



# Emil TABAKOV

**COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME THREE**  
CONCERT PIECE FOR ORCHESTRA  
SYMPHONY NO. 4

# EMIL TABAKOV: COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME THREE

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 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 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 them 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 recorded a large amount of the Romantic repertoire. 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 Symphony Orchestra of Bulgarian National Radio.

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, with Shostakovich, Brahms, Skryabin and Richard Strauss among his foremost influences. His output is dominated by two time-honoured orchestral genres. He has written ten symphonies (1982, 1984, 1988, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2009, 2015, 2017) and an impressive series of concertos for double-bass (1975), percussion (1977), two flutes (2000), piano (2003), cello (2006) and viola (2007), 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).<sup>1</sup> 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 *Tarnovgrad the Great – 1396* (1976) and a 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

---

<sup>1</sup> Symphony No. 8 and the *Five Bulgarian Dances* were released on Toccata Classics TOCC 0365, and Symphony No. 1 and the *Viola Concerto* on TOCC 0410.

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, as well as *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 Ruse 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. On 16 March 2018, at the opening concert of the 2018 'March Music Days' in Ruse, Tabakov conducted the world premiere of his Ninth Symphony with the Sofia Philharmonic.

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.

### ***Concert Piece for Orchestra* (1985)**

Tabakov's *Concert Piece for Orchestra* <sup>[1]</sup> was written in the same year as his appointment as conductor of the Sofia Philharmonic and, since the work was written with a premiere performance by his new colleagues in mind, the sound of the orchestra was an important factor in determining its character and sonorities. The bravura aspects of the score allow members of all the instrumental sections to display their musicianship and technical prowess, as the composer was very keen to 'show the possibilities of the orchestra', as he put it.<sup>2</sup> Another notable aspect of the work is the considerable use of augmented triads, which grew out of a desire to construct a piece for large symphony orchestra on severely restricted material. Large forces are required, consisting of piccolo, three flutes (third

<sup>2</sup> E-mail to the author, dated 12 May 2018.

doubling second piccolo), three oboes, cor anglais, two clarinets in B, two clarinets in E flat, three bassoons, contrabassoon, six horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (gongs, bells, bongos, snare drum, marimba, vibraphone), organ, synthesiser and strings.

In the dynamic, fast-paced first section of the piece, the synthesiser plays an important role. It is not integrated into the orchestra, but acts as an alien presence to which the traditional instrumental forces react.<sup>3</sup> Eventually the insistent arpeggios in the synthesiser are taken up by members of the orchestra and both forces meet in a vigorously *staccato*, fanfare-like idea which brings the music to a climactic halt. In the atmospheric central section, timpani and percussion come to the fore, with effective marimba and vibraphone contributions. The texture fills out gradually and an ear-catching passage filled with what sound like bird and animal calls suggests that the whole of Nature is waking up. A hefty climax leads to a return of the synthesiser arpeggios. In the intentionally disorientating closing moments, the organist is instructed to turn off the motor and wait until the sound fades away and the synthesiser player is required to ensure the pitch of the tone becomes distorted as the music winds down.

At the time that Tabakov wrote this piece, he was particularly interested in combining the sound of a synthesiser with the sound of a symphony orchestra. It was the first time that he had used a synthesiser in one of his scores, and he went on to include one in his Third Symphony (1988) and the Requiem of 1993. The *Concert Piece* was first played by the Sofia Philharmonic in 1986 and then in 2010 with the Symphony Orchestra of Bulgarian National Radio, the composer conducting on both occasions.

### **Symphony No. 4 (1997)**

Tabakov's Fourth Symphony was written in 1996–97 and premiered in Sofia on 26 March 1998, with the Sofia Philharmonic conducted by the composer. It is scored for a large orchestra consisting of three flutes (the third doubling piccolo), three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani (two players), percussion (four players: bass drum, snare drum, tambourine,

<sup>3</sup> In an e-mail to me, dated 2 July 2018, Tabakov described the relationship between the two forces as a 'battle'.

whip, Bulgarian drum, tom-tom, tam-tam, vibraphone, bells, bass drum with cymbals) and strings. The prevailing mood is tenebrous and intensely brooding, almost without respite, and the composer has commented that it is unlike any of his other symphonies.<sup>4</sup> Though the piece is cast in the conventional four movements, they do not conform to the standard format of quick first movement, slow movement, scherzo and fast finale. Indeed, the second movement presents the only genuinely fast music in the symphony, the other three movements being either slow or moderate in pace.

The initial hushed phrases of the *Largo* first movement [2] might lead listeners to assume they are being presented with the measured introduction to a conventional *Allegro*. Slowly it becomes clear that there is not going to be a contrasting faster main section and the shadowy, expectant phrases set out in the initial pages of the score form the basis of the entire movement and, indeed, play a significant part in the material of the Symphony as a whole. Intervals are also important to the character of the Symphony and the seconds and sevenths introduced in these opening phrases recur throughout the work. Tabakov daringly withholds wind and percussion for a considerable time, and it begins to feel as if the movement will be scored for strings only. This monopoly by the strings is eventually ended by a four-note tattoo, heard first on timpani and then on bass drum, which will be taken up later in the work. Other instruments are admitted into the textures and there is a climax capped by a mighty unison statement of the main motif, but the overriding mood of this *Largo* is one of baleful stillness.

The following spirited *Allegro vivace* [3] draws on elements of Bulgarian and Romanian folk-music, though there are no actual quotations. Tabakov has no firm explanation for his references to the traditional music of these countries, other than that he wanted to create a considerable contrast between this movement and its predecessor.<sup>5</sup> In this regard he is successful, although there are some commonalities between them: as well as sharing ideas and motifs, they are both obsessive. In the *Allegro vivace* this preoccupation takes the form of multifarious reiterations of short, rhythmic phrases. A judicious use of percussion helps to create a sense of frenzied excitement in this explosive, dance-like outburst.

<sup>4</sup> E-mail of 12 May 2018.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

In the third movement [4], which has the hazily tranquil character of a nocturne, the tempo and the atmosphere of the opening *Largo* return. With satisfying symmetry, the opening vibraphone phrases trace a descending pattern acting as a counterpoise to the rising lines in the solo violin at the start of the Symphony. An expressive theme, marked 'dolce' (sweetly) is introduced by horn and taken up by woodwind. It is then broken down into smaller phrases sounding like bird-calls. When I suggested to the composer that this passage reminded me of Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which warned of mankind's destruction of nature, with the last surviving birds singing in a desolate landscape, he expressed approval of the reference.<sup>6</sup> This evocatively scored movement closes with the sound of distant pealing bells.

Though the finale [5] is permeated by rapidly repeated semitonal figures, it is in fact a moderately paced movement, marked *Andante*. The key to its character in the opening paragraphs is not the furious *moto perpetuo* in the woodwind but rather the unhurried oboe theme unfolding calmly in semibreves underneath. This closing statement revisits and transforms all the foregoing material of the Symphony, including various motivic, rhythmic and harmonic elements. As in the *Concert Piece*, Tabakov makes liberal use of augmented triads. The imposing final bars, which withhold the consolation of a major key resolution, bring to a convincing, resonant conclusion not just this final movement but the entire work.

Emil Tabakov's Fourth Symphony is one of his most intense and powerful utterances. A substantial orchestra is used with restraint, only unleashed fully in the *Allegro vivace* which offers a dynamic counterpoint to the other three measured movements. There is no overt programme, and yet at times the listener may have the distinct impression that the music is speaking of personal, extra-musical matters, so eloquent and impassioned is the argument. As always with this composer, it is the notes themselves which matter and in this closely argued piece they are made to work very hard indeed. It is a tribute to Tabakov's mastery of orchestration that the essentially dark character of the piece is created without recourse to any sonorous woodwind instruments such as alto flute, cor anglais, bass clarinet or contrabassoon.

<sup>6</sup> E-mail of 2 July 2018.

*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. Tabakov was replaced by Rossen Gergov for one season (2017–18), and since then the principal conductor has been Mark Kadin.

The SOBNR has toured extensively in Bulgaria and abroad. Making recordings is among its main activities. As well as for the sound archive of Bulgarian National Radio, the orchestra has made recordings for many international labels; this is its third appearance on Toccata Classics, the first being in a recording of Emil Tabakov's Eighth Symphony and *Five Bulgarian Dances* (TOCC 0365) and the second in the First Symphony and Viola Concerto (TOCC 0410).

## Also available on Toccata Classics



‘The style [in Symphony No. 8] is complex, dense and severe. [...] The composer’s unique sound world is the end product of subjecting several motivic cells to constantly morphing layers of color and texture. The *Five Bulgarian Dances* (2011) occupy an entirely different universe. They are melodic, rhythmically forthright, brilliantly orchestrated, comfortably accessible. The committed playing of the Bulgarian NRSO is somewhat rough-hewn, an asset apropos these 2 compositions. The sound image fashioned by the production team is three dimensional and dynamic. Toccata Classics, an enterprising label out of London, should be commended for championing unusual material like this. The remaining 8 symphonies could be very interesting.’

—customer review, Amazon



‘[Symphony No. 1] makes a striking impact from the very opening bars with a boldly declaimed brass fanfare. The overall impression throughout is conflict, unease, menace and portent. [...] Tabakov is a master of creating atmosphere and a menacing backdrop opens up once again. Towards the end he really turns the heat up, with those brass fanfares making a final stance.

The Viola Concerto is much more recent, composed in 2007, and premiered by Alexander Zemtsov in 2012. This studio recording was made two years later, again Zemtsov is the soloist. [...] The Concerto’s solo part is no mean feat, virtuosically demanding and rhythmically complex. Zemtsov’s technically assured playing reaps rich dividends. The engineers have struck an ideal balance between soloist and orchestral forces, which is a plus.’

—Stephen Greenbank, MusicWeb International



Recorded on 7, 8, 11 and 12 January 2010 at Bulgarian National Radio (Symphony No. 4) and on 4 and 5 October 2010 in Bulgaria Hall, Sofia (*Concert Piece*)

Recording engineer: Sava Lavsov

Editor: Valentin Ivanov

Producer: Vladimir Hristozov

Booklet text: Paul Conway

Cover design: David M. Baker ([david@notneverknow.com](mailto:david@notneverknow.com))

Typesetting and lay-out: KerryPress, St Albans

Executive producer: Martin Anderson

© Toccata Classics, London, 2018

© Bulgarian National Radio, 2010

Toccata Classics CDs are available in the shops and can also be ordered from our distributors around the world, a list of whom can be found at [www.toccataclassics.com](http://www.toccataclassics.com). If we have no representation in your country, please contact:

Toccata Classics, 16 Dalkeith Court, Vincent Street, London SW1P 4HH, UK

Tel: +44/0 207 821 5020 E-mail: [info@toccataclassics.com](mailto:info@toccataclassics.com)

---

## EMIL TABAKOV Complete Symphonies, Volume Three

---

1	<b>Concert Piece for Orchestra</b> (1985)	<b>12:28</b>
	<b>Symphony No. 4</b> (1997)	<b>50:13</b>
2	I <i>Largo</i>	15:24
3	II <i>Allegro vivace</i>	8:28
4	III <i>Largo</i>	12:12
5	IV <i>Andante</i>	14:09

**Symphony Orchestra of Bulgarian National Radio**  
**Emil Tabakov, conductor**

**TT 62:41**

FIRST RECORDINGS