

Like so many Russian musicians, Mravinsky seemed first headed toward a career in the sciences. He studied biology at St. Petersburg University, but had to quit in 1920 after his father's death. To support himself, he signed on with the Imperial Ballet as a rehearsal pianist. In 1923, he finally enrolled in the Leningrad Conservatory, where he studied composition with Vladimir Shcherbachov and conducting with Alexander Gauk and Nikolai Malko. He graduated in 1931, and left his Imperial Ballet job to become a musical assistant and ballet conductor at the Bolshoi Opera from 1931 to 1937, with a stint at the Kirov from 1934. Mravinsky gave up these posts in 1938, after winning first prize in the All-Union Conductors' Competition in Moscow, to become principal conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic. He remained there until his death, long ignoring many guest-conducting offers from abroad. Under Mravinsky's direction the Leningrad Philharmonic came to be regarded as one of the finest orchestras in the world, although the world had comparatively few opportunities to hear it aside from the rare tour (about 30 performances in 25 years, starting in 1956), some dim Soviet recordings, and a very few highly acclaimed records for such Western European companies as Deutsche Grammophon and, in the end, Erato. Mravinsky was made People's Artist of the U.S.S.R. in 1954, and in 1973, he received the order of Hero of Socialist Labor. But his more lasting international acclaim came for his performances of Mozart, Beethoven, Bruckner, Wagner, Sibelius, Bartók, Stravinsky, and anything Russian or Soviet. His reputation only rose upon his retirement from the Leningrad Philharmonic.



Mravinsky's rehearsal manner was said to be autocratic and brutal, and the resulting performances were tightly clenched. Yet they were also technically precise, finely detailed, subtly colored, and highly dramatic -- and this not always because he was in the habit of whipping fast finales into a frenzy. His readings had an intensity, concentration, and -- despite the arduous rehearsal -- spontaneity comparable to those of Wilhelm Furtwängler. In the West, Mravinsky was particularly noted as an interpreter of Shostakovich, whose Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth symphonies he premiered, and of Tchaikovsky. His recordings of the Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies, made in 1960 for Deutsche Grammophon while the orchestra was on tour in London, are touchstones of the Russian repertory.



Evgeny Mravinsky
conducts the
Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra

Beethoven
Symphony No 4
in B Flat Major op. 60

Recorded Live

Robert Schumann described this symphony as "a slender Greek maiden between two Norse giants," and started the long-standing tradition which holds that somehow Beethoven's even-numbered symphonies are less profound than the odd-numbered ones. This may seem true at first glance, but there is much that Schumann's analysis leaves unsaid. While the lambent beauty of the Adagio might suggest the kind of Classicism that the Eroica transcended, one should remember that, in many senses, the Fourth, emerging from an intensely foreboding, and even tragic, introduction, is no less heroic than either the Eroica or the Fifth. Dark-hued and intensely chromatic strivings pull the music from B flat minor toward the unison F which heralds the beginning of the sunny Allegro vivace exposition. While Weber criticized the deliberately sparse-sounding introduction, Tovey sensed its immense stature, writing of the "sky-dome vastness" of its harmonic progression. The Adagio, a sonata structure minus development, begins with an insistent rhythm which recurs several times. At the start, the violins sing out the sublimely reflective principal motif, a tenderly lyrical utterance which stands in direct contrast to the opening figure. These two contrasting elements are always at the hub of the movement, the expressive violin theme later becoming the subject of variations. The reprise of the second group then leads to the highly

atmospheric coda. What follows is the Scherzo; a bucolic main theme suggests the rustic folk-dance idioms that Beethoven knew well; nevertheless, the movement surpasses the Eroica's Scherzo in power and dynamism. It should be noted that this is the first of Beethoven's symphonic scherzos to feature a repeat of the trio section, which is significant, given the massive nature of the surrounding material. The scherzo is heard one last time, now abridged, before the shattering final coda with its three-bar horn solo. Expanded scherzos also figure in several of Beethoven's later symphonies (the exception is the Eighth), and sketches suggest the technique was originally envisaged for the Fifth. Opening with a series of mercurial sixteenth note fragments from which the first subject group is derived, the final movement is "perpetuum mobile." As the movement unfolds, the oboe's second theme provides contrast with the initial statement, the relentless development section posing serious technical challenges to the lower instruments: bassoon, cellos, and basses. In the coda, surely one of Beethoven's most humorous inventions, the theme is passed around at half speed after a "false" ending has been reached, and finally brushed aside dramatically as cellos and basses plummet down the scale before the striking final bars for full orchestra.

Beethoven Symphony No. 4

Mravinsky Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra

1 Adagio - Allegro vivace 9:00

2 Adagio 9:45

3 Menuetto - Allegro vivace 5:42

4 Allegro ma non troppo 6:54

Total Time: 31:21

Recorded by Melodydia Live at the Grand Hall of Leningrad Philharmonic 1973
Transferred from a 15ips tape



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