



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

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GRAMOPHONE

Ormandy and Ansermet - Perennials in contrast

Two 'house' conductors of the '50s and '60s receive the retrospective treatment

During the 1950s and '60s two of the most ubiquitous conductors on disc were Eugene Ormandy in Philadelphia and Ernest Ansermet in Geneva. Both were selected by their respective record labels (Columbia/CBS and Decca/London) for standard repertoire – Brahms and Beethoven symphonies, Debussy and Ravel orchestral works, Russian “showpieces” and so on – though each was also occasionally allowed to record more esoteric fare, in Ormandy’s case certain American works, whereas Ansermet set down the likes of Honegger and Magnard. Neither conductor has until now been the subject of what you could call a comprehensive CD “edition”. Ormandy still awaits his day, but thanks to the Australian branch of Universal Classics and Jazz and their ever-enterprising Eloquence series manager Cyrus Meher-Homji, Ansermet is at last enjoying the systematic reissue of a very sizeable (and very welcome) “Decca Legacy”. Among the most recent instalments is a four-disc Brahms box that includes all four symphonies, the overtures and variations, the German Requiem (with Agnes Giebel and Hermann Prey), Alto Rhapsody (Helen Watts) and Nänie, all the choral works featuring the Lausanne Pro Arte Chorus.

So why should we bother with Ansermet in Brahms? After all, the Suisse Romande Orchestra, although nearly always responsive to persuasive rostrum direction, is no match sound-wise for the fuller sonorities of London’s Philharmonia or the Philharmonic orchestras of Berlin or Vienna. What it does have, in this particular context, is an impressive pooled intelligence and a comprehensive understanding of its conductor’s clear thinking. There is absolutely no “wow” factor here: these performances brook no fuss and parade few mannerisms. Time and again one finds oneself admiring the sheer simplicity of Ansermet’s sage-like method, his insistence on allowing arguments to unfold naturally, refusing to bolster a specific point or indulge a seductive detail. His Brahms has a real sense of perspective, the First’s opening Allegro sounding fresh and unforced, the finale jubilant but with inner voices scrubbed clean. Both the Second and Third symphonies include their first-movement exposition repeats. The Fourth parades a mighty profile, especially the finale, where Ansermet holds fast to a steady tempo, much as Toscanini did in 1935, and refuses to allow the closing pages to run away with themselves. The choral works are affectionately done (though Giebel is a little past her prime), the overtures and variations are securely held in check, with the Tragic Overture receiving one of its finest recorded performances. Sound-wise things go swimmingly, the Geneva Victoria Hall’s ample acoustic easily accommodating both the scale and detail of

Ansermet's revelatory readings.

Other Eloquence Ansermet reissues include an instructively transparent orchestral Wagner programme (Lohengrin, Götterdämmerung, Meistersinger, Parsifal) and the complete Ansermet Sibelius recordings coupled with Rachmaninov's Isle of the Dead. Some of this material has already appeared here, though not a fast and sparsely textured Tapiola, nor a measured but cumulatively powerful account of Sibelius's Second Symphony. Ansermet's compelling 1954 Paris Conservatoire recording of Rimsky-Korsakov's Sheherazade (in stereo of sorts) is coupled with a rousing and atmospheric mono Le coq d'or suite with the Suisse Romande Orchestra. Perhaps the most interesting of these new Ansermet releases is an imaginative coupling of Liszt (Faust Symphony, Two Episodes from Lenau's Faust, Hunnenschlacht) with Alberic Magnard's Third Symphony.

Ormandy's Philadelphia quota for the month is impressive but, in comparison with Eloquence's Ansermet deluge, conceptually limited. Sony's 10-CD "Original Jacket Collection" treats us to some much-loved but oft-reissued perennials: Respighi's Roman Trilogy, Rachmaninov's Second Symphony and a legendary coupling of Shostakovich's First Symphony and Cello Concerto (with Rostropovich) are all top-of-the range. So are Tchaikovsky and Mendelssohn concertos with Isaac Stern, a two-disc sequence of Bach orchestrations (previously out on Sony Legacy) and Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings. A Bartók programme (Concerto for Orchestra, Two Pictures, Miraculous Mandarin Suite) is luxuriant but lacking in bite and although a coupling of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition (Ravel's orchestration) and Rimsky's Sheherazade is both sumptuous and technically secure – "handsome" might be a better word – I'd rather Ansermet's less comfortable but more probing accounts on Eloquence. Perhaps the least convincing performance is Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony, which is both mannered and strangely lacking in tension. A rather more striking 1954 broadcast account of the Fourth Symphony where Ormandy conducts the Berlin RIAS Symphony Orchestra has appeared on Audite. As with the Fifth there are some fairly theatrical gear-changes and yet one could hardly fail to admire the warmth of string tone or the high level of commitment: the orchestra is plainly going all out for maximum visceral impact. But what makes this well transferred CD more or less unmissable is a remarkable performance of Saint-Saëns's Fourth Piano Concerto with Robert Casadesus as soloist, a cool but virtuoso reading and possibly the best of the many versions of the work that we now have from Casadesus. Ormandy is as ever a superb accompanist but if Sony intend to supplement their "Original Jacket" set with a second Ormandy/ Philadelphia volume, I would strongly recommend choosing Ormandy's Brahms as a theme – the concertos, the symphonies, the variations (including Rubbra's orchestration of the Händel Variations) and other works. Now that would be worth buying.