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CD reviews

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Beethoven / Strauss, by Taiwan Philharmonic Live

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BEETHOVEN/ STRAUSS, Symphony No.7, Till Eulenspiegel, Taiwan Philharmonic Live, MU 130002; NSO 022

PROKOFIEV, Symphony No.3, Scythian Suite, Cinderella Suite No.1 (excerpts), Taiwan Philharmonic Live, MU 130003; NSO 023

One of the most ambitious projects of Taiwan's National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) in recent years has been the 7-CD set Highlights of Shao-Chia Lu & Taiwan Philharmonic Live. In

essence, what this boxed set contains is two CDs devoted to music by Olivier Messiaen, with a little Wagner thrown in, a single CD devoted almost equally to Beethoven and Richard Strauss, two CDs devoted to Prokofiev and another two containing French music (by Cesar Franck, Debussy and Ravel).

This is too much music to do justice in a single review, so we will consider it in two parts. Today we will report on the two Prokofiev CDs and the Beethoven/ Richard Strauss CD. Next month we will see what the two CDs devoted to French music, plus the two devoted mostly to Olivier Messiaen (also a French composer) have to offer.

But it's worth pointing out before we start that the two largely Messiaen CDs are, unlike the other items, not available except as part of the 7-CD boxed set. This is for complex reasons involving the record label. Everyone involved with both the performance and the recording was satisfied with the result, but the product nonetheless remains "For Promotion Only," and is duly so labeled.

What are we to say about Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)? That he was a master modernist, that he was a Russian genius who became influenced by French models, that he combined spectacular innovations with an ability to write lovable melodies in the traditional manner or that he was international in stature but forced to remain in the Soviet Union once he returned there from Paris in 1936?

All or most of these things are probably to some extent true, but his stature is anyway assured. This is illustrated by the decision of the NSO's music director, Lu Shao-Chia (呂紹嘉), to fill two CDs in the set currently under consideration exclusively with his work.

First comes the Symphony No 3. Its origins lie in the failure of the authorities to approve his opera The Fiery Angel, with its story of a young girl who experienced visions in the Middle Ages and was eventually burned at the stake. Prokofiev responded by using the music for this symphony. The problem with this is that operas last several hours and all

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the events need to have their musical accompaniment. The symphony, by contrast, has from its earliest times been concise, and involved with meaning. Prokofiev's eclectic symphony almost inevitably doesn't have these qualities.

Nevertheless, Maestro Lu's forces handle their material with consummate mastery. This is by far the most impressive of the Prokofiev performances on these two CDs devoted to the Russian master. The final movement alone is enough to make your hair stand on end. Unfortunately, the entire work was somewhat undermined when The Fiery Angel was finally staged a year after the composer's death.

Next we have excerpts from the Cinderella Suite No 1, a concert version of some of the composer's hugely successful ballet music for that story. I found this rather underwhelming, possibly because the ballet when heard complete is so very touching and memorable.

When Prokofiev's Scythian Suite was first performed in January 1916 it was greeted with howls of derision. The Scythians were a nomadic people who flourished 2,000 years ago and more north of the Black Sea. They were known to the ancient Greeks and to the Chinese. The general view has been that they were sun-worshipping barbarians given to the excessive consumption of cannabis, a perception reflected in this music.

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