Honegger – Orchestral Works (Plasson) [1993]

1 Prélude pour "La Tempête" de Shakespeare 5:05 2 Pastorale d'été--Poème symphonique 9:01 3 Horace victorieux--Symphonie mimée pour orchestre 19:42 4 Pacific 231--Mouvement symphonique No. 1 6:30 5 Rugby--Mouvement symphonique No. 2 7:54 6 Mermoz--Suite No. 1 "La Traversée des Andes" 8:56 7 Mermoz--Suite No. 2 "Le Vol sur l'Atlantique" 7:57
Toulouse Capitole Orchestra Michel Plasson – conductor

I suppose it is understandable that Honegger is not a very well-known or often-played composer, due to the difficulty of his compositions, but it is unfortunate that these pieces aren't more well known amongst the general classical community. The works here are difficult to digest; they are densely packed with ideas that take time and repeated listening to organize, have no real discernible traditional structure, often seem to have more orchestral "effects" than substance, do not have traditionally developed themes, and contain quite a lot of dissonance. The disc can be hard to sit through at once; these pieces were not meant to be heard as a whole and they do not function that way--they were written at different times for different mediums and purposes, and since they all exist as self-contained entities the only thing that helps is the strategic choosing and placing of the order of works by the conductor. The disc is very skillfully put together in that sense, beginning with a short piece that was written as a prelude, putting the most serious, weighty piece in the center, and ending with majestic film music, filling in the gaps with shorter symphonic poems.

Pastorale d'été This piece was my first exposure to the music of Arthur Honegger; I played it as a college student in my chamber orchestra. I am very grateful to my conductor at the time for picking this piece, as I would never have found a reason to pick up any works by Honegger in my life. It certainly lives up to its name, and sounds as pastoral as any work could--it definitely shares some kinship with Beethoven's 6th symphony in that regard. It does have some wonderful moments of "what the hell is that" with an uptempo middle section that introduce some decidedly non-pastoral, non-thematic rhythmic portions that I guess could be considered dance-like, before Honegger brings us back to a beautiful Swiss country landscape (in my eyes,

on a summer night of a full moon).

Horace Victorieux This work is the beast of the disc, clocking in at nearly twenty minutes. It is the work that has taken me the longest to come to appreciate, but it deserves its spot as the centerpiece of this collection. For years I wrote it off as a painfully uninteresting gallimaufry of ideas that I would suffer through in order to get to the cool piece about the locomotive (nowadays, I don't see why that piece deserves any more attention than the majority of the other pieces here). It was originally conceived to accompany a ballet depicting the story of the battle between the Horatii and Curatii, but Honegger's collaborator passed away before the work could be completed. Honegger nonetheless completed the music and put the piece out on the concert circuit, enjoying a bit of popularity with it. The story can be followed if one desires, but it's really better to just experience the piece as a marvelous creation on its own merits.

It starts with layered blasts of percussion and brass for thirteen seconds before immediately switching to a chorale of shifting false harmonic tones in the strings with a wind accompaniment that drifts and flows like a twisted river. The solo lines and voices move amongst each other without settling on an idea or repeated statement, with wandering counterpoint harmonies trading opportunities to be in the foreground. At six minutes a more structured and forceful fugal statement appears that is again overtaken by a more wistful wind melody which again makes way for the dark fugal material--they try to coexist and end up melting into each other. There are fanfares, battle music, expressive chamber moments, and death represented. The piece is constantly on the move, and Honegger is continuously introducing new ideas and motifs even as others seem to have barely established any solid footing. It moves like a virus that refuses to be quarantined for study. It's brilliant, but at the same time if the listener does not remain focused and engaged, it is easy to grow lost and disinterested.

Mermoz Suites 1 & 2 The disc ends gloriously with these two "symphonic movements" of music distilled from the score to the 1943 Cuny film. It's the most melodic and easy to digest, with the suites sharing the same thematic material and actually developing a nice arch with what could be considered an almost Romantic progression to the sound. Film composers of today could take a lesson from the pages of Honegger's works in being able to write music for a film that can be brought together to make a strong concert piece. Listening to these two movements, there's no need to have a film in front of you at all, the music is so descriptive and alive, and is not at all secondary to whatever could be happening on a screen.

The Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse led by Michel Plasson along with the engineers of the recording do a remarkable job of cleanly tackling and bringing out the voices in the hardest rhythmic and contrapuntal passages, and all of the virtuosic elements for each voice show no

signs of hesitation or weakness, with the single standout "whoopsie" exception in the Mermoz Suite No. 2 at the 5:15 mark, where the piccolo comes down off of a group rising scale before the rest, which in turn helps a lone string player miscount and come in early at the next entrance. It's very small, though I wonder, given the excellence of the rest of the performance, how it is that that was allowed to remain in the recording. It is also a testament to how in touch the players in this symphony are with each other.

The Prelude to Shakespeare's Tempest, Pacific 231, and Rugby are also equally amazing works, with Pacific 231, from what I can see regarding Honegger's available discography, being the most popular of his pieces. --- rateyourmusic.com

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