Claude Debussy: La Cathédrale engloutie

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EAN: 4022143976994

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The Organ (Curtis Rogers - 2014.05.01)

Setting as Debussy's Piano Preludes have been orchestrated (most notably by Colin Matthews) it was by no means a fanciful project for Carsten Wiebusch to have transcribed them for organ. However, the results are only partially successful.

To some extent, any shortcomings are beyond Wiebusch's control, attributable simply to the very nature of the organ. On the one hand it does not have the fixed, percussive tones of the piano, which means that the fairies of Les Fées sont d'exquises danseuses do not quite flit around as spryly as they might (and although it is rhythmically nimble, the registration could utilise a few more mixtures or mutations to create a more sparkling sonority); nor do the bell-like chords of La Cathedrale come over with the increasing clarity that they might. On the other hand, the effect of the organ's sustained sounds – however quiet – is not the same as the vibrations of pedalled chords, and so Brouillards sounds merely mushy rather than mysteriously nebulous (nor is it clear why Wiebusch draws the detached staccato quavers in the treble register during the section marked 'un peu retenue' into a legato line near the end of this Prelude).

Wiebusch plays the 2010 Klais organ of the Christuskirche in Karlsruhe (an instrument rebuilt from an older organ by the same firm). The church acoustic provides an ideal sonic atmosphere in holding phrases together which, on paper, appear disjointed, for example in Ondine. Wiebusch also uses the Swell shutters astutely to draw a contrast between those passages marked by Debussy 'en dehors' and those which are more prominent in volume. He also creates some beautifully sombre registrations, with just a touch of reediness, for Feuilles mortes, Bruyeres and Canope. Vivid timbres are used in Feux d'Artifice though its climax is a damp squib, consisting simply of spread chords rather than the heaving pairs of chords Debussy notates. Paradoxically, it is perhaps the technical study Les tierces alternées whose registration sounds most authentically 'French', and elsewhere, a more vibrant use of colours would have been welcome. Wiesbusch plays the Suite with rhythmic flexibility, but I might have been inclined to use a more shimmering string sonority for the lustre of Clair de Lune.

Sadly the CD notes do not explain the specific principles which guided Wiebusch in making his transcriptions, nor do they provide a breakdown of registrations.

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