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**Reinhold GLIÈRE (1875-1956)**

Solemn Overture Op.72 (1937) [7:29]

**Nikolai RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1844-1908)**

The Flight of the Bumblebee (1900) [1:27]

**Aram KHACHATURIAN (1903-1978)**

Armenian Folksong and Dance (1932) [4:57]

Lezginka (Gayane Ballet) (1942) [2:25]

Soviet Police March (1973) [4:02]

Uzbek March and Dancing Song (1932) [4:27]

**Dmitry KABALEVSKY (1904-1987)**

Comedians' Galop (The Comedians' Suite Op.26) (1938) [1:35]

**Aram KHACHATURIAN (1903-1978)**

The Battle of Stalingrad Op.74a (1949) [28:24]

Royal Norwegian Air Force Band/Leif Arne Pedersen

rec. Byscenen, Trondheim, Norway, 21-25 May 2012

**LAWO CLASSICS LWC1045** [54:46]

The Royal Norwegian Air Force Band has existed under its current title for just eight years but under different guises there has been a military band in Norway for nearly two hundred years. The reputation it has as one of the finest military ensembles is well deserved and this disc can only enhance that reputation. Throughout the playing is admirably clean, articulate and subtly musical in a way that many might not associate with the genre.

The programme is a combination of original works and arrangements of music by Soviet composers. I use the term advisedly for although Khachaturian was immensely proud of his Armenian cultural heritage all the music here ultimately served the Soviet State. This disc opens with Glière's Solemn Overture. I have written before about the slightly guilty pleasure I take in Glière's music - rather obvious and unsubtle though it can often be, the tunes are infectious and the compositional craft clear. So it proves with this Overture which was previously unknown to me. The major caveat though, which applies to the whole disc, is just how thin the musical value of the piece and whether or not its full character is exploited by the polished and urbane playing of the Norwegian band. Everything is just slightly too refined and considered. What is needed is the blare and glare of a *real* Soviet ensemble playing this as though it were the greatest music ever written and summoning the Motherland to arms. The liner points out that this is a piece that has maintained its toe-hold in the repertoire and I can understand why; the music is immediately appealing in a rather generalised way and sounds like a lot of other similar works but I think even the most ardent Glière admirer - a group in which I would include myself - would be hard put to argue for its place amongst the pantheon of his greatest works.

The disc is bulked out by three arrangements. Again, well-played - no very well played - though these are, I am left wondering just what they add to our appreciation of the music itself. Certainly both the Kabalevsky Comedian's Galop and Khachaturian Lezginka from Gayane sound rather pale in direct comparison to their orchestral originals. I am not sure of the playing strength of the band - no list of band is given - but there is a rather odd picture in the liner of eighteen people standing on a fighter jet's wing so I assume that is their personnel. Compare that to a minimum of eighty in a symphony orchestra playing the same music and the difference in sheer sonic weight alone is clear. I remember seeing Svetlanov conduct his USSR Symphony Orchestra in concert where they gave the Lezginka as an encore. This was nearly thirty years ago yet it remains in my memory as one of the great moments of concert hall theatricality. You would not know the Norwegian band were playing the same piece in terms of impact and emotion. That being said the collective dexterity and precise ensemble work is shown to maximum effect in the third arrangement; Rimsky-Korsakov's finger-twisting Flight of the Bumblebee.

The remainder of the disc is given over to other works by Khachaturian. The Armenian Folksong and Dance is an original band work written for the fifteenth anniversary of the Red Army in 1932. This is

Khachaturian on familiar and fertile soil, lilting cross-rhythms and nagging harmonic and rhythmic ostinati. The Norwegian's rather laid-back approach certainly works helped by the clear and unfussy engineering which allows the skill of the composer's part-writing to emerge to full effect. Again, I do feel that this music would benefit from a greater sense of sensual abandon. Interesting though to hear how Khachaturian first made use of musical material that he would recycle elsewhere - first in the trio for clarinet, violin and piano and later in his Dance Suite for orchestra. One of the great merits of this pair of pieces - and the similar Uzbek March and Dancing Song - is their brevity. Khachaturian had a tendency to musical verbosity which did not always show him in the strongest light but these are two pairs of very characterful pieces.

Unfortunately, the remainder of the programme shows the composer in less complimentary light. The Soviet Police March is simply generic and almost wholly unmemorable. The main interest is the juxtaposition between the jaunty happy go lucky feel of the piece and the idea of the institution for whom it was written - a kind of slightly disconcerting Lubyanka Quickstep. The liner note writer claims that this was written in substitution for a Shostakovich March deemed too subversive. Shostakovich did write a March of the Soviet Militia for military band, op. 139 (1970) but this is neither the penultimate opus the liner writer claims and 3 years before the Khachaturian work so the latter is hardly a quick substitute. The disc takes its title from the last and longest work on the disc; an eight movement suite from the 1949 film The Battle of Stalingrad. The original work is an orchestral score and this arrangement is by Grigori Kalinkovich and was made with the approval of the composer.

Sadly, the score proves to be exactly the kind of agit-prop piece of hokum one might expect - and the relatively undifferentiated tonal palette of a wind ensemble rather than a full orchestra reinforces that impression. The exact same suite in its original form was released on Marco Polo played by the Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra which I have heard. There is a third version played by the Armenian Philharmonic under Loris Tjeknavorian as a coupling to the 2nd Symphony which I have not. Putting aside the musical qualities of the work for the moment, the Slovak recording is more impressive because it embraces the gaudy melodrama of the music and the actual sound of the orchestra is surely closer to the brash style most appropriate for this music. Having heard other discs in the ASV/Tjeknavorian series I suspect that disc will be 'better' still. With movement titles that include, "The Enemy is Doomed", "For Our Motherland" and "Eternal Glory to the Heroes" - a rather effective sombre hymn-like movement - do not expect many pastel hues or subtle nuance. Actually, the "Enemy is Doomed" is the most effective section of the work - grimly brooding and building powerfully from a passacaglia like figure in the low strings. Khachaturian employs all the film composers tricks of distorted musical quotations - here The Red Flag - and extended repeated rhythmic and melodic cells allowing lengthy passages of screen time to be filled with the musical content. Cinematically this can work well - in musical isolation far less so. Composer-sanctioned or not the windband arrangement brings a lack of tonal palette that further reduces the music's impact significantly. Allied to that, the Norwegian player's refinement acts to inhibit its impact further. As a model of technical skill and agility this is excellent but not when it fails to serve the music as here - never louder than beautiful is a concept rarely applied to Khachaturian effectively. There is a nagging suspicion that the band under its principal conductor is more concerned about presenting itself as a polished and virtuosic ensemble rather than serving the music it plays.

Good engineering and a no-more-than-adequate liner booklet in Norwegian and English. There is little detailed information about the music and nothing about the band except a brief biography about it and conductor Leif Arne Pedersen. The bizarre picture of the band on the wing is printed twice - both ways round. The disc is presented in the now-popular cardboard gatefold form with the liner tucked into a fiddly pocket on the inside front cover. Playing time is a rather stingy sub-fifty-five minutes. Ultimately a disc for those interested in the genre rather than the music performed.

**Nick Barnard**