



Emil TABAKOV

COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME FOUR
CONCERTO FOR DOUBLE BASS AND ORCHESTRA
SYMPHONY NO. 5



Entcho Radoukanov, double bass
Symphony Orchestra of Bulgarian National Radio
Emil Tabakov

EMIL TABAKOV: COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME FOUR

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 has 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 counts 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 and 2017) and an impressive series of solo 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).¹ 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.

Although much in demand as a conductor, Tabakov has continued to compose steadily but, 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

¹ Symphony No. 8 and the *Five Bulgarian Dances* were released on Toccata Classics TOCC 0365, Symphony No. 1 and the Viola Concerto on TOCC 0410, and Symphony No. 4 and the *Concert Piece for Orchestra* on TOCC 0467.

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 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. His Concerto for Marimba, Vibraphone, Tapan (Bulgarian traditional drum) and Chamber Orchestra, which was written in 2015, was first performed on 29 November 2017 in Gabrovo, in central-northern Bulgaria, with Miroslav Dimov as soloist and the Gabrovo Chamber Orchestra under the composer’s baton. 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 summer 2018 he completed a concerto for an orchestra of double basses (with a version for a quartet of double basses). His Tenth Symphony was premiered on 14 March 2019 in Sofia by the Sofia Philharmonic conducted by the composer.

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.

Concerto for Double Bass and Orchestra (1975)

Composed in 1974–75, Tabakov’s Double-Bass Concerto was his diploma work, undertaken in order to graduate from the Bulgarian Conservatoire as a composer. The piece is dedicated to Professor Todor Toshev, who was Tabakov’s double-bass teacher at

the State Academy of Music. The premiere of the work took place in Sofia, soon after it was completed, as part of the ‘New Bulgarian Music’ programming strand of the festival Sofia Music Weeks. The soloist was Entcho Radoukanov, with the Symphony Orchestra of Bulgarian National Radio conducted by Kamen Goleminov. Following this successful first performance, the Concerto was played several times in various other countries, including Finland, Japan, Mexico, Portugal and, most recently, in Skopje on 12 October 2018 with soloist Georgi Cincievski and the Macedonian Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by the composer. According to the composer, there are no conscious influences on the piece, apart from the spirit of Bulgarian folk-music.² The Concerto is scored for a modestly sized orchestra of two flutes (the second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, trombone, percussion (tom-toms, bongos, side drum, cymbals), piano and strings.

The opening *Allegro* [1] begins with the double bass setting out the material (including two notes a semitone apart and a repeated-note pattern) from which the rest of the movement, and the entire work, is built. The busy solo line is punctuated, initially, by the lower strings. As the movement unfolds, Tabakov introduces contrasting sonorities: for example, playing the double bass off against shrieking upper woodwind, especially the clarinet in its highest register, which at one point suggests klezmer music. Rhythmic elements in the soloist’s material are both underlined and countered by explosive interjections from percussion and piano. The first violins have a particularly close affinity with the solo line, whether doubling it, filling it out or developing it. In this compact and inventively scored opening movement Tabakov is not concerned with creating a bravura vehicle for the solo instrument, though his writing certainly contains challenging elements, but rather in constructing a symphonic structure with the solo bass as the protagonist – a first among equals, an individual struggling together with, rather than against, the masses.

Offering a brief respite from the constant activity of the first movement, the central *Lento* [2] is an ominous nocturnal landscape, with lonely bird-calls echoing over desolate

² E-mail to the author, dated 2 February 2019.

and sparse textures. At first, the solo line is imbued with the flavour of a viola da gamba with an archaic, vibrato-less line in high register. The intensity of the previous movement is maintained by an almost fanatical concentration on the tiniest of motifs – two notes a semitone apart. These two notes, taken from the bird-calls, come to dominate the movement, whether appearing one after the other or in the jarring form of a dissonant chord. The two notes feature prominently in the extended central cadenza and form the basis of the soloist's contributions in an austere, uneasy coda.

Marked *Vivace*, the finale [3] takes up rhythmic, harmonic and melodic elements of the previous two movements. The writing for double bass consists mainly of rapid and skittering *spiccato* semiquavers, picking up on the repeated-note motif from earlier in the work. In the central section, jazz elements are heard briefly in the form of syncopated rhythms. All the principal material of the Concerto appears in a powerful episode for full orchestra before the decisive and emphatic concluding gesture.

The three movements of Tabakov's Double-Bass Concerto may be said to follow the design memorably described by Joseph Horowitz as favouring the listener 'first in the head, then in the heart, and finally in the toes'.³ Thus the opening *Allegro* is expository in nature, setting forth the principal ideas; the central *Lento* is the emotional conscience of the piece, perhaps reflecting on the deleterious, even devastating, effect of all the frantic activity elsewhere in the score, and the cathartic finale brings out the dance-like properties of the material.

Tabakov's approach to the solo instrument has authority and imagination, benefiting no doubt from his studies at the Bulgarian State Academy of Music and his previous experience writing for the double bass in chamber and instrumental music. Although Tabakov has fashioned a *concertante* piece rooted in the character of the solo instrument, his exploration of its expressive possibilities often has striking and unexpected results, such as the eerily still, high tessitura in the central movement and the bravura, scrubbing repeated notes of the finale.

The essence of Tabakov's compositional method and style is already present in this comparatively early work: a predilection for constructing substantial movements of

³ Booklet notes to *Joseph Horowitz: Music for Brass Band* (Polyphonic DPRL 901D).

symphonic stature from tiny cells or motifs; the capacity to maintain a consistent tone throughout a piece, however disparate its constituent elements, and a determination to develop the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic aspects of the material rigorously and comprehensively – all these essential components of the composer's creative arsenal are to be found in this fresh and invigorating score. Written at the start of Tabakov's compositional odyssey, this tough and compact concerto shares the same stylistic effects and creative concerns as his later works, here presented in a raw and often visceral manner. Lacking the last degree of polish and refinement of his later scores, the Double-Bass Concerto is all the more exciting and directly communicative for its unvarnished immediacy and concentrated energy.

Symphony No. 5 (2000)

Tabakov's Fifth Symphony was written in 1998–2000 and premiered in Bulgaria Hall, Sofia, on 28 September 2000 with the Sofia, Philharmonic conducted by the composer. It was also played in March 2004 with the Bilkent Symphony Orchestra, Ankara, again under the direction of the composer. It is scored for a large orchestra consisting of two piccolos (second doubling third flute), two flutes, four oboes, two clarinets in B, two clarinets in E flat, three bassoons, contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets (first doubling piccolo trumpet), four trombones, tuba, two timpani, percussion (side drum, tenor drum, tamburo bulgaro (tapan), cymbals, hi-hat cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, bells, gongs *ad lib.*), vibraphone, marimba, synthesiser (organ *ad lib.*) and strings. Although there are no direct quotations from any existing sources in the score, the third movement does contain several reminders of Bulgarian folk-music and dance-rhythms, and Tabakov even employs a typical Bulgarian instrument, the tamburo bulgaro, or tapan, in the percussion section.⁴

The opening movement, *Spirituoso* [4], provides a good example of Tabakov's preoccupation with long-term planning in his symphonic thinking. Brass fanfares announce one of the main ideas, brutal and short. It is followed immediately by another key idea, an extended and impassioned theme introduced by upper strings and

⁴ E-mail to the author, dated 2 February 2019.

reiterated by the full orchestra. With the later addition of an important falling motif as counterpoint to the string theme, the rest of the symphony consists of a rigorous working out of the rhythmic, harmonic and melodic implications of all these basic materials. After the explosive expository section, in place of a conventional development section there is a massive crescendo which begins quietly on the strings with gurgling woodwind interjections. Almost imperceptibly and displaying an impressive control of the orchestral forces, the music gradually accumulates strength and weight until the final section offers a towering reiteration of the initial material. In every bar the movement is evolving, increasing in intensity and moving inexorably towards the merciless tolling of its final climax, after which supplicatory strings give out the devotional secondary theme. The opening material returns, forthright as ever, but the final bars are inconclusive, indicating that the main argument is yet to be resolved.

The *Largo* slow movement [5] begins magically with vibraphone and marimba and continues in hushed and contemplative mood. The expressive and lyrical aspects of the main ideas of the work are explored, though not to the exclusion of several more impassioned episodes. Tolling bells introduce an overtly religious element and the opening vibraphone and marimba return briefly. Florid upper woodwind arabesques introduce a more densely scored section reminiscent of the powerful passages for full orchestra in the opening movement. The *Largo* ends plaintively and economically, with an expressive cor anglais solo and bells tolling over rustling strings.

Marked *Allegro moderato*, the third movement [6] is an ironic march reminiscent of Mahler and Shostakovich. Tabakov creates terrifyingly barbaric passages from the breezy opening idea. After horror accumulates upon horror, massive timpani strokes gradually usher in the opening insouciant march, the folk-like qualities of which now take on a sinister hue in the light of preceding developments.

The finale, *Andante* [7], is another obsessive movement. It is dominated by a driving, two-note rhythmic motif. The main theme from the first movement is also in attendance and a massive crescendo soon ensues. All the motifs from the previous movements are called to arms in a monumental final *tutti* capped with grinding dissonances. The work

does not so much conclude as stop in its tracks, leaving the listener to contemplate the ramifications of such an abrupt halt to this musical juggernaut.

After the bleakness of Tabakov's Fourth Symphony (1997), the Fifth is more defiant, with a sense of a relentless struggle against massive and oppressive forces. If this description appears to indicate a traditional darkness-to-light trajectory, crowned by victory, the reality is more complex. Ultimately, there is an ambiguity to this score so that, for all its savage power and dynamism, it remains almost monstrously elusive and unknowable.

Paul Conway is a freelance writer specialising in twentieth-century and contemporary British music. He has reviewed regularly for The Independent, Tempo and Musical Opinion, 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.

Entcho Radoukanov was born in 1946 in the town of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria. At the age of seven, he started playing the violin, which ensured his acceptance into the Dobri Khristov Music Academy in the city of Varna in 1960; it was there that he switched instruments, taking up the double bass. The following years at the Academy were intensive, resulting in his winning the first prize for double bass at a national competition for young musicians in 1964. Later the same year, he performed his first solo concert with piano accompaniment.

Following his entry into the Music Conservatoire in Sofia in autumn 1967, in the class of Todor Toshev, he began to enjoy a period of professional success as bassist, winning first prize in a national competition for singers and instrumentalists in May 1969 and, four months later, second prize for double bass at the Concours de Genève (no first prize was awarded that year). In 1978 he won third prize at the International Double-Bass Competition 'The Great Double-Bass Race' on the Isle of Man. During this period, he performed over 80 concerts and recitals throughout Bulgaria, made numerous TV appearances and several studio recordings for the Bulgarian National Radio. On those occasions



he recorded Emil Tabakov's Double-bass Concerto, as well as his *Motivy* for solo double bass. In 1980 he recorded his first LP, *Virtuoso Double-Bass Concertos*, with music by Vivaldi, Bottesini and Dittersdorf.

Entcho Radoukanov has performed as soloist with orchestras in the former Czechoslovakia and in Germany, and in autumn 1981 he was offered the position of Principal Double Bass in the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, where he remained until his retirement in 2012. During his years with the Orchestra, he gave many concerts and recitals, as well as recording many pieces for Swedish Radio and making three CDs for the Bluebell label, one of double-bass solos with Ingrid Lindgren, piano (ABCD 018; 1988), with works by Bottesini, Eccles, van Goens, Haydn, Karamdimchev, Serventi and Shostakovich; another of concertos by Dittersdorf, Koussevitzky and Vanhal with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra (ABCD 067; 1996); and a third, this time with Stefan Lindgren, piano (ABCD 081; 1991), featuring his own transcriptions of pieces originally for violin and cello by Aulin, Franço ur, Mozart/Kreisler, Stenhammar and Alexander Vladigerov.

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 ensemble began under the major Bulgarian conductor Vassil Stefanov (1913–91), who took up his position in 1954 and worked with the Orchestra for over thirty years, during which time the SOBNR turned into one of the leading cultural institutions of Bulgaria. Further contributions to its artistic growth 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 first by Rossen Gergov and now by Mark Kadin.

The SOBNR has toured extensively in Bulgaria and abroad. Making recordings is among its main activities. Besides those for the sound archive of Bulgarian National Radio, the Orchestra has made recordings for many international labels. This album marks its fourth appearance on Toccata Classics, the first being in a recording of Emil Tabakov's Eighth Symphony and *Five Bulgarian Dances* (TOCC 0365), the second in the First Symphony and Viola Concerto (TOCC 0410) and the third in the Fourth Symphony and *Concert Piece for Orchestra* (TOCC 0467).



Recorded on 28 December 1982 at Bulgarian National Radio (Double-Bass Concerto)
and on 5–8 December 2011 in Bulgaria Hall, Sofia (Symphony No. 5)

Recording engineers: Stefan Vladkov (Double-Bass Concerto) and Sava Lavsov
(Symphony No. 5)

Editors: Nikola Mirchev (Double-Bass Concerto) and Valentin Ivanov (Symphony No. 5)

Producers: Lili Topalova (Double-Bass Concerto) and Vladimir Hristozov (Symphony No. 5)

Booklet text: Paul Conway

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

Typesetting and lay-out: KerryPress, St Albans

Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

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EMIL TABAKOV Complete Symphonies, Volume Four

Concerto for Double Bass and Orchestra (1975)

① I <i>Allegro</i>	20:42
② II <i>Lento</i>	6:54
③ III <i>Vivace</i>	6:53
	6:55

Symphony No. 5 (2000)

④ I <i>Spiritoso</i>	54:00
⑤ II <i>Largo</i>	17:51
⑥ III <i>Allegro moderato</i>	9:44
⑦ IV <i>Finale: Andante</i>	10:25
	16:00

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