

**POULENC Piano Music, Volume One.** • Eric Parkin, piano. • CHANDOS CHAN 8637 [DDD]; 58:32. Produced by Tim Handley. (Distributed by Koch Import Service.)

**Suite for Piano. Les Biches: Adagietto. Three Mouvements perpétuels. Les Soirées de Nazelles. Intermezzo No. 3 in A<sup>b</sup>. Valse-Improvisation "sur le nom de Bach." Trois Pièces: Pastorale; Hymne; Toccata. Badinage. Napoli— Suite for Piano.**

Pianist Eric Parkin has done fine work on records for a cloud of British composers, most recently by slugging his way through the admittedly very pianistic thickets of Bax. But he does not, in this first issue of a suggested series, seem to have much affinity with his subject. Poulenc's musical citations are quite broad enough without the sort of caricaturing that Parkin injects into the Chopinisms of the Intermezzo in A<sup>b</sup>, or the highlighting in drypoint imposed on an already adequately poker-faced Ravel impression in the opening Presto of the Suite.

Elsewhere, Parkin is inclined to be excessively matter-of-fact and joyless, lacking in rhythmic lift despite a perfect capability to maintain proper speed.

The clincher is in the delectable character-variations of *Les Soirées de Nazelles*, where he elects to omit Variations Nos. 4, 5, and 6. While this is ostensibly composer-sanctioned, it strikes me as extremely inappropriate for a recorded survey ... if that is what Chandos and Parkin intend to produce.

*Les Soirées*, the largest work here, has been done in uncut performances twice recently, with extreme delicacy and sensuality by Pascal Rogé (London 417 438-2) and with more vigor but no loss of stylistic focus by Michael Boriskin (Musical Heritage Society MHS 512169).

The Chandos record, by itself, is just not very attractive in the quality of performance, nor a promising inception for a series. Good piano recording.

**John Wiser**

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**POULENC Piano Music, Volume 2.** • Eric Parkin, piano. • CHANDOS CHAN 8847 [DDD]; 71:32. Produced by Tim Oldham. (Distributed by KOCH International.)

**Suite française. Thème varié. Improvisations, Nos. 1-15. Intermezzos: No. 1 in C; No. 2 in D<sup>b</sup>. Humoresque. Three Novelettes. Villageoises. Presto in B<sup>b</sup>. Mélancolie.**

**POULENC Piano Music.** • Flavio Varani, piano. • DANTE PSG 9017 [DDD]; 65:30. Produced by Jean-Louis Percot and Bruno Saint-Germain. (Distributed by KOCH

International.)

**Suite française. Thème varié. Improvisation No. 15. Intermezzo No. 3 in A<sup>b</sup>. Trois Pièces. Nocturnes. Pastourelle (d'après L'Éventail de Jeanne). Valse-Improvisations.**

Reviewing the first chapter of Parkin's Poulenc (Chandos 8637), John Wiser suggested that the pianist was "excessively matter-of-fact and joyless" and that he did not "seem to have much affinity" for the music (*Fanfare* 12:3). My response to this second volume is considerably more positive. There is, after all, a strong Stravinskian vein to Poulenc's writing—and Parkin's ringing tone, his highly charged rhythms, his tight articulation, and his squeaky-clean textures mine the music's cool cheekiness to the max. Thus, while he's capable of quiet reflection (try the third Novelette or *Mélancolie*), these spunky performances tend to treat even the moments of big-hearted sentiment (for instance, the Schubert pastiche in the *improvisation No. 12*) with the same clear-eyed ironic distance he gives to his brazen, high-contrast reading of the *Suite française*, or his robust romp through the *Presto*. The results are refreshingly tangy.

Still, Wiser's complaints are hardly ill-founded: Parkin's lean approach does reduce caloric content—and what's lost is immediately apparent when you turn to the Dante disc. The divergence in attitude is immediately suggested by the programming. Parkin opens his recital with the nervy *Humoresque* and takes his bow with the *molto agitato* coda of *Thème varié*, thus suggesting that dash is the essence of the music. Varani—a Brazilian-born, French-trained pianist currently teaching in the United States—chooses instead to introduce himself with the caress of the first Nocturne, and to bid farewell with the daringly luxurious tempo-stretching of his lingering *Improvisation No. 15*, dedicated to Edith Piaf.

The rest of Varani's graceful recital follows suit: he's tonally plusher, rhythmically more modest, softer in articulation, less imposing in his handling of the left hand but more generous in his use of the right foot. The interpretations oscillate between the sunny and the secretive (try the first of the *Trois pièces*), but they invariably skirt any hint of the self-importance that Parkin sometimes pries from the scores. And Varani likewise keeps the virtuosity (even in the "Toccata" from *Trois Pièces*) from submerging the lyrical impulse, playing up the music's dreamy flow rather than its animation, its sentiment rather than its sarcasm.

Granted, the more angular passages of the *Pastourelle* are arguably too soft—and the Horowitz-inspired *Valse-Improvisation* would profit from a drier touch. Still, while his *Suite Française*, less modernistic and more nostalgic than Parkin's, may seem less memorably pugnacious on first encounter, on repeated hearings its hazy evocations come to beguile the ear. And his *Thème varié*—fleeter in the first variation, more whimsical in the sixth—has a greater range of mood and color. In the end, Varani's Poulenc seems more amiable and less crotchety than Parkin's, less immediately striking but richer over time.

Chandos has given Parkin exceptionally clean engineering. Dante provides murkier and less immediate sound, and quality control continues to elude them: this disc

gave fits to one of the machines I tried it on. Despite production problems, though, and despite an increasingly competitive environment (see, for instance, Wiser's comments on Roge, Tacchino, and Poulenc himself, 11:2, 13:1, and 12:3), Varani's supple performances are well worth having—and I look forward to hearing more from him.

**Peter J. Rabinowitz**

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**POULENC Piano Music, Vol. 3 • Eric Parkin (pn) • CHANDOS CHAN 9636 (70:20)**  
***Pastourelle. Les Biches: 2 Pieces. Feuilletts d'album. Pièce brève sur le nom d'Albert Roussel. Intermède. Française.***Nocturnes. Valse. 5 Impromptus.  
*Bourrée, au pavillon d'Auvergne.*Caprice. Promenades

Francis Poulenc deserves a special place in musical history. His style strikes a perfect balance between the natural skills of the composer with a scope and dramatic range that are modest. Poulenc knew exactly what his tools were, and used them with an honesty and humility that are always refreshing. The composer's own words are worth quoting; "I know perfectly well that I'm not one of those composers who have made harmonic innovations like Stravinsky, Ravel, or Debussy, but I think there's room for new music which doesn't mind using other people's chords."

Yet it would be highly misleading to conclude from these observations that this music is insignificant (not to mention the real grandeur achieved in such larger pieces as the Gloria and *Dialogues of the Carmelites*). Within demure structures, two chief elements cause this piano music to sparkle: Poulenc's irresistible and completely unpretentious charm, and his wonderful talent for inventing original melodies. These are the qualities that raise this music above the level of similarly endowed miniaturists such as Frederic Mompou. As another example, I found it much more rewarding to listen to over an hour of Poulenc's piano music than I did an hour of the music of Monsalvatge, also reviewed in this issue. Although Poulenc's Spanish contemporary also produced small, harmonically conservative piano pieces of a light nature, he does not convey the originality and pervasive honesty of expression that Poulenc does.

All of that being said, I wish I could be more enthusiastic about the performances on this CD. Eric Parkin should be an ideal pianist for this project. He has a poetic sense of rhythm, and his affection for Poulenc's music is strongly evident. I probably would have been more inclined to like this playing if not for the performance of the Nocturnes by Ralph Votapek that is also reviewed in this issue. Votapek shows that there is spine and dynamic vitality in this music, while Parkin's too light touch only reinforces the misleading conception of Poulenc as an effeminate composer. Also, Parkin is surprisingly shaky technically in this relatively

undemanding material, such as in the wobbly ornamentation in the Impromptu No. 1. Unfortunately, the choices are limited at the present, with the crisp, bright playing of Pascal Rogé now deleted from the domestic London catalog (although his fine performance of the Piano Concerto is still available). Bits and pieces of Poulenc solo piano music are around, such as the aforementioned Votapek, and several historic recordings by the composer's friend Artur Schnabel. Despite the misgivings about the performances, this release is still recommendable, as it readily conveys the tremendous appeal of this music. **Peter Burwasser**

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### **Poulenc: Complete works for solo piano (Antony Gray)**

by *Phillip Scott* on 22 December, 2015 *Limelight*

Antony Gray's set of the complete piano music of Francis Poulenc is, to paraphrase Orwell, more complete than others. Besides the many pieces written expressly for solo piano it contains Poulenc's music accompanying the story of Barbar the Elephant (sans narration) and several transcriptions of other works including the Sonata for Two Clarinets, the Sonata for Horn, Trumpet and Trombone, and the ballet Les Animaux Modèles. The latter was arranged by the composer, so it is more than a mere piano reduction for rehearsal purposes. There is also an arrangement of Mozart's Musical Joke. Hence, five CDs as opposed to Pascal Rogé's three.

Gray has previously given us welcome surveys of piano music by Eugene Goossens and Malcolm Williamson, but here he enters a highly competitive field. Beginning with the composer himself (who recorded the *Mouvements Perpétuels*, the *Two Novelettes* and a selection of *Nocturnes* and *Improvisations* in the 1920s and 30s), many extensive selections of Poulenc's piano music have appeared. Among French pianists are the composer's friend and duo-piano partner Jacques Février, Gabriel Tacchino, Rogé, and more recently Éric Le Sage. Poulenc's light touch is compelling; he plays his music as though he were improvising it. English pianist Paul Crossley recognises this in his own "complete" 1987 recording for Sony, employing plentiful rubato and, like the composer, sudden bursts of speed. (Poulenc's rendition of *Mouvement Perpétuel* No 1 is by far the fastest.) Gray's use of rubato is less wilful than Crossley's, but also more conventional, neatly rounding out the ends of phrases. Gray emulates Poulenc's lightness, but his elegance and polish feel more suitable for Fauré or Saint-Saëns. His approach is underlined by the recording, which emphasises the treble end of the instrument: Gray's piano is frustratingly bass light at times. Compare the first of the

Improvisations: Gray is swift and incisive where the aggressive Le Sage explosively shatters the silence. Le Sage's Poulenc is a modernist first of all, with a rough-hewn, impulsive nature. It doesn't work for everything, and one wearies of it, but Gray at the opposite extreme strikes me as too civilised and mellifluous. Rogé, whose Poulenc CDs for Decca have remained a benchmark for decades, seems to strike a workable balance between the two. (However, Fevrier's warmth in the suite Napoli has never been matched!)

Comparisons apart, Gray's recording represents a major achievement.