

CD Review by Jerry Dubins

CASTELNUOVO-TEDESCO *Le danze del Re David. Questo fu il carro della morte. Alt Wien; I naviganti. Piedigrotta* • Mark Bebbington (pn) • SOMM 032 (66:56)

Many readers' first, last, and only acquaintance with the music of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1895–1968) may be his once (and still?) popular D-Major Guitar Concerto, or a Heifetz recording of the second movement of the composer's Violin Concerto No. 2, op. 66, subtitled "The Prophets." Yet his catalog lists some 200 works, among which can be found some very fine music; for example, his Sacred Service and oratorio, Naomi and Ruth, which I reviewed as part of the Milken Archive of Jewish American Music perspective back in 27:2. So, let me take a moment to explore some possible explanations for Castelnuovo-Tedesco's consignment to oblivion.

He was an Italian Jew who found himself in the midst of a rising tide of anti-Semitism and the hostile environment of Mussolini's Fascist regime. That, in itself, is enough to explain the maligning of his music and his person, as happened to so many German and Austrian Jewish composers of the time. But Castelnuovo-Tedesco had another battle to fight as well. Like Respighi, Casella, Malipiero, and Nino Rota, all Italian and all approximate contemporaries of his, Castelnuovo-Tedesco's interest was not primarily opera or vocal music, but orchestral and instrumental music—this, at a juncture in history when demand for non-operatic music in Italy was on a par with demand for thermal underwear at the equator. Thus, before his emigration to the US, Castelnuovo-Tedesco was twice damned, once for being a Jew and once for being out of touch with the prevailing Italian opera culture.

Upon his arrival in the US, he then committed the sin that among the classical elite dare not speak its name. Not only did he settle in Hollywood and become involved with the film industry, but he also ended up teaching film-music composition at the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music, where his students included André Previn, Henry Mancini, Nelson Riddle, and John Williams. Few composers who tried to straddle that fence were able to command the continued respect of the academic and elitist opinion makers, or to be embraced by classical concertgoers for their "serious" concert works. One of the notable exceptions who proved the rule was Korngold.

The phrase I used above, "consignment to oblivion," was probably too strong and misleading a statement, for Castelnuovo-Tedesco is represented on record by a considerable portion of his output (a large part of which consists of pieces for guitar and for piano); and none of the pieces played on the present CD, as far as I can determine, is a world-premiere recording. Still, how often does one hear any of these pieces programmed in live recitals, or, for that matter, any of the composer's very fine chamber works, which include a wonderful piano quintet, sonatas for cello and piano and for clarinet and piano, and a Kol Nidre for cello and piano that gives the Bruch a run for its money? The selection of solo piano works assembled here are not brief sketches or vignettes. These are major compositions, the shortest among them, *Questo fu il carro della morte*, running to over six minutes. *Le danze del Re David* and *Alt Wien* run to over 16 minutes each, and *Piedigrotta* to over 20 minutes. The booklet note cites Liszt, Granados, Albéniz, Rachmaninoff, Debussy, and Ravel as models for much of this music. To my ear, some of these connections are more tenuous than others, but the Debussy link is unmistakable. I

can imagine this is what Debussy might have sounded like had his muse been more Mediterranean than Gallic. It is precisely this Mediterranean influence that runs deep in Castelnuovo-Tedesco's music, and for reasons that extend beyond the fact that he was Italian. Ingrained in him from early childhood were the traditional melodies of the Sephardic Jewish cultures that flourished throughout Spain and Portugal in the 15th century and in Italy in the 16th century. These melodies are not directly quoted; rather they have become assimilated by the composer into a subconscious but ever-present mode of expression, much in the way that Bartók's music came to speak naturally the inflections of Magyar and Rumanian folk sources.

All of the pieces on this CD are striking and hauntingly beautiful, even if they do tend to exhibit a somewhat morbid pathology with titles like "This was death's chariot," "In memory of death," and a portrait of sailors (I naviganti) escorting their human cargo (in Rachmaninoff-like manner) to an island of the dead. Given the horrors he escaped and the nightmares that must have troubled his sleep, Castelnuovo-Tedesco's preoccupation with death, dying, and decay (or, as the booklet note colorfully puts it, "a hellish vision of a skeletal banjo-player" and "visions of skeletons, coffins, and sickles") is not hard to understand. Yet by no means is all of this music a Lisztian *La lugubre gondola* or Mahlerian grotesquerie; there are fireworks, primitive savagery, and pianistic acrobatics aplenty, as in the *Tarantella scura* movement from *Piedigrotta*, which pianist Mark Bebbington describes as "the most difficult two minutes in the whole of the recital."

I found this to be a most rewarding program, one that deserves to be heard by a much wider audience. Speaking of Mark Bebbington, here is a young British pianist making his debut recording in music that is both technically taxing and psychologically difficult to put across. From what I can hear, he is well up to both challenges. His live performances have drawn critical acclaim throughout Britain and the Continent, and his programming, which leans heavily towards 20th-century repertoire, much of it by British composers, is earning him a growing reputation. Excellent sound and very insightful notes (written mostly by Bebbington himself) contribute to making this CD highly recommended.

Jerry Dubins