

The name Daniel Ericourt is, perhaps, remembered, if at all, in the UK for a pair of Ace of Clubs LPs featuring repertoire by Debussy, which were released in the early 1960s. These comprised material culled from the 'complete' solo piano music that he recorded on six LPs in New York for Kapp and which is now making a belated first appearance on CD. Although he was not a name with the resonance of a Walter Gieseking or a Robert Casadesus, Ericourt's credentials in Debussy were impeccable. He had known Debussy and his family personally and turned the pages for the composer at the March 1917 concert in which he gave the first performance of the Sonata for Cello and Piano with Joseph Salmon. He also enjoyed friendships with Ravel, Honegger and Hahn, as well as Prokofiev and Stravinsky, in addition to which Roger-Ducasse dedicated the last of his *Quatre Études* of 1915 to Ericourt, who was 12 years of age at the time!

Roger-Ducasse had, in fact, taken a particular interest in Ericourt's prodigious talent, which saw him admitted to the Paris Conservatoire at nine, where he became a pupil of Georges Falkenberg, progressing to the class of Santiago Riera at 12 and graduating with First Prize when he was 15. As well as with Roger-Ducasse, Ericourt also studied harmony, counterpoint and composition with Nadia Boulanger, being a member of the same class as Aaron Copland and Roy Harris. Ericourt's own compositions, written in the piquant harmonic idiom of the day, include a *Fantaisie* and *Pièce en forme de Rag*, written in 1924 and published by Leduc. In the same year, while still on compulsory National Service, he was awarded the prestigious triennial Prix Diémer and in 1925 undertook an extensive tour of France, performing with Georges Enescu.

Although he made tours of Europe in the 1930s that took in concerts in Paris, London, Berlin, Brussels and Monte Carlo, his departure for the United States in 1926 shifted the main focus of his career to the Western Hemisphere, apart from a short period based in Madrid in the 1950s – his sympathy with the Spanish idiom in art and music may in part be attributed to his studies with Riera. He was also highly active as a teacher, first at the Cincinnati Conservatory until 1934 and later at the Peabody (1957-63), after which he became Artist-in-Residence at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, under whose auspices these recordings have reappeared, where he remained until 1976 and where he produced and hosted a weekly television programme, *The Ericourt Forum of Music and Art*, in which he presented masterclasses and performed a wide repertoire.

Yet it was with the music of Debussy that Ericourt's name became increasingly linked and he often presented both books of *Préludes* in concert – in collaboration with Robert Erickson, he also published *Masterclasses in Debussy* (Hinshaw; Chapel Hill, N. C.; 1978)

Debussy's Solo Piano Works

Daniel Ericourt on Ivory Classics

by Charles Hopkins

and *Masterclasses in Spanish Piano Music* (Hinshaw; Chapel Hill, N. C.; 1984). In a characteristically perceptive tribute in the detailed insert note, Charles Timbrell opines that Ericourt's Debussy combines Gieseking's tonal suavity with the textural clarity and rhythmic precision of Casadesus, to which must be added a quality of spontaneity entirely of his own. Perhaps some of Ericourt's remarkable capacity for reconciling topical flexibility with a broadly unified interpretative vision derives from his early studies with Riera, who advocated the principle of 'seeing a work whole, from beginning to end'. With Falkenberg Ericourt had learnt to study in a very detailed way, with great emphasis on clean technique; with Riera, in his own words, the emphasis was very much on 'colour, emotion, dash and the overall effect of a work'.

Unusually for a French pianist of his generation, Ericourt advocated the application of controlled weight in playing, as distinct from the high finger articulation that formed the basis not only of the teaching of Falkenberg and Riera, but also of the *jeu perlé* style that came to epitomize so much French pianism at the time. He also laid great emphasis himself on the production of a wide range of softer sonorities without recourse to the *una corda* pedal, which, again, invites interesting comparisons with the approach of Gieseking (EMI 5 65855-2)

– Falkenberg himself published a book on pedalling (*Les pédales du piano*: Heugel; Paris; 1892). In the 'Prélude' from *Pour le piano*, for instance, the clear distinction Gieseking draws in the *tempo di cadenza* between the piano white-key quasi *glissando* scales and the *pianissimo* whole-tone answer, achieved with touch alone while both passages are muted with the *una corda* pedal, stands in contrast to Ericourt's bolder sonority. On the other hand, Ericourt's approach in the following 'Sarabande' takes the instruction *avec une élégance grave* as a tempo marking as much as an indication of stately solemnity, taking a full two minutes longer than Gieseking to unfold, his application of the *una corda* and subtly overlapping pedalling bringing an almost Satie-like quality of suspended time to the writing (compare Satie's *Sarabande* No. 2). (For similar reasons, one can only concur with Timbrell's assessment of Ericourt's reading of 'Hommage à Rameau' – *Images*, Set 1; 'Reflets dans l'eau' is also one of the highlights of the set.) Interestingly, both Gieseking and Ericourt fail to catch the bass harmony in the approach to the final major key appearance of the Toccata subject,

although at least Ericourt does play the bass octave! Likewise, Gieseking advocated playing the whole of 'Serenade for the Doll' (*Children's Corner*) with the *una corda* depressed (see Joseph Banowetz *Pianist's Guide to Pedalling*: Indiana University Press; Bloomington; 1985), whereas Ericourt uses it to heighten dynamic contrasts – similar observations apply in 'La danse de Puck' (*Préludes*, Book 1), which in Gieseking's hands thus conveys more of the ambiguity of the subject apostrophized in the moments of bitonality that occur during the course of the piece's eight sections, while in Ericourt's more direct, yet no less vividly characterized account, the underlying ternary form is, perhaps, more clearly defined.

If Ericourt's cultivated spontaneity leans more towards Gieseking, then, maybe his sound-world in general more closely calls to mind that of Casadesus (Sony SM2K60795), deriving to an extent from a particular combination of articulation and depth of touch. Casadesus's Debussy, however, recorded in the first half of the 1950s, does not include *Suite bergamasque*, *Pour le piano* or the majority of the miscellaneous piano pieces, the most notable omission being the *Études*, which, according to his wife, Gaby, Columbia did not want him to record on account of their unfamiliarity (see *Mes nocces musicales*: Editions Buchet/Chastel; Paris; 1989). Ericourt's sympathy with the mood and idiom of pieces such as 'La sérénade interrompue' (*Préludes*, 1) and, especially, 'La Puerta del vino' (*Préludes*, 2) is, if anything, more sharply defined, more immediate in its responses, than Casadesus's cool clarity of exposition. On the other hand, if Ericourt's attention to textual detail may lack the absolute fastidiousness of Casadesus – an extraordinary recurrent misreading at the beginning of 'Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest' (*Préludes*, 1) is especially surprising – his capacity for combining clean textures with imaginative tonal nuances in, for example, the *Étude* 'Pour les cinq doigts', more than balances such momentary lapses, while the improvisatory nonchalance of 'Pour les agréments' captures to a remarkable degree not only the mood of Debussy's 'barcarolle on a rather Italian sea' but also the subtle play on words in the title: '[for the amusement] but not of pianists, as virtuosos will readily say'. A long overdue reappraisal of a major artist, whose name deserves mention in the company of such pioneers as E. Robert Schmitz, George Copeland and Walter Rummel (*Ivory Classics* 73006, four discs, 4 hours 34 minutes).