

Tchaikovsky Sibelius - Violin Concertos (Lisa Batiashvili) [2016]

Written by bluesever

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Violin Concerto in D major op. 35 Composed By – Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (36:52) 1 1.
Allegro moderato 19:39 2 2. *Canzonetta. Andante* 07:06 3 3. *Finale. Allegro vivacissimo*
10:07

Violin Concerto in D minor op. 47 Composed By – Jean Sibelius (33:15)
4 1. *Allegro moderato - Molto moderato e tranquillo - Allegro molto - Moderato assai - Allegro moderato* 17:00 5 2. *Adagio di molto* 08:41 6 3. *Allegro ma non tanto* 07:34
Lisa Batiashvili - violin Staatskapelle Berlin Daniel Barenboim - conductor

The Georgian-German violinist Lisa Batiashvili has quietly reached the point of being one of the cognoscenti's players in mainstream repertory, with a free-spirited manner married to formidable technique in such a way as to bring to mind the greats of the past. Here she has warm-hearted support from an obviously energized Daniel Barenboim and the Berlin Staatskapelle, with strong engineering from Deutsche Grammophon in the Funkhaus Natepastraße in Berlin. The result is a superior recording of some well-worn repertory concertos. This isn't a single artistic statement; the two concertos were recorded a year apart. But each one is grasped as a living, breathing entity. Get the technical prowess out of the way by sampling the blistering finale of the Sibelius Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47, and turn then to the Tchaikovsky opening movement, where Batiashvili cultivates a restrained purity of expression that Jascha Heifetz would have loved. In the extremely dark, slow movement of the ostensibly less sentimental Sibelius, however, Batiashvili pours on the emotion. Each of the six movements here seems to tell a story in the best Romantic tradition, and in addition to marking a stage in the ascent of a new star, the album handsomely marks Barenboim's diamond jubilee. Highly recommended. ---James Manheim, AllMusic Review

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The irritatingly self-important booklet note for this release describes it as a “testimony to the musical culture of Berlin”, citing Barenboim and Batiashvili’s work together over several years in the Staatskapelle’s annual open-air “State Opera for All” concert in Bebelplatz. The essay is a little too caught up in its own importance there, and to read it you would think that no other city in the world had a comparable musical culture, something that New York, Vienna and London would, no doubt, dispute.

About one thing they are correct, however: this disc captures something pretty special. Daniel Barenboim first saw Lisa Batiashvili on TV, playing the Sibelius concerto with the Finnish RSO, and he immediately wanted to perform the work with her. It took them several years to set it up, but the brilliant results are captured on this disc with a Tchaikovsky concerto to match.

The first thing that strikes you is the beautifully rich, deep recorded sound that DG have managed to conjure up for the recording. The airy opening of the Tchaikovsky concerto is delightful when the violins introduce the first idea, and you’re almost taken aback by the strength with which the cellos and basses come in to answer. This then builds to a wonderfully rich first climax that precedes the soloist’s entry, and when Batiashvili enters she instantly marks herself out as someone worth paying attention to.

At first the violin seems to meander gently (almost like *The Lark Ascending*) before settling onto the main theme, which is introduced gently, cautiously, curiously, as though she is feeling her way through it. It’s a magical opening, and the songful lyricism of the second subject is every bit as fine, gently yet confidently sliding its way from one phrase to the next, eventually soaring on high with the finest cantabile quality. The scherzo-like passage that leads into the development then sounds utterly different: capricious, carefree and skittery, before the orchestra launches into a gloriously full-bodied statement of the main theme. The double-stopping of the development is handled with panache, yet is taken surprisingly slowly, as though she’s being careful to get it right rather than just dashing it off because she can. The cadenza is played with that same musicality that marks out her sense of musicianship rather than mere virtuosity, and her playing feels summative as well as dramatic during the recapitulation, the coda sounding truly like the full stop at the end of a well-argued paragraph.

She barely seems to whisper the opening phrases of the *Canzonetta*, so delicate and shaded-back is her playing, weaving in and out of the wind phrases delightfully. The second theme is much more confident, played like a song-without-words, and there is no holding her back for the Russian dance of the finale. Again, however, it’s played with great control and focus, so that it never feels rushed and is immensely satisfying. The second theme is given a much more nuanced treatment, with carefully graded tempo changes and some cheeky (but

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very effective) slurs.

Barenboim and his orchestra are on great form, too, sounding totally at home in repertoire that isn't quite their meat-and-potatoes. That doesn't matter a bit, though, and they seem to understand the Russian idioms of the last two movements very well indeed. The languid, wilting winds at the start of the Canzonetta are a treat, and you'll never hear the clarinet paddings (at 4:39) done better. The transition from the slow movement into the finale is brilliantly done, and it opens with very Germanic-sounding weight (which is no bad thing!). They strike the tone of a hurdy-gurdy as the violin begins the second subject, and Barenboim conspires with Batiashvili to pull the tempo around to delicious effect here. He also whips up a brilliant storm for the full-on run into the coda, which is thrilling, and the ending is extremely satisfying.

While the Tchaikovsky concerto is very good, however, the Sibelius is something rather special. It's a concerto I have often struggled to love, but this recording not only made me rate the performance but rank the work more highly in my estimation.

The orchestral violins are as chilly as you could imagine as they twinkle gently behind the opening. Over them, Batiashvili gives the first theme as operatic a treatment as you'll ever hear, setting up the emotional journey we're about to undergo together, and I found it remarkably compelling, drawing in the listener like the first chapter of a novel. The orchestral colour is predominantly dark, with the low strings and winds seeming to dominate (something that is thrown into sharp focus in the tutti passage that precedes the cadenza), but that gives Batiashvili even more of a backdrop against which to sparkle, an opportunity she takes with relish. The cadenza itself also has that quality of an operatic aria, a great emotional outpouring rather than a mere virtuoso showpiece, and that quality returns in spades for the lyrical splendour of the great Adagio, which is the highlight of the performance. For a start, it's paced just right, allowing the line to unfold in an unhurried way that nevertheless keeps the argument moving purposefully, no mean feat in a movement that can turn into pudding. Soloist and conductor turn it into an emotional exploration the likes of which I've seldom heard, plumbing depths and reaching heights in a movement that feels like an exploration into something enormously profound. The orchestral strings play their part as well, conjuring up dark sounds that are remarkably enticing, and the rich recorded sound is an undoubted boon.

The orchestra also sound like they're having a whale of a time in the finale (listen to the big tutti passage at 3:37!) and the chug of the movement's opening is infectious. Batiashvili seems to feed off the orchestra's energy in the lightness that she brings to the main theme. The second theme is both carefree and pleasingly airborne, and the interplay of the two themes creates a playfulness and energy that sees the concerto safely home.

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This disc speaks of a great and evidently successful partnership between conductor and soloist, cultivated over several years and bearing rich fruit. This is definitely worth exploring, even if you have several recordings of both concertos already, which many of our readers will. ---Simon Thompson, musicweb-international.com

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