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Arts

CLASSICAL RECORDINGS

Opera's El Dorado

Brazil's 'Il Guarany': A Golden Opportunity

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When Plácido Domingo announced that the Washington Opera's 1996-97 season would open with "Il Guarany," the most common reaction around town was, "Il what?" Now, a Sony recording (S2K 66275, two CDs with libretto) gives a very clear idea of what Domingo was talking about. He has the role of Pery—the chief of the Guarani Indian tribe, living near Rio de Janeiro around the year 1560—in a superb performance of the opera by Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Gomes (1836-1896).

On the evidence of this recording, taped live in Bonn with John Neschling conducting the city's Beethovenhalle Orchestra and Opera Chorus, our next opera season should open in splendor. "Il Guarany" has a thud-and-blunder plot of a kind common in the mid-19th century, but the music is spectacularly good, with strong dramatic impact, expert orchestration and excellent melodic material for soloists and chorus. If you heard this recording without being told what it was, you might easily mistake it for a previously unknown opera by Giuseppe Verdi.

"Il Guarany" was a smashing success at its premiere at La Scala in 1870, but later passed into oblivion outside of Brazil, where it is still a cornerstone of operatic life. Domingo deserves consider-

able gratitude for his role in reviving it for European audiences and bringing it to Washington for the centennial of the composer's death. In this recording, he is supported by an excellent cast, notably Veronica Villaroel as Cecilia, Pery's Portuguese beloved, and Carlos Alvarez as Gonzales, the villainous adventurer who tries to abduct her and steal the silver mines owned by her father (Hao Jiang Tian). All four will be featured in the Washington Opera production next November, and the quality of their performance on this recording promises some outstanding singing.

Carlos Gomes is only one example of the neglect of Latin American composers by North American audiences and musicians. The record companies are finally beginning to pay more attention to the southern continent and are finding a lot of pure gold.

A few composers, notably Heitor Villa-Lobos, Carlos Chavez and Alberto Ginastera are fairly well known. The 17 string quartets of Villa-Lobos have been recorded before, but there is great excitement in a new complete recording, played with fire and lyrical impulse by the Cuarteto Latinoamericano, being issued by Dorian Recordings as part of its important "Music of Latin American Masters" series. The second volume of Villa-Lobos quartets has just been issued (DOR-90220), and it is a delight.

Also worth watching for are the recordings on this label by the Simon Bolívar Symphony Orchestra, one of the best in Latin America. The latest in the series, and one of the most instantly enjoyable records I have heard in a long time, is "Caramelos Latinos" ("Latin American Lollipops") conducted by Maximiliano Valdes (DOR-90227). As the title indicates, these are works in a lighter vein, frequently borrowing ideas from the continent's rich folk music tradition. One highlight is Ginastera's "Creole Faust Overture," in which themes from Gounod's opera are treated in the style of Argentine folk music. Others include works by Camargo Mozart Guarneri and Jose Pablo Moncayo incorporating the distinctive rhythms of folk dances, and the brilliantly witty "El renacuajo paseador" ("The Wandering Tadpole") of Silvestre Revueltas.

Some less familiar Latin American composers as well as a lot of traditional music in choral arrangements can be heard in "Cantares de las Americas," a collection issued by Inter-American Music Editions, an affiliate of the Organization of American States (OAS-004, three CDs). Featuring choral groups from Colombia, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Paraguay, Ecuador and Peru, these discs exemplify a choral tradition that dates back to the Renaissance and has tremendous vitality today. There are 81 selections, splendidly varied in style, performed with spirit and discipline and selected with the same excellent taste shown in earlier OAS recordings: "Great Argentinian Composers and Musicians," "Music of Great Brazilian Composers" and "Music of the Americas." There is no better way than these collections to begin an exploration of the musical treasures of Latin America.

Elan

If you want background music while watching the Academy Awards tomorrow night (and you well may when the sound of self-congratulation becomes too thick), I recommend "Piano in Hollywood: The Classic Movie Concertos" (Elan CD 82268). This collection has some fine classical crossover soundtrack music played with virtuoso flair by pianist Santiago Rodriguez with William Hudson conducting the Fairfax Symphony Orchestra. Most of the material in this collection is highly popular and has been recorded before, but I have never seen a more carefully considered selection or heard more idiomatic and beautifully styled performances. Most of the material is from the 1940s, a golden age of movie piano music in ripe, late-romantic styles.

The archetypal "Warsaw" Concerto of Richard Addinsell leads off the collection, and others from the '40s include Miklos Rozsa's compelling "Spellbound" Concerto, Hubert Bath's "Cornish Rhapsody" and the piano concertos of Leith Stevens from "Night Song" and of Edward Ward from the 1943 (Claude Rains) "Phantom of the Opera." The latter was not finished on the soundtrack because the walls and ceiling of the Paris Opera collapsed while it was being played. Rodriguez has composed an ending that works quite well.

Also on the disc are George Gershwin's "New York Rhapsody," written for

a long-forgotten film called "Delicious" and later reworked into his Second Rhapsody; Charles Wildman's "Swedish Rhapsody" from "Gypsy Fury" (1951); and the cavatina from "The Deer Hunter," which Rodriguez has transcribed for piano from its guitar original.

The Elan label, owned by Rodriguez and his wife, Natalia, once focused almost exclusively on his performances. One of its continuing projects is a survey of Rachmaninoff's piano music by Rodriguez. The third volume in this series and Rodriguez's 12th recording for Elan (CD 82250) has imaginative, technically flawless performances of the 10 Preludes, Op. 23; the magnificent Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42; and three Nocturnes and a Song Without Words dating from 1887-88 that are his earliest known compositions.

Elan's high standards of programming and production have attracted other artists, and it now has quite a diversified list. Most intriguing is "Michael Habermann Plays Sorabji" (CD 82264). Habermann has been widely acclaimed as the definitive interpreter of the mystic composer Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, whose long, wide-ranging and technically demanding works are a matter of legend. On this disc, Habermann plays some of Sorabji's shorter works, including "Gulistan" and "Djami," as well as his own imitation of Sorabji's style in a short arrangement of the French folk song "Au Clair de la Lune." The results are enchanting for those who like dreamy late romanticism.

"A Golden Horn" (CD 82260) features mellow, technically assured performances of music for horn and piano from the romantic era—Schumann, Rheinberger, Karl Pilss and Franz Strauss—by hornist Peter Landgren and pianist Ann Schein. And a reissue of legendary recordings from the 1960s by pianist Earl Wild includes his interpretations of two of the most challenging piano concertos in the repertoire: Xaver Scharwenka's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting the Boston Symphony, and Paderewski's Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 17, with Arthur Fiedler conducting the London Symphony. The technique in these numbers and in Balakirev's transcription of themes from "A Life for the Czar" is breathtaking, but not more so than the intelligent musicianship underlying the razzle-dazzle display.