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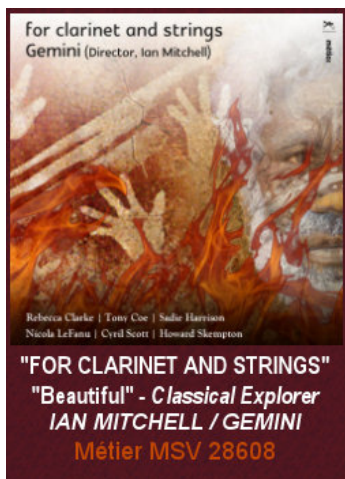
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### Review by Jerry Dubins

### TCHAIKOVSKY Symphony No. 2 • Yuri Botnari, cond; Moscow PO • ROYAL MUSIC SOCIETY 10049 (38:52)

With this release of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 2, along with the simultaneous releases of the Symphonies Nos. 3 and 5, concurrently under review, Yuri Botnari wraps up his survey of the composer's six (official) symphonies. No. 1, on a single disc by itself, was reviewed by me in 43:1, and one issue later by Daniel Morrison in 43:2. Paired together and clocking in at over 92 minutes, the Symphonies Nos. 4 and 6 would have had to be a two-disc set in physical form, but the release was reviewed from an mp3 download by both Colin Clarke and me in 43:3 and 43:4, respectively. All three of us reviewers of record were favorably impressed by Botnari's Tchaikovsky, and I, perhaps more susceptible to hyperbole than my colleagues, kvelled that the conductor's readings and the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra's playing of the scores were among some of best Tchaikovsky to arrive on the scene in recent times.

Of Tchaikovsky's six symphonies, I've always felt that the Nos. 2 and 3 vie with each other for the distinction of being weakest of the lot. But admittedly, I might not hold that opinion if the Symphony No. 1 that preceded them, "Winter Dreams," hadn't turned out to be the masterpiece it is. Granted, it's unusual for a composer's No. 1 to be so filled with magical touches of orchestral color, scene painting, and originality. With that score behind him, the Nos. 2 and 3 that followed it were bound to seem fairly workaday in comparison. Tchaikovsky, himself, acknowledged as much in a letter he wrote to his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, in 1883, writing that "although it [the First Symphony] is in many ways very immature, yet fundamentally it has more substance and is better than any of my other more mature works." There is, however, a caveat to the above judgment. From its inception in 1866 to its final version in which it's known today, Tchaikovsky's First Symphony underwent a series of revisions, rejections, excisions of the revisions, a return to the original draft, and final cleanup and touchups before the work was ready for prime time. In other words, the composer spent more time and effort polishing and perfecting it than he did practically any of his other major works.

The Second Symphony, of which we have Botnari's performance here, was composed in 1872. It, too, underwent extensive revisions seven and eight years later, but Tchaikovsky was never fully satisfied with it. His determination to revise the work was prompted by his desire to "turn this immature and mediocre symphony into a good one." To no small degree, the work was Tchaikovsky's sincere attempt to make peace with the Russian nationalist school of composers, namely, the "Mighty Handful," that represented everything his traditional conservatory training rejected. To that end, Tchaikovsky's Second is a symphony crafted largely from Ukrainian folksongs, hence its nickname, "Little



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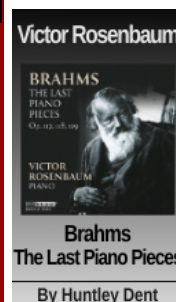
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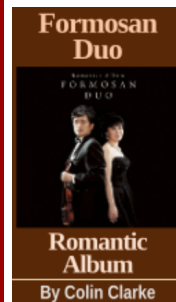
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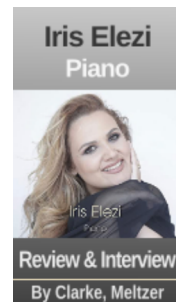
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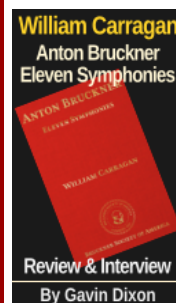
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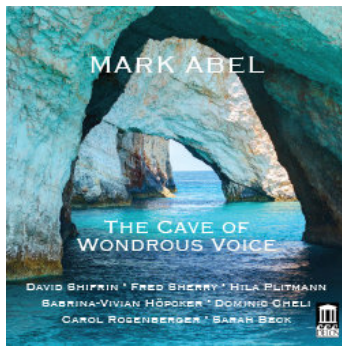
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Russian” (i.e., Ukrainian) coined by Russian music critic Nikolai Kashkin.

Tchaikovsky’s tinkering with the score didn’t help much, for the edifice is only as strong as the foundations it’s built on, and in this case, the foundations—three folk melodies—were somewhat wobbly to begin with. It therefore takes a conductor of Yuri Botnari’s insight and ability to avoid the sense of monotony that can settle in from the over-repetition of fairly prosaic material. This he accomplishes by constantly shifting orchestral weight and rebalancing textures to highlight the material from different angles. The highest compliment I can pay Botnari’s version of Tchaikovsky’s Second Symphony is to say that he elevates “this immature and mediocre symphony,” if not into a great one, at least “into a good one.” Great performances of Tchaikovsky’s symphonies by great conductors and great orchestras are not in short supply, but it’s rare to find a complete cycle by a single conductor and orchestra that is as even in excellence of interpretive vision and orchestral execution across all six scores as is that by Yuri Botnari and the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra.

As with previous releases in this cycle, this one is also available for download and/or streaming from the usual online sources: Amazon, Apple Music, CDBaby, Google, iTunes, Spotify, and YouTube. The physical CDs may also be purchased from Amazon. **Jerry Dubins**



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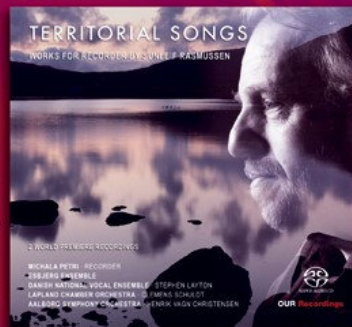
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