

## EDITOR'S CHOICE



Anima Eterna:  
big sound from  
small forces



A few misfiring moments, but this Belgian cycle is nevertheless a stimulating, exhilarating experience



## Beethoven

Complete Symphonies. Coriolan, Op 62. Egmont, Op 84 – Overture. Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus, Op 43 – Overture. Die Ruinen von Athen, Op 113 – Overture; Turkish March. Die Weihe des Hauses, Op 124 – Overture

Anima Eterna / Jos van Immerseel with Anna-Kristiina Kaappola sop Marianne Beate Kielland mezz Markus Schäfer ten Thomas Bauer bar  
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(5h 8' • DDD • T/t)

It's been two decades since the first period-instrument Beethoven symphony cycles appeared on disc. The pioneers were Monica Huggett and Roy Goodman – who shared directorial honours for the Hanover Band (Nimbus, 1/89) – and Roger Norrington (EMI, 11/89). Sets led by Christopher Hogwood (Decca), Frans Brüggen (Philips) and John Eliot Gardiner (DG, 11/94) followed within five years. We've also had “historically informed” interpretations from modern orchestras, including notable cycles by Nikolaus Harnoncourt (Teldec, 11/91), Charles Mackerras (twice, with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic – EMI, 1/03 – and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra – Hyperion, A/07) and David Zinman (Arte Nova, 7/99). Simon Rattle even cajoled the Vienna Philharmonic into adopting some period techniques (EMI, 4/03).

In a sense, then, there's nothing particularly newsworthy about this recent account by Jos van Immerseel and his Belgian period band Anima Eterna. There are a few scholarly novelties,

explained by Immerseel in a detailed booklet-note: the ensemble's use of specifically Viennese period instruments, for example, and how the nature of the Viennese winds necessitates a higher pitch (A=440) than most period orchestras employ. Other features, such as the relatively small string band (24 players, 33 in the Ninth) and basic adherence to Beethoven's metronome markings could, by now, be considered almost standard.

Yet there's nothing remotely routine about these performances. Indeed, from the bristling chords that introduce the *Creatures of Prometheus* Overture – the set's opening gambit – Anima Eterna's playing held me on the edge of my seat. Admittedly, the mostly vibrato-less string tone can take on an astringent edge but the players' graceful athleticism is mightily impressive and swept away any of my occasional misgivings. There's an easy virtuosity to the finale of the Second Symphony, for instance, that gives the music charm as well as fizz. And there are a host of felicities – like the warmly confidential *sotto voce* with which the lyrical second theme is presented in that same movement – that make one listen to these battle-worn warhorses with fresh appreciation. The brass also inspire admiration with a fiercely brilliant sound that can cajole (try the seductively *legato* lick that leads into the *Allegro* of the First Symphony's opening movement) or galvanise (as the feral fanfares do in the Seventh's finale).

No integral set of the Beethoven symphonies is without its disappointments, of course, and it's

perhaps because these interpretations are so full of character and incident that the few moments (and movements) that misfire stand out so starkly: the conspicuous lack of tragic weight in the *Egmont* Overture's slow introduction; in the Eighth, an *Allegretto scherzando* that's disconcertingly dull-witted; and, most sadly, a perfunctory reading of the Ninth's sublime *Adagio*.

In a pair of movements, I'm of two minds, and these happen to be Beethoven's Greatest Hits: the first movement of the Fifth and the choral finale of the Ninth. In the former, Immerseel drives like a shot straight through, and while the result robs the music of some of its drama, it simultaneously emphasises its unprecedented compactness. In the latter, Immerseel evokes more solemnity than joy though the effect is still potent as well as plausible. It certainly helps that he's selected a rich-toned and youthful-sounding vocal quartet and choir.

Again, though, the virtues of this cycle far outweigh any faults. Among the many highlights is a blistering account of the *Coriolan* Overture. The *Eroica* is magnificent from start to finish, with an opening *Allegro con brio* whose powerful muscularity does not preclude songful lyricism. In the *Marcia funebre*, sinewy strings and stinging sharp rhythms evoke a grim grandeur. Similarly, the Seventh is wholly engrossing. I've rarely heard its rhythms dance with such bouncy energy as they do here in the two outer movements and *Scherzo*.

The *Pastoral* may be more controversial, partly because Immerseel and his musicians produce a gentler thunderstorm than one normally encounters. It's not that it's without power, it's just not apocalyptic. I've come to like it. A lot. In any case, the first movement is surely paced; it's fast enough to suggest intense

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eagerness yet is phrased in such a way that it's euphoric rather than breathless. There's plenty of detail, too, like the high-lying violins (at 6'40") who hang in the air like dewy mist. The second movement is best of all, however. Immerseel's brook is no ordinary stream but one that flows through a secluded oasis so hushed, cool and shady that one longs never to leave. And that's as good a reason as any for me to recommend this superbly recorded and handsomely packaged set – even if it's just so you can visit that rejuvenating sanctuary whenever you like. I know I'll be back there often.

**Andrew Farach-Colton**