

Amsterdam Sinfonietta New CD/SACD
Shostakovich Chamber Symphonies^a –
 C minor, Op. 110a; A flat, Op. 118a
 (both arr. Rudolf Barshai).
Weinberg Concertino for Violin and
Strings, Op. 42^b.

Amsterdam Sinfonietta/Candida Thompson
 (violin).

Channel Classics CCS5A34313 (full price, 1 hour
 6 minutes). Website www.channelclassics.com
 Producer/Engineer C. Jared Saks. Producer Willem
 de Bordes. Dates ^aApril 13th–15th, 2012, ^bMay 3rd,
 2013.

Comparisons:

Shostakovich:

COE/Barshai (DG) 477 544-2 (1989, two discs)

Tapiola Sinfonietta/Kantorow (BIS) CD1180

(2001, rev. May 2005)

Weinberg:

Ostrovsky, Bournemouth SO/Sanderling

(Naxos) 8.572631 (2010)

This exceptional issue celebrates the 25th anniversary of the Amsterdam Sinfonietta, a 22-player string ensemble led by its artistic director and concertmaster, the violinist Candida Thompson. Founded in 1988, the Amsterdam Sinfonietta garnered widespread critical acclaim for its concert appearances, and for its recordings for Channel Classics under the leadership of its original director, Lev Markiz. Its relationship with Channel has coalesced further since Thompson's appointment in 2003, and this silver jubilee recording of works by Shostakovich and Weinberg reaffirms the ensemble's reputation for original programming and incendiary performances.

The principal works here are the two Chamber Symphonies for strings by Shostakovich, transcriptions by Rudolf Barshai of the composer's Eighth and Tenth String Quartets. Dedicated 'to the memory of the victims of war and fascism', the C minor Quartet No. 8, Op. 110 appeared in 1960, though more recent research, endorsed by several of Shostakovich's letters of the period, indicate that the work had an especially intimate and personal significance for him, being in many senses autobiographical.

Shostakovich's musical talisman, the note sequence D, E flat, C and B, combined with themes from many of his earlier works (including the First and Eighth Symphonies, the Second Trio and the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk District*) and interwoven with fragments from *Götterdämmerung* and Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique', contributes much to the obsessive and embittered atmosphere of the score. This new account is emotionally searing and inescapable in its ferocity; few rival performances seem to have captured the work's labyrinthine circle of despair and angst so affectingly and eloquently as this. From every technical standpoint, the playing of the Amsterdam Sinfonietta is first-rate: the taxing passagework and complex exchanges of the second and third movements are at once

entirely cohesive and the way these players listen and react to each other is enthralling.

Shostakovich dedicated his String Quartet No. 10 in A flat, Op. 118 (1964) to Mieczysław Weinberg (1916–96), one of the first to see the score of the former's Eighth Quartet and a lifelong friend and confidante of the composer. 'Although I never had a lesson from him', wrote Weinberg, 'I consider myself his pupil, his flesh and blood.' He composed prolifically, turning out 22 symphonies, 17 quartets, film scores, operas and concertos, in total some 153 opus numbers.

Weinberg almost certainly never heard his 1948 Concertino for violin and strings, yet this wistfully reflective work, lasting around 15 minutes, is a useful addition to the literature, especially when played with the finesse and attentiveness it receives here from Thompson. The piece also appears on a Naxos CD of little-known Russian violin concertos, played in a more forthright and declamatory style by Sergey Ostrovsky, with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra under Thomas Sanderling. Of the two, Thompson's is the more compelling and idiomatic reading, rich-hued, complex but appealingly understated, too, while the Naxos engineering is never going to match the purity and radiance of Channel's astonishing engineering.

Barshai recorded both Chamber Symphonies with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe for DG, and one might well have expected their accounts to be definitive. But despite the COE's well-ordered playing, Barshai's readings do not match the stinging vehemence and obsessiveness, nor attain the moments of breath-catching stasis, of these new Amsterdam recordings. The Jewish influences pervading the Op. 118a Chamber Symphony, transcribed by Barshai from Shostakovich's Tenth String Quartet, register no less poignantly in Thompson's deeply moving performance, and the formidably difficult second movement (marked *Allegro furioso*) again demonstrates the precision of ensemble playing achieved by the Amsterdam players to thrilling effect.

On BIS Jean-Jacques Kantorow directs the excellent Tapiola Sinfonietta, which plays hardly less capably, and again has the tight-knit unanimity you'd expect from a string chamber ensemble of comparable proportions. Kantorow's interpretations are wholly plausible, and the sonics accord fully with the high standards we've come to expect from BIS, and yet what these accounts, and to a degree Barshai's too, singularly lack is a palpable sense of direct personal involvement – as if each player's very life depended on it. That's what communicates itself so readily and powerfully to the listener here and makes these extraordinary performances by Thompson and the Amsterdam Sinfonietta an undisputed triumph for all concerned. Bravo – and a happy anniversary!

Michael Jameson