



MIRRORS

LE COCQ: *Suite in C minor*. LOSY: *Partita XIII in C minor*. FICHTEL: *Partie XXXVII in E major*. HAGEN: *Sonata in D minor*. J.S. BACH: *Adagio and Fuga from Sonata BWV 1001*. GIULIANI: *Sonatina in D major Op.71 No.3*. TÁRREGA: *Maria (gavota)*; *Adelita (mazurka)*; *Marieta (mazurka)*; *Mazurka en sol*; *Capricho Arabe*; *Rosita (polka)*. PAGANINI: *Allegro Risoluto*; *Capriccio XXI*; *Romanza*; *Capriccio XIV*; *Capriccio IX*.

Carlo Ambrosio

Wonderland WR 9038 (2 CDs)

In January 2009, the Manchester Guitar Circle received an unsolicited and scrupulously polite email from one Carlo Ambrosio. He was asking for a gig, which is fair enough, but the MGC's reply had to be in the negative on the grounds that none of the membership had personally witnessed the man in action. More interestingly, those of us who recognised the name had no recollection of hearing it uttered in many a long year.

The explanation lies in the booklet to this 2006 release, in which Ambrosio devotes an agonising seven columns of small print to explaining the whys and wherefores of his decision to take a 15 year

career break. Now it's well established that, when it comes to rambling introspection and tragicomic self-pity, the acting profession are undisputed world leaders. Robert Wagner's newly-minted tome, in which he agonises over the mysterious death more than two decades ago of his infinitely more successful wife, promises to be an absolute corker. But it has to be said that Ambrosio, writing from the standpoint of a mere musician, makes a pretty decent fist of things in recalling his first public performance after the prolonged period of self-imposed exile:

'I felt a sense of suffocation, together with a physical lightness, which gave me the metaphysical impression of flying. After a very long, very slow breath, with eyes closed, my fingers began to move and the notes started to break free...'

Believe me, there's much more where that came from, including a number of references to the fact that Ambrosio now grows his own vegetables. At first, this sounds like it might be some high-flown metaphor, but in the end turns out to be a straightforward literal statement. And yes, work on the present recording really was stopped in its tracks by an unfortunate gardening accident. It's all documented here, including the exact date on which the catastrophe took place.

But despite this *Diary of a Nobody* approach to the writing of programme notes, the playing throughout this two hour innings is terrific. Performing most of the agenda on a Juan Maria Garcia guitar dated 1849, Ambrosio generates a soundscape that maintains a near-perfect balance between the seemingly incompatible qualities of warmth and clarity. The latter is particularly prominent on the first disc, subtitled *Baroque Guitar*, in which Ambrosio on several occasions adopts what he terms 'terzina guitar tuning' (i.e. a minor third above standard). This presumably also explains the double appearance of the rarely explored key of C minor.

Throughout the fleeting dance movements of Le Cocq and Losy, Ambrosio's lightness of touch is enhanced by the occasional introduction of modest and uncluttered levels of ornamentation, including some fluid single-string trills. It is tentatively claimed that all the four items preceding the Bach are previously unrecorded on classical

guitar, although Ambrosio wisely issues a disclaimer that '...if this isn't so, I beg your pardon, although this won't disturb my dreams'. OK, we get the idea.

But the strongest playing of all is on the second disc, in which Giuliani, Paganini and Tárrega are treated to that potent old-style mix of brash virtuosity and flowery lyricism that we experience all too rarely in these undemonstrative times. Some hidden treasure is even found in *Maria*, a piece that I have for many years dismissed as Tárrega at his most corny. But by spreading it over a leisurely 3'08", Ambrosio successfully replaces all that irritating jauntiness with a compelling representation of the charming salon miniature that was always lurking within. This approach maybe sits a little uneasily alongside the subtitle of *gavota*, but then *Maria* performed at any tempo no more resembles a baroque *gavotte* than Mickey Mouse resembles a mouse.

And so to the Paganini, which must surely be seen as Ambrosio's finest hour. Transferring the *Capriccios* to guitar may no longer be considered the Olympian achievement it once was, although the three presented here emerge as particularly engaging examples. But what really wins the day is Ambrosio's triumphant account of the *Allegro Risoluto* from *Grand Sonata in A*. OK, it's been done a zillion times before, but this version really flies, possibly to a greater height than any other recording I currently own. And if you're wondering why only two movements from the *Grand Sonata* are presented, Ambrosio inevitably takes several paragraphs to explain why he doesn't think the final *Andantino Variato* quite matches up to what has gone before. Perhaps he's got a point.

A remarkable release in any man's language, but please don't let Ambrosio's epic proclamations interfere with the music, or *vice versa*.

Paul Fowles