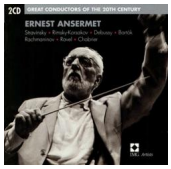
03.Great Conductors of the 20th Century - Ataulfo Argenta



Disc 1: *Franz Liszt - A Faust Symphony: A Three Character Portraits (After Goethe) 01. I. Faust 02. II. Gretchen 03. III. Mephistopheles* Maurice Ravel *04. Alborada Del Gracioso: Assez Vif-Plus Lent-Au Mouvement*
Disc 2: Franz Schubert - Symphony No.9 In C Major, D944 “The Great”
01. I.Andante - Allegro Ma Non Troppo 02. II. Andante Con Moto 03. III. Scherzo. Allegro Vivace 04. IV. Allegro Vivace
Manuel de Falla - El Amor Brujo: Escenas Gitanas De Andalucia. Ballet En Un Acto
05. I. Introduccion Y Escena: Allegro Furiosos Ma Non Troppo Vivo 06. II. En La Cueva: La Noche: Tranquilo E Misterioso 07. III. Cancion Del Amor Dolido: Allegro 08. IV. El Aparecido: Vivo, Ma Non Troppo 09. V. Danza De Terror: Allegro Ritmico 10. VI. El Circulo Magico: Romance Delpescador: Andante Molto Tranquillo 11. VII. A Media Noche: Los Sortilegios: Lento E Lontano 12. VIII. Danza Ritual Del Fuego: Para Ahuyentar Los Malos Espiritus: Allegro Ma Non Troppo E Pesante 13. IX. Escena: Poco Moderato 14. X. Cancion Del Fuego fatuo: Vivo 15. XI. Pantomima: Allegro 16. XII. Danza Del Jeugo De Amor: Allegretto Mosso 17. XIII. Final. Las Campanas Del Amanecer: Allegretto Tranquillo
Ana Maria Iriarte – soprano Orchestre de la Societe des Concerts du Conservatoire Ataulfo Argenta – conductor

With its first dozen releases in the 'Great Conductors of the 20th Century' series EMI Classics ally themselves with the same gold standard as the Philips 'Great Pianists' series. I wonder how many more are to come after the first barrage. The classical newsgroups will be rocking with the usual debates about why one conductor was included and another waits disconsolately in the steppe. Why was this or that version chosen over another? I do not want to be left out. More of that anon.

Argenta was born on the Northern Atlantic coast of Spain at the small fishing town of Castro Urdiales (about the same size as Brixham in Devon, UK). It is not far from Santander. He studied in Belgium and Germany after beginning his conservatoire studies at the age of thirteen

in Madrid. His wartime prentice years in Germany were possible because of Spain's and Franco's special relationship with the Dritte Reich. Argenta promptly left Germany and returned to Spain when allied bombs fell too close for comfort. In 1946 he became chief conductor of the Spanish National Orchestra. His interpretations of Spanish and French music were well regarded.

His recordings include a Symphonie Fantastique with the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra, a reputedly exhilarating Tchaikovsky 4 (LSO), he conducts the LSO in the famously OTT Campoli Tchaikovsky violin concerto (reissued on Beulah 3PD10- how we miss that label) and serves similar duty, this time with the LPO, for Katchen's Liszt piano concertos.

He recorded a great deal of Spanish music. All the usual suspects are there. Turina, Rodrigo, Guridi, Usandizaga, de Falla, Halffter and Granados all get a look in. His Ravel also includes Pavane, Rapsodie Espagnole and Ma Mère l'Oye. I am sure I recall these appearing on Decca Ace of Diamonds LPs with the ADD prefix (how those prefixes resonate: SRCS, VIC, ACL, ADD, SXL, ASD etc!). Maurice Ohana's early Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter was also recorded. There are upwards of twenty Argenta LPs of zarzuela by Vives, Jimenez, Serrano, Breton and Chapi.

I am not sure what has been done in Spain but so far as the wider European and world market is concerned, Argenta has not received the sort of methodical adulation and 'reissuitis' accorded to the likes of Kubelik, Silvestri and Markevich let alone Stokowski and Walter. This set is a major step forward for his reputation.

The Argenta Faust Symphony is furiously virtuosic, oozing fiery conviction and bringing you up short with artistic parallels that would never have occurred to you without Argenta's attack. I defy you not to think about Tchaikovsky's Fifth and Manfred when you hear this. This is the original version without the chorus in the Mephistopheles finale and Argenta gave it its first recording.

The slowness of Argenta's Great C Major is the first thing that hits you and I can't say I like it. This does however accentuate the quick tumbling Brucknerian climax at 4.19 and the quicker tempi chosen for the later movements. In the andante the precisely limned steadily ticking beat works well. The scherzo is roughened and tartly brusque. This is not in my view an extraordinary Great C Major nor for that matter was the last Ninth I reviewed - that of Boult and the BBCSO on the now sunken Beulah label.

It is rather a shame that Argenta's El Amor Brujo follows just after the Schubert. The Schubert symphony is the only thing here to be in stereo and its sound is pretty good as is that for the Liszt. The de Falla is the oldest recording in the set and its string tone is a mite splintery. Odd, too, that it was recorded by the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra when Argenta's own orchestra the Orquesta Nacional de España would have been a more natural choice. However the invitation came from French Columbia and he had to dance to their tune. As it turns out the orchestra are on good mettle. This is a superbly spick and span interpretation of a work which I have long adored. By this I do not imply that it is too regimented. It finds time to stretch and wonder, for example in the Pantomima in which de Falla wrote an angel's gift of a tune. Here the massed violin tone takes off some of the sheen. As for the mezzo, Ana Maria Iriarte, she is perfect, with guttural hues to catch the smoke-roughened gypsy throatiness. There is hardly a trace of vibrato. She is a cut or two above the flawed Ines Rivandeneyra recently heard by me in Markevich's 1966 recording on Eloquence. She also takes great care with the shaping of the words (printed in full in Spanish and trilingual translation) and their meaning. When the suite finished I immediately played it again - such was the effect of this recording on me. In time it might even displace my perverse and aberrant preference for the Russian CFP licensed performance on CFP 40234 with Arvid Jansons conducting the Moscow Radio SO. The mezzo is Irina Arkhipova. But before you go looking for it bear in mind that it is an LP and that the sound is surprisingly scrawny in places.

Both the Faust and the Alborada are recorded in the present set in close-up vivid sound with more hiss evident in the Faust than the Alborada. The Alborada has some of its brashness and brilliance bled away by the 1950s engineer's decision to pull back on the recording levels for climaxes.

The notes are informative and thorough as you would expect from Alan Sanders. I owe it to Mr Sanders that I can tell you that the Cento Soli was a contractual pseudonym used at different times for the Lamoureux, the Paris Conservatoire or for a pick-up orchestra. The trilingual notes are contrasted with five wonderfully grainy and articulate photographs courtesy of Toni Argenta. The recordings are licensed to EMI by Decca, Musidisc and EMI France.

Lisztians need to hear Argenta's Faust. His El Amor Brujo is perhaps the best ever. This set has attractions transcending fogeydom and 1950s nostalgia. ---Rob Barnett, MusicWeb International

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