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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)

The music of the prolific Heitor Villa-Lobos reveals an earthy exuberance associated with his native Brazil, along with a European sophistication in terms of its technical challenges and textural palette. This applies to his output for solo piano as much as to his orchestral and chamber works. Villa-Lobos pianists tend to fall into two camps: those who take an outwardly virtuosic approach (such as Nelson Frieri), and those who go for a lyrical, less punchy attitude (such as Cristina Ortiz). Both are valid. In his sole Villa-Lobos disc, Marc-André Hamelin mixes both in his own Promethean, objective fashion. My personal favorite Villa-Lobos player, who only recorded one LP's worth of the music (for DG), is the late Roberto Szidon. His playing is gutsy without being overbearing, and tremendously clear (a real asset with this composer), as accomplished as Frieri and as tender as Ortiz.

Flavio Varani's program is well chosen to display the folksy side of the composer's piano output, leaving out the potential minefield of the demanding *Rudepoema* or the over-played *A Prôle do bebê*. He sides with the exuberant Villa-Lobosians: listen, for example, to the kick he gives to the dance rhythms underpinning *Chôros No. 1*, or the sheer fun and games he finds in "The pranks of the masked Mignon," No. 6 from *Carnaval das Crianças Brasileiras* (Brazilian Children's Carnival). This a suite of eight movements is one of Villa-Lobos's most delightful inspirations: The composer later reconstituted the material for piano and orchestra in *Mômoprecóce*. (Incidentally, Varani once performed the latter work in Paris, in the composer's presence.) Varani is fully in tune with the children's joyful games depicted in these pieces, although he gives a rather blunt performance of No. 7 ("The precocious harmonica player"): Ortiz and Szidon are both more affectionate here. The eighth number ("The gaiety of a group of children"), is written for four hands. Szidon plays it with Richard Metzler, his partner at the piano and in life. No second pianist is credited on the new release, which leads me to believe Varani has double tracked the piece—quite effectively, if so.

Varani is fully at home with the dance inflections of the *Three African Dances*, and gives a fine rendition of *Bachianas brasileiras No. 4*, a four-movement work originally written for piano but also extant in an orchestral version. He plays the *Prelude*, a pure Bach pastiche, with a quasi-improvisational rubato that is entirely convincing, and does not fall prey to the temptation to bash the hell out of the keyboard in the final pages as some do. Consistent with his playing throughout, he emphasizes the Brazilian rather than the Bachian aspects of the *Chorale*, *Aria* and *Dance* movements. Varani's is the most satisfying recorded performance of the piano version of *Bachianas brasileiras No. 4* that I know.

This is a highly recommendable recital. The delight Villa-Lobos exuded in creating his music is captured, indeed mirrored, in Varani's playing. While the competition I mention above is significant, this disc is special in its own way, and a lot of fun.

Phillip Scott