

teacher and both scored their works for the classical-size orchestra of, say, 50 players tops, to achieve the transparency and voicing intended. Rattle explains so much on this subject, making the enclosed Blu-ray disc so valuable in the understanding and background of so many facets of these works. Also by believing Schumann's marked tempos and natural orchestral balances, the music can be incredibly profound without being heavy or slow. A fascinating and most informative part of Rattle talking about Schumann is the story of the *Fourth Symphony* and the reason for his decision to use Schumann's original 1841 version...the one considered unplayable by many orchestras.

No doubt about it, this is an absolutely essential package for all Schumann appreciators and others. The set contains CDs but the exemplary sight and sound of the live performances on the Blu-ray disc moves the viewer right into the Philharmonie.

Bruce Surtees

Tchaikovsky – The Nutcracker; Symphony No.4

**Mariinsky Orchestra; Valery Gergiev
Mariinsky MAR0593**

► There are those who think *The Nutcracker* is a children's ballet. There are others whose only experience of the ballet is the constant and dreadful repetition of its greatest hits in shopping malls at this dark time of year. To both groups: listen to the Mariinsky Orchestra under Valery Gergiev perform the entire score, paying particular attention to the *Waltz of the Flowers* and the *Intrada* to the *Pas de Deux* immediately following. The rating "adult entertainment" could well be applied to these passionate expressions.

Gergiev is known for eccentric technique but also for wringing amazing performances from the players he leads. Mariinsky is his house band, so they have lots of practice following his tiny obscure gestures. They can turn on a dime out of an outrageous *Presto*, they phrase as a choral unit, the strings are encouraged to emote, and on this recording at least one hears observance of the composer's more subtle dynamic indications. Although arguably chestnuts, they're delicious, and so much fresher than the overcooked versions we are often fed while choosing gifts.

The remainder of disc two is Tchaikovsky's *Fourth Symphony*. The symphony predates the ballet by a good 14 years, from the period before and immediately following his failed marriage. Pit bands *love* to perform concert music, an assertion audibly demonstrated here. Delicacy and ferocity alternate, melancholy gives way to joy and returns. The relationship between conductor and players is so solid, lending brilliant assurance to



the performance that wildly (romantically) swings through the gamut of expression and tempi. They perform, understandably, as artists who love and treasure their heritage. The *Canzonetta* is breathtaking in its lyricism, and then one can almost imagine a choreography for the *Scherzo* movement involving two opposing teams of folk dancers, the strings versus the winds.

Max Christie

Strauss – Elektra; Der Rosenkavalier (Suites)

**Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra; Manfred Honeck
Reference Recordings FR 722 SACD
(referencerecordings.com)**

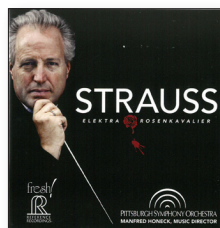
► Some of us may remember back in the 50s something called "Opera without Words" (Stokowski was good at these) specially created for folks who couldn't stomach all the singing but were more comfortable with the orchestra. Until now *Elektra* had escaped such treatment even though Strauss is one of the most symphonic of all opera composers and well suited for orchestral excerpts and suites (e.g. *Dance of the Seven Veils* etc.). But in *Elektra* the voices and the action are so closely intermeshed that the total devastating impact has to come from seeing or at least listening to the *complete* score.

Nevertheless Austrian conductor Manfred Honeck, newly appointed music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony, did decide to extract most of the orchestral score into a 35-minute suite. Certainly done with love and expertise and a thorough empathy with the opera, the particularly gruesome story with its moments of dark forebodings, evil lurking in the shadows, bloody murders, piercing shrieks and animals tortured is well brought out, as well as moments of filial and brotherly love, ecstasy and exuberance. Unfortunately, to fully appreciate program music like this, an audience not familiar with the opera will have to read the printed notes and that can be pretty annoying at a concert.

Der Rosenkavalier however is an entirely different story and the *Suite* created by Arthur Rodzinski is a wonderfully enjoyable concert piece. We are still blessed with the memory of Karajan and even more Carlos Kleiber's sublime performances, a hard act to follow, but Honeck's main strength is the beautiful, spacious orchestral sound and sumptuous hidden details he brings out with somewhat slower tempi.

Janos Gardonyi

**Rachmaninov – Symphony No.1; Balakirev – Tamara
London Symphony Orchestra; Valery Gergiev**



LSO Live LS00784

► Rachmaninov's *Symphony No.1* certainly didn't have the smoothest entry into the world. At its premiere in March of 1897, the (possibly) inebriated conductor, Alexander Glazunov, had already expressed his doubts about it and gave a less-than-stellar performance. As a result, the scathing reviews were enough to shatter Rachmaninov's confidence as a composer for four years. Since that time, the piece has come to be better regarded and is presented here as the last in a cycle of the complete symphonies featuring the London Symphony and Valery Gergiev.

From the menacing chords that open the first movement, it's clear that Gergiev and the LSO have full command of this challenging score – and challenging it is. Rachmaninov rarely ever again demonstrated such raw emotion in his orchestral writing and the sometimes strident tone can be a bit of a challenge. Nevertheless, the LSO delivers a suave and polished performance despite brisker tempos than we might be accustomed to. The warmly romantic strings meld perfectly with the stirring brass, particularly in the second and fourth movements and the bombastic finale is approached with much panache without ever resorting to empty virtuosity.

An added bonus is Balakirev's *Tamara*, a work the composer considered his finest. Based on a sultry love-poem by Mikhail Lermontov, the score is an exercise in oriental exoticism so favoured by Russian composers of the period. Gergiev and the LSO offer up a convincing performance of this sensuous music, from the mysterious beginning to the tumultuous finale before quietly fading away. Are there shades of *Scheherazade* here? Quite possibly. Under Gergiev's skilful baton, the result is a wonderful blending of cultures, rounding out this outstanding three-disc cycle. Highly recommended.

Richard Haskell

**Stravinsky – The Firebird; Nikolaev – The Sinewaveland
Seattle Symphony; Ludovic Morlot
Seattle Symphony SSM1014**

► *The Firebird* brought the world's attention to Igor Stravinsky, who at the time of the premiere of the ballet was an unknown composer not yet 30 years old. His first collaboration with Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, the score is broadly romantic, full of tricks practised by Ravel and Debussy. The ballet itself is rarely performed, perhaps owing too much

