

Still Champion in the Tchaikovsky Competition

By RICHARD FREED

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BEFORE ANTAL DORATI'S recent recording activity made him the world's champion Haydn conductor—with the symphony cycle completed for London/Decca; the complete keyboard concertos with his wife, Ilse von Alpenheim, for Vox; and the phenomenal complete opera series now under way for Philips—he had established a similar record on behalf of Tchaikovsky.

No other conductor has recorded so many of Tchaikovsky's works, and, by and large, none has presented them more persuasively. By way of pointed reminder, we have three major releases this month, one of them a stunning remake, the others glorious refurbishings of classic recordings from the mid-1960s.

It is no secret that Dorati has been for decades an incomparable conductor of music for the dance; one of the most popular of ballet scores, after all, is his own *Graduation Ball*. When his first recording of *The Nutcracker*, with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, was issued in mono more than 20 years ago, it was greeted, without hyperbole, as a revelation; his 1962 remake with the London Symphony Orchestra was even more attractive, not only because of its fine stereo sound, but for the sparkling playing of the LSO, which Dorati had helped substantially to become one of the most versatile of the world's great orchestras.

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Now Philips has brought out a third Dorati *Nutcracker*, this one with the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam (6747 257, two discs).

Essentially, what we have here is the same blend of spirit and elegance as before, set off now in a still more opulent sonic frame. One small but endearing advantage is the use of a boys' choir as Tchaikovsky specified (here the Choir of St. Bavo Cathedral, Haarlem) instead of the women's voices usually heard in the Snowflake scene at the end of Act I. I do wish Philips would not persist, though, in putting two discs in a box thick enough for six; in this case it was not done to accommodate an elaborate booklet—the notes are the skimpiest offered with any *Nutcracker*.

It does seem, too, that the great Dutch orchestra may be a bit less fluid and flexible in this particular music than the LSO, which responded to Dorati's leadership with more flair, more apparent spontaneity, more of a sense of shared delight. I would not want to suggest that the new version is anything less than distinguished, but the infectiousness of its predecessor was something very special; the Mercury sound was less sumptuous than that of the Amsterdam recording (which, however, tends to be a little overpowering now and then), but might have come up handsomely in a "Golden Imports" reprocessing.

Dorati's 1965 set of Tchaikovsky's first three symphonies, also with the LSO, has been given the "Golden Imports" treatment, and the resultant reissue is enormously appealing (SR13-77009, three discs). The sound is first-rate, much closer to that of the master tapes I remember than the original release in which the *Little Russian* was crowded on to a single side, or the sub-

sequent repackaging with the last three symphonies on domestic pressings.

The big waltz in the scherzo of the First Symphony might have been a bit more animated, but otherwise this set comes closer than any other to offering what might be called definitive statements of these enchanting symphonies. The *Little Russian* in particular is a triumph of both interpretation and execution, and I doubt that a stronger case has yet been made for Tchaikovsky's only symphony in a major key, No. 3 in D. (Philips might have been more careful, though, than to identify the late James Lyons, author of the excellent notes, in the present tense.)

The three-disc symphony set is of-

fered for the price of two records, and so are all of Tchaikovsky's Suites for orchestra, which Dorati recorded with the New Philharmonia Orchestra a year or two later (SRI3-77008). All four suites were composed between the Fourth and Fifth symphonies, a period in which Tchaikovsky experimented with various forms he had not touched before and never used again. No. 3 in G (Op. 55) is relatively well known, both from Balanchine's choreographic treatment and from concert performances of the concluding Theme and Variations movement on its own; No. 4 in G (*Mozartiana*, Op. 61), also choreographed by Balanchine, is heard occasionally, but the other two suites qualify as discoveries for most of us, and they are fascinating ones.

No. 1 in D minor (Op. 43) has one familiar section, the adorable *Marche miniature*, but it gives no hint of the variety and substance to be found in that suite's five other movements. No. 2 in C major (Op. 53) has the most surprises, including a rumbustious *Scherzo burlesque*, very much *à la russe*, in which the orchestra is augmented by four accordions. All the suites have qualities in common with Tchaikovsky's great ballet scores; two of them—Nos. 2 and 3—contain characteristic waltzes. There is no other recording of the Second Suite at present, but even if there were it would probably come no closer to matching Dorati's superb realization than the competing versions of Nos. 1, 3 and 4 that do exist. The new side layout is immeasur-

ably more sensible than that of the original release, and the new pressings are sheer perfection. This set, I would think, is indispensable to anyone who enjoys Tchaikovsky—and that would seem to mean just about everyone with ears. □

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