Emil TABAKOV

COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME ONE
FIVE BULGARIAN DANCES
SYMPHONY NO. 8

Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra
Emil Tabakov

FIRST RECORDINGS
The composer and conductor Emil Tabakov was born on 21 August 1947 in Ruse, northern Bulgaria. He first took to the podium at the age of seventeen and won the Nikolai Malko Young Conductors Competition in Copenhagen in 1977. At the Bulgarian State Academy of Music he studied double-bass with Todor Toshev, conducting with Vladi Simeonov, and composition with the distinguished Bulgarian composer Marin Goleminov. While still at music school Tabakov founded a chamber orchestra made up of friends. He came to the attention of the principal conductor of the Ruse Philharmonic Orchestra, Ilija Temkov, who invited the eighteen-year-old to conduct his orchestra. Among the works Tabakov chose to perform at this prestigious event was his own *Two Improvisations for String Orchestra and Timpani* (1964).

From 1975 to 1979 Tabakov conducted the Ruse Symphony Orchestra. He then directed the Sofia Soloists Chamber Orchestra, appearing internationally with them from 1980 to 1989. Appointed conductor of the Sofia Philharmonic in 1985, he was made its general music director three years later. With this orchestra, and as guest conductor with several others, he has performed all over the world, enjoying particularly close associations with orchestras in Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Macedonia, Russia, Turkey, Serbia, South Korea and the USA. Under his baton the Sofia Philharmonic recorded a large amount of the Romantic repertoire.

Tabakov began to compose at the age of fourteen. His first orchestral piece was the aforementioned *Two Improvisations*. Like Mahler before him, Tabakov composes mostly during the summer months: during the concert season he is busy conducting. From his earliest years as a creative artist, Tabakov has been drawn towards the big symphonic forms. He numbers Shostakovich, Brahms, Skryabin and Richard Strauss among his foremost influences. This affinity for large-scale works has resulted in a number of compositions for a sizable body of musicians, such as...
the cantata *Tarnovgrad the Great – 1396* (1976) and a Requiem for soloists, chorus and orchestra (1992–93). During the 1990s his harmonic palette was refreshed and extended by a renewed interest in Bulgarian folklore; the resultant enriched musical language is notable for its pictorial vividness, incisiveness and economy of means.


His chamber works include *Lamento* for twelve double-basses (1970), *Vocalise* for viola and mixed choir (2012), a sonata for viola and trombone (1971) and a sonata for viola and double-bass (1972). Chief among his instrumental music may be numbered *Motivy* for double-bass solo (1968), a sonata for solo double-bass (1969), a sonatina for piano (1974), a prelude for violin (1977), *Imagination* for solo flute (1968), *Monody* for solo clarinet (1977) and *Duet* for violin and viola (2016). Several solo songs and choral works also feature in a catalogue which is modest in terms of numbers of works but wide-ranging in its scope and ambition.

In all his compositions, whether for full symphony orchestra or chamber instruments, Tabakov is punctilious in matters of dynamics, timbre and thematic development. Most of his symphonic movements are constructed upon several tiny but memorable ideas which are then worked out rigorously during the course of the piece. Due attention is paid to the effective use of bold contrasts, whether in terms of dynamism versus stasis or full orchestral statements counterbalancing instrumental solos.
Symphony No. 8
Tabakov’s Eighth Symphony was written between 2007 and 2009. Expansive and atmospheric, it is cast in three substantial movements which cross-reference important intervals, phrases and rhythms. The composer has described it as ‘quite different’ from his previous examples in the form in that it is profoundly concerned with timbre and sound-colour and uses short motifs and figurations rather than full-blown themes or subjects. In this regard, the work is more akin to his earlier non-symphonic orchestral pieces such as Astral Music, Ad Infinitum and the Concerto for percussion instruments. Although each movement contains a variety of moods and tempi, the basic formal arrangement of the work consists, rather unusually, of two consecutive slow movements followed by a quick finale. The result is a deeply concentrated symphonic statement in which suppressed dynamism is gradually intensified in the first two-thirds of the score and released in a cathartic discharge of energy in its last third.

The large orchestra required consists of three flutes, piccolo, four clarinets (the fourth doubling clarinet in E flat), four oboes (fourth doubling cor anglais), three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, four trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings. The percussion section, used judiciously, contains a snare-drum, tenor drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, thunder sheet, marimba and vibraphone.

The entire symphony is fuelled by the continual development and reappraisal of several pliable and protean motifs adumbrated in the opening of the Largo first movement. Over sustained string chords the first principal idea – a three-note rising figure – is introduced by piccolo shadowed by harmonics on three solo violins. An accompanying repeated-note rhythm is explored extensively throughout the work, as is a sequence of undulating figurations which either oscillate rapidly or slide up and down via micro-glissandi. Trills on the lower strings herald the arrival of the second main idea of the movement, first heard on cor anglais: a lyrical six-note phrase followed by its varied restatement. A series of ascending rippling semiquaver sextuplets make their

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1 E-mail from Emil Tabakov, dated 19 April 2016.
debut on flute and vibraphone; this component will also play an important role in the rest of the piece.

The whole of the preliminary section of the opening Largo conjures up images of illimitable vistas and barren terrain, thanks to a severely restricted reservoir of thematic material and an intense focus on the outer extremities of the orchestra. After the cor anglais has suggested a human voice in the midst of this desolate landscape, a fragment of birdsong is heard on the clarinet in a further intimation of life-forms coming into existence. The remainder of this movement consists of deft transformations of the basic expository material as Tabakov exploits fully the expressive and colouristic potential of a diverse array of instruments. Two densely scored episodes for full orchestra are both very carefully prepared and unfold inexorably, the second example resulting in a powerfully extended climax after which the texture thins out dramatically. The mood and substance of the prefatory section returns as vertiginous solo-violin harmonics and piccolo close the movement with another reminder of the three-note principal idea before the solo-violin chords die away to nothing.

Also marked Largo, the second movement explores further the ramifications of some of the themes and gestures presented in its predecessor. It begins with slowly shifting layers of precisely calibrated, muted violin lines. Eventually woodwind and brass join in. A quicker central episode for full orchestra soon flares up but just as swiftly the pace slackens and a hushed and sustained passage for clarinet and vibraphone over pulsing bass drum leads into a florid restatement of the opening material. Sustained piccolo and double-bass lines ensure the outer edges of the orchestral register are clearly defined in the fading closing bars. This second movement is not so much a straightforward variation of the first, but more of an extensive consideration of the potentialities of certain tropes already foreshadowed in the opening Largo.

The Presto finale is a rondo-like structure in which darting quicksilver music alternates with slower, more sustained episodes. Teeming with activity, the opening bars make a satisfying contrast to the predominantly slow and measured music of the previous two movements. The musical substance consists of fleet-footed variants of the various leitmotifs of the work, but such is the rapidity of the music that these thematic
connections may not register immediately with the listener. After a lively section for full orchestra, intensified by trombone and tuba alarums and trumpet calls, the pace slackens and the first atmospheric interlude appears featuring eerie, muted trombone glissandi. After several varied restatements of both sets of material, the pulse slackens, all passion spent. The work ends quietly with an eloquent solo-cello line which ultimately fades into silence. It is perhaps fitting that a symphony which has evolved primarily through a succession of intimate solos and dialogues rather than via the accustomed big-boned tutti should end with such a simple, confiding soliloquy on the instrument that is reputedly closest in range to the human voice.

**Five Bulgarian Dances**

Having found writing his Eighth Symphony an exacting task, Tabakov decided to produce something less demanding for his next large-scale orchestral work and so produced a set of *Five Bulgarian Dances*. These exuberant vignettes are not based on existing examples but emulate the forms and characteristics of Bulgarian folksong. Only the second dance is loosely inspired by an actual song of a humorous nature which the composer heard sung by a little girl when he was a teenager, but it has been drastically recast to render it more rhythmical and dance-like.² There is a mixture of Bulgarian elements and jazz throughout the set.

The *Dances* – which bear simple numbers rather than names – are written for two flutes, piccolo, three clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings. Tabakov’s selection of percussion instruments is especially wide-ranging and features side-drum, tambourine, Bulgarian (bass) drum, tom-tom, bongos, bass drum, maracas, guiro, cymbals, hi-hat cymbal and vibraphone. These considerable forces are deployed with taste and restraint throughout.

Marked *Moderato*, Dance No. 1 begins quietly as the clarinet introduces the sinuous main theme with discreet rhythmical accompaniment from the bass drum. The theme is then repeated on clarinet joined by flute. A contrasting episode appears on oboe accompanied by tom-tom, and clarinet and piccolo take up the main subject again, ² *Ibid.*
supported by the whole string section knocking on the body of their instruments with their fingers. There follows a *tutti* version of all the main material, featuring whooping horns. Reduced to its essence, the dance ends with the main theme given out softly on solo violin and solo cello, played near the bridge of their instruments, accompanied by tom-tom taps.

Launched by bongos, the second dance is a lively *Presto*, with an emphatic main melody characterised by accented syncopations. A secondary idea is introduced by clarinet over an intricately layered accompaniment consisting of vibraphone and string chords and a downward-cascading series of sextuplet and triplet figurations in the first violins. Unlike the first dance, when the main theme of this *Presto* is repeated, it is extended and varied. The joyous momentum is maintained right through until the final trenchant cadence.

With no let-up in pace in the sequence, there follows a strenuous *Allegro molto*, the grace-notes of which are broadened out into vigorous horn *glissandi* near the end. This is the most virtuosic piece in the set, with facets of a concerto for orchestra in its exploration of the timbres and sonorities of various instrumental combinations.

Providing a moment of reflective calm after the vigorous and extrovert central movement, Dance No. 4 begins intimately, with a solo violin playing near the bridge of the instrument. Tension and volume gradually increase as more and more instrumental layers are added to the fabric and the dance ends imposingly with the main theme writ large on full orchestra, *fff*.

The final dance is a spirited *Allegro molto* that highlights different sections of the orchestra in turn before the principal melody is restated by the whole orchestra in bold and jubilant terms. The ebullient closing bars make a fittingly exultant conclusion to the movement and to the set as a whole.

Direct in their appeal, Emil Tabakov’s *Five Bulgarian Dances* combine melodic and rhythmic immediacy with subtle textural contrasts. They are audibly the product of several decades spent on the podium, surveying a wide range of scores and their composers’ individual solutions to discovering new orchestral colours. With its attractive
themes and imaginative use of a big orchestra, this set of dances is one of Tabakov’s most immediately attractive and thoroughly enjoyable works.

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Paul Conway is a freelance writer specialising in twentieth century and contemporary British music. He has reviewed regularly for The Independent and Tempo, provided programme notes for The Proms and the Edinburgh, Spitalfields and Three Choirs Festivals and contributed chapters to books on John McCabe and Robert Simpson.

The Symphony Orchestra of Bulgarian National Radio has acquired a leading position in Bulgarian musical culture and among the community of radio formations of Europe. The musicians are graduates of prestigious music academies in Sofia, Moscow, St Petersburg and New York.

The extensive development of the Orchestra to reach the standards of a prominent professional orchestra began under the major Bulgarian conductor Vassil Stefanov (1913–91), who took up his position in 1954 and worked with the ensemble for over thirty years, during which time the SOBNR turned into one of the leading cultural institutions of Bulgaria. Further contributions to the artistic growth of the orchestra were made by the conductors Vassil Kazandjiev, Alexander Vladigerov, Milen Nachev and Rossen Milanov. From late 2008 until early 2016 the principal conductor was Emil Tabakov. Since then the position has been occupied by Rossen Gergov.

The SOBNR has toured extensively in Bulgaria and abroad. Making recordings is among its main activities. As well as recording for the sound archive of Bulgarian National Radio, the Orchestra has made recordings for many international labels; this is its first appearance on Toccata Classics.
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*Five Bulgarian Dances* (2011)  
1. No. 1 *Moderato*  
2. No. 2 *Presto*  
3. No. 3 *Allegro molto*  
4. No. 4 *Moderato*  
5. No. 5 *Allegro molto*  
19:39

*Symphony No. 8* (2007–9)  
6. I *Largo*  
7. II *Largo*  
8. III *Presto*  
43:24

TT 63:63

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