

## FANFARE MAGAZINE - R E V I E W / March-April 2009

**A. MATHIEU (orch. Bellemare) Piano Concerto No. 4. Scènes de ballet . 4 Songs for Choir and Orchestra • George Hanson, cond; Alain Lefèvre (pn); Tucson SO & Ch • ANALEKTA 29281 (74:26 Text and Translation) Live: Tucson 5/8,9,11/2008**

**Have you ever heard a piece of music new to you that makes you sit up and say to yourself, “This is truly a work of genius”?** I had that feeling the first time I ever heard Mahler (the Second Symphony, conducted by Ormandy on the radio), Beethoven’s late quartets (live performances by the Hungarian Quartet), Britten’s *War Requiem* (the Decca recording), and the symphonies of C. P. E. Bach (various recordings). And now I’ve had the same experience with **André Mathieu’s Fourth Piano Concerto.**

Mathieu was born in Montreal on February 18, 1929. His parents were both music teachers, yet ironically his father Rudolphe forbade his son even to touch a piano, because he thought the life of a musician a pauper’s profession. Yet he relented and taught his son, who began composing at the age of four. At age six, André gave his first recital, playing his own compositions at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. By 1939, he was being hailed as the “little Canadian Mozart,” even by Sergei Rachmaninoff, who said of him, “He is a genius, more so than I am.”

Unfortunately, World War II interfered with his plans for self-growth. In 1946, he went to Paris to study composition with Arthur Honegger and piano with Jules Gentil, but nothing went as planned. Depressed and broke, Mathieu returned to Montreal a changed person, weary and discouraged. He continued to compose for a few more years (to the best of anyone’s knowledge, he stopped composing in 1957), but largely took part in “pianothons” to break records for money. He also began teaching, but shortly thereafter became an alcoholic. In 1960, he married Marie-Ange Massicotte, but their happiness was short lived due to his incessant drinking and depression. Mathieu also engaged in affairs behind Marie’s back. He died broke and largely forgotten, in June 1968.

Mathieu’s music crosses many boundaries. Perhaps because he was young and composing more from inspiration than knowledge of form, his pieces are very emotional, if sometimes structurally loose. But structural formality is not lacking, and his personal excursions brought him into some remarkable harmonic and rhythmic byways. Stylistically, his music resembles a cross between Scriabin and Ravel. Like Scriabin, he uses a great many chromatic trap doors that lead the listener through an *Alice in Wonderland* inner maze of the mind; but unlike Scriabin, he did not give in to demonic tendencies, and Mathieu’s use of chromatics further resembles Oriental music or, at least, the kind of Orientalisms used by Rimsky-Korsakov and Charles Griffes (yet another underrated composer). Trying to describe the intensely fascinating yet melodically slithery style of his music is like trying to put lightning in a bottle. Words fail before the torrent of notes that never seem excessive, as they do in Liszt, Alkan, or Rachmaninoff, but always seem to add up to coherent statements.

This concerto was reconstructed from oblivion by pianist Lefèvre. As described in the booklet, an old woman approached him after the pianist performed the *Concerto de Québec*, told him that she was Mathieu's last lover, and handed him a bag that she said was rightly his. In the bag, between two sheets of brown cardboard, were five vinyl records with Mathieu's handwriting on the center labels. The works included were the *Laurentienne* (1946), the Sonata for Violin and Piano (1949), excerpts from the 1949 trio, and a heretofore-unknown work, the Concerto No. 4. Mathieu played the entire piece sans orchestra, but Lefèvre had it transcribed and scored by a Mathieu expert, composer-conductor Gilles Bellemare. **Lefèvre's playing in this work may only be called incandescent; from the very first note, he is as totally absorbed in the music as if he were the composer himself.** Possibly because the piano part dominates the recording, the orchestral part seems slim, but this is yet another miraculous charm of this work. Rather than partnering the piano in the musical development, or laying a "cushion" for it as in the concertos of Chopin, the orchestration gives the odd sensation of hurrying to "catch up" with the mercurial invention of the solo part. Moreover, the orchestral base is written in less-chromatic language, while the piano part drags it through chromatic trap door after trap door.

I sincerely hope that readers of this review do not get the impression that I found the work merely "clever." Far from it. I would say that Mathieu's greatest tragedy is that his music was *so* original that it defied categorization; it had the formal shape and semblance of a classical piano concerto, but beyond that it seemed to come straight from the universal overmind without stopping along the way to ask formal permission. Rachmaninoff was entirely right (he often was, by the way; despite his great technique and propensity for flash, he was a sincere and dedicated admirer of talents superior to his).

The early *Ballet Scenes* were composed when Mathieu was between eight and 11 years old. They are considerably simpler and less chromatic in nature than the piano concerto, yet despite their immaturity, there are signs of the genius to come. The *Four Songs for Choir and Orchestra* are among his last composed works, written in 1957, yet they are actually simpler and less interesting than the ballet scenes; indeed, they sound very derivative of Brahms's choral songs. Judging from these, Mathieu's flame had certainly been dimmed by despair that his great works would never be appreciated or performed.

Conductor George Hanson and the Tucson Symphony and Choir give committed performances of all these works, but this disc is a must-have chiefly because of the Concerto.

**FANFARE: Lynn René Bayley**