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Site review by Geohominid Yesterday 12:29 pm

Performance: ~~XXXX~~ Sonics (S/MC): ~~XXXX~~ / ~~XXXX~~

This is the latest of several fine Beethoven cycles on SA-CD to reach completion. It arrives in a very competitive market. Herreweghe's cycle with the Royal Flemish Philharmonic originated on the Talent label, and then was picked up by PentaTone. Herreweghe, with his long experience of period orchestra and classical choral work, had already produced a period-instrument Ninth in 1999 with the Orchestre des Champs-Élysées (and his period-trained Collegium Vocale Gent who also feature on the present disc). The Pentatone Ninth, like the earlier symphonies in the new cycle, is played with modern instruments, except for period trumpets and kettledrums with hard sticks, but follows some period Viennese performing practices such as controlled vibrato on the strings and execution of classical phrasing styles. Violin desks are disposed left and right to optimise Beethoven's many effective antiphonal textures.

There is no mention in the notes as to the edition used; Vänska and Järvi both use Jonathan del Mar's new revised version (1999). It would take extensive analysis of the recording to determine if that edition was in use here, but after following the performance with the del Mar score, my impression was that the latest edition was not in use.

Interestingly, Herreweghe's new Ninth comes in at 60:59 compared with his 1999 version at 64:18 (Haitink/LSO 68:10, Vänska/Minnesota 65:12, Järvi/D.K Bremen 63:55), reflecting his close approach to Beethoven's somewhat controversial metronome marks. As a reference, Norrington's recording with his London Classical Players set out to use the metronome marks, and lasts a mere 58:23.

The Royal Flemish Philharmonic play the first movement with plenty of spirit and energy, and at the pace taken, the mysterious separated falling fifths make sense as a theme rather than isolated motifs. By comparison, Haitink and the LSO sound positively dragging. However, while there is nimble and well-articulated playing of the many staccato string passages, the winds are rather underpowered, middle parts not always clear and the overall dynamic range is somewhat more compressed than with Vänska and Järvi.

Herreweghe's Scherzo has a notable lilt even at its fleet speed, more rhythmically alive than Vänska but not with the astonishing precision of Järvi's chamber orchestra. He does, however, manage the tempo change into the Trio without noticeably making a gear-change, the mark of a good conductor. Vänska finds an appealing and more earthy peasant character here, and Järvi's marvellously characterful wind section play a more prominent and humorous part with a truly exciting ensemble, and he also uncovers some delectable counter-melodies.

In the 'slow' movement, the RFP's playing lacks the sense of true repose and poetic tranquillity which is essential preparation for unleashing the choral finale upon the ears. As the note-values get faster in the successively more ornamented variations of theme 'b', the violins begin to sound merely hasty. Although certainly classical in its aspect, this movement's reading is rather plain. At much the same speed, Järvi's strings and winds make beautifully inflected slight rubatos in the playing of Beethoven's long lines, giving them grace, charm and fluid yet restful movement.

Despite his classical trumpets, Herreweghe's sudden eruption into Beethoven's dissonant 'horror fanfare' (which begins the theatrical entry to the Finale) is nowhere nearly as terrifyingly modern in sound as with Vänska and especially Järvi. The succeeding recitative by the basses and cellos rather loses its rhetorical edge by being played quite legato, while the lack of slurs in the score indicate detached playing. There isn't much as much character here in the blustering basses and cellos as they waspishly dismiss the successive appearances of themes from previous movements; other conductors apply more rubato and tension. This transition is a great piece of theatre on Beethoven's part; Vänska and Järvi make it much more dramatic and convincing. David Wilson-Johnson's rich bass voice roundly exhorts the audience to put all this aside and join in the jolly drinking song, but his request is rather stiff and formal. Goerne, for Järvi, is extraordinary here, lighting up Schiller's words of companionship and really communicating with the audience.

Herreweghe's Collegium Vocale Gent is joined in the Finale by the Academia Chigiana Siena. Their combined voices are fresh-sounding but often dominated by the sopranos, with less internal detail audible compared with the choirs of Vänska and Järvi. The soloists form a competent and spirited ensemble, although Christiane Oelze has a heavier vibrato than in her marvellous contribution to Järvi's soloists, where she also illuminates the text more with her adroit word-painting.