

Site review by Geohominid December 27, 2013

Norway's Lawo Classics label presents us here with an intriguingly unusual compilation of wind band music. The Royal Norwegian Air Force Band was established in 2006, but it has existed for almost 200 years as a band of the Norwegian Armed Forces. Formed in Trondheim on Norway's west coast in 1818, and undergoing several name changes since, it was, for over one hundred years, Trondheim's only professional ensemble. Since the band was transferred to the Norwegian Air Force, its activities around Central Norway have expanded to be country-wide. It is now involved in many innovative concerts and festivals, particularly concentrating on young people's attitude to music. Its motto is "No genre is unknown to us", and this disc certainly illustrates that.

Most of the music in this often testing programme of Russian band music is by Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978) and dates back to "The Art of Fear" for musicians in the Stalin regime. Two lighter pieces, however, lighten the bread, as it were, and coincidentally, both have become international favourites. Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) died before the Russian Revolution in 1917, but his "Flight of the Bumble Bee" made him a household name. This technically demanding piece was taken from the opera by Rimsky-Korsakov called "The Tale of Tsar Saltan", Op. 57. It comes as the prelude to Act III, where a prince rescues a swan which is attacked by a bumble bee. Perhaps some of the Royal Norwegian Air Force Band are apiarists, because their virtuoso playing and the detailed capture of orchestral instruments are in a fine recording makes it one of the most convincing swan chases I have heard. Gerardo Lasilli's deft arrangement for wind band is used here, but note that Rimsky himself was Inspector of Bands of the Russian Navy, writing and arranging for bands.

Dmitry Kabalevsky (1904-1987) was a pioneer of the official Soviet tradition of socialist-realist music and for decades he was a leading light of the Union of Soviet Composers. Kabalevsky made a crucial impact on Soviet musical education. His ditties and nursery-rhymes for very small children, his prolific output of study-pieces for young pianists and other instrumentalists, his innumerable songs, cantatas and anthems for the Pioneers and other Soviet youth organisations, made him easily the most familiar composer to anyone who grew up in the USSR. His music was simple, tuneful and designed not to put Stalin in a bad mood. The Norwegian Air Force Band rides his "Comedians' Galop" with a sizzling xylophone solo. The piece, which most listeners will find very familiar, was arranged from an orchestral site of his children's play 'The Inventor and the Comedians'.

Reinhold Glière (1875-1956) was a conductor until 1908, when he began to compose. A survivor from the late Romantic era, he managed to keep official approval in Soviet Russia throughout his life. This led to many commissions for Communist Red Letter Days, amongst them a band piece with the unwieldy title 'Solemn Overture for the Twentieth Anniversary of the October Revolution' (1937). The band produce a fine sampling of the glorification of the Party and the Workers, using Glière's colourful scoring.

Aram Khachaturian was a much-loved Soviet composer of Armenian background. His continued vein of colourful Russian exoticism from 19th century composers like Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov made him popular to the Soviet State Music Czars and concert audiences. After Stalin, he courageously experimented with many of the modernist composition practices from the West, bringing them to Russia. Now not very well known in the West, a movement of his ballet 'Spartacus', 'Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia' was used a theme music for a highly successful BBC drama series. 'The Onedin Line' brought much attention of Khachaturian to the West, with a brief upsurge of recordings of his music (and many conducting appearances).

Khachaturian's fondness for Russian folk and dance music is represented in the disc's selections, as are several Soviet-oriented marches. The 'Soviet Police March' (1973) is of particular note, as the commission by the Minister for Police was first given to Shostakovich. The story may be partly apocryphal, but Shostakovich's ironic and witty march was rejected as not ostentatious enough, so Khachaturian was approached. As shown delectably here, Khachaturian's quick march is breezily cheerful, with a somewhat pompous middle tune, embroidered with sneering muted trumpets - all this the opposite character of the State Police as experienced by the general public. We don't know what the Minister thought of it.

The titular and longest piece on this disc is band version of a suite from Khachaturian's music for a film, 'The Battle of Stalingrad', which was arguably the turning point of World War II. Late in his career, Khachaturian was approached by treasurer of the British Band Federation, Robert Peel, to write a band arrangement of an orchestral suite which Khachaturian himself had made. The ailing composer was very pleased that this music should once again be aired, because he had a high opinion of it. The new version was made by Grigory Kalinkovich under close supervision of Khachaturian.

The Suite contains eight movements each with titles referring to the German invasion of the city and their ultimate defeat. The style is Khachaturian's modernistic, dissonant pictorial tone painting of the brutality, starvation and suffering of the Russian inhabitants of Stalingrad and achieving their final freedom at terrible cost. This is a powerful and gritty performance, vividly rendered under the Band's principal conductor and Art Director, Leif Arne Pedersen.

Pedersen himself has had an interesting career; his career began as a clarinettist of the Staff Band of the Norwegian Armed Forces. He performed for some time in the Bergen Symphony Orchestra, and is now principal clarinettist of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra. His great experience from conducting all the Norwegian military bands, combined with his familiarity of full symphonic orchestras certainly shows in this disc; the playing is crisp and generally light-footed in rhythmic response, with a stoic approach to the deep emotions of the 'Battle of Stalingrad'.

Lawo tend to mark their CDs as SACD only on the back of their Digipacks, in very small type. This recording turns out to be Stereo SACD/Stereo CD. The recording was made in located in Trondheim's Byscenen, Central Norway's new venue for concerts. While the left-right spatial sound stage is clear and detailed, there isn't a great deal of front-to-back information, which a 5.0 pick-up system might have improved. The ambience is more that of a studio rather than a large concert hall, and I did feel that it was a touch dry. Nevertheless, the sound is very listenable, as, indeed, is the programme, barring perhaps the gritty Battle of Stalingrad, which is harrowing and unrepentantly (but meaningfully) ugly for much of its time.

Congratulations to Lawo Classics for presenting this challenging programme, which shows off the range of skills available to the Royal Norwegian Air Force Band, very well recorded - but in Stereo only.

Copyright © 2013 John Miller and SA-CD.net