

Subtle harmonic colours

In many countries, Darius Milhaud is known first and foremost as the composer of two pieces of music: Scaramouche and the ballet La Création du Monde. The fact that he has also produced a host of truly magnificent symphonies, beautiful chamber music (amongst which there are fifteen phenomenal string quartets), as well as a large number of operas, concertos and oratorios has remained virtually unnoticed in the musical world. La Cheminée du Roi René, opus 205, which literally means the "fireplace of King René" but in this case could equally well read as the "domains of King René", dates back to 1939. The suite was originally intended for flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and horn and pays homage to René d'Anjou, the Count of Provence, whose royal courts were situated in Aix en Provence, Milhaud's place of birth. The Provence remained very close to his heart right through to the end of Milhaud's life. Its 'couleur locale' ran through his veins and touched his music in all its essence. Although it cannot be denied that La Cheminée offers a large degree of playful diversion, the music at the same time breathes an atmosphere which is anything but light-hearted. The counter-point is full of exquisite ingenuity. There is an abundance of very subtle harmonic colours, which are especially striking on account of their musical effect. More importantly perhaps, the special qualities attributable to the different wind instruments have been used to their fullest effect. At the same time, however, this has not led to a composition whereby everything boils down to outward appearance. In conclusion, it is interesting to see how Milhaud has succeeded in turning his work, which consists of seven parts, into a piece of music which is highly reminiscent of the music from the Middle Ages. He has done so, we are happy to say, in a way which has nothing whatsoever to do with the saccharine versions produced by so many musical minds from the post-modern era.

Playful witticisms

What is the secret of good humour? For one thing, that it should never degenerate into some sort of farcical vulgarity. One person who always took his humour completely seriously was, without a doubt, Milhaud's French colleague and contemporary Eric Satie who is quoted to have said: "People say I am a joker. Not only is this not true; What is more, I do not even wish it to be true!" We may add that the utterly funny, unbelievably witty and almost spiritual Ludions (1923) marked the end to a friendship between the composer and Léon-Paul Fargue, a poet who was particularly popular within the Dadaist movement. Fargue was renowned for his offensive language and gross insults and Satie featured highly as one of his favourite victims. For fear that his offensive remarks might not be heard, Fargue would sometimes deliver his letters to Satie in person and slide them under his door. This, in addition to a number of other incidents, ultimately caused such an enormous row between the two artists that Fargue even refused to visit Satie when the latter was in hospital. Still, whatever the case may have been, Satie's five musical settings to Fargue's Ludions are absolutely delightful, not in the least because of the large number of puns which are full of wit and are highly sophisticated in style, but certainly also because the composer makes fun of a number of musical styles. Although it is virtually impossible to come up with a good, literal translation for the term 'Ludion', we cannot fail but recognize the resemblance it bears to the word 'ludic', which means playful. At times, Satie's musical settings include obvious references to Bach, only to be followed by allusions to the circus or to variety shows. There even seems to be a kind of 'pre-echo' from Stravinsky's Circus Polka which dates from 1942.

In the first and the last song of the Ludions - here in an arrangement from Arie Boers for soprano, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, French horn and piano - we even find allusions to Satie's speech in daily life. It is a well-known fact that his speech was often impeded with a stammer.

Satie the 'pub-crawler'

La Diva de l'Empire, which on this CD can be heard in the same formation, together with Je te veux, as the Ludions, is based on a text written by Dominique Bonnaud and Numa Blès and can be characterised as a true cabaret-like song. The same holds true for Je te veux. At the Folie Bergère, considered to be the hottest centre of town in the French capital and a place where men could gaze

at feminine beauty as much as they liked, Satie felt like a fish in water. This was also reflected in *La Diva*: Underneath a wide-rimmed feathered hat, there hides a little girl, a veritable little queen she is, this Diva of the Folies Bergères. She knows full well how to wind around her delicate fingers every man, whether he be snob, gentleman or Dandy.

As for the music, which is so full of dashing and elegant accents and sometimes even reminds us of the music played in Vienna at the time of the Strauss family, there is no question about the double-entendre intended in the words.

One of Satie's best friends was the poet Henry Pacory. In 1898, Satie was looking for a new place to live, because, as he put it, he needed "more space to accommodate the wealth of his ideas". He found his new residence in Arceuil, which was the birthplace of Pacory. Satie set to music many of the poems written by Pacory, one of them being *Je te veux* (1900). In it, Satie once again expressed his love of regular nights out. He was indeed a regular 'pub crawler'. To some extent, this was inherent to his line of work. After all, he played the piano in a cafe in Paris called 'Le Chat Noir' in order to earn a living. It is from this period that the classic stereotype image of Satie originates, of a man dressed in a black velvet suit, complete with bowler hat and spectacles and holding the inevitable umbrella. Satie was a passionate collector of umbrellas. He had a huge number of them. *Je te veux* is a proper drinking song in the truest sense of the word, albeit cast in the shape of a seductive walse of a highly titillating sort.

Happy tongues

Although we usually speak of evil tongues, there is absolutely nothing evil about them in the *Trio d'Anches*, composed by George Auric and dedicated to his fellow composer Henri Sauguet. In this utterly funny piece of work, whereby the French word 'anche' is to be translated as tongue, the tongues are not at all evil but provide a happy note for a change. Auric completed his work in 1938. It is intended for oboe, clarinet and bassoon. The title is directly connected with the human tongue and more specifically, with the intimate relationship between the said organ and the tongue of a wind instrument, i.e. the straw. As soon as this relationship is made to come full circle, it is bound to lead to a type of music which is extraordinarily clever and pungent. Auric's *Trio*, with its abundance of brilliant witticisms, is living proof of this. In it, the composer has managed to kill two birds with one stone. First of all, the rationalistic spirit of the so-called 'Groupe des six', of which Auric was a well-known member, is about everywhere in the score. The entire piece is a true miracle of contrapuntal ingenuity. Furthermore, we cannot fail but recognize that Auric must have been fully aware of, and familiar with Stravinski's ballet *Pétrouchka*. It is in the first part of his composition that the said ballet is hinted at, albeit vaguely but still clearly recognizable. And as for the last part, it almost sounds like the modernised version of a baroque suite, with its various sections following each other in rapid succession. So down-to-earth do they sound that an attentive audience might even recognize a Christmas carol in them.

Evocative streak

Milhaud's music may have found little acceptance in The Netherlands, but the situation has been far worse for Charles Koechlin and his vast body of work. Koechlin's name is primarily associated with his musical expression of Kipling's famous *Jungle Book*. Although it consists of five symphonic poems, it is only the part called *Les Bandarlog*, opus 176, that v,411 occasionally be played here. Koechlin's original style can be characterised by its preference for polytonality, a quality which he shares with Milhaud, and by a large degree of expressiveness. A major difference with Milhaud's work is that he shows a tendency to strive for the sublime and the mystical. The latter quality is very obvious in another part of the *Jungle Book*, called *La Course de Printemps*, opus 95, which is a monumental piece of work and has been projected over enormous distances. To a certain degree, the mystical and the sublime can even be found, albeit in miniature format, in the second of the *Deux Nocturnes*, opus 32bis, intended for flute, horn and piano, which is entitled '*Dans la forêt*'. Opus 32bis was created over a long period of time. According to Robert Odedge, an authority on Koechlin, this can be

explained by the fact that it was during that very period that Koechlin was shaped as a composer. It was not until after 1903 that Koechlin made his many discoveries, especially in terms of bitonality of idiom and his rich, complex harmonies. The latter qualities are very clearly present in the above-mentioned second nocturne, which is a great deal more sophisticated than the first, which bears the title 'Venise'. One striking detail is that the French horn is sometimes played with a damper, which emphasises all the more clearly the highly evocative nature of this very special type of music. Koechlin started working on nocturnes 2 and 3 as well, but, unfortunately enough, was never able to finish them.

A tasteful, neo classical approach.

If one element can be said to stand out in the music of Francis Poulenc, it will have to be the unification of neo-classicism - which can be recognized in a slight predilection for the baroque and classicist forms - and a tasteful element only to be referred to as 'esprit français'. There are two separate versions of the Grand Masters famous Sextet for flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn and piano. The composer first completed his work in 1932, but was to realise it completely only seven years later. In this particular score, Poulenc clearly demonstrates his love of wind instruments. The two outer movements, both fast and absolutely brilliant, show a certain degree of symmetry, With the themes from the opening scenes reappearing towards the end of the grand finale. The central part offers a great deal of playful diversion, such as only Poulenc could write. A structure of this type - with its bold opening part, its beautifully elegant slow second part and a concluding Rondo which is almost ethereal in quality and in which the characteristic elements of the opening section return - was certainly not new in Poulenc's oeuvre. The Trio for oboe, bassoon and piano from 1926 had also been based on a similar structure.