



Emil TABAKOV

COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME SIX
SYMPHONY NO. 7



Symphony Orchestra of Bulgarian National Radio
Emil Tabakov

FIRST RECORDING

EMIL TABAKOV: COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME SIX

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, Macedonia, Russia 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.

From his earliest years as a creative artist, Tabakov has been drawn towards the big symphonic forms, and he counts Shostakovich, Brahms, Skryabin and Richard

Strauss among his foremost influences. His output is dominated by two time-honoured orchestral genres. He has written eleven symphonies (1982, 1984, 1988, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2009, 2015, 2017 and 2020) and an impressive series of solo concertos, for double bass (1975), percussion (1977), two flutes (2000), piano (2003), cello (2006), viola (2007) and violin (2019), 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 enriched musical language which resulted 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 this 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 characteristically broad range of genres. In 2016 he completed an *Adagio* for string orchestra, commissioned

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, Symphony No. 4 and the *Concert Piece for Orchestra* on TOCC 0467, Symphony No. 5 and the Concerto for Double Bass and Orchestra on TOCC 0530, and Symphonies Nos. 2 and 6 on TOCC 0562.

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, a *Caprice* for solo double bass, was commissioned for the 2018 Spenger Competition in Germany. His *Concerto for Marimba, Vibraphone, Tapan and Chamber Orchestra* (the tapan is a Bulgarian traditional drum), which was written in 2015, was first performed on 29 November 2017 in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, with Miroslav Dimov as soloist, and the Gabrovo Chamber Orchestra under the baton of the composer. On 16 March 2018, at the opening concert of the 2018 ‘March Music Days’ International Music Festival in Ruse, Tabakov conducted the world premiere of his Ninth Symphony with the Sofia Philharmonic. In summer 2018 he wrote a concerto for an orchestra of double basses (there is also a version for a quartet of double basses). His Tenth Symphony was premiered on 14 March 2019 in Sofia, with the Sofia Philharmonic conducted by the composer. Completed in the autumn of 2020, his most recent works are an Eleventh Symphony and a piece for two double basses, written at the request of Rick Stotijn.

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. 7 (2004)

Completed in 2004, Tabakov’s Seventh Symphony was premiered the following year in Ankara by the Bilkent Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the composer. The work is dedicated to Professor İhsan Doğramacı, who established the Bilkent Symphony

Orchestra, the first private, international and academic artistic ensemble in Turkey. A large orchestra is required, consisting of piccolo, two flutes, three oboes (the third doubling cor anglais), two clarinets, bass clarinet (doubling piccolo clarinet), two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, two trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, tenor drum, bass drum, tam-tam, cymbals and vibraphone) and strings. There are four substantial movements, all of which explore the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic implications of several important motifs introduced in their opening bars.

Without preamble, the opening *Allegro moderato* [1] presents the main ingredients which fuel the rest of the movement. Insistent reiterations of a fanfare-like, rhythmic motif on brass are juxtaposed with an equally decisive theme for lower woodwind in counterpoint with an important upper woodwind three-note motif rounded off with a flourish. Contrast is provided by a passage for strings alone; though hushed, this episode is charged with a baleful, unquiet expectancy. After a brief outburst from the main motifs, a pile-up of muted solo upper-string chords provides an underlay for a vertiginous statement on piccolo of the fanfare motif, now resembling an urgent birdcall. Tabakov then develops all these ideas rigorously, often pitting one theme against another and at other times combining them in strenuous counterpoint. After such a wide-ranging and substantial development section, the recapitulation is shrewdly telescoped and builds to a powerful climax. In its aftermath, flute and strings revisit the central ideas of the movement in a detached, numbed fashion, as if viewing in painful disbelief something once familiar but now lying in ruins after a brutal conflict. This steely, closely argued movement dies away to nothing.

Although the ethereal ending of the first movement might suggest that it is preparing the way for a gentle, reflective successor, such thoughts are swiftly dispelled by the forceful intensity of the initial gestures of the *Largo* slow movement [2]. Over imperious timpani roulades and implacable bass-drum strokes, the strings unleash an intensely expressive theme, featuring sighing two-note phrases and rounded off by a grand flourish answered by chattering trumpet and upper woodwind over grindingly dissonant brass chords. After several restatements of this material, the strings give

out a theme consisting of falling three-note figures, which feels like a new idea but is actually spawned from the chattering demisemiquavers of the trumpet and woodwind. From these simple building-blocks, Tabakov constructs a taut and imposing symphonic movement that unfolds with the force of nature. At the still centre of the movement lies a hushed passage with pared-back textures featuring sustained upper woodwind chords and a soft statement from solo cello, like a human voice sounding in the wilderness. The forceful main material soon holds sway, its relentless sequences seemingly recharged. Eventually the juggernaut moves on and a couple of tam-tam strokes usher in a desolate coda for held string-harmonic chords and hollow babbling from the piccolo, all passion spent.

The *Largo* has the ineluctable tread of a funeral procession; the following movement, ♩ = 72 [3], is inspired by a more energetic form of ritual. It has the dance-like character of a traditional scherzo, but the pounding rhythms are those of a mass gathering rather than a graceful duet. Intimacy is admitted into the movement in the central portion with an atmospheric use of vibraphone and string solos. The principal idea in this lightly scored interlude is derived from a figure accompanying the main material, so that there is a lurking suspicion that this utopian vision is more of a respite than a destination. Sure enough, the components of the chief dancing theme soon begin to re-assemble and the main scherzo material is repeated, though not verbatim and in shortened form. There is a brief reminiscence of the central idyll before the trenchant dance-rhythms gather pace for one last hurrah. The boundless energy of this scherzo has the self-sufficiency of a *moto perpetuo* and this feeling is intensified by the abrupt termination of the movement: but for this summary curtailment, one feels Tabakov's unflagging dance of life might have carried on indefinitely.

The finale [4] begins with an extended slow introduction, marked *Largo*, which sets out some of the key constituents of the ensuing main *Allegro* section. These elements include an expressive rising figure, first heard on woodwind and then taken up by the strings; an insistent repeated-note, rhythmic figure in the brass; and two falling figures that would seem to be derived from the opening of the 'Dies irae' plainchant – although,

intriguingly, Tabakov has stated² that he was not consciously alluding to the plainchant in his music. When the *Allegro* section begins, the brass give out a sinister new idea, consisting of a rising, three-note chromatic figure and its inversion. This cramped, airless motif dominates the movement, creating a sense of confinement. In the closing pages, solo violin and vibraphone conjure up a nostalgic reminiscence of the idyllic central section of the third movement, but this precious memory is short-lived and the symphony ends with an emphatic restatement of the angular, oppressively symmetrical principal motif.

Emil Tabakov's Seventh Symphony is one of his darkest scores. The use of such instruments as cor anglais, bass clarinet, contrabassoon and bass trombone and tuba, together with a predilection for sonorous low strings, gives the work a tenebrous resonance. In addition, the fierce concentration upon the working out of short, pregnant motifs and the composer's steadfast determination not to be sidetracked by incidental pleasures along the way generates considerable intensity and an inexorable momentum. Every bar is driven by the power of conviction. Perhaps with this forceful, adamant piece Tabakov can relate to a comment made by Ralph Vaughan Williams at a rehearsal of his own Fourth Symphony (1934), 'I don't know if I like it, but it's what I meant'.³

Paul Conway is a freelance writer specialising in twentieth-century and contemporary British music. He has reviewed frequently 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.

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),

² E-mail to Martin Anderson, dated 17 December 2020.

³ Quoted in Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 2nd edn., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 246.

who took up his position in 1954 and worked with the Orchestra for over thirty years, during which time the SOBNR developed 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 sixth 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), the third in the Fourth Symphony and *Concert Piece for Orchestra* (TOCC 0467), the fourth in the Fifth Symphony and Concerto for Double Bass and Orchestra (TOCC 0530) and the fifth in the Second and Sixth Symphonies (TOCC 0562).



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EMIL TABAKOV Complete Symphonies, Volume Six

Symphony No. 7 (2004)

① I *Allegro moderato*

② II *Largo*

③ III ♩ = 72

④ IV *Largo – Allegro*

60:54

18:29

12:00

13:23

17:00

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