French Saxophone - 20th Century Music for Saxophone & Orchestra

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American Record Guide (Ritter - 01.09.2004)

This release has four works that are offered in their original orchestral guise for the first time on CD. But what makes it so important is the inclusion of the massive, growling, brazen concerto of Henri Tomasi (1901-71). His father was a researcher in folk music, and Tomasi studied at the Paris Conservatory, later becoming founder of the famous group “Triton”, along with Poulenc, Prokofieff, Milhaud, and many others. This exposure to multiple cultures (the son of Corsican parents, and raised in Marseille) had an effect on his rather hard-to-define style. Saxophonists have known this work for years, so it is hard to believe that it has taken so long to get its first full recording. But now that we have it, there is a great cause for rejoicing, because this performance should set the standard for many years.

Usually when we hear saxophone and orchestra, we are hearing a chamber group or reduced forces with only a few woodwinds and the occasional brass. But Tomasi understood the power of the instrument and did not hold back when considering his instrumentation. This is a full-orchestra setting, and the lets the instrument sail above massive string lines and high-pitched trumpets. Multiple meters and loud, punctuating percussion only add to the excitement in this most assertive of all saxophone concertos. Tomasi was a prolific composer and wrote in all genres, but none that I have heard match the effectiveness of this extraordinary work.

The rest of the recital is unfortunately not as exciting. Andre Caplet is probably most known for his arrangement of the work of Debussy, and he is the author of many delightful chamber works, like his Piano Quintet. His “Legends” is very atmospheric, impressionist and Wagnerian in harmony, and bears only a slight resemblance to some of the more “mystical” (notes) work that he would produce later in his career. While the piece is charming in its introverted melodic consciousness, the whole seems to meander somewhat, and one comes away from it curiously unsatisfied.

Far better is the “Concert Music” for saxophone and 12 instruments by Marius Constant (born 1925). Of Romanian and French parentage, Constant uses a blend of intimate techniques and chamber textures to set the stage for his own unique variety of neoclassicism. The instrumentation (three brass, three strings, three woodwinds, piano and percussion), lends an Alban Berg feel to the musical grain, while reminding us more of Stravinsky in his confused pre-serial music. But Constant never for a moment abandons melody as the driving force in his work, and the four movements of this suite ably sustain the ideas he puts forth, holding the interest and flooding us with color.

Jean Absil (1893-1974) does little to assist us in our appreciation of his music with this late (1971) “Fantasy-Caprice”. Earlier in his career he was somewhat of an enfant-terrible with his (at least theoretical) embrace of atonality, but later he backed

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off and produced rather straight-laced, lyrical music with many ascetic qualities. Such is the case here, and while some of the effects are not without interest, the work rambles on with little to hold our aural or intellectual curiosity.

And for those so inclined, this is absolutely the best recorded performance of Debussy's awful "Rhapsody" that I have ever heard. The bold, snarling brass and warm, vibrant strings almost made me like that piece. Well, face it, the composer did it for money, admitted he knew next to nothing about the saxophone, didn't orchestrate it, and now has the honor of turning in about the worst piece for a solo instrument by a major composer. It has some moments, and when played like this, a lot of excitement, though it will always be an also-ran in my book. But the name is Debussy, so it will continue to be a mainstay – perhaps even the most recorded piece for saxophone. If this was my only recording, that would be just fine with me, as it is really wonderful, though it does not quite erase the names of Jean-Marie Londeix (Martinon on EMI) and Sigurd Rascher (Bernstein on Sony) – both currently available.

Audite has supplied stunning sound for Mr Tassot – a crackerjack player if ever there was one – and the Munich Radio Orchestra sounds here for all the world like the best group in the history of recordings. The Tomasi alone would sell me; other will have to decide if the plusses outweigh the minusses. The notes are excellent.

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