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Keene Volume 9

“St. Laurent Studio’s series of releases devoted to conductor Christopher Keene has revealed a gifted artist who sometimes surpassed himself. But to reach that point in my appreciation, it has taken ten installments, of which this is Vol. 9, to grasp what American music lost in 1995 upon Keene’s premature death, at age 48. In retrospect, as one impressive concert after another with the Syracuse Symphony has emerged from private sources, he should be recognized as a tragic loss to the AIDS plague.

It isn’t only world-class orchestras that have a golden period. The Syracuse Symphony, which was entirely professional, enjoyed a time of remarkable music-making during Keene’s tenure as music director from 1975 to 1984. Two years in, he led this wonderful performance of Dvorák’s Seventh Symphony. It affords a perfect example of the occasions when the conductor surpassed himself.

What stands out is the personal bond between conductor and score. Freely using Romantic rubato, Keene shapes the music from a profound depth of feeling. To demonstrate that this isn’t an exaggeration, the slow movement provides a continuous lyrical flow shaped as few others have been able to - you can’t help but feel that the spirit of Bruno Walter is smiling down. There is warmth, heartfelt playing, and a sense of passion in this movement. Taken more slowly than usual, the Scherzo succeeds on the basis of a secure rhythmic pulse. The finale, despite some scruffy passages, is exuberantly dramatic. One can point to felicities throughout, but what’s important is simply stated: You

can't tear your attention away for a moment. The recorded sound is very good FM stereo, expertly remastered by producer Yves St. Laurent.

The recorded sound is even clearer and more vivid for the Debussy *IBÉRIA* performed earlier that year. The piece has always been the popular favorite in the *IMAGES FOR ORCHESTRA* and Keene, true to his musical inclinations, emphasizes the Romantic side of these sketches from Spain. For a generation of Spanish composers who gained fame in the twentieth century, principally Albéniz, Falla, Granados, and Turina, Paris was a musical beacon, and there was reciprocity in the fervor that French composers had for inventing their own imaginary Spain, although Ravel could also claim a family link through his Basque-Spanish mother.

In the first movement, 'Par les rues et par les Chemins' (Along the streets and along the paths), Keene conveys the vibrancy of Spanish dance with instinctive sureness, and the orchestral colors at the center of Debussy's sound world emerge vividly. I am completely in favor of a visceral treatment like this one that avoids sounding gauzily Impressionist. If anything, some listeners might think the energy level is too brash, particularly at the outset, but how often can you call a Debussy performance soul-stirring?

An atmosphere of sultry gardens permeates the second movement, 'Les parfums de la nuit' (The scents of the night), and Keene is completely at home with the shift in mood to the sultrily exotic. The orchestra has a lovely capacity to execute a range of dynamics at the softer level without losing tone. In music that

often seems to vanish into the night air, this reading is grounded in just the right proportion to keep the lyrical line alive at every moment.

A troupe of guitarists marching through the streets is the picture painted in the third movement, 'Le matin d'un jour de fête' (The morning of a festive day). The clamor of a processional approaching from a distance is common to the 'Fêtes' movement in Debussy's Nocturnes and Albéniz's 'Corpus Christi en Sevilla' from Book II of IBÉRIA. Keene's reading is particularly jubilant, but the whole performance is imbued with the joy of music-making.

I won't pretend that the Syracuse Symphony rivals the Berlin Philharmonic under James Levine in the most virtuosic reading of the complete IMAGES that I know. But I've grown to respect them enormously as the Keene Edition has unfolded. The musicians knew that they were performing at a special time under a conductor of equally special gifts. This release is one of the 'must-listens' in the series. Strongly recommended."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE