

Arthur Honegger & Jacques Ibert - L'Aiglon (2016)

Written by bluesever

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CD 1: Honegger & Ibert: L'Aiglon Act 1: Les ailes qui s'ouvrent 1.Scenes 1-3 4:54 2.Scene 4 3:59 3.Scene 5 1:32 4.Scene 6 4:24 5.Scene 7 6:25 6.Scene 8 4:27

Act 2: Les ailes qui battent

7.Scene 1 2:43 8.Scene 2 5:47 9.Scene 3 5:56

CD 2: Honegger & Ibert: L'Aiglon Act 3: Les ailes meurtries

1.Scene 1 1:15 2.Ballet 9:01 3.Scene 2 3:15 4.Scene 3 4:57 5.Scenes 4-5 3:18
6.Scenes 6-7 4:07

Act 4: Les ailes brisées

7.Scenes 1-4 13:33

Act 5: Les ailes fermées

8.Scene 1 12:53

Anne-Catherine Gillet (sop) L'Aiglon Marc Barrard (bar) Flambeau Étienne Dupuis (bar) Metternich Philippe Sly (bar) Marmont Pascal Charbonneau (ten) Military Attaché Isaiah Bell (ten) Gentz Tyler Duncan (bar) Prokesch Jean-Michel Richer (ten) Sedlinsky Hélène Guilmette (sop) Therese Marie-Nicole Lemieux (cont) Marie-Louise Julie Boulianne (mez) Fanny Elssler Kimy McLaren (sop) Comtesse Camerata Montreal Symphony Orchestra Chorus Montreal Symphony Orchestra Kent Nagano Conductor

Co-written by Arthur Honegger and Jacques Ibert, L'Aiglon was first performed in Monte Carlo in March 1937. An adaptation of Edmond Rostand's play of the same name, it deals with the elusive historical figure of Napoléon II – known in his lifetime as the Duke of Reichstadt and posthumously as 'the Little Eagle' – who, following his father's abdication, was taken into the custody of his mother, Marie-Louise of Austria, and kept a virtual prisoner at the Habsburg court. He died, aged only 21, in 1832, but while he lived, all Europe waited, in anticipation and terror, to see if he would attempt to claim his imperial title.

Rostand's play was written in 1900 as a travesti vehicle for Sarah Bernhardt, following her success in Hamlet the previous year, and self-consciously echoes Shakespeare in its

examination of the relationship between volition and action. The Duke – drawn to Napoleonic idealism but trapped by Metternich's sinister Realpolitik – dreams hopelessly of the France he will neither see again nor rule, though his forceful imagination gradually colours the lives of all those round him. In the climactic scene, he narrates the history of the battle of Wagram with such intensity that the old soldier Flambeau, fatally injured in a futile attempt to help the Duke escape, believes he is dying a hero's death on the battlefield.

At the time of the opera's premiere, the two composers kept teasingly quiet about who had written what. We now know, however, that Ibert composed Acts 1 and 5 and the Act 3 ballet, while Honegger undertook the rest. The pervasive mood is one of bittersweet nostalgia. Vocal writing and characterisation are remarkably consistent, but we can detect subtle differences elsewhere. Ibert's contribution is characteristically refined and svelte. Honegger's dissonances have greater bite, and his brass-writing is more elaborate and prominent. The booklet-notes make much of the opera as an expression of French nationalism in the face of the rise of Nazism, and it was indeed dropped from the repertoire during the Occupation, when Ibert's music was proscribed. But the work is neither simplistic nor propagandist. Austrian culture was comparably under threat in 1937 and Ibert's glorious waltzes evoke 19th-century Vienna even as they mourn its passing.

Of late there has been something of a revival of interest in the piece, with important stagings in Marseilles and Lausanne in 2004 and 2013 respectively. Decca's recording was made in Montreal, during the series of concert performances that marked its Canadian premiere in March last year. Conducted with care and palpable affection by Kent Nagano, it boasts a fine, mostly francophone ensemble cast, with not a weak link anywhere. At its centre, in a trouser role that is a gift for a lyric soprano, is Anne-Catherine Gillet's Duke, bright in tone and wonderfully subtle in her response to the complexities of both text and character. Marc Barrard is the touchingly funny Flambeau, while Etienne Dupuis makes Metternich all the more sinister by singing his music so beautifully. The orchestral sound is gorgeous, as is the recording itself, and only the occasional distant cough reminds us that it was made live. ---Tim Ashley, gramophone.co.uk

The notes to this Decca release offer various theories for the almost total disappearance of this hugely listenable 1937 opera, beginning with the fact that its nationalistic French theme made it unperformable for several years soon after its premier. Here's one more theory: classical music listeners are invested in the idea of the solitary composer offering an individual creation to the world, and collaborative works, few and very far between, somehow do not compute. L'Aiglon

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(the "little eagle" was the ill-fated Napoleon II, son of Napoleon Bonaparte) was written by Arthur Honegger and Jacques Ibert, with roughly equal proportions contributed by each composer and close collaboration on the dynamic third act. Part of the appeal of the score is that it places the breezy, melodic content of French neoclassicism in a larger stylistic context, and does so in a convincing way. The opera is based on a play by none other than Edmond Rostand of *Cyrano de Bergerac* fame, and it has one of the most convincing libretti of any opera of the 20th century. The action takes place as the young Napoleon, who grew up in Austria and was influenced by his surroundings there, becomes the point man in a conspiracy to restore him to power in France after Bonaparte's defeat. The plot unfolds against the splendor of life at a Habsburg court, and Ibert is deployed in the waltzes and the other lighter music (sample the opening scenes of Act III, the first tracks on the second CD), while the more Wagnerian Honegger takes the meatier dramatic content such as the remarkable dreamlike fourth act as the young Aiglon recalls Bonaparte's exploits at the Battle of Wagram in 1809. No other work has been shaped in exactly this way, and the results are compelling. So too are the performances here. The role of L'Aiglon is given to a soprano, perhaps in recognition of the fact that the role was played by Sarah Bernhardt in the stage production, and Belgian soprano Anne-Catherine Gillet and the rest of the partly French-Canadian cast in this live Montreal performance excel and throw themselves into the action. But the star of the show is the conductor Kent Nagano, not French at all but resident in Montreal long enough to have shaped the *Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal* into his own instrument. The score has a real lightness in his hands, and it moves. Highly recommended, and a real find for lovers of French opera. ---James Manheim, AllMusic Review

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