

THE FRENCH PIANO SCHOOL

ROBERT  
CASADESUS

*The complete  
French Columbia  
recordings*

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# ROBERT CASADESUS

## *The complete French Columbia recordings 1928–1939*

including the first release of the 1931 Mozart ‘Coronation’ Concerto

COMPACT DISC 1

(78.15)

### SCARLATTI **11 Sonatas**

1. Sonata in D major, Kk430 (L463) ..... (1.51)
2. Sonata in A major, Kk533 (L395) ..... (2.23)
3. Sonata in D major, Kk23 (L411) ..... (2.29)
4. Sonata in B minor, Kk377 (L263) ..... (1.17)
5. Sonata in D major, Kk96 (L465) ..... (4.10)
6. Sonata in D minor, Kk9 (L413) ..... (1.36)
7. Sonata in G major, Kk125 (L487) ..... (2.00)
8. Sonata in B minor, Kk27 (L449) ..... (1.54)
9. Sonata in G major, Kk14 (L387) ..... (1.53)
10. Sonata in E minor, Kk198 (L22) ..... (2.10)
11. Sonata in G major, Kk13 (L486) ..... (1.58)

Recorded on 15 June 1937; matrices CLX 1952-1<sup>Tracks 1,2</sup>, 1953-3<sup>3,4</sup>, 1954-1<sup>5</sup>, 1955-3<sup>6,7</sup>, 1956-3<sup>8,9</sup>, 1957-3<sup>10,11</sup> (LFX514/6)

### MOZART **Piano Concerto No 24 in C minor K491**

with EUGÈNE BIGOT / ORCHESTRE SYMPHONIQUE DE PARIS

12. Allegro (cadenza: Saint-Saëns) ..... (12.57)
13. Larghetto ..... (8.14)
14. Allegretto ..... (8.49)

Recorded on 20/21 December 1937; matrices CLX 2026-1, 2027-1, 2028-1, 2024-2, 2025-1, 2029-1, 2030-2 (LFX543/6)

### MOZART **Piano Concerto No 26 in D major ‘Coronation’ K537**

with WALTHER STRARAM / ORCHESTRE DES CONCERTS STRARAM

15. Allegro (cadenza: Mozart, originally for the Piano Concerto in D major, K451) ..... (13.25)
16. Larghetto (bars 72 – end) ..... (2.12)
17. Allegretto ..... (8.55)

Recorded on 25/26 March 1931; matrices WLX 1515-1, 1516-1, 1517-1, 1518-1, 1512-1, 1513-1, 1514-1  
(previously unissued; matrix WLX 1511 missing)

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1. **MOZART Rondo in D major** K485 ..... (4.12)  
 Recorded on 8 December 1937; matrix CLX2023-1 (LFX 546)
- BEETHOVEN Sonata No 26 in E flat major 'Les adieux'** Op 81a
2. Das Lebewohl: Adagio – Allegro ..... (5.05)
3. Abwesenheit: Andante espressivo ..... (3.07)
4. Das Wiedersehen: Vivacissimamente ..... (4.05)  
 Recorded on 4 January 1932; matrices WL 3416-1, 3417-1, 3418-1, 3419-1 (LF97/8)
- SCHUBERT Sonata in A major** Op 120, D664
5. Allegro moderato ..... (4.21)
6. Andante ..... (4.02)
7. Allegro ..... (4.17)  
 Recorded on 12 June 1939; matrices CLX 2177-2, 2179-1, 2180-1 (LFX585/6)
8. **SCHUBERT Deutsche Tänze** Op 171, D790 (nos 1, 3 – 8 & 11) ..... (4.24)  
 Recorded on 12 June 1939; matrix CLX 2178-1 (LFX586)
9. **WEBER Konzertstück in F minor** Op 79 with EUGÈNE BIGOT / ORCHESTRA ..... (15.39)  
 Recorded on 6 June 1935; matrices CLX 1858-1, 1859-2, 1860-1, 1861-3 (LFX384/5)
- SCHUMANN Études symphoniques** Op 13
10. Thema: Andante ..... (1.27)
11. Variation I: Un poco più vivo ..... (1.07)
12. Variation II ..... (2.16)
13. Étude III: Vivace ..... (1.05)
14. Variation III ..... (0.58)
15. Variation IV ..... (0.33)
16. Variation V ..... (0.31)
17. Variation VI: Allegro molto ..... (0.35)
18. Variation VII ..... (1.34)
19. Étude IX: Presto possibile ..... (0.35)
20. Variation VIII ..... (0.36)
21. Variation IX ..... (1.21)
22. Finale: Allegro brillante ..... (5.20)  
 Recorded on 20 & 28 June 1928; matrices WL 1198/1201 & 1213/15 (D13078/81)
23. **SCHUMANN Vogel als Prophet** No 7 from Waldszenen, Op 82 ..... (2.19)  
 Recorded on 28 June 1928; matrix WL 1216 (D13081)

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| 1. CHOPIN <b>Ballade No 1 in G minor</b> Op 23 .....   | (7.39)  |
| Recorded on 28 June 1928; matrices WLX 475-1, 499-1 (D15076)   |         |
| 2. CHOPIN <b>Ballade No 2 in F major</b> Op 38 .....   | (6.45)  |
| Recorded on 14 October 1929; matrices WLX 1118-1, 1119-1 (LFX166)  |         |
| 3. CHOPIN <b>Ballade No 3 in A flat major</b> Op 47 .....  | (6.28)  |
| Recorded on 10 November 1930; matrices WLX 1120-5, 1121-5 (LFX131)   |         |
| 4. CHOPIN <b>Ballade No 4 in F minor</b> Op 52 .....   | (10.09) |
| Recorded on 14 April 1930; matrices WLX 1330-1, 1331-1, 1332-1 (LFX74/5)   |         |
| 5. CHOPIN <b>Mazurka No 13 in A minor</b> Op 17/4 .....  | (3.45)  |
| Recorded on 14 April 1930; matrix WLX 1333-1 (LFX75)   |         |
| 6. CHABRIER <b>Impromptu</b> .....   | (4.07)  |
| Recorded on 12 June 1939; matrix CLX 2182-1 (LFX589)   |         |
| 7. CHABRIER <b>Scherzo-valse</b> No 10 from Dix Pièces pittoresques .....  | (3.32)  |
| Recorded on 12 June 1939; matrix CLX 2181-2 (LFX589)   |         |
| 8. FAURÉ <b>Prélude in D minor</b> Op 103/5 .....  | (2.04)  |
| 9. FAURÉ <b>Impromptu No 5 in F sharp minor</b> Op 102 .....   | (2.04)  |
| Recorded on 21 November 1935; matrix CLX 1890-2 (LFX401)   |         |
| <b>FAURÉ Piano Quartet No 1 in C minor</b> Op 15   |         |
| with JOSEPH CALVET violin, LÉON PASCAL viola & PAUL MAS cello  |         |
| 10. <b>Allegro molto moderato</b> .....  | (9.00)  |
| 11. <b>Scherzo: Allegro vivo</b> .....   | (5.38)  |
| 12. <b>Adagio</b> .....  | (7.24)  |
| 13. <b>Allegro molto</b> .....   | (7.24)  |
| Recorded on 7/8 May 1935; matrices CLX 1843-1, 1844-1, 1845-5, 1846-3, 1847-3, 1848-4, 1849-3, 1850-1 (LFX380/3) |         |

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1. **SÉVERAC Le retour des muletiers** from Cerdaña ..... (4.34)  
 Recorded on 21 November 1935; matrix CLX 1889-1 (LFX401)
- DEBUSSY Sonata for cello and piano**  
 with MAURICE MARÉCHAL cello
2. Prologue: Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto ..... (4.10)
3. Sérénade: Modérément animé ..... (2.48)
4. Final: Animé, léger et nerveux ..... (3.12)  
 Recorded on 3 June 1930; matrices WLX 1411-1, 1412-1, 1413-1 (LFX85/6)
5. **CAPLET Danse des petits nègres** from L'Épiphanie ..... (4.22)  
 with MAURICE MARÉCHAL cello  
 Recorded on 3 June 1930; matrix WLX 1414-2 (LFX86)
6. **RAVEL Jeux d'eau** ..... (4.31)  
 Recorded on 20 June 1928; matrices WL 1196-1 & 1197-1 (D13054)
7. **WITKOWSKI Mon lac** ..... (21.52)  
 with GEORGES MARTIN WITKOWSKI / ORCHESTRE SYMPHONIQUE DE PARIS  
 Prelude; Theme; Variation 1: Bois et labours; Variation 2: Jeux aquatiques; Variation 3: Glas; Finale  
 Recorded on 18 June 1928; matrices WLX 461-1, 462-1, 463-1, 464-1, 465-1, 466-1 (D15082/4)
- CASADESUS Sonata for flute and piano Op 18**  
 with RENÉ LE ROY flute
8. Allegro moderato ..... (4.26)
9. Andante ..... (3.53)
10. Molto vivo ..... (4.58)  
 Recorded on 3 June 1935; matrices CLX 1854-1, 1855-2; CL 5405-1, 5406-1 (LFX330 & LF147)

**W**HILE no more recent family has quite matched the output of the Bachs (c14 musicians), the Casadesus family have equalled the Couperins in reaching double figures, and have continued to flourish into the present day. The family came originally from Catalonia and it was Luis, born in 1850, who took French nationality. The name Casadesus means 'the house above the village': strictly in French it's pronounced 'Cázadsú', but so many Americans turned it into 'Casadéesus' that Robert and his wife Gaby gave up correcting them!

Luis was cashier in a biscuit shop, but he also played the guitar and at weekends conducted dance bands in Montmartre to earn a bit more towards keeping his 13 children, all of whom started to earn their livings in their early teens. The most noteworthy of them were the eldest, Francis, who founded the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau, and Henri, a virtuoso on the viola and the viola d'amore, who in 1901 founded the groundbreaking Société des Instruments anciens. Our pianist's father, also called Robert, was an actor and nightclub singer, although he was also a handy pianist: when his son began to make a name for himself, he shortened his own to Robert Casa. As important for our pianist as any of these was his aunt Rosette, who taught the instrument wonderfully and was a sterling support for Robert until her death in 1944. This support was all the more necessary since his mother gave birth to him in 1899 out of wedlock, refused to keep him, and threatened to hand him over to a state nursery for illegitimate children. Happily, when his paternal grandmother first saw him, she exclaimed: 'He looks like a Casadesus – I'll

bring him up, one more in the family won't matter!'

Thanks to Rosette's teaching, at the age of nine Robert was playing 'The Harmonious Blacksmith', without pedals since he couldn't reach them – a salutary exercise that may even have laid the ground for his clear but expressive playing of Scarlatti sonatas. The following year he entered the Paris Conservatoire, first in the class of Isidor Philipp, then that of Louis Diémer, and in 1913 he won his Premier Prix playing Fauré's *Theme and Variations*. The composer, on the jury in his capacity as Director of the institution, prophesied a fine career for him. He then stayed on at the Conservatoire, studying harmony and chamber music and, with the outbreak of war, was able to earn his first few francs as a professional musician playing percussion in the orchestra of the Opéra-comique. Playing the celesta in a rehearsal of *Mother Goose*, he was alarmed to see the composer leap up from his seat, complaining the instrument was inaudible: Robert thereafter hit it with his fists, perhaps the only time in his life he could be accused of banging ... Happily, a few years later relations between the two would become far warmer. Ravel had signed a contract with the Aeolian Company in London to make piano rolls of his own music. Finding 'Le Gibet' and the 'Toccata' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* beyond him, he persuaded Casadesus to record them instead, though Ravel's name appears on the label. Gaby later admitted Robert was very well paid.

It was Ravel who pointed out to him that, while Beethoven wrote only five piano concertos, Mozart wrote far more. The C minor became Casadesus's favourite, and here as



Robert Casadesu, 15 May 1920

elsewhere, when dialoguing with the woodwind he tried to imitate their tone. In his view breathing ('respiration') was crucial, as was singing. His 1937 recording shows how careful he is to avoid saying too much in the opening paragraph but leaves us wanting more. Modern taste does not really approve the Saint-Saëns blood-and-thunder first movement cadenza, but how delicately Casadesu shades the slow movement, with notes at the extremes often quieter than we expect.

In 1921 he married the pianist Gabrielle L'Hôte and the two of them gave many joint recitals over the next 50 years. In her memoirs she makes clear how much she envied not only his larger hands, but particularly their flexibility – audible especially in the vigour and snap of his repeated notes, as in the D major Scarlatti sonata Kk96. This flexibility, together with the freedom of his wrists, means that even in fortissimos there is no hardness in the tone: the motto was 'press, not strike', or as another French saying has it, '*close* the suitcase'. In the Schubert A major sonata, his powerful octaves still sing out, and overall the work flows naturally, leading us to wonder 'how could it be otherwise?' On the principle that 'less can be more', his generally steady pulse means that in the middle movement tiny touches of rubato make a surprising impact; this applies too in the A minor Chopin *Mazurka*.

Over repertoire, Casadesu began by being quite adventurous. In the 1920s he regularly played music by Szymanowski, who was living in Paris at the time and became a friend, and in 1933 he gave the first performance of Messiaen's uncharacteristically jokey *Fantaisie burlesque*. Caplet's 'Danse des petits nègres' is as far as he went on the modern front, and there was to be no Bartók, no Prokofiev. Still, there were other unfamiliar subjects to address. In 1927 a review in the *Morning Post* praised not only his playing of Schumann's *Kreislaria*, but also the fact that he should involve himself with this composer at all in 'the anti-Schumann wave which is now passing over us'. His recording in the following year of the *Études symphoniques* delights in contrasts, for example between variations III and IV, while the 'morendo' in



Gaby and Robert Casadesus, on board SS Île de France, 1935

variation IX is wonderfully controlled. Another of his favourite pieces, though far more familiar in those days, was Beethoven's sonata 'Les adieux' where, again, his pianissimo in 'Das Lebewohl' is full of different colours and everything sings.

Although by the late 1920s his reputation was widespread, it has not remained uncontested. In 1927 the BBC showed interest in broadcasting a recital by him, offering seven guineas. Casadesus refused to come down below 10; and there they stuck. Many years later, a British pianist was heard to say: 'For me, listening to Casadesus is like having dental work with a local anaesthetic: I can hear the sound, but I don't feel anything.' No doubt this judgment springs partly from the modern desire to 'express yourself', often with limited regard

for the notes and indications involved. My answer is twofold. First, as a teacher one of his habits was to get a student to play a piece, then immediately play it a second time. At which point he would ask, 'Which performance did you prefer?' And, crucially, 'Why?' Not only did this make clear to the student that no two performances of anything were ever exactly the same, but also that listening to oneself was the key to progress. One thinks of Debussy's daughter Chouchou, when Alfred Cortot, shortly after the maître's death, played her one of his pieces and asked her how it compared with Debussy's own playing, and she replied: 'Il s'écoutait davantage' ('He listened to himself more'). And second, Casadesus's passionate 1935 performance of Weber's *Konzertstück* knocks on the head any notion of him as some effete amateur.

Of course, Casadesus was not perfect, and occasionally we have to question the thinking behind his performances. In Chabrier's early *Impromptu*, he communicates the humour with absolute precision, but in the *Scherzo-valse* is the tempo (dotted crotchet=78) perhaps a trifle fast – too much scherzo and not enough valse? Nor is his performance of Fauré's D minor *Prélude* entirely convincing, but then this is one of the composer's most recondite pieces. On the credit side, Casadesus's finger work in the fifth *Impromptu* is a tour de force, and here exceeding the composer's metronome mark adds to the excitement. Speed is also a feature of his rendition of Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*, much admired by the composer for adhering to its qualities, as intimated by him to Gaby: 'Cheerful, iridescent, free of rubato.' Séverac's 'Le retour des muletiers' is also full of joy, but it



contains too a diminuendo astonishing in its control and delicacy.

One also, I think, has to question Casadesus's judgment that he was an accomplished composer. He did compose a great deal of music, including seven symphonies and ten concertos but, brutal as it seems, there is a case for regretting that the time spent on these might have given us even more recordings than we have. As for his choice of Witkowski's *Mon lac*, recalling the atmosphere of Lake Paladru in the Dauphiné where the composer had a summer residence, suffice to say that our taste in Impressionism is nowadays rather more demanding than when he recorded it in 1928.

But Casadesus's few weaknesses serve only to highlight his many strengths. Two of these are of particular note: his approach to Chopin, and his talents as a player of chamber music. Gaby recalls how surprised she and Robert were in the 1930s by the Chopin playing of Paderewski, full of gross rubato and in general 'affected, very mannered'. Casadesus's conception was quite different. But whereas in France he was thought 'not to play with enough suppleness or finesse', in Poland his interpretations were loudly applauded, Lutosławski claiming after his death that 'we adored Casadesus and his way of playing Chopin'.

This is not to say that rubato is entirely absent from it. But at the very start of the first *Ballade*, for example, it serves to underline the hesitancy of these extraordinary opening bars. The second theme sings as it should, and Casadesus's concern for structure leads him, in the final bars, to play the G minor chords very slowly, to underline the slow/fast contrast that animates the whole piece. The folksy start to the



Robert Casadesus, 1930



René le Roy

Maurice Maréchal

second *Ballade* is played absolutely straight, but with subtle variations of dynamics, and again the slow/fast contrast is the moving element of the whole piece. In the third *Ballade*, the temptation to play the semiquaver passages just that bit more slowly is resisted and the whole interpretation testifies to the care over structure that was one of Casadesus's hallmarks. Gaby records that she used to find Robert's tempo for the beginning of the fourth *Ballade* too fast, but in this recording it is certainly on the slow side, so perhaps he took her advice. Anyway, like the opening of the first *Ballade*, the slow speed gives this paragraph a fragility that accords with its apparent lack of connection with what follows and observing the same slow speed on its later return allows a welcome breathing space in the texture.

Casadesus's introduction to chamber music came at an early age through the rehearsals and performances of the Capet Quartet of which two of his uncles, Henri and Marcel, were

members. The group performed Beethoven more than any other composer, so that Robert soon knew all his quartets by heart, leading him in later life to arrange them for piano duet so he could play them with Gaby. But the lessons he learnt about balance, timing and colour were not wasted when he came to play chamber music by Debussy and Fauré. Debussy insisted that in his cello sonata the cellist was the star, and the pianist was to accompany. Casadesus's performance with Maurice Maréchal is a masterclass in how to blend in with your partner, the piano never obtruding or obscuring; wherever the piano takes over from the cello, the dynamic is perfectly judged so the handover is seamless; and in the second movement the 'fantasque' element rightly governs everything, its seeming improvisation no doubt the result of hard rehearsal.

Fauré's C minor piano quartet is accorded the same care and attention. The rhythms in the first movement are taut, the ensemble perfect, while in the finale Casadesus's touch is light but just supportive enough. The most striking structural feature is the single 'marking' of a signpost through a tiny pause before the final sequence of bass Cs. Otherwise all is flow.

Casadesus's death on 19 September 1972 was greeted with universal sorrow. Pierre Boulez recalled how, at their one and only collaboration: 'Our understanding was immediate, total, without problems. It's not always the case with a soloist.' Henri Dutilleux wrote that 'a whole part of the French and foreign piano repertoire remains marked for me, in an indelible way, by the honesty and purity of style which this great artist conferred

on his playing'. Let the last word go to Casadesus's pupil Monique Haas, who resumes some of the features already touched on in this brief essay: 'Casadesus influenced me through the clarity of his playing and the extreme refinement of his touch. He also had a marvellous feeling for colours and attached a very special importance to a work's construction.'

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Gaby and Robert Casadesus,  
Moscow, 1942



Test pressing of matrix LX 1516,  
part two of the first movement  
of the unpublished recording of  
Mozart's 'Coronation' concerto,  
currently in the collection of IPAM.

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