



YSL 505 T Martinon Vol. 1

“I should make clear at the outset my connection with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and with these particular recordings. From 1985-2003 I was President of the CSO, and during that time I oversaw special releases on CD of performances in the Orchestra’s archives that I and a small committee

felt were deserving of public issue. All three of these performances were included in those limited-edition releases, the Debussy in a set devoted to Martinon, and the Chausson and Ravel in a set devoted to CSO guest soloists. There is, I believe, no conflict of interest since I have not been on the CSO payroll since 2003, and the CSO copies of these have long been unavailable. It is clear that this will be a positive review because I was partly responsible for choosing this material from the orchestra’s extensive archives of broadcasts excellently engineered by Chicago radio station WFMT. If you perceive this as a conflict, you are of course free to read no further or ignore the recommendation.

Canadian Maureen Forrester was one of the great contraltos of her time (the 1950s through the early 1980s), particularly known for her singing of the music of Mahler. I am not aware of any commercial recording of her singing the Chausson, which means that this fills a real gap. She wraps her rich voice around Chausson’s sensuous writing, and at the same time articulates the text with pointed inflection and color. This certainly is one of the finest recordings in existence of this piece, especially because of Martinon’s stylish, elegant and lush accompaniment and the brilliant orchestral playing. Her style is perhaps more fulsome than some other French performances might be, but Chausson was definitely influenced by Wagner and to my ears the richness of the singing here is appropriate.

Martinon made an EMI recording of Debussy’s IMAGES with the French ORTF Orchestra, but this performance inhabits a different world. Perhaps the presence of an audience, or perhaps the virtuosity of the Chicago Symphony, or both, inspired the conductor. The studio recording offers clear, transparent textures, carefully judged balances, and elegant playing. What it doesn’t offer is a strong dramatic impact, a sense of commitment and the frisson that we find here. The CSO manages to sound like a French orchestra in terms of color and refinement, but at the same time this is a performance that seems to actually matter to the musicians. It is very hard to describe ‘élan’ in words, but listen to this performance and you know that you are hearing it. There is energy and commitment in every bar, a sense of exuberance where that is what the music calls for (the last movement of IMAGES for instance), and great intimacy when that is required. There is a French horn blip at 2:24 of the first movement (‘Gigues’) which goes by in a milli-second, and aside from that the performance has the technical polish of a highly edited studio recording. Martinon did once call the Chicago Symphony ‘the best I ever had’, and we can hear why in this performance.

As a kind of encore, we have a sizzling performance of Ravel's TZIGANE with the French violinist Zino Francescatti. There are a number of live-performance recordings of this work with Francescatti and piano accompaniment, but I am not aware of any orchestral alternative. Martinon seems inspired by the soloist and everyone involved is clearly having a ball.

As is usual for St. Laurent Studio releases, there are no notes or texts, but good documentation of the sources, and very fine sound quality." - 5 Stars: Martinon and the Chicago Symphony at their best.

- Henry Fogel, FANFARE