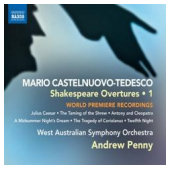
Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco - Shakespeare Overtures • 2 (2010)



1 As You Like It, Op. 166 12:00 2 Il Mercante di Venezia (The Merchant Of Venice), Op. 76 15:05 3 Much Ado About Nothing, Op. 164 10:14 4 King John, Op. 111 8:21 5 Il racconto d'inverno (The Winter's Tale), Op. 80 13:32 Cello [Soloist] – Michael Goldschlager Concertmaster, Violin [Soloist] – Ashley Arbuckle Cor Anglais [Soloist] – Jay Harrison Oboe [Soloist] – Joel Marangella West Australian Symphony Orchestra Conductor – Andrew Penny

I have often wondered why the music of the Florentine Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco has been so rarely heard at least in Britain. He was after all hugely influential and after moving to America taught well-known figures like André Previn and Henry Mancini. He was also an extraordinarily prolific composer.

I have known the Violin Concerto for several years and it has received a few good recordings for example by Itzhak Perlman (EMI Classics 754296 2). I also knew a little about his film music in the 1950s and 1960s but little else. I suspect that he has been elbowed out because he appears less important or original than his contemporaries Pizzetti, Dallapiccola and Casella. Despite my interest and the purchasing of a few piano pieces - mostly when in Italy and second-hand - I did not realize the composer’s obsession with Shakespeare: two operas The Merchant of Venice and All’s Well That Ends Well, thirty-five sonnet settings and thirty three separate songs. There are also eleven concert overtures which are less overtures and more like symphonic poems. I somehow managed to miss Volume 1 in this series, which is a pity because it includes his first effort in this genre, The Taming of he Shrew. Nevertheless what we have on the present disc are five overtures ranging from the longest, composed in 1930, to the last of over twenty years later.

Let’s take them in chronological order. The Merchant of Venice, weighing in at over fifteen

minutes, could almost be described as a tone poem. It has an opening unison string melody which does indeed sound rather Eastern - perhaps I could say Jewish - and it does, of course, represent Shylock. The mood later on however is sometimes reminiscent of Scheherazade. There is, suitably, a romantic moment when, after about seven minutes a lyrical tune enters possibly representing the lovers Jessica, Shylock's daughter and Lorenzo with whom she elopes. Although printed in the Comedies the work ends in the minor key in a serious and almost tragic vein, which seems quite appropriate.

A Winter's Tale is something of a disappointment in many ways. Whilst it is true, to quote the excellent notes by conductor Andrew Penny and Graham Wade, that when listening to these pieces we should know that they the composer set out to "create impressions of specific aspects of the drama rather than following closely the details of the plot" I still found that there was a lack of momentum and power. The first part of the play is taken over by King Leontes' all-consuming jealousy when he comes to believe that his wife has produced a bastard son by his childhood friend Polexenes. There is a faster and slightly wild passage half-way through but this does not convey the mood satisfactorily. The beautiful Bohemian second half of the play as well as a strong mood of nostalgia earlier in the music dominate the work therefore not representing the contrasts found in the plot.

Shakespeare's quite early play King John is a misunderstood and rarely performed political drama. Castelnuovo-Tedesco heads up his score with a quote from the end of the play beginning "That England never did, nor never shall, Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror". This sonata-form structure begins with a militaristic Elgarian march and there is even a touch of lyrical English pastoralism in the second subject that possibly reflects the (brief) feminine influences on the King or of his innocent young son Prince Henry. The piece though is not particularly programmatic but it was a suitable choice for a work written in 1941 during a time of fervent hopes for an allied victory in Europe. I really took to it. Concision and memorable ideas abound and this should be heard in Britain.

You will spend a most enjoyable ten minutes in the presence of the Much Ado About Nothing. This features those two young bickering characters, later lovers, Beatrice and Benedict who became also the leading personalities behind Berlioz's comic opera. The overture is divided into five sections: an Introduction recalling pipers and general gaiety, then Badinage followed by a fine Funeral March which reaches a great climax and finally a Love Duet ending happily and in elation. This is suitable music for a most joyous play.

The last Overture is for As you like it. In this we hear hunting horns setting the forest scene in Arden where Duke Senior has been exiled. There also Rosalind and Celia, his daughters, will

hide away. A general sense of anticipation and jollity rules the day. The style is a little Hollywood at times and while I know that Shakespeare had a wobbly sense of geography Castelnuovo-Tedesco's forest seems to be more Mediterranean than a fresh English Spring or summer wood. We even have a dance section with castanets! That said, it's a successful piece of really light music; and none the worse for that I hear you cry.

The disc is recorded at a slightly low level and the volume control will need to raised otherwise some sections of the orchestra can sound rather recessed. Unless I've missed a trick I can't see why this disc has had to wait sixteen or so years to emerge, but it has been worth it. The music is unfailingly attractive, is colourfully orchestrated and sympathetically played. And so, for such a modest outlay, this is well worth searching out. ---Gary Higginson, musicweb-international.com

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