Alfred Schnittke - Symphony No. 0 & Nagasaki (2007)

Symphony No. 0 (40:34) *1 I. Allegro Ma Non Troppo 12:58 2 II. Allegro Vivace 7:08 3 III. Andante 10:26 4 IV. Allegro 9:35* Nagasaki (36:09) *5 I. Nagasaki, City Of Grief 6:27 6 II. The Morning 4:44 7 III. On That Fateful Day 7:14 8 IV. On The Ashes 5:31 9 V. The Sun Of Peace 11:54*
Hanneli Rupert – mezzo-soprano Cape Town Opera Voice Of The Nation Cape Philharmonic Orchestra Owain Arwel Hughes – conductor

Aimed at the hardest of hardcore fans of post-modernist Russian composer Alfred Schnittke, this 2007 BIS disc presents two world premieres of works written while the composer was still in his early twenties and a student at the Moscow Conservatory. The Symphony No. 0 from 1956-1957 is a large-scale, four-movement work written for his composition class, and Nagasaki from 1958 is the massive five-movement oratorio for mezzo-soprano, chorus, and huge orchestra that served as his graduation piece. As performed here with energy, expertise, and enthusiasm by conductor Owain Arwel Hughes and the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra joined in Nagasaki by the Cape Town Opera Voice of the Nation chorus and mezzo Hanneli Rupert, both works are impressive student works -- the symphony's big tunes and monumental structures solidly hold together and the oratorio's huge climaxes and searing expressivity are wholly sincere -- but they are still student works. Despite Schnittke's obvious talent, these works show none of his later individuality. The symphony sounds like melancholic Myaskovsky seasoned with a dash of ironic Shostakovich and the oratorio sounds like Orff's choral-writing backed by Prokofiev's orchestral writing. Although hardcore Schnittke fans will embrace this disc, few other fans of post-modernist music will make it all the way through either the symphony's borrowed gestures or Nagasaki's blazing banalities.

Recorded in bright, open digital sound by producer Jens Braun at the Cape Town City Hall, the South African forces are tight, polished, and amazingly passionate about less than first-rate music. Recordings of Schnittke's later, greater symphonies from this same crew would be warmly welcomed. --- James Leonard, Rovi

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