



Armin Jordan conducts Debussy, Roussel & Chausson

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[Fanfare](#) (01.01.1970)

This attractively assembled program, taken from two different years at the Lucerne Festival, forms a satisfying concert of French music, along with a chance to hear Armin Jordan leading the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. Under its founder Ernest Ansermet the OSR rose to international prominence, especially once he and the orchestra became the source of innumerable Decca recordings in the postwar era. They were at the forefront of every advance in sound that Decca engineers devised, and Ansermet himself had a direct connection to Diaghilev, Ravel, and Stravinsky, along with many other modern composers between the wars.

I thought of Ansermet as the presiding reason for keeping the OSR so highly visible, because the harsh reality was that their playing was often ragged and thin-sounding. After he departed in 1967, ending half a century with them, the Suisse Romande didn't disappear from view; recordings followed under every subsequent music director. Yet somehow in the minds of many veteran collectors, everyone in the post-Ansermet era has been an afterthought. Being located in Geneva has attracted no Francophone conductors, and no Swiss ones, oddly enough, except for Jordan, who was both. (Currently the Music Director is English, Jonathan Nott, who took over in 2017.)

Happily, without rising to world-class status, the OSR on these two occasions proves itself to be a solid ensemble that plays quite well, and Swiss Radio has captured it in near studio-quality sound. I listened to a stream and don't have the documentation for which pieces appeared at which concert. But the two dates, 1988 and 1994, were part of Jordan's tenure as Music Director, from 1985 to 1997, which the booklet cover calls a golden age for the orchestra. Be that as it may, Jordan had to be a sympathetic arrival for a French Swiss orchestra after his two predecessors, Wolfgang Sawallisch and Horst Stein.

But from what we hear on this disc, he didn't bring inspiration in his valise. These are skillful but unimaginative readings at the level of a very good subscription concert. Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun weaves no spell, either erotic or mysterious. The Suite No. 2 from Roussel's 1930 ballet Bacchus et Ariane encompasses a languorous mood that mounts to frenzied excitement à la Daphnis et Chloë. The music, for me at least, isn't nearly as inspired as Ravel's, but the suite gets a skilled reading from Jordan. I don't find that orchestrations of Debussy's piano works turn out to be very satisfying, but Ansermet's arrangement of Six épigraphes antiques makes for pleasant summer music.

What I was waiting for is the final item on the program, Chausson's vocal masterpiece, Poème de l'amour et de la mer, which consists of a small song cycle cum solo cantata for soprano. After a decade-long gestation ending in 1892, the work

received a dedication to Henri Duparc, and in fact the closest vocal style is Duparc's intense rhapsodic idiom. The music sets two poems, about love and the sea, with an orchestral bridge. At just shy of half an hour, the music makes peace with Wagner in a very French way, but Debussy would take French Late Romanticism in a different new direction.

This Lucerne performance is quite beautiful. Jordan conducts idiomatically, and we hear Felicity Lott in her prime. Lott's strength was her enchanting timbre, which is bright, sparkling, feminine, and expressive. She was never the greatest explorer of the text, but here that's a minor drawback. Her outpouring of radiant sound is irresistible. Only a French-speaker would object to her diction and accent, which both pass muster for me. It is irritating, however, that Jordan inserts a pause between the three sections of a work that begs to be treated as a single unbroken arc.

Without the Chausson as a high point, I doubt I would have more than a passing interest in this disc. As it stands, however, it can be warmly recommended, and there is always the option of streaming or downloading only Lott's lovely performance.