

# Emil TABAKOV

COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME EIGHT  
ADAGIO FOR STRING ORCHESTRA  
SYMPHONY NO. 10

Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra  
Emil Tabakov

FIRST RECORDINGS

# EMIL TABAKOV: COMPLETE SYMPHONIES, VOLUME EIGHT

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 own *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 other orchestras, he has performed all over the world, enjoying particularly close associations with ensembles 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).<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 enriched musical language that emerged 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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, Symphony No. 7 on TOCC 0597 and the *Concerto for Fifteen String Instruments* and Symphony No. 9 on TOCC 0636.

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 *Vocalise* for solo viola and mixed choir 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 the baton of the composer. In summer 2018 he wrote a concerto for an orchestra of double-basses (there is also a version for a quartet of double-basses). In 2022 he wrote a two-act ballet, *Caliope*. His Eleventh Symphony was premiered on 13 March 2025 in Bulgaria Hall, Sofia, by the Sofia Philharmonic conducted by the composer.

In all his pieces, whether for full symphony orchestra or chamber groups, Tabakov is punctilious in matters of dynamics, timbre and thematic development. Most of his symphonic movements are assembled from a number of 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.

### ***Adagio for String Orchestra (2016)***

Emil Tabakov has remarked that 'the string orchestra has great possibilities. Unlike wind instruments, it allows for more interesting technical means to be used';<sup>2</sup> he has written

<sup>2</sup> Sofia Philharmonic website: <https://sofiaphilharmonic.com/en/works/emil-tabakov-adagio-for-string-orchestra/>.

for strings throughout his creative life. He completed the score of his *Adagio for String Orchestra* on 17 July 2016, in the village of Banya, where he usually writes his music in the summer months. It was commissioned by Martin Anderson, who runs Toccata Classics, in memory of his partner, Yodit Tekle, as one of a number of works, all for string orchestra, that he elicited from composer friends for a recording project called 'Music for My Love'. The second and third albums of this project were recorded in Ukraine before, first, the Covid lockdowns and then the war put everything on hold. The premiere of Tabakov's *Adagio* therefore took place on 1 March 2019 in Varna, North Bulgaria, with the Orchestra of Varna State Opera, conducted by the composer. More recently, it was performed on 6 November 2025 in Bulgaria Hall, Sofia, with the Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra, also under the composer's direction.

Spaciously lyrical, the *Adagio* [1] has been described by Tabakov as being 'in tune with'<sup>3</sup> his mood at the time he wrote it. It is based on two principal themes, the first of which is gently reflective and appears at the outset on a muted solo violin, melliflously accompanied by muted, divided solo violas. After this haunting refrain is repeated three times, variously scored, the second main subject, a plain, stepwise tune, appears on unison second violins and is then restated by solo first violin. In the hushed central section, solo instruments present tender rhythmic motifs, initially in quavers and subsequently in semiquavers. A steady *crescendo* ensues, leading to an impassioned, sonorously scored, triple *forte* climax. In the wake of this expressive peak, the main material is revisited once again before divided strings fade away in a resigned close.

An air of wistful melancholy pervades the score, in addition to which, the steady, measured tempo and concentration upon a handful of musical ideas creates a powerful sense of inexorability. The string writing is variegated and inventive throughout, without recourse to any outlandish effects. Even *pizzicato* articulation is dispensed with, a sparing use of chordal harmonics being Tabakov's sole deployment of an extended technique. Such is the ease with which the music brings out the naturally expressive qualities of the

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

featured instruments that it is difficult to imagine their idiomatic material having the same impact if scored for any other ensemble.

### **Symphony No. 10 (2017)**

Emil Tabakov completed his Tenth Symphony in Banya on 31 August 2017. It was first performed on 14 March 2019 by the Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra (which had commissioned the work), conducted by the composer, in Bulgaria Hall, Sofia. These performers played the work again two days later in Ruse at the ‘March Music Days’ International Music Festival.

A large orchestra is required, consisting of piccolo, two flutes, three oboes, cor anglais, three clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, temple blocks, tom-toms, wood blocks, tubular bells, vibraphone, celesta) and strings. As in his earlier symphonies, there are important woodwind solos at key junctures in the narrative, heavy brass carries the main melodic ideas in passages where the whole orchestra is playing at full stretch and a diverse array of percussion ensures the material is colourfully scored. Following a precedent set by some of his earlier contributions to the genre, including the Ninth Symphony, the work adheres to the customary four-movement structure. In the case of the Tenth, a time-honoured layout is respected, with two dramatic, extended movements framing a slow movement and scherzo.

Forgoing a prefatory statement, the *Allegro moderato* first movement [2] gets under way with a powerful unison brass theme. The ensuing tumultuous *tutti* section presents a dense contrapuntal web of musical lines, including an eloquent, ascending theme for trombones and tuba reinforced by low woodwind and low strings, undulating flurries of upper woodwind semiquavers, tenacious side-drum and timpani figures and soaring phrases for piccolo and upper strings, all of which will be explored further as the work unfolds. There follows, without transition, a fragile sounding viola solo, musing upon the expressive, upwardly striving theme from the preceding polyphonic passage. The rest of the movement consists of varied restatements of the opening salvo, juxtaposed with remote sounding, contemplative episodes, featuring small instrumental groups. In

the atmospheric closing section, florid piccolo and tender flute alternate with solemn, distantly tolling tubular bells, which sound a final reminder of the initial brass theme. The distinctive, chiming patterns might seem to invest the concluding bars with a spiritual atmosphere, but, when questioned on this point, Tabakov responded by saying that he had simply written ‘the music which sounds in [his] head’;<sup>4</sup> asserting that there is no attempt here to suggest the bells of some religious establishment.

Marked *Largo*, the second movement [3] is virtually monothematic. Upper woodwind and upper strings recall their soaring phrase from the feat of counterpoint in the previous movement, and the woodwind semiquaver flourishes from the densely layered *tutti* passage in the *Allegro moderato* are also evoked. The high phrase is then elaborated into a chant-like melody, initially on piccolo and subsequently joined by clarinet. Before long, flutes, cor anglais and clarinets play the tune in unison. Then lower strings combine with the full woodwind section in chorus, and finally the whole orchestra unites, giving out the theme, *fortissimo*. In the very still coda, the recurring air is wistfully recalled, firstly on muted solo violin and finally on piccolo. A gradual accumulation of instruments, playing together in unison and in solidarity, gives the music the character of an anthem. When I asked Takabov whether there was any political aspect to this movement, he demurred, responding that ‘the repeated musical theme is purely musical’ and that he has ‘never written any political music’.<sup>5</sup> Yet there is no gainsaying the visceral, communal strength of this *Largo*, which forms the emotional core of the entire work.

The following *Allegro* [4] takes the form of a massive scherzo, contrasting music of textural intricacy with dynamic, full-orchestral onslaughts in which the intimate, stately dance origins of such a movement are supplanted by frenzied revels. As with so much of Tabakov’s music, the opening material contains the seeds of what is to follow. Thematic wisps flit about the strings before a clarinet flourish is decorated by upper woodwind and punctuated by wood blocks. By now it is evident that variants of the undulating flurries in the first-movement initial *tutti* are being pressed into service to lead a swirling, headlong, white-knuckle ride. The portentous brass theme from the opening bars of the

<sup>4</sup> E-mail to the author, 28 November 2025.

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

symphony appears at the climax of the movement, a grim counterpoise to the layers of convulsive, seething lines. In the home stretch, textures thin out and the music dives down to muttering lower strings, over which a solo viola offers a gentle reminder of the upwardly rising subject that permeates the piece.

Announced by the repeated rhythmic figures of the first movement, now transformed into rapid brass fanfares, the *Allegro molto finale* [5] establishes a sense of urgency and scale from the outset. Strings, low woodwind and low brass then give out a striding, long-limbed theme, capped by wailing upper woodwind alarums. The music builds to a formidable climax and in its aftermath, clarinets softly trace the main subject of the movement. These are the disparate building blocks upon which Tabakov constructs the rest of the narrative, featuring increasingly stark dynamic contrasts. There is an arresting moment of buoyant serenity towards the end of the movement, consisting of ascending vibraphone and celesta lines accompanying lofty solo-violin phrases, joined in due course by solo oboe. This idyllic interlude is short-lived, however, as the ubiquitous rhythmic figure, now delivered by timpani, signals the return of the thunderous, rangy main material, which brings the symphony to a vehement conclusion.

Emil Tabakov's Tenth Symphony is replete with his familiar musical fingerprints, including a single-minded focus on thematic cohesion and stark juxtapositions of forceful *tuttis* with desolate solo passages. Such dynamic contrasts are pushed to extremes, however, so that full orchestral episodes have a fearsome intensity and almost tactile density, whereas the eerie, barren starkness of the extended instrumental soliloquies brings a chill of foreboding. Tabakov's previous symphonies were already noteworthy for their intensity of expression – which this uncompromising work notches up yet further, in an unmistakable indication of artistic self-assurance and integrity.

*Paul Conway is a freelance writer specialising in twentieth-century and contemporary British music. He has reviewed for The Independent, Tempo and Musical Opinion and provided programme notes for The Proms and the Edinburgh, Spitalfields and Three Choirs festivals. His book Moorland Symphonies: An Introduction to the Music of Arthur Butterworth was published by Lyrita in 2023.*



Founded in 1928, and one of the top orchestral ensembles in Bulgaria, the **Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra** has long established itself as one of the leading institutions in the musical life of the country, representative of its general musical culture. 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 Pantelev (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, Yuri Bashmet, Joshua Bell, José Carreras, Sarah Chang, Ghena Dimitrova, Plácido Domingo, Angela Gheorghiu, Emil Gilels, Thomas Hampson, Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Schlomo Mintz, David Oistrakh, Vadim Repin, Sviatoslav Richter, Mstislav Rostropovich, Dmitri 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 second appearance on Toccata Classics, the first being a recording of Emil Tabakov's Ninth Symphony (on TOCC 0636).

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.



Live performances, recorded on 14 March 2019 (Symphony No. 10) and on 6 November 2025

(*Adagio*) in Bulgaria Concert Hall, Sofia

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# EMIL TABAKOV Complete Symphonies, Volume Eight

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1 *Adagio for String Orchestra* (2016)

12:42

**Symphony No. 10** (2018)

51:12

2 I *Allegro moderato*

16:33

3 II *Largo*

11:23

4 III *Allegro*

9:26

5 IV *Allegro molto*

14:10

TT 64:17

**Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra**

FIRST RECORDINGS, LIVE

Leaders: Pavel Zlatarov 1 and Kalina Hristova 2–5

**Emil Tabakov, conductor**