

Hector Berlioz: *Symphonie Fantastique*, Op.14, Paris Conservatoire Orchestra, Ataulfo Argenta, conductor, Decca SXL 2009 (Speakers Corner LP reissue)



The Decca LP, dating from 1958, is one of a handful of souvenirs of Ataulfo Argenta's tragically truncated career—recordings indicating considerable unrealized interpretive potential. When I first heard them, I found them of passing interest at best, partly because of the boxy-sounding London Stereo Treasury LPs. As expected, Speakers Corner's immaculate processing markedly improves things—even the soft opening has remarkable presence when heard against an utterly silent background. The LP soundstage is deeper than that of RCA's CD; high woodwinds, though less polished than Boston's, sound liquid and transparent, while trombones and tuba cut through with considerable punch. The low strings, though not especially "buzzy," are clean and focused—you can actually make out most of their pitches in the Finale for a change. But the overall sonority never quite coalesces; in this relatively dry acoustic, the instrumental strands remain separated.

Argenta's interpretation, predictably, is more conservative than Munch's. He favors steady tempi—minimizing even the indicated *ritards* in the waltz—allowing the music to build at its own pace: The slow movement conjures a spacious serenity, and the Finale's fugue, steadier than Munch's, is ultimately just as exciting. Where he does push forward, as with the long oboe solo in the first movement, the effect is graceful and natural. Rhythmic and textural detail receive careful attention: Long and short pickups in the first movement are differently weighted, while the Finale's contrapuntal dialogue is unusually clear. Oddly, Argenta takes the rarely encountered repeat in the *March*, but skips the printed one in the opening.

The orchestra isn't particularly good—the violins are thin and papery, and the horns have that old-fashioned French watery vibrato—but at least they're responsive and characterful. What should have represented a promissory note on things to come instead stands, sadly, as a memorial.

—Stephen Vasta