Emil TABAKOV

COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME SEVEN

CONCERTO FOR FIFTEEN STRING INSTRUMENTS

SYMPHONY NO. 9

Sofia Soloists Chamber Ensemble
Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra
Emil Tabakov

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDING
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. During this time (1994–99) he was also 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 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). 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, resulting in an enriched musical language that is notable for its pictorial vividness, incisiveness and economy of means.


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:

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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, Symphonies Nos. 2 and 6 on TOCC 0562 and Symphony No. 7 on TOCC 0597.
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 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 Sperger 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 Tabakov’s baton. 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 by the Sofia Philharmonic, conducted by the composer. Among his most recent works are an Eleventh Symphony and a single-movement work, as yet untitled, for 26 stringed instruments.

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 Fifteen String Instruments**

In 1979 Tabakov was appointed artistic director and conductor of the Sofia Soloists Chamber Ensemble. In the summer of that year, he wrote his *Concerto for Fifteen String Instruments* for the Ensemble, which premiered it on 2 February 1980 in the
‘Bulgaria’ Concert Hall in Sofia, under the direction of the composer. They performed the Concerto many times, in concerts throughout Bulgaria and on tour in Europe, Asia and the United States. The piece is scored for five first violins, four second violins, three violas, two cellos and one double bass. The three movements adhere to a traditional fast–slow–fast pattern.

Without preamble, the first movement (which has no suggested tempo but bears an indication of \( \dot{\text{j}} = 96–92 \)) \(^1\) introduces three main motivic elements, all of which proceed in stepwise motion. These ideas consist of an ornamental turn-like, declamatory, four-note gesture, appearing simultaneously with its inversion; a hectic, upward-rushing scalic figure, and a hushed, sustained, arch-like sequence, introduced solemnly by lower strings, bowing on the fingerboard. All three motifs are repeated several times in the opening section, as if to lodge these creative building blocks firmly in the listener’s memory, and the rest of the movement rigorously explores their melodic, rhythmic and harmonic potential. As the music unfolds, the third motif emerges as the most significant component in the overall design of the movement. In the closing bars, it is presented sonorously on upper strings, before being deconstructed, while the lower strings growl the turn-like figure and eventually shudder the music into silence.

From that still, soundless state, the slow movement (\( \dot{\text{j}} = 63 \)) \(^2\) falteringly comes into being. Eerie chords of harmonics on lower strings establish a mood of desolation and dislocation, which the muted, chattering violins do nothing to dispel. Convulsive tremolos, haunted, flute-like phrases and obsessive, repeated-note figures maintain an oppressive, claustrophobic atmosphere as fragments of the principal subjects of the previous movement are half-remembered. Eventually, the upward moving scalic figure provokes a climactic, expressive unison statement, after which the movement dies away, disappearing into the bleak, isolated region from which it came.

Although the first two movements are given only metronome markings as tempo indications, the spirited finale (\( \dot{\text{j}} = 108–112 \)) \(^3\) is marked Presto. This vigorous movement picks up thematic threads from the previous two. The arch-like sequence which dominated the opening movement also comes to the fore towards the close of the finale. In the sparsely textured concluding bars, a chilly chord of upper-string harmonics
brings a reminder of the solitude of the slow movement, and the work ends equivocally and without resolution.

The title *Concerto for Fifteen String Instruments* is aptly chosen. Tabakov varies the texture assiduously throughout the score, treating each individual player as a soloist. For example, he divides the first violins into five separate strands when delicate wisps of sound are required, whereas at other, more critical, junctures he requires them to declaim in expressive unison. His capacity to construct logical and convincing statements from reiterated gestures and short motifs in varied form, his scrupulous attention to dynamics and timbre and his fruitful deployment of striking contrasts were all strong indications, even now, that he was a born symphonist. In this comparatively early work, which pre-dates Tabakov’s imposing cycle, the quintessence of his symphonic thinking may be discerned.

**Symphony No. 9 (2015)**

Emil Tabakov completed his Ninth Symphony in 2015, having worked on it for three years.\(^2\) A little over 50 minutes in length, it was first performed on 16 March 2018 at the opening concert of the 2018 ‘March Music Days’ International Music Festival in Ruse by the Sofia Philharmonic, conducted by the composer. The score bears no dedication, the work having sprung from an inner impulse to write another large-scale symphonic statement. There are several notable instrumental effects, not least in the inventive writing for strings, and the composer has acknowledged that in this symphony he wanted to explore as far as possible the expressive potential of his orchestral forces.\(^3\) He has also confirmed that, despite the colourful and evocative ideas contained within its pages, the symphony contains no programmatic content or extra-musical ideas, ‘just sounds and feelings’ coming from within the composer himself.\(^4\)

A large orchestra is required: piccolo, two flutes, three oboes, three clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani,

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\(^2\) According to the score, the movements were completed in chronological order, the first on 4 September 2012, the second on 4 September 2013, the third on 7 August 2014 and the fourth on 15 January 2015.

\(^3\) E-mail to the author, dated 17 November 2021.

percussion (snare drum, bass drum, tam-tam, three tom-toms, whip, bell, temple block and vibraphone) and strings. Interestingly, in this score Tabakov dispenses with particular wind instruments at the lower end of the orchestral spectrum which featured in his earlier symphonies: cor anglais, bass clarinet and bass trombone. That is not to say that the Ninth conspicuously avoids the darker regions of his musical forces, but rather to observe that in this work he chooses to create those sounds with the use of other instruments, notably tuba and lower strings. Following a precedent set by several of the previous six symphonies, the work adheres to the customary four-movement structure. Unusually, the Ninth consists of three slow movements and one fast movement, though the last of the slow movements contains extended quicker episodes. Each substantial movement explores the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic implications of several important motifs introduced in its opening bars.

Without preamble, the Adagio first movement presents the basic material which will fuel the rest of the symphony. The important opening theme stated by the first violins contains the key intervals of a minor sixth, a minor second and a perfect fifth which underpin the ideas presented in each of the four movements. This intense principal theme is subjected to a number of rhythmic, harmonic and melodic transformations throughout the course of the movement. Contrast is provided by a series of rapid, ascending flourishes first heard in the upper woodwind. In spite of constant reshaping and adaptation, the main material remains of primal importance to the narrative of the opening movement and dominates the musical argument, even in the closing bars when it is transformed into an eloquent supplicatory solo for muted first violin in high register, vaulted over hushed, undulating strings.

The second movement, marked Presto, is a fast and furious scherzo. Primordial, rasping brass fanfares sound like a portentous call to arms, and they are answered by swarming semiquavers in woodwind and strings. These teeming, insect-like figures are equally unsettling, whether ascending or descending at each summons by the brass. Tabakov cranks up the tension during the movement with a battery of terrifying ostinati that inflict the sort of tenacious, merciless pounding encountered in a James Bernard Hammer horror film score. Relief at last comes in the form of a distant chiming bell,
which assumes an almost religious significance as counterpoise to the demonic activity elsewhere in the musical drama. It is with this fragile symbol of hope that the movement ends.

The Largo third movement has an airy, weightless quality, achieved by spare and transparent scoring. After the visceral scherzo, this music is predominantly calm and introspective, allowing the listener time to digest what has happened so far and providing an opportunity to refresh and regroup. Inflected by chirruping piccolo birdcalls, the melodic line first heard on oboe recalls the theme heard in the opening bars of the symphony, recollected in tranquillity and in the light of all that has occurred since then. A feeling of nostalgia infuses the movement, which is threatened at various points by timpani and tom-tom strokes, all the more sinister and insidious for being played softly. An attempt to disrupt the tranquil mood is soon dispelled, and the movement ends with an extended duet for vibraphone and first violin, a pairing as magical and soothing in effect as the chiming bell which rounded off the previous movement.

The finale begins with an expansive slow passage marked Largo, as the violins give out an impassioned, highly expressive theme. Disruptive elements encountered previously in the symphony, such as swirling woodwind and hammering timpani and tom-toms, gradually halt the progress of the string theme, and the music is transformed into a driving Allegro moderato. At length, the material of the opening Largo section tries to reassert itself, but the tapping timpani and woodwind flurries ensure the Allegro moderato pulse is swiftly re-established. A violent climax is topped off by fierce hammer-blows on timpani and tom-toms, and the Largo pulse returns. The searing strings give out their heartfelt theme more fervently than ever as the movement ends, not in triumph or decisive resolution but with a wrenching expediency, as timpani and tom-toms intrude upon the ambivalent closing bars.

Emil Tabakov’s Ninth Symphony is one of his most personal musical statements. In spite of the presence in the narrative of imposing passages for full orchestra, there is an intimacy about the scoring, underlined by the number of important solos for various instruments, especially in the first three movements. As in his other symphonic works,
these eloquent soliloquies seem to represent the expressive, dignified voice of humanity amidst the turmoil of the angry mob, as conjured up by the massed orchestral forces.

Also of note is Tabakov’s imaginative approach to his instrumental palette. There is a whiff of sulphur about the tenebrous trombones and tuba in their lowest registers before the final climax of the first movement; and the vibraphone brings warmth, as well as otherworldliness, to the third movement. The inventive string-writing is clearly demonstrated in the subtle but highly effective use of divided strings throughout the third movement. Yet it is perhaps most powerfully evident in the intricate and extensive deployment of harmonics in the opening *Adagio*, which contributes in no small measure towards creating in that movement moments of vulnerability and a fragile, confessional immediacy.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Ninth Symphony is its almost obsessive use of ostinati. These repeated rhythmic figures often assume gigantic proportions and have the spontaneity of aleatoric passages. As is Tabakov’s wont, however, each repetition is written out in full throughout the score. Nothing is left to chance, no matter how improvisatory the effect. Thus, the composer remains, as ever, in total control of his material, though arguably the Ninth impresses most in its eagerness to question and to subvert the symphonic achievements and certainties established in his previous essays in the genre.

*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, Robert Simpson and José Serebrier.*
The **Sofia Soloists Chamber Ensemble** is one of the oldest such groups in Europe. The orchestra was established in 1962 by a group of young musicians from the Sofia Opera. Its first concert in March 1962, conducted by Mihail Angelov, attracted the immediate interest and sympathy of the Sofia audience. Soon afterwards it began touring abroad. Three conductors have played an important part in the development of the group and in the creation of its very special sound: Vassil Kazandjiev (1964–78), Emil Tabakov (1979–88) and the current conductor Plamen Djouroff, who has directed the orchestra since 1988. These long musical relationships have been a significant factor in its growth.

In those 60 years the Sofia Soloists Chamber Ensemble has performed over 3,000 concerts all over the world. It began by delighting audiences at major festivals in Germany and France, and today is popular at many other European festivals, such as San Sebastian and Santander (Spain), Zagreb and Dubrovnik (Croatia), Città di Castello (Italy), Louvain (Belgium) and Bergen (Norway). The ensemble has toured many other countries, mainly in Europe, but also the United States, which has been visited ten times; and there have been three tours of South America, fourteen of Japan, seven of Korea and others of Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. It has performed in many prestigious venues: Carnegie Hall in New York, the Royal Albert Hall and the Barbican in London, the Leipzig Gewandhaus, the Herkulessaal in Munich, the Salle Gaveau in Paris, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Palau de la Musica in Barcelona, the Seoul Art Centre, the Sydney Opera House and, in Japan, the Suntory Hall and Bunkakaikan and Art Space Centre in Tokyo, as well as the Osaka Symphony Hall.

In 2011 the Sofia Soloists performed for the first time in the Middle East, when the ensemble had the honour of opening the most prestigious festival in the region: the Al Bustan Festival in Beirut. It then participated in a festival in Alger.

Among the internationally renowned musicians of the past who have performed with the orchestra are Daniil Shafran, Henryk Szeryng and Nicanor Zabaleta, and in more recent times it has worked with Carlos Barbosa-Lima, Patrick Gallois, Heinz Holliger and Nigel Kennedy, among many others.

The Ensemble has more than 600 works in its repertoire, ranging from Baroque to contemporary music. It has premiered over 100 works, some of them written especially for it. The discography comprises over 60 albums, published by Centaur, Columbia, Denon, Decca, Gega New, Harmonia Mundi, Saba, Sony Classical-BMG and Victor, among others. This is the first time the group has appeared on Toccata Classics.
Founded in 1928, and one of Bulgaria’s top orchestral ensembles, the **Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra** has long established itself as one of the leading institutions in Bulgarian musical life, representative of the overall contemporary musical culture of the country. Its organiser and first conductor was the violinist and educator Sasha Popov. Initially called the Academic Symphony Orchestra, it was renamed the Tsar’s Military Symphony Orchestra (Bulgaria had a Tsar until 1946), the National Philharmonic Orchestra and, finally, in 1949, the Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra. That name refers both to an orchestra, also still known as the National Philharmonic Orchestra, and to a group of associated ensembles, including the National Philharmonic Choir, the Sofia and Quarto Quartets and the Bella Voce and Impresia small vocal ensembles. All these groups perform at the Bulgaria Concert Complex in Sofia, which includes concert-halls of various sizes, as well as an art gallery.

Recent conductors of the Sofia Philharmonic have included Martin Panteleev (beginning in 2011) and Nayden Todorov (beginning in 2017). Throughout its history, the Orchestra has worked with eminent conductors, such as Hermann Abendroth, Charles Dutoit, Valery Gergiev, Sir Neville Marriner, Kurt Masur, Gennady Rozhdestvensky and Bruno Walter. The soloists who have performed with the orchestra include Paul Badura-Skoda, Elena Bashkirova, Joshua Bell, José Carreras, Sarah Chang, Ghena Dimitrova, Plácido Domingo, Angela Gheorghiu, Emil Gilels, Thomas Hampson, Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Shlomo Mintz, David Oistrakh, Vadim Repin, Sviatoslav Richter, Mstislav Rostropovich, Dmitry Shostakovich, Maxim Vengerov, Alexis Weissenberg, Sonya Yoncheva and Tabea Zimmermann. In recent years the Sofia Philharmonic has extended its reach under its music director, Nayden Todorov, making well-received international tours, performing at the prestigious Musikverein in Vienna and touring throughout Europe and the USA. The Orchestra has also become known for its collaborations with popular musicians: it has accompanied, among others, Sting and Robin Gibb, as well as performing in ‘Star Wars: A New Hope’, a concert tour of China organised by Disney Studios.

The Sofia Philharmonic has recorded for various Bulgarian labels and for the Austrian label Capriccio. In the 2010s, it recorded for Red Bus Classical and Timpani, moving to Naxos in 2020 for a recording of the Johann Strauss II operetta *Blindekuh*. This is its first appearance on Toccata Classics.

The Orchestra has received many prestigious accolades, including Musician of the Year, awarded through the contest run by the radio programme ‘Allegro Vivace’, hosted on the Horizont channel on Bulgarian National Radio, the Golden Lyre and Crystal Lyre awarded by the Union of Bulgarian Musicians and Dancers and Classic FM Radio, the Honorary Sign of Sofia and the Honorary Sign of the President of Bulgaria.
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EMIL TABAKOV Complete Symphonies, Volume Seven

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3 III Presto \( \text{j} = 108–112 \) 5:40

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Emil Tabakov, conductor

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