

DVD

BILL BAILEY unveils his Prokofiev-style *Guide to the Orchestra*; film-maker **SHEILA HAYMAN** untangles Mendelssohn's Jewish roots; plus **JORDI SAVALL** conducts highly authentic Haydn

Sound systems

ERIK LEVI applauds a new film about Venezuela's *Sistema*



EL SISTEMA: MUSIC TO CHANGE LIFE

Paul Smaczny & Maria Stodtmeier
José Antonio Abreu; Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra/Gustavo Dudamel
EuroArts 880242569585
(NTSC system; PCM-stereo; 16:9 picture format) 100 mins

BBC Music Direct

£24.45

This is the second DVD on Venezuela's remarkable and inspirational music education project to have come my way. Yet unlike DG's documentary *The Promise of Music*, which focused specifically on the work of Gustavo Dudamel and the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, Paul Smaczny's

equally riveting *El Sistema* offers a more holistic approach. Dudamel and his orchestra are still an imposing presence, providing among other things a strongly characterised performance of Ravel's *La valse* and the inevitable high-octane Mambo from Bernstein's *West Side Story*. But the main emphasis here is placed upon the missionary zeal of José Antonio Abreu, the visionary politician who masterminded the Sistema some 30 years ago. Abreu's staunchly held belief in the capacity of music to better people's lives is nowhere more eloquently illustrated than in the extensive exploration of the performing opportunities that have become available to children living in the crime-ridden ghettos of the country's main cities.

Clearly someone who refuses to rest on his laurels, Abreu is also seen directing his team of committed assistants to establish increasingly bold ventures. Among the most



LOOKING UP:
music is key to life
beyond the ghetto

heart-rending sections of the film is one in which an orchestra is established in an area where most children survive from scavenging rubbish dumps.

Throughout the documentary, the uninhibited commentaries from children about their musical experiences, as well as the trials and

tribulations of auditioning for the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, which features in the bonus item, pays admirable testament to the drive and determination of those running the Sistema.

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

PICTURE & SOUND

★★★★★

EXTRAS

★★★



HAYDN

The Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross

Le Concert des Nations/Jordi Savall
(Cadiz, 2006)

Allia Vox AVDVD 9868
(NTSC system; PCM stereo;
16:9 picture format) 68 mins

BBC Music Direct

£13.70

Already issued on CD, this live 2006 performance of Haydn's spiritual masterpiece is given in its original orchestral form in the location for which it was intended – the chapel of Santa Cueva in Cádiz – in an account that revives many of the circumstances of the first performance. The venue's walls have even been at least partially draped

with black cloth, as they apparently were for the Good Friday ceremony back in 1787 – though for some reason authentic candlelight has been judged too visually warm, and a meagre, cold luminosity has been arranged by the modern lighting engineers. As well as the filming of the performance itself, the visuals cut away to show us elements of the distinctive penitential services, with their image-carrying processions and ornate and slightly sinister costumes.

In addition, one can cue in the reading of each 'word' – the short Biblical texts representing Jesus's final statements from the cross which inspired the work to begin with – as well as substantial commentaries on the texts by Raimon Pannikar, a specialist in inter-religious dialogue, and by the Nobel prize-winning Portuguese writer, José Saramago.

Played on period instruments, the performance itself is expertly motivated by Jordi Savall, achieving a fine blend of solemnity and austerity

with intimacy of feeling. The acoustic takes some of the edge off the tone, but this is the ultimate in authentic performance. *George Hall*

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

PICTURE & SOUND

★★★★★

EXTRAS

★★★★★



TCHAIKOVSKY

Two Films: Tchaikovsky's Women; Fate

Vladimir Ashkenazy, Cynthia Harvey, Mark Silver, Helen Field, Clarry Bartha; Swedish Radio SO

Allegro Films A 10CD D (NTSC system;
Dolby 2.0; 4:3 picture format) 156 mins

BBC Music Direct

£22.50

Even the self-confident Christopher Nupen might have had doubts about

releasing his 1989 Tchaikovsky films on DVD. Any necessarily selective documentary which ends by telling us its subject 'died of poison procured for him by his important friends and taken at their insistence' seems offensive in the we-still-don't-know climate of the 2000s.

What's more reprehensible is that in upholding his thesis about Tchaikovsky's idealisation of women – true up to a point – Nupen only introduces the word 'homosexual' 40 minutes into his film. It remains a cloudy miasma to be avoided and ultimately punished in an unrelentingly tragic view of this multifaceted composer's life. Instead, the marriage with Antonina Milyukova is accountable as a mother-substitute situation, and the 'passionate' and 'intense' aspects of the correspondence with Nadezhda von Meck are overplayed. Nupen ignores the fact that Tchaikovsky was as fascinated with Romeo as with Juliet, with Siegfried as