

***Keeping Score*. Created by Michael Tilson Thomas
with the San Francisco Symphony. Directed by David
Kennard, Joan Saffa, and Gary Halvorson.**

***Beethoven's Eroica*. DVD, 2006. \$24.99.**

***Berlioz's Symphonie fantastique*. Blu-ray and DVD, 2009. \$24.99.**

***Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5*. Blu-ray and DVD, 2009. \$24.99.**

***Stravinsky's Rite of Spring*. DVD, 2009. \$24.99.**

DANIEL BAROLSKY

In the extra features to the San Francisco Symphony's recent DVD of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, violinist Raushan Akhmedyarova comments on the filming of the orchestra: "These cameras are not in our way so they're actually getting the true story as it is in reality. It's pretty powerful." Michael Tilson Thomas's *Keeping Score* series is indeed powerful. It is easy to get swept away by the conductor's passionate narrative and the immediacy with which we experience performances of Beethoven, Berlioz, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich from within the orchestra (or "inside the music").

Each DVD, which contains no liner notes but a link to extensive online resources (www.keepingcore.org), consists of two main sections. In the first, we witness a concert performance of the central work. The videos reflect not so much a "reality" but a hyper-reality in which the camerawork serves as a visual guide. The changing images encourage us to hear prominent themes by focusing our attention on the relevant instruments, or suggest to us, as we watch the expressions of the musicians, the emotional state with which we might experience the music. The shifting cuts serve to *perform* the compositions since visual changes often correspond to musical developments, stimulating both our ears and eyes. This is not the reality that one encounters in concert halls, but it is a new reality that more and more students experience as they learn music from YouTube, and it provides a valuable, stimulating, and often revelatory perspective on the work at hand.

As an accompaniment to each performance, Thomas tells us the story of each work. His narration weaves together comments by selected members of

the symphony, archival footage, musical excerpts, and Thomas's own analysis and interpretation. The conductor's discussion and style, clearly influenced by his mentor Leonard Bernstein, guides us through the music by focusing our attention on harmonic subtleties, melodic idioms ("imagine this melody had it been written by someone else"), and motivic links and associations.

It is difficult to separate the performance from its interpretive accounts and Thomas clearly intends for his exploration of history and biography to shed light on key moments. We see, for instance, how Berlioz's early songs, the performance of alpine horns, and Harriet Smithson's readings of Shakespeare (recreated for us by actress Sarah Nealis) come alive in *Symphonie fantastique*. And after listening to Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony alongside videos of Stalin and marching soldiers it becomes difficult to hear the work apart from its oppressive context.

The question, however, remains: what is the pedagogical value of these videos as a whole? If the goal is to promote classical music for listeners who already have some interest, then these DVDs serve their purpose. Though Thomas is not as entertaining (or as cool) as Bernstein, his boyish enthusiasm is contagious; witness the enthralled audiences and the attentive expressions of the orchestra musicians as their conductor speaks. These productions, after all, serve to increase the public's interest in classical music, thereby developing an audience—and preserving a financial future for the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and similar institutions. We teachers would be fooling ourselves to suggest that this institutional support did not also undergird similar interest in our curricula.

As tools for teaching music history, however, the DVDs are limited. Because of their need to appeal to and attract audiences, the narratives perpetuate and celebrate the seductive romances and myths of music history. What we miss as historians are complexity, tension, and a more nuanced perspective that provides viewers or students with the necessary skills for thinking critically about the musical past. Thomas's discussion of Stravinsky's use of folk music, for instance, invokes Romantic ideas of musical origins: "Stravinsky frequently summered at Ustilug where he was exposed to the Russian culture that still thrived in those old villages, the ones that surrounded his family's country home." Missing is any context that accounts for contemporary national tensions, differences in class, or Stravinsky's later attempts to conceal his folkloric influences. Instead we are presented with an attractive but touristy performance of a folk song that suggests a timeless and authentic musical tradition. Of the melody that influenced the opening bassoon solo, Thomas remarks, "[a]s the raw material for this, Stravinsky goes to the actual dance tradition of villages within Russia. He gets a book that's meant to contain all kinds of folk songs which have their roots in those pagan rituals. . . . Stravinsky, of course, knew this music very, very well from his

summers spent in Ustilug.” His historical accounts sadly shy away from challenging the rhetoric of national character or the presumption that folk music is timeless, natural, or authentic.

Or consider how Thomas frames the discussion of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony: “The question is what did the composer really mean when he wrote the music which makes its way from the confrontational beginning . . . to this ending [we hear the last nine measures of the symphony]. At first hearing it sounds joyous enough, even triumphant, but is it?” Fifty minutes later, after we are inundated with interviews by musicians who trained in the Soviet Union and a narrative that suggests a single interpretation, Thomas is insincere when he asks, “What’s left with you when the last note is played? In the end, the choice is yours.” For an audience unfamiliar with the counter-arguments available, there is no real choice.

These criticisms notwithstanding, we are privileged to see the inner workings of a great orchestra interpreting wonderful music, dynamic performances that we can see from the inside out. The stories that these videos present demonstrate the captivating power of these long-standing narratives: the claims of Beethoven’s universality, or the musical character of nations or folk. As a subject of study, the DVDs serve as excellent primary sources through which students can examine such musical institutions as the San Francisco Symphony, the relationship between music and urban identity, and the nature of music spread and mediated through technology. They allow us to reflect on how music history is retold and why it is represented the way it is. And ultimately these videos signal, through their popularity on DVD and as broadcasts on PBS, what values are still thought to be relevant or sought after by music-loving audiences.