

Emil TABAKOV

COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME TWO

SYMPHONY NO. 1
VIOLA CONCERTO

Alexander Zemtsov, viola
Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra
Emil Tabakov

EMIL TABAKOV: COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME TWO

by Paul Conway

The composer and conductor Emil Tabakov was born on 21 August 1947 in Ruse in 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 under 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 Ilija Temkov, the principal conductor of the Ruse Philharmonic, who invited the eighteen-year-old to conduct his orchestra. Among the works Tabakov chose to perform at this prestigious event was his *Two Improvisations* for string orchestra and timpani, his first orchestral piece, written at the age of fourteen. From 1975 to 1979 Tabakov conducted the Ruse Symphony Orchestra. He then directed the Sofia Soloists Chamber Ensemble, appearing internationally with the group from 1980 to 1989. Appointed conductor of the Sofia Philharmonic in 1985, he was made its general music director three years later and held this post until 2000. At the same time (1994–99) he was chief conductor of the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra. With the Sofia Philharmonic, 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, Russia, Macedonia and South Korea. Under his baton the Sofia Philharmonic has recorded a large amount of the Romantic repertory. From 2002 to 2008 he was music director and chief conductor of the Bilkent Symphony Orchestra in Ankara and from 2008 to 2016 he was chief conductor and director of the Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Tabakov began to compose at the age of fourteen. From his earliest years as a creative artist, he has been drawn towards the big symphonic forms and numbers

Shostakovich, Brahms, Skryabin and Richard Strauss among his foremost influences. His output is dominated by two time-honoured orchestral genres. He has written nine symphonies (1982, 1984, 1988, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2009, 2015) and an impressive series of concertos for double-bass (1975), percussion (1977), two flutes (2000) and piano (2003), as well as concertos for fifteen string instruments (1979), orchestra (1995), chorus, violin, vibraphone, marimba and bells (1996) and a concert piece for trumpet and strings (1985). Other orchestral works include the *Variations for Symphony Orchestra* (1972) and the one-movement pieces *Astral Music* (1976) and *Ad Infinitum* (1989). His affinity for large-scale works has resulted in such compositions as the cantata *Tarnograd the Great – 1396* (1976) and the Requiem based on the Latin text of the Mass for soloists, chorus and orchestra (1992–93). There are also two early ballet scores, *Sashka* (1967) and *Helen of Pristis* (1969).

Complementing this predilection for big formal structures is a fastidious and inventive approach to orchestral colour and textural subtlety, especially in *concertante* works. 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 output includes *Lamento* for twelve double-basses (1969), 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 solo double-bass (1968), *Imagination* for solo flute (1968), a sonata for solo double-bass (1969), a sonatina for piano (1974), *Monody* for solo clarinet (1977) and a *Prelude* for violin (1977). Several solo songs and choral works also feature in a modest but wide-ranging catalogue.

In spite of being much in demand as a conductor, Tabakov has continued to compose steadily – although, like Mahler before him, he writes mostly during the summer months: during the concert season he is busy conducting. His most recent scores cover a characteristically broad range of genres. In 2016 he completed an *Adagio* for string orchestra, commissioned by Martin Anderson, who runs Toccata Classics, in memory of his partner Yodit Tekle; *Vocalise* for mixed choir and vibraphone; and *Dedication* for solo viola and chamber orchestra, written for Yuri Bashmet and the Moscow Soloists

Chamber Orchestra on the occasion of their 25th anniversary and premiered by them, conducted by the composer, during the 'March Music Days' International Music Festival in Rousse in March 2017. On the first night of this event, *Horo* for symphony orchestra (2017) was premiered by the Festival Symphony Orchestra, again conducted by Tabakov. Another work dating from 2017, *Caprice* for solo double-bass, was commissioned for the 2018 Sperger Competition in Germany.

In all his pieces, 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 assembled from several tiny but vivid 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. 1 (1981–82)

Tabakov's First Symphony is written for an orchestra consisting of two flutes, piccolo, two clarinets, E flat clarinet, three oboes (third doubling cor anglais), two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings. The percussion section, requiring two players, comprises a snare drum, bass drum, tam-tam and tom-toms.

The *Moderato* opening movement 1 begins with a brass fanfare, immediately followed by the principal theme which appears on first violins and piccolo. It has a folk-like character and is reminiscent of, and influenced by, traditional Bulgarian music, though Tabakov does not use actual quotations from folk-tunes or any other 'found' material. The second theme, given to hushed unison double-basses, recalls male singing in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in that, of two voices, one sings on the note and the other sings around the note. Tabakov comments of this theme that:

maybe it seems a bit similar to [the] 'Dies Irae' in the character of the music, but it's absolutely not the same. No Dies Irae references. It's more Orthodox Church chant like. No programmatic elements in my music at all.¹

¹ E-mail to the author, dated 15 April 2017.

These two contrasting, distinctive types of Bulgarian music – folk and Orthodox – are combined and contrasted throughout this first movement. In the exposition an expressive solo viola strikes a note of intimacy. The central development section recalls the movement's opening fanfare-like figures on the brass, which may suggest images of warfare and conflict, but Tabakov is adamant that the fanfares are presented as pure music and not as a cypher for any non-musical elements.² After a telescoped and varied recapitulation, the movement ends very quietly in the depths of the orchestra with double-basses, horns and timpani solemnly reiterating the main motifs in a chant-like manner.

The central *Largo* [2] bursts in with three dissonant chords for full orchestra before the piccolo begins a simple statement of one of the ideas from the previous movement. This initiates a passacaglia-like set of short variations as the theme is picked up by flutes, with tuba interjections, and then passed down the woodwind section. Eventually the brass section takes up the melody, to an accompaniment of rushing upper woodwind and strings. The theme is then deconstructed into its constituent parts as tiny phrases peep out of upper woodwind. The fearsome opening *tutti* chords return but the movement ends in a spirit of quiet defiance, with expressive piccolo and flute restating the theme, undaunted.

The finale [3] begins with a hushed *Largo*, featuring fluttering strings interrupted by outbursts of faster music. These juxtapositions of contrasting tempos recur until the *Presto* main section establishes itself with a full-blooded account of the main ideas of the work. There are several opportunities for individual players and orchestral sections to shine in this brilliant and varied final movement, which has elements of a concerto for orchestra. Brass fanfares from the opening movement return to call a halt to the dynamic progress. The *Largo* that opened this movement is also revisited before a shrill clarinet reinstates the *Presto* material. In the aftermath of a bravura climactic section the lamenting solo viola from the first movement returns to sound a lone voice amid the vigorous full orchestral statements with which the movement ends.

² E-mail to the author, dated 16 December 2016.

This first essay in a medium to which Tabakov has now returned many times is a deeply personal one, and it requires an effort of concentration from its listeners as well as from the players. Each section of the symphony takes its place within the wider context, and the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic elements of the themes and motifs are developed thoroughly, logically and with unflinching invention.

Tabakov's First Symphony was premiered on 10 February 1983 in Sofia Hall, by the Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Jordan Dafov. Subsequent performances took place in the composer's home town of Rousse, with the Rousse Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Georgi Dimitrov, and in Plovdiv, southern Bulgaria, with the Plovdiv Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Rumen Bajrakov. The work was not performed again until this studio recording with the Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by the composer.

Viola Concerto (2007)

Tabakov's instinctive approach to the concerto form avoids the time-honoured convention of pitting a bravura solo part against an orchestra in an accompanying role. Instead the solo instrument is treated as first among equals – but unusually for a *concertante* work featuring a solo stringed instrument, the orchestral forces required in his Viola Concerto of 2007 are considerable: two flutes (the second doubling piccolo), two oboes (the second doubling cor anglais), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, marimba and vibraphone) and strings. Tabakov takes care to ensure that the solo viola is heard throughout the work. Thus the purely orchestral sections contain the loudest and most powerful music, whereas the violist interacts with reduced, chamber-like textures. And yet, despite the frequent juxtapositions of rich tutti with intense dialogues for small instrumental groups, the general mood and character of the concerto remains consistent.

The opening movement ⁴ begins with a *Largo* section that sets out the main material: intervals of seconds and ninths given out by the soloist and a series of demisemiquavers in the strings. After the possibilities of these initial ideas have been surveyed in a slow

tempo, there follows a quicker central section, marked *Più mosso*, in which the dynamic potential of the main ideas is explored. A substantial cadenza-like episode heralds the return of the opening *Largo* and the movement ends quietly and expectantly.

Also marked *Largo*, the slow movement [5] probes more deeply the motifs initiated in the first movement, bathing them in new colours and creating a sense of wonder with gurgling sextuplets in woodwind and strings. An earthy, dance-like interlude with woozy solo viola and trombone glissandi over muted strings leads to an expressive slower section. After an eloquent, lyrical solo cadenza, the enigmatic closing section is irradiated by vibraphone.

The *Presto finale* [6] begins balefully with sinister ostinatos before focusing on the rhythmical capabilities of the principal ideas of the work. As the movement unfolds, the soloist encourages individual players to become soloists in their own right. Proceedings are brought to a halt abruptly and unexpectedly for a ruminative section, led by the soloist. Gradually the music gathers tremendous momentum, building to a massive climax. In its aftermath, the soloist, accompanied by piccolo, traces the shadowy remains of those chief motifs before the music fades away.

In his *Viola Concerto* Tabakov adopts an unhurried approach, taking time to realise fully the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic implications of his protean ideas. These explorations are carried out as much in the orchestra as in the solo-violin line: this concerto is far from being the traditional vehicle for a soloist's technical prowess. That's not to say that the solo part lacks bravura – far from it – but rather that its more virtuosic aspects are put entirely at the service of the developing musical argument. Similarly, the orchestral writing, though varied and colourful, is more concerned with advancing the concertly evolving narrative than with furnishing a showcase for the players.

The *Viola Concerto* was first performed on 9 March 2012 by Alexander Zemtsov, with the Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Tabakov. The same soloist and conductor have subsequently performed the work with the Macedonian Philharmonic Orchestra in Skopje, the Bilkent Symphony Orchestra in Ankara and the Bulgarian NSO again in Varna, Bulgaria, as part of the 2014 Varna Summer International Music Festival.

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.

Alexander Zemtsov is one of the most versatile musicians before the public today, having achieved recognition as soloist, conductor, teacher and chamber musician. He has been performing as a solo violist since the age of fifteen, appearing with orchestras across Europe, the USA, Asia and Australia, the conductors with whom he has worked including Neeme Järvi, Vladimir Jurowski, Leif Segerstam and Alexander Vedernikov. At the age of 23 he was appointed Principal Viola of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. In 2012, after ten years with the Orchestra, he left to dedicate himself entirely to his demanding career as soloist, conductor and chamber musician.

Born in 1978 into a family of musicians – now a renowned dynasty of violists – he attended the famous Gnessin Music School for gifted children in Moscow, where he studied with Elena Ozol. He continued his education with Michael Kugel in the Hoogeschool in Maastricht and, as a postgraduate, with Tabea Zimmermann at the Hochschule Hanns Eisler in Berlin. Concurrently he studied conducting, taking inspiration from mentors such as Vladimir Jurowski, Kurt Masur and Leif Segerstam.

In 2014 he made his conducting debut with the International New Symphony Orchestra (INSO) Lviv, and the next year was appointed artistic director and principal conductor of the orchestra, giving this German-Russian-Ukrainian-Jewish musician a role as ambassador of peace in the Ukraine, aiming to bring peace and unity through music. An appearance as conductor and soloist with the Lappeenranta Orchestra in Finland was followed by a re-invitation for the following season as well as an invitation to conduct the Sinfonia Finlandia in Jyväskylä. Future conducting engagements are scheduled with the Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra, with Mischa Maisky as a soloist, with the Mannheim Chamber Orchestra for performances of Tchaikovsky's ballet *The Nutcracker* at the Rijeka Opera Theatre in Croatia, and a European tour and recordings with his orchestra, the INSO Lviv, are also planned.



His mastery of the viola has won him many awards, among them the first prizes at the 'Classical Legacy' International Competition in Moscow in 1995, at the Elise Meyer competition in Hamburg in 1997 and at the Eighth Brahms competition in Poertschach, in Austria, in 2001. As a chamber musician he has performed in the world's most prestigious venues with such partners as Peter Donohoe, Patrick Gallois, Itamar Golan, Natalia Gutman, Mischa Maisky, Gerhard Schulz and Dmitri Sitkovetsky. His recordings as violist have appeared on the Chandos, LPO Live, Navis Classics and Naxos labels; this is his first for Toccata Classics.

Alexander Zemtsov holds professorships at some of the finest conservatoires in Europe: the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, the Vienna Konservatorium, the Haute École de Musique de Lausanne and the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz in Cologne. Many of his students are members of, often section leaders in, major orchestras around the world as well as frequent winners of international competitions.

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. Besides its work for the sound archive of Bulgarian National Radio, the Orchestra has recorded for many international labels; this is its second appearance on Toccata Classics, the first being in a recording of Emil Tabakov's Eighth Symphony and *Five Bulgarian Dances* (TOCC 0365).

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Listener review



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EMIL TABAKOV Complete Symphonies, Volume Two

Symphony No. 1 (1981–82)

① I	<i>Moderato</i>	34:56
② II	<i>Largo</i>	11:42
③ III	<i>Largo – Presto</i>	8:51
		14:23

Concerto for Viola and Orchestra (2007)

④ I	<i>Largo – Più mosso – Largo</i>	38:54
⑤ II	<i>Largo</i>	17:40
⑥ III	<i>Presto</i>	10:43
		10:31

Alexander Zemtsov, viola ④–⑥

TT 73:50

Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra

FIRST RECORDINGS

Emil Tabakov, conductor