



St Laurent Studio YSL T-886 **Tennstedt Vol. 30**

“Klaus Tennstedt approached conducting as an unalloyed romantic, perhaps the last in a great tradition along with Leonard Bernstein. Neither was touched by the incursions of Toscanini’s objectivity or literalism. They relied instead on instinct and the mood of the moment, which makes their performances feel intensely personal and involved. I gravitate toward this style, and it is a luxury to find Tennstedt’s discography expanding year after year thanks to a wealth of live performances coming to light. Romantic conductors achieve their absolute height in concert, and he was no exception.

Not every great performance is indispensable, however, and this new release from St. Laurent Studio must be considered in that light. There are two other live readings of the Prokofiev Fifth Symphony under Tennstedt, who toured with the piece in the 1977–78 season. Profil issued a reading from December 2, 1977 with the Bavarian State Radio Symphony, and a previous St. Laurent Studio release with the Orchestre National de France comes from October 12 of the same year. A few months later came the present reading, on February 4, 1978, with the Detroit Symphony. Tennstedt had something to say on all three occasions, but if you aren’t a Tennstedt completist, it is unreasonable to collect all of them.

Reviewing the French account (FANFARE 43:2) I took the Munich one into account, noting that the span between October and December might seem short, ‘But two months could make quite a difference with this mercurial, touchy, at times insecure conductor. Where the Munich performance is solid and fairly conventional, in Paris Tennstedt is transformed, delivering a reading that’s riveting and rousingly spontaneous’. I had wished that the Detroit performance would feature the same spontaneity but in better sound and with better execution. (Orchestras played well for Tennstedt when he inspired them; otherwise, he was no disciplinarian.) As it turned out, I got my wish, but it’s a balancing act.

Tennstedt was more on fire in Paris, as evidenced by him taking the finale at a crackling speed half a minute faster than in Detroit. The best movement in the Detroit performance is the first, thanks to deeply considered phrasing and the creation of a gripping mood. As to sound quality, Detroit is clearly the best, particularly in the detailed bass, which is murky in the Paris performance. Both feature more than listenable FM broadcast stereo; for impact, both fall short compared with the full dynamic range of a good studio recordings. I imagine the dullness in the upper frequencies was due to a secondary source being used, such as an off-air tape recording. I expected the Detroit Symphony to stand out technically, but there are some sketchy entrances, thin string tone, and lapses in concentration. Fortunately, these are incidental.

A decisive factor might be the absolutely riveting account of Janáček's late masterpiece, the Sinfonietta, which has all the thrill partially missing in the Prokofiev. The odds against a note-perfect live reading tend to be remote, simply because the 14 trumpets in the orchestration are not readily available, especially with high-quality players, except in a major metropolis, and even then there are bound to be fluffs. Janáček makes things doubly difficult by calling upon the full brass complement only in the first and last movements, which adds up to a dubious expense in an orchestra manager's mind. In Hamburg the trumpets and accompanying timpani aren't painfully bad, but you do have to endure them a little.

Afterwards a few more glitches appear. Janáček calls for multiple tempos in each movement, with a total of seven tempo changes in the finale, for example. The orchestra is caught off guard by the switch to Prestissimo in the third movement and must scramble to catch up. Those flaws out of the way, Tennstedt's reading is electrifying. He is urgent and intense as few conductors can be, and you can't tear yourself away. There is another reading of the Sinfonietta on BBC Legends (nla) with Tennstedt's own London Philharmonic from April 2, 1991. It is much better played and recorded, but there isn't the same electricity heard in Hamburg, and the pacing is considerably slower.

Overall this is a valuable contribution to the conductor's discography, and the Janáček is incandescent. St. Laurent Studio is indefatigable about adding newly discovered Tennstedt recordings to their expanding series, which has reached Vol. 30 with this release. The label is performing a great service to collectors and helping to cement Tennstedt's reputation for genuine greatness."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE