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Christopher Keene Vol. 4

“This disc is Volume 4 in the ongoing series of St. Laurent Studio releases of performances by Christopher Keene - and an unexpected stunner among them. Given that most of [the about 80 to 90 different available versions] are by big-name conductors, soloists, and orchestras of international stature, one would hardly expect a live performance by a regional ensemble with a young if promising conductor to merit more than a polite smile and a patronizing nod of the head in acknowledgement. In this instance, that would be a huge mistake. I have no hesitation in setting this account among the very finest of the score I have evert heard, with a level of interpretive insight and visceral commitment that puts much of the high-powered competition to shame.

Perhaps no other composer matches Mahler for being a veritable interpretive Rorschach test that distinguishes one conductor from another; and there seem to be a many different ways of interpreting the sets of inkblots comprising the notes of a Mahler score as there are viewers. And, of course, there are all the debates as to how closely one is meant to adhere to Mahler’s own highly detailed instructions. One cannot even settle the issue with an appeal to recordings by conductors personally associated with Mahler; tune in the Second to Oskar Fried, Otto Klemperer, Bruno Walter, and even an excerpt recorded in 1934 led by Arnold Schönberg (!), or else in the Fourth to Klemperer, Walter, and Willem Mengelberg, and one hears radically different ‘takes’ on the score. Certainly Keene has his own highly individual profile here. Overall one would place him on the Bernstein to Mengelberg, Romantic to hyper-Romantic, end of the interpretive spectrum, though at slightly under 80 minutes his

performance is quite mainstream. In addition, there is nothing willful, arbitrary, or eccentric about any of his manifold interpretive choices. Even though many of them are quite different from what I am used to hearing from, say, Walter, Klemperer, Bernstein, or Solti, they always make perfect sense; they are both eloquently expressive and utterly convincing in building a totally coherent interpretation. If one is, for example, initially arrested by the quick tempo at which the initial iteration of the funeral march motif with its ominous triplet figure is taken in the opening movement, it snaps right into place as one piece of the sonic puzzle being assembled. I cite that as but one of a myriad of illustrative moments that could be singled out. As with other conductors, most of Keene's particularly distinctive choices occurred in the sprawling, kaleidoscopic first and last movements, where the manifold contrasting sections and huge dynamic ranges provide the freest rein to imaginations.

Enormous credit is likewise due to all of the performing forces here. Although it was a regional orchestra outside of a major metropolitan center, the Syracuse Symphony was a fully professional ensemble that had the good fortune to be able to draw upon a number of highly skilled players from the greater New York area for its membership. There no NY City musicians who played in the Syracuse Symphony; all of the players lived in Syracuse and its suburbs - occasionally some from Rochester came down when the orchestra needed extras. Many musicians moved from other places to audition and be in the orchestra. While the degree of precision in ensemble playing, and the individuality of first-desk players, does not quite match that of top-tier counterparts, the playing is never less than very good indeed. More to the point it is also extraordinarily intense, everyone involved is pouring the energy of his or her life's blood into what they all may have regarded as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The chorus, if a bit on the small side, sings with fervor, and has clear diction. The two vocal soloists are likewise quite fine, and indeed superior to more famous counterparts on major-label recordings; Shirley Thompson has the requisite depth and gravitas, and sister Patti the sweetness of tone and soaring high notes. The recorded sound is clear but one only wishes that it could have the breadth and depth that modern digital technology now provides.

In sum, while there are now many recordings of the ‘Resurrection’ available that pack a greater sonic wallop. There are very few that equal this for a thrilling interpretive punch to the solar plexus, which counts for even more. Under no circumstances should you let this one slip by; order it now before a limited stock of pressings disappears. The no-frills packaging may include only a tray card with tracks, timings, and photos; texts and translations would be nice, but those are readily obtainable elsewhere, and this performance isn’t.

Urgently recommended.”

- James A. Altena, FANFARE

