

**FUCHS Cello Sonatas: No. 2 in eb**, op. 83; **No. 1 in d**, op. 29. **7 Fantasy Pieces**, op. 78 • Martin Ostertag (vc); Oliver Triendl (pn) • TYXART 16078  
(Download: 75:40) Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

Complementing its recent release of viola works by Robert Fuchs reviewed in 39:5, Tyxart has followed up with this album of the composer's complete works for cello and piano. There are only three of them, and they fit comfortably onto a single disc, so it's not surprising to find this same program duplicated elsewhere more than once. As far back as 1993, in issue 16:5, John Bauman reviewed a recording of these works by Nancy Green and Caroline Palmer on a Biddulph CD, and then just two issues later, in 17:1, Bauman reviewed Mark Dobinsky and Daniel Blumenthal in exactly the same three works on a Marco Polo CD, this time erroneously giving the key of the Second Sonata as B<sup>b</sup> Minor in the headnote. Perhaps, like me, he couldn't believe that any composer of sound mind would write a sonata for cello in the grotesquely awkward key of E<sup>b</sup> Minor, but I checked the score, and it really is in E<sup>b</sup> Minor, all six ugly flats of it, preclude the use of any of the cello's open strings—not that B<sup>b</sup> Minor would have been much better. Perhaps Fuchs was writing the piece for a cellist with small hands whose fingers weren't long enough to manage the larger stretches in keys with sharps. Or perhaps, taking a page from Paganini's playbook, he expected the cellist would tune his instrument up by a half-step, causing it to sound more brilliant, and enabling the player to use all of the open strings, each of which would sound a half-step higher—C/D<sup>b</sup>, G/A<sup>b</sup>, D/E<sup>b</sup>, and A/B<sup>b</sup>—in effect, cancelling out four of the key signature's six flats so that the cellist could play the piece as if it had only two flats. But, as usual, I digress. In 31:2, I reviewed a Hänssler release containing Fuch's E<sup>b</sup>-Minor Cello Sonata, performed by Johannes Moser and Paul Rivinius, but that disc bypassed the other two Fuchs cello works in favor of cello sonatas by Brahms and Zemlinsky, which make reasonable discmates in light of the next two paragraphs. As has been recounted here more than once, Fuchs was part of Brahms's extended circle of friends and admirers. In Fuchs's case, the admiration was mutual. In fact, after meeting Brahms in the late 1870s, the two men struck up a friendship, taking Sunday walks together in Vienna's nearby woods, and Brahms did his best to further Fuchs's career, recommending his younger friend's Cello Sonata No. 1 in D Minor to his own publisher, Simrock, in May of 1881. In his lifetime, Fuchs gained recognition and considerable popularity, particularly for his serenades, which, ironically, in the long run, turned out to stereotype him as a composer and eclipse the rest of his considerable output. In addition to his activities as a composer, as a professor of harmony, theory, and counterpoint at

the Vienna Conservatory, Fuchs saw pass through his classroom such future notables as Mahler, Hugo Wolf, Zemlinsky, Franz Schreker, Korngold, Enescu, and Sibelius.

I'm not sure what the logic was behind Martin Ostertag and Oliver Triendl programming the Sonata No. 2 first, but curiously this later of the two sonatas, composed circa 1907, has Brahms written all over it; whereas the earlier Sonata No. 1, the one that Brahms recommended to Simrock for publication, sounds like Fuchs had an encounter with Fauré, which theoretically is quite possible, for Fuchs (1847–1927) and Fauré (1845–1924) are much closer contemporaries, albeit not compatriots, than Fuchs and Brahms (1833–1897) are.

I don't know if Fuchs ever visited Paris or, for that matter, ever heard a note of Fauré's music, but the rippling arpeggios in the piano and the vocalise-like melody in the cello at the beginning of the D-Minor Sonata are of a makeup quite similar to the opening of Faure's Violin Sonata No. 1 of 1876, composed five years before Fuchs's Cello Sonata No. 1. All I can say is that I'm completely baffled as to why Fuchs's D-Minor Sonata hasn't been taken up by every cellist on the planet. It's a work so overflowing with heart-throbbing melody, intense Romantic passion, and more than enough opportunity for the cellist—and the pianist too—to demonstrate virtuosic skill that it's simply inexplicable that the only recording of the work listed by ArkivMusic should be this one, and the only versions listed by Amazon is the aforementioned Dobinsky/Blumenthal on Marco Polo. Not that those versions or this new one aren't worthy, but I just don't know why we haven't seen the big names in the cello world drawn to this arrestingly beautiful score.

The Second Sonata has garnered slightly more attention on disc, and, as noted above, though it postdates the First Sonata by around 25 years, it closer to Brahms in manner of phrase structure, harmonic vocabulary, and expressive gesture than its older sibling is, which was written in Brahms's lifetime and admired by him. In the quarter of a century that separates the two works, however, Fuchs has lost none of this melodic inspiration or emotional fervor. Again, this is another absolutely gorgeous work. To so many cellists looking for original works for their instrument to play—and often ending up transcribing pieces composed for other instruments to fill the void—I say to them, "What's wrong with you? Fuchs's sonatas are staring you in the face!"

Dating from around 1905, the *7 Fantasy Pieces* are of approximately the same vintage and cut from the same cloth as Fuchs's Second Cello Sonata. The moods of these short pieces range across a wide spectrum of gay and giddy to contemplative and nostalgic, with one of them in particular—the third number marked *Lebhaft*—suggesting that Fuchs had more than passing familiarity with Dvořák, specifically the Czech composer's "Dumky" Trio.

Much as I liked and enthused over Moser and Rivinius's performance of Fuchs's Second Sonata, their album didn't contain the First Sonata or the *Fantasy Pieces*, and I don't have either of the aforementioned releases reviewed by Bauman that do contain all three Fuchs cello works. So, on that score alone, I would extend

Ostertag and Triendl's album a strong recommendation. But what turns a strong recommendation into an urgent one is that Ostertag's cello in turn sings and soars, gliding in graceful arcs on the rising and falling currents of Fuchs's airborne muse. As far back as 14:1, David Johnson, reviewing Ostertag in a program cello works by David Popper, Auber, and Massenet, called Ostertag "world class." I'd second that and go even further, saying that Ostertag is in a class by himself. Since then, he hasn't been that active, at least not on record, though he has partnered in a number of chamber music albums, mainly of works by Mozart, Hoffmeister, Schumann, and Reger. Be that as it may, on the present release, Ostertag gives us some of the most vibrant and beautiful cello playing I've heard.

As for Oliver Triendl, pianist for all seasons and all reasons, what is there to say? He seems to be everyone's go-to pianist for chamber music recordings of everything by everyone, which I'm beginning to suspect has resulted in his acquiring the largest and most diverse repertoire of any pianist in history. The amazing part of it is that he is able to learn and absorb so much unfamiliar music so fast and to perform it all exceedingly well. He is a true musical polyglot. As state above, this earns an urgent recommendation. **Jerry Dubins**

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## **FUCHS Piano Trios: No. 1; No. 2 • Gould Pn Trio • QUARTZ 2028 (58:06)**

So popular in his lifetime were his serenades that Robert Fuchs (1847–1927) was affectionately nicknamed "Serenaden-Fuchs" (Serenading Fox). Listening to these two piano trios, it's easy to understand why. This is some of the prettiest music you will ever hear, and I don't use the term pejoratively. When composers lined up to receive the gift of melody, Fuchs must have been very near the head of the queue, for his endowment was one of the most generous to be bestowed.

Given his dates and cultural milieu—he was born in Austria and spent most of his life in Vienna, first as a student and then as a professor at the conservatory there teaching such future luminaries as Mahler, Zemlinsky, Sibelius, Enescu, and Korngold—one might reasonably expect Fuchs to have been one of the many composers who emulated Brahms. In fact, Brahms was one of Fuchs's great admirers, writing, "Fuchs is a splendid musician; everything is so fine and so skillful, so charmingly invented, that one is always pleased."

But Fuchs was not a Brahms imitator, and the elder composer's praise of him may have come as much from relief that Fuchs was not another Herzogenberg as it did from genuine appreciation of his music. In truth, much of what Fuchs composed—and that includes, in addition to his popular serenades, three symphonies, a

couple of operas, three masses, and a considerable volume of chamber works—might be described as a storybook that begins, “Once upon a time, before Brahms and before Schumann, there was Mendelssohn.”

But from there the tale takes a very strange turn, for in the Scherzo movement from the B $\flat$ -Major Trio, for example, Fuchs introduces the former Mendelssohn to the future Leroy Anderson in a passage beginning at 2:38 that, I swear, could have been the model for the American composer’s *The Typewriter*. At every turn, there’s a breezy, easygoing, almost jazzy feeling to Fuchs’s music that seems to blend elements of the salon with elements of the dance hall. In this regard, Fuchs is probably more closely allied in style and intent with composers like Johann Strauss Jr. and Franz Lehár as opposed to the “deep and serious thinkers” among the Austro-German composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fuchs’s influence on those deep and serious thinkers, however, is not to be dismissed, for some of those very salon and dance-hall elements, contorted and twisted, turn up in the music of Mahler, one critic of the time noting the “Fuchsisms” in Mahler’s Second Symphony.

The recording at hand is not new; in fact, a copy of it has been sitting on my shelf for a number of years. It was taped in 2004 (Trio No. 1) and 2005 (Trio No. 2) at Champs Hill in Sussex. I’m always a bit amused to see a CD advertised by ArkivMusic or some other mail-order website as an “advance order” with a future release date, when the disc actually appeared seven years ago and has been available, at least in England, since then. Perhaps it’s only now being distributed in the U.S. In any case, I find no other versions of Fuchs’s piano trios listed—he wrote three of them—though I can’t bring myself to believe that they’ve never been recorded before. It wouldn’t surprise me to learn that a *Fanfare* reader has them on LP.

These are enjoyable, engaging works that offer a counterweight to the heavier, meatier trios by Brahms and other composers active around the same time that Fuchs made his first two contributions to the medium (1878–1903); his last in the genre, the Piano Trio in F $\sharp$ -Minor, op. 115, didn’t come until 1925. For now, it seems that the Gould Piano Trio is your only choice for recorded performances of this repertoire. Happily, the choice is a good one and can be strongly recommended for solid ensemble playing that brings out the best qualities in Fuchs’s music. **Jerry Dubins**

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**FUCHS** Serenades: No. 1 in D; No. 2 in C. *Andante grazioso and Capriccio* • Christian Ludwig, cond; Cologne CO • NAXOS 8.572222 (53:52)

His friends called him "Serenaden-Fuchs" (Serenading Fox), a pun on his name, while the sparingly complimentary Brahms praised him as a "splendid musician." He was Robert Fuchs (1847–1927), an Austrian composer and professor of theory and composition at the Vienna Conservatory whose students comprised an extraordinary roll-call of up-and-coming talents: Enescu, Korngold, Mahler, Melartin, Sibelius, Schmidt, Schreker, Wolf, and Zemlinsky.

As a musical genre the serenade found itself largely neglected after Mozart, at least until Brahms revived it with his two symphonic-scaled serenades in the late 1850s. Despite Mozart's lending a greater gravity to the form, especially with his so-called "Gran Partita," the genre continued to carry the stigma of its 18th-century antecedent as a type of lightweight, summer's eve, *al fresco* entertainment, at a time when Austro-German Romanticism in particular saw itself as cultural custodian of the serious and the profound. Thus, even after Brahms's two mid 19th-century examples, it would be another 25 years before composers would enrich the repertoire with serenades that, in content and dimensions, resembled symphonies or symphonic suites in all but name.

When Fuchs came to compose his First Serenade in 1874, his main models were the two efforts by Brahms and the three serenades by Robert Volkmann (1869–70). But by the time he got around to composing his fifth and final serenade in 1894, many masterly and magnificent serenades had already made their way into the world: Dvořák (1878), Tchaikovsky (1880), Strauss (1882), Wolf (1887), Suk (1892), and Elgar (1892), and not long after, Reinecke (1898); Dohnányi (1902), Sinding (1902 and 1909), Reger (several between 1904 and 1906), and Stenhammar (1913) would add to the growing list.

If the serenades had been Fuchs's only contribution to music, it might explain why he virtually vanished from the mainstream almost immediately after his death, even though he'd been highly regarded in his own day. But the fact is that Fuchs worked in all the major musical media and his output, which included symphonies, concertos, a large volume of chamber works, three masses, and two operas, was considerable and diverse. And all of it—at least the works I've heard—is nothing but expertly crafted and melodically inspired.

Of Fuchs's five serenades, the first three are scored for strings only and the fourth adds only two horns to the string ensemble. In the string-only pieces, however, textural richness is achieved through division of parts, so that for much of the time we are hearing six or even seven voices. Sometimes the violas play divided parts; other times, first or second violins are divided; and still other times violins and violas are divided at the same time. This lends both breadth and depth to the writing, allowing for greater fullness and luminosity to the sound as well as greater flexibility to the interplay of voices as they overlap and weave around each other. As I said, if the serenades were Fuchs's sole contribution to music, his disappearance from the scene might not be so surprising, for I will be the first to admit that these are not the stuff great reputations are made of. They were popular in their day precisely because they *were* the popular music of the day. As

one listens to these serenades, especially their fast-paced movements, it's easy to discern how Fuchs's style was influenced by the polkas and quadrilles of Johann Strauss Jr., another composer, by the way, much admired by Brahms. So associating Fuchs with this type of crowd-pleasing entertainment music is not to denigrate him as a composer. His symphonies, concertos, and chamber works tell us that he was a man of both talent and substance. His serenades are tuneful, occasionally touching, and always enjoyable, reminding me in ways of some of Grieg's orchestral music, like the *Lyrical Suite*.

In checking all of the usual mail-order sources, I was surprised to find no complete collection of Fuchs's five serenades. In fact, you would have to hunt down some fairly obscure labels featuring some fairly provincial ensembles to find recordings of Nos. 3 and 5, not to mention other versions besides this one of Nos. 1 and 2. And I had no luck at all finding even a single recording of No. 4. I guess I hadn't realized when I began this review just how far Fuchs's serenades had fallen on hard times, for the rest of his output in general is reasonably well represented on disc.

The *Andante grazioso and Capriccio* that concludes the disc is no insignificant filler. At 17 and a half minutes, it's longer than the Serenade No. 2, and, written in 1900, it's a work postdating the last of the composer's serenades. Harmonically more advanced and complex, and emotionally darker than the serenades, the piece, suggests note author Anthony Short, is an example of Fuchs the teacher being influenced by his students, namely Sibelius.

One can only hope that this new recording of the first two serenades with the Cologne Chamber Orchestra directed by Christian Ludwig is the first in a survey that will bring us the remaining three, for in every respect the performances and recording are excellent. Strongly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

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**FUCHS Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2** • Karl-Heinz Steffens, cond; WDR SO • CPO 777 830-2 (69:59)

There is an undated photo of a young Robert Fuchs (1847–1927) inside the CD booklet showing the composer, perhaps in his late teens, with wild, piercing eyes and no smile, glaring forth with arms folded. I might have expected such a pose from a young Scriabin, but Robert Fuchs? Robert SERENADE Fuchs? It just doesn't add up. Somewhere in time between that photo and the music that we have come to know, Robert Fuchs mellowed. In his lifetime, he published 117 works in all of the major categories: solo, chamber, concerto (a lone piano concerto), symphony (three), choral, and opera. His music hews to the German school and the muse of Brahms and Schumann is never far away. Fuchs was especially prolific in

composing chamber music, much of which has been recorded (and which is quite fine, too!). Despite this attention from record labels, there are currently only 34 recordings of Fuchs's music listed at ArkivMusic. That's less than the number of recordings of Dvořák's Symphony No. 6 alone. Such is the fate of composers of the second rank.

This CPO release duplicates the program from a 1997 Thorofon CD performed by the Moravian Philharmonic under Manfred Müssauer. That Thorofon disc is very good, with solid performances in fine sound. If you have that (as I do), then this new one is superfluous. But if you are new to Fuchs (or are a rabid collector like me), then there is much to be said for these CPO performances, which really leaving nothing to be desired and are in very good sound to boot. These recordings were made way back in 2011 and sat on CPO's hard drive for nearly five years before seeing the light of day—puzzling, for sure. But when the laser encounters the first pit, Fuchs's sturdy melody that leads the first movement of Symphony No. 1 brings much enjoyment. "Hey, I know that melody" said I to me. Of course it was simply the remembrance of the Thorofon recording coming back to life. Most second-rank composers are that way because they lack a memorable melodic gift, but Fuchs was perhaps more hit than miss in this sense. Just the fact that I could recall that first movement melodic line testifies to the memorability of the music. But, of all the music on offer with this release, that is really the most memorable bit. The movement builds around that opening motif in a dramatic fashion, bringing to my mind Brahms and, to a lesser extent, Schumann—truly outstanding stuff. After the peak of that first movement it's a bit downhill for the rest of his First Symphony. The second movement (*Intermezzo, presto*) is a playful romp followed by a slow movement that lacks a strong melodic profile. The finale is Schumann redux but in a good way. The whole is well orchestrated and the WDR Symphony under the direction of Karl-Heinz Steffens plays the music for all of its considerable worth.

A noble brass fanfare begins the Second Symphony. Here the melodic profile is a tad less memorable, but the working out of the theme is effective. At 18 minutes in length (nearly equal in length to the next three movement combined) the movement is too long for the material and Fuchs would have been wise to trim it. The orchestral sonority remains that of Brahms, but without that master's turns of phrase that make him so delectable. The ensuing *Andante* movement is taken by Steffens at a nice, flowing pace. A Menuetto follows with some lovely wind playing. Brahms is never far away in this music. The finale completes this symphony with drama and flair.

The booklet notes are by Eckhardt van den Hoogen whose long, sprawling essays in many past CPO releases have, I think, suffered from non-idiomatic translations. In this instance, the notes in their English version are lucid, informative, and entertaining—one couldn't ask for more! I may have come across as somewhat hard on Fuchs in this review, but the fact is that I really like this music. The playing of the WDR Orchestra is excellent under Steffens and the audio quality is also

quite fine. Rather than giving Johannes another spin on your player, why not give Fuchs a try? It might bring a smile to the young man. Recommended. **Mark Novak**

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