

Serge Koussevitzky, Vol. 11 = Orchestral Works by CASADESUS, SIBELIUS, SCHUMANN – Yves St-Laurent Studio

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Serge Koussevitzky, Vol. 11 = H. CASADESUS: Concerto in D Major for Strings and Winds; SIBELIUS: Symphony No. 7 in C Major, Op. 107; SCHUMANN: Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 97 “Rhenish” – Boston Symphony Orchestra/ Serge Koussevitzky – Yves St-Laurent Studio YSL 78 643, 68:20 [78experience.com] ***:**



The Yves St-Laurent label happily extends the Serge Koussevitzky (1876-1951) sound document legacy with performances from the 1940s, including the Schumann *Rhenish Symphony* (19 February 1944), a work Koussevitzky never recorded commercially. The opening selection (17 December 1948) by violist-composer Henri Casadesus (1879-1947), the *Concerto in D for Strings and Winds*, has its origin in a Concerto in D for Viola and Orchestra (1911) once ascribed to K.P.E. Bach, and arranged for small orchestra by Maximilian Steinberg. Besides its contrapuntal energy, the piece offers in its slow movement, *Andante lento molto* the kind of homogeneous intimacy Koussevitzky could elicit from the BSO strings, a sound he claimed had taken twenty-five years to hone to perfection.

Serge Koussevitzky

Koussevitzky made a noted, even mesmerizing, recording of the Sibelius *Symphony No. 7* with the BBC Symphony 15 May 1933, a remarkable performance of sizzling tension and wrought iron and crystal, alternately. The 1924 work perseveres in its unique approach to symphonic form: a one-movement, sonata-form compression of distinct periods, an opening allegro and a scherzo, a slow movement and a rondo. When the music finally attains an abruptly “conclusive” C Major finale, the atmosphere eschews triumph for a sense of foreboding, the Yeats sentiment that some “rough beast slouches towards Bethlehem to be born.” Simon Rattle once called the final peroration “a scream of pain.” Koussevitzky (17 December 1948) builds the kernels of melody with meticulous care, creating an organ-like sense of a chorale’s lurking in the welter of convergent string sounds. When the harmonic-rhythmic motion speeds up, the effect marks a kind of paradox in the musical imagination, that the metrical modulations create their own stasis. Whether the effect captures Yeats once more, his “cosmic dance” in the poem “Among School Children” becomes a matter of the kind of mania Koussevitzky beckons from his trombone theme, the tympani, and the wispy elements that converge into a kind of waltz-song that unfolds from the various tugs and forward urgings of the musical line. Koussevitzky and his faithful BSO bring a lithe finesse to the latter portion of the symphony, capitalizing on the competing textures to secure the dynamism of effect. For those who have always revered Koussevitzky’s affinity for the music of Sibelius, this collaboration justifies the price of admission.



Koussevitzky recorded scarce Schumann, leaving us only a 1930s performance of the *Spring Symphony*. Upon hearing the very chords of this volatile *Rhenish Symphony*, we seem to have found the model for another fine Schumann disciple, Leonard Bernstein. We can well imagine the young conductor-in-training thoroughly galvanized in his chosen seat at this muscular, virile reading in Boston’s Symphony Hall. The epic sweep of the first movement *Allegro*—its volcanic string sound complemented by fierce tympani—achieves a relentless drive (based on modulating $\frac{3}{4}$ rhythm) whose nobility of phrase only gains from the feral intensity of execution. The blend of strings and horns maintains of sonorously active, martial motion in the *Scherzo*. No less a contributor, flutist Georges Laurent makes his aerial presence felt. The gently serene, richly textured *Intermezzo* leads us into the realm of the Cologne cathedral that inspired the contrapuntal *Andante* movement, which extends the sentiment of the sixth of the songs in 1840 cycle of songs, *Dichterliebe*. Koussevitzky keeps a tight rein on the brass, string, and tympanic motion of this vaulted, searing, intense score, which rises relentlessly, perpetually, into more than a “mere” fanfare, but a testament of Schumann’s faith as expressed in music. The chorale sentiment will re-emerge in the last movement, though the tempo there will not relax in the same, processional manner. Both “joyful” and “sweet,” the last movement *Finale* moves with leonine power that exploits the BSO trumpets. A performance of colossal inspiration and vitality, the rendition makes us wonder why neither Koussevitzky nor RCA decided to commit such noble reading to recorded posterity. Given the breadth of the St-Laurent collection of Koussevitzky performances, I urge serious admirers of this conductor to consult the catalogue with dispatch.

