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VILLA-LOBOS Danças características africanas. Bachianas Brasileiras No. 4. Ciclo Brasileiras: No. 2, Impressões Seresteiras; No. 3, Festa no Sertão. Chôros No. 1 (arr. Gurgel). Carnaval das Crianças Brasileiras. Cirandas: No. 8, Vamos atrás de serra, Calunga • Flavio Varani (pn) • AZUR 175 (67:38)

This is the 28th disc to appear in the Collection du Festival International Albert Roussel. Already composers such as Paul Paray, Claude Delvincourt, and Claude Guillon-Verne have been featured, as well as the more familiar names of d'Indy, Massenet, and, of course, Roussel himself. It's good to have Heitor Villa-Lobos featured in a carefully chosen program.

The long booklet essay by Damian Top offers an excellent overview of Villa-Lobos, but a slip means the disc duration is given on the disc back cover as 56:21 (it is actually 67:38). But what matters is the music and the performances, and both are of the highest caliber. Varani is a fresh, imaginative pianist who seems to fully embrace Villa-Lobos's mode of expression. He was taught by the great Magda Tagliaferro (1893–1986; there is a lovely photo of the two together in 1960 in the booklet), and one can feel a certain sensitivité has been handed down. The contact with Tagliaferro also places him in the lineage of Cortot.

The three Danças características africanas each have an individual opus number: a bright Farrapós, op. 47; a teasing, somewhat slinky Kakukús, op. 57, that put me in mind of Debussy's "Minstrels" from Préludes, Book 1 (including both sharing a rather dismissive end); and the playful Kankikis, op. 65. Flavio Varani is a fine pianist who clearly understands the composer's appropriation of African rhythms and gestures and assimilation of those within Villa-Lobos' own mode of expression. The rhythms of the final Kankikis seem particularly complex and intriguing, fully rewarding repeated listening. The music would sit well with much of Villa-Lobos's output; Roberto Duarte, conducting the orchestral version on Marco Polo, put it with Villa-Lobos's equivalent to the Rite of Spring, his Rudepoema.

The better-known Bachianas Brasileiras No. 4 for solo piano occupies a whole other world. The links to Bach are suddenly very clear, thrown into even higher relief after the preceding Africanisms. The Chorale is magnificently imposing (parallels with Rachmaninoff here, perhaps, until we get to the somewhat sleekly amusing juxtaposition of imposing block chords with quiet treble single line descents); the Aria (Cantiga) is virtually a shimmying tone-poem; and the final Dança a dizzying, dry pedaled whirligig. Here there is competition in the form of Marcelo Bratke (Quartz) and Sonia Rubinsky (Naxos, who is a constant throughout given her coverage of Villa-Lobos's output), but Varani's character wins me over.

Another side of Villa-Lobos surfaces in the two movements of the Ciclo Brasileiro: a deep nod to French Impressionism in "Impressões Seresteiras," and a bright fiesta for "Festa no Sertão" (the brightness of the recording a real boon here).

I wonder if there could have been more space between tracks of the two excerpts from Ciclo Brasileiras and the stand-alone Chôro No. 2 (in a transcription by Odamar Amaral Gurgel). It's nice to have the Carnaval das Crianças Brasileiras, a delightful work that links to Kinderszenen as much as it does to Bartók's For Children. While Varani has pianistic royalty as competition here in the form of Nelson Freire (on his album Brasileiro), he acquits himself more than well, with the penultimate "A gaita do precoce fantasiado" being a particular highlight of intelligent playing. This recording includes the final "A folia de um bloco infantil," for piano four hands (multi-tracked presumably, as no other pianist is mentioned).

A single movement from the 16 of Cirandas (children's rounds, based on Brazilian folk tunes) is offered as both wind-down and encore.

This is a well-constructed recital blessed with some phenomenal pianism. The only fly in the ointment is the recording, which, while it gave "Festa do Sertão" a helping hand, would benefit from a little more depth and presence overall.

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