

while the Australian mezzo-soprano Fiona Campbell delivers O'Sullivan's words with keen empathy.

Top-notch sound and judicious balance from the team of producer Wayne Laird and engineer Adrian Hollay. The composer himself supplies succinct notes for each work and the booklet includes full texts. This bold Naxos pairing strikes me as well worth investigating. **Andrew Achenbach**

Kancheli

'The Legacy'

Complete Symphonies. Light Sorrow.

Liturgy (Mourned by the Wind)

Tbilisi Symphony Orchestra / Djansug Kakhidze

Cugate ℹ️ 5 CGC050 (4h 44' • ADD)

Also available separately: Symphonies Nos 1 & 2 (© CGC046), Nos 3-5 (ℹ️ 2 CGC047), Nos 6 & 7 (© CGC048), Light Sorrow & Liturgy (© CGC049)

Recorded 1994-95



The symphonies of Giya Kancheli (1935-2019) constitute a truly remarkable body

of work. They come out of the context of Soviet Georgia and all the social and cultural elements that implies, just as the symphonic work of Avet Terterian (1929-94) represents something similar for Armenia. While they are pervaded by a sense of sorrow, of impending doom, they also possess simultaneously an extraordinary power and a disarmingly delicate intimacy: this latter would be what would characterise much of Kancheli's work after he left his native country in 1991. They span the years 1967 to 1986, and are complemented in this five-disc set by a disc containing *Svetlaya pechal* ('Light Sorrow', 1985) and *Mourned by the Wind* for viola and orchestra (1986).

Kakhidze was a lifelong collaborator of Kancheli, and understood his work as few others can have done. Indeed, he conducted the premiere of Symphony No 1, and his deep understanding of it shines through in this performance: Kancheli's music is always a slow burn and it is essential to understand the structure as a whole, however shockingly disorientating the contrasts and sudden interruptions may be. While the First Symphony is in two movements, the Second (1970) is a single arch, which in fact comprises three movements played without a break, two slow movements surrounding a central *Allegro*. The work's subtitle is *Chants*, and it is a refraction of the composer's admiration for the traditional church music of his native

country, which he always said he was unable to understand and transmit. But here it is clear that the melody – the chant – played by the small group of soloists right at the end is the point at which the whole half-hour span of the work has been aiming to arrive, and Kakhidze's shaping of the symphony is fundamental to the listener's understanding of this.

The second and third discs of the set contain Symphonies Nos 3, 4 and 5. No 3 dates from 1973 and continues the composer's exploration of his native country's traditions, inspired as it was by the simultaneous intoning of a Svaneti funeral lament and a boisterous, celebratory song. Not that Kancheli uses the material in an obvious fashion: it serves as a starting point, provoking Natalya Zeifas in her booklet notes to speculate on exactly what it is that makes this work – again one of brutal contrasts – so Georgian. While Georgian-ness will, of course, be in the eye of the beholder (or the ear of the listener), such an apparently unanswerable question lies, in fact, precisely at the centre of the enigma that was Kancheli. I must pause here to mention the outstanding playing from the Tbilisi Symphony Orchestra; if anyone understands what Georgian-ness is, these players must. The strings are rich but refined, the brass and wind incisive, and never for a moment do they lose the narrative thread – tension is maintained throughout.

While the commemoration of Michelangelo is the ostensible *raison d'être* of the Fourth Symphony (1974), the work that brought Kancheli's name before a wider public, once again we are plunged into a world of far-from-Italian mystery, initiated by tolling bells and exploiting sequences of chamber sonorities. It is a truly haunting work. The Fifth (1977), dedicated to the memory of the composer's parents, is the nearest he comes – up to this point – to Schnittke. It is not that it is polystylistic in Schnittke's barnstorming fashion but that the huge contrasts in register, dynamics and tone now also include deliberate evocations of childhood, in the form of a deliberately 'naive' melody in C major played on the harpsichord. This is music that bears a huge emotional load.

The last two symphonies date from 1980 and 1986 respectively. The Sixth was a commission from Kurt Masur, who conducted the first performance in Leipzig in 1981. It is elemental in precisely the way Terterian is: one feels that one is listening, so to speak, to the shifting of tectonic plates. And that feeling of something imminent, that sense of foreboding, keeps the listener attentive so that the ear

becomes attuned to the constantly varying chamber-size groups and is then genuinely shocked by the massive eruptions of the full orchestra. With the Seventh, written for the Prague Philharmonic, we are in uncharted waters. I mentioned Schnittke earlier, but this is where the two composers really meet. The work is like a whirligig of associations of different kinds of music, usefully elaborated in Zeifas's notes; but while the dramatic contrasts are expected, one is more perplexed than ever as to why they should be these particular contrasts and, even more, as to why the work coheres in quite the way it does. In the hands of a lesser composer it would have been a recipe for disaster.

Light Sorrow (1985, another commission from Masur) was, I remember, the first work by Kancheli I ever heard, in a recording from the Leningrad Contemporary Music Festival from, if I am not mistaken, 1988. Its impact has not faded over the years, and I continue to think it perhaps his greatest work. Setting words by Tabidze, Goethe, Shakespeare and Pushkin, it evokes a world of lost innocence without a trace of sentimentality. This performance is sublime, transmitting the music's knife-edge delicacy with tremendous precision. From the following year comes another memorial work, *Mourned by the Wind*, a 'Liturgy' in memory of the composer's friend, the musicologist Givi Ordzhonikidze. This is a work in which mourning is more palpable, because more personal, and which also relates perhaps more directly to the cycle of symphonies in its anatomically detailed approach to orchestration.

I must return to the question of the performances: they are quite simply outstanding throughout, combining the extremes of tranquillity and the brutal outbursts that it is so essential to balance in Kancheli's music. The documentation is sketchy, so that one does not know exactly when each symphony was recorded, but they have all been beautifully remastered by Mikheil Kilosanidze from recordings made at the Kakhidze Centre for Music in Tbilisi. The booklet notes could also have done with some more intensive copy-editing – most seriously, there is no reference anywhere, as far as I can see, to the boy soloists and choir for *Light Sorrow* and no mention of the viola soloist in *Mourned by the Wind*! – but let no one with the slightest interest in this giant among composers be dissuaded from buying these five discs, which constitute such a magnificent monument to his life and work. **Ivan Moody**