

Castro: Piano Concerto; Pieces;

Ponce: Concerto; Pieces

Jorge Federico Osorio; Minería Symphony/

Carlos Miguel Prieto--Cedille 221—75 min

The two piano concertos on this release are both by Mexican composers, of whom Ricardo Castro (1864-1907) is the lesser known. In fact, he has no entry in our index, and this was my first encounter with his music. Yet he occupies an important place in the history of Mexican music as the first composer to attract international attention and also the first to write a piano concerto. He was the soloist in its world premiere in Antwerp, Belgium, late in 1904, having already written a cello concerto, an opera, *Atzimba*, and many shorter pieces. He died suddenly at the height of his career.

His Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 22, is an attractive work requiring considerable virtuosity. It is in the European romantic tradition, with influences from the likes of Liszt and Scharwenka. There is little Mexican flavor, but the themes are pleasing. The most interesting movement is II, which follows I without pause. A sweet melody presented by the soloist with steady left-hand accompaniment later gives way to a turbulent central section that leads to a dramatic climax. Pianistic roudades relieve the tension, but there is another climax, almost Elgarian in its triumphalism, near the quiet end. In I lyrical orchestral passages alternate with pianistic brilliance, whereas III is a Polonaise with a rather insistent dotted rhythm, not like the typical Polish rhythm or two 16th notes following an 8th.

Manuel Ponce (1892-1948) is well known as a composer for the guitar, but his numerous piano pieces are no longer a secret, thanks in large part to the efforts of Mexican master pianist, Jorge Federico Osorio. The Piano Concerto No. 1, known as the "Romantic", was premiered in 1912 in Mexico City, with the composer as soloist. It is characteristic of Ponce's earlier, fully romantic style, which he partly abandoned later in life. (There is another, apparently unfinished concerto from that second period, which Gil French was not excited about; M/A 2015). Like Castro's concerto, it is very much in the European tradition: and here, too, II is the most engaging movement, where lyrical and virtuosic episodes alternate and lead to a grand cadenza. I and III are musically less compelling but impressive in their pianistic requirements.

The performances are excellent. Osorio has recorded the Ponce concerto previously with the State of Mexico Symphony under Enrique Batiz (ASV 926 and 952, J/F 1996+97), but the new reading is in better sound, and Osorio plays slower and more thoughtfully. The orchestra is not from an obscure town called Minería (as I thought at first) but a classy Mexico City band that performs summer concerts in the former school of Mining, the Minería. Prieto (b. 1965) is the most prominent Mexican conductor today and does a fine job.

In addition, Osorio performs several short pieces by both composers. Some of them he has also recorded previously. They are: 'Berceuse', Op. 36:1, 'Canto de amor', and 'Plainte', Op. 38:2 by Castro; and 'Arrulladora Mexicana', 'Gavota', 'Romanza de amor', and Intermezzo No. 1 by Ponce. They are all lovely, and Osorio plays them to perfection. Perfection, while perpetually out of performers' reach in long and complex compositions, can actually be achieved in such miniatures, but it still requires exceptional artistry, which Osorio has. Reviewers of his previous recordings of Ponce's pieces, including Alexander Morin (S/O 1994), Jack Sullivan (M/A 1999), and Margaret Barela (M/A 2006), were of the same opinion. This is a beautiful recording, guaranteed to give much pleasure.

Bruno Repp

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