



Igor Markevitch conducts Schubert, de Falla, Mussorgsky and Roussel

aud 95.631

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Fanfare (James Miller - 01.01.2010)

Born in 1911 in the Ukraine, Igor Markevitch was truly a citizen of the world, having held conducting positions in France, Spain, Monte Carlo, Italy, Canada, Sweden, and Cuba while appearing as a guest in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Soviet Union, Poland, and elsewhere during his career. He was raised in France and Switzerland. A musical prodigy, he attracted the attention of Serge Diaghilev, who promoted his career as a composer until the ballet impresario's death in 1929. Although he apprenticed with Hermann Scherchen, his primary focus during the 1930s was on composing. For whatever reason, after World War II, he concentrated on conducting, seldom promoting his own music. Deteriorating hearing forced him to curtail his career during the 1970s. He died in 1983.

He's not so easy to pigeonhole. The conductors that I think he most resembled, say, Eugène Goossens, Robert Irving, Efrem Kurtz, and Constant Lambert, have faded into the past along with him; how about Antal Dorati, with a lighter touch? I suppose it is no coincidence that all of those conductors, at least initially, made their mark as ballet maestros. There was a vigorous rhythmic component to Markevitch's style, and ballet music made up a large fraction of his repertoire. To be sure, there are Markevitch recordings that don't fit my characterization (an eccentric Tchaikovsky Fourth on French EMI, for example), but I think I'll stand by my reluctant attempt to classify him. Reviews from his prime years suggest that some listeners found him too lean, too clipped in phrasing, too abrupt, maybe too "streamlined"—gemütlichkeit and angst were not his thing. He was generally a "fast" conductor.

Markevitch made studio recordings of all the selections on this disc. I never heard his Schubert Third Symphony with the Berlin Philharmonic but I did hear him conduct it in person some 30 years ago. Here, with the RIAS Symphony, he will be vulnerable to complaints that, for all his energy and efficiency, he dispatches the piece in too unsentimental and businesslike a way, but some listeners may find it quite bracing. Around this time, he recorded the Three-Cornered Hat Dances with the Philharmonia Orchestra. Although there is really nothing "wrong" here, that recording is superior to this one in detail and refinement of execution. The other two selections on the disc, however, are right up his alley, really superb performances—if only they could have been done stereophonically! In the Bacchus and Ariadne Suite, his nervous energy and rhythmic drive absolutely animate the piece (not that it needs much help) and, although I have not heard his Lamoureux Orchestra recording in many years, I have a strong suspicion that it doesn't measure up to this one—the Berliners pour it on and even hold their own with the orchestras of Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia (and I admire the Munch, Martinon, and Ormandy recordings). Unlike those of Munch and Ormandy, this one is uncut.



Mussorgsky has to be one of the great songwriters of the 19th century. Many of his 63 songs resemble folk songs. I like Leonard Altman's explanation in an LP annotation: "Strongly inclined toward building a national style, Mussorgsky's task was that of creating art music for a people whose natural channel of musical communication was the folk-song; the Russians were a people unaccustomed either by nature, tradition, or experience to 'culture-music.' That he succeeded in retaining the color and flavor of the folk idiom, and at the same time created an art music of significance to his own people as well as to the entire world, was his triumph." During the early 1960s, Markevitch recorded his own orchestration of six Mussorgsky songs in Moscow with Galina Vishnevskaya. That performance, a very fine one, has been reissued on a two-CD set devoted to Mussorgsky's music but, as far as I can determine, the first song, Lullabye, is missing from the reissue. In 1962, with Vishnevskaya in even better voice, he led the BBC Symphony in a superb performance that was eventually issued on CD and had better sound and playing ("had," because it seems to have been deleted). Both of the Vishnevskaya recordings were stereophonic. Unlike some modern orchestrators of music of the past, Markevitch seems to have been more interested in serving Mussorgsky, actually enhancing the songs, than showing us how clever he could be. I was skeptical about this 1952 mono broadcast. Who was Mascia Predit? It turns out that she was a 40-year-old Latvian soprano who had at one time studied with Feodor Chaliapin. It also turns out that she had a rich voice of the Slavic type without the unpleasant edge that can seep into the top of the range and she absolutely relishes the text without destroying the melodic line. In a word, she's terrific, and while the dynamic range is a bit more level than that of the other two recordings, the orchestra comes through clearly and plays beautifully. I also wouldn't have minded if she were just a shade further from the mike, but, given the artistry on display here, that is a piddling point. Trivia: she appeared as a Russian tourist in the film, "Death in Venice," under the name "Masha Predit," and sang snatches of the Mussorgsky Lullabye, while sitting in a beach chair. I seldom make assertions of this sort but I think the six Songs may be worth the price of the disc, and you will get one heck of a Bacchus and Ariadne Suite too.

