

**MILHAUD** *La création du monde. Le boeuf sur le toit. Suite provençale. L'homme et son désir* • Jean-Claude Casadesus, cond; Lille Natl O • NAXOS 8.557287 (68:40)

The extensive compositional legacy of Darius Milhaud (1892–1974) will no doubt continue to be evaluated for some time to come. There's a lot of it: 443 opus numbers spanning 63 years of ceaseless activity. Within that *œuvre*, of course, there's a certain amount of dross, but also a fair number of standouts. At least two of the four works on this release could be counted among the finest and most influential from his early maturity, while *L'homme et son désir* is earlier still, but was an important avant-garde work in its day; and *Suite provençale* is just plain fun. There's surprisingly little representation of most of this on CD, too, so neither Naxos nor Jean-Claude Casadesus can be accused of furrowing over-used fields.

All four performances here are well judged, after a manner that won't surprise anyone familiar with the conductor's finely balanced Poulenc (Naxos 8.554241). Clean articulation is the hallmark of this *L'homme et son désir*, while the *Suite provençale* exhibits a nice harmonic edge and rhythmic verve. *La création du monde* has a 1920s louche quality here in both its "jazz machine" sections, especially the one that occurs about two minutes before it concludes, reveling in energy, precise articulation, and vertical clarity. It bears remembering that Boulez was one of Casadesus's conducting mentors, and it shows to good effect in the contrapuntal textures of Milhaud.

One quality is missing at times from these performances, most notably *Le boeuf sur le toit*: an over-the-top boisterousness. It's currently best represented by Bernstein/ORTF (EMI Classics Special Import CDC 47845), and gives that work (*La création du monde* as well, to a lesser extent) an exuberance you won't find under Casadesus's direction. But it's not an absolute necessity so much as a personal preference; and the understated manner of the new recording brings its own rewards in the form of greater equilibrium among the simultaneous, distinctive lines.

Tempo are reasonably chosen, and the Orchestre National de Lille rises to the challenge admirably. It may not be a household name (unless presumably you're from the Région Nord/Pas de Calais), but the ensemble work is effective, and solos are handled in a crisp fashion that does credit to the French instrumental tradition.

Engineering is excellent, and the liner notes are decent. This is a fine release, and I can only hope that Casadesus turns his attention to Milhaud's fine operas, or his group of short, delectable symphonies in the future.

**Barry Brenesal**