indulged. Yet, like those old German masters, Jansons understands the importance of proportionality within and between tempi. He is no metronome-monger, nor do his performances need to race in order to generate symphonic momentum. Should the lovely Fourth be directed with German rigour or Latin fire? Jansons and his players resolve this ancient conundrum by bringing the competing aesthetics within the ambit of a living whole.

As an ensemble, Jansons's Bavarian orchestra is in a similar league to the pre-war BBC SO under Toscanini or the Berlin Philharmonic at the time of Karajan's celebrated 1961-62 cycle. The string playing is of superlative quality, its transparency enhanced by the dispensations favoured by Jansons: antiphonally divided violins, double basses to the left, cellos in front of the podium, violas to the right. Vibrato is sparingly but progressively used by an ensemble which takes on weight as the cycle progresses. There are four double basses in the first two symphonies, six in the Seventh, eight in the Ninth. The quality of the winds – undoubled throughout – is first-rate. Textually, the new Bärenreiter edition is Jansons's starting point. When he breaks ranks the results can be diverting, as at the moment in the finale of the *Eroica* Symphony where the horns unexpectedly make common cause with cavouring cellos and clarinets.

Several of the contemporary 'reflections' take their cue from Beethoven's Heiligenstadt Testament of 1802. The octogenarian Soviet-born Rodion Shchedrin's 'symphonic fragment' is a powerfully scored darkness-to-light piece which works well as a musical *digestif* after the *Eroica*. Most enthralling of all are Jörg Widmann's *Con brio* and Johannes Maria Staud's *Maniai* ('Furies'). Strategically placed between the First and Second Symphonies, *Maniai* explores the psychic turmoil Beethoven must have experienced as he confronted the catastrophe of his emergent deafness.

CD layouts occasionally impose constraints. Mochizuki's *Nirai* doesn't come between the Second and Sixth Symphonies as originally intended, and Kancheli's *Dixi*, a meditation for mixed chorus and orchestra on 54 lapidary Latin texts, needs to be heard after the Ninth Symphony. That said, nothing better sums up the reach and originality of the CD set than the disc on which memorable accounts of the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies sit astride Widmann's wittily subversive *Con brio*.

If the Beethoven symphonies are your principal concern, the DVD set might well be your first port of call. The eye is notoriously intolerant of repetition, but I have yet to tire of these DVDs. Jansons's rostrum manner is as unobtrusive as it is visually informative, and watching orchestral playing of this level of skill and concentration is always a joy. **G**



BEETHOVEN
Diabelli Variations, etc
Andrés Schiff *pf*s
ECM New Series 481 1446
'Schiff brings an agenda with him (and why not?), but throughout he delights with insights and a feast of fine playing, excellently recorded; and his focus on the music never wavers.'



PAGANINI
24 Caprices, Op 1
Ilya Gringolts *vr*
Orchid ORC100039
'Where we were once content simply to marvel at the pyrotechnics, now, because of Gringolts's acute sense of timing and close attention to dynamics, we hear the music.'



LASSUS
Lagrime di San Pietro
Galicantus / Gabriel Crouch
Signum SIGCD339
'Details are tellingly lingered over, repetitions properly emphasised and the score's illumination of an inner drama sensitively rendered.'



CHOPIN
Polonaises
Rafal Blechacz *pf*
DG 479 0928GH
'It is not just the nobility and imperiousness of these works that Blechacz captures so well, but also the phrasing of a great singer and the moments of heart-wrenching grief to be found here.'



SCHUMANN
Piano Sonata No 2, etc
Mitsuko Uchida *pf*
Decca 478 5393DH
'The sonata passes by at white heat – just as it does when she plays it in the concert hall; yet what makes this such a gripping performance is the contrast between the manic writing and the inwardness.'



MAHLER
Das Lied von der Erde
Sarah Connolly *mez*
Toby Spence *ten*
London Philharmonic Orchestra / **Yannick Nézet-Séguin**
LPO LP00073
'What can there be left to say about Sarah Connolly, whose performances these days are pretty much beyond praise?'



MOZART
'Piano Sonatas, Vol 1'
Christian Blackshaw *pf*
Wigmore Hall Live
WHLIVE0061/2
'Blackshaw's mindful yet spontaneous virtuosity, pinpointed sense of character and utterly alive music-making completely disarmed my scepticism.'



JS BACH
'Cantatas, Vol 55'
Soloists; BCJ / Masaaki Suzuki
BIS BIS2031
'This final volume highlights the BCJ's growing stature and confidence to break free of generic convention towards ever greater interpretative character.'



VICTORIA
Tenebrae Responsories
Tenebrae / Nigel Short
Signum SIGCD344
'Nigel Short and Tenebrae have produced a recording that strips all excess musical flesh aside, exposing the chilly bones of these penitential masterpieces.'