



SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 6

The Age of Gold: Suite.

KHACHATURIAN Symphony No. 3

Leopold Stokowski, cond; Chicago SO

ST. LAURENT STUDIO 992 (74:55)

Live: Orchestra Hall, Chicago 2/15/1968

In the studio Leopold Stokowski and the Chicago Symphony recorded the same repertoire for RCA that is now featured on a new release. While the studio accounts are wonderful performances, what happened in the concert hall before the commercial sessions was even more spectacular. Roger Dettmer lived in Chicago and attended the concerts as the music critic of the *Chicago American*. In *Fanfare* 8:2, he said the following when reviewing the Shostakovich LP: “In his remake with the Chicago Orchestra, vividly recorded in Medinah Temple by producer Howard Scott and engineer Paul Goodman, Stokowski takes 17:10 for the first movement alone, but it is the summit of this endeavor. Prior concert performances had been a revelation, with an owlish Scherzo and a finale that raised the hackles, but recording sessions didn't quite recapture the hyperkinesis that had stamped more than 5,000 Orchestra Hall patrons in two days.”



Now the hyperkinesis can be experienced by all of us, thanks to St. Laurent Studio's release of the CSO broadcast, which was very well recorded by the local classical radio station WFMT. The Khachaturian Third Symphony, which was also given a studio recording, rounded out that concert.

The Shostakovich performances are quite extraordinary. Stokowski was almost 86 at the time of these readings, but there is no flagging of energy. The satirical tone of much of *The Age of Gold* music is fully captured in this performance, with crackling rhythms and brilliant flashes of color. However, the peak achievement is the Sixth Symphony from 1939. It is structurally an unusual work, beginning with a slow movement that is longer than the remaining two movements combined. The first movement, marked *Largo*, paints a bleak landscape, but is then followed by two brief fast movements, creating a jarring contrast.

The manic character of these two movements is the polar opposite of the tragic first. The Scherzo is biting, satirical, crackling with rhythmic force and energy. The finale, which one commentator called a music-hall gallop, is light, merry, and comical. Stokowski maintains the long span of the phrases in the *Largo*, drawing from the Chicago musicians a huge range of dynamic shading and orchestral colors. In the second and third movements we hear the biggest difference between this live performance and the RCA recording that followed. You can sense an extraordinary intensity, giving the impression that every member of the CSO is playing as if his life depended on it.

This is coupled with the concentration of musicians totally focused on listening to each other. Phrases are passed between instruments in conversation that doesn't break down even in the most hectic passages of the last two movements. Such performances happen on those rare occasions when everyone is communicating on the same wavelength, and they all know it.

The Khachaturian Third Symphony, the closing work, was composed in 1947 to honor the 30th anniversary of the Russian revolution. It is one of the most garish symphonic works ever written, complete with 15 extra trumpets, an organ, and considerable percussion. It is in one movement and was actually described by Khachaturian as a "symphonic poem." All I can say is that he and I have very different definitions of poetry. Ironically, this blatant attempt to please the Communist authorities did not really work. As the composer put it, he "wanted this work to express the Soviet people's joy and pride in their great and mighty country," but in the notorious Zhdanov crackdown of 1948 the work was condemned as being "formalistic," whatever that meant—the same accusation was aimed at Prokofiev and Shostakovich.

The first movement begins with a gentle cushion of strings that sits under a growing outburst from the brass, followed by a manic organ cadenza. After a few minutes of noise, there is a rather kitschy oriental-sounding theme that slithers around the strings for a while until the noise builds up again. Stokowski gives his all to the performance, and the CSO does as well. Sonically the Allen electric organ is the one disappointment, but the roof-raising quality of the performance wins the day. Even so, I will not return to it very often.

St. Laurent Studio has retained the final applause and the WFMT announcer. At the very end comes a rare treat. We hear one of the most precious tributes an orchestra can bestow on a conductor, called a “tusch.” It is an impromptu flourish or fanfare that starts with the brass and is then joined in by other instruments. This occurs during the conductor’s final bows and is generally reserved for a revered and quite senior maestro. To clarify for you just how rare a tusch is, I have personally seen it happen only three times in my life.

The first was in 1971 in Syracuse, when Stokowski came to guest conduct the Syracuse Symphony. The musicians were thrilled to have a conductor of such legendary stature on the podium, and Stokowski had elicited an astounding performance from them. When the tusch came, I had no idea what it was. Some of the musicians had to explain it to me. The second time was in Chicago, in the spring of 1991, at the end of Georg Solti’s final concert as CSO music director (even though he returned every year afterwards as Principal Guest Conductor until his death in 1997).

The third time was in October that same year. The CSO (which I was managing at the time) concluded its year-long centennial celebration with a concert that replicated its very first concert of 100 years earlier. All three living music directors participated. The current one, Daniel Barenboim, opened the concert conducting Wagner’s *Faust Overture*; Solti then conducted Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. After intermission, Barenboim played and Solti conducted Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto. To conclude the evening, Rafael Kubelik came out of retirement to make this single appearance, conducting Antonin Dvořák’s *Hussite Overture*.

After the Dvořák, as he was bowing, Kubelik was honored with a tusch. He had been music director from 1950 to 1953, a tenure that was short both because the acerbic local music reviewer Claudia Cassidy did not like his work and because the CSO’s board did not care for the amount of twentieth-century music Kubelik introduced. Beloved by the musicians, he did return to Chicago in the 1960s and even more frequently in the 1980s. The orchestra members were thrilled that he agreed to conclude the centennial celebration and honored him with a tusch.

Here the ovation and tusch make a lovely conclusion to another remarkable concert. The recording captures Stokowski briefly explaining to the audience that they just heard a tusch. Even if you are not enamored of the Khachaturian, the two Shostakovich pieces more than justify an unreserved recommendation. The kind of music-making heard on that February evening in 1968 is representative of the pinnacle of orchestral playing and conducting. St. Laurent Studio’s faithful reproduction of WFMT’s original broadcast tape could hardly be bettered. The disc comes without notes, only brief documentation. It is available through Norbeck, Peters & Ford (norpete.com).

Henry Fogel

Five stars: Hair-raising music-making