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record of the week

Big music, boldly driving, expertly composed, seeming to come straight out of 1930s modernism (Schoenberg in the Barcelona sun): such is the art of Benet Casablanca as represented on a disc of orchestral pieces from the last three decades, delivered with appropriate energy by the Orquestra Simfònica de Barcelona i Nacional de Catalunya under Salvador Mas-Conde (Naxos 8.579002). The main work is *The Dark Backward of Time*, from 2005, which owes its title to Prospero's description of memory as 'the dark backward and abysm of time', and much of which fits the source in being tempestuous, though the composer's unquellable imagination keeps the storm going—a few breathing spaces apart—for close on twenty minutes. An earlier piece of similar length, *Postlude* (1991), intimates a stage of reliance on imitative counterpoint before the vigorous style of constantly onward urging took over.

Curiously for a composer with such a command of abstract symphonic poetry at expansive length, Casablanca has written a lot of what he calls 'epigrams'—not as epigrammatic as many of Webern's pieces, but all done in two or three minutes, or perhaps a little longer in the case of slow movements. This collection includes a set of three from 2001: a soaring opener and a mostly bright and festive finale around a nocturne (another favourite genre) that has some echoes of Mahler and Bartók.

The catalogue on Casablanca's [website](#) indicates a composer excited principally by instruments, so this programme is true to his output in offering just one vocal item, a dreamy love song that is also considerably the earliest piece here, dating back to 1981. From the nearer end of his career, *Intrada sobre el nom de DALÍ* (2006) is another epigram, quicksilver in tone but characteristically sure all through.

A companion album (Naxos 8.579004) adds scores for smaller forces done by another fine Catalan ensemble, the Sinfonietta/Modern/Inter Contemporain-scale BCN 216. Shakespeare again features, in the *Siete escenas de Hamlet* for a narrator (Paul Jutsum) setting the scene for colourful musical illustrations, and there are more epigrams and nocturnes.