

Ravel - L'heure espagnole (2016)

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Maurice Ravel: L'heure espagnole, M. 52 *Introduction Scene 1: Senor Torquemada, horloger de Toledo? (Ramiro, Torquemada) Scene 2: Totor! (Concepcion, Torquemada, Ramiro) Scene 3: Il reste, voila bien ma chance! (Concepcion, Ramiro, Gonzalve) Scene 4: Il etait temps, voici Gonzalve! (Concepcion, Gonzalve) Scene 5: C'est fait, l'horloge est a sa place (Ramiro, Concepcion, Gonzalve) Scene 6: Maintenant pas de temps a perdre! (Concepcion, Gonzalve) Scene 7: Salut a la belle horlogere! (Inigo, Concepcion) Scene 8: Voila!... Et maintenant a l'autre!... (Ramiro, Concepcion, Inigo) Scene 9: Evidemment, elle me congedie (Inigo) Scene 10: Voila ce que j'appelle une femme charmante (Ramiro) Scene 11: Monsieur, ah! Monsieur! (Concepcion, Ramiro) Scene 12: Enfin, il part! (Inigo, Concepcion) Scene 13: Voila l'objet! Que faut-il que j'en fasse? (Ramiro, Concepcion, Inigo) Scene 14: Ah! vous, n'est-ce pas, preste! (Concepcion, Gonzalve) Scene 15: En depit de cette inhumaine (Gonzalve) Scene 16: Voila ce que j'appelle une femme charmante (Ramiro, Concepcion) Scene 17: Oh! la pitoyable aventure! (Concepcion, Gonzalve) Scene 18: Voila!... Et maintenant, Senora, je suis pret (Ramiro, Concepcion) Scene 19: Mon oeil anxieux interroge (Inigo, Gonzalve) Scene 20: Il n'est, pour l'horloger, de joie egale (Torquemada, Inigo, Gonzalve) Scene 21: Pardieu, demenageur, vous venez a propos! (Inigo, Torquemada, Ramiro, Concepcion, Gonzalve)* Maurice Ravel:

Don Quichotte à Dulcinée, M. 84

No. 1. Chanson romanesque No. 2. Chanson epique No. 3. Chanson a boire

Isabelle Druet, Mezzosopran – Concepción Luca Lombardo, Tenor – Torquemada Frédéric Antoun, Tenor – Gonzalve Marc Barrard, Bariton – Ramiro Nicolas Courjal, Bass – Don Inigo Gomez François Le Roux, Bariton – Don Quichotte Orchestre National de Lyon Leonard Slatkin – conductor

Leonard Slatkin is an exceptionally versatile conductor, but it is perhaps in French repertoire of the 19th and 20th centuries that he feels most comfortable. The singers in Ravel's exquisitely formed little comic opera L'Heure espagnole, complete with cheating lovers hidden inside grandfather's clocks carried up and down stairs, are all entirely appropriate and admirably clear, but it is really Slatkin who's the star here, right from the "Introduction" that's so artfully linked to what follows. Ravel here cultivates a kind of updated accompanied recitative, well matched to

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his stated goal of reviving the old tradition of Italian opera buffa. The dialogue seems straightforward, but it is subtly and considerably heightened by the music in ways that may be clear to the listener only in retrospect. Sample the sly "Salut à la belle Horlogère!" (track eight) for a taste of how Slatkin holds the entire scene, orchestra and singing of mezzo-soprano Isabelle Druet, in the palm of his hand, and of the light sexiness in the opera embodied in the afternoon-delight-seeking Concepción. A bonus is the set of three Don Quichotte à Dulcinée songs, the last work Ravel completed. Highly recommended and absolutely delightful. ---James Manheim, AllMusic Reviews

This is a companion disc to Slatkin's recording of Ravel's L'Enfant et les sortilèges I reviewed here earlier. Like that CD this account of L'Heure espagnole has strengths and weaknesses in equal measure. As in L'Enfant, the orchestra plays a role at least equal to that of the singers and here is where this new recording excels. I have more reservations about the vocal soloists, as I did on the earlier disc.

L'Heure espagnole is farcical, but Ravel's sense of comedy also contains a certain elegance that is essential for the work to attain its appeal. Both Marc Barrard, as Ramiro, and Nicolas Courjal as Don Iñigo, as the banker, are over-projected. Barrard's heavy vibrato quickly wears and while Nicolas Courjal suits the pompous nature of his character, he too is a bit overdone. Some distance in the recording would help, but everything is close-up and present. The other characters are better portrayed, especially Luca Lombardo's Torquemada and Isabelle Druet as his wife. Frédéric Antoun's Gonzalve is also good as the self-regarding and ridiculous poet, until you compare him with some of his predecessors in the role. On the other hand, the Lyon orchestra leaves little to be desired and Slatkin clearly appreciates the score, capitalizing on the Spanish elements. No detail in Ravel's wonderful orchestration is missed and Slatkin's tempos are perfectly judged. Everything comes across vividly but is it all a bit too vivid? As with the singing, there are times when a bit of distance would have been advantageous.

For comparison I went back to two previous favourites: Lorin Maazel's 1965 recording with the Orchestre National, Paris, and a superlative cast consisting of Jane Berbié, Gabriel Bacquier, José van Dam, Jean Giraudeau and Michel Sénéchal; and Gianandrea Noseda's BBC Philharmonic account from the 2 August 2002 BBC Proms that was issued as a cover CD with BBC Music Magazine. Noseda's cast was headed by Sarah Connolly as Concepción and Jean-Paul Fouchécourt as Torquemada. I listened to the Maazel through the pops and clicks of my old LP and even there could appreciate the subtleties beneath the score's surface. Noseda's account is nearly as good with idiomatic singing and an excellent orchestral accompaniment.

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Being recorded before a live audience also helps and their clearly audible laughter only adds to the enjoyment of the experience. The music comes across vividly, but at a more natural distance than with Slatkin's production team. In any case, more so than L'Enfant et les sortilèges, this opera ideally needs the visual element to be fully enjoyable. The physical nature of the farce, with the male characters hiding in the large clocks and the muleteer carrying them up and down the stairs demands to be seen and not just heard. There are two videos containing both of Ravel's operas that are recommendable, both Glyndebourne productions: Simon Rattle's designed by Maurice Sendak on a Warner DVD and more recently Kazushi Ono's award-winning one both on DVD and Blu-ray (FRA Musica). Dave Billinge designated the latter as a Recording of the Month.

A substantial bonus offered on the CD under review is the last of Ravel's compositions, Don Quichotte à Dulcinée, which was originally commissioned for a new film version of the Cervantes novel. Instead, four songs by Jacques Ibert were used in place of Ravel's three. Still, the songs, continuing the Spanish theme of the programme, are colourful in their depiction of the Quixote character, by turns heroic and tender. One would think the celebrated baritone François Le Roux to be the ideal interpreter of these songs. Unfortunately, his voice turns blustery and effortful whenever the volume increases, which is only exacerbated by the close recording.

So, despite the appreciable talent and dedication that went into making these recordings, I can endorse this CD only as a supplement to other versions. Naxos has provided an attractive booklet with good notes and a detailed synopsis of the opera's action scene by scene, but no text or translation. The listener is directed to the company's website for the libretto in French only. ---Leslie Wright, musicweb-international.com

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