

## Kagan - Naxos Vol. 1

**RIES Piano Sonatas: in f**, op. 11/2; **in E<sup>b</sup>**, op. 11/1. **Sonatina in a**, op. 45 • Susan Kagan (pn) • NAXOS 8.570796 (50:02)

By all rights, Susan Kagan should be reviewing this CD; but then that would pose a serious conflict of interest, given that she is the performing artist. Nonetheless, if you haven't already done so, I would urge you to read Peter J. Rabinowitz's interview with Susan in 32:1; for she has become not only a champion of Ferdinand Ries but also a foremost authority on his music; and for the Naxos label she has embarked on a project to record the composer's complete keyboard *œuvre*. This is Volume 1.

Ries (1784–1838) is often unfairly judged as little more than Beethoven's amanuensis and gofer. In exchange, Beethoven gave him piano lessons, but refused to teach him composition, a refusal Beethoven extended to all his students. It has also been suggested that in the IQ department Ries may not have been the brightest button in the sewing kit. Yet for all the charges that his relationship with Beethoven stifled his own creativity and independence, Ries established himself as a successful concertizing pianist, appeared regularly in Salomen's Philharmonic concert series during his years in London, and wrote nine piano concertos, eight symphonies, and a considerable volume of chamber music, including over two-dozen string quartets. Late in life, (1837) living with his wife in Germany, he was commissioned to write a large oratorio, *Die Könige in Israel*, which, more than any other of his works at least assured him passing mention in the music history texts.

Like many of the early Romantics—Moscheles, Hummel, Kuhlau, John Field, Kalkbrenner, Wölfl, and countless others—Ries was an offspring of the genetic struggle for influence and dominance between father—Haydn-Mozart-Beethoven—and mother—Weber-Mendelssohn-Chopin; and, like Schubert, he was caught right in the middle of it. It is hardly surprising then that Ries's works should exhibit certain bipolar characteristics.

Admittedly, I am more familiar with Ries from his chamber music—a recording of his piano quartets on cpo made my 2003 Want List—and from his symphonies than I am from his solo keyboard works. (It surprises me that Howard Shelley has not taken up Ries's piano concertos for Hyperion's "Romantic Piano" series.) So, as one uninitiated into this world of which Susan Kagan has spoken so eloquently, I can only offer my first impressions which, absent Kagan's intensive study and understanding, can be only superficial at best.

If it sounds like I'm dissembling in order to delay delivering a less than enthusiastic opinion, you're right. These piano sonatas and sonatina, to my unfamiliar ear, had very little to say to me. Occasionally, Ries offers a bold harmonic stroke, but

overall my sense is of miles of busy work—lots of running passages, especially in triplets—and not a single memorable tune. The keyboard style is not unlike that which one hears in Schubert's sonatas, but what strikes me as lacking are melodic inspiration and the kind of dramatic contrasts that create alternating states of emotional tension and repose. Good, solid musical ideas aplenty fly by, which one senses would be made something significant of by a more gifted muse; but in Ries's hands tuition never quite seems to achieve fruition.

This is my response to the music, which is purely personal and attributable to matters of taste. It is not my response to Kagan's playing which, at every turn, reveals her dedication and commitment to this body of neglected work. These are not technically easy pieces to play, either in terms of pure keyboard dexterity or in terms of making sense of some of Ries's quirky figurations and mercurial shifts of gears; yet Kagan navigates them flawlessly. I am equally certain that interpretively she makes as strong a case for Ries as possible.

I'm all for exploring the tributaries of music history, especially those that run parallel to the 19th-century Romantic mainstream, even if not every one of them floats my boat. Kagan and Naxos are both to be commended for undertaking this project, and it is to be hoped that they will be repaid by a renewed interest in a composer whose music deserves to be heard. **Jerry Dubins**

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## **Kagan - Naxos Vol. 2**

**RIES Piano Sonatas: in C**, op. 1/1; **in a**, op. 1/2. **Piano Sonatinas: in B<sup>b</sup>**, op. 5/1; **in F**, op. 5/2 • Susan Kagan (pn) • NAXOS 8.570743 (73: 45)

Up until recently, it has pretty much been the job of the excellent German record company, cpo, to provide the interested collector with recordings of music by Ferdinand Ries (1784–1838). Susan Kagan, a *Fanfare* contributor herself, has been furthering the cause on the Naxos label, though, and the present disc is the second volume of a projected series of the composer's piano sonatas and sonatinas.

Ries was a tremendously popular composer in his lifetime. Virtually everything he wrote was published. Famously, he was Beethoven's piano pupil (he was under Albrechtsberger for composition), and he was remarkable for his fusion of Beethovenian elements with foreshadowings of later composers such as Mendelssohn, Schubert, and Chopin. Thus, proto-Schubertian elements jostle with Beethovenian shadows in the first movement of the C-Major Sonata, op. 1/1 (the two sonatas, op. 1, were published in Bonn in 1807). On an immediate level, there are similarities between this sonata and Beethoven's C-Major Sonata, op. 2/3; melodic decoration in the Adagio ma non tanto generally reflects the influence of

Beethoven's early piano style, also. Op.1/1 is the only sonata on the disc in four movements as opposed to three. It includes a charming Menuetto that, in a lesser performer's hands, could degenerate into mere teaching material. Kagan lavishes it with all the affection she can muster, though, elevating its stature somewhat. The Rondo plays with meter (2/4 and 6/8) and is rather subdued in character. The Second Sonata of the op. 1 set is in three movements. The minor mode immediately establishes a contrasting mood to the preceding C-Major. There is charm, and wit aplenty in the hybrid second movement, though, and the finale has a sort of subdued *grazioso* feel to it. The two sonatas actually work well as a pair, and listening straight through is an eminently satisfying experience. The gap in expressive intent between "sonata" and "sonatina" is immediately apparent when Kagan launches into the slight B $\flat$  Sonatina. An infinitely sweet bonbon, this Sonatina reaches back to early Haydn. The Andantino central movement is of a controlled stateliness. Nothing here is seriously going to disturb the general delicacy; the same goes for the companion F-Major Sonatina, despite a more determined second theme in its first movement. The first movement of this Sonatina effectively evaporates; out of the silence comes the charming D-Minor Andantino. And if you don't smile at the finale, you haven't got a pulse. The piano sound (Kaufman Astoria Studios, Queens, New York) is well judged without being exceptional. What is exceptional is Kagan's fervent, eloquent advocacy of Ries. She writes her own booklet notes, and they exude the air of someone steeped in this music. More, she coedited the editions used for the sonatinas (with Allan Badley, who single-handedly edited the sonatas—[www.artaria.com](http://www.artaria.com)).

The disc comes with a free download—follow the instructions and you too can have the *Larghetto e cantabile* from Hummel's *Fantasie*, op. 18, played by Midoka Inui (from Naxos 8.557836, which I reviewed at the time of issue for an online journal and gave a mixed welcome). **Colin Clarke**

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## Kagan - Naxos Vol. 3

**RIES Piano Sonatas: in C**, op. 9/2; **in f $\sharp$** , op. 26, "L'Infortuné." ***The Dream***, op. 49 • Susan Kagan (pn) • NAXOS 8572204 (64:07)

*Fanfare's* own Susan Kagan has been performing a real service on behalf of Ferdinand Ries (1784–1838). This is her third volume dedicated to the composer's piano sonatas and sonatinas. I was privileged to review Volume 1 in *Fanfare* 32:3; Colin Clarke reviewed Volume 2 in 32:5; and here Volume 3 falls once again to me. Kagan, who is not only a highly accomplished pianist but also a distinguished musicologist who has written her own booklet notes and co-edited some of this

music with Allan Badley, has surely become today's leading advocate for and exponent of Ries's keyboard works. Not being anywhere near as knowledgeable about Ries as Kagan is, I don't know how many piano sonatas and sonatinas he wrote in total, and how many more discs in this cycle we can look forward to. Ries, as is well known, was a student of Beethoven—in piano, not composition—served for a time as the master's amanuensis, and was one of Beethoven's early biographers. Still, he managed a successful concert career as a pianist, wrote nine piano concertos of his own, and a quite respectable volume of music, including eight symphonies, more than two dozen string quartets, and other chamber works. Perhaps more than any of his other efforts, his oratorio, *Die Könige in Israel*, has had a fair degree of staying power.

Like many composer/virtuoso performers of the time, however, Ries fell into that narrow gap, musically speaking, between Beethoven/Schubert and Mendelssohn/Chopin, or in what you might call the transitional phase between the end of the Classical and the onset of the full-blown Romantic periods. That would include the likes of Czerny, Kalkbrenner, Moscheles, Spohr, Field, Onslow, and Paganini. In her booklet notes, Kagan describes very well Ries's "anticipation" of the romantic style and the ways in which his piano sonatas are "harbingers of the romantic style that was to flourish two decades later."

My response to the sonatas and sonatina presented on Volume 1 was not overly enthusiastic. "Occasionally," I wrote, "Ries offers a bold harmonic stroke, but overall my sense is of miles of busywork—lots of running passages, especially in triplets—and not a single memorable tune. The keyboard style is not unlike that which one hears in Schubert's sonatas, but what strikes me as lacking are melodic inspiration and the kind of dramatic contrasts that create alternating states of emotional tension and repose. Good, solid musical ideas aplenty fly by, which one senses would be made something significant of by a more gifted muse; but in Ries's hands tuition never quite seems to achieve fruition." That conclusion in no way, however, faulted Kagan's playing, which I found to be "flawless in terms of keyboard dexterity and in terms of making sense of some of Ries's quirky figurations and mercurial shifts of gears."

My reaction to the sonatas on the current volume remains unchanged. We're dealing here with something less than great music. Its main weakness, in my opinion, lies in an area seldom discussed in music criticism, and that is the art of continuation. A melody, theme, or motive occurs to a composer and he writes it down. In itself the idea may be lovely, even memorable; but then comes the real test. What comes next, how to go on?

The greatest composers seemed intuitively to know how to extend an idea or to counter it with another in a way that sounds natural and right, as if it could not have been otherwise. Take, for example, Schubert, whose piano sonatas Ries's somewhat resemble in a superficial way. Within the first 30 seconds of Ries's C-Major Sonata, he presents an attractive enough idea and introduces some Schubert-like shifts into the underlying harmony, one at the 24-second mark that is quite striking. But then, at the 31-second mark, he comes to a dead stop and

begins anew with a figure that sounds like the beginning of Beethoven's *Für Elise*. There's little logic to what happens for the next 15 seconds, until he returns to his opening statement at the 45-second mark.

It's not that any of it sounds bad; rather, it's that we're not gripped by the sense of an unfolding drama that takes us on an emotionally charged and psychologically satisfying journey. Contrast this to the first 45 seconds of Schubert's great B $\flat$ -Major Sonata, where the opening theme is not only harmonically undermined a number of times, but is not even presented as a complete statement, so that its true identity is concealed until the very end of the movement. Isn't that the hymn tune *Adeste Fidelis* at its core; and isn't that why we experience such a catharsis when we hear it at the end? Ries is to Schubert as Salieri was to Mozart; some are simply not summoned to such an exalted calling.

This does not mean that there is not much to take pleasure in here. The F $\sharp$ -Minor Sonata borrows much from Beethoven. Listen to the "Waldstein"-like drumming bass in the left hand and the "Appassionata"-like roulade of rapid repeated notes at 1:10. Kagan calls attention to the sonata's "Pathétique" similarities as well. Was Ries wallowing in self-pity when he titled the work "L'Infortunée" ("the unfortunate" or "ill-fated")? He wrote the work during his time in Paris, and he was disappointed and not a little angry when the French didn't express much enthusiasm for his music.

Truly one of the funniest essays I've come across on Ries was written by a Dr. David C. F. Wright, a psychologist by profession. The article is accessible at [musicweb-international.com/classrev/2003/Nov03/Ries\\_Wright.htm](http://musicweb-international.com/classrev/2003/Nov03/Ries_Wright.htm). Wright recounts the story, possibly true, that as a citizen of Bonn, Ries was subject to conscription in the French army, and was summoned to Paris in 1805, a journey of some 650 miles it is believed he made on foot. Perhaps that, or the fact that the army decided he was unfit for duty once he got there because he had only one eye (he lost the other one in a bout with smallpox as a child) was the reason he saw himself, in monocular vision of course, as "l'infortunée." Couldn't he have sent this information to the conscription office before making the trip? I mean, logic would have to tell you that someone with only one eye can't shoot worth a damn; there's a lack of depth perception.

If Wright had stopped after he said, "There is a lot of rubbish written about composers and their music and others perpetuate it by repetition; for example, Michael Kennedy writes that Salieri was hostile to Mozart and there is the other apocryphal story that Salieri poisoned Mozart," no one would question his credentials as either an amateur music historian or professional psychologist. But when he says, "This has done Salieri's reputation no good and, while I adore much Mozart, *Salieri is a finer composer and far more original*" [my italics], I would have to question his judgment in both fields of endeavor. One has to wonder what Wright means when he says "Ries had his eyes set on Russia." Don't you just love this stuff? Kagan is smiling too, like a Cheshire cat, in her booklet photograph. She must have as wicked a sense of humor as I do.

Ries's fortunes took a turn for the better when he arrived in London in 1813. It was

here that he wrote his one-movement fantasy work *The Dream*. It has no program, but its multisectional form does suggest, according to Kagan, a "programmatic narrative." If Beethoven and Schubert were Ries's models for the earlier sonatas, the keyboard style of *The Dream* clearly stands at the threshold to Chopin. Kagan's playing continues to be exceptional. She serves up Ries in a most pleasing and palatable way. And though I've yet to hear one of these works that I would care to take with me to the other side, while I'm still on this side, I shall enjoy, in Colin Clarke's words, the affection she lavishes on these works, in the process elevating their stature. Ries could not have asked for a better pianist and proponent than he has found in Susan Kagan. Definitely recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

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## **Kagan - Naxos Vol. 4**

**RIES Piano Sonatas: D, op. 9/1; A<sup>b</sup>, op. 141 • Susan Kagan (pn) • NAXOS 8.572299 (58:45)**

Back in *Fanfare* 32:5, I reviewed Volume 2 of Susan Kagan's ongoing survey of the piano sonatas and sonatinas of Ferdinand Ries. Here's Volume 4; there are no sonatinas in this volume, just two of the heftier sonatas (each lasts around half an hour). The first we hear is the D Major, composed in 1808 in Vienna. For the first movement, Ries pits grand ideas (in keeping with the key choice) against more *gemütlich* ideas. Kagan's pearly touch is a consistent delight. The end of this movement is strangely inconclusive. Presumably the idea is to act as a bridge to the fragmentary beginning of the ensuing Tempo di menuetto ma molto moderato. This second movement is fascinating, in that it is like hearing the boundaries of classical form being pushed and fragmenting in front of one's ears. It is multifunctional in that it acts as slow movement and minuet, but its ambition is far beyond that. Ries's contrapuntal embroiderings are a constant source of delight. The first theme is of a distinct stumbling nature, giving it a most appealing quirkiness (thanks, no doubt, to Kagan's handling; it is easy to imagine it just sounding clumsy). The finale begins with a deceptively simple, distinctly Schubertian theme (it is in fact a set of eight variations). Kagan brings real fantasy to the cadenza-like passage around nine minutes in. The A<sup>b</sup>-Sonata constitutes Ries's penultimate effort in the genre. Again tripartite in structure, it was composed in 1826. The lovely, flowing first movement casts its eye toward Weber. Ries deliberately shades his charming music with Beethovenian overshadowings. Indeed, it is in the central Adagio con moto where Beethoven's influence is most marked. Kagan's cantabile is magical, and she renders the low bass figure around 1:15 superbly and characterfully. Rusticity is the order of the day for the finale (think German country dance tunes). Here Kagan's wonderful,

pearly touch (noted earlier) comes into its own, coupled with more of that lovely bass clarity. Throughout, Kagan's pedaling is a model of taste. Textures are always clear. Credit should also go to the engineers and the piano technician. The superbly toned Steinway is ably caught, as are Kagan's myriad subtleties. In short, this is a disc that guarantees much pleasure. May the explorations continue. **Colin Clarke**

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## **Kagan - Naxos Vol. 5**

**RIES Piano Sonatas: in A**, op. 114; **in A<sup>b</sup>**, op. 176; **in b**, WoO 11 • Susan Kagan (pn)  
• NAXOS 8.572300 (62: 04)

Susan Kagan's survey of Ferdinand Ries piano music continues in this, the fifth volume of her series. The A-Major Sonata dates from Ries's final period (it was composed around 1823), and one can perhaps be forgiven for spotting the many parallels with late Beethoven, not least a surprising sparseness of texture, unashamed use of registral extremes, and the emancipation of the trill from a merely decorative function. Over and above all this, there is a feeling of serenity that also mirrors late Beethoven. The Scherzo (A Minor) is interesting. Cast in rondo form, it exudes resolve while encompassing moments of respite. Kagan is superb at delineating each and every mood. She also exhibits superb legato at speed for the *moto perpetuo* theme of the finale, while articulating the left-hand keening motion (which in other, lesser hands would surely go unnoticed) with great character. Chordal outbursts are purely celebrational.

The A<sup>b</sup>-Sonata, op. 176, is Ries's final essay in this genre (Rome, 1832; his penultimate sonata had also shared this key). After the facility of op. 114's finale, op. 176's first movement ruminates on a variety of textures and fragments. Although the mood is optimistic, it is nevertheless exploratory. There is a beautiful civility to the dialogues between voices in the first movement; this element of dialogue is enhanced and expanded in the beautiful Larghetto quasi andante (perfectly paced here by Kagan). The cantabile here is a continual sense of delight, and the richness of Kagan's tone is expertly retained by Naxos's engineers (the recording itself is made in the Beethoven-Saal, Hanover). After this, Kagan captures the sweet innocence of the theme of the Ländler third movement perfectly, and contrasts this with the shifting rhythms of the mysterious Trio. What is consistently interesting about this music is how Ries might begin a movement with a gesture or a theme of charm, and the myriad ways he goes on to explore that music's potentialities. At times quirky, sometimes witty, sometimes tragic, often unpredictable, he is rarely less than fascinating, and often much more. Kagan sees the B-Minor Sonata as "the starting point for the 14 sonatas of Ries's

*oeuvre.*" It dates from either 1801 or 1805. It is not a slight work, as it lasts some 22 minutes and begins with an intimate eight-minute slow movement marked *Largo molto et appassionato* that is followed by a seven-minute Adagio. The first movement reaches its nadir, its darkest point, around two minutes before its end. Kagan gives the silences of the central Adagio full weight. The music speaks eloquently through them. Ries's textures are surprisingly, daringly bleak at times. Even the finale brings little relief (*Allegro agitato*), and it ends enigmatically, with the musical equivalent of a raised eyebrow. This is a remarkable work that fully deserves to sit with the two later works on the disc.

I really cannot think of anything negative to say about this most recent volume. It takes one on a voyage of discovery that guarantees to delight and fascinate. More, it (at least in my case) inspires one to look further. Ferdinand Ries's cause could hardly be better championed. **Colin Clarke**

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