

ENESCU Piano Suites: No. 1, op. 3, "Dans le style ancien"; No. 2, op. 10; No. 3, op. 18, "Pièces impromptues" • Luiza Borac, pn. • AVIE AV0013 (79:06)

Enescu was an all-embracing musician—a magnificent violinist, a first-rate conductor whose sympathies extended from Bach to Bartók, and a meticulous composer whose incomprehensibly under-appreciated music ranges widely in technique and spirit. You can get some sense of his scope from the three suites recorded here, none of which has the slightest bit in common with the popular, but atypical, *Romanian Rhapsodies*. Much of the staunchly backward-looking First (written when he was still a teenager) could pass as a Busoni arrangement of some unfamiliar Bach; the intricate and audacious Third, dating from around World War I, looks in spots as far ahead as Messiaen (try, in particular, the visionary bell effects of the closing "Carillon Nocturne"); between them comes the Gallic Second, much under the spell of his beloved teacher Fauré. All of it is idiomatically written for the instrument; and even at their most derivative, the first two never sound pallid, much less timid. From the beginning, Enescu sounded like a composer who knew exactly what he was doing.

Bits and pieces of this repertoire show up on recordings from time to time: Among the best performances are an old version of the Second's Bourée played with characteristically light-fingered panache by Dinu Lipatti, an evocative rendering of the final movements of the Third by Dana Ciocarlie (Empreinte Digitale ED 13122, 25:1), and a fragrant reading of the entire Second Suite by Erling Helmer Petersen (Danica DCD 8165, 19:2). If you're after the whole cycle, though, the only alternative on a single CD is, I believe, the old Electrecord recording by Aurora Ienei (reissued on Olympia OCD 414). Fortunately, Luiza Borac, who has a string of competition honors to her credit, plays the music with tact, flexibility, and an interpretive perspective that offers new illumination rather than redundancy. On the whole, Borac is less studied, less massive than her predecessor: Thus, where Ienei serves up a grandly noble reading of the Adagio from the First Suite, Borac provides something more intimate and mysterious; and while Ienei gives a stony profile to the Scarlatti-esque Presto that follows, Borac—softer but also faster—turns out something far wittier. Borac's more pliant approach pays special dividends in the gloriously melodic Second; at the same time, Ienei's concentration provides more focus in the potentially rambling Third. Forced to choose, I'd probably opt for Borac—which is fortunate, since the Ienei isn't easy to find these days. The sound is natural, and the notes—by Borac herself and by *Fanfare* colleague Martin Anderson—are magnificent.

Peter J. Rabinowitz

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ENESCU Piano Sonatas, op 24: No. 1 in fit; No. 3 in D. Prelude and Fugue in C. Nocturne. Scherzo. Pièce sur le nom de Faure • Luiza Borac, pn. • AVIE AV 2081 (2 Hybrid multichannel SACDs: 93:38)

I was sent the final pressing of this set, along with the cover story and review Peter Rabinowitz wrote for *Fanfare* 29:4. Broadly speaking, I agree with Rabinowitz's opinions on Borac, though I've not heard her recording of the Suites. "Sensitivity and timbral imagination" is an excellent way to characterize her refinement of touch in everything on both discs of this set. It is also extremely poised playing that she offers, however; and while there are some pianists whose beauty and variety of tone is unfortunately partnered by an inchoate musical conception, that's not the case here. Borac always seems to have in mind a clear goal for every phrase, and exactly the means to achieve it. Those differences that I have with her playing on this release have far less to do with technique and basic musical understanding than interpretative choices.

You might think this a given, but Dana Ciocarlie in her Enescu selections on a recent disc of Romanian piano music (L'Empreinte Digitale ED 13122) found it nearly impossible to sustain a simple rhythmic pulse for any length of time. This had a seriously deleterious effect on her performances of the *Romanian Rhapsody No. 1* and the First Piano Sonata, despite an otherwise attractively inflected reading. Borac is less given to sharp accenting. Her performance of that sonata's Scherzo correctly emphasizes its fleetness, but she plays down its harmonic spikiness and rhythmic propulsion in a way I find dampens its individuality. There, and in the work's first movement, I continue to prefer Maria Fotino, who combines Borac's energy with Ciocarlie's angularity and a bold spontaneity entirely her own. But in the third movement—an *andante molto espressivo* remarkable for its somnambulistic breadth—Borac is most persuasive. Slower and more detailed than the other versions, hers offers a greater range of well-articulated shadings. Perhaps it's something in her technique that responds especially well to situations of musical near-stasis, where momentum ceases to matter and the proper weighting of each phrase becomes paramount; but this is the kind of movement that brings out the best in Borac. It is one of my favorite things from a performance perspective on the release, fully capable of standing alongside the lengthy, sometimes Scriabinesque Nocturne in its visionary quietude and structural insight.

Or is there a temperamental tendency at work towards the more subdued side of the spectrum, where the pianist can best display her broad but impeccably

disciplined range of color? Possibly so, for the outer, extroverted sections of the early Scherzo lack the incisiveness and drive that Aurora Ienei finds. Ienei also discovers a puckish joyousness in the Prelude from Enescu's Prelude and Fugue—a heady mix of Bach infused with Faure—and a sweeping majesty in the work's Fugue. Both are played much faster and with a greater range of volume than Borac, who is serenely smiling from the start, with carefully modulated dynamics throughout. But after repeated hearings I find myself drawn more to the latter, in a subtle performance that seems to flow along inevitably of its own volition, buoyed by a natural rhythmic pulse without human interference. That's an absolute illusion, of course, but it was a skill Dinu Lipatti developed over time, and it appears Borac may have done so, as well.

The Third Piano Sonata does yield to Lipatti in insight if not technique, but the *Pièce sur le nom de Fauré* is handled with delicacy and restraint. It is not an easy work to play well, combining aspects of the dedicatee's late harmonic language with Enescu's own tendency towards maximum compression: even when there's apparently little going on, there's a lot happening.

The engineering is good, realistic and close, stereo, with a bit of dullness to the midrange at lower volume levels. The ambience is slightly dry, but this has its good side in that it doesn't flatter the soloist: you hear exactly what is being played, barring edits. In SACD mode the sound blooms, creating a richer palette and more presence. The attractive liner notes are in two parts: a lengthier essay on Enescu and the enclosed works, followed by a brief but insightful musical analysis of the First Sonata's finale, by Borac.

Finally, a word of thanks to Avie, John Barnes (co-producer with Borac), and, of course, Luiza Borac, herself. We haven't had anywhere near this quantity of Enescu for piano in quite some time, if allowances are made for deleted recordings. It's been long overdue, and bespeaks a love for this music, and a recognition of its uniformly high quality. Despite my mild reservations expressed above, I can wholeheartedly recommend this album.

Barry Brenesal

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Enescu: Piano Suites/Borac - ClassicsToday

Review by: David Hurwitz *Artistic Quality: 10 Sound Quality: 10*

George Enescu was a musical genius of Mozartean universality and range, and the only reason his music isn't better known is because it's terribly difficult to play, not just technically but emotionally and stylistically. Despite the neo-classical patterning of such works as the first two suites on offer here, there's really no such thing as a chaste, "classical" approach to these, or any other of his works.

Either you're a full-blown Romantic virtuoso in the "golden age" sense of the term, or you'd better not waste your own (or the listener's) time. In particular, Enescu's subtle approach to tempo requires the most sensitive use of rubato and the ability to play whole phrases and paragraphs across the bar lines as if in a single breath. Add to this the composer's exquisite sensitivity to matters of tone color and his sheer love of rich textures—of writing music with "lots of notes" but in which every one of them matters—and the result requires a very special sort of artistry in performance.

On evidence here, Romanian pianist Luiza Borac makes a very worthy exponent of her countryman's music. The First Suite, composed at the ripe old age of 15, is Bach on steroids, and Borac's playing perfectly conveys its gusto and enthusiasm. She projects the second-movement fugue with effortless insouciance and makes a thing of poetry of the Adagio, one of Enescu's first essays in the sort of endlessly flowing river of melody that later became so characteristic of his style. In the final Presto, Borac unleashes a torrent of sound and sustains it from the first bar to the last.

The Second Suite, which dates from 1901/03, begins with a jubilant Toccata, played here with the necessary freedom of tempo and uninhibited sense of abandon. Listen to the way Borac caresses the gorgeous third-movement Pavane, her fingers scarcely seeming to touch the keyboard as she spins out its gentle trills and decorative filigree. Captivating! In the concluding Bourrée Enescu turns to Romanian folk music, and Borac captures both the music's rustic charm as well as its evident desire to break out of the simple rhythm of its initial accompaniment and become something altogether more sophisticated (an apt musical illustration of the composer's personality).

Dating from 1913-16, the Third Suite consists of individual pieces later collected together in a single volume, and so it completely lacks the neo-classical formal outlines of the previous two. It also contains some of Enescu's most remarkable piano music now in his fully mature style. *Voix de la steppe* perfectly illustrates his "parlando-rubato" melodic style, as does Borac's presentation of it. Burlesque recalls many a similar moment in Bartók, with its nose-thumbing humor and deliberate grotesquerie. The most remarkable movements, though, are the finale pair, a chorale shot through with mysterious modal harmony, and a remarkable Carillon nocturne whose chiming dissonances and evocative use of piano resonance sound like some early work of Messiaen.

It's very instructive to compare Borac's performances of these last two pieces to those of Aurora Ienei (last on Olympia). Borac takes a full three and half minutes longer over both movements but plays with such dynamic sensitivity and breadth of phrasing that Ienei sounds quite prosaic by comparison. Borac also is much

better recorded; the silken tones she conjures from the keyboard are very naturally captured in a lively acoustic that conveys optimal warmth and clarity. Even were this not the only show in town in this repertoire, it's obvious that Borac has a special affinity for the composer's elusive idiom, and that makes this disc an outstanding contribution to the still far-too-small Enescu discography.
[10/11/2003]

George ENESCU (1881-1955) - MusicWeb Review - Borac V. 1

Suites for solo piano: No. 1 in G minor *Dans le style ancien* Op. 3 (1897) [19.40]; No. 2 in D major Op. 10 (1901) [22.21]; No. 3 *Pièces Impromptues* Op. 18 (1913-16) [36.54]

Luiza Borac (piano)

rec. 23-30 March 2003, Stadttheater Lindau, Bodensee. DDD

AVIE AV0013 [79.06]

Enescu's three *Piano Suites* chart the development of this most protean of composers from 1897, his sixteenth year, to 1916. Whilst only the last of them gives a foretaste of the mature Enescu of the opera *Oedip* or the Piano Sonatas, all this music is imaginative, vital and idiomatic – something only to be expected from this most remarkable of musical polymaths, the composer-violinist-conductor whose own piano technique was the envy of Alfred Cortot, no less!

Just now Luiza Borac's Avie account has the field more or less to itself. Aurora Ienei on Olympia is theoretically available but difficult to obtain. Cristian Petrescu's, from his controversial but charismatic 3-CD set of the complete piano music on Accord, has been unaccountably deleted; the *Second Suite* is certainly available in mixed recitals by Monica Gutman (Claves) and Daniel Goiti (Symposium) but neither of these is specially worth seeking out. Even the composer's own recording of a handful of movements from the first two suites has, with the demise of Dante-Lys, gone temporarily underground.

Fortunately, Borac's attractively produced CD is more than just a stopgap, enhanced as it is by Martin Anderson's notes and a neat essay on the technical difficulties of the Suites from the pianist herself. If what Anderson aptly describes as the "crazy Bachian quality" of the *First Suite dans le style ancien* is rendered a touch somnolently, there is clarity in both playing and recording to compensate. The disconcertingly bland *Adagio* is the only movement where Borac stumbles, failing to catch its enigmatic, deadpan quality. Here we certainly miss Ienei's poise, compromised though that was by Olympia's tinny recording.

In the more Frenchified neo-classical games of the *Second Suite*, Borac treads

equally cautious ground. Though the majestic opening *Toccata* lacks nothing in grandeur there's a hint of prissiness about her over-pointed articulation. The wistfulness of the elegant *Pavane* is brought out well, though partially at the expense of that *bercé* (rocking) rhythm Enescu asks for and captured in his own, more flowing version.

The *Pièces impromptues* are not an integrated suite but a collection of independent compositions written between 1913 and 1916. They inhabit a different sound world altogether, more complex and personal, shot through the Slavic richness associated with Enescu's later music. Most substantial are the linked *Choral* and *Carillon nocturne* which close the suite, fading to the sound of church bells echoing enharmonically through the Romanian summer night. A magical effect, precisely evoked by Borac. The reflective element in many of the *Pièces* suits the personality of her playing well, though once again in faster movements such as the *Mazurk mélancholique* (not enough Mazurka and too much melancholia) rhythmic elasticity can be lacking.

This is absorbing music, outstandingly recorded. If Luiza Borac does not always rise to some of the insights of some of her earlier Romanian compatriots, her interpretations are consistently lucid and thoughtful. Especially given the absence of competition, this is a self-recommending, quality issue.

Christopher Webber

George ENESCU (1881–1955) - MusicWeb Review - Borac V. 2 Piano Music, Vol. 2

CD1: Prelude and Fugue in C major (1903) [15:10]; Nocturne in D flat major (1907) [20:27]; Scherzo (1896) [5:58]; Pièce sur le nom de Fauré (1922) [3:05]

CD2: Piano Sonata No. 1 in F sharp minor Op. 24/1 (1924) [25:08]; Piano Sonata No. 3 in D major Op. 24/3 (1934) [23:30]

Luiza Borac (piano)

rec. 4-5, 7 July 2005, St. Dunstan's Church, Mayfield, England

AVIE AV2081 [44:50 + 48:53]

Having recently fallen under the spell of Enescu's masterpiece, the opera *Oedipe* [\[review\]](#) , it was a pleasant surprise to find this double CD in the latest batch of review discs. I was totally unfamiliar with his piano music, but this multi-talented man, who first and foremost was one of the great violinists of his day, was also a brilliant pianist, admired by pianist colleagues of the calibre of Alfred Cortot, who stated that Enescu had a better piano technique than Cortot himself. And it is obvious that some of this music puts the pianist to severe test. The music,

spanning a period of almost forty years, is also extremely diversified.

The opening piece, the *Prelude and Fugue*, written when he was 22, has more than a nod in the direction of Johann Sebastian Bach, the prelude especially clarified and serene, but this is far from a pastiche and there soon creep in un-Bachian harmonies, reminding us that his teacher was Fauré and that the piano composer of the day was Debussy. The long *Nocturne* is even more impressionistic, starting softly almost immobile but slowly growing. It reaches no real climax at this stage but goes back to the initial mood, strangely hypnotic. After about seven minutes it changes character, becomes darker with menacing rumble in the left hand while the right hand sprinkles arabesques on the dark surface. Enescu's night music is no idyll; Chopin and Field are in a completely different world; this is rather nightmarish but with rays of light to both illuminate and console. Fascinating music that is a challenge to both pianist and instrument. After 14 minutes it dies away and there is a long silence before we return to the stillness of the opening. This music was never heard during Enescu's lifetime – it was found among his papers after his death.

The *Scherzo*, written he was 15, starts with youthful nervous eagerness. After about two minutes there is a contrasting trio with a beautiful Brahmsian melody and then back to puberty again. *Pièce sur le nom de Fauré* was a commission from the *Revue musicale* which turned to seven of the aged masters former pupils to write a short piece each – among the others were Koechlin, Ravel and Florent Schmitt. It has an improvisatory character but is in fact utterly calculated with the little tune, built on the letters of Fauré's name, repeated twelve times but skilfully hidden behind the decorations with which he fills his little canvas.

CD2 contains his first and third piano sonatas only. Where is the second? Well, it doesn't exist, but it once did – only in Enescu's head, though. It was a finished composition that he, as in many other cases, never found the time to write down. He once said to a colleague: "If I could put down on paper everything I have in my head, it would take hundreds of years". I wonder what riches we would have had if the modern computer with all its possibilities had existed in Enescu's time. *Sonata No. 1* from 1924 was one of few works that had him temporarily abandoning the strenuous composition of the opera *Oedipe*. It is a bit strangely organised, has a long first movement, marked *Allegro molto moderato e grave* and it is serious and mostly dark. It begins with a simple descending motif that is soon immersed in a swarm of ideas, seemingly improvised. The second movement, instead of being slow is a *Presto vivace*, a short and whirling scherzo, actually a kind of *perpetuum mobile*. The slow movement instead comes last, starting on a repeated single note, very sparse music, reminding me of Arvo Pärt's piano compositions. The whole movement feels like consolation finally reached after the darkness of the beginning and the hectic gaiety of the scherzo.

Sonata No. 3, written ten years later, after having finished the opera, is light and full of invention, seemingly written by a harmonious and confident person. Nothing could be more wrong: in reality his private life was in a tumultuous state, his life partner Maruca having suffered a mental breakdown "which left her bordering on madness for the rest of her life". Enescu wrote in a letter to Edmond Fleg, the librettist of *Oedipe*: "I console myself by taking refuge in composition. The result is a new piano sonata, freshly arrived after *Oedipe*. It's full of gaiety, in complete contrast to the atmosphere which surrounds it". Little more needs to be said about it, only that the central movement, *Andantino cantabile*, breathes harmony, deeply influenced by Romanian folk-music. The last movement is bouncy and jolly, like someone dancing around on a brightly sunlit summer meadow.

One must wonder why this music isn't heard more often, but of course Enescu has never been a household name outside his native Romania and even great composers need first rate advocates to salvage them from obscurity; and this is exactly what Enescu has in the shape of Luiza Borac. The two discs, not too well-filled (but at a special price), abound with ravishing pianism and although I have not been able to hear any alternative versions it is hard to imagine this music better played. Ms Borac has such delicate touch and also all the requisite power. She is recorded with exceptional truthfulness, the acoustics of St. Dunstan's Church being obviously ideal for this music. The booklet has a lot of interesting biographical details as well as good notes on the music. Altogether this is a high quality product. Maybe Enescu at last is due for wider appreciation and then this set will be a valuable gateway.

Göran Forsling

Raluca Stirbat Reviews Below:

ENESCU Suites, op. 3/1; op. 10/2. Piano Sonatas Nos. 1 and 3. *Pièces impromptues*. Nocturne in D \flat . *Prélude et scherzo*. Barcarolle. *La fileuse*. Impromptus: in A \flat ; in C. *Regrets*. *Prélude et fugue*. Sonatensatz. *Pièce sur le nom de Fauré* • Raluca Stirbat (pn) • HÄNSSLER 98.060 (3 CDs: 201:19)

This set brings us the complete output for solo piano by George Enescu (1881–1955), save a half dozen trifles from his childhood years. The primary works are the two Suites, written in 1897 and 1903 respectively; the *Pièces impromptus*, op. 18, of 1913–16, sometimes referred to as Suite No. 3 but not designated as such by the composer; the Nocturne of 1907, an extended work lasting 17 minutes; and the later Piano Sonatas Nos. 1 and 3, composed in 1924 and 1935 respectively. The missing Second Piano Sonata was never written down, although Enescu

reputedly had it all in his head and even performed it. Unfortunately no recording exists, otherwise scholars would have reconstructed it by now. The shorter pieces on this set consist of juvenilia from around the same period as the first two Suites, and one occasional piece from 1922 in honor of the composer's teacher Gabriel Fauré. *La fileuse*, *Regrets*, and the Impromptu in C are given recording premieres, as is the Sonatensatz (1912), an earlier, longer and substantially different version of the piece that became the first movement of the First Piano Sonata. Although Enescu's best-known work, the *Romanian Rhapsody* No. 1 for orchestra, was composed as early as 1901, he reached his true maturity as a composer in the 1930s. Of the piano music, only the Third Sonata falls into that period.

Enescu was a musical prodigy and, unsurprisingly, his early pieces form a compendium of disparate influences. The First Suite is pastiche-Bach, skillfully done and not without interest; the 18-year-old composer could write a fugue with the best of them. The *Presto* finale, still Bachian in its gestures, also contains more than a whiff of Chopin, particularly in Stirbat's impassioned performance. The Second Suite reflects the influence of Fauré in its harmonic progressions and melodic turns of phrase. Despite the occasional suggestion of Romanian folk music in parts of this suite and the *Pièces impromptues*—an influence that would become stronger later on—it is hard to discern an individual voice in this music.

That is not to say that Enescu was without fresh ideas: The "Carillon Nocturne" (the final movement of the *Pièces impromptues*) creates a highly distinctive representation of bells. Peter J. Rabinowitz, reviewing a different performance in *Fanfare* 27:3, remarks quite rightly that this piece dating from the era of the First World War looks ahead to Messiaen, although Debussy and Ravel had previously explored bell sonorities in their piano music.

The Third Sonata dates from a period of increased compositional activity. During the first half of the 1930s Enescu completed his opera *Œdipe*, and was soon to produce the Third Orchestral Suite, "Villageoise," and the *Impressions d'enfance* for violin and piano, both remarkably individual works. The sonata, like Suite No. 1 and the early Prélude et Fugue, draws on Baroque models—but those models are now imbued with folk-dance rhythms, sophisticated harmony, and a tendency to say more with less (this latter trait in direct contrast to the early works). It is a work of considerable integrity, once famously championed by Dinu Lipatti. In this performance, Raluca Stirbat winningly ensures that the asymmetrical rhythmic figures never sound jerky, and she clearly relishes the subtle thematic transformations. She also thoroughly understands and communicates the improvisational quality of the writing in the central *Andantino cantabile*.

In 2003 and 2006, Luisa Borac recorded three CDs on the Avie label of Enescu's piano music. They contain all the main works, but her selection is not quite as extensive as Stirbat's. Borac received excellent reviews at the time, and hers were regarded as the versions of choice in a sparsely populated field. I have Borac's disc containing Suites Nos. 1 and 2, and the *Pièces impromptues*, but not her recording of the Sonatas. Generally speaking, Borac is slower and softer edged,

more inclined to find poetry, where Stirbat moves things along and stirs up greater *Sturm und Drang*. In the aforementioned "Carillon Nocturne," for instance, Borac links the music back to Debussy's cathedral, where Stirbat's chiseled placement of the bell sonorities pre-echoes Messiaen. In all three suites, Stirbat is consistently faster. In terms of piano sound, Borac's recording is easier on the ear, whereas Stirbat's piano gets clangy above a *forte* and lacks fullness in the bass. It is still acceptable, however, and Stirbat proves to be a pianist of fluency and strength. She is also an Enescu expert, and writes enlightening booklet notes. If you are interested in this repertoire you cannot go wrong with either artist, but if you already own the Borac discs you probably don't need the new set.

To end on a subjective note, I find Enescu's music uneven. Great claims were made for him by Lipatti, Menuhin, Casals, and indeed some critics in this journal, but I am inclined to the view that his manifold musical activities interfered with his progress as a composer. Enescu spent a great deal of his life as a violin virtuoso (he was also an excellent pianist), a conductor, and a much sought-after teacher. The fact that he left both his Fourth and Fifth Symphonies unfinished tells the story: He did not have time to concentrate on composing. His dense opera *Œdipe* shows signs of having been written piecemeal over a long period (21 years, in fact). Menuhin wrote, "as long as I knew my beloved and great teacher, Georges Enescu, the score of this overwhelming opera was by his side. Night and day, instead of sleeping after and between concerts, he would work at this monumental opus..." but the work never flows. It is too painstaking for its own good. Enescu's three finished symphonies have always seemed to me over-scored, with a tendency to tread water (structurally speaking), although Hannu Lintu has recently given us a chance to re-evaluate them in first-class readings. As for the early piano music, it would be perfect as the prelude to a string of mature masterpieces, but these never followed. Why listen to pseudo-Bach and pseudo-Fauré when you can hear the real thing? If that is harsh or too dismissive, the truth is our listening time is limited, perhaps more severely today than ever before, and there is a lot of music out there. Enescu wrote a handful of imaginative and at times fascinating works, but while he was undoubtedly a great musician, I am not convinced he became a great composer. **Phillip Scott**

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**George ENESCU (1881-1955) - MusicWeb Review - Stirbat
Complete works for piano solo**

Raluca Stirbat (piano)

rec. 1-4 September 2010, 6-12 January 2013, April and June 2013, Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst, Wien

HÄNSSLER CLASSIC CD98.060 [3 CDs: 61:41 + 73:38 + 66:00]

Enescu was apparently as accomplished a pianist as a violinist but it has taken a long time to get his work for the piano into focus (see [survey by Evan Dickerson](#)). This set appears to be the first to contain all his piano works, and it claims several first recordings, as well as one work, the Sonatensatz, which was discovered only after Noel Malcolm published his indispensable [handbook to the composer in 1990](#). Indeed, the history of Enescu's compositions is one of works of which some were completed, some left unfinished or sketched, and some which were lost only to turn up decades later. This was partly because of the political vicissitudes through which he lived but also because he was a meticulous craftsman who repeatedly pored over and adjusted his works until he was satisfied. An Enescu score is remarkable for the detail with which he notates his intentions and it presents a corresponding challenge to his interpreters.

Of the three discs, the first finds him still finding his way in the world of *fin-de-siècle* Paris. The first piano suite, *Dans le style ancien*, is the eighteenth century seen through late nineteenth century eyes, like Busoni's versions of Bach. Enescu was sixteen when he wrote it. The gem here is the Fugue, which aroused the admiration of Ravel. The *Prelude* and *Scherzo* are also Brahmsian but with a demonic touch in the *Scherzo* which rather suggests Liszt. The *Barcarolle* is closer to Chopin, as one might expect, with a long melody which unfolds over a repeating bass with many subtle modulations. The other shorter pieces on this first disc are closer to the Liszt of the *Années de pèlerinage*. The *Prelude* and *Fugue* in C date from rather later, and might have been intended for the second piano suite. By this time he has found his idiom, which has accepted some influence from the French impressionists into a basically Germanic language.

That second suite, subtitled *Des cloches sonores*, opens the second disc. The titles suggest a suite by Debussy or Ravel, and it has been compared to Ravel's *Tombeau de Couperin*. Enescu acknowledged the influence, but with his tongue in his cheek since Ravel's suite dates from fourteen years later than his own. A more plausible influence is that of Fauré, whose pupil he had been. The *Sarabande* is far more energetic and full-blooded than the corresponding piece by Debussy and it rises to a Lisztian climax. The *Pavane* is the most interesting piece with its very free and flexible solo melodic line above a subtle and varying accompaniment. This is apparently close to the kind of Romanian folk-music known as the *doina*.

The *Nocturne* is a long and somewhat unsatisfactory work, with outer sections fairly close to what one might expect from the title, though quite heavily written. There's a sinister middle section which quite belies the title. Enescu did not publish this work, perhaps because he was not satisfied with it, but it anticipates some of the effects of his later music in its rhythmic complexity.

The *Pièces Impromptues pour piano* were also unpublished, in this case because Enescu lost the manuscript, which turned up only after his death. This is not really a suite, though it is sometimes referred to as the third piano suite, but more a set of individual pieces. In these works the Lisztian idiom has become modified in the direction of Ravel. These are charming works, very varied in their moods. Perhaps the most interesting is the final *Carillon nocturne*, in which Enescu captures the sound of bells heard across mountains with note clusters, unlike Ravel's *La vallée des cloches* but anticipating not only the end of Stravinsky's *Les noces*, with its final bell sounds evoked by four pianos, but also Messiaen's *Noël* from the *Vingt Regards*.

The third disc opens with another discovery. This *Sonatensatz* is the first version of the first movement of the Piano Sonata Op. 24. No. 1, which was found in the Enescu Museum in Bucharest in 1993. This is a dark, brooding work, difficult to follow because of the constant development of its principal themes and restless modulation. However, it was well worth rescuing, though one can understand why the composer rejected it.

Between this and the two sonatas is the tiny *Pièce sur le nom de Fauré*, written to honour the composer for his seventy-seventh birthday. It is a touching tribute, short and characterful, and would be a good piece for pianists to try, except that, like most of the works in this set, it is not in print.

We come then finally to the two big sonatas, Enescu's most important works for the medium. They are very different. The first sonata begins with a powerful movement, reworked from the earlier *Sonatensatz*, terser and more varied but no less haunting. The Presto which follows is a kind of Prokofievan scherzo. The finale is an Andante which draws on Romanian folk music, with ambiguous tonality and bell sounds.

There is no Sonata Op. 24 No. 2. Enescu said he had it in his head but he never wrote it down and after his death only a few sketches were found.

The third sonata is in contrast to the first. It is predominantly light-hearted with a first movement which skitters and glitters and jumps about. The slow movement features a long, lyrical and rhythmically irregular line which is festooned with decorations and ornaments. The printed page – for this work is actually in print – is quite amazing in the complexity of the writing and the precision of the notation and instructions. It is a most beautiful piece. The finale is a kind of delicate toccata, full of verve and excitement with a good deal of use of fast repeated notes.

The young Romanian pianist Raluca Stirbat has made a particular study of the

composer, including writing a doctoral dissertation on his piano works, so she is well placed to record them complete. She clearly knows them thoroughly and from the inside. Her technique is up to their considerable technical demands. She does not quite have the magical feathery touch of Lipatti in his famous recording of the third sonata but she has clearly listened to it and has allowed herself a similar flexibility though without simply copying him. She is decently recorded and writes her own, very helpful notes. Her main competitor is Luisa Borac in some well-received Avie discs, issued separately ([vol. 1](#); [vol. 2](#)). Borac omits most of the early works on Stirbat's set but adds a piano version of the third orchestral suite, titled *Villageoise*. I would love to hear a pianist such as Hamelin, Anderszewski or Tiberghien tackle the two sonatas in particular but for someone who wants a complete survey of Enescu's fascinating piano works this will do very well.

Stephen Barber

George Enescu: Complete Works for Piano Solo Review by Blair Sanderson
AllMusic Review of Stirbat Rating: 4*/5*

George Enescu's primary instrument was the violin, but he also wrote a substantial body of works for piano, including sonatas, suites, preludes, and other short character pieces. This three-disc Hänssler Classic set of the complete works for piano solo, performed by Romanian pianist **Raluca Stirbat**, offers valuable insights into **Enescu's** evolving methods and artistic development over a period of four decades, from the Suite No. 1 in G minor, Op. 3 (1897) to the Piano Sonata No. 3 in D major (1935). **Enescu** passed through several phases, starting with a fascination with Baroque forms in his teenage years, and progressing to an enthusiasm for Wagnerian chromaticism and Romanian folk music, which led to a more integrated mature style. **Stirbat** is an ardent proponent for **Enescu's** music, and her album is the first complete set of his piano music on CD. Recorded at the University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna, the sound is crisp and detailed, though the resonance of the performing space is quite pronounced.