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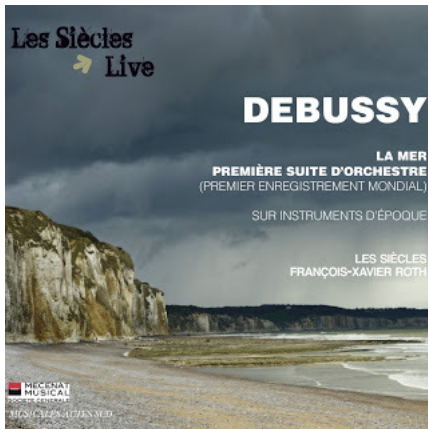
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Saturday, 13 July 2013

Debussy's La Mer from Les Siecles

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Period instrument ensembles are continuing the discovery of late 19th and 20th century music, showing what revelations the changes in timbres and performing styles can bring. The French group Les Siècles, conductor Francois-Xavier Roth, who will be appearing at the Proms on Sunday 14 July 2013 playing Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, have a new disc out exploring the music of Debussy. Recorded live, the disc pairs Debussy's early *Premiere Suite* in its first ever recording, with his orchestral masterpiece *La Mer*.

Debussy's *Premiere Suite* was written whilst the composer was studying at the Paris Conservatoire in Ernest Guiraud's composition class. (Guiraud, incidentally, was the friend of Bizet who was responsible for writing the recitative in *Carmen* after Bizet's death). Debussy's *Premiere Suite* was written in 1882-84 but only came to light in the 1970's. The work exists in a piano duet form and in a fully orchestrated form.

The piano duet version was premiered in 2008 and the orchestral version in 2012. The work is in four movements, *Fete, Ballet, Reves, Cortege et Bacchanale*. The orchestration to the third movement, *Reves*, has been lost and on this disc the movement has been orchestrated by Philippe Manoury.

The orchestra plays with period style and instruments, which means gut strings and little vibrato, rather more edge to the woodwind and narrow bore brass. The end result is to accentuate the details and the textures though I have to admit that I wondered whether the wind players brought as much character to their playing as the ones in Sir Thomas Beecham's recordings with the Orchestra National de la Radiofusion Francaise.

Fete opens with rumbustious charm, leading to a perky, quirky middle section. *Ballet* is something of a scherzo, playful with exotic hints. There are definite echoes of Debussy's predecessors and contemporaries in the music, you can pick the influence of Faure, Chabrier, Lalo and Delibes.

Reves opens with a haunting scurrying and delicate wisps of melody, and it builds to a lush climax with definite pre-echoes of mature Debussy. *Cortege et Bacchanale* opens with a trumpet melody, the orchestra answering. It rather develops into a march which, however attractive, does sound as if it comes from a 19th century French opera. The *Bacchanale* is rhythmically attractive but not in any way lascivious.

This is the world premiere recording, so there is nothing to compare it to. The orchestra's textures are clear and details are nicely defined. But, apart from the novelty of seeing what later Debussy you can pick out, I can't see much reason for digging this recording out very often.

La Mer, Debussy's three symphonic sketches, is a different proposition. Written 20 years after the *Premiere Suite* in 1903, *La Mer* was one of the most played of Debussy's works during his lifetime. There is a supple and subtle quality to Debussy's writing which means that historically informed performance practice is never going to be enough, mere colour and texture will not suffice.

De l'aube a midi sur la mer opens with an austere clarity of texture, thanks to the lack of a vibrato laden wash from the strings. Roth's tempi in the movement feel a little stilted and the work does not flow perfectly. After a lovely thinning of texture we get the glorious cello theme. But then things steady again; the textures are lovely, but what is happening within, the ebb and flow, is not always so gripping.

Jeux des vagues is delicately impulsive with a lot of detail apparent in the orchestra, though again I felt a fatal steadiness. *Dialogue du vent et de la mer* opens with some nicely dark and threatening playing, with strongly characterful woodwinds. But nice details and characterful playing are not enough, and there is not quite sufficient swing through the climaxes which seem inhibited. But details do occasionally tell, even in the loudest passages there are lovely piquant textures. But I did find myself noticing the details rather than the general flow of the music.

One are that I did wonder about was the vexed question of portamento. Roth and his players seem to avoid the portamento entirely. Surely we would have had some?

We have a lot to learn from performing works like *La Mer* in period style and I hope that Francois Xavier Roth will deepen his interpretation and come back to *La Mer* with greater interpretative depth.

Claude Debussy (1862 - 1918) - Premiere Suite d'Orchestre [26.40]

Claude Debussy (1862 - 1918) - La Mer [23.04]

Les Siècles

Francois-Xavier Roth (conductor)

Recorded live: 13 April 2012, Accademia Nazionale di Santa-Cecilia, Rome; 2 February 2012, Cite de la musique; 13 October 2012,

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