

Petr Eben
Symphonia Gregoriana (Organ Concerto No.1)

Gunther Rost (organ); Bamberg SO; Gabriel Feltz (conductor)
OEHMS Classics OC643

This is one of the finest performances and best produced CDs that I have heard for some considerable time. The music is glorious and it was Eben's graduation piece. From those early years of his one is initially surprised, perhaps, that the later Eben style is not very evident. True there are several Gregorian themes to be heard but in general this is far more, dare I say, romantic in feel than his later works.

Many members will already know this work from the Motette CD (CD40151) released in 1991. This featured Paul Wißkirchen on organ with Volker Hempfling conducting the Händel-Festspielorchester Halle. The Motette CD's advantage over the Motette issue is a performance by Andreas Meisner of the *Moto ostinato* movement from Eben's *Nedělní musik (Sunday Music)* plus a speech (with the English in the notes) by Petr Eben himself.

The huge advantage of the new issue is the performance by Gunther Rost and the superb sound on the SACD. For me the Motette releases of most of Eben's works with organ are easily the best available, outshining the Hyperion set by a mile. With the *Symphonia Gregoriana* Rost excels himself in what must go down as an exemplary audiophile recording. Feltz also coaxes an electrifying performance from the Bamberg players.

The work itself had to lose its real title to gain the approval of the Czechoslovak authorities of 1954 when it was first performed. These days we can fully appreciate the religious source of some of the themes of the work. It is a concerto very much in the Czech tradition, with organ and orchestra as equally partners. Gustav Mahler puts in a few appearances in the work, adding to its rich tapestry of sound. There is no space here for analysis in depth.

This CD deserves the very highest praise in absolutely every respect. Anyone who has not dared to tiptoe into Eben's world should start here because, even if much of it does not "sound" like Eben, in fact everything that comes to the fore in later years really is there already. The music is truly both beautiful and magnificent in its triumphant march through an hour of time. The production values that OEHMS have brought to this project are amply in evidence. Do please buy this CD because you are guaranteed to love it.

Peter Herbert

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