

About this Recording

[8.579002](#) - CASABLANCAS, B.: Dark Backward of Time (The) / 3 Epigrams / Postlude / Love Poem
(Barcelona Symphony and Catalonia National Orchestra, Mas-Conde)

[English](#) [Spanish](#)

Benet Casablanças (b.1956): The Dark Backward of Time • Three Epigrams • Postlude Love Poem • Intrada sobre el nombre de DALÍ

The expressive power, rigour, meticulous virtuosity and the refinement of a musical language that faithfully combines the traditional and the avant-garde have made the Catalan composer, musicologist and pedagogue Benet Casablanças one of the most widely recognised Spanish musicians internationally. His works have been played recently at the legendary Musikverein of Vienna, the Barbican Hall in London and the Miller Theatre of New York, among other venues. These compositions include, particularly, his *Seven Scenes from Hamlet*, born of his admiration for the plays and poetry of William Shakespeare, a work that has been performed more than thirty times since its première in 1989, his string quartets, which the famous Arditti Quartet has performed at numerous festivals, the celebrated series of *Epigrams*, programmed all over the world, and *Alter Klang, Impromptu for orchestra* (2007), based on a painting by Klee, which Josep Pons has conducted in Holland, Sweden and Belgium. Casablanças has never yielded in matters of musical rigour and technical demands, and while he realises that contemporary music is a pleasure for small minorities, he has attained a freedom and independence as a composer that enables him, through an increasingly more refined language, to convey emotions and move his audience without resorting to theatricality or making concessions.

Trained in Barcelona and Vienna, where he worked with Friedrich Cerha, and a graduate in philosophy from the Autonomous University of Barcelona, with a doctorate in Musicology from the same university, Benet Casablanças in 2002 became director of the Higher Conservatory of Music of the Liceu of Barcelona. He has the determination and stamina of a long-distance runner who, contrary to current fashions, lives music as a cultural expression and as witness of his time, in connection with the arts, literature, theatre or philosophy. And this solid and humanistic musical training, bound to an untiring cultural curiosity and concern, has helped to forge a personal style and language. “Style is merely the assertion of the personality”, says the composer, who venerates the legacy of the Second Viennese School, a basic reference-point at the outset of his career, loves the vitality and imagination of Igor Stravinsky and shuns eclecticism, asserting the roots of his musical discourse in the love and knowledge of the great classical tradition and the landmarks of modernity, from Berio to Dutilleux, Boulez to Ligeti. “I like the idea of contemporary classicism, which means never losing sight of one’s musical heritage, knowing where we come from in order to keep advancing, following our own voice”.

His constant search for new harmonic textures and colours has resulted in admirable achievements in instrumental and chamber music; *Three pieces for piano* (1986), *Scherzo for piano* (2000) (Jordi Masó and Miquel Villalba have recorded his piano music for Naxos), or the fascinating sounds of his *Petita Música Nocturna (Little Night Music)* (1992) for flute, clarinet, percussion, harp and piano, are eloquent examples of a significant evolution in his language towards soundscapes with the utmost expressiveness and a greater sense of drama, illuminated by instrumental writing of great virtuosity and a mastery of a wide variety of technical and expressive techniques of the classic avant-garde of the twentieth century, with special attention to harmony, a concern he shares with composers of his generation such as Benjamin, Knussen and Lindberg.

The serene creative maturity of Casablanças and his expressive intensity are shown in the piece that gives the present recording its title, *The Dark Backward of Time*, commissioned by the Barcelona Symphony and Catalonia National Orchestra (OBC), which had its première in January 2006, conducted by Ernest Martínez Izquierdo. The score, another tribute to Shakespeare, bears the enigmatic title: “What seest thou else / In the dark backward and abysm of time?”, which Shakespeare has Prospero utter at the beginning of *The Tempest*. “There is a link between these words and the main section of the work’s three sections, where tranquillity and mystery seek to create the illusion that time has stopped. Shakespeare is a constant reference in my work, but in this case, and unlike the theatrical atmosphere of the *Seven Scenes from Hamlet*, it is abstract music, with a purely symphonic discourse. I use the resources of a large orchestra to create maximum tension, with vast and expansive sound, but the heart of the score exudes tranquillity, in an intimate climate of transparent sound and chamber refinement”.

Conceived in a single movement of wide dimensions, both in the ambitious use of myriad compositional resources and in its communicative power this work heralds a significant advance in the development of Casablanças’ symphonic language. Powerful contrasts drive a work charged with genuine expressiveness that is split into three sections, with a central part of fascinating contemplative tranquillity between two extreme parts of intense strength. Prospero’s mystery-laden words are musically mirrored in a static dimension where time seems to stand still; the harmonic movement becomes slower, sounds become stranger and the wind instrument solos seem to float over a soundscape of suspended rhythms. Stopping the inexorable passage of time is the eternal dream which this time incorporates a significant self-reference when the composer introduces, with the oboe, a reference to one of his first masterpieces, *Two pieces for piano*, written in 1978. As in all mature works, the virtuosity of the orchestral score generates powerful tensions and contrasts, as borne out by the extreme parts of the composition through the deep sonorities and luminosity of the wind passages. Contrasts with the more lyrical and intense moments never impair the solidness and fluidity of a narrative pulse that reaches a climax in a powerful brass chorale which precedes the serene and evocative climate of the final epilogue.

In the evolution of the style of Casablanças, special mention should be made of the collection of *Epigrams*, consisting of some of his best-known scores, which share a name, even though they cover different instruments: *Epigrams*, for six performers, *Three Epigrams*, for symphony orchestra, *Seven Epigrams*, for piano and the *New Epigrams*, for a chamber orchestra consisting of eleven musicians, written for the London Sinfonietta in 1997. The term epigram refers to a literary form of classical origin, a pointed and clever sentence, which very often has a moral or ethical purpose, as well as one of entertainment and amusement. The composer makes excellent use of a term that describes a type of music that seeks to concentrate as much content as possible into very concise time structures. The underpinning traits of the series include a sense of contrast, both in tempo and in atmosphere, a progressive mastery of the differentiation of the harmonic material, a wealth and refinement of the pitch textures and the composition’s high level of demand upon the instruments. This whole process of refinement and synthesis culminates in the absolute mastery of the resources of the orchestra which confer major power of expression upon the *Three Epigrams* (2001), first performed, to great acclaim from audiences and critics alike, by the OBC conducted by Salvador Mas-Conde.

Two works enable us to delve further into the evolution of the style of Casablanças. *Postlude*, from 1991, brings a period marked by discursive breadth and polyphonic density to a close, already hinting at the greater formal and harmonic refinement of subsequent work. A piece with a text by the Catalan poet Miquel Martí i Pol, *Poema d’amor (Love Poem)*, takes us back to the composer’s first creative period, in 1981, a formative epoch when, in

addition to its excellent writing, it already surprises us by its expressive ambition, with a very personal lyricism. Including them in a programme where mature works predominate allows us to grasp one of the constants that have defined the music of Casablancas throughout his creative life: his search for structural rigour and self-discipline to an unusually high level of quality.

The last work included, *Intrada on the name of DALÍ* (Variations on three notes) was written in 2006 for a commission by the Fundació Gala-Dal í in commemoration of the artist's centennial, and had its première on 8th May of the same year in the Teatre Jardí de Figueres with the OBC, conducted by Antoni Ros Marbà. The work focuses totally and strictly on the notes D, A and B (I) which in Spanish form the surname of Salvador Dalí. Casablancas goes beyond a simple and solemn homage, thus achieving a formal and extremely concise design and potent expression which once again fit firmly into a set of vibrant contrasts between the exultant fanfares that frame lyrical passages and a central *scherzando fugato* of exquisite refinement.

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