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RECORDINGS VIEW

Yes, Another Prodigy, but Hold the Yawn

By K. ROBERT SCHWARZ

THE MUSIC WORLD MAY NOT seem to need another teen-age violin virtuoso at the moment, but fans of fiddle playing would be well advised to pay attention to a newcomer, the 18-year-old Maxim Vengerov. Mr. Vengerov, who has just given his New York debut recital, can be heard on three recent Teldec CD's. These make clear that in technique and, more important, in musicianship, he has what it takes for a major career.

Born in Novosibirsk, Siberia, Mr. Vengerov began to attract attention in 1989, with recital debuts throughout Europe, and in 1990, by winning first prize in the Carl Flesch International Violin Competition in London. Since 1990, he has lived in Tel Aviv, where he recorded his first Teldec CD (9031-73266-2) in 1991, with Zubin Mehta and the Israel Philharmonic. It features Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1, which, though once considered

nearly unplayable, has recently been recorded by several young fiddlers. Yet it is a rare violinist who can wring so much musical substance from such a lightweight work. (Indeed, Mr. Vengerov even finds poetry in encore pieces like Saint-Saëns's "Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso" and Franz Waxman's "Carmen Fantasy," which fill out this disk.)

The sinful ease with which Mr. Vengerov commands his instrument renders any questions of technique superfluous. So effortless is his playing that nothing in the Paganini sounds awkward — not even those infernal double harmonics. Nor does Mr. Vengerov neglect the work's almost operatic lyricism, which he imbues with the expressive suppleness of a bel canto aria.

What is especially pleasing is that Mr. Vengerov sees no need for grandstanding, for gratuitous gestures that divert attention from the music. That same forthrightness is evident in two disks of violin sonatas, with the pianists Itamar Golan and Alexander Markovich. One includes a Mozart B-flat Sonata (K.

**Even in present,
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Maxim Vengerov is a
talent to watch.**

378), the Beethoven "Spring" and the Mendelssohn F-major (9031-76349-2); the other, the Beethoven "Kreutzer" and the Brahms A-major (9031-74001-2).

Nowhere does one sense a brash teen-ager, eager to create a frisson with exaggerated, intrusive mannerisms. The music-making is direct, dignified and sincere. More significant, it is suffused with an astonishing stylistic awareness.

Certainly, no one can accuse Mr. Vengerov of choosing lightweight sonata repertory. The Mozart is neat and pointed in articulation, uncomplicated in expression and possessed of a veiled, silken tone (warmed by a rapid

but narrow vibrato) that suggests a reluctance to pull out all the stops. Mr. Vengerov plays the "Spring" with a similar Classic poise and grace. Some small points in the Mozart and Beethoven (like a tendency to slow down at cadences) sound fussy and studied. But Mr. Vengerov will have plenty of years to rethink them.

In the "Kreutzer," he takes off the gloves, offering a searing account that leaps from the speakers. Forceful in bow stroke, focused in tone, taut in rhythmic drive and confident in structure, this is tough, clear-eyed Beethoven, showing a welcome disinclination to sentimentalize or Romanticize.

If only Mr. Vengerov were as successful in the Brahms. Here he tends to overdo, favoring a passionate emotionality not suited to the work. Still, it is a pleasure to hear the full warmth of his tone and the long sweep of his lines. And even here, he never stoops to gimmicks in a misguided attempt to impart "personality."

In fact, all three CD's are refreshingly free of trickery, supplying honest, hard-working music-making of impressive maturity and immense promise. □



Klaus Thumser/ICM

Maxim Vengerov—A sinful ease.

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