

Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra



Photo: Peter Brenkus

The Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra was founded in 1949 as the first Slovak professional state symphony orchestra, based in the capital, Bratislava. Its chief conductors have included Václav Talich, Ludovít Rajter, and Libor Pešek. From 1991 to 2001 Ondrej Lenárd was Principal Conductor and Music Director. In the 2003/2004 season Jiri Bělohávek acted as Artistic Director, and in 2004 Vladimír Válek became Principal Conductor. In September 2007 the position of Principal Conductor was taken up by Peter Feranec, with Leoš Svárovský as Permanent Guest Conductor. Since 2009 the Principal Conductor of the orchestra has been Emmanuel Villaume, with Rastislav Štúr as permanent Guest Conductor from 2011. The orchestra has worked with a number of distinguished conductors and soloists, and in 1996, after a long-term successful collaboration with the orchestra, Zdeněk Košler was awarded the title of honour of Honorary Principal Conductor in memoriam. The orchestra is a regular guest at major European music festivals. On tour it has performed throughout Europe, in Japan, on Cyprus, in Turkey and in the United States. It has recorded extensively for Naxos as well as for other labels, national and international, and for radio, television and film companies.

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Michael Halász



Photo: Zeininger

Michael Halász's first engagement as a conductor was at the Munich Gärtnerplatztheater where, between 1972 and 1975, he directed all operetta productions. In 1975 he moved to Frankfurt to work as principal Kapellmeister with Christoph von Dohnányi and here he conducted the most important works of the operatic repertoire. Many engagements as a guest conductor followed and in 1977 Dohnányi took him to the Staatsoper in Hamburg as principal Kapellmeister. From 1978 to 1991 he was general musical director of the Hagen Opera House and in 1991 he took up the post of resident conductor at the Vienna State Opera. Michael Halász's recordings for Naxos include ballets by Tchaikovsky, operatic excerpts of Wagner, symphonies by Beethoven, Schubert and Mahler, Rossini's overtures, two volumes of Liszt's symphonic poems (the latter described by the *Penguin Guide* as 'one of the most successful collections of Liszt's symphonic poems to have emerged in recent years'), *Don Giovanni* (8.660080-82) and *Die Zauberflöte* (8.660030-31). He has also recorded Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* and *Orfeo*, Richard Strauss's *Bourgeois Gentleman* and, for Marco Polo and Naxos, Rubinstein's ballet music, Schmidt's *Symphony No. 1* and a pioneering recording of Schreker's opera *Der ferne Klang* (8.660074-75).

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Anton
RUBINSTEIN
Symphony No. 6
Don Quixote

Philharmonia Hungarica • Gilbert Varga
Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra • Michael Halász



Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894)**Symphony No. 6 in A Minor, Op. 111 · Don Quixote – Humoresque for Orchestra, Op. 87**

Anton Rubinstein has had a bad press. In his own life-time he incurred the hostility of the Russian nationalist composers, led by Balakirev, a group that, with some justification, he described as amateur. To others his compositions seemed facile and superficial. In his own words he seemed in Germany to be Russian and in Russia German. Posterity has been similarly critical of Rubinstein. Sacheverell Sitwell, in his biography of Liszt, refers to Rubinstein as “a fountain of bad music”, while a scholar of the eminence of Gerald Abraham described him, as a song-writer, as “a highly competent imitator of Mendelssohn or Schumann with little personality” and elsewhere write in the most disparaging terms of his music.

Whatever detractors have had to say, Anton Rubinstein enjoyed a high enough reputation as a composer in his own time, while as a pianist he was at least the equal of Liszt. It is an irony of the history of taste that the nationalist composers should have explored a vein of material that has won continued popularity, whatever technical shortcomings their music may have contained, while Rubinstein has been regarded as a mere craftsman, lacking true musical inspiration. It is only now, some 120 years after his death, that it is becoming possible to reassess his very real achievement.

Anton Rubinstein was born in the Podolsk District of Russia in 1824. His first music lessons were with his mother, followed by study under Villoing, with whom he embarked on a concert tour at the age of eleven, playing for Chopin and Liszt in Paris and for Queen Victoria in England, and impressing members of the Russian Imperial family. In 1844 his family settled in Berlin, where he took lessons from Glinka's composition teacher, Siegfried Dehn, and was able to associate with Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer. The death of his father in 1846 led to the return of his mother and his brother Nikolay to Russia and to his own move to Vienna, after playing to Liszt in Weimar. From the latter he received little encouragement, when it was most needed, and Liszt

was later to refer to Rubinstein as “a Pseudo-musician of the Future”.

Returning to Russia in 1848, Rubinstein won the patronage of the German-born Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, the sister-in-law of the Tsar, and formerly Princess of Saxe-Altenburg. The relationship was to prove an important one both for Rubinstein and for the future of Russian music. With the support of the Grand Duchess he was able to start a series of concerts in St Petersburg in 1859 and three years later to establish the St Petersburg Conservatory. A similar institution was founded in Moscow in 1864 by his brother Nikolay.

Throughout his life Anton Rubinstein had to cope with a certain hostility because of his Jewish origin, although the Rubinsteins, like the Mendelssohns before them, had become Christians, accepting what the German-Jewish poet Heine had described as “a ticket of admission to European culture”. Jewish emancipation was relatively recent, and there was always a lurking suspicion that no Jew could properly represent the national spirit of the time, whether in Russia or Germany or anywhere else. The Jewish reaction to this was often to become *plus royaliste que le roi*, more German than the Germans, a phenomenon particularly evident in the significant Jewish support for Wagner, a composer known for his anti-semitic ideas. Sacheverell Sitwell, indeed, was prepared to perpetuate the myth of the Jews not as creators but as interpreters, with “a faculty of providing the almost perfect counterfeit”. Others have been able to understand Jewish pre-eminence in performance as a reflection of the social and educational restrictions placed on the Jewish community by a hostile society.

It was largely racial hostility that led Rubinstein, in 1867, to resign as director of the concerts of the Russian Music Society that he had founded and as director of the St Petersburg Conservatory. His career thereafter was spent in international concert-tours as one of the greatest pianists of the age and as a composer who could please the general public. In 1887 he resumed the position of

director of the Conservatory and two years later celebrated his jubilee. By this time his fame was a legend, attested by the popularity of his historic concerts, in which he offered a discerning public a remarkably diverse diet of keyboard music.

Rubinstein died in 1894. For the younger generation of composers he seemed the epitome of the superficial – “C'est du Rubinstein” was the highest dispraise, while, with Balakirev, the new generation were happy to refer to him as Tupinstein, Block-head, punning on his name. Nevertheless, however blind they may have been to his work as a composer, it was necessary to acknowledge the debt of Russian music to his efforts in establishing professional public concerts in the country, and providing the beginning of a system of professional musical education that has born remarkable fruit in more recent times.

As a composer, Rubinstein enjoyed success with some of his operas, particularly *The Demon*, based on the poem by Lermontov, while his symphonies, works of classical clarity, proved impressive enough. The *First Symphony* was written in 1850, with the *Second*, the famous *Ocean Symphony*, composed in the following year and later revised and augmented. The last of his six symphonies was written in 1866.

Symphony No. 6 in A minor, Op. 111, dedicated to the Leipzig Gewandhaus Concert Society, opens with a remarkably dramatic *Moderato con moto*, effectively written. The following *Moderato assai* provides a measure of contrast, although here too there is an almost operatic element of drama in the writing. The *Allegro vivace* has all the ingredients of a striking Scherzo, expanded and leading to a witty conclusion. The final *Moderato assai*

continues in the same characteristic vein, reminding us of Rubinstein's verdict on Brahms. In a letter to Liszt he wrote of the champion of pure music, “For the drawing-room he is not graceful enough, for the concert hall not fiery enough; for the countryside he is not primitive enough, for the city not cultured enough.” The *Sixth Symphony* of Rubinstein has grace, fire and evidence of a long-established European cultural tradition, however little of the primitive it may contain.

Don Quixote, a musical picture after Cervantes, was written in 1870, the year before Rubinstein's period as conductor of the Philharmonic concerts in Vienna and a subsequent American tour with Wieniawski. The work has a clear enough narrative intention, from the chivalrous ambitions of Don Quixote, his love for the imagined Dulcinea del Toboso, through various mistaken adventures to his death, a moment of final pathos. Rubinstein shows us Don Quixote's awakening ambitions, as he reads romances of chivalry, dons his rusty armour and mounts his steed Rocinante. A flock of sheep, mistaken for an army, is routed, and there is an encounter with three village women, one of whom seems to Don Quixote to be his lady, Dulcinea. The women laugh at him and run away, leading him to suppose that he needs to prove his valour further. Don Quixote extends unexpected clemency to a gang of prisoners condemned to the galleys, and they repay him by beating and robbing him. His complaints at the ingratitude of the criminals lead him to forswear chivalry, and he returns home, to die in the presence of his friends, his niece and his house-keeper.

Keith Anderson

Phiharmonia Hungarica

The Phiharmonia Hungarica was established in 1957 by Hungarian musicians who had left their native country after the political troubles of 1956. From its first concert, given in Vienna on 28th May 1957, the orchestra won an international reputation, and two years later found a permanent home in the West German town of Marl in North-Rhine-Westphalia, thereafter receiving considerable assistance from the national and regional governments and from its new home-town. Its achievements included the recording of all the symphonies of Haydn under Antal Doráti, the Honorary President of the orchestra, and its recordings continued to win international prizes and awards. With subsequent changes in political circumstances, the orchestra eventually suffered the withdrawal of official funding and gave its last concert in 2001, as audiences dwindled and its original purpose no longer needed to be served.

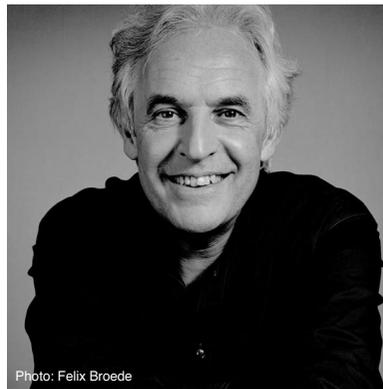
Gilbert Varga

Photo: Felix Broede

Gilbert Varga, son of the celebrated Hungarian violinist Tibor Varga, studied under Franco Ferrara, Sergiu Celibidache and Charles Bruck. A commanding and authoritative figure on the podium, Varga is repeatedly acclaimed for his ability to draw out a broad range of colours and emotions from the orchestra. In North America Varga regularly guest conducts the symphony orchestras of Houston, St Louis, Atlanta, Baltimore, Milwaukee, Minnesota, Utah and Nashville, and in Europe works with the major orchestras of Berlin, Leipzig, Frankfurt, Cologne, Budapest, Porto, Brussels and Glasgow among others. In May 2013 he was appointed Principal Conductor of the Taipei Symphony Orchestra. Gilbert Varga was Chief Conductor of the Hofer Symphoniker (1980-1985), and of the Philharmonia Hungarica (1985-1990), conducting their début tour to Hungary with Yehudi Menuhin. In 1991 he was appointed Permanent Guest Conductor of the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra until 1995, and from 1997 to 2000 was principal Guest Conductor of the Malmö Symphony. From 1997 to 2008 he was Music Director of the Basque National Symphony Orchestra. Gilbert Varga is represented by InterMusica.