Henri Vieuxtemps - Six Morceaux de Salon & Voix du Coeur (1999)

Six Salon Pieces (Six Morceaux), op. 22 (1847) *1.Morceau brilliant de salon [5:22]; 2.Air varié [8:44]; 3.Rêverie[6:45]; 4.Souvenirs du Bosphor [8:16]; 5.Tarantelle [4:53]; 6.L'Orage [5:46]* Voices of the Heart (Voix de Coeur), op. 53 (1880) *7.Tendresse [5:46]; 8.Décision [31:19]; 9.Mélancolie [4:34]; 10.Barcarolle [3:28]; 11.Rêve [5:51]; 12.Interrogation [2:49]; 13.Souvenir [4:26]; 14.Pourquoi? [4:52]; 15.Théme et variations [4:25]* Philippe Koch (violin); Luc Devos (piano).

The reputation of Henri Vieuxtemps comes to us via the history books as a leading violinist of the nineteenth century. Yet he took composing seriously and in turn was taken seriously as such during his lifetime. While still in his teens he was gaining some fame in respect of both activities. Schumann heard him play in Leipzig and wrote a review comparing him to Paganini. Vieuxtemps was then only 15 and within weeks he was playing in London where Paganini was already wowing the public. Vieuxtemps was hugely impressed by the great man's playing but this proved to be mutual. Paganini heard Vieuxtemps and declared a great career ahead. Less than two years later in 1836 he had completed his first violin concerto (now published as No. 2). When in Paris in 1841, Berlioz heard the work and publicly wrote that Vieuxtemps was developing skills as a composer equalling his playing virtuosity.

With hindsight this may seem an exaggerated claim, but what impressed Berlioz and others about Vieuxtemps' compositions was the attempt to elevate the violin/orchestra form to something more than just a vehicle for violinistic display. Paganini was, of course, the leading exponent of that sort of thing but Vieuxtemps attempted works of more symphonic pretension. His ambition probably outstripped his compositional powers. Nevertheless, several recent recordings are testimony to a revival of interest in these works. You can hear them for yourself - see review of three of the concertos here.

This disc presents a genre in which Vieuxtemps is perhaps more naturally at home. I was not relishing the prospect of sitting through a string of 15 light salon pieces for violin and piano lasting nearly ninety minutes; yes, it's a generous disc. Once stuck in though, I found myself enjoying each and looking forward to the next one. The numbers are carefully arranged so that there is contrast– in mood, tempo, texture and technique - and this helped carry me along.

In turn, there is contrast between the two sets. The Six Morceaux are the work of a young man whilst the Voix de Coeur have a certain swan-song character, being written shortly before the composer's death. The earlier pieces are, on average, significantly longer than the later ones. As so often with composers, maturity carries greater conciseness, concentration and simplicity. Overall, what brings interest to these pieces relative to all the violin salon trivia written in the nineteenth century is greater musical interest, refusal to rely on violinistic display and a lack of sentimentality. Some might think the music benefits from a certain French sophistication.

Most of the pieces consist of tune and contrasting counter-tune. This sometimes gives an impression that we are being launched into a sonata-form movement. The fact that such promise is not fulfilled is probably no bad thing for I suspect Vieuxtemps' powers of development might not easily sustain such an enterprise. However, some pieces are skilfully wrought. The Tarantelle in the first set has a second, contrasting lyrical tune but Vieuxtemps keeps the dance rhythm pounding along across the seam between the melodies.

The second set, Voices of the Heart, has an air of ruminative melancholy about it. In fact it was the piece, Melancolie, that impressed me most of all. Untypically it is monothematic; the whole thing being steadily built out of a four note motto building to a moving climax.

In playing these works, many violinists might be tempted into a sentimental salon style and to try to exaggerate the technical difficulties. Philippe Koch, ably accompanied by Luc Devos, resists such temptations. I was impressed by the clean simplicity he brought to the pieces. This certainly helps to focus on the musical content. Some players could easily wreck the music with schmaltzy playing; I bet they do. These may not be Paganini-style display pieces but there are difficulties. For example, one of Vieuxtemps' violin fingerprints is a sudden leap into the stratospheric heights above the stave to strike a note high up on the E string. Koch hits these with impeccable accuracy and no attempt to show off. --- John Leeman, musicweb-international.com

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