

Emmanuel Chabrier - Orchestral Works (2013)



1 Joyeuse marche (c. 1888) 3:40 *2 Overture to 'Gwendoline'* (1879-85) 9:23 *3 Habanera* (c. 1885) 4:11 *4 Espana* (1883) 6:12 *5 Lamento* (1874) 7:44 *6 Bourree fantasque* (1897) 6:44
Suite pastorale (c. 1888) 19:05
7 I. Idylle *8 II. Danse villageoise* *9 III. Sous-bois* *10 IV. Scherzo-valse*
Three movements from *'L'Etoile'* (1877) 8:11
11 I. Overture *12 II. Act, Entr'acte* *13 III. Act, Entr'acte*
Two movements from *'Le Roi malgré lui'* (1884-87) 12:28
14 I. Fete polonaise *15 II. Danse slave*
Orchestre de la Suisse Romande Neeme Järvi - conductor

This album of popular works by Emmanuel Chabrier marks the beginning of a new series of French repertoire, performed by the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande under its newly appointed Artistic Director, Neeme Järvi.

After three attempts at comic opera, Chabrier finally achieved success in 1877 with *L'Étoile*, the plotline of which is set in the court of the somewhat emotionally unstable King Ouf. A couple of years previously, Chabrier had written a short *Lamento* for orchestra, a work which would not perhaps be considered revolutionary by today's audiences, but which caused the committee of the *Société nationale de musique* to hum and haw over it for eighteen long months before finally letting it loose on the Parisian public in 1878.

From July to December 1882, Chabrier took his family on an extended holiday to Spain, during which he kept himself busy by noting down the Spanish folk tunes and dance rhythms he encountered on his way. He put many of them into his orchestral masterpiece *España*, a work overwhelming in its orchestral colour, which is such a characteristic feature of this composer. The impressions of his Spanish holiday can also be heard in the *Habanera*.

For six years Chabrier worked on *Gwendoline*, a two-act dramatic opera on a libretto by Catulle Mendès, set in Britain in what he called 'barbarous times'. Inspired by Wagner and Berlioz, the Overture sets the scene perfectly for a drama of violence, treachery, and passion. A month after *Gwendoline* was premiered in Brussels in April 1886 the Opéra-Comique in Paris agreed to put on Chabrier's next opera, *Le Roi malgré lui*, a melting pot of complex political intrigue, cheerful arias, and vivacious dances.

In 1880 Chabrier had written his *Dix Pièces pittoresques* for piano, and over the next few years he orchestrated four of them to form the *Suite pastorale*, with its gently pulsing 'Idylle' movement (which inspired Poulenc to become a composer), the raucous 'Danse villageoise', the sultry 'Sous-bois', and last but not least the sunny, high-spirited 'Scherzo-valse'.

Also on this release is the *Joyeuse marche*, one of Chabrier's most popular works, and the *Bourrée fantasque*, based on a dance from the Auvergne region in France where the composer had spent his childhood. ---chandos.net

Neeme Järvi's discography is very diverse and seemingly endless. He has been particularly successful - I would say - in many of the less familiar areas of the repertoire. One seldom knows whether it is the CD company or the conductor who has been the driving force behind the selected repertoire. In either case it is good to find Järvi recording music by Chabrier, whose orchestral output may well be a little greater than many people imagine. There are gems here, so I should add that Chabrier's orchestral music is also of higher quality than is generally acknowledged. Certainly most of it is imbued with sunshine and joie de vivre.

We start with the most substantial piece - the *Suite pastorale*. Järvi has a good instinct for this delightful music, the composer's own orchestration of four of his marvellous *Dix Pièces pittoresques* for piano. When Poulenc inserted a coin into a machine and first heard the opening *Idylle* (in its piano version) he was captivated. Many years later he wrote "Even today it makes me tremble with emotion to think of the resultant miracle; a whole universe of harmony suddenly opened up before me, and my music has never forgotten that first kiss." For me also this wonderful piece never loses its innocent freshness and fascination. Järvi handles *Idylle* sensitively, with close attention to dynamics, but his tempo feels just a tiny bit hurried. Chabrier

marks Allegretto crotchet = 120 for the piano original but Andantino, poco con moto for this orchestration. Sous bois (crotchet = 60 in the piano version, merely Andantino in the suite) also is slightly impatient and short on languor but, once one has become used to the tempo it clear that it is nicely handled. The two faster movements are fine, very well played and again show Järvi's excellent attention to dynamics and telling detail as well as his buoyancy of rhythm. Putting reservations aside, I believe he has an affinity with this music.

Järvi gives a magnificent performance of the Bourrée fantasque, another piece originally composed for piano and a masterpiece with so many harmonic anticipations of music to come, French or otherwise. As Roger Nichols writes in his informative and illuminating notes, "The bourrée was a dance especially popular in the Auvergne (Chabrier's native region), where it was generally performed in clogs." Järvi captures this rugged stamping effect and observes all markings and nuances - the numerous accents and sforzandos especially - while relishing the eccentricity and changes of mood. This is among the finest recordings I have heard, though the even more robust Paul Paray and the Detroit Symphony should not be missed (review). Both here and in the splendid Joyeuse marche the warm but over-reverberant acoustic of Geneva's Victoria Hall rather blunts the sharp edge of Chabrier's rhythms. Nonetheless the march receives another fine performance, as does the more serious, Wagner-influenced Gwendoline Overture - though this is not as swashbuckling as Beecham (EMI, BBC, Magdalen) or as thrilling as Paray.

The Habanera shows yet another different aspect of Chabrier and here Järvi is delightfully characterful and rhythmically buoyant. España is notable for some superb trombone playing - also evident in Gwendoline and the Bourrée fantasque - but Järvi's reading is good rather than exceptional. Here his attention to accents sometimes sounds laboured rather than natural, giving the melodic line a bumpy ride. In Lamento, the earliest and least familiar item on the CD, Järvi compares rather unfavourably with Hervé Niquet (Naxos 8.554248) who finds more depth and passion and shows more belief in this neglected piece. The disc ends with operatic music of a very different kind from Gwendoline, and with these extracts we revisit the composer's more characteristic warm-heartedness and sense of fun. Among the greatest admirers of L'Étoile - and Chabrier's music in general - was Stravinsky, a man of exacting taste who incidentally was subtly influenced by Chabrier. Of the three L'Étoile extracts the overture is short on sparkle, while the Fête polonaise from Le Roi malgré lui (a comic opera greatly admired by Ravel) is spirited but a bit rushed. The final track, the Danse slave, shows Järvi at his most engaged.

This disc is very good in parts but generally a little too variable to deserve an outright welcome.
---Philip Borg-Wheeler, musicweb-international.com

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