

NAXOS

Luís de
FREITAS BRANCO

Symphony No. 1

Scherzo Fantastique • Suite Alentejana No. 1

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

Álvaro Cassuto



Luís de Freitas Branco (1890-1955)

Symphony No. 1 • Scherzo Fantastique • Suite Alentejana No. 1

Luís de Freitas Branco was born in Lisbon in 1890 where he lived most of the time until his death in 1955. He was a preeminent figure in Portuguese music of the first half of the twentieth century, and his four symphonies constitute the essence as well as the culmination of his musical development.

Born into an aristocratic family with ties to the royal family for many centuries, Luís de Freitas Branco enjoyed a highly sophisticated education, which included studies both in Berlin and then in Paris, where he worked with composers including Engelbert Humperdinck and Désiré Pâque. He started composing at a very early stage, as reflected in his *Scherzo Fantastique*, written in 1907 at the age of seventeen, one year before the homonymous work by Igor Stravinsky, which dates from 1908. He was active also as a leading force in the restructuring of musical education at the Lisbon Conservatory of Music, of which he became the deputy director under the leadership of José Vianna da Motta, a celebrated pianist who was one of Franz Liszt's more distinguished students. Freitas Branco also played a significant rôle as a musicologist, having been active in research into the rich legacy of Portuguese polyphonic composers of the seventeenth century and publishing a book about the works of King John IV of Portugal, himself a distinguished composer and promoter of new music of his time.

As far as Freitas Branco's legacy as an orchestral composer is concerned, it must be pointed out that when he entered the Portuguese music scene at the beginning of the century, no permanent orchestra existed in Lisbon apart from that of the São Carlos Royal Opera, which did not perform symphonies but played operatic repertoire, mainly Italian, and sometimes German and French. Indeed, after João Domingos Bomtempo (1771-1842), who composed various symphonies, only Vianna da Motta (1868-1948) wrote a symphony, published in Rio de Janeiro in 1899. This said, it means that when Freitas Branco composed his first symphony in 1924, he

was profoundly aware that he was treading on new territory in Portugal.

His musical development began with the influence of French late Romantic composers and some of the Impressionists such as Debussy. Yet, aware of the importance of introducing into Portuguese music large scale works such as symphonies for large orchestra, he clearly opted for a neo-classical style of his own, based on thematic development as he found it in the music of the so-called cyclic school of the Belgian composer César Franck. Needless to say Freitas Branco's *First Symphony* reflects César Franck's *Symphony in D minor* in many ways: not only are there stylistic influences but also formal ones: indeed, like Franck's symphony, Freitas Branco's first symphony has only three movements, a deviation from the German tradition of the four-movement form.

Freitas Branco's musical legacy does not only include his rich and varied body of work, but also his activity as a teacher and mentor. Suffice to say that he taught many Portuguese composers of the younger generation, including Joly Braga Santos (1924-88), most of whose orchestral works are already available on the Marco Polo label with a variety of orchestras conducted by the same conductor as this first CD of a series of four, dedicated to the symphonies and other orchestral works of Luís de Freitas Branco.

The opening movement of *Symphony No. 1* (1924) starts with a slow introduction which reappears at the beginning of the reexposition of its main allegro section. The introductory theme is based on two ideas, one presented in the low register (cellos and basses and low woodwind players), and another one in the violins equally doubled by woodwind. These two ideas constitute the building blocks of the whole work, mainly of its outer two movements, the initial *Allegro* and the *Finale*. The slow *alla breve* introduction leads after a build-up to the main *Allegro* section in a fast 3/4 metre, the first theme of which is presented by the violins

doubled by woodwind. The second theme of this sonata-form movement has a kind of *scherzando* character, and somehow justifies the absence of a formal third movement, a *scherzo*, as would be the case in a four-movement symphony. The second movement of the symphony is rich in lyricism and warm orchestral colours. A homophonic introduction by the brass precedes the main theme played by the cor anglais and accompanied by soft sustained chords in the strings. After its development, a fast middle section in 2/4 metre appears, constituting a contrasting centrepiece to the generally slow tempo of the movement. The final *Allegro molto vivace* is again in an *alla breve* rhythm, and there are clearly two themes. The first alternates between low and high registers, while the second one is mainly entrusted to the high register in the strings doubled by the wind. Both the exposition and the recapitulation lead to a slower third section, which again builds up from the bottom register to a full-blown orchestral canon. The finale ends with a coda built on its initial theme bringing the symphony to a brilliant and grandiose ending. The symphony is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, cor anglais, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings.

The *Scherzo Fantastique* is a short single movement work which alternates between two sections, both in 3/4 metre, the first very fast and the second a shade slower. It is a most delicate work, a kind of orchestral filigree, brilliantly orchestrated yet extremely controlled in using the orchestral forces. One could easily consider it a piece for chamber orchestra, were it not for the fact that it uses a full orchestra, yet without brass. The musical ideas are short and incisive, and its dynamics range from triple pianissimo to triple fortissimo, rushing from one

into the other. It is scored for piccolo, pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, timpani, harp, four percussionists and strings.

The two orchestral suites which Freitas Branco composed on themes inspired by the folklore of the Alentejo, a region south of Lisbon and bordering the southern coastline province, the Algarve, are the result of his ownership of an estate in that region, where he spent many of his summers. Both suites are based on the rich musical folklore of the region.

The first movement of *Suite Alentejana No. 1* (1917) is in ABA form, the outer sections presenting the musical themes (shepherd songs) in the woodwind, surrounded by sustained pianissimo chords in the strings. The second movement is slightly faster, growing from a slow introduction and its main section is in 6/8 rhythm, similar to a *berceuse* or lullaby. Again it follows the ABA form with an animated middle section for full orchestra. The third movement is a *Fandango*, a popular dance both of the Alentejo as of the neighbouring Spanish Andalusia. Again the ABA formula is respected with two robust and energetic outer sections, and a reflective middle section whose theme is presented by the cor anglais and repeated by the horns and by the full orchestra. It ends with a coda based on the initial four-bar introduction of the movement. It may be noted that this *Fandango* is the most often played, and the most popular movement of the whole Portuguese orchestral repertoire.

The work is scored for piccolo, pairs of flutes and oboes, cor anglais, pairs of clarinets, bass clarinet, bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, five percussionists and strings.

Álvaro Cassuto

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

Principal Conductor: Gerhard Markson



Photo: Neil Warner

of recent seasons have included Ireland's first complete Shostakovich, Bruckner, Prokofiev, Beethoven and Schumann symphonies, a Brahmsfest, a Stravinsky retrospective, and the orchestral song-cycles of Mahler. 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. 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, national tours and residencies and summer concerts series, 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* (8.225233) under conductor Álvaro Cassuto. Highlights

Álvaro Cassuto



Álvaro Cassuto is Portugal's foremost conductor. He has been Music Director of the Portuguese National Radio Symphony Orchestra, the University of California Symphony Orchestra at Irvine, 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 of the Lisbon Metropolitan Orchestra. Born in Porto, he studied in Lisbon and later in Berlin with Herbert von Karajan, and obtained his conducting degree in Vienna. A recipient of the Koussevitzky Prize among many other honours, his career has met with high international acclaim. He has been a frequent guest of many leading orchestras, including the London Symphony, the Royal Philharmonic, the London Philharmonic, and dozens of others across the world. He has an extensive discography with a variety of orchestras and for different labels, among which a highly successful series for Naxos and Marco Polo, dedicated to some of Portugal's most important composers.

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Luís de Freitas Branco was a pre-eminent figure in Portuguese music of the first half of the twentieth century. This first disc of a four-volume series of Freitas Branco's orchestral works features the *First Symphony*, in which the influence of César Franck, Brahms and French musical impressionism is assimilated into his own musical style. The *Scherzo Fantastique* is a short single movement work, brilliantly orchestrated yet extremely controlled in its use of the orchestral forces. The *Suite Alentejana No. 1* is based on the rich musical folklore of the Alentejo, a region of Portugal south of Lisbon where Freitas Branco spent many of his summers.



Luís de
FREITAS BRANCO
(1890-1955)
Orchestral Works • 1

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|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| Symphony No. 1 (1924) | 34:02 |
| 1 I. Adagio – Allegro molto | 12:49 |
| 2 II. Andante | 11:52 |
| 3 III. Allegro molto vivace | 9:20 |
| 4 Scherzo Fantastique (1907)* | 5:52 |
| Suite Alentejana No. 1 (1917) | 21:15 |
| 5 I. Prelude: Allegretto | 7:42 |
| 6 II. Intermezzo: Adagio – Andantino | 5:10 |
| 7 III. Finale: Allegro | 8:24 |

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Please see inside booklet for full details

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