

and can play DVDs, this ought to be on your shopping list.

CHAKWIN

MAHLER: *Symphony 3*

Mignon Dunn, mz; Manhattan School of Music/
Glen Cortese—VAI 4267

VAI calls this release "What the Universe Tells Me", and bills it as a documentary about the symphony with the performance itself a bonus (by a student orchestra in concert at New York City's Riverside Church). With all due respect, this slights an outstanding performance. The documentary is excellent, but the performance is great and can stand proudly with the best of its rivals in the recorded catalog.

Cortese gives us Mahler unmixed, as it were. What's on the page comes out of the speakers, no matter how strange, beautiful, harsh, ugly, or simply outlandish it happens to be. There's no pulling of punches, no attempt to charm or impress. This is the music, period. And what music it is!

I is taken at a Goldilocks tempo—not too fast, not too slow, just right. Cortese builds an unbroken arc from the energy of the opening march and the contrast between it and the dark inertness that follows it to the happy chaos of the end of the movement. In between everything is in place and everything makes sense: the airy woodwinds, the lyrical horn and solo violin canoodling as only Mahler lets them, the march of everyone who can be rounded up on short notice to join in.

The solo trombone deserves special praise. Mahler (who himself had a loud bass voice; some friends of his said that this symphony sounded as if he had written his own voice into it) wrote a loud, awkward, roaring solo trombone part (Mengelberg called it the Voice of Death) to articulate part of the world he was creating. And generations of trombonists have practiced it until it sounds as elegant and effortless as a horn concerto. If you want a sense of what has been lost, listen to the Schuricht concert recording from 1960, with a trombone soloist who blasts and roars like an angry bull. The sound is elemental—probably the effect Mahler had in mind.

Cortese's soloist, Paul Whichard, doesn't push things as far as Schuricht's trombonist did, but he catches some of the primal power and grittiness built into the solo part, and the result is wonderful. And he gets to show that he can sing on his instrument later in the movement when Mahler lets the trombone play lyrically.

II is proto-impressionist as the best performances tend to be. Mahler's sly and elegant sliding from key to key and the faux-simplicity of this music are presented beautifully—nei-

ther driven, as they are by Zander nor drooled over, as they are by Bernstein.

III is deceptively hard to perform. It's hard to understand: some sort of country dance about a dead cuckoo that nobody seems too sad about, then an interruption from a nostalgic off-stage post horn, then the dance comes back and gets swept away by a big wave of...what?, and then a noisy conclusion. Parts of the movement, especially the balances, are really tough to make sound right. Mahler sometimes seems to be writing hockets. The melodic line jumps from voice to voice in the middle. A line will jump from multiple horns to a solo woodwind or two and then on to trumpets, all in a matter of a few notes. Hard to play, hard to conduct, hard to hear.

Cortese pulls it off splendidly. The "animal" elements are rough-edged, full of life, and extroverted. The sudden intrusion of the posthorn interlude (played excellently by Brad Sikory on a trumpet from a church balcony) is powerful and gently challenging; and the manic attempt of the "animal" element to reassert itself, like the catastrophic end of the movement, jars as it should.

IV is sung by the majestic-looking Mignon Dunn, whose voice is a little lighter than usual for the part, but whose presence (aided by the setting: she sings from the church pulpit) lends gravitas to the performance. Cortese's gently ecstatic orchestral tone-painting is just right.

I've heard livelier-toned female choruses and children's choirs than the ones assembled here in V, and things aren't as airborne as in Thomas (San Francisco) or Boulez (!), but it's still a lovely movement affectionately done.

VI will be controversial. Cortese takes a slow, but mainstream, tempo, sustains it beautifully, but stays close to it. Mahler's markings to speed up and slow down are treated with great subtlety. It's not how most conductors play the movement, but it works very well here. Once the concept sinks in, the movement unfolds inexorably and hypnotically. The ending, built on such a firm foundation, is overwhelmingly powerful; and the orchestra (it helps to be young!) is able to sustain energy and concentration to the very end.

There are a small number of bloop and missteps and a few moments where I knew that more experienced instrumental soloists would have found an extra twist in a phrase, but they were minor blemishes in a huge work and didn't matter in the least. In the interest of completeness, I note that Cortese's performance of the end of the last movement suffers from a peculiar balance problem that I blame on the conductor. Mahler, who wanted the sound here to be "not coarse, but with noble saturated tone" propels his march into Heaven with

falling fourths on the timpani, but doubles them with bassoons and the bass strings to broaden and round out their sound. In an ideal reading, we'd have a sound like what Abbado got in Vienna: the defined attack of the drums with the richness and overtones of the strings and woodwinds on the sustained part of the note. Here the drums take over the show, not as badly as in some performances, but enough to add an edge where none was needed.

The documentary is a model of its kind. Parts of the script are overwritten: we don't need extreme adjectives to show what Mahler was doing; the sound clips do that quite well. Parts of it are a little ill-conceived: the terror in III is not, I think, that animals eat one another, but that this whole animal-like dance of life is so superficial that it doesn't even take death seriously ("cuckoo is dead" means only that we have to find someone else to sing) and can't survive the challenge of the posthorn interlude (a personal connection that calls past, and is answered from beyond, the grave). Stockard Channing, the narrator, sounds stiff when she wants to sound oracular. But these are quibbles. Who could resist an hour of very bright, very informed people, including such Mahler scholars as Morton Solvik (who wrote his dissertation on this symphony), Peter Franklin (who wrote a book about it), Donald Mitchell, Henry-Louis de la Grange, a theologian, a philosopher, psychologist Howard Gardner, and singer Thomas Hampson, all sharing thoughts in speech or song about this endlessly fascinating work?

If you love Mahler's music and have a DVD player, this is a must-buy. If you aren't sure about Mahler, this is a fine introduction to his musical world. The Third, though it's the longest of his symphonies, is among the easiest to get to know.

I can't praise the thinking, planning, filming, and engineering that went into this enough. It truly is a model for what such enterprises ought to be. I wish space had been found for liner notes or at least a listing of the players.

I can't end this without noting how much the visual element adds to the musical one. It helps that the concert setting was in a beautiful church (having Dunn framed by stained glass windows for parts of the Midnight Song of IV was lovely and appropriate), but it also helps that you can see the players and the movement that goes with and produces the music. I am starting to wish that all recordings came with video tracks.

CHAKWIN

MENOTTI: *The Consul*

Patricia Neway (Magda Sorel), Regina Sarfaty (Secretary), Maria Marlo (Foreign Woman), Evelyn Sachs (Mother), Chester Ludgin (John Sorel), Leon Lishner (Police Agent), Norman Kelly (Magician); Orchestra/ Werner Torkanowsky

VAI 4266 [DVD] 125 minutes

When the opera first opened (on Broadway no less) in March of 1950 it was a phenomenal success. This 1960 production produced for television (an early attempt at "pay per view") gives clear evidence of why. Not only does it preserve the original 1950 score before Menotti made some editorial changes, but also the extraordinary performance of Patricia Neway, the original Magda Sorel. Leon Lishner and Maria Marlo are also original cast, and the staging is by the composer. So it is an important historical document, but it is also a strong, compelling, deeply emotional performance. There isn't a weak link here. The production is an intimate one, darkly evocative, claustrophobic, focussing on the singers with a closeup view impossible from a theater seat that only adds to the strength of the performance. It is Neway who dominates the opera, singing just as she does on the 1950 Decca original cast recording (still not on CD!). Singing and acting with such commitment and an intensity that is riveting, she begins simply, heating up the emotion as she goes, with an explosive, gut-wrenching "To this we've come" to climax the second act.

The audio soundtrack is available from VAI (1228; 2CDs), but go for the whole show on video (black-and-white).

PARSONS

MOUSSORGSKY: *Boris Godounov*

Alexander Pirogov (Boris), Georgi Nelepp (Dmitri), Nikander Khanayev (Shuisky), Maxim Mikhailov (Pimen), Larissa Avdeyeva (Marina), Ivan Kozlovsky (Simpleton); Bolshoi/ Vassily Nebolsin—VAI 4253 [DVD] 108 minutes

The running time announces at once that this must be an abridged *Boris*. There are cuts everywhere, small and large, and anyone who knows the opera well will be jarred by the constant skipping ahead. Rangoni is gone from Act 3; Boris's most lyrical music—his loving words to his daughter in Act 2—is omitted, and the wonderful tune is omitted a second time in Act 4. The only virtually complete scene is St Basil's, and it ends just before the Simpleton's lament. From there we move to Kromy Forest for a while, dart back to the Kremlin for Boris's death, then return to Kromy with Dmitri and the Simpleton (who had to travel 250 miles to get there).

So grumble a little, but don't miss these *Boris* vignettes. The 1954 film, directed by Vera Stroyeva (a student of Sergei Eisenstein), is