



## Armin Jordan conducts Debussy, Roussel & Chausson

aud 95.648

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Armin Jordan can always be counted on for insightful, freshly considered performances, and these concert recordings from the Lucerne Festival prove no exception, even if they don't quite match his achievements in the recording studio.

In the mid-1950s, Ernest Ansermet, the Suisse Romande Orchestra's founder and longtime music director, made a cool, clear recording of the Faune that still remains sui generis. Jordan's approach is more Romantic: note the languorous, caressing flute and horn solos in the opening, and the various liquid woodwind interjections. An impulsive surge propels other passages, including the (in)famous nine-against-six; Jordan maintains clear textures in the fuller-sounding bits.

The Bacchus suite comes next - the headnote reflects organizational convenience rather than program order. It's a disappointment, which isn't entirely the conductor's fault. Roussel's style doesn't fit into the standard boxes: its harmonic idiom is extended French late-Romantic, yet his aesthetic is more angular, so much of his orchestral music leaves a vaguely sour impression. The juxtaposition throws Jordan slightly off his game. The mysterious opening and the driving, incisive final dance – akin to the Danse générale in Ravel's Daphnis – move with a firm sense of purpose; and the conductor brings a nice uplift to the rhythmically clearer passages. Some of the tuttis, on the other hand, come off as noisy and unorganized.

The Six épigraphes antiques, originally for piano duo, bring us back to Ansermet, who orchestrated them. The "open" soundscapes of the first two movements, with airy, vibrant violins, recall the composer's earlier writing, with the second introducing the more "advanced" harmonies of Jeux. The whole-tone writing characteristic of late Debussy dominates the other movements. I never heard Ansermet's 1953 monaural recording, but Jordan and the orchestra do a nice job, especially with their precise, pointed "landing" of the pizzicatos.

Jordan also does well with Chausson's shimmering palette; he's sensuous in the undulating orchestral passages, projecting an affirmative mood the brief central interlude. Dame Felicity Lott's deep, burnished timbre should have been ideal - despite a relatively quick vibrato – and she inflects the French text comfortably and expressively. But she sounds hard-pressed in the climaxes – literally, as if she's "pressing hard." Gradually, the upper tones "hit a ceiling," without climbing quite all the way up; then, one starts noticing iffy tuning in some of the passing chromatics. Lott draws uplift and mystery from the third movement, but her attempts to float high notes turn tight and throaty. Had I actually heard her in Lucerne, I'd have been



impressed; at home, I was less so.

The Lucerne Kunsthhaus is slightly more ambient than the orchestra's regular home in Geneva's Victoria Hall; this isn't bothersome, but it may account for the opaque peaks in the Roussel and the Debussy suite. The program booklet fusses over questionable intonation from the third horn – I'm not kidding – but it didn't bother me. Oddly, we hear a fair amount of coughing and other audience noises between movements in 1994, but none at all in 1988.

**Claude DEBUSSY (1862-1918)***Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) [9:38]*Six épigraphes antiques* (1914-15, orch. Ansermet 1939) [16:37]**Albert ROUSSEL (1869-1937)***Bacchus et Ariane*, Op. 43: Suite No. 2 (1931) [19:04]**Ernest CHAUSSON (1855-1899)***Poème de l'amour et de la mer* (1882-90, 1893) [29:09]

Dame Felicity Lott (soprano)

L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande/Armin Jordan

rec. live, August 1988, August 1994, Kunsthhaus, Lucerne

**AUDITE 95.648** [74:36]

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**Stephen Francis Vasta**[stevedisque.wordpress.com/blog](http://stevedisque.wordpress.com/blog)