



Czech Philharmonic

Beloved Friend: Tchaikovsky Project with Semyon Bychkov

Boxset Release

30 August 2019 (Decca Classics)

Inaugural Trophée Radio Classique Nomination 2019

A delectable package for the Tchaikovsky lover: most of the composer's great orchestral concert music, performed by Russian conductor Semyon Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic. They give us the six numbered symphonies plus *Manfred*, *Romeo and Juliet*, the *Serenade for Strings* and the three Piano Concertos with Kirill Gerstein as soloist. It is especially rewarding to have the original versions of the First and Second Concertos. Beautifully played, charismatically interpreted.

The Daily Mail, 27 December 2019
6 of the Best in 2019

Each of the other six symphonies, in its own way, receives revelatory treatment, helped by the exceptional quality of the Decca recorded sound... Although the orchestral writing of the first three is sublime, they lack the show-stopping tunes of the later ones, and the great ensemble passages of *Manfred*. Thanks to the clarity, in every sense, of these performances, one can make a fresh assessment of the first three, for their depths become immediately apparent. As for the "big three": the Fifth is perhaps the most brilliant and assured performance, showing Tchaikovsky in all his moods... the Sixth teeters on perfection. If you are still wondering what to ask for from Father Christmas, you could do far worse than this stunning collection.

The Daily Telegraph, 23 December 2019

The Tchaikovsky cycle is a well thought-through project in which every detail has been considered with exquisite care, from the interpretation to the capturing of the sound. Some words that might describe the results are balance, intensity, sensitivity and clarity. Bychkov's recordings reflect what he expressed very clearly with words: the balance between the emotion and the intellect... The Czech Philharmonic's contribution is a real delight from beginning to end. There are plenty of examples of the magnificent quality of the strings but the *Serenade*, performed with extraordinary filling and rich colour, is the best of them. When things are done well, with one of the best conductors on the scene and with an orchestra like this, it is logical that the result will be first rate. Without a doubt, these recordings. Do not miss them.

Scherzo, December 2019
Best Recordings of the Month

The First Piano Concerto, presented here in its original form: a revelation of delicacy, and a war horse as you've never heard.

The New York Times, 12 December 2019
The 25 Best Classical Music Tracks of 2019

And while I enjoyed Semyon Bychkov's readings of Symphonies 4-6 very much (particularly a punchy account of No. 4), it's the less well known works which really stand out. Semyon Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic tackled the symphonies in reverse order, their recordings of Nos. 1-3 a culmination rather than a warm-up. What's not to love about Tchaikovsky's First? The opening melody, doubled on flute and bassoon, is already superb, and I'm always tickled by its string reprise a few minutes later, winds chirruping away in the background. Possibly my favourite Tchaikovsky moment. Or maybe it's the shadowy scherzo of No 3, dispatched with rare finesse here. No 2's big horn solo is sweetly done, and there's a spectacular tam tam thwack in the last movement. The transparent orchestral sound suits these works really well, though Bychkov's brass still have plenty of weight... Production values are consistently high; this is a covetable set.

The Arts Desk, 7 December 2019

It is a boxset full of lyricism from a traditional musical ensemble, that is coherent and well conducted.

Le Quotidien du Medecin, 25 November 2019

The fine motorist Kirill Petrenko and the interpreter-extremist Teodor Currentzis may have recently presented more daring Tchaikovsky readings, but the warmth of the orchestral sound, the blazing emotional fire of this complete recording dive deep into the Russian soul of the cosmopolitan composer. In these pre-winter days, these recordings warm the ear and the heart.

Salzburger Nachrichten, 19 November 2019

A passionate recording, enthralling, precise and totally free of kitsch...

Die Bühne, November 2019



Semyon Bychkov's Fourth with the Czech Philharmonic suggests solemnity rather than defiance, especially in the opening fanfares. Traditionally the F minor journeys form warning alarms to reckless abandon, with all manner of subtle asides in between, here sensitively negotiated tempo-wise so nothing jars. In the second movement, winds and horns are tellingly supportive of the cellos and at 5'32" the basses are nicely underlined, a detail that hardly registers on many other versions. The Scherzo is crisp as ice, with prominently screeching piccolos. If you opt for Bychkov, you won't be short-changed.

Gramophone, November 2019

The sound is a beauty, relishing that bloom and resonance you get in Prague's Rudolfinum without the Czech Phil ever sounding too soft-grained. If you seek single-disc issues only, *Manfred* and the *Pathétique* certainly won't disappoint as among the very best in a crowded field.

BBC Music Magazine, November 2019

The result is phenomenal: the harsh, abrupt sound of both strings and winds, the electricity of the quartet and, the extinguishable rhythmic rage make Tchaikovsky sound so modern, so powerful, so unromantic that the vision of these works changes ones view of additional works like *Francesca da Rimini*, *Romeo et Juliet*, a cool and brilliant *Serenade for Strings*, and a *Manfred* which is pure theatre and in which every bar is astounding.

Artamag, 26 October 2019

Semyon Bychkov and his orchestra are the model of natural tension, as in the *Andante* from the Fifth Symphony, which first blossoms and then gradually sinks back. The music condenses into a sounding organism. Not only in the symphonies that make up the bulk of *The Tchaikovsky Project*, but also in works such as the *Serenade for Strings* or in the *Fantasy Overture*. Here the composer combines the sweet longing of the lovers and the conflicts of the enemy families into a stirring drama in which the opposites collide directly at the end. Here, too, Bychkov demonstrates the virtuosity and vigilance of the Czech Philharmonic.

Deutschlandfunk, 6 October 2019

The orchestral playing is consistently outstanding – rich, characterful, lyrically responsive – so that it's easy to understand why Bychkov was so keen to perform Tchaikovsky with the Czech musicians... The drama of *Manfred* is magnificently projected, just as it is in *Romeo and Juliet* (with the Czech Philharmonic strings at their finest) and *Francesca da Rimini*.

The Guardian, 4 October 2019
Classical Album of the Week

These are vivid, exciting performances, Bychkov drawing from the orchestra a warm sound that's thrilling without ever losing refinement. The highlights are many: hear the aching winds in the First Symphony's *Adagio cantabile*, over throbbing strings, or revel in the slithering *Scherzo* of the Third Symphony, the intensity of colour in the dramatic *Francesca da Rimini*, and the incredible growling bassoon in the *Pathétique*'s opening, Bychkov going on to stoke a crackling accelerando... Certainly in repertoire so well-worn every listener will have their own tastes, but this survey by Bychkov and his Czech band makes for a deeply rewarding listen.

Limelight, October 2019
Editor's Choice

The boxset of seven discs follows the release of two single discs: Semyon Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic, of which he is Chief Conductor, have recorded all the symphonies including "Manfred" as well as Tchaikovsky's piano concertos, together with several other orchestral works. The Orchestra impresses with its warmly rehearsed almost chamber quality sound, through its lyricism and, when required, through its concentrated power that Bychkov never pushes for its own sake. The cycle emerges as coherent and homogeneous, free of extremes, and both far-sighted and definitive. Never melodramatic, the cycle is organic with a hint of "Russian" spirit.

Semyon Bychkov, who succeeded Jiří Bělohlávek as Chief Conductor and Music Director of the Czech Philharmonic during this "project", had no such qualms – and an ally in pianist Kirill Gerstein for the realisation of a comprehensive survey of his music as a newly indispensable seven-disc set from a major label... The musicians who will be performing Tchaikovsky over the next few months should know that some of us will be bringing refreshed ears.

The Herald Scotland, 21 September 2019

Throughout, Bychkov draws playing from the Philharmonic of the utmost sensitivity to details in balance and articulation. As a result, these are truly purposeful performances.

Arts Fuse, 14 September 2019

Bychkov launched the Tchaikovsky Project, an ambitious exploration of the composer's orchestral repertoire, with a spacious, somewhat Teutonic *Pathétique* in 2016. This was followed by a compelling *Manfred*: dark and brooding, theatrically exhilarating. Now the series is complete, the Czech Phil responding to the conductor's lithe, flexible baton with gripping freshness in the rarely programmed early symphonies. Contrasting accounts of great love stories – *Romeo and Juliet*, lyrical and romantic, and *Francesca da Rimini*, peering into the abyss of hell – are thrilling, as are the Third and Fourth Symphonies... the symphonies and other orchestral works are for the ages.

The Sunday Times, 15 August 2019



Album of the Week

The Czech sound is abundantly warm and inviting but modest and unflashy in colour, cast and delivery. It's the kind of playing that frees the music to do its embraceable thing.

Gramophone, October 2019

Over the course of some eight hours of music, Bychkov shows off all of his most reliable conducting moves — his ability to shape a broad rhythmic phrase that's both pliable and firm, his assured ear for orchestral color and dynamic shadings, his command of symphonic rhetoric. The distinctively dark and gritty textures of this orchestra have rarely sounded so urgent or so robust.

San Francisco Chronicle, 11 September 2019

"The Tchaikovsky Project" is an intelligent 'white-gloved' standard. Highly recommended.

ConcertoNet, 30 August 2019

The conductor here is the Russian-born Semyon Bychkov, unambiguously one of the good guys, who, after decades spent paying his dues, has recently hit the sweet spot where every note speaks, every gesture ignites, and — crucially — critics actually notice... *Manfred* is a vast, glowering emotional apocalypse, painted in lurid oils and seething with drama. I recommend diving straight in.

The Spectator, 29 August 2019

This edition is a rich fund of great music. The interpretation of the symphonies has all the makings of a reference recording. The warm sound of the Czech Philharmonic, which is famous far beyond the borders of its homeland, is eminently suited to the lyrical aspects of Tchaikovsky's music. Slow movements like the plaintive finale of the Sixth Symphony or the gently melancholy Andantino from the Fourth Symphony come completely naturally to this traditional orchestra. These movements sound as if the Czech Philharmonic, which has had a triumphant history conducted by greats like Mahler and Dvořák, has never played anything else.

Klassik Akzente, 28 August 2019

Musically, the cycle can be considered classical in the best sense of the word. The focus of the Czech Philharmonic's artistic identity is not only on transparency, the filleting of sound into a sum of individual voices, but for long, collective melodies, like those that Karajan once cultivated and Bychkov now maintains so peerlessly... Additionally, the Orchestra has a sumptuous, dark velvety tone and has made many incomparable recordings of the Czech (including Mahler) and Russian repertoire from Karel Ančerl through Václav Neumann to Jiří Bělohlávek.

Online Merker, 27 August 2019

Mr. Bychkov's orchestral sound here is gorgeous, enlivened with clean, crisp attacks and warm instrumental sonorities. From the opening dark chorale, the music moves at a robust pace. An air of intensity permeates the performance, with pronounced dynamic swells and skilfully etched phrases. The work's real payoff—the sumptuous love theme—will melt your heart. "The Tchaikovsky Project" can be viewed as a series of snapshots of Tchaikovsky as he sorted out his artistic inclinations. The music is all beautifully captured by the Czechs and impeccably conducted by Mr. Bychkov.

Wall Street Journal, 28 August 2019

Prime among these is the cultured playing of the Czech Philharmonic, one of the under-sung paragons of the orchestral world, well-blended, understated in virtuosity, and never vulgar.

Financial Times, 24-25 August 2019

Vol. 2, *Manfred* Symphony

25 August 2017 (Decca Classics)

The most beautiful orchestral playing imaginable can be heard on Semyon Bychkov's 2017 recording with the Czech Philharmonic, in which Decca's state-of-the-art recording captures every detail... Bychkov's is the more measured and has the finest sound of all recordings.

BBC Music Magazine, 24 April 2019

Under Bychkov, it becomes clear that *Manfred* is actually an opera without words... Only a conductor like Semyon Bychkov with a track-record in conducting operas can succeed in navigating the turbulent passages of the piece without everything ending in chaos... This album definitely proves that the symphony's bad reputation is completely unfounded.

HighRes Audio, 7 February 2019

The performance of the *Manfred* Symphony is even better... Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic give us reading that provides fresh insights on nearly every page of the score. For example, the fortissimo string chords on the first page have a strength and colour I had not heard before. A few pages later, there is heartrending tenderness... The slow movement, with its evocation of rustic



Alpine life, flows beautifully under Bychkov, and the long and, for some critics, problematic final movement gets a totally convincing performance... Now, with Semyon Bychkov in charge and Decca Classics supporting it, the Czech Philharmonic may finally get the recognition it deserves. The playing on these first two releases of *The Tchaikovsky Project* is absolutely first rate, and the recording quality is state-of-the-art.
Ludwig Van Toronto, 24 October 2017

The most beautiful orchestra playing imaginable can be heard on Semyon Bychkov's 2017 recording with the Czech Philharmonic, in which Decca's state-of-the-art recording captures every detail. It beggars belief that the orchestra's musicians had not previously encountered the *Manfred* until Bychkov introduced them to it, but initial scepticism from them clearly became a labour of love... a model of restraint, Bychkov's is the more measure and has the finest sound of all recordings.
BBC Music Magazine, September 2018

But it's more than orchestral virtuosity that makes this performance great: Bychkov plans out the vast arcs of the work with precision and depth. Sample the finale, with its fugue representing the discovery of the hero in the midst of a wild orgy. Critics since Tchaikovsky's time have deplored the fugue as inadequate to its subject, but with Bychkov's muscular, rather febrile reading this argument will no longer fly. The pleasures of the performance throughout are too numerous to list here, but the work of engineer Stephan Reh at the Rudolfinum in Prague should be noted. Bravo!
All Music, 2 May 2018

The Decca sound engineering is fine, capturing the beautiful and often powerful playing of the Czech Philharmonic effectively...
Audiophile Audition, 1 February 2018

With the Czech Philharmonic in wonderful form, superbly virtuosic and musically certain and sensitive, relishing some of Tchaikovsky's most imaginative, descriptive and sophisticated orchestration... What we have then is a performance that has been painstakingly prepared – the big gestures and all the inner workings, yet how spontaneous it all sounds – so that when the composer's creativity demands rawness, visions of loveliness, emotional upheaval, lightness of touch, pastoral eloquence or bacchanalian drive, it's absolutely present, all part of a grand and expansive design – Tchaikovsky's – and with an organ contribution (saved until near the end) that doesn't dominate but nonetheless feeds a new colour (of many) and something momentous: the signalling of the very moving and transcending closing bars, poignantly achieved here. Add in a recording that is ideally vivid yet natural to the sympathetic venue – with a bass response that should have your speakers and floor shaking with approval (double basses on the left, violins antiphonal, as required) – to confirm this as a very special and notable release, documenting a stunning drama.
Classical Source, 24 January 2018
Editor's Choice - January

The *Manfred* glows with inner radiance... the first movement is warm, full-hearted, and exciting. The Czech Philharmonic soars in every section, especially the ardent strings... The *Andante con moto* (in the second movement) is especially lovely for the interplay among the famed Czech woodwinds.
Fanfare, January-February 2018

... the combination of superb sound (both on the recording but especially from the terrific, lush Czech Philharmonic), the surprising orchestral clarity and the evocative sense of slow power that conductor and orchestra develop had me in their grip by the fourth bar, at the latest... this recording has done a world of good to my *Manfred* Symphony appreciation.

Forbes, 13 December 2017
The 10 Best Classical Recordings of 2017

The work is in good hands with Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic. The conductor was rightly chosen as their new Chief Conductor designate; a promising cooperation can be expected here.
Evolver, 12 December 2017
2017 Music Recommendations

A dark, turbulent account of the programmatic symphony.

The Sunday Times, 3 December 2017
100 Best Records of the Year

The Czech Philharmonic's idiomatic playing makes me want to get up and dance! The orchestra's energy and aplomb through the bacchanal and ensuing fugue are remarkable, though only in heaven are the lovers reunited. Strongly recommended.
WholeNote, November 2017

As with the opening disc in *The Tchaikovsky Project*, Symphony No. 6, the Russian conductor and Czech Philharmonic perform the work that Byron inspired with a string sound that is both dense and rich, and colours in the woodwind and brass that are both clear and Slavic sounding... Conducted with ample tempi that are neither too fast nor too slow, the work opens with a *Lento funeral* that is masterfully handled especially the strength of the violins in the string themes, without excess



despair... The second movement *Vivace con spirito* presents a beautiful dynamic a style of playing that is particularly well-suited to Tchaikovsky, performed with the ideal balance... this recording makes the acoustics of the of the magnificent Rudolfinum in Prague sound impeccable. This beautiful recording leaves one to hope for a complete set which is as interesting as it is intelligent...

ResMusica, 30 October 2017

In this performance, magnificently delivered by the Czech Philharmonic and captured in clear yet opulent sound, Bychkov's attention to inner detail effectively enhances the work's emotional intensity.

BBC Music Magazine, November 2017
Orchestral Choice

Bychkov's conducting reveals a whole palette of colours in the music: the darkness of Manfred's soul exposed with a pointillist yet clear direction, the homogeneousness of the strings and overall, a true musical coherence. This troubled work, too often judged as insignificant and overly-influenced by Berlioz is neither well known nor always well played, but is here magnified by Semyon Bychkov who interprets it with all his heart and all his soul.

Froggy Delight, 23 October 2017

The sound is superb, and this is a recording which really cries out to played loudly when the neighbours are out. Bychkov's achievement with the Czech Philharmonic is that they bring out all of Tchaikovsky's seductive textures without losing a sense of propulsive drama.

Planet Hugill, 18 October 2017

Conducting with a strong sense of security throughout, Bychkov provides a satisfying degree of shading and ensures a splendid internal balance of sound. The Czech strings excel with unity, weight and intensity, and the glowing brass and vibrant woodwind sections are detailed and expressive... Without hesitation I can place this majestic new Decca recording from Semyon Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic comfortably alongside the finest available accounts in the catalogue.

MusicWeb International, 5 October 2017

There is, of course, the abiding warmth and humanity of the Czech Philharmonic where expressivity always trumps spectacle, where phrasing relates to sound in ear catching ways and the reasons the notes are there in the first place rightfully take precedence over their cosmetic effect... The Czech Philharmonic woodwinds have such a beguiling homespun quality generally but in the shimmering waterfall of the second movement they are super-balletic, engagingly decamping us to the world of *Nutcracker* or *Sleeping Beauty*. I love the songful phrasing of strings and solo clarinet in the lovely second idea – so effortless – and it is this very humane response to the lyricism of the piece that is carried through to the pastorale of the third movement.

Gramophone, September 2017

The sound production of this disc in the Dvořák Hall in Prague captures the exquisite bass tones and high trumpet work vividly... as a self-enclosed entity, *Manfred* makes its dramatic effect with a dedicated ensemble who have come to admire this composer.

Audiophile Audition, 7 September 2017

Since completion of his 2015 introductory The Tchaikovsky Project, Vol.1, the conductor has taken a 360-degree turn by focusing on this underperformed and underappreciated work; his goal was to challenge such a strongly-felt stigma. Persuasive of a visit is two-faceted: 1) The Czech Philharmonic's awakening and 2) Semyon Bychkov's arguments...

Overplaying a work often ignites preconceived notions. That is why the Czech Philharmonic sharpens *Manfred's* imagery through a savvy Bychkov lens. Violins' soaring lines and horns' annunciations dig into the soul of Lord Byron's protagonist, a man writhe with torment... The Czech Philharmonic is building a compelling case of acute sensitivity.

ConcertoNet, 5 September 2017

The "Manfred" Symphony has never attained the popularity of the composer's other late symphonies, but Semyon Bychkov is a champion. This performance of the work is beautifully played by the Czech Philharmonic, spaciouly recorded, and indulgently grand of utterance

Financial Times, 2-3 September 2017

Tchaikovsky's programmatic work, based on a poem by Lord Byron, has never really enjoyed the popularity of his other late symphonies, partly because the composer expressed reservations about the final three movements. Bychkov, in keeping with many modern Tchaikovskians, refutes that. "Manfred is absolutely a masterpiece," he says in a booklet interview, and his dark, brooding account of music that occasionally recalls the sound world of the composer's Byronic opera *Mazeppa* has rarely been played with such conviction on disc. The Czech Philharmonic are clearly inspired by Bychkov's dramatic, almost Wagnerian conception of the piece. The Russian conductor clearly revels in the gloomy, doom-laden quality of the music: the opening movement is *lento lugubre*, and even the final *allegro con fuoco* ends depicting Manfred's death in music that looks



forward to the tragic adagio lamentoso of the *Pathétique*... This outstanding issue makes one look forward to the other five canonical symphonies with impatience.

The Sunday Times, 3 September 2017
Album of the Week

Semyon Bychkov could be the man to convince doubters. He's performing it with the BBC SO at the Proms next Thursday – surely a must-hear. As preparation, buy or download this new recording, taped in April with the Czech Philharmonic on inspired form. Upper strings have a Hollywood sheen and there's some sublime brass playing. The first movement's coda is sensational, anticipating Khachaturian at his kitschiest. This disc is worth buying for those two minutes alone. Interplay between strings and winds in the scherzo is miraculous. Despite the work's doomy narrative, it's difficult not to grin with pleasure. The redemptive organ entry near the symphony's close is wonderful, a necessary corrective after the craziness earlier in the movement. Bychkov's conviction is infectious – an enjoyable disc.

The Arts Desk, 27 August 2017

Paradoxically, although Tchaikovsky is really popular, a lot of his finest music is little known. That is undeniably true of the so-called *Manfred* Symphony, which secures from Semyon Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic a superb performance in excellent sound, recorded in Prague four months ago... I was in my mid-teens when I first heard Tchaikovsky's version at a concert of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, under their charismatic, sadly short-lived music director Constantin Silvestri, a musical maverick of real genius, just like Bychkov... Just so, and the dramatic recording that has emerged, proves, says Bychkov, that *Manfred* is actually 'an opera without words. And one of Tchaikovsky's greatest operas at that.' Even in a performance as good as this, *Manfred* is undeniably uneven... *Manfred* is a bumpy ride but an exhilarating and treasurable one.

The Mail on Sunday, 27 August 2017
Album of the Week

There is only one work on this album and it is only an hour long, but it won't leave you hungry. Tchaikovsky's *Manfred* Symphony marks the latest instalment of the conductor Semyon Bychkov's exploration of the Russian composer's work on record, a partnership with the Czech Philharmonic. It's a full meal by itself, the combination of a seasoned operatic conductor with a headstrong, idiosyncratic orchestra proving a lip-smacking combination...

The Czech Philharmonic... plays with a very satisfying "crackle", enhanced by the lively acoustic of the Rudolfinum in Prague, where the orchestra is based. The Philharmonic's last chief conductor, Jiří Bělohlávek, died this year, and if Bychkov is the prime mover on this album, the virtuosity on show here should also stand as a tribute to Bělohlávek's many years' service with the orchestra he adored.

The Times, 25 August 2017
Classical Album of the Week

With rich tone, the musicians of the Czech Philharmonic under Semyon Bychkov's inspiring leadership perform the final part of the poem in which Manfred is at last freed from his earthly torment and dies. Semyon Bychkov together with the Czech Philharmonic has created a recording of great emotional force whose tight, dramatic expressiveness is both an overwhelming and deeply moving experience for the listener.

Klassik Akzente, 23 August 2017

The playing of the Czech Philharmonic is a wonder. They make all the different moods shine out with superb vividness: the doom-laden atmosphere of the opening, the dancing water-spirit of the second movement, the nostalgia of the folk-melody in the third... The sudden turn to major-key, organ-drenched radiance ought to sound sentimental, but somehow Bychkov makes it seem moving.

The Daily Telegraph, 19 August 2017
Classical CD of the Week

A tremendous new chapter in Bychkov's project... He clearly relishes the music's moments of grandeur, over-the-top rhetoric and dramatic coups, and the Czech orchestra responds with playing of tremendous character. The wonderfully pungent bassoon solo early in the first movement sets the standard for all the vivid woodwind playing that follows, and even in the most massive climaxes the sound is never coarse or overbearing.

The Guardian, 18 August 2017

Vol. 1, Symphony No. 6 *Pathétique*, *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy-Overture

14 October 2016 (Decca Classics)

All the markers for success are there in the first few minutes of the symphony: the expectant silence surrounding the lachrymose bassoon solo; the elegant and articulate counterpoint of the first Allegro; the fluid, unfussy arrival of the great second subject, very much an inspiration of the moment. Bychkov's Russian roots make him mindful of Tchaikovsky's classicism, the emotion



always 'contained' until it can be contained no more. The explosive development section is a controlled panic attack, classical in form, neurotic in nature. But it is only when it boils over into that mighty *sostenuto* passage for strings answered in breast-beating trombones that the music breaks free of classical constraint and gives way to full-blown despair. It's one of the great soul-baring moments in 19th-century symphonic music and Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic give it the fullest intensity. And yet – tellingly – the return of the second subject is fleet and songful rather than indulgently fulsome as is so often the case. Suddenly it is a beautiful aide-memoire salvaged from the despair.

Gramophone, 21 February 2020
The 50 greatest Tchaikovsky recordings

The fantasy overture *Roméo et Juliette* is equally fine and revealing. It seems to echo the first movement of the *Pathétique* in its alternation of turbulence and relaxation, but of course here the centre of gravity is elsewhere, in the great depiction of Romeo and Juliet's love that Bychkov evokes without any exaggerated sentimentalism and that is on the contrary suffused with tenderness and grace, but perhaps the cathartic finale, with its supreme and pure beauty, is even more impressive.

The Music Gala, December 2017

A tsunami of good Tchaikovsky produce one alarming and one alarmingly good *Pathétique* Symphony (Semyon Bychkov, for Decca).

The Bay Reporter, 28 December 2017
The year's best classical recordings

From its opening bars... it is clear that Bychkov is giving us a fresh look at a familiar piece. I have rarely heard these bass parts played so well in tune... The orchestral balances are near-perfect and rhythms are pretty accurate too. The quality of the playing is first-rate and there is excitement in all the right places.

Ludwig Van Toronto, 24 October 2017

The result is a robust, lush reading, deeply Romantic with well-paced climaxes rich in emotional intensity. Beautifully recorded in the Rudolfinum in Prague and accompanied by effusive notes from Bychkov himself, the package is steeped in a wilt enthusiasm to which resistance is largely futile.

Limelight, 3 March 2017

Everything in the symphony [No. 6] is beautiful – and the orchestra enters into it fully. This is not sight-reading! And the orchestra is Slavic – that may help! They are moody people. And the Czech Philharmonic is not typical of modern orchestras (and sports teams); they don't hire musicians from all over the world. They are Czech and maintain that identity. Their sound is unique, almost (there are other Czech orchestras, but none so great). Their playing places them among the best orchestras in the world today.

American Record Guide, March-April 2017
American Record Guide, Critics' Pick 2017

That the *Pathétique* is Tchaikovsky's greatest symphony becomes apparent when you hear a good rendering. This beautiful new recording made in Prague by the Czech Philharmonic, under Russian conductor Semyon Bychkov, has everything going for it. The playing is subtly flexible, the acoustic of the Dvorak Hall in the Rudolfinum lets the instrumental timbres expand and glow and Bychkov knows how to pace each movement. For a modern version, this takes some beating.

The Daily Mail, 20 January 2017

The first time I realized what an extraordinary, varied score *The Nutcracker* is was with Semyon Bychkov's 1987 recording, never surpassed, though it set a standard to which other conductors have risen. Now he's done it again with the Sixth Symphony (*Pathétique*), the best-known and most misunderstood of Tchaikovsky's symphonies, in a new recording with the Czech Philharmonic (Decca), the first instalment in a promised Tchaikovsky Project. From the start, Bychkov's *Pathétique* conveys the sense that you're back in a place you know well yet have never been before. The clarity with which the score is revealed is remarkable, but such sonic lucidity – pretty much the *sine qua non* of good recordings now – can, in many other hands, substitute for interpretation or, more to the point, feeling. Bychkov's view of the work is less an interpretation than a vision, multifaceted but whole, direct yet dreamlike... That may all sound overwrought, but I've never felt this piece take possession of me in quite the same way, and now I won't settle for less.

The Bay Area Reporter, 12 January 2017

But in his new recording of another great Sixth Symphony, Tchaikovsky's (with the Czech Philharmonic, on Decca), is so impressive as to render the distinction between technique and imagination irrelevant..

Bychkov's vehicle is the Czech Philharmonic... In his liner notes, Bychkov expresses his admiration for the ensemble's retention of "a sound identity that is uniquely theirs." In a review of a Carnegie Hall performance in 2014, James Oestreich, of the *Times*, spelled this out, extolling the orchestra's "warm and caressing" strings, its "brash and incisive" brass, and the way its woodwinds "sang with a slightly nasal, Slavic character." Blessed with ample rehearsal time, Bychkov, helped by a fresh and open recording acoustic, does a wonderful job of treating the orchestra's different instrumental departments as equal colleagues, bringing distinctive gifts to a common effort...



Commenting on the *Romeo and Juliet* Overture-Fantasy (which also gets a winning recording here), Bychkov reminds us of Tchaikovsky's overlooked genius as a "deeply polyphonic composer," not just as a master of sumptuous melody and orchestration. This deeply personal disk amplifies that concept, giving us a multidimensional view of the composer's greatest symphony.

The New Yorker, 13 December 2016

Complementing the *Pathétique* is the *Roméo et Juliette* Fantasy-Overture which is wonderful for both its extreme tranquillity and sweetness, with a particular highlight made of the brass counterpoint. The dynamic remains measured, even when the tempo speeds up, with Bychkov keeping the orchestra in a state of total serenity... the sense that it came straight from a ballet (13') gave it a truly other-worldly character, transporting the work towards a coda of total subtlety.

Following this very beautiful first release, we hope to hear more very soon, and especially the first three masterful symphonies where there is plenty of room for a new point of reference.

ResMusica, 3 December 2016

Bychkov gives a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* that generates an intense passion such as I could scarcely imagine being surpassed. The sense of mystery in the opening section is remarkable, yet Bychkov keeps the music flowing with assurance. After the first presentation of the love theme, I was struck by the stunning texture of the strings and the striking brass, which blaze so marvellously in tune. Following the final two renditions of the main melody, the combination of strings and brass could have been made in heaven. Under Bychkov's accomplished baton it is hard to imagine this glorious music being played any better than here by the Czech Philharmonic...

This reading [of the *Pathétique* Symphony] feels beautifully proportioned... Extraordinary is how Tchaikovsky closes the symphony with a slow movement marked *Adagio lamentoso*, a scheme that under the circumstances feels so apposite. The descending phrases create a deep melancholy together with a chorale of sorrow on the brass and winds as if mirroring the last vestiges of human spirit slowly fading away... Bychkov and his Czech Philharmonic players obtain an array of emotions that can leave the listener crushed... This new release from the Czech Philharmonic under Bychkov is a stunning reading full of beauty and intense passion and can stand comfortably alongside the catalogue's greatest... Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic are in breathtaking form and this first volume of the *Tchaikovsky Project* on Decca augurs remarkably well for its future releases.

MusicWeb International, 1 December 2016

Completed in 1893, Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 takes the listener on a highly personal journey, and the Czech Philharmonic under Bychkov's competent direction has no difficulty conveying the sense of tragic resignation. Well-articulated phrasing highlighted by the luxuriant strings and brilliant brass makes this performance a true odyssey. The four contrasting movements are all marked by a technical precision and warmly romantic sound that particularly befits one of the composer's final works. The *Romeo & Juliet* Fantasy Overture from 1869 has long been a favourite with audiences for its interpretation of the familiar story of ill-fated love. Without overly sentimentalizing the score, Bychkov draws the full range of tonal colours from the orchestra – from the prophetic opening of the fight scenes, to the lyrical love theme and on to the cataclysmic finale. This is a fine beginning to a promising series.

The Whole Note, 29 November 2016

Semyon Bychkov and the world-class Czech Philharmonic give Tchaikovsky space and depth, and a richness of sound and ambience, without missing any of the excitement at moments of high drama. The Symphony No. 6, *Pathétique*, gets a performance that eschews hysteria in favour of heartfelt lyricism. In the *Fantasy-Overture* named after them *Romeo and Juliet* play out their tragedy in a heady spirit of exalted passion.

Financial Times, 29-30 October 2016

Semyon Bychkov's new Tchaikovsky series on Decca is well timed to rekindle interest. It is also exceedingly well played – not by a Russian orchestra but by the Czech Philharmonic which brings out Slavonic russet colours rather than Baltic grey. The brass is polished like a ministerial doorplate and the strings know how to sing...

Musical Toronto, 21 October 2016

There are passages in both works that are undeniably thrilling – the great climaxes in both the first movement of the symphony and in the overture are irresistible, with the Czech orchestra, its brass especially, on top form.

The Guardian, 20 October 2016

Bychkov takes a literalist approach [in the *Pathétique* Symphony], dependent on the glowing timbre of his ensemble to radiate Tchaikovsky's emotional transports. The orchestral response remains excellent, alluring in the strings, and heady and opulent in the trumpets...

Audiophile Audition, 19 October 2016

With Semyon Bychkov gently directing the Orchestra to exploit its rich sound the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra blossoms bringing to the performance the clearest and strongest emotion that I have ever heard. Bychkov is a stroke of genius. He brings Tchaikovsky's romantic pathos and



strict musical form together organically, a skill which proves to be equally effective in Tchaikovsky's *Fantasy Overture Romeo and Juliet*...

And, one can hear the personal connection in this new recording which has a natural flow and a dreamlike quality. Semyon Bychkov is unmatched as a Tchaikovsky lover and, the fact that this new album marks the start of a major series of recordings is good news for anyone who loves of romantic orchestral music. "The Tchaikovsky Project - Vol. 1" shows emphatically that we can expect something important from the collaboration between Semyon Bychkov, the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra and Decca.
Klassik Akzente, 13 October 2016

The beginning of what's billed as 'The Tchaikovsky Project' from Semyon Bychkov – and what a way to start: a powerful, devastating *Pathétique*.

All the markers for success are there in the first few minutes of the symphony: the expectant silence surrounding the lachrymose bassoon solo; the elegant and articulate counterpoint of the first *Allegro*; the fluid, unfussy arrival of the great second subject, very much an inspiration of the moment. Bychkov's Russian roots make him mindful of Tchaikovsky's classicism, the emotion always 'contained' until it can be contained no more. The explosive development section is a controlled panic attack, classical in form, neurotic in nature. But it is only when it boils over into that mighty *sostenuto* passage for strings answered in breast-beating trombones that the music breaks free of classical constraint and gives way to full-blown despair. It's one of the great soul-baring moments in 19th-century symphonic music and Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic give it the fullest intensity. And yet – tellingly – the return of the second subject is fleet and songful rather than indulgently fulsome as is so often the case. Suddenly it is a beautiful aide-memoire salvaged from the despair.

Which makes more sense of the second movement – more memories arriving as in a reverie, slightly imperialistic and so redolent of the ballet. Again playing that is infused with an in-the-moment spontaneity: no flash, just honest, musical, shapely playing...

A very fine performance, then, no question, and supplemented by a *Romeo and Juliet* of similar qualities – keen and articulate in strife, rich in romance. And it feels personal in a way that the warm, homespun playing of the Czech Philharmonic only accentuates. A disc that augurs well for what is headlined here as 'The Tchaikovsky Project'.
Gramophone, October 2016
Editor's Choice

Stalked by tragedy as these pieces are – respectively personal and through literature – these are musically intense and illuminating readings superbly played and clearly and openly recorded... There is no doubt in my mind however that this beginning to Semyon Bychkov's *Tchaikovsky Project* series whets the appetite for further recordings... rather Bychkov sees the Symphony [No. 6] as a whole – he ebbs and flows it convincingly, ensures that details and dynamics are immaculately tailored, appreciates structure, and has the Czech Philharmonic playing for all its considerable and seasoned worth, brilliantly and beautifully.
Classical Source, October 2016