



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky & Camille Saint-Saëns: Symphony No. 4 & Piano Concerto No. 4

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These recordings emerging here in clean 'Honest John' mono from Audite who are quite justly held in high esteem by the German radio companies' archive chiefs. The unshowy audio integrity of these tapes is typical of European radio work of the time - analogue hiss well subdued. The sound is not splendid but remains totally enjoyable.

There was an audience present in both cases and while well-groomed they are prone to the occasional, cough, creak and rustle - especially in the Saint-Saëns, speaking of which this work is in two solid movements. It has a sturdy majesty and a Beethovenian repose which occasionally descends into decoration. In that sense the Concerto is no different than many other romantic concertos. Casadesus lends substance to the decoration and gravitas to the reflective moments. Decoration tips towards absurdity in the galloping section at 1.55 in the finale which sounds as if it escaped from vaudeville. The galloping figures favoured by this composer work well in the masterly Second Concerto but can seem miscalculated here.

The Tchaikovsky 4 is prime Ormandy territory and he recorded it several times. The one I am familiar with is the version with the Philadelphia on Sony Essential Classics. The italicised tenderness of the first movement is notable. Much care is taken over the most tender of details. Listen to the conductor at 1.35 in I where every hesitant breath and pressing forward is relished. Every detail is engraved by a craftsman. I have yet to hear a Monteux version of 4 but this fascination with detail reminded me of Monteux's way with the Fifth Symphony and the LSO in Vienna in 1960 (Vanguard). That said, the French conductor gives a better feeling for the overall architectonic skeleton of the work.

The brass of the RIAS Symphony Orchestra are sturdy not stolid. Listen to the way they chisel out the tragic fanfaring at 8:10 in the first movement. They major on the iron in the brass rather than the gold. Their tone is stern not plump - sin botox as we might now say.

Ormandy's approach is affectionate but never sloppy - refreshingly honest. In the finale he takes pains over clarity in the way he sculpts those gaunt fanfares. This is nowhere near as impulsively headlong as Mravinsky's Leningrad Phil DG recordings made in London in 1960. On the other hand Ormandy is a wily hand and saves the zest for the whirlwind of the finale's last four minutes.

Ormandy, Casadesus and Tchaikovsky enthusiasts will need this.