

[MUSIC REVIEW WSJ April 9, 2019 by David Mermelstein](#)

## Casadesus: Hard to Say, Easy to Listen To

A 65-CD tribute to the now-obscure French pianist Robert Casadesus highlights his broad classical repertory and reveals why he was so popular during his life.



French pianist Robert Casadesus PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

*By David Mermelstein*

What are music lovers to do when faced with yet another batch of old recordings newly transferred to CDs, stirring memories in some and curiosity in others? When Sony Classical released smallish multidisc tributes to such once-famous paragons as the cellist Leonard Rose, the pianist Alexander Brailowsky and the Budapest String Quartet last year, the answer seemed obvious: Buy them! But the company's latest effort—a whopping 65-CD tribute to the French pianist Robert Casadesus—could make the choice harder, at least for those of us with already groaning shelves and ever-spreading piles of similar material on the floor.

Yet the decision shouldn't be difficult, especially for those who regularly attended concerts before the early 1970s—even as the name, for Americans at least, continues to be problematic. It's been reliably pronounced casa-DAY-soos, cah-SAH-day-SOO, and cuh-SAHd-soo, though his daughter, who was born and lives in the U.S., recently suggested rhyming it with Kalamazoo. In any case, Casadesus occupied a special place in Western musical culture in the years between the end of World War II and his death in Paris, the city of his birth, at age 73 in September 1972. This is because, more than any other European-refugee artist who didn't adopt American citizenship, he maintained a strong presence in the U.S. even after it was safe to return home. In addition to the plethora of recordings he made for

Columbia both in France and the U.S.—all of which are now gathered in the Sony set, titled “Robert Casadesus: The Complete Columbia Album Collection”—he and his family were the subject of a 1967 episode of the NBC television series “The Bell Telephone Hour” (available on DVD from VAI).

Though it’s harder to account for Casadesus’s relative obscurity after death—look how many records he made!—his fame in life is no great surprise given these discs. No pianist plays all the standard repertory with equal conviction, but Casadesus played enough different corners of it to be considered remarkable in his breadth. (There aren’t that many keyboard players who can make the case equally for Rameau and Weber.) And what he performed especially well—Mozart, Schumann, Debussy, Ravel—was significant enough to place him, then and now, in the pantheon of the 20th century’s great pianists.

Sony has given its box the additional title “Pianist of Elegance,” but Casadesus needs no special pleading, even though he was certainly an elegant musician and excelled in interpreting some of the most elegant works in the canon, French and otherwise. His chief claims to fame as an artist lie in the clarity of his tone, the fleetness of his passagework, the understated manner in which he conveyed thematic material and what used to be called refinement or taste. Some of these characteristics are now nearly lost arts, in pianism and elsewhere, but Casadesus shows us how it’s done.

Though some of the first recordings in this set, from the early 1940s, have a slightly crabbed, rushed or nervous quality to them, Casadesus was in complete possession of his myriad gifts by the end of that decade. Pick just about any record, and his talent is on full display. Take, for example, a disc from 1958 that includes four familiar Beethoven sonatas, including the “Moonlight” and “Appassionata.” The competition here is stiff, to say the least, yet Casadesus, unpretentious to the core, conveys this music with a straightforwardness that only enhances its grandeur. His forays into Beethoven were limited—beyond these he recorded only three more of the 32 solo-piano sonatas—but he stakes his claim thanks to a towering 1955 performance of the “Emperor” Concerto with the New York Philharmonic led by Dimitri Mitropoulos, and a superb survey of all the Sonatas for Violin and Piano with the great French violinist Zino Francescatti, his frequent collaborator. (And just where are *his* complete Columbia recordings?)

Casadesus’s recordings, from the 1950s and 1960s, of most of Mozart’s mature Piano Concertos with George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra were considered benchmarks even into the 1980s (when I first heard them), and for all the right reasons. Crisply dispatched in the spirited outer movements, they seem to freeze time in the slow middle movements, with Casadesus savoring every nuance without fussiness.

The set includes some of Casadesus’s own music (all of it charming, none of it memorable), recorded mostly by his wife, Gaby, an accomplished pianist in her own right as well as her husband’s regular duo partner. Their son Jean, who died in a car crash at age 44, also showed promise at the keyboard. Three of his albums, including an enchanting Chabrier recital recorded in 1965, cap the box. One imagines the elder Casadesus, ever music’s servant and a dotting *père*, regarding that as the ultimate tribute.

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