

Eugene Bigot Vol. 1 = WAGNER: Eine Faust Overture; KHACHATURIAN: Violin Concerto in D Minor; BORODIN: Symphony No. 3; BRAHMS: Double Concerto – Yves St-Laurent YSL T-1501

Rarely do we hear French composer-conductor Eugène Bigot (1888-1965) in repertory outside of the opera stage, given his enormous, recorded legacy of accompanying vocalists as a result of his positions with the Opéra-Comique (1936-1947) and the Concerts Lamoureux (1935-1950). Among the distinguished instrumentalists who recorded with Bigot, we find esteemed readings of Mozart, Haydn, Bartok, Debussy, Saint-Saens, and Fauré, with soloists Robert Casadesus, Wanda Landowska, Andor Foldes, Yves Nat, Ruggiero Ricci, and Gaby Casadesus. Trained as both a pianist and violinist, Bigot built a strong reputation in the music of Wagner, Russian repertory, and French opera. He toured with the Ballets Suédois after WW I, giving world premieres of various works. This release from Yves St-Laurent, featuring performances from 1953 (Brahms) and 1961 (Wagner, Khachaturian, Borodin), has but two “solo” readings, the Wagner and Borodin, while the violinist Jean Fournier (1911-2003) appears in two major, concerted works, the second of which, by Brahms, includes Italian cellist Antonio Janigro (1918-1989).

Bigot opens with a performance from 10 July 1961 of Richard Wagner’s 1840 concert piece *Eine Faust-Overture*, originally conceived as part of a full symphony devoted to Goethe’s legend, a project Franz Liszt actually realized, having been inspired by Wagner’s lead here, which Liszt revived in 1852. Set in a brooding D minor, the color of the slow introduction pays debts to Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, a performance of which Wagner attended in 1839 Paris. Bigot’s reading bristles with excitement, similar in style and drive to the Toscanini concept. At the sound of the tympani and trumpets, the work gains considerable momentum, making us think Wagner’s model lies in Carl Maria von Weber, perhaps in the 1821 *Overture to Der Freischütz*. Bigot urges seductive colors from his woodwinds and strings, especially in the development section. The sense of Faust’s soul in torment and its pleas for redemption through love reverberate throughout, the same opening leitmotif’s having suffered martial, agonized expression.

The 1940 Khachaturian *Violin Concerto* offers its principals a spirited, rhythmically active work in Armenian colors, one that its dedicatee David Oistrakh graced with a voluptuous tone and another acolyte, Leonid Kogan, drove with relentless precision. Without actually quoting Armenian folk tunes verbatim, Khachaturian manages to inflect his entire work with a sense of endemic energy and lyric power, the latter quality Jean Fournier seizes with easy relish. Fournier’s is a thin, nasal tone, sweetly reminiscent of Mischa Elman and Joseph Szigeti, and this natural gracefulness shines in the second movement, *Andante sostenuto*, which flows forth in the spirit of spontaneous, rural song. Bigot attacks the last movement, *Allegro vivace*, with a pungent, militant force that Fournier cannot quite match in terms of sensuous volume. The speed and brilliance of execution, however, do not lack for stunning articulation. Here, the virtuoso element, somewhat restrained in the opening *Allegro con fermezza*, has sailed forth in plastic, vigorous figures. The course of the movement projects an orchestral, voluptuous haze that makes this rendition memorable. Fournier negotiates the demanding tessitura with fluent vitality, achieving a peroration worthy of the grand masters of this concerto, without apologies.

Alexander Borodin's 1882 *Symphony No. 3 in A Minor* remained unfinished at the time of the composer's death in 1887, the orchestration of the surviving two movements having been completed by Glazunov. The first movement, *Moderato assai*, offers a lovely oboe melody that I have always thought befitted the character of Anna Karenina, especially as portrayed by Vivien Leigh, with no disrespect to the film score by Constant Lambert. Borodin's music flows in a sonata form with balletic influences, and its great, classic interpreters for me have been Nikolai Malko and Ernest Ansermet. Bigot molds the evolving phrases with warmth and an easy sense of structure. The second movement, considerably more played out, is marked *Scherzo: Vivo – Trio: Moderato*. The initial, vivid energy might remind some listeners of the concentrated momentum Bruckner likes to stir. Bigot keeps a sharp focus on the rhythmic pulse as it girds up the colors from the chirping woodwinds. The brass and low wind punctuations add a degree of Slavic rusticity to the moment. The *Trio* section provides a bucolic, pastoral relief, with echoes of mountain song. As a testament to Bigot's individual capacity for lyric exultation, the moment does him overdue justice. The *da capo* returns us to the manic, dervish, motor propulsion, breezy and unbuttoned.

The final offering on this rare collection comes from 24 February 1953, when Jean Fournier and Antonio Janigro indulge in the gypsy strains of the finale of the Brahms 1887 *Double Concerto*. Conceived as a "reconciliation" piece for the violinist Joseph Joachim, with whom Brahms had become estranged by the violinist's domestic crises, the last movement proves lush with vivid attacks from both instrumentalists, particularly explosive in Janigro's cello tone. The orchestral contribution, no less volatile, invests a robustly virile continuity that makes us lament the lack of the first two movements. When the duo plays in harmony, the sonorous effect proves mesmerizing, and so inspires the conductor and his responsive ensemble to complement them with a passionate accompaniment that has transfixed us from the outset.

This disc becomes my surprise 2024 Christmas present to myself, and I recommend it highly.

—Gary Lemco

Eugene Bigot Vol. I

WAGNER: Eine Faust Overture;

BORODIN: Symphony No. 3 in A Minor (unfinished);

KHACHATURIAN: Violin Concerto in D Minor;

Jean Fournier, violin/ French Radio Symphony-Orchestra/

BRAHMS: Double Concerto in A Minor, Op. 102: Vivace non troppo

Jean Fournier. Violin/ Antonio Janigro, cello/ Paris Radio-Symphony Orchestra