MOUSSORGSKY: *Pictures at an Exhibition; Night on Bald Mountain; Boris Godounov Symphonic Synthesis; Khovantschina Act IV Entr'acte*
with **TCHAIKOVSKY:** *Solitude; Humoresque;*
STOKOWSKI: *Traditional Slavic Christmas Music*
Bournemouth Symphony/ José Serebrier
Naxos 557645—77 minutes

Given the immense and sustained popularity of Leopold Stokowski's Bach transcriptions with modern audiences, I find it both fascinating and rewarding that his arrangements of Moussorgsky—most notably his immensely stimulating recreation of *Pictures at an Exhibition*—should arouse such remarkable enthusiasm among conductors today; this is now, incredibly, its *eighth* recording—including an early RCA Philadelphia with Stoky (Dutton; Nov/Dec 1994, p 255) and another with the All-American Orchestra for Columbia, not yet released on CD as far as I know—and I understand yet another with Riccardo Chailly is still to come. Certainly next to the Maestro himself I can imagine no more authoritative interpreter than José Serebrier, who for nearly five years served alongside Stokowski as Associate Conductor of the American Symphony—and it is a great pleasure to welcome this generous compilation of Russian music to the catalog.

While Stokowski offered faint praise of the Ravel arrangement as "a masterpiece in the Gallic manner", he clearly felt—not without justification—that Ravel's treatment was in fact too "French", quite lacking in the dark colors and brooding atmosphere of Mother Russia that we may find in other "Slavic" transcriptions including the first such attempt by Rimsky-Korsakoff's student Mikhail Tushmalov as well as later arrangements by Leo Funtek, Sergei Gortchakov, and most recently Vladimir Ashkenazy. But Stokowski is anything but brooding; his treatment is, in his own words, "by turns fantastic, grotesque, sinister, terrifying, mystical, ecstatic"—in short, it is cinematic in the best sense of the word, conjuring up vivid images the poor besotted Moussorgsky could have seen only in his most delirious hallucinations. Indeed, the listener might be forgiven for believing it was actually put together by Bernard Herrmann: note the *Psycho*-like shrieks from the violins in the 'Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks', or the sonorous horns and menacing trumpet trills in 'Baba Yaga', not to mention the recurring *misterioso* tremolos in the strings. We may raise an eyebrow at his omission of 'Tuileries' and 'The Marketplace at Limoges'—too "French" perhaps?—yet it is all of a piece, Moussorgsky's quaint keyboard sketches blown up to Hollywood proportions and sumptuously set forth in full color.

That is why I must part company with our Editor, who in his review of the DG Knussen (July/Aug 2004) expressed disdain for the Phase 4 sound of Stokowski's London recording. The "refined" orchestral sound that may serve the Ravel has no place here: unlike Stokowski's celebrated London *Scheherazade* where excess sometimes proves distracting (here the Editor parts company with me!), in this grandiose display—far more Stokowski than Moussorgsky—excess is the very meat and drink of the mesmerizing final effect.

No one revels in these bold splashes of color more than Stokowski. Serebrier comes very close—very close indeed—but that sheer drunken flamboyance eludes him, as it has all others who have ventured into the arena. Serebrier coaxes a rapturous blend from the Bournemouth strings, warm and enveloping, and he summons forth wonderful sounds from the brass, all captured marvelously by the engineers. But those walloping stentorian horns in 'Bydlo', the room-filling brass in 'Catacombs', not to mention the fearsome gallop of the witch 'Baba Yaga'—no one can touch Stoky, or maybe it's the close-up Phase 4 miking (though I'll admit Stoky's oxcart exceeds all reasonable speed limits). Bamert on Chandos (Sept/Oct 1996) also comes very close and offers stiff competition—unlike the bland, homogeneous Knussen or the seemingly uninvolved Sedares (March/April 1996, p 222). (Ignore the slipshod and wiry-sounding Rozhdestvensky.)

In the *Boris Godounov* synthesis, Serebrier and Stokowski are far more evenly matched. This is no facile "opera without words" but a truly masterly and soul-satisfying synopsis that pays homage to the festive panoply of Boris's coronation along with more soulful elements, including the Fool's soliloquy and Boris's death. Serebrier is outstanding, reveling in the clangorous tintinnabulation of the 'Coronation Scene' while setting forth the more spiritual passages in warm and sympathetic fashion, from the opening scene outside the monastery to the hushed imagery as the now repentant Czar fearfully breathes his last, the consoling strings surely intended more for the despairing Russian people than the fallen monarch. Bamert also comes off very well; but he uses a different version of the closing fade-out (Stokowski rewrote it several times) that omits the distant tolling of the church bell—a haunting effect employed on the Phase 4 by Stokowski and also by Serebrier. (Knussen uses the bell too, but it's so far back you can hardly hear it.) Given the excellence of Serebrier and Stokowski, I could not in good conscience choose between them—nor would I even want to try.

The entr'acte from *Khovanshchina* is one of Moussorgsky's most miraculous creations, fully on a par with the far better known Prelude ('Dawn Over the Moscow River'). We see the exiled Prince Galitsin en route to what he realizes will be his execution, a scene calling for somber tones from gong and low brass. This is the one weak point in an otherwise outstanding disc, let down by the strained sound of the strings. And again the master captures perfectly the grotesque and sinister imagery of the Satanic revels on *Bald Mountain;* nor does he flinch from the almost embarrassingly Wagnerian swelling of brass and percussion that heralds the approaching sunrise. Serebrier's hulking demon is more sinister than terrifying, with a humongous roll of the gong as all descend into Hell midway in. Bamert again comes close to Serebrier in a broadly drawn narrative, while Knussen really piles into it—a heady experience! I must call special attention to Serebrier's wonderfully expressive account of the hushed close, rapt playing from the Bournemouth winds set against the consoling church bells—or at least right up to the point where Siegfried makes an unexpected appearance in Stoky's grand apotheosis.

Completing this richly satisfying Russian repast are two pieces arranged from Tchaikovsky—the ethereal, disembodied string sound of 'Solitude' set against the wind foolery of 'Humoresque'—and Stokowski's own *Traditional Slavic Christmas Music* modeled on *In a Manger* by Ippolitov-Ivanov, in turn based on a somber Christmas hymn. In sum, Serebrier not so much challenges as affectionately celebrates the master in this opulent and evocative fare; and given the extra servings—not to mention the minimal investment—I can't imagine any reason to hesitate.

HALLER