Great Russian Symphonies, Vol. 1 (2012)

Pyotr Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 *1.I. Andante sostenuto - Moderato con anima 18:59 2.II. Andantino in modo di canzona 9:52 3.III. Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato - Allegro 5:53 4.IV. Finale: Allegro con fuoco 9:15*
Alexander Borodin Symphony No. 2 in B minor
5.I. Allegro 6:59 6.II. Scherzo: Prestissimo. Trio: Allegretto 5:31 7.III. Andante 7:50 8.IV. Finale: Allegro 6:19
Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra (1-4) Adrian Leaper - conductor Seattle Symphony Orchestra (5-8) Gerard Schwarz - conductor

The word ‘symphony’ is used to describe an extended orchestral composition in Western classical music. By the eighteenth century the Italianate opera sinfonia—musical interludes between operas or concertos—had assumed the structure of three contrasting movements, and it is this form that is often considered as the direct forerunner of the orchestral symphony. With the rise of established professional orchestras, the symphony assumed a more prominent place in concert life between 1790 and 1820 until it eventually came to be regarded by many as the yardstick by which one would measure a composer’s achievement.

The symphony came late to Russia. The first attempts at a Russian Nationalist symphony were made in the late nineteenth-century by Balakirev and his acolytes, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov as well as by Tchaikovsky, whose symphonies (despite his European leanings) have a distinctly Russian flavour. In their wake followed numerous composers, from Glazunov to Myaskovsky, similarly instilling their music with the melodies of their homeland. In the years that followed Russian politics had an unmistakable impact on the Russian symphonists, as Rachmaninov and Prokofiev (among others) went into exile whilst composers such as Shostakovich vented their political frustrations through the medium of music—his Leningrad Symphony being a prime example. ---Editorial Notes, chandos.net

The most important works here also tend to get the best performances. So let’s proceed in order of overall quality. Best are Shostakovich’s Fifth with Petrenko, Borodin’s Second and Rimsky-Korsakov’s Scheherazade with Schwarz, Kuchar’s Prokofiev First and Fifth, and Kalinnikov’s First, and Antoni Wit in Tchaikovsky’s Fifth and Sixth. All the rest are fair to good. These include Glazunov’s Sixth and Rachmaninov’s Second (and The Rock) with Anissimov, Shostakovich’s Seventh and Miaskovsky’s 25th (Yablonsky), Tchaikovsky’s Fourth and assorted short works (1812 Overture, Romeo and Juliet) with Adrian Leaper, and Scriabin’s Poem of Ecstasy and Third Symphony with Golovschin. Topping it all off is a pretty respectable Antar Symphony conducted by André Anichanov. Yes, you can do better in most of this music, but this 10-disc set is well-chosen and an easy way to get a big pile of popular and unfairly neglected Russian symphonies, so who’s complaining? -- David Hurwitz, ClassicsToday.com

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky composed his Fourth Symphony, the Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36, between 1877 and 1878, dedicated to his patroness and 'best friend' Nadezhda von Meck.

Following his catastrophic marriage to former student Antonina Miliukova, lasting a mere two months, Tchaikovsky made a start on his fourth symphony. After emerging from a profound period of writer's block, struggling with his sexuality and battling with a heavy bout of depression, it's perhaps unsurprising that the music is urgent, supercharged and violent at points. Even the opening bars of the first movement are intended to represent a metaphor for Fate, or, as poor old Tchaikovsky put it: "the fatal power which prevents one from attaining the goal of happiness".

Between the moments of anguish and melancholy, Tchaikovsky proves he knows how to write a great tune - even the plaintive oboe melody at the beginning of the second movement, the Andantino in modo di canzone, swells with a poignancy and optimism, helped along by lush strings and booming brass.

The Finale, complete with frenzied plucking from the strings and rushing scales bursting through the texture, is certainly a highlight. The doom-laden Fate theme comes back once more - a

cyclical feature Tchaikovsky went on to use in the two symphonies that followed, Manfred, and Symphony No. 5, completed in 1885 and 1888 respectively. ---classicfm.com

Alexander Borodin's Symphony No. 2 in B minor took a long while to compose, as Borodin fit it in between labors on other works and his efforts as a scientist to ensure that women had access to chemistry courses. It was begun in 1869, but the piano score was not complete until 1875, and the orchestral version was not performed until 1877. That version was revised in 1879 after a poorly received premiere. Yet posterity has made the Symphony No. 2 not only Borodin's most popular symphony, but the most popular symphony written by any member of the nationalist Mighty Handful (Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, Mili Balakirev, and Borodin), because of its vividly rugged harmonies, deft orchestration, and a seemingly inexhaustible fund of energetic, passionate, and, above all, Russian themes.

A program for all but the second movement of the symphony has survived, as Borodin told it to critic Vladimir Stassov. The sonata-form first movement depicts a gathering of Russian knights; it opens with a strong, noble theme played on unison strings, as brasses and winds provide dark color and essay a chivalric-sounding contrasting theme. After a few repetitions of the opening music, a second theme enters, based on motifs from the folk songs "The Terrible Tsar" and "The Nightingale" and distinguished by its easy lyricism. The development section introduces a gallop rhythm that affects fragments of the themes and lends a knightly feel to the proceedings, leading into a recapitulation whose longer notes and thicker orchestration make it even more emphatic than the exposition. The Prestissimo scherzo that follows uses a sustained brass chord to modulate from B minor to F major (a remote key), and then launches into a succession of quick, bright, lightly scored melodies. The Trio takes a graceful, winding theme (also derived from the abovementioned folk songs) and runs it through various keys. The Andante third-movement portrays a legendary minstrel named Bayan, and evokes the sound of his zither in the opening bars with harp and pizzicato strings. At first, a warm horn melody dominates, but soon a struggle develops between a nervous, minor-mode motive introduced on the woodwinds and the opening melody. Finally, the opening melody enters triumphantly in the strings, and leads into a coda that brings back the minstrel evocation; this in turn leads directly into the Allegro finale. This finale depicts a jubilant crowd, using an appropriately buoyant main theme (decorated with generous percussion) and a second theme that begins as a quiet lyric, but soon expands into a celebration itself. A new development theme recalls the symphony's opening music, but this soon yields to a supremely joyous, unstoppable elaboration of the two main themes, whose momentum propels the music through the recapitulation and the coda. Borodin's Symphony No. 2 deserves its exalted position in the annals of the Mighty Handful's orchestral music. ---Andrew Lindemann Malone, allmusic.com

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