

French Album

Debussy, Rameau, Ravel, Chabrier, Fauré
Jorge Federico Osorio, p
Cedille 197—75 minutes

I gravitate primarily toward orchestral music. So it was striking for me to have been swept away by this piano album that opens and closes with piano originals that today are far better known in the composers' own orchestral transcriptions.

It took a second hearing for me to appreciate Fauré's Pavane minus the sumptuous grace of Thomas Beecham (EMI). Fauré makes sparing use of the piano's left hand below middle C, and when he does, he puts the bass accent on the third beat of the 4/4 measure, not the first, where one would expect it. Jorge Federico Osorio, 69, the elegant Mexican pianist and long-time resident of Chicago, uses this spare piece to introduce us to an unforced, transparent, floating, bell-like style where every note is clear yet integrated and where the lyrical line flows freely and musically—a foretaste of what's to come.

There follow eight selections from Debussy's Preludes and 'Clair de Lune'. In 'The Hills of Anacapri,' if another pianist pedaled like Osorio, the sound would become cluttered, but not here. He phrases the music by holding down the pedals for measures at a time, yet the texture and leading motifs come through, leading the ear. All notes are clear, none are buried, and yet Osorio never sounds pedantic. Everything fits naturally as the music ripples and skips along. Then 'The Terrace Where the Moonlight Holds Audience' is just the opposite. In lesser hands it could be a blur of modulating chords. Here Osorio terraces the details and lets the very flow give life to what otherwise could be a miasma of techniques.

And so goes the album, a series of contrasts that seem to flow into one another without jarring. In a relaxed, unrushed 'Clair de Lune' the music is phrased by the resonance from the pedaling. Touches of rubato and retard create a five-minute integral masterpiece as gorgeous as I've ever heard it. 'What the West Wind Saw,' arpeggios and trills and chords galore rendered into a musical whole, is followed by 'Voiles' (Sails or Veils—either is legitimate) with melody and harmony gently fused in a transparent whole-tone scale. The last two, 'Fireworks' (which makes one listen carefully in the quiet intervals) and 'Dead Leaves,' are a perfect pair as Debussy makes

the listener linger in transparency, like a prelude to the dazzling clarity of a nighttime display, followed by a meditative resolution.

Osorio then shifts gears to three short works from Rameau's third collection of harpsichord pieces. Rameau, born in 1683, was a contemporary of Bach, Handel, and Scarlatti, all born in 1685. 'Le Tricotet,' two Minuets, and 'L'Egyptienne' fit with the world of Scarlatti's sonatas, music that cleanses the air with steady rhythms under playful tunes (*tricotet* means knitting, here integrating the right and left hands like a knitting machine). Osorio is the farthest thing possible from a sewing machine; instead these three pieces in 7 minutes are a midway refresher in how to make impeccable technique sound musical.

From this point to the end I became especially conscious of how carefully and beautifully Osorio planned this album. The key where one piece ends fits naturally into the key the next one begins with. Sometimes it's the same; sometimes a mediant key fits easily with the following tonic key. In other words, not only do moods contrast (as in the Debussy works) and the air clears (Rameau), but the whole program is tonally integrated too.

Chabrier's 'Habanera' is simplicity itself, so it seems: a touch of Viennese waltz with a habanera beat, a melody with chords, rendered perfectly with an inimitable gait and flow. Debussy's 'Puerto del Vino' (one of the gates to Granada's Alhambra) continues the syncopated beat, here flamenco rather than habanera. After a dramatic modulation the music wants to relax but can't. Which leads to 'An Evening in Granada' from *Estampes*, which I once played imperfectly but have firm ideas about its musicality. Here Osorio is pure genius. He captures all of the many nuances while conveying a feeling of spontaneity rather than that super-professional feeling of having played it so many times that one has stopped finding anything new in it. As the Corn Flakes ad used to encourage, "Taste 'em again for the first time," and Osorio does.

There follows one of classical music's most impossibly difficult pieces to perform, whether in the piano original or Ravel's orchestration: 'Alborada del Gracioso' from *Miroirs*. I describe Fritz Reiner's performance of it with the Chicago Symphony (the JVC XRCD2 pressing is astounding) as "how to get a huge orchestra to dance on the head of a pin". Well, that's Osorio at the piano. He makes me aware of the scores of countless technical challenges, piled on top of one another, that he had to

have rehearsed ad nauseum. Yet here the music flows, counter-rhythms and all, just like it does with Reiner: never bombastic, crystal clear, with impossibly clear castanet-like articulations, floating, and with solid punch the few times it's needed. One integrated whole. How can a human being do it!

And what a stroke of genius to end the album with `Alborada's opposite: Ravel's *Pavane for a Dead Princess* (or a princess long ago), echoing Fauré's *Pavane* 68 minutes earlier: simple, clear, flowing but with melancholy, the end of a sublime journey through French piano music.

FRENCH

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TAILLEFERRE: *Pastorale; Partita; Impromptu; Romance*; **AURIC:** *Sonatine; Nocturne; 3 Pastorales*; **DUREY:** *Romance sans Paroles; Nocturne; 3 Preludes*

Biliana Tzinlikova, p—Paladino 103—55 minutes

Les Six was a name originated by Henri Collet in 1920 and influenced by the Russian group of composers called the Mighty Five. The French group included Poulenc (1899-1963), Milhaud (1892-1974), Honegger (1892-1955), Auric (1899-1983), Durey (1888-1979) and Tailleferre (1892-1983) and was seen as a response to the music of Wagner and the Impressionism of Debussy and Ravel. Milhaud wrote that Collet "chose six names absolutely arbitrarily...simply because we knew each other and we were pals and appeared on the same musical programmes, no matter if our temperaments and personalities weren't at all the same! Auric and Poulenc followed ideas of Cocteau, Honegger followed German romanticism, and myself, Mediterranean lyricism!"

Bulgarian pianist Biliana Tzinlikova has chosen the three lesser-known composers of Les Six for an enlightening program of music that certainly is not well known. Recently Pascal and Ami Rogé had a release devoted to Les Six and Satie (Onyx 4219, July/Aug 2020), and there are only two duplications with this new one. Groups of three dominate this collection of pieces: Tailleferre's *Partita*, Auric's *Sonatine* and *Pastorales*, and Durey's *Preludes* are all three pieces or movements.

I cannot imagine any of these works getting a better performance. Every phrase is built with great attention to detail that never hides the main musical message. While there is no shortage of recordings of music by the other three composers who were part of Les Six, we

are indebted to Tzinlikova for giving us the opportunity to hear music not readily available and worth getting to know.

HARRINGTON

Journey with Piano 4 Hands

LISZT: *Scenes from Lenau's Faust*; **DVORAK:** *3 Slavonic Dances*; **GOUNOD:** *Love Duet & Waltz from Faust*; **GODARD:** *Berceuse*; **BIZET:** *Carmen Overture*; **MILHAUD:** *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*

Zeynep Ucbasaran & Sergio Gallo

Divine Art 25208—65 minutes

Piano duets, 4 hands at one piano, have attracted great composers since Mozart and Beethoven. Schubert brought the genre to another level with a vast quantity of great music. As the romantic era progressed, it fell to Liszt, Brahms, and Dvorak to add significant works to the repertoire. All along, there were tons of lesser composers writing original music and transcribing vast amounts of orchestral repertoire for piano duet. French composers enlarged the repertoire towards the end of the 1800s and into the early 1900s. By the mid 1900s and the proliferation of recorded music, the arrangements that were almost required to disseminate the music to a wider audience began to fade, although there are great arrangements of some Gershwin, Copland and Shostakovich for duet. The 2-piano idiom took over at that point for concert music by notable composers.

Here we get a well designed, enjoyable program that touches on most of what was mentioned above. Ucbasaran and Gallo have been an active duo for 15 years and have an affinity for this repertoire. Their ensemble and balance are spot-on, as is Divine Art's recorded piano sound. They begin with Liszt's duet arrangements of two of his early tone poems: *Der Nächtliche Zug* and *Der Tanz in der Dorfschenke*. While these titles may not be well known and the first is not often heard, the second also had a solo piano arrangement done by Liszt where the title became *Mephisto Waltz*. That has been a staple of many virtuoso's repertoire for well over 150 years. The differences between the solo version familiar to all and this duet version are not great, but are noticeable and interesting.

Three of Dvorak's *Slavonic Dances* follow. They are influenced by the quality and popularity of the Brahms Hungarian Dances. The remainder of the program is by French composers, both original music and orchestral arrangements. Milhaud's *Boeuf sur le Toit* is