

## Eloquence Celebrates its 10th Anniversary with the “Decca Ansermet Legacy”

BY RICHARD A. KAPLAN

(Article reproduced courtesy of *Fanfare*)

It's hard to imagine that the Australian Eloquence label has already been in existence for 10 years. The label originated in France as a subsidiary of Universal; the story of its migration, reinvention, and development under the direction of Cyrus Meher-Homji, director of marketing at A & R Classics and Jazz for Universal Australia, was first told in the pages of *Fanfare* as recently as the March/April 2006 issue (29:4) by Phillip Scott. Up until that point, Eloquence was probably the most laid-back Australian export since the koala bear; in the same issue, one of *Fanfare*'s most prolific reviewers averred that the disc about which he was writing was the first Eloquence CD he'd encountered!

What a difference a few years can make! Reviews of Eloquence releases now appear without fail in every issue of *Fanfare*. As of December 2008, the label has well over 400 titles in print, with more appearing every month.

Credit for Eloquence's blossoming can be placed directly at the feet of Meher-Homji (pronounced MAY-er HOME-jee), a soft-spoken man who seems perfectly content to be addressed simply as "Cyrus." In the interest of efficiency, I will refer to him thus from here on. Cyrus would seem to have an ideal background for the peripatetic life of a recording-industry executive: born into a family of Zoroastrian-Persian origin—the same ethnicity as the celebrated Mehta family—and raised near Bombay, he emigrated to Australia, settling first in Perth and then in Sydney, along the way gaining

mastery of both the piano and the retail record business. By the time he took over Eloquence, he understood virtually every aspect of record production, and the label began to flourish under his direction. When I asked him how large an operation Eloquence was, he responded wryly, "It's essentially a Cyrus-in-spare-time labor of love effort."

Using his position with Universal as an entrée, Cyrus has built Eloquence into a high-class budget-priced reissue label, with access to the huge back catalogs of the three major recording companies that form Universal (originally Polygram): Philips, Deutsche Grammophon, and Decca. He has concentrated on reissuing items that are out of print on CD on the parent labels, and especially on issuing recordings from the beginnings of the stereo era through the 1980s that have never before appeared on CD. In several cases, public and critical reaction to a release has led to further issues from the same artists, and thence to fairly comprehensive "editions." Among Cyrus's early projects were a retrospective of the Decca recordings of Zubin Mehta—a family friend, it turns out—which were highly regarded here in the States but not so much in the U.K., and a series devoted to the Cleveland Orchestra recordings of Lorin Maazel. Among my own early favorites were the complete Ravel orchestral works with Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony from DG. A glance through the Eloquence catalog, however, shows an enormous range of repertoire and artists—a fortunate consequence of the quantity of material in Universal's vaults. Many collectors will be

delighted to know that one of Cyrus's ongoing "projects" is the reissue of Kirsten Flagstad's complete Decca recordings—several of which, if I remember correctly, have never been issued outside Scandinavia.

The genesis of this article was a small announcement I spotted in another record magazine stating that Eloquence would be issuing a substantial "series" devoted to Ernest Ansermet, Decca's indispensable conductor through most of the 1950s and 1960s. I asked Cyrus why he had decided on an Ansermet project, and he replied by e-mail, "A conversation with Paul Westcott of Chandos, a big Ansermet admirer, over a coffee at Liverpool Street Station in London! The idea was for a few releases, and it expanded to an 'edition.' I wanted something special to come around the 10th anniversary of Eloquence, this November (which I've championed through thick and thin—every bit of the work, from compiling, sourcing masters, choosing artwork, commissioning liner notes, etc.) And I thought this would be a worthy project."

When I read the list of the first group of releases (reviewed below), I suggested a feature article to Editor Flegler; on getting the green light, I wrote to Cyrus and asked him how much more Ansermet material he anticipated issuing. The list he sent me, including only those items already scheduled, totaled some 65 CDs, many of them in multiple-disc sets. More still are in the planning stage. For now, he is necessarily avoiding items still in print on the parent label—an eight-disc set of almost all the stereo Stravinsky recordings; the stereo version of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*; "Double Decca" sets of almost all the stereo Ravel orchestral recordings and another of Rimsky-Korsakov (although Decca allowed an exception here—see the review below); and yet another comprising Ansermet's complete recordings of Frank

Martin. There is also a smattering of Decca singles still in print. At this point, it appears that Eloquence will issue all of Ansermet's stereo recordings—some 120 LPs—over the next couple of years. Aside from the current sets devoted to Karajan's 100th birthday and perhaps Sony's long-unavailable Bruno Walter Edition, this will represent a project of practically unprecedented proportions. In addition, Cyrus is expanding his plans to reissue many of Ansermet's early-1950s mono recordings as well, whereas Sony generally issued only Walter's final recording of a given work. While there is a considerable degree of overlap between the mono and stereo recordings, there are quite a number of items that were never remade in stereo: the Villa-Lobos Piano Concerto with Ellen Ballon; the Haydn "Clock" and "Drumroll" symphonies; Ravel's opera *L'heure espagnole* as well as the Piano Concertos with Jacqueline Blancard; symphonies of Schumann (No. 1) and Prokofiev (No. 6), and more. There are also a number of items that were made after Decca began recording in stereo in 1954, but never issued in stereo: Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, Mozart's "Gran Partita," and a disc of works by the obscure Swiss composers Walter Geiser and Robert Oboussier. I asked Cyrus about these, and he replied, "We located stereo tapes . . . and they've all been *wiped!* Says so on the tape box and we verified with the actual masters." Another example of the foresight of large record companies in caring for their archives!

A few perspectives on the art of Ernest Ansermet: Terry McEwen, Decca's classical manager in New York, wrote a short tribute for the jackets of Ansermet's posthumously released final recordings. It began thus: "About two years ago in a rather heated discussion about our recordings plans for an important artist, one of my superiors in our company asked if, after all, we did not have a moral obligation to the artist in

question. For a moment I lost my temper and shouted back rather violently that in my opinion this company had a moral obligation to only three artists—Ernest Ansermet, Renata Tebaldi and Mantovani.”

Indeed, the English record market in the 1950s and early 1960s was dominated by EMI, the conglomerate that encompassed both HMV and English Columbia; virtually all the orchestras actively recording in Britain at the time—including those in London and Manchester’s Hallé Orchestra—were predominantly obligated to one or the other. DG and Philips had most of the continental orchestras under contract, leaving only a few Scandinavian orchestras, the Paris Conservatory Orchestra, and L’Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (hereafter abbreviated OSR) for Decca. The OSR, which Ansermet had founded in 1918 and conducted until 1968—a record unlikely ever to be matched—provided the foundation of Decca’s orchestral catalog for a full decade or more. (The “Suisse Romande” is an informal name for the French-speaking portion of Switzerland; their home was the Victoria Hall in Geneva, which, along with Kingsway Hall in London, was recognized as one of the most stunning recording venues of the era.)

Ansermet is a fascinating figure in several respects. From a collector’s standpoint, his stereo recordings up to about 1963 are considered “audiophile” material, so the demand for them was and is in significant part driven by sonic considerations. The Eloquence CDs I have heard so far do full justice to the richness and beauty of the sound of the orchestra in Victoria Hall. Ironically, the orchestra itself was not a top-flight group; the strings sometimes sounded a bit thin, and especially in the 1950s the intonation of the woodwind section was notoriously unpredictable. Still, Ansermet’s interpretations are almost always characterized by a trait I can best refer to as

integrity; there were never gratuitous histrionics, nor were there deviations from the score as one hears in the work of so many of his contemporaries.

Ansermet’s musical temperament dictated a very clearly delineated repertoire, although he had to fight to record a core part of that repertoire, the German “classics” from Bach to Brahms, mostly because of the opposition of Decca’s chief classical producer John Culshaw. Ansermet conducted the entire range of 19th-century French repertoire, moving into the 20th as far as Debussy, Ravel, and Roussel. He was consistently loyal to his Swiss compatriots, particularly Honegger and Frank Martin. Reflecting the close association of French and Russian cultures, Russian music from Glinka to the nationalistic “Five,” as well as Tchaikovsky, represented a vital part of his repertoire. His association with Stravinsky, which grew out of his work with Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, is legendary. The other 20th-century Russians he championed were Glazunov, a reactionary, and Prokofiev, who spent a number of years in Paris. (Stravinsky, for his part, spent time in both Paris and Switzerland.) The only other 20th-century composers he recorded (a somewhat artificial guide, since, for example, he seemed quite sympathetic to the music of Benjamin Britten, premiering *The Rape of Lucretia* and performing the *War Requiem*, which was issued on a private LP) were Bartók and a handful of Spanish composers: mostly Falla, but also Albéniz and Turina. He had a special flair for the fanciful or fantastic: many of his finest recordings are of scores with legendary programs involving Orientalisms and various supernatural beings or events: most ballets, of course, fall into this latter category; in addition, there are works such as *Antar*, *Sadko*, and the Rimsky-Korsakov operas, as well as *La péri* and *Le chasseur maudit*.

As interesting as Ansermet’s

repertoire was the music he did *not* conduct, as James Miller pointed out in our tandem reviews of the Decca “Original Masters” Ansermet set in *Fanfare* 30:6. He avoided like the plague music that wore its heart on its sleeve and extravagantly expressive late-Romantic music; it’s no accident that his Tchaikovsky discography is limited to the three ballets (although he does summon the requisite ardor for *The Nutcracker*’s act II *Pas de deux*), the last two orchestral suites, and the *Rococo Variations*—and a none-too-successful “Pathétique.” He recorded no Bruckner, Mahler, or Strauss, or for that matter *any* German music past Brahms.

Despite his close association with Stravinsky, the fact is that Ansermet conducted almost none of the works written after the 1930s; and, as central as French music was to his repertoire, he avoided French composers after Ravel and Roussel altogether; there is not a single recording representing Les Six, for example. I think the avoidance of hyper-Romanticism was a matter of temperament; regarding later 20th-century music, however, his recorded lecture, “What Everyone Should Know about Music” (also to be issued by Eloquence), gives a clearer idea. It is well known that Ansermet renounced Stravinsky’s late-career turn to serialism; what the lecture makes clear is that Ansermet believed that the major and minor triads, and the diatonic (white-note) scale—for which he offers a highly idiosyncratic structural model—*must* be the basis of any music that has the capability of expressing anything. Thus, not only do we have no late Stravinsky, but no music of the Second Viennese School, or for that matter any music that is not in some way rooted in the basic elements of tonality.

As doctrinaire as this may be, Ansermet can be admired for his integrity—there’s that term again—in remaining within his tastes; and, probably as a result, he left

few bad recordings. On the other hand, despite the fact that he made virtually all his stereo recordings with a frankly second-rate orchestra, he left a considerable number of great ones. As an idle exercise, I quickly listed my “top-ten” must-have Ansermet recordings; the list ended up saying much about where his greatest strengths lay, at least to my ear. For your amusement, here they are, in chronological order, with the original London stereo LP catalog numbers:

1. Balakirev: *Tamara*;  
Liadov: *Orchestral Works*  
(1954)—STS 15066
2. Borodin: *Symphonies*  
Nos. 2 and 3; *Prince*  
*Igor*: *Overture* (1954)—  
CS 6126
3. Rimsky-Korsakov:  
*Tsar Saltan*: *Suite*; *May*  
*Night*: *Overture* (1956)—  
CS 6012
4. Rimsky-Korsakov:  
*Christmas Eve*: *Suite*;  
*Sadko* (1957)—CS 6036
5. Dukas: *La Péri*;  
Debussy: *Jeux* (1958)—  
CS 6043
6. Tchaikovsky: *The*  
*Nutcracker* (1958)—CSA  
2203
7. Bizet: *Symphony in C*;  
*Jeux d’enfants* (1960)—  
CS 6208
8. Sibelius: *Symphony*  
No. 4 (1963)—CS 6387
9. Magnard: *Symphony*  
No. 3 (1968)—CS 6615
10. (your choice here)

Item No. 8 will no doubt raise a few eyebrows; refer to the review below for my rationale. I leave one open space because I have listened to only slightly more than half of Ansermet’s stereo recordings, and although those are the ones to which I gravitated because of my knowledge of Ansermet’s strengths and consideration of my own tastes, there may well be another deserving entry I have yet to discover.

Each CD or set has a booklet with basic program notes by Greg Keane or *Fanfare* colleague Colin Anderson (plus Raymond Tuttle in the Wagner). They concentrate mostly on the repertoire, which strikes me as perhaps unnecessary for such a series, particularly with the best-known works; there is a fairly extensive biographical blurb in each volume, and the authors incorporate remarks on Ansermet's performances to varying degrees in their notes. The one significant problem is the lack of texts for vocal works; one hopes Cyrus will be able to squeeze in texts for lesser-known works on future releases, even at the expense of some of the expository prose. One correction for Mr. Anderson: Ansermet recorded *Pictures at an Exhibition* three times, not twice; the two OSR recordings are preceded by a 1947 version with the London Philharmonic, first issued on 78s, then on London LLP 34.

A practical note: the symbiosis between Eloquence and its parent company, Universal, is a strangely ambiguous one. Universal does not distribute Eloquence worldwide; that would in essence amount to competing against itself. And yet the company clearly and strongly supports Cyrus's enterprise. Because there is no U.S. distributor, the easiest way to obtain Eloquence CDs is through the Australian Web site [www.buywell.com](http://www.buywell.com). At December 2008 exchange rates, a single disc is just over \$6.00, a two-disc set just over \$9.00. Obviously, shipping is a consideration, but it's quite reasonable and more cost-efficient the more CDs you order. Eloquence titles also invariably show up on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), but prices are wildly unpredictable. If you just want one specific title, it's worth checking, and the shipping will be a bit faster and cheaper.

Cyrus Meher-Homji deserves a medal for his service to the "Decca Ansermet Legacy"; that title, printed above

a small, fairly inconspicuous medallion-like portrait of Ansermet on the rear cover of each disc, is the only sign that these CDs are part of a project of historic proportions. Otherwise, the packaging is identical to that of Eloquence's other issues. It's typical of Cyrus's, and Eloquence's, tendency toward understatement, but in significance it looms large.

**BRAHMS Symphonies: Nos. 1–4. Variations on a Theme by Haydn. Academic Festival Overture. Tragic Overture. Nänie.<sup>3</sup> Alto Rhapsody.<sup>1,3</sup> Ein deutsches Requiem<sup>2,3</sup>** • Ernest Ansermet, cond; Helen Watts (alt),<sup>1</sup> Agnes Giebel (sop),<sup>2</sup> Hermann Prey (bar),<sup>2</sup> Suisse Romande O & RCh,<sup>3</sup> Ch Pro Arte de Lausanne<sup>3</sup> • DECCA ELOQUENCE 480 0448 (4 CDs: 300:10)

**LISZT A Faust Symphony. 2 Episodes from Lenau's Faust. MAGNARD Symphony No. 3** • Ernest Ansermet, cond; Suisse Romande O • DECCA ELOQUENCE 442 9992 (2 CDs: 147:39)

**SIBELIUS Symphonies: No. 2; No. 4. Tapiola. RACHMANINOFF Isle of the Dead<sup>1</sup>** • Ernest Ansermet, cond; Suisse Romande O; Paris Conservatoire O<sup>1</sup> • DECCA ELOQUENCE 480 0044 (2 CDs: 114:46)

**WAGNER Lohengrin:** Prelude. *Götterdämmerung: Siegfried's Funeral Music. Die Meistersinger:* Prelude. *Parsifal:* Prelude and Good Friday Music • Ernest Ansermet, cond; Suisse Romande O • DECCA ELOQUENCE 480 0567 (50:50)

**ROYAL BALLET GALA** • Ernest Ansermet, cond; Royal Op House O,

Covent Garden • DECCA ELOQUENCE  
442 9986 (2 CDs: 96:52)

Excerpts from **TCHAIKOVSKY** *The Nutcracker. Swan Lake. The Sleeping Beauty.* **RESPIGHI** *La boutique fantasque.* **DELIBES** *Coppélia.* **ADAM** *Giselle.* **SCHUMANN** (orch. Glazounov, Rimsky-Korsakov) *Carnaval.* **CHOPIN** (orch. Douglas) *Les sylphides*

**MUSSORGSKY** *Pictures at an Exhibition* (orch. Ravel). *Night on Bald Mountain. Khovanshchina: Prelude; Dance of the Persian Slaves. The Fair at Sorotchinsk: Gopak.* **BALAKIREV** *Tamara* • Ernest Ansermet, cond; Suisse Romande O • DECCA ELOQUENCE 480 0047 (78:08)

**RIMSKY-KORSAKOV** *Antar. May Night: Overture. The Tale of Tsar Saltan: Suite; Flight of the Bumblebee. Capriccio espagnol. Russian Easter Festival Overture. Christmas Eve: Suite. Dubinushka. Sadko. The Snow Maiden: Suite* • Ernest Ansermet, cond; Suisse Romande O • DECCA ELOQUENCE 480 0827 (2 CDs: 141:48)

**RIMSKY-KORSAKOV** *Scheherazade. Le coq d'or: Suite*<sup>1</sup> • Ernest Ansermet, cond; Suisse Romande O; Paris Conservatoire O<sup>1</sup> • DECCA ELOQUENCE 480 0081 (68:53)

The five items representing the first release in Eloquence's Ansermet Legacy Series were astutely chosen: not only is each the first international issue on CD of its entire contents (with the exception of the Rachmaninoff, which was included in the volume of EMI/IMG's "Great Conductors of the Twentieth Century" devoted to Ansermet, and the "Royal Ballet Gala," which is a special case); but, the repertoire

falls distinctly outside that which we normally associate with Ansermet. In fact, each of the first four issues represents Ansermet's complete recordings of the given composer(s)'s work. Thus, even collectors who have many of Ansermet's recordings will probably be unfamiliar with much that is contained in these discs.

The inclusion in this release of Ansermet's complete Brahms recordings was a particularly felicitous choice: the complete orchestral works were issued in the U.S. by London in 1963 as a four-disc set only (although they were reissued later as single LPs on London's budget "Stereo Treasury Series," in sonically compromised masterings); this, plus the fact that there were already stereo sets of the symphonies available by Klemperer, Kubelík (for the same company!), Steinberg, and Walter, not to mention innumerable versions of individual symphonies by the world's best-known conductors and orchestras, resulted in very limited sales. Indeed, while Ansermet's stereo LPs appear in large numbers on eBay, I believe I've seen this set listed only once in the past two years.

All of which, on listening to these CDs, proves to be a great disservice to a consistently high-level Brahms cycle. While it is true that Ansermet's métier, at least on records, encompassed largely French and Russian music, he always conducted "the classics"—Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms—and it was largely due to the influence of Decca's head classical producer John Culshaw that he was prevented from recording more standard German repertoire.

However this Brahms cycle came to be, it needs no apologists. The conducting is energetic, rhythmically taut and accurate—a critical matter in Brahms, and always an Ansermet strong point—and scrupulous without ever descending into fussiness. The OSR produces a suitably dark, well-blended sound highlighted by tasteful woodwind

solos; only the Third struck me as occasionally understated. Exposition repeats are taken in the Second and Third. (I believe the repeat in the First should now be considered *de rigueur*, but the earliest example of its observation on disc that I have encountered is the 1979 Solti recording.)

The two overtures receive mainstream, effective readings—they are so well written that they almost always sound good—and only the *Haydn Variations* fails to meet the set's otherwise uniformly high standard; I find it neither as tonally beautiful nor as monumentally powerful as those of Szell or Monteux, and occasional intonation problems come to the surface in the highly exposed woodwind-writing.

The choral pieces were recorded in 1965–66, and while they are overall satisfactorily done, I think they lack the authority of the symphonies. The *German Requiem* is a fine reading overall, but not in the same league as the towering Klemperer version on EMI; Hermann Prey can't match the still-young Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's intensity and gravitas, and Agnes Giebel's soprano in the fifth movement lacks color. Ansermet comes close to expressing the work's full range of expression, but falls just short in the monumental sixth-movement climax (at "Hölle, wo ist dein Sieg?"). *Nänie*, quite a rarity at the time, is lovely, but its opening exposes the lack of polish in the OSR woodwinds, and the all-important harp part is barely audible. The *Alto Rhapsody*, on the other hand, featuring Decca stalwart Helen Watts, is in the same league as the best recordings of the time: Baker/Boult for EMI, and Miller/Walter for Columbia (now Sony). My only complaint is the lack of texts—not really a major problem in familiar repertoire for which most purchasers will already have at least one other recording, and perhaps a score. But when we venture into less mainstream

repertoire, like the soon-to-be-released Ravel operas, this will be a distinct liability. In all, particularly at its budget price, this set is a fine introduction to Ansermet's surprisingly authoritative way with mainstream German repertoire.

Ansermet sounds less comfortable in Liszt's *Faust Symphony* (1967); the famous introduction is well done, but the main "Faust" theme (the C-Minor *Allegro agitato ed appassionato*) lacks the vehemence of Beecham's version, for example, and the triumphal E-Major theme (*Grandioso*) as well as the buildup to the recapitulation seems underplayed; it is as though Ansermet is uncomfortable with Liszt's most extravagant musical gestures. Likewise, in the second movement ("Gretchen"), Ansermet seems to shrink from sentimentality, and the tempo is far too hurried.

The shorter Liszt works generally fare better; of the *Two Episodes*, a natural coupling for the original LP release, the first, the ubiquitous "Mephisto Waltz," is more effective in its diabolical passages than in the erotic ones. The second, "Nocturnal Procession," is nicely atmospheric. The tone poem *Battle of the Huns*, recorded eight years earlier, is suitably vehement.

With only about 109 minutes' worth of Liszt (there are extant live recordings of the First Piano Concerto, but none for Decca), Cyrus finds room on disc 2 for another of Ansermet's late recordings—in fact, one of his last, the Third Symphony of Albéric Magnard (1865–1914), taped in 1968. In my review of the "Original Masters" set, I referred to this work as Ansermet's answer to George Szell's claim that there are "no undiscovered masterpieces." This, which I believe was the Symphony's first recording, proves Szell quite wrong: this extraordinary work, expansive, noble, and ascetic, brings out the finest qualities of Ansermet's conducting,

making it alone easily worth the price of the set. I believe this Symphony has received only three subsequent recordings, two of which appear to be out of print, and thus it is sadly entitled to retain its “undiscovered” distinction. That shouldn’t be; it is easily one of the greatest works in the post-Franck symphonic tradition, and no later conductor has captured its glories as Ansermet did. Magnard’s modest output includes several sublime, moving works—the Violin Sonata and the opera *Guercœur* are both surpassingly beautiful as well—but this symphony is likely his finest creation. If you care at all about late-Romantic French music, buy it!

For some reason, 1963 marked a number of departures from Ansermet’s standard repertoire on record. Not only was the entire Brahms cycle taped that year, but also two LPs of Sibelius—his only recordings of this, or for that matter, any Nordic composer—and a record of Wagner excerpts, again the only recordings he ever made of Wagner’s music (see below). The Sibelius items are assembled into a two-disc set, with the 1954 PCO stereo recording of Rachmaninoff’s *Isle of the Dead* (Ansermet’s only recording of this composer as well) as a “filler.” Perhaps Ansermet, who was extremely jealous of his fellow Decca artist Pierre Monteux, aware that the latter had recorded the Sibelius Second, felt the need to produce his own version; it’s striking how much of Monteux’s Decca/Philips repertoire Ansermet also recorded.

Happily, Ansermet went Monteux one better, with a record of the Fourth Symphony and *Tapiola*. The Second, an expression of the full-blown Romanticism Ansermet so assiduously avoided most of the time, is well enough executed, clear-eyed if sometimes inflexible, but predictably fails to engage Ansermet the way the Fourth does. This piece, which Sibelius famously

described as “a clear glass of water,” is uncompromisingly serious—even grim—and totally lacking in sentimentality. Ansermet responds with some of his best work: the tempos are right on the money; the doggedly offbeat rhythmic patterns with which Sibelius continually seems to try to subvert the regular meter are played precisely without being mechanical; the architecture of the monumental third movement unfolds naturally and—ironically—movingly. Ansermet uses tubular bells in the finale, a choice I believe is the correct one (see my discussion of this in my survey of Sibelius symphony recordings in *Fanfare* 30:3). This is a top-notch performance. By comparison, *Tapiola* struck me as somewhat less mysterious than I would have liked; the tempos are on the fast side, with the timing at 16:23, and Ansermet’s characteristic rhythmic precision sometimes lapses into inflexibility. I’d place this *Tapiola* in the middle of the pack.

I do not know what prompted Ansermet to record *The Isle of the Dead*; this is a dry-eyed reading, building to considerable drama at its climax but free of histrionics. Compared to versions like Previn’s London Symphony recording for EMI, it seems insufficiently expressive. This recording, incidentally, was one of Decca’s very early experiments in stereo, taped in Ansermet’s September 1954 sessions in Paris; the sound on this issue seems similar to that of the EMI/IMG version, with a serious channel balance problem corrected. Compared to the stereo items recorded earlier in that year in Victoria Hall, the OSR’s home in Geneva (see below), the results are less than satisfactory. The sound is less transparent, instrumental locations less focused, and the stereo image not as well defined. Incidentally, the booklet mistakenly lists this as a mono recording.

The Wagner disc shows that Ansermet was versatile, but not truly at

home in the composer's sound world. Both the *Lohengrin* Prelude and the standard *Parsifal* excerpts lack mystery; the former, the very opening of the disc, is not nearly as hushed and ethereal as it is in the hands of more sympathetic interpreters like Furtwängler or Stokowski. Incidentally, one sign of Ansermet's relative inexperience with Wagner's music occurs at the first woodwind entrance in this piece: the ambiguously written bass-clarinet line, using German notation, is played an octave too low whenever it is notated in the treble clef. Since much of this line is written in unison with the other lowest-sounding instruments, it represents something of a sore thumb here. "Siegfried's Funeral Music," which ought to be larger-than-life (or, for that matter, death), is too metrically stolid, giving an almost perfunctory effect. The most successful item on the disc is the *Meistersinger* Prelude, a vigorous reading that revels in Wagner's complex counterpoint.

The remaining item in the first group of issues is unique in several ways: composed completely of ballet excerpts, its program is quite different from those of the great majority of Ansermet's stereo LPs, which almost always consist of complete works. This is also Ansermet's only studio recording from 1946 to the end of his career to have appeared on a label other than Decca. Finally, it is his only recording with the Covent Garden Orchestra. When the recording was made in 1959, RCA and Decca had a licensing agreement whereby a number of recordings made in the U.K. by Decca were issued in the U.S. by RCA Victor. The present set, recorded by Kenneth Wilkinson in Kingsway Hall, exactly duplicates the contents of one of RCA's most famous Soria LP issues, now the grail of "audiophile" LPs. A copy of the original set can still bring over \$1,000, while the Classic Records CD set, when seen, usually

sells for several hundred dollars.

Of course, this set commemorates Ansermet's longtime association with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; and, in fact, he also recorded six of the eight items excerpted here in their entirety. But this set is really all about the sound, and an illustration of recording as artifact as much as musical content. Naturally, Ansermet is a master in this repertoire, and the Covent Garden Orchestra is more polished than the OSR, so it is a delight to listen to in spite of all that. The sound of this issue is very similar to that of the Classic Records LP, with which I did a careful A/B comparison; the latter may perhaps have marginally better-detailed high-frequency response, but not so much as to warrant such a large multiple in price. One element that one does miss, however, is the original album design and artwork, which were always beautiful in RCA's Soria issues; the Classic Records reissue provides a facsimile of the original album art. So, depending on your priorities and the level of your mania for completeness, this set may be the odd-item out. Again, however, none of the ancillary considerations can subtract from the set's musical joys, or its sensational sonics.

The second group of releases finds Ansermet on his musical "home turf": works by three of Russia's nationalist "Five." (A Borodin disc is to follow shortly, and hardly anyone has recorded any orchestral music by Cui.) The first of these discs collects all of Ansermet's stereo-era Mussorgsky recordings, from three original LP sources, and adds the classic 1954 Balakirev *Tamara* (or *Thamar*). The centerpiece, of course, would seem to be Ravel's orchestration of *Pictures at an Exhibition*; but, while Ansermet is solid as always in sympathetic repertoire, the competition is simply overwhelming, and Ravel's brilliant virtuoso orchestral writing doesn't always work to the OSR's favor. For more polished,

extroverted versions, try Bernstein, Szell, or Mehta. Oddly, the other Mussorgsky items mostly fail to satisfy as well: *Night on Bald Mountain*, in the standard Rimsky-Korsakov version, strikes me as too “civilized,” while the Prelude to *Khovanshchina* exposes some of the orchestra’s perennial woodwind intonation problems, and the reading overall lacks the shimmering sonic beauty of Szell’s version in a surprisingly colorful and expressively played Russian recital disc. The exoticisms of the “Dance of the Persian Slaves,” on the other hand, bring out the best in Ansermet. The real reason to own this disc is the Balakirev. One of the stunning early stereo recordings of June 1954, this performance of a little-known gem—an exotic musical legend tinged with a whiff of Middle-Eastern fragrance, this is music in which Ansermet is completely at home and utterly convincing. Even accounting for the usual rough woodwind-playing, no other version, even Beecham’s, has ever sounded so simply “right” to me. (Note: the original discmates of this work, a group of orchestral works of Anatol Liadov, are scheduled for imminent release as well.)

I have not mentioned the admittedly trifling *Gopak*, but this recording is the reason for my carefully worded “stereo-era” reference above. Originally issued as part of a mono-only collection, it has never appeared in stereo. Since it was recorded in 1955, however, I asked Cyrus whether it in fact existed only in mono; his forthright reply was that he had located the stereo tape, but too late to include in this disc, which was already in production. He hopes to include it in a future release.

The remaining two items (three CDs) incorporate all of Ansermet’s recordings of Rimsky-Korsakov from 1952 on, with the exception of his third and final version of *Scheherazade* from 1960. In fact, the two-disc set in large part replicates the contents of the Double Decca Rimsky collection,

with the substitution of *Antar* and the *Capriccio espagnol* for *Scheherazade*. I asked Cyrus how he got Decca’s permission to issue this material, and he replied that it was approved because he was publishing the 1954 Paris *Scheherazade* (in the last disc, below), not the 1960, and that the rest of this material formed simply too compelling a group of discmates not to issue. The gain is ours, especially since the 1960 OSR *Scheherazade*, likely in many collections already, is in fact a fairly generic reading, again with prodigious competition. *Antar*, another instance of Eastern exoticism and a work of great beauty, was Decca’s first stereo classical recording. Considering that, the sound is astonishingly lifelike. The reading may not always be as orchestrally sumptuous as Morton Gould’s Chicago Symphony version for RCA, but that was recorded some 15 years later; in the meantime, Ansermet held sway.

The greater portion of the set reissues in their entirety two of Ansermet’s most magical early-stereo LPs, featuring mostly little-known works recorded at a time (1956–57) when most listeners knew Rimsky-Korsakov almost exclusively from the three colorful orchestral masterpieces of 1887–88. The suites from *Christmas Eve* and *Tsar Saltan* are absolute gems—who knew at the time that Rimsky had composed 15 operas?—and the performances have long been, for me at least, simply *the way* these pieces go. The shorter works, particularly the “musical picture” *Sadko*, are equally definitive—a word I almost never use to describe a performance.

A bonus is the relatively brief (12:36) suite from *Snegourochka* (“The Snow Maiden”). This is a rarity in the U.S.; originally issued in the U.K. on a 10-inch Decca disc, it was never released here on LP. Finally, the spirited *Capriccio espagnol* from 1952, Ansermet’s only recording of the work, is given here in brilliant-sounding true

mono. If you don't already own the Double Decca set, or want the *Capriccio*, this set is an absolute must-buy; and, at slightly over \$9.00 U.S. at current exchange rates, impossible to resist.

Given the lifelike sound of the *Capriccio espagnol*, it was a shock to hear its original discmate, the suite from *Le coq d'or*, on the final CD. Cyrus assured me that, when an item has not already been issued on CD, Decca provides him with the original master tape; the sound quality of most of the material here would seem to confirm that. And yet, this recording suffers from extremely dull high frequencies and, worse, fake stereo; my suspicion, which I am not able to confirm, is that someone at Decca's archives mistakenly sent Cyrus the master tape for the Decca "Eclipse" LP reissue, since these characteristics are typical of that budget line. It's a shame, since this recording is unlikely to be reissued again in our lifetime.

Finally, the 1954 *Scheherazade*, from the same Paris stereo sessions as the Rachmaninoff, Ansermet's last with the PCO, is also a duplication with the EMI/IMG volume. Again, the latter suffers from a very odd channel-balance problem, but while this is corrected here, I suspect that both may originate from the same mastering; the original London LP (CS 6018) and the four-track reel-to-reel tape both capture more sonic brilliance. In any event, this is a perfectly acceptable performance, brisk and completely free of idiosyncrasy; but, with Beecham, Ormandy, and Monteux available, cannot be considered competitive. Of all the discs reviewed here, this is the one most likely to be of interest to specialists only.

These 15 CDs represent the beginning of the documentation of a priceless legacy indeed; other releases are already appearing and will continue to appear at least until 2010. Cyrus tries to

keep his titles in print as long as possible, but that constitutes a continuous battle with Universal, and some of the more esoteric items are likely to sell in relatively small numbers. So, buy these now; a project like this comes along once in a lifetime!