


Rachmaninov

New CD/SACD

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27.
Vocalise, Op. 34 No. 14 (arr. composer).
Singapore Symphony Orchestra/Lan Shui.

BIS SACD1712 (full price, 1 hour 8 minutes).

Website www.bis.se  Producer Marion Schwebel.
Engineer Fabian Frank. Date July 2008.

Comparisons:

Symphony No. 2:

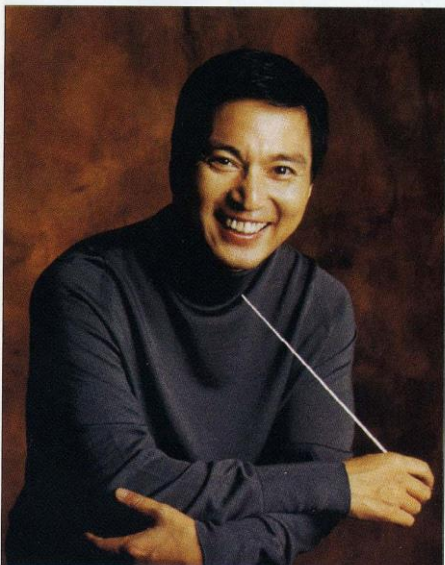
Royal Scottish Nat Orch/Hughes (BIS) CD1279

(2001, rev. Oct 2002)

Philadelphia Orch/Ormandy

(EMI Classics) 5 75127-2(1973, two discs)

RPO/Previn (Telarc) CD80113 (1985)



Lan Shui

BIS

The two earliest recordings of this symphony in my collection – one conducted by Artur Rodzinski and the other by Dimitri Mitropoulos – require under 45 minutes from first note to last. Nowadays, performances lasting more than an hour are the norm, and recordings of 67 or 68 minutes are not unusual. What is going on? Have we slowed down that much since the 1940s? True, in the last half-century, there has been a tendency for conductors, perhaps mistaking it for profundity, to get slower, but in this case, there is another explanation. As recently as the 1970s, it was unusual to perform and record this symphony as Rachmaninov composed it, without cuts. Today, it would be unusual to observe them. They are unnecessary and, in fact, they damage the symphony's structure. In the eras of shellac and vinyl discs, were the limitations of recording media the tail that wagged the dog, or were listeners really more impatient or afflicted with shorter attention spans? The latter seems unlikely, particularly in today's hyperactive, attention deficit-prone society. BIS's responsible booklet note writer tells us, 'Criticisms of the symphony's broad, indulgent scale later prompted [Rachmaninov], unwisely, to sanction some cuts in other conductors' performances.' The composer died in 1943, yet the cuts remained 'traditional'

for decades. I guess one could argue that traditions die hard, even bad ones.

Here's a new recording that is note-complete, and that requires 61'23", which actually seems a little fast by today's standards. I was surprised to find that BIS had recorded this symphony again so soon; in 2002, it released the Scottish version listed above. (For the record, that one takes 67'21".) Could the reason be the use of SACD technology this time around? On a conventional CD player, there's little to choose from between the two – the sound is splendid and impactful on both discs – so that leaves the performances. I continue to enjoy Owain Arwel Hughes's, whose big reading throbs with emotion but nevertheless holds its shape and refuses to gush. Lan Shui is very satisfactory too. His orchestra has a leaner sound – not anaemic, though – and he seems to delight in bringing out the score's inner lines. There are some interesting (or, depending on your taste, mannered!) nuances here, including swoopy strings in the finale's 'big tune': very Max Steiner! This is a world-class orchestra, as those who have heard its Tcherepnin series (also on BIS) will already know. It is not, however, the Philadelphia Orchestra, or even the Royal Philharmonic, for whose versions I maintain a dogged preference, although that might be a 'tradition' of my own! I think Philadelphia's strings justify my preference for the former, and Previn's rapt performance of the third movement (17'07", as compared to Lan Shui's 14'41") justifies my preference for the latter. Still, if you need this symphony on SACD, this new disc will be welcome and give pleasure. The *Vocalise* is performed with efficiency and sensitivity and, like the symphony, neither controversy nor excessive sentiment mars the performance.

Raymond S. Tuttle

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