

Abbado's supreme naturalness, from Horenstein's thrilling physical intensity to Jochum's noble serenity. Marin Alsop has already proved herself an outstanding interpreter of the American classics, so I was particularly curious to hear how she would handle a work that lies at the very core of the central German tradition. Naxos clearly has every faith in her and has lavished the release with no fewer than three presentations: CD only, SACD with hybrid CD track, and DVD-Audio. Back-to-back comparisons reveal no audible difference between the CD and its hybrid cousin. The warm sound-picture envelops the central movements in a seductively warm glow, although elsewhere a shade more clarity would not have gone amiss (the upbeat first violin *pizzicato* into bar 384 of the first movement, for example, is virtually inaudible at normal listening levels). DVD-Audio clarifies the situation slightly, with a significant increase in weight and atmosphere, although it's the SACD track which sounds the most tangible and tight in its directional focusing.

The volatile landscape of the first movement is immediately signalled by an introduction of the highest intensity which contains all the essential thematic elements to be employed therein. Schoenberg picked up on the formal processes involved by aptly describing the technique as 'developing variation'. Alsop's warmly affectionate overview is evident right from the start.

She lacks nothing in power, but those who rejoice in the visceral timpani strokes encouraged by Klemperer may feel their ardour initially dampened. Yet in some ways it's Alsop who proves the more thematically illuminating. By keeping the music on more of an even keel (first-movement exposition repeat intact) one senses the work evolving organically, the melodic lines expanding, contracting and mutating before one's ears as the music flowingly progresses. Klemperer may activate the goose-flesh on occasion, Jochum the tear ducts, but Alsop is far closer to Abbado in providing an overview so comprehensive that it feels as though she's swallowed the work whole.

The second and third movements inhabit an entirely different world; indeed their relative brevity and melodic grace led Hermann Levi to suggest that they were 'more suitable for a serenade or a suite than a symphony on this scale'. Here again the monumental overview has a tendency to emphasize the intermezzo-like

nature of the inner movements, whereas Alsop's cruising speed ensures that there is still plenty of fuel left in the tank. One senses far more than usual a sense of belonging between the various sections, rather than Brahms's wrestling with the almost impossible situation he had left himself in by employing outer movements of such epic power.

The finale opens with one of the most extended of all symphonic introductions, its sinister, brooding atmosphere ultimately soothed by the calming influence of a solo French horn. Again, those craving the theatricality and raw emotional power of a Horenstein may feel short-changed (the same applies to the coupled *Tragic Overture*), but Alsop's clear-sightedness ensures that the music never overheats too soon. The *Academic Festival Overture* can plod along relentlessly in the wrong hands, but Alsop keeps it moving naturally onwards, ensuring that Brahms's little contrapuntal ingenuities aren't allowed to distort the larger picture. Some may prefer their Brahms rather more imposing, grim and implacable. Yet there is a calm, inner strength to Alsop's readings which is no less satisfying. It will be interesting to see how this cycle develops over the coming months.

Julian Haylock

Brahms

New CD/SACD/DVDA

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68.

Academic Festival Overture, Op. 80.

Tragic Overture, Op. 81.

London Philharmonic Orchestra/Marin Alsop.

Naxos 8.557428/6.110077/5.110077 (super-budget/medium price, 1 hour 13 minutes). Website www.naxos.com. Producer/Engineer Tim Handley. Dates January 18th and 19th, 2004.

Comparisons:

BPO/Abbado (DG) 431 790-2 (1991)

LSO/Horenstein (Chesky) CD19 (1962)

BPO/Jochum (DG) 449 715-2 (1953, two discs)

LPQ/Jochum (EMI) 5 69515-2 (1976, two discs)

Philharmonia Orch/Klemperer (EMI) 5 67029-2 (1956-57)



Marin Alsop

Naxos

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