



November / December 2023

RICARDO CASTRO Piano Concerto in a, op. 22. ¹ *Berceuse*, op. 36/1. *Canto de amor. Plainte*, op. 38/2. **PONCE** Piano Concerto No. 1, “Romantico”. ¹ *Arrulladora mexicana, “La Rancherita”*. *Gavota. Romanza de amor. Intermezzo No. 1* • Jorge Federico Osorio (pn); ¹ Carlos Miguel Prieto, cond; ¹ OS de Minería • CEDILLE 90000 221 (74:31)

Mexican pianist Jorge Federico Osorio has previously impressed me in *The French Album* (Fanfare 44:3) and a disc of Debussy and Liszt (31:2). Here, he brings his expertise to a disc of Romantic Mexican piano concertos under the title *Conciertos Románticos*.

The command Osorio has of the keyboard is remarkable, as is his innate feeling for this music. He captures the flitting, skittish nature of Ricardo Castro’s writing in the first movement of that composer’s A-Minor Concerto (dedicated, incidentally, to Reinecke). Castro is one of those composers who died early (his dates are 1864–1907). A pianist himself, he gave the Mexican premiere of the Grieg Piano Concerto. Castro is clearly of Romantic bent, and Osorio and conductor Carlos Miguel Prieto give the first movement of his Piano Concerto plenty of space to speak. Apparently, this is the first Mexican piano concerto, or even concertante work with piano. Castro seems keen to emphasize the influence of Chopin in both the first and second movements, and his projection of line is perfectly judged. The recording is superb: The brass climax of the first movement is properly moving and sonically impressive, and the delicate woodwind entrance to support the very closing measures of the slow movement is perfectly judged and together. Osorio is beautifully expressive in this post-Chopinesque Andante; but it is in the scintillating finale that the true delights really happen. This polonaise glitters, and yet some intriguing turns of harmony add an extra layer of fascination. Osorio’s legerdemain is phenomenal, as is the orchestra’s own lightness and discipline. It is impossible to imagine a finer performance of this concerto.

The recording of the Castro on the Sterling label by Rodolfo Ritter with the Orquesta Sinfónica de San Luis Potosí under José Moramontes Zapata is a fine one, but was recorded live and is somewhat lacking in recorded finesse (the strings can lack depth). The slow movement is well shaped, but the polonaise finale sounds a little insubstantial; Osorio’s command carries all before it, therefore, although if one is fascinated by Castro’s music, the Sterling disc is worth hearing for the couplings of the 1895 Cello Concerto and the symphonic poem *Olthona* (1885, after a Celtic legend).

The set of solo piano works by Castro is a dream: a “Berceuse” from a set of two Piano Pieces, op. 36 (the other is a “Valse mélancolique”) that does exactly what it says on the case, and deliciously. A *Canto de amor* is an extended six-and-a-half-minute tone poem for piano. The

move to the climax of the Canto is worthy of Liszt, and Osorio performs it with dignity and total command. The “Plainte,” op. 38/2, an Andantino of whispered intimacy, has a melody to die for. Osorio’s phrasing here is perfect, with just the right amount of rubato.

This is not Osorio’s first recording of the Ponce First Piano Concerto: He previously recorded it for ASV, with Enrique Bátiz conducting the State of Mexico Symphony (reviewed back in *Fanfare* 20:2, more than a quarter of a century ago). It appears, however, quite difficult to locate a physical copy.

As to the piece, immediately the musical world shifts, with Ponce showing a real debt to Germanic Romanticism (as opposed to the more fragranced, French-oriented Romanticism of Castro). Chopin’s ghost offers a bridge between the two composers; but Ponce’s voice is absolutely his own. The first movement is an amazing succession of tableaux, with the many changes of moods impeccably tracked by Osorio and Prieto. Osorio’s easy virtuosity is a boon here, allowing us to concentrate on Ponce’s astonishingly fertile invention, while the slow movement is monumental in intent, and Osorio’s performance is nothing short of magisterial. A cadenza is mesmeric under Osorio’s hands. At one point woodwind gestures take us into the world of the Romantic tone poem before an extended lyrical melody in the lower strings moves us into more internal regions. Ponce’s use of extended fields of utterance for the orchestra allows the piece to exude a sense of expansive thought and, in the piano part, of solitary rumination for the soloist. So it is that while Lisztian octaves are part of the vocabulary, here it is the lyrical aspect that seems pronounced. The finale glitters. Aspects of this last movement seem reminiscent of the finale of Liszt’s First Piano Concerto, but Ponce’s movement is less intense, morphing easily into passages of comparative rest. Technically, Osorio’s staccato is perfect, and how impressive is the woodwind echo of a succession of piano chords, a real acknowledgement of the rapport between Osorio and Prieto in these performances. The finale has real backbone; the very conclusion is almost Hollywood-epic in demeanor. This is a fabulous performance of a most impressive concerto.

There is a performance by Rodolfo Ritter on Sterling, again with the Orquesta Sinfónica de San Luis Potosí, this time under Zaeth Ritter (the disc also includes Ponce’s Piano Concerto No. 2). Ritter is a fine pianist, but his technique does not have the sheer comprehensive majesty of Osorio’s; there is a sense of (heroic) struggle at times. And again, the live Sterling recording is decidedly inferior to that on Cedille. Frankly, the Sterling feels more like a good run-through, as against Osorio’s red-hot intensity and concentration.

In a sense, the little bouquets of solo pieces after the meaty concertos act as a succession of encores, complementing the tower blocks of the concertos with little contrastive oases. It certainly feels that way with the onset of Ponce’s *Arrulladora mexicana*, a piece based on a popular song, *La rancherito*. Osorio shapes the melody beautifully. The *Gavota* is the perfect salon piece—short, flowing, harmonically sophisticated yet completely accessible, and with a lovely, light central section (almost Brahmsian in its writing). Ponce’s *Romanza de amor*

balances Castro's Canto de amor beautifully, a true outpouring of emotion, before the fascinatingly elusive Intermezzo No. 1 rounds off this magnificent disc.

This is utterly convincing, committed music-making from all concerned, captured in a state-of-the-art recording. Colin Clarke