



PIERRE
MONTEUX
in France

1952-58 Concert Performances

Monteux in France

Pierre Monteux did not like working with French orchestras. One might consider his antipathy toward them strange, considering that he had grown up with them. But, of course, he knew them and their idiosyncrasies only too well. From the age of eighteen, in 1893, he had been principal violist of one of Paris's major orchestras, the Orchestre des Concerts Colonne, and from 1895 its assistant conductor, remaining in both posts until 1912. Thus he witnessed at first hand the orchestra's juvenile behavior during rehearsals of Debussy's *La mer* conducted in 1908 by no less than the composer himself.

A particularly disagreeable (to conductors, anyway) aspect of the Parisian orchestral scene, which for years had made the city a laughingstock in the rest of the musical world, was the infamous "deputy system." Under this system, a musician would contract to play a specific concert, but if he obtained better-paying engagements on any of the rehearsal dates, he could send a substitute to replace him at the rehearsals. Such a system, of course, played havoc with the preparation and performance of concerts.

In 1929 Monteux became the artistic director and principal conductor of the recently-formed Orchestre Symphonique de Paris (OSP). This ensemble was able to pay the musicians a salary sufficient to enable them to have the OSP as their primary activity, thus eliminating the deputy system, at least where that orchestra was concerned. Composed mostly of young professionals fresh out of the conservatory, with a few more seasoned players interspersed, this quickly became Monteux's favorite orchestra, and their recording of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* remains a classic of the phonograph. Unfortunately, uncertain economic conditions in Europe and the onset of World War II caused the OSP to cease operations entirely in 1939.

Monteux's postwar performances with the Paris Conservatory Orchestra (in spite of its name not a student ensemble) and the Lamoureux Orchestra were not pleasurable appearances for him. Concerning the latter, the late Samuel Lipman wrote in the January 1984 issue of *Commentary*:

"The first rehearsal (of Copland's *El Salón Mexico*), in a hired room, was a disaster, an outcome not mitigated by the timeworn diversion of the orchestra string players who pushed a mute along the floor with their bows from one stand to the other until it had traversed the entire section—while the orchestra was playing or the conductor was talking. In Richard Strauss's *Rosenkavalier Suite*, the harpists missed their cue because they were openly filing their nails.

The final insult to this grand old man of French music took place when he (with me carrying his briefcase) turned up at the hall the morning of the concert a half-hour before the rehearsal and was told by the commissionaire that he had no right to be there and should go away immediately."

In 1956 Monteux recorded the three great Stravinsky ballet scores with the Paris Conservatory Orchestra. While details of the orchestra's rehearsal behavior are not known, the fact is that these are not among Monteux's most distinguished recordings. In the *Suite from The Firebird* the string sound is weak and the performance in general lacks energy. *Petrushka* is better, but the performance as a whole is a bit pedestrian. As for *The Rite of Spring*, Monteux's only stereo recording of the work is quite cautious, without the impact of his great San Francisco and Boston versions. It's as though the musicians could play the piece, but didn't really want to. It is obvious that there was little chemistry between Monteux and the musicians.

With the rather clumsily named French National Radio and Television Orchestra (today known simply as the Orchestre National) matters improved considerably for Monteux. Under the administration of the French government, this orchestra was (and is) a permanent ensemble with no need for the deputy system, unlike the self-governing orchestras so prevalent in the French capital. Thus Monteux could accept annual guest engagements with this orchestra without fear of ill treatment at rehearsals.

While this collection contains many works that Monteux recorded commercially, it also offers several that are new to his discography. Concerning the former, pride of place must go to the Beethoven symphonies. Nineteen years of sitting in the principal violist's chair of the Colonne Orchestra resulted in multiple exposures to the standard repertoire, which Monteux, owing to his remarkable ear, came to know by heart. How much Monteux's interpretations were influenced by those of Edouard Colonne and his various guest conductors is difficult to say. Nevertheless, one can say that his own personal *bonhomie* made him ideally suited to the even-numbered Beethoven symphonies, which are usually considered less "profound" than the odd-numbered ones.

Certainly he captures perfectly the high spirits and bumptious humor of the *Second Symphony*. Monteux's interpretations were remarkably consistent over the years, and the version offered here can hold its own with those recorded in San Francisco, London, and Hamburg. One can regret the omission of the first movement's exposition repeat, included only in the San Francisco version, and perhaps the overall length of the program on which it appeared was a factor in this decision. (Monteux was not known for the brevity of his programs.) Among the points that Monteux made to his pupils were:

the development section in a Beethoven symphony should be played a fraction slower than the rest of the movement; the trio in a classical work should be somewhat slower than the minuet or scherzo proper; all trills in Beethoven should end with a turn, whether so written or not, as espoused in Leopold Mozart's violin method, which Beethoven knew and used as a reference. All of these points can be observed in the present recordings.

The Beethoven *Seventh* was a Monteux specialty. Again, there are no exposition repeats, but that was common practice for this symphony in those days. Some may find the scherzo's two trios excessively slow (especially when compared with Toscanini's version), but, again, Monteux is not alone in his choice of tempo here. Monteux was in the habit of gradually accelerating the tempo in the finale's coda, which some may also object to, but one can argue that it is a natural response to the impetuosity of the music.

Beethoven's *Eighth* was also a Monteux specialty. Few conductors brought out the work's unbridled energy and unbuttoned humor more than he. Here the exposition repeat is observed, and the first movement's important bass line is given its due. (Monteux, in fact, referred to this work as "the symphony of the basses.") An idiosyncratic touch occurs in the finale: Monteux's holding back the tempo on the fortissimo unison c-sharps.

The *Ninth* was a special favorite of Monteux's. During his seventeen years in San Francisco he almost always concluded the season with it, and he chose to conduct it on his eighty-fifth birthday concert with the Boston Symphony in 1960. Monteux's interpretation is very straightforward and faithful to the score; there is nothing "philosophical" about it, yet it is both exciting and sensitive. Monteux never indulged in obvious retouching of Beethoven's orchestration or that of other composers. In 1963 he recorded the *Ninth* with the London Symphony Orchestra, of which he was then principal conductor. The original release of the Westminster recording included a rehearsal sequence in which, during the Scherzo, the French horns can be heard adding their sonority to a passage Beethoven wrote only for the woodwinds. This revision, followed by many conductors, was originated by Felix Weingartner, who was the first to record all the Beethoven symphonies and who published a treatise on their interpretation. In the rehearsal, when Monteux hears the horns in that passage, he stops the orchestra and exclaims quite firmly, "That is not Beethoven. That is Weingartner, and I don't like it at all!" You will not hear the horns in that passage here.

Monteux was, of course, most closely associated with the music of Stravinsky, and his conducting of the riot-torn premiere of *The Rite of Spring* is well known. His association with Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballet Russes* began when he was asked, on quite short notice, to take over the preliminary orchestral rehearsals of *Petrushka* in 1911. It was the Colonne Orchestra that Diaghilev employed for his Paris seasons, and

Monteux, as its assistant conductor, was only too happy to comply. So impressed was Stravinsky with Monteux's thorough knowledge of a complex score he had first seen only a short time before that, when it became time for Diaghilev's principal conductor to take over, Stravinsky insisted that only Monteux would conduct *Petrushka*, for he knew the score better than anyone else. Within a short time Monteux became the principal conductor and the rest, as they say, is history.

In the composite recording of *Petrushka* included here, Monteux plays, as he usually did, the original ballet ending depicting the death of Petrushka rather than the composer's rather abrupt concert ending. While some may find a few of his tempos on the conservative side, Monteux always kept in mind the tempos at which the music could be danced; he was not interested in brilliant display for its own sake. Worth mentioning is that he always played the score in Stravinsky's original 1911 version rather than the 1947 revision which the composer made so that he could receive royalties. Monteux and Ernest Anserment were the only conductors authorized by Stravinsky to continue playing the original version.

Monteux's finest recordings of *The Rite of Spring* remain those made in Boston in 1951 and San Francisco in 1945. The present version is certainly superior to those with the Paris Conservatory Orchestra in 1956 and the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris in 1929. While other conductors (Leonard Bernstein, Igor Markevitch, Georg Solti) may have surpassed Monteux in terms of visceral energy or personalized interpretation, Monteux's remains the classic account in terms of projecting what is written in the score, so that all the disparate elements—savage, mysterious, sensuous, rhythmic, and lyrical—are presented in proper proportion. Everything unfolds naturally, as always in a Monteux performance, with no lack of excitement. (By the way, though he continued to perform both works throughout his career, Monteux's wife Doris stated in a letter that her husband was "fed up" with *Petrushka*, and he himself exclaimed in more than one newspaper interview, "I hate *The Rite of Spring*!")

One might think that Monteux, as a Frenchman, would not be sympathetic to Tchaikovsky, but he stated on more than one occasion that he loved Tchaikovsky and confirmed this by performing his music frequently. Many were the all-Tchaikovsky programs conducted at New York's Lewisohn Stadium, for example. However, he did not play the composer in the tortured, exaggerated manner favored by so many conductors. As always, Monteux brought a sense of proportion to his music making, and if the last ounce of emotional turmoil is missing, the performances were nevertheless tremendously exciting and faithful to the score. In the *Fifth Symphony* his tempos are very flexible, though some of that flexibility was requested by Tchaikovsky himself when, in the famous Andante cantabile second movement, he added the words *con alcuna licenza* ("with some license" or "liberty"). As was customary at the time, and perhaps still is, Monteux prepared for the first movement's soaring second theme by ritarding into it, then playing that

theme at a markedly slower tempo. But slowing at that point has always been traditional and effective, and Monteux certainly made the most of it.

Monteux programmed the Richard Strauss tone poems quite often, even though he had refused to play that composer's music during and shortly after World War I because Strauss had signed a manifesto against France. He later made his peace with Strauss, and of all the tone poems *Death and Transfiguration* was undoubtedly his favorite. Performances of the work in San Francisco, Boston, and New York were truly staggering, the work's one true climax magnificently achieved.

Probably the work with which Monteux was most closely identified is the César Franck *Symphony*. So often was it requested of him, and so often did he program it, that in a letter dated 1 March 1949 he wrote to Rudolf Mengelberg, artistic director of the Concertgebouw Orchestra, "I will tell you frankly that I am tired to death of the César Franck *Symphony*." "Tired to death" he may have been, but the work remained central to his repertoire till the end of his days, and his recording of it with the Chicago Symphony remains a classic.

Having attended the work's world premiere in 1888, he was well aware of certain interpretive traditions surrounding it. He maintained that toward the end of the finale, where the themes of the first movement are recalled, the restated themes should be played as much as possible in their original tempos, even though no such indication appears in the score. Also in the finale, when the second movement's theme returns for the last time, *fortissimo*, the missing upbeat should be inserted into the trumpet part. (It is possible that Monteux himself was responsible for these "traditions," for they are rarely evident in performances by other conductors, including French ones.) The Franck *Symphony* is, of course, bread and butter to French orchestras, and the Orchestre National satisfies Monteux's requirements in every way.

In his later years Monteux came to resent being labeled "a French conductor" and being asked to program mostly French music. (His favorite composer was Brahms, followed by Wagner.) As he told Ross Parmenter of *The New York Times*, "...Debussy didn't exist when I was educated. Neither did Ravel. I was brought up on Haydn, Mozart, and a little Brahms. I have learned the French since. But I'm not a French conductor. I'm just a conductor." Yet his rapport with Debussy was very great. He said that Debussy had little patience for those who performed his music in an overly delicate and perfumed manner. Debussy rejected the term "impressionism" as applied to his music, and said, according to Monteux, "When I write *forte*, I want *forte*." In the three *Images* and *Jeux* Monteux takes the composer at his word, and achieves great transparency of textures without undue delicacy.

Jeux is another work of which Monteux conducted the world premiere for Diaghilev, two weeks before that of *The Rite of Spring*. A ballet ostensibly about tennis, but more subtly about human relationships, *Jeux* is considered by many to be one of Debussy's greatest works, and it is certainly his most difficult orchestral score. Monteux continued to perform it from time to time, though he never recorded it commercially, and it remains on the fringe of the repertoire. Today another Pierre (Boulez) is its most distinguished champion.

Two composers whose music one might think rarely performed in France, at least during the 1950's, are Elgar and Hindemith. In fact, one doesn't associate them with French conductors in general. But Monteux was different. His enormous repertoire encompassed music of all periods, schools, and nationalities. Elgar came relatively late to his repertoire, during his San Francisco years, but once there the *Enigma Variations* occupied an important place in it. His 1958 recording with the London Symphony is one of the great interpretations of that work, and while it may have been unfamiliar territory for the Orchestre National, their performance belies that possibility.

Two works of Hindemith figured prominently in Monteux's repertoire, the *Mathis der Maler Symphony* and *Nobilissima Visione*, a suite from the ballet *Saint Francis*. The latter was the last piece I heard Monteux conduct, concluding a concert with the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood in the summer of 1963. At that time of his life, his personal serenity seemed appropriate for evoking that of Saint Francis, and he certainly captured the majesty of the *Passacaglia*, as he does here.

Speaking of majesty, little in the repertoire can equal the ending of *The Pines of Rome* (except possibly the conclusion of *Pictures at an Exhibition*). Monteux chose *The Pines* to finish his New York Philharmonic winter season début concert in 1944, but it was not a work that turned up frequently on his programs (*The Fountains of Rome* was more of a favorite of his). Here he is very adept at capturing the score's shifting moods, and does not stint on the finale.

The one curiosity in the current collection, by present-day standards, is the Couperin-Milhaud *Overture and Allegro from La Sultane*. Thoroughly unfashionable today, this work was once frequently performed by such conductors, in addition to Monteux, as Dimitri Mitropoulos, Artur Rodzinski, Efrem Kurtz, and Vladimir Golschmann, who commissioned it. What we have is a twentieth-century French composer's treatment of a chamber work by a compatriot of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Even in the 1940's and 50's it was considered a bit overblown for its subject matter, but Monteux treats the score with respect and makes one regret its absence from today's concert programs.

Monteux usually enjoyed a good rapport with soloists with whom he collaborated. He felt that the soloist had spent quite some time perfecting his or her interpretation, and that the conductor, even if he disagreed, should accommodate himself to the soloist. After all, the conductor had a symphony or other major work on the program with which to make an impression. Not that the soloists included here caused him any difficulty. Robert Casadesus was an old friend with whom he often worked, and the Mozart *C minor Concerto* was a work of which he was a distinguished interpreter. Here he infuses the score with his typical elegance, especially in his simple, unaffected treatment of the piano's first statement. Monteux's skill as an accompanist is evident throughout, and he is quite successful in emphasizing the first movement's C minor storminess. While Casadesus normally played his own cadenzas in Mozart and Beethoven concertos, in the first movement he plays that of Saint-Saëns (abridged), which is notable for the way it leads impetuously into the orchestral *tutti*. It must be said, however, that for a work in which the woodwinds play such a prominent part, the nasal sound of the French players, the oboe especially, takes some getting used to.

Monteux could at times be a bit brusque in Mozart, and so he appears in the *A major Violin Concerto*, for all that the first movement is quite spirited and the Turkish section of the finale suitably energetic and menacing. However, cadences that could benefit from some tapering off of the sound are treated rather abruptly. Violinist Annie Jodry plays extremely well, apart from an occasional wiriness of tone.

For Ravel's *Shéhérazade* Monteux's favorite soloist was his niece Ginia Davis, whom he coached on the work and with whom he performed it in London and elsewhere. A live concert recording also exists with Victoria de los Angeles. Here soprano Germaine Moysan is an affecting soloist and Monteux is, as always, sensitive to the score's exoticisms.

Regrettably absent from today's operatic stages, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Le coq d'or* was conducted by Monteux to great acclaim in 1918 during his first season at the Metropolitan Opera. While the orchestral suite did not appear to be in his repertoire, the two excerpts heard here turned up occasionally on his concerts, and it is satisfying to note that in the Bridal Procession he gave the dramatic trombone passages their due, passages that are often less than declamatory in the hands of other conductors.

Belying the apparent simplicity of its title, Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony* is one of his most difficult scores. While Monteux's first movement is not so fleet as Koussevitzky's, neither is it as leaden as the tempo adopted by some other nameless conductors. The *Larghetto* is a true slow movement, as it was with Toscanini, and the finale zips along as quickly as one would want.

As for Wagner's *Overture to The Flying Dutchman* (The French title, *Le vaisseau fantôme*, does not include the word "Dutchman," or "flying," for that matter.), in spite of his aversion to being labeled "a French conductor," Monteux and his French orchestra succeed in lightening the textures to a degree not met by German conductors (a decided advantage in Wagner) without downplaying the music's turbulence.

To sum up, these are performances never intended for posterity, but posterity, in the form of us listeners, is definitely the beneficiary.

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This set is released with the kind cooperation of Nancie Monteux-Barendse and The Pierre Monteux School for Conductors and Orchestra Musicians. Information on the School follows:

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Pierre Monteux became an American citizen in 1942 and made his permanent residence in Hancock, Maine, the childhood home of his wife Doris Hodgkins Monteux (1894-1984). In 1943, Pierre and Doris Monteux founded a summer school for conductors and orchestra musicians in Hancock, inspired in part by Monteux's earlier conducting classes in France. Musicians came from all over the world to Hancock to study with their beloved "Maitre." Monteux once said: Conducting is not enough. I must create something. I am not a composer, so I will create fine young musicians.

A few years after Pierre Monteux's death, Doris Monteux named Charles Bruck (1911-1995) the second music director of the school. Monteux's pupil in Paris, Bruck had enjoyed a close friendship with Monteux through the years and was uniquely qualified to carry on the traditions of the school. He served as the school's music director and master teacher for over a quarter century, becoming one of the great conducting teachers of his generation.

In 1995, Charles Bruck's long-time student and associate Michael Jinbo was named the school's third music director. Jinbo's teaching, consistently praised by colleagues and students, continues the tradition established by Monteux and Bruck, and exemplifies the musical integrity and high standards of excellence of his distinguished predecessors.

The Pierre Monteux School continues to provide training and practical experience to enable conductors to competently handle any conducting situation, and to help instrumentalists meet the many demands of orchestral playing. It offers an unrivaled opportunity to learn a large and varied repertoire over the course of its six-week program. The school's international reputation attracts musicians from across the country and around the world. Over the course of its 62-year history, the school has trained thousands of conductors and instrumentalists. Among the school's distinguished alumni are conductors Lorin Maazel, André Previn, Sir Neville Marriner, David Zinman, Erich Kunzel, Leon Fleisher and Hugh Wolff, and musicians in orchestras throughout the world.

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