



French Cello

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A distinguished French cellist and a French orchestra present a fine programme which celebrates the important role of the cello in late 19th century France. This is a shrewd selection: the works by Saint-Saëns and Fauré are familiar, that by Lalo less so, and (outside the organ loft) the music of Léon Boëllmann remains obscure.

I was very glad to discover Boëllmann's concertante work, as I suspect will be many music lovers. Its thirteen minutes contain plenty of rewarding music, and no note-spinning. The title pays homage to Franck's piece for piano and orchestra, and it sounds to me almost in the same class as that work. The commanding Moderato maestoso opening introduces the cello at once with the first theme. The Andantino second theme has an appealing lyrical fragility, but is still strong enough to generate some lively variations, and crown the final apotheosis. There are several taxing display opportunities which Marc Coppey relishes. He is a fine advocate of this compact and engaging piece.

Is there a finer cello concerto than Saint-Saëns's A minor? Maybe, but few that are over in less than twenty minutes and offer such opportunities for a skilled cellist. The soloist has a showcase for all the instrument can offer, including becoming a chamber musician, or one who is primus inter pares. Coppey's playing is impressive. In particular, there is a rapturous quality to his playing of the lyrical music in both of this work's outer movements.

The disc inevitably offers Saint-Saëns's The Swan. This perhaps best known of all cello works is played here in Paul Vidal's arrangement for cello and chamber orchestra, and it casts the usual serene spell.

Another arrangement for cello and orchestra, this time by the composer, is Fauré's noble Élégie, originally a fragment of an abandoned cello and piano sonata. Coppey gives it a spontaneous-sounding account, at times almost improvisatory in feeling. The cellist's tone and line are deployed in the service of a haunting interpretation, aided by touching flute and oboe contributions from the Strasbourg players under John Nelson, attentive collaborators throughout.

Lalo is best known for a single work, his Symphonie espagnole. His Cello Concerto could well stand alongside it if it received more performances as good as this one. The stormy opening is stirring, and the lyrical passages silken, in Coppey's treatment of the opening movement, at thirteen minutes the longest track on the disc. The central intermezzo shifts neatly between slow and fast music, transitions which



Nelson and Coppey manage without any undue jolt. The sprightly rondo finale is a spirited dance, delivered by all concerned.

The sound is reasonably good, if a bit lacking in terms of realistic orchestra colour. The recorded balance favours the cello, as is common, but sometimes a bit too much. It is tolerable when the orchestral music is loud, but less so when the music is quiet for both soloist and orchestra. Thus in the Allegretto con moto minuet of Saint-Saëns's concerto and the swift passages of Lalo's Intermezzo the solo instrument dominates the aural picture so much that it covers details in the orchestral contribution. One paradox of an instrument captured so close up is that the quality of a pianissimo is less easy to appreciate.

It is instructive to compare this performance of Saint-Saëns's pieces with that which Mischa Maisky and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra recorded in 1998 for Deutsche Grammophon. There is a similarly forward cello but its prominence is better balanced and accommodated within the whole musical picture. Perhaps it helps that Maisky is both soloist and conductor, so there is just one view of the right balance.

Still, I would not wish to exaggerate this aspect of a fine disc, for I soon adjusted to it. It may worry some listeners more than others, and most will simply wish to get as close to such fine cello playing as they can. And it could be difficult to find exactly this well-chosen programme in such consistently good performances.

French Cello**Léon Boëllmann (1862-1897)***Variations Symphoniques* Op 23 (1892)**Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)**

Cello Concerto No 1 in A minor Op 33 (1872) [19:35]

Le carnaval des animaux (1886): Le Cygne**Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)***Élégie* in C minor Op 24 (1880)**Éduard Lalo (1823-1892)**

Cello Concerto in D minor (1877)

Marc Coppey (cello)

Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg/John Nelson

rec. 2021, Palais de la musique et des Congrès, Salle

Erasme, Strasbourg, France

AUDITE 97.802 [70]

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Roy Westbrook