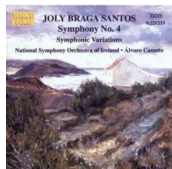


Joly Braga Santos – Symphony No.4 Symphonic Variations (2002)

Written by bluesever

Monday, 01 August 2011 18:49 - Last Updated Thursday, 12 September 2013 13:11

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1. *Symphonic Variations on a popular song from the Alentejo* 2. *Symphony No. 4: Lento* 3. *Symphony No. 4: Andante* 4. *Symphony No. 4: Allegro tranquillo* 5. *Symphony No. 4: Lento*
National Symphony Orchestra Alvaro Cassuto – conductor

Braga Santos (1924-1988) spent the early part of his musical career studying under a Portuguese composer of the previous generation, Luis de Freitas Branco, who would appear to have influenced all of Braga Santos's compositions through and including the 4th Symphony, all of which were written while he was still in his 20s. (The excellent booklet notes, by Álvaro Cassuto, the conductor for this Marco Polo series and clearly the principal champion of the music of Braga Santos, go on to state that Braga Santos subsequently studied with Herman Scherchen and Virgilio Motari, and that his later works reflected a more avant-garde compositional style, something that I have yet to look forward to.) Despite his Iberian roots, there is little in his music that brings to mind a characteristically Iberian style (say, that of Manuel de Falla). Instead, there is a more "international" flavor to these works, including some fairly obvious similarities with a number of better-known composers: Bax, Bruckner, Hanson, Nielsen, Ravel, Respighi, Rimsky-Korsakov, Sibelius and Vaughan Williams come to mind at various points throughout the 4th Symphony, and the Symphonic Variations have their Ravelian and Respighian touches as well.

The symphony (Braga Santos's longest, at some 53 minutes), is in four rather evenly divided movements, save for the last movement, which concludes with a stirring epilogue in the form of a chorale that largely accounts for its greater length. Each of the movements is full of good tunes, incorporated with real craftsmanship and a high regard for orchestral color. One can hear the ravishing lushness of Ravel, the motivic cells of Sibelius (even successfully combined with the Ravel touches in several places), brilliant splashes of orchestra color that readily remind one of Respighi, frequently modal writing reminiscent of Vaughan Williams, side drum tattoos that bring Nielsen to mind, and so forth. The epilogue-in-the-form-of-a-chorale that concludes the work does so on a very high note; with its use of timpani ostinato and a chorale theme that is of a definitely "Romantic yearning" bent, it reminds me in most respects of the final-movement coda to Hanson's "Romantic" Symphony, even to its brilliant modulations in the closing bars.

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What is exceedingly difficult to put into words is the fact that all of this works, and works brilliantly, without seeming obvious or "pastiche-like." Each movement is a fully-developed entity having its own themes (and ear-catching tunes), with its own immediate appeal, yet the four movements fit together with perfect logic. Tis a puzzlement that this work has labored pretty much in obscurity for a half-century, for it is a "can't fail" audience-pleaser that need make no apologies.

The "Symphonic Variations" (which is the opening track on the disc) is, according to the booklet notes, based on a popular song from the Alentejo region of southern Portugal. It is a catchy tune, even a pretty one, where the "theme and variation" idea is utilized as a formal device for displaying the virtuoso and coloristic capabilities of the orchestra; a "Concerto for Orchestra" without actually being one, so to say. The work is "of a piece" with the 4th Symphony in terms of its obvious craft and its immediate - and seemingly lasting - appeal.

This last point deserves a small bit of additional commentary. Seldom, when listening to something totally new to me, do I latch on to it as I seem to have with these two Braga Santos works. My music library is literally littered with roadkill, stuff I gave a try to that in the end just didn't make an impression on me. Not so for these works; each time I listen to them (and it's been a few times already, just for purpose of putting these thoughts together), I find something new to appreciate in what Braga Santos has crafted.

Marco Polo has done us an outstanding service by committing to disc a major portion of Braga Santos's symphonic output (including all of his symphonies), under the direction of Cassuto. The National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland is a fine group that does justice to both these works, and the sound is excellent.

This is truly a composer who deserves to be "rescued from obscurity," and Cassuto and Marco Polo have done themselves proud in their efforts. I hope to have the opportunity to hear a Braga Santos work performed "live" some day, now that all this "heavy lifting" by Cassuto and Marco Polo has brought his works before the listening public. ---Bob Zeidler, amazon.com

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