

Milhaud

L'homme et son désir, Op. 48^a. *Le boeuf sur le toit*, Op. 58a. *La création du monde*, Op. 81a. *Suite provençale*, Op. 152a.

♫Tomoko Makuuchi (soprano); ♫Jian Zhao (mezzo); ♫Matthias Vidal (tenor); ♫Bernard Deletré (bass); **Orchestre National de Lille/ Jean-Claude Casadesus**.

Naxos 8.557287 (super-budget price, 1 hour 9 minutes). Website www.naxos.com. Producer Andrew Walton. Engineer Mike Clements. Dates July 15th-18th, 2003.

Comparisons:

Le boeuf sur le toit/La création du monde/Suite provençale:

Champs-Élysées Orch, orch, Concert Arts Orch/Milhaud (EMI) 7 54604-2 (1958, 1932, 1956)

La création du monde:

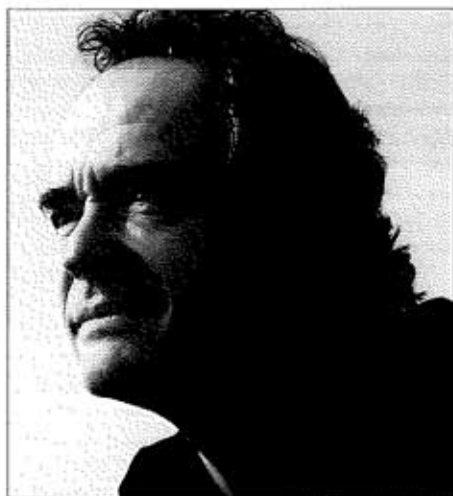
Columbia CO/Bernstein (Philips) NBR6019 (1950, LP)

L'homme et son désir:

Doerner, Klein, Arend, Koster, Luxembourg RSO/Milhaud (Vox) CDX5109 (1968), (Calliope) CAL9526

Suite provençale:

St Louis SO/Golschmann (Camden) CAL178 (c1945, LP)



Jean-Claude Casadesus

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This is magnificent. Here are four of Milhaud's relatively early orchestral works through which his initial reputation was made, each of which has been recorded many times (all comparatively well known), in performances that – frankly – sweep the board. The sound quality is quite superb. Milhaud himself conducted all of these pieces for the gramophone (some more than once) and students of his work will naturally not wish to part with those classic recordings, but to them – and to newcomers, especially – I urge purchase of this disc forthwith.

I studied with Milhaud in Paris in 1962-63 and have known most of these compositions and his performances of them intimately for longer than that. So far as I was concerned, the first Bernstein recording of *La création du monde*, for American Columbia with Benny Goodman and other jazz players in the band, was the unsurpassed version (none of Milhaud's own recordings, as realizations of the music, was quite in the same class). I had always had a problem with *Le boeuf sur le toit*, for I had never heard a performance, either live or on disc, which convinced me that it was out of Milhaud's top drawer. With the *Suite provençale*, the record collector has been luckier: both Golschmann (on RCA) and Milhaud himself (for Capitol) directed thrilling performances, and the extraordinary ballet *L'homme et son désir* in essence always struck me as more of an interesting experiment (four vocalizing soloists, chamber orchestra and a truly vast percussion section) than a fully coherent work of art.

This new Naxos disc has caused me to revise my opinions upwards. Every one of these performances is stunningly good, but – more importantly – the musical understanding of the conductor Jean-Claude Casadesus has come as a series of revelations. Perhaps the most famous work, *La création du monde*, receives a performance that is unequalled in the current catalogues. This is a magnificent performance, fully demonstrating the totally original genius that lies behind it. The *Suite provençale*, too, is equally brilliant – although I think the tempo for the sixth movement may be too fast (but winningly played), and I hope this account will gain new friends for a lovely work.

But *Le boeuf sur le toit* and *L'homme et son désir* on this disc have caused my admiration for Casadesus to grow. The former receives a performance in a thousand: this is a very difficult work to play and to conduct, for the south-American tune that runs through the work as a ritornello can too easily become boringly repetitious. The orchestral texture also needs delicate handling if it is not to appear raucous or ill-scored. Here, every last quaver is in place, and the subtle tonal and tempo gradations are handled with a mastery that had me lost in appreciation of such fine music-making. The work is revealed anew as a far better composition than could have been imagined earlier. Finally, *L'homme et son désir* is equally splendidly performed: I have never heard a performance that comes near this one for sheer musical quality.

The notes by Richard Whitehouse are very good, and my only tiny quibbles are in the titlings: *Le boeuf sur le toit* is Op. 58a, and the *Suite provençale* is Op. 152a – neither is as shown on the track listings. Offhand, I cannot think of a finer Milhaud orchestral collection than this one, and I am profoundly grateful to the musicians, the engineers and to Naxos for making such a musical and technical success of these works by my old friend and mentor.

Robert Matthew-Walker