

Cesar Cui - Suites Nos. 2 and 4 - Le Flibustier (1993)

Written by bluesever
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Suite No. 2 in E major, Op. 38 1. *I. Tema con variazioni* 00:10:15 2. *II. Quasi ballata* 00:10:50 3. *III. Scherzo* 00:09:54 4. *IV. Marcia* 00:07:46

Suite No. 4, Op. 40, "A Argenteau"

5. *I. Le cedre* 00:08:30 6. *II. Serenade* 00:03:22 7. *III. La petite guerre* 00:01:43 8. *IV. A la chapelle* 00:03:52 9. *V. Le rocher* 00:06:54 10. *Le Flibustier: Prelude* 00:07:44

Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra Robert Stankovsky – conductor

Although now known as a music critic and polemicist - and that only by repute, many of his vitriolic and partisan opinions long-since discredited and regarded solely as the source of a ready quote for writers on Imperial Russian music - Cesar Cui was the least individual and least talented member of the Mighty Handful albeit not the least productive. His catalogue includes some 15 operas, a substantial corpus of songs, plus sundry piano and chamber works; the orchestral works form the smallest grouping within his output and Marco Polo has recorded most of them on this and a companion disc.*

Like his "Suite Miniature", the fourth suite "A Argenteau"*** was derived from piano pieces rather than conceived as orchestral music and, listening to it and the other works here, one can understand why his peers considered his scoring to be below par (Rimsky-Korsakov repeatedly offered to help him re-orchestrate passages from his magnum opus, the opera 'William Ratcliffe' - a suggestion that was haughtily dismissed by the bristling Cui). As far as I can ascertain from the perfunctory liner note, the first suite was an orchestral work from the start. At some points, the music is quite charming, such as in the beguiling Spanish-styled 'Serenade' second movement, and sometimes Cui's melodic writing is attractive and memorable, as in the 'Quasi ballata' of the E major suite, but overall the effect is of a flatter and less technically accomplished version of the sort of music Massenet and Tchaikovsky were producing in their own orchestral suites. The music of movements like the scherzo of the second suite or 'Le Cèdre', which opens the fourth suite, is too wan and unmemorable - however indistinctly amiable it may be in passing - to sustain their length; his reliance on ternary, ABA forms or

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variations thereof (presumably due to inadequate technique) means that he can't compensate for the lack of profile in his thematic writing or for the workmanlike scoring with any sort of structural or developmental interest either.

Neither this nor its companion disc suggest that there is anything misguided about the received opinion that his best work lies in some of his piano works and, above all, his songs. That said, his considerable body of operas remains unexplored for the large part and many commentators have spoken highly of 'William Ratcliffe'. The prelude to his 1889 opera, 'Le Flibustier', is rather one-of-a-piece with the other works on the disc in its pallid lyricism - there is a striving for emotional effect in parts, resulting in a sort of watered-down Tchaikovsky (which in itself is quite remarkable given Cui's very vocal antipathy to that composer's music) but even those passages are more enjoyable than the clunky allegro sections of the prelude, which sound quite amateurish and very old-fashioned in their idiom; the opera was apparently a notable failure at its 1894 Paris premiere.

When I reviewed Cui's other two orchestral suites I recommended that disc over this one and, having listened to the music here again for this review, I stand by that opinion. The recording is fine if unremarkable and the performances under Robert Stankovsky are adequate and no more than that - perhaps less than that, even, in the opera prelude; and one could certainly imagine the music of the suites played with more finesse and charm.

At his best, although not an original or a great composer, Cui is well-worth hearing and we still await a decent and comprehensive survey of his songs on disc but, while there are incidental pleasures to be had here there is not much to furnish sustained listening, I fear, or to gain him many new admirers. ---J. A. Peacock, amazon.com

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