

NAXOS

Luís de
FREITAS BRANCO

Symphony No. 4

Vathek

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

Álvaro Cassuto



Luís de Freitas Branco (1890-1955)

Symphony No. 4 • Vathek

Luís de Freitas Branco, the most important Portuguese musician of the first half of the twentieth century, was both a great composer and an important teacher. His creative output is symbolically represented on this recording by his last symphony and one of his early and most revolutionary works, the symphonic poem *Vathek*. His legacy will be represented in future recordings by the works of his most outstanding disciples.

Symphony No. 4, composed between 1944 and 1952, and scored for four flutes, two of them doubling piccolo, two oboes, cor anglais, two clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, contrabass tuba, timpani, percussion and strings, represents the culmination of his symphonic vision of monumentality in music, a kind of neo-classic late Romantic stylistic approach, following the four-movement tradition to which he had remained faithful since his *Second Symphony*, composed in the 1920s.

Dedicated to his disciple Joly Braga Santos, the *Fourth Symphony* is based, like the *Second*, on Gregorian chant. Used as a means to unify much of the thematic material which appears in the work, it also establishes, right from the start, a mood which prepares the listener for the chorale-like passages which constitute big climaxes in the first and last movements. Suffice it to say, there is no question that this work is the most creative, appealing, and accomplished of Freitas Branco's four symphonies.

The first movement opens with a *Kyrie* played by the woodwind and punctuated by open fifths in the strings. The following *Allegro*, starting in the strings in the low register, builds up to a climax where the strings play the theme, punctuated by harsh and ominous chords from all the woodwind, brass and percussion. This movement follows the traditional ABA form, in which A has three clearly identifiable sections. B (the development section) starts with a four horn call in unison, answered by all strings in triplets, and after a climax of highly dissonant syncopated chords from the

whole orchestra, the second A section (the recapitulation), reappears in the low strings. This very basic analysis does not, however, do justice at all to the high quality of the music, its contrasts, its rich orchestration and, above all, the vitality and interior conviction which pervade this movement and the remaining three.

The second movement is based on a kind of *moto perpetuo* which starts in the lower strings in 2/4 rhythm against the 3/4 metre of each bar. The main theme is an innocuous, unpretentious, and innocent phrase played by a solo bassoon, which, after a variety of adventures in different musical regions, constitutes the climax of the movement. This is succeeded by an ascending sequence of chords, supported by steady, softly repeated quarter notes played on the timpani, starting in the low register and building up to a majestic conclusion.

The third movement is the shortest of all four, and also the most concise. It starts with an outburst of sound, one bar followed by a sustained chord, which reappears at the end, although without the sustained chord. It is actually an excerpt of the main climax of the A part of this ABA *Scherzo*.

After this outburst the music starts in a faster tempo, quietly, almost a reminiscence of the *Scherzo* of Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony*. The main part of the *Scherzo* leads directly into the B section, the *Trio*, a typical *fandango* rhythm and melody of the countryside where the composer owned an estate and composed the two folk-inspired *Alentejo Suites* more than twenty years earlier. The *Scherzo* is then repeated, ending as abruptly as it started.

The *Finale* has a short majestic introduction based on a 5/4 thematic fragment which had already appeared in the *Scherzo*. The music proceeds at a steady slow march tempo, leading directly into the *Allegro*, an idyllic melodic line where the cellos are in dialogue with the flute, under and over a tremolo in the higher strings. Again, as in the first movement, there is an enormous

wealth of different sections, especially some in which the melody (or what could be called a melody) is placed in the cellos and basses, doubled by the lower woodwind and brass, punctuated by accompanying chords from the rest of the orchestra in the high register. Before the recapitulation, the slow introduction reappears and the movement ends with majestic chorale-like sections in the woodwind and brass, and also in the full orchestra. When the work ends, it leaves us with a distinct need to hear it again, to try to understand the musical journey in which we have been carried along, since the, by now, distant, and almost forgotten, opening *Kyrie*.

Vathek, the full subtitle of which is *Symphonic Poem in the form of variations on an Oriental theme*, is a most important, revolutionary work which, although composed in 1913, was not performed until 1950, and even then without its *Third Variation*, which was played for the first time in my first concert in Lisbon, in 1961.

Those who are familiar with the kind of music which was produced in Portugal during the first decades of the twentieth century, can well understand that a work such as *Vathek* would have met with utter repulsion. And why, after all? Because of the polytonal introductory brass fanfare? Because of the twelve-tone chords (built of superimposed fourths in the strings) in the middle and at the end of the *Prologue*? These dissonances, never heard before, and never heard again until the avant-garde of the 1960s, are yet minor details compared with the *Third Variation*, which offered something unheard of in all European music in 1913, when it was written. It is a *fugato* in 5/9 "voices", starting with eight solo cellos, followed by eight violas, sixteen second violins, sixteen first violins and, finally a variety of solo woodwind, leading to a slow, majestic, restatement of the main motif in the lower brass, interrupted by two bars of silence. This sudden silence is followed by an outburst of "laughter" from the whole orchestra, as if the composer expressed his "amusement" about the utter disbelief of the audience.

Vathek is scored for four flutes, two doubling piccolo, two oboes, cor anglais, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, double bassoon, four horns, four

trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, five percussion, two harps, two celestas and strings, and is based on the novel, written in French by William Beckford (1760-1844), "the wealthiest son of England", according to Lord Byron. It became more widely known through a new edition with a preface by Mallarmé published in 1876. The following is based on the synopsis which Freitas Branco wrote at the beginning of his manuscript score:

"Vathek, a Caliph whose magnificence exceeded that of all of his predecessors, dissatisfied by the Palace built by his father in the city of Samarah, added to it five other palaces, each one of which was destined to satisfy each of the human senses.

The first was dedicated to the sense of "taste", and the tables were always covered by the most delicate kinds of food. The palace was called the "Eternal Feast".

The second palace, the "Temple of the Melody", was inhabited by the best musicians and poets of his time, who performed without ceasing.

The third palace, called "Delight of the Eyes" was dedicated to the most rare paintings and statues, collected from all over the World.

The fourth palace, or "Palace of the Perfumes", was filled with aromatic lamps which were lit all day, even during sunlight.

The fifth palace, or "Refuge of Happiness", was filled with maidens, beautiful and kind, who never faltered in providing well-being for the Caliph's guests".

There is a festive introduction, followed by the *Theme* (bassoon solo), representing the Caliph. The *Prologue* precedes the five *Variations*, each one of which represents one of the five palaces, and the *Epilogue* is the composer's final musical comment.

Álvaro Cassuto

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra



Seóirse Bodley and Deirdre Gribbin. Highlights of recent seasons have included Ireland's first complete Mahler symphony cycle, as well as complete cycles of Shostakovich, Bruckner, Prokofiev, Beethoven and Schumann symphonies, a Brahmsfest, a Stravinsky retrospective and the orchestral song-cycles of Mahler. In September 2010 a new artistic team began with Alan Buribayev as Principal Conductor, Hannu Lintu as Principal Guest Conductor, and the Dublin pianist, Finhin Collins, as Associate Artist. Full details of all upcoming RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra concerts are available on www.rte.ie/performinggroups/nationalsymphonyorchestra

The RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra plays a central rôle in classical music in Ireland, through live performance, broadcast and touring. Previous international tours have visited Britain, France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Austria, Hong Kong and the United States. As an integral part of RTÉ (Ireland's Public Service Broadcaster), the orchestra reaches a great number of listeners through its weekly broadcasts on RTÉ lyric fm and through its association with the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). In addition to its annual subscription season, *Horizons* contemporary music series, summer concerts series, residencies and national tours, the orchestra continues to make a name for itself internationally through its recordings with Naxos, Marco Polo and on the RTÉ label. In 2004 the RTÉ NSO won the *Orchestra and Concerto: CD Première* category of the Critics' Awards in the 2004 Cannes Classical Awards for its recording of Joly Braga Santos's *Symphony No. 4* (Marco Polo 8.225233) under conductor Álvaro Cassuto. In 2005, Gerald Barry's opera *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* was released on the RTÉ label to considerable acclaim. This has been followed by recordings of works of Raymond Deane,

Alvaro Cassuto



Alvaro Cassuto is Portugal's foremost conductor. He has been Music Director of the Portuguese National Radio Symphony Orchestra, the University of California Symphony Orchestra, the Rhode Island Philharmonic, the National Orchestra of New York, the Nova Filarmonia Portuguesa, the Portuguese Symphony Orchestra, the Israel Raanana Symphony Orchestra, the Algarve Orchestra, and the Lisbon Metropolitan Orchestra. Born in Porto, he studied in Lisbon, and after establishing himself as one of the most promising young composers of the avant-garde of the early 1960s, he went on to study conducting with Herbert van Karajan in Berlin. After graduating in Law from the University of Lisbon in 1964, he obtained his conducting degree in Vienna. A recipient of the Koussevitzky Prize among many other honours, he has enjoyed a career of high international acclaim. He has been a frequent guest of many leading orchestras, including the London Symphony, the Royal Philharmonic, the London Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and dozens of others across the world. In 2009, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his career, the President of Portugal bestowed on him the degree of Grand Officer of the Military Order of Sant'Iago da Espada. He has an extensive discography with a variety of orchestras and for different labels, among which a highly successful ongoing series for Naxos, dedicated to some of Portugal's most important composers.

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This fourth volume in Naxos's critically acclaimed series of Portuguese composer Luís de Freitas Branco's orchestral music juxtaposes his magnificent *Symphonic Poem in the form of variations on an Oriental Theme*, *Vathek*, with his final symphony, an appealing masterpiece that combines Neo-classical stylishness with late Romantic richness. Álvaro Cassuto, Portugal's finest living conductor and an authority on the classical music of his country, is an ideal interpreter of this eminently satisfying yet unaccountably neglected repertoire.

RTÉ

Luís de
FREITAS BRANCO
(1890-1955)

Orchestral Works • 4

Symphony No. 4 (1944-52)

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|----------|----------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | I. Andante | 42:20 |
| 2 | II. Adagio | 11:39 |
| 3 | III. Allegro vivace | 10:22 |
| 4 | IV. Allegro | 4:04 |
| | | 16:15 |

**Vathek – Symphonic Poem
in the form of variations on
an Oriental Theme (1913)**

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| 5 | I. Introduction | 34:03 |
| 6 | II. Theme | 2:46 |
| 7 | III. Prologue | 1:19 |
| 8 | IV. Variation I: Festin éternel | 3:13 |
| 9 | V. Variation II: Temple de la Mélodie | 2:55 |
| 10 | VI. Variation III: Délices des Yeux | 5:02 |
| 11 | VII. Variation IV: Palais des Parfums | 2:00 |
| 12 | VIII. Variation V: Réduit de la Joie | 5:57 |
| 13 | IX. Epilogue | 4:19 |
| | | 6:31 |

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra • Álvaro Cassuto

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