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“Best recordings of the year” selection



RAVEL Piano Concerto in G; Piano Concerto for the Left Hand; FLORENT SCHMITT: *J'entends dans la lointain...* Vincent Larderet (p) Ose Symphonic Orchestra. Daniel Kawka (cond) ARS 38 178 (53:45)

As the story goes, George Gershwin, enamored of the music of Maurice Ravel and determined to study with him, arranged a meeting in Paris with the French master. Ravel, bemused and flattered, asked Gershwin if he would first mind answering a simple question. “How much money do you make in a year?”, he queried. “Oh, several million dollars, at least”, answered Gershwin. Said an astonished Ravel, “Then perhaps it is I who should study with YOU!”

There is something about that spirited exchange, which is evidently a true story, which brings to mind my first encounter with the extraordinary French pianist, Vincent Larderet, who I first heard in concert in Spain in 2001. At the time, I was serving on the jury of the prestigious, Premio Jaen, one of the oldest and richest piano competitions in the world, alongside such pianistic luminaries as Dag Achatz and Rosalyn Tureck. Of the few dozen pianists who were gifted and lucky enough to be admitted to the contest, only a few stood out. Among those was Larderet. He did not win a prize, but unlike most of the other competitors who would go on to languish in obscurity or in academia, he claimed a real victory years later with a major international career. Like so many competitions where jurors routinely reward consistency and mediocrity, the standouts are more often left to their own devices, a truism that casts doubts not only on the collective wisdom of competition juries, but on the entire ethos of the piano competition itself.

A pianist who has devoted much of his time to Ravel, drawing heavily on original sources and the notes of his student, the late pianist, Vlado Perlemuter, Larderet’s commitment has more than paid off; his performances here are breathtaking. To the ever vivacious G major concerto he brings fastidious élan, flattering the piano’s often internecine dialogue with its orchestral partner. While there is much about this work that evokes chamber music – a certain convivial camaraderie that values the interplay of motivic material among all the instruments, including the piano - it also embraces its *raison d’être* as a concerto. Not once, in Larderet’s competent hands, is the essential autonomy of the piano compromised in favor of a cat-and-mouse game with the orchestra.

On the other hand, nothing about the G major concerto suggests its principal objective is the presentation of a soloist and his instrument in tandem with an underlying accompaniment, as if the latter were a second class citizen. What binds the concerto to classicism's symmetry and logic has been liberated from conventional decorum. Rarely has the undulating sarabande that informs the *Adagio* been so poignantly stated, or the suggestive, Latin inspired-asides and crackling plosives of the opening *Allegramente* and the concluding *Presto* turned out so gracefully. This is not a performance to be listened to so much as experienced; Larderet, whose rhythmic understanding of this music is probative and discloses its immanent relationships in unexpected ways, conveys not only its innumerable dialogues, but its implicit physicality, which is every bit as relevant to its aesthetic as its musical trajectory. These qualities are visceral, but not exogenous to the music; they are one and the same with Ravel's aesthetic vision.

Much the same can be said for the turbulent, even Promethean Concerto for the Left Hand, which was Ravel's homage to his friend, the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm in the first World. Larderet's performance here easily surpasses most readings, and is in a league of its own, giving even those of Michelangeli (in the G major) and Samson Francois a run for their money. The mammoth complexities of the piano writing and its proximity of notes and gestures would at first seem to defy that it could possibly be delivered by a single limb. If anything, especially for those unfamiliar with the work, only the title will give it away; it sounds as if it is being played by five hands, not five fingers. For a musician of Larderet's stature, it is hardly an opportunity to show off, but on the contrary, an occasion to elaborate its cosmos of counterpoint, served up in a spirited collaboration with its orchestral accompaniment, which in less competent hands than conductor Daniel Kawka's might overpower the soloist. Indeed, Larderet is nothing if not judicious, building the work inexorably from the uncertain rumblings of the rhetorical sarabande of its opening to the playful filigree of its intermittent scherzos.

Of neglected composers about whom it can be legitimately said were great, Florent Schmitt (1870-1958) is certainly among them. Schmitt, whose music hovers somewhere in the harmonic and atmospheric vicinity of Richard Strauss and Alexander von Zemlinsky, was every bit as celebrated as his rival and contemporary, Ravel in the early part of the 20th century. Perhaps his music fell into obscurity as a consequence of his peculiar and often objectionable public behavior; he was an unabashed and often severely opinionated music critic who would often make his most negative judgments vociferously public during concerts, when he would shout his approval, or lack of it, from his loge.

Whatever the case, the one movement *J'entends dans la lointain...*, composed on the heels of World War 1, is a kaleidoscopic elegy to the dead. It is also a most heady and sublime work of art that was inspired by a citation from the Uruguay-born French poet, Comte de Lautreamont's (né Isadore- Lucien Ducasse, 1846-1870) *Chants de Maldoror*. Schmitt composed this evocation of the sado-masochistic realities of war, and the suffering born of such malevolence, as a piano work in 1917, but refashioned it more than a decade later into an orchestral work with piano. The entire quote is " J'entends dans le lointain des cris prolongés de la douleur la plus poignante " (I hear in the distance drawn-out cries of the most poignant grief). And that is precisely what Schmitt has so exquisitely codified in this opulent concoction of fanciful and sinuous arabesques played out on a phantasmagorical, instrumental battlefield of its own. To say that Larderet and Kawka meet the challenges of this complex and enchanting piece with the command and eloquence it deserves would be an understatement.

No less authoritative and impressive is Daniel Kawka, who at the helm of the OSE Symphonic Orchestra, brings to the concept of collaboration a whole new meaning. Not one to back down nor to overpower his soloist, Kawka proves himself an exceptionally robust, yet fastidious conductor whose attention to detail is second to none. Not only has this recording earned a place on my short list of the best recordings of the year, but it sets a new standard by which all other performances will likely be measured in future. As for Vincent Larderet, who has blossomed into a great pianist indeed, I can only say that if I played even a tiny role in bringing him to wider public attention those many years ago, I could not be prouder.

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