

Darius Milhaud - Complete Piano Concertos (2006)

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CD1 *Le Carnaval d'Aix* op. 83b 1. *Le Corso* (*Tres decide*) 2. *Tartaglia*. (*Tres anime*) 3. *Isabelle* (*Modere*) 4. *Rosetta* (*Souple at anime*) 5. *Le Bon et le Mauvais Tuteur* (*Large - Anime - Large*) 6. *Coviello* (*Vif*) 7. *Le Capitaine Cartuccia* (*Allegro de Marche*) 8. *Polichinelle* (*Vif*) 9. *Polka* (*Tres anime*) 10. *Cinzio* (*Tres vif*) 11. *Souvenir de Rio* (*Tango*) 12. *Final* (*Modere - Tres vif*) 13. *Ballade pour piano et orchestre* op. 61 Cinq etudes pour piano et orchestre op. 63 14. *Vif* 15. *Doucement* 16. *Fugues* (*Assez vif et rythme*) 17. *Sombre* 18. *Romantique* (*Tres anime*)
Concerto pour piano et orchestre op. 127 (Concerto No.1) 19. *Tres vif* 20. *Mouvement de Barc...* 21. *Final* (*Anime*) 22. *Fantaisie Pastorale pour piano et orchestre* op. 188
CD2 Deuxieme Concerto pour piano et orchestre op. 228 1. *Anime* 2. *Romance* 3. *Bien moderement anime*
Troisieme Concerto pour piano et orchestre op. 270 4. *Alerte et avec elegance* 5. *Lent* 6. *Avec esprit et eleg...*
Quatrieme Concerto pour piano et orchestre op. 295 7. *Anime* 8. *Tres lent* 9. *Joyeux*
Cinquieme Concerto pour piano et orchestre op. 346 10. *Alerte* 11. *Nonchalant* 12. *Joyeux*
Michael Korstick, piano SWR Rundfunkorchester Kaiserslautern Alun Francis – conductor

The cpo label deserves real credit for bringing us not only this 2CD set with all of Milhaud's works for piano and orchestra but an earlier issue with all his symphonies. And on an earlier CD with 'French Concertos for Two Pianos' we get his work in that form. Can his complete quartets be far behind? I've been familiar with various of Milhaud's works for fifty years and will affirm that his sassy style has never palled for me. I particularly respond to his tangy version of polytonality.

This issue has the virtue of presenting the works in near-chronological order of their composition. One can see how his style evolved over time. Milhaud was not a particularly talented pianist himself and one notices that the works he wrote for his own use when appearing as piano soloist are less virtuosic than those he wrote for others. Nonetheless, his most popular work in the form, from 1926, is one of these, the 'Carnival d'Aix', a suite with twelve short individual pieces. I'm particularly fond of the eleventh of these, the tango 'Souvenir de Rio', which reminds us that Milhaud made wonderful use of Latin rhythms in much of his music, largely as a result of his exposure to South American music when he served as his friend Paul Claudel's attaché when the poet was the French ambassador to Brazil. (Sidenote: Has the US ever appointed one of its major literary figures as ambassador?) The earliest work here is the brief 'Ballade' from 1920 which also has South American overtones. Also from 1920 are the 'Cinq Études' for piano and orchestra, experimental in form and more abstract than some of his other early works. And, ah!, those Parisians who took their music seriously: the work caused a near-riot at its premiere.

The First Piano Concerto, from 1933, was premiered by Marquerite Long and is quite virtuosic. In the excellent booklet notes by Charles K. Tomicik the comment is made that there are virtually no French piano concertos in the mainstream repertoire except those of Ravel -- one might suggest that at least one of the Saint-Saëns concerti retains a toehold there as well -- and that the Milhaud, premiered shortly after Ravel's G Major concerto, is not nearly as effective as the Ravel and is much the more difficult for the pianist. Bitonality is much in evidence throughout and only minimal effort is made by Milhaud to develop materials; rather, there is a profusion of interesting ideas that follow each other in rapid succession. The piano part is brilliantly showy and Michael Korstick, a fine pianist I first heard as a student in Aspen almost thirty years ago, handles the ungrateful piano part beautifully here. The first CD concludes with the 'Fantaisie pastorale' from 1939 which sounds more like Poulenc than anything else here, largely because bitonality is used only minimally and there is a pristine Gallic transparency and ease that contribute to this work's great beauty.

CD2 contains Piano Concertos 2-5. No. 2, premiered by the composer with Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony in 1941, is extrovert, sassy and imaginatively orchestrated, the latter an increasingly notable aspect of Milhaud's style. It is basically neobaroque throughout. It has a middle movement that could be said to be similar to that of Ravel's G Major concerto in its quiet serenity, but there is still the sauciness of Les Six. One hardly notices at first that canonic writing features prominently in this movement. The finale is as polytonal as anything I've ever heard by Milhaud and the orchestral texture becomes extremely dense; however, one of the advantages of polytonality is that it is relatively easy to follow the various planes of orchestral sound. The first movement of the Concerto No. 3 is a bitonal Sicilienne, optimistic in tone. The second movement is stark by contrast, a chorale with brief aphoristic piano interjections. One senses a caution, a developing pessimism in this movement. I find it unsettling but moving. The finale sweeps all this aside in an almost jokey manner that reminds one somewhat of Shostakovich in a similar mood. There is a very effective contrapuntal middle section and then a

return to a conclusion that elaborates the opening materials. I love this concerto best of all, I think.

Concerto No. 4 is by far the most demanding for the soloist. There are hair-raising double runs of thirds, sixths and sevenths (!) as well as fast octave passages for the hands in contrary motion. An unusual (weird?) aspect of the first movement is that in the recapitulation piano and orchestra trade the parts they had in the opening of the movement. The slow movement is extremely dissonant. I have trouble responding to it with other than mild irritation. But the finale, almost diatonic or at least with simple bitonality, and with a clever four-part canon as one of its features, relieves the previous tension and the concerto ends with 'esprit et élégance.' Concerto No. 5 (1955) was introduced at one of the Lewisohn Stadium Concerts with Stell Andersen as soloist (he had also premiered the 'Fantaisie pastorale'); Pierre Monteux conducted the New York Philharmonic. Once again, in the first movement, Milhaud reverse the roles of pianist and orchestra at one point. It seems more effective (and less noticeable, frankly) than in the 4th Concerto. The middle movement is dreamy, serene and lovely. There are some moments of creative and effective orchestration here, especially the section where piano, glockenspiel, celesta and harp have a colloquy. Interestingly, Milhaud's direction for this movement is 'Nonchalant' and yet the movement sounds, as played here, tender and wistful. The finale is a cheeky ending to this extraordinary run of nine piece for piano and orchestra; its style harkens back, to some extent, to that of the opening movement of 'Carnival d'Aix', a fitting symmetry.

Korstick's pianism cannot be praised too highly. He has both the technical ability and the musical acuity to give these not always grateful but always interesting solo parts their due. Alun Francis who has given us such wonderful recordings on cpo -- Toch's, Pettersson's and Milhaud's symphonies, for instance -- leads expert and musical performances by the SWR Radio Orchestra Kaiserslautern. This is a most satisfying set. ---Scott Morrison

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