

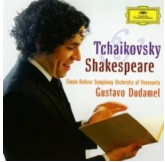
## Tchaikovsky - Shakespeare (2011)

Written by bluesever

Sunday, 17 July 2011 08:42 - Last Updated Friday, 30 May 2014 14:34

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*01 - Hamlet - Fantasy Overture after Shakespeare op. 67 02 - The Tempest - Symphonic Fantasy after Shakespeare op. 18 03 - Romeo and Juliet - Fantasy Overture after Shakespeare*  
Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela Gustavo Dudamel – Director

Gustavo Dudamel, the "energetic ambassador for classical music" (Vanity Fair), conducts symphonic pieces derived from Shakespeare as reimagined in music by Tchaikovsky. Unlike the fantasy overture, Romeo and Juliet, and The Tempest, which are program pieces, Hamlet is more mysterious and less literal in the way its thematic material is developed. All three are luminously beautiful. In every case, Dudamel elicits the most appropriate interpretations imaginable from his electrifying Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra. He conclusively demonstrates that in addition to being able to generate excitement, he is a sophisticated musical thinker.

In demand around the globe, Dudamel is currently Music Director of orchestras on three continents: Sweden's Gothenburg, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Venezuela's Simón Bolívar - and also in great demand as guest conductor for orchestras such as the Berliner Philharmoniker, Chicago Symphony, La Scala Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw, Vienna Philharmonic, and others. ---amazon.com

Gustavo Dudamel and the Simón Bolívar Orchestra - the "Youth" bit now discreetly dropped as time has gone by - have already recorded Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony with DG and generally created quite a stir with their raw energy and marketability. They continue their series here with

three Shakespeare-inspired works: "Hamlet", "The Tempest" and the "Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture".

The disc turns out to be a real oddity; there are two orchestras and two conductors here. The first combination makes a valuable contribution to the Tchaikovsky discography with powerful, assured interpretations of two relatively neglected symphonic fantasies: "Hamlet" and "The Tempest". The second delivers a thunderously ponderous account of the famous "Romeo and Juliet".

Dudamel's "Hamlet" cannot rival the grip and urgency of Stokowski's celebrated account (coupled with the even more stunning performance of a "Francesca da Rimini" which should be in every Tchaikovskian's collection) nor is the Simón Bolívar Orchestra anywhere near as virtuosic as Stokowski's "Stadium Symphony Orchestra" (the New York Philharmonic incognito) but they create an atmosphere of grim concentration - *lento lugubre*, indeed - which perhaps reflects the turmoil and melancholy of the composer's own temperament. There is certainly no danger here of the sentimentality some conductors indulge in - in fact a little more overt emotionalism would be welcome - and we do not hear the depth of singing tone in the strings or the subtle gradation of dynamics that Stokowski secures - but there is a good deal more grandeur and sense of shape and momentum than in the subsequent "Romeo and Juliet". Indeed, Dudamel captures much of the tragic intensity this piece demands, although the plaintive oboe theme representing Ophelia is coolly played and the love theme music itself remains slightly four-square, lacking the fantasy of the love music heard in "Romeo and Juliet" and "Francesca da Rimini". Perhaps that is more Tchaikovsky's, not Dudamel's, fault, however.

"The Tempest", the earliest tone poem here, displays the musical influences the composer had experienced since he composed "The Storm" in 1864; we are now in the sound-world of "The Ring" and all the better for it. The opening combines a heroic, Wagnerian horn theme with a gradual crescendo betraying the influence of "Das Rheingold". We hear storms at sea, a depiction of Caliban and a strangely swooning, Hollywood-movie-style love theme on the strings for Miranda and Ferdinand. The opening lacks somewhat of the sense of mystery which more lightness and legato in the strings would create but there is a haunting quality to the insistent, ostinato figure high on the violins reminiscent of Bruckner. Even a good performance played with energy such as we have here cannot prevent the piece from sounding a little too long, formless and episodic.

After two such engaging and thoughtful accounts, the "Romeo and Juliet" comes as a let-down. David Hurwitz was vitriolic about this release in his recent review on the Classics Today website, excoriating Dudamel's "droopy" tempi and "flaccid" rhythms and condemning the fight

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sequences as "about as dull as any yet recorded" and the love music as "remarkably under-characterized". I tend to take many, if not most, of his pronouncements with a big pinch of NaCl, yet he is in this instance right - at least about the "Romeo and Juliet", if not the other two tracks. Barely a trace emerges of the febrile eroticism which should suffuse the work; the rhythmic pulse constantly stalls. The whole enterprise is fatally hobbled by Dudamel's lugubrious tempi and a deliberateness which robs the music of all spontaneity.

The opening should drip tension, underlined by edgy, nervy little marcato accents on each note to suggest impending doom, but Dudamel takes almost 7 minutes to reach the battle when it should take about 5. Phrases are accent-free and smoothed over; the effect is soporific. One has only to compare Dudamel's plodding pizzicato with that of Adrian Leaper and the RPO twenty years earlier on Naxos, a performance which positively sizzles with energy. The requisite brilliance in the swirling, scurrying string passages is missing because the Simón Bolívar strings cannot articulate with sufficient clarity, speed and snap. When the violas wheezed in to the famous - here, long-delayed - love theme like a band of superannuated bagpipes, I found my patience exhausted. This music is simply not played with the verve we expect from a celebrated youth orchestra. There is no ecstasy, no exaltation - just notes. A real dud.

The sound is a bit muddy and soft-edged: the drums thud soggly, the brass is too recessed and everything is a little muffled for a modern, digital, state-of-the-art DG recording. This discs is a real mixed bag which will, for some, be hopelessly compromised by the performance of the best-known item but might still to others be desirable for the accounts of the lesser-known music. --- Ralph Moore "Ralph operaphile"

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