

Eduard FRANCK (1817-1893) - MusicWeb Review

Piano Concerto No 1 in D minor, Op 13 (1846) [40:42]

Piano Concerto No 2 in C major (1879) [34:08]

Georg Michael Grau (piano)

Württembergische Philharmonie/Fawzi Haimor

rec. 2018, Studio der Württembergischen Philharmonie, Reutlingen

CPO 555 320-2 [74:57]

Breslau-born Eduard Franck moved in exalted circles: Mendelssohn (his teacher), Schumann and Sterndale Bennett were friends. The wealth and artistic inclinations of his family must surely have helped; contrast Schumann's circumstances. My knowledge of Eduard Franck first found its footing with a clutch of Audite discs about ten years ago. I am now pleased that CPO have enabled me to reopen that door.

The Piano Concerto in D minor was Franck's first ambitious work with orchestra. It runs to three movements and to forty minutes. From a propitious drum-roll and flamboyant flourish we get a pre-echo of the Grieg concerto which at the time lay twenty years in the future. This Franck meant business even if he occasionally luxuriates in a steady-as-she-goes pulse and leans on the received gestures of the times. When the work was completed he was only thirty. The warmly accomplished and musing slow movement - an *Andantino* - seems to have been partly written under the knowledge of the slow movement of Beethoven's 'Emperor'. It never becomes mawkish. The striding and flashing finale begins with a recollection of the start of the work. It settles into some Chopin-like introspection and romance which I suspect held the greatest glamour for Franck, but he still builds a convincing final statement. There's certainly contrasting steam, stamina and cantering dignity in the mix. The First Concerto was probably premiered with the composer as pianist in Berlin in 1846.

The Second Concerto seems not to have had an opus number assigned to it. It has survived in the form of a piano reduction and manuscript from which what we hear has been extrapolated. The work again spans three movements across what is six minutes shorter than the First Concerto. It's occasionally gritty with a stormy Beethovenian ('Eroica'-style) tension previously only hinted at. The Intermezzo: Adagio is most beautifully written and shaped and Grau quietly voices the very tenderness invited by the orchestra. No-one blinks throughout the movement's ten

minutes such is the concentration of everyone involved. The Presto gallops neatly in a way that recalls Mendelssohn - romantic but in full flood - and the more demonstrative moments touch on the concertos by Litolff and Tchaikovsky.

The supporting notes are in German and English. They are by Dr Andreas Feuchte and pianist Georg Michael Grau. Grau, together with the orchestra and conductor, seems fully in sympathy with this music and makes it sing and sparkle.

Rob Barnett

Albert ROUSSEL (1869-1937) - MusicWeb Review

Complete Piano Music - Vol. 1

Sonatine, Op.16 (1912) [12:45]

Le Marchand de sable qui passe - musique de scène, Op.13 (1908) [21:48]

Trois Pièces, Op.49 (1933) [8:36]

Prélude et Fugue, Op.46 (1934; 1932) [4:39]

Doute (1919) [4:06]

Petit Canon perpétuel (1912) [2:14]

L'Accueil des Muses (1920) [4:34]

Segovia, Op 29 (1925) [2:57]

Conte à la poupée (1904)

Jean-Pierre Armengaud (piano)

rec. Studio 4'33 Ivry sur Seine, 11-12 October 2012 (*Sonatine*), 6-7 September

2012 (*Marchand*), April 2006 Temple Saint-Marcel, Paris (*rest*)

NAXOS 8.573093 [64:14]

Albert Roussel was originally destined for a seafaring career, but after a period of study with Julien Koszul - director of the Roubaix Conservatoire in northern France and, in fact, Henri Dutilleux's grandfather - he eventually went to study with Vincent D'Indy at the Schola Cantorum in Paris. There he taught composition, numbering Erik Satie, Edgar Varèse and Paul Le Flem among his pupils.

Most serious students of the piano will certainly have heard of Roussel, and may even have played something of his during their formative years. His music has never attained the popularity of Debussy or Ravel since it tends to lack the sumptuous appeal of much of their writing. Yet Roussel was still an important French composer, even if critics have variously said that 'he possessed every quality but that of spontaneous invention', 'remains almost famous', or 'walks the line between the memorable and the impossible to forget'.

Roussel was, by temperament a classicist, and while his early work was strongly

influenced by Debussy and Ravel's Impressionism, he evolved a personal style more formal in design, with a strong rhythmic drive, and often characterized by contrapuntal textures. This, though, was not surprising given his rigorous Schola Cantorum training, with its emphasis on Palestrina and Bach. Equally, he was interested in jazz, which also found a place in his evolving musical style.

Given this background, anyone coming to Roussel's music for the first time is certainly in for a revelation, but definitely one that will benefit from more than just the first playing. This first of three volumes of his complete piano music is a perfect introduction to this seemingly intriguing and nonetheless influential French composer. While the present compilation includes music written between 1904 and 1933, Naxos has wisely chosen not to follow a mere chronological track order. This very much succeeds in engaging the listener from the outset, while showing how the style changes and develops over the course of an hour or so.

The opening *Sonatine*, Op. 16 was written in 1912. Its two movements already give an indication of how Roussel's music is to evolve - a more abstract form of writing, where the usual four movements of a fully-fledged sonata are here condensed to two. Frequent shifts in tempo characterise the second movement, which opens with an intimate slow section, but builds eventually to an effective and dazzling conclusion, where irregular rhythms are a prominent feature.

By contrast the second work - *Le Marchand de sable qui passe - musique de scène* (The Sandman) is a four-movement set of incidental music written in 1908 for a one-act verse-play by Georges Jean-Aubry. Previously recorded in its orchestral format ([Naxos 8.570323](#)), this is a world-premiere recording of Roussel's piano version, but one where he skilfully transfers the original colours across, in music which is eminently tuneful.

The *Trois Pièces*, Op. 49 that follow, are from 1933, and demonstrate the essence of the composer's last creative period - harmonically more astringent at times, and strongly rhythmic. The middle 'Tempo di Valz' has that essential lilt that seems to flow so freely from the pen of French composers, even without the almost mandatory accordion. The final piece of the set, with its lazy triplets, mingles jazz harmonies with rhythmic vivacity in a delightfully light confection.

The *Prélude and Fugue in F minor* is a composite work, the Prelude being the composer's last work for piano, and involves a rhythmically terse ostinato-like movement with a fugue based on Bach's name (using German notation: B flat - A - C - B natural), all topped off with a surprisingly perfunctory final cadence. *Doute*, with its constant falling minor seconds and shifting tonality is very much a musical representation of the word itself. The *Petit Canon perpétuel*, demonstrates, as César Franck does in the finale of his Violin Sonata, how a piece

of canonic writing can transcend its quasi-mathematical conception - Roussel was, in fact, initially interested in mathematics.

L'Accueil des Muses was written as part of a tribute to the late Debussy, to which a number of composers also contributed, and while the music, which makes frequent use of the lower register, largely expresses Roussel's grief, there is no sense of actual musical borrowing.

The penultimate track, *Segovia*, is a piano transcription of an original guitar piece dedicated to the Spanish legend, and which seems, in the middle section, to inhabit a similar sound-world as Ravel's *À la manière de Borodin*, itself also cast as a waltz.

The CD comes full circle with *Conte à la poupée* (1904), a gentle lullaby, once more in tripartite form, and with a simple canon as its central section.

While Jean-Pierre Armengaud has recorded the complete piano works of Roussel, Debussy, Satie and Edison Denisov, and written a biography of Satie for the French publisher Fayard, he still remains relatively little known except in his homeland.

Well-respected British artist, Eric Parkin has recorded a selection of Roussel's piano music on Chandos (CHAN8887), and Italian pianist, Emanuele Torquati has brought out a 2-CD set of the composer's complete piano music, *Promenade sentimentale*, on the budget-label, Brilliant Classics (94329).

However, while the projected three-series collection from Naxos will ultimately prove a little more expensive, there are still good reasons for preferring Armengaud's recording.

The selection on Parkin's single CD clearly provides a good all-round introduction to Roussel's unique piano writing, while Torquati gets everything onto two CDs, but then with a lot to digest at one sitting.

Armengaud is very well recorded, with an excellent piano sound, highly-accomplished playing and idiomatic sense of style. It scores significantly as far as track selection and ordering go, complemented by comprehensive and informative sleeve-notes. As a 'taster' it's ideal, and is a self-contained insight into Roussel's pianism. Equally if it succeeds in whetting the appetite, then the final two volumes with much more of the same are surely not going to be too long arriving.

While you wouldn't usually buy a CD for its cover, Naxos has aptly used a photo of the chalk cliffs at Étretat for the first volume. Roussel was always fascinated by the sea, and he was laid to rest in the cliff-top cemetery at Varengeville-sur-Mer, further along the Normandy coast.

ALBERT ROUSSEL (1869 – 1937): *Piano Music, Volume 1*—Sonatine, Op. 16 (1912); *Le Marchand de sable qui passe*, Op. 13 (musique de scène, 1908); Trois Pièces, Op. 49 (1933); Prélude et Fugue, Op. 46 (1934 & 1932); *Doute* (1919); *Petit Canon perpétuel* (1912); *L'Accueil des Muses* (1920); *Segovia*, Op. 29 (1925); *Conte à la poupée* (1904); Jean-Pierre Armengaud, piano [Recorded at Studio 4'33 Pierre Malbos, Ivry-sur-Seine, France, 6 – 7 September and 11 – 12 October 2012; NAXOS 8.573093; 1CD, 64:14;

While many Classical Music record labels pursue 'safe' releases featuring standard repertory and commercially lucrative performers, the insightful minds responsible for decisions about future projects on the NAXOS label peruse the discographies of composers of all levels of significance and, where they find a need, seek to fill it. From operas and oratorios by forgotten composers to forgotten works by famous composers, NAXOS recordings have enabled listeners to explore musical byways that might otherwise have remained uncharted. The piano music of French composer Albert Roussel is hardly a road not taken, so to speak, but many listeners who are familiar with Roussel's Symphonies and chamber music may well have never encountered his music for piano, on disc or in the recital hall. This first volume in NAXOS's collection of Roussel's complete compositions for solo piano reveals music that deserves the attention of an intelligent pianist with an authentically French style of playing, and this disc entrusts Roussel's adventurous, uniquely melodious music to no less a light in the firmament of French pianism than Jean-Pierre Armengaud.

In contrast to *Wunderkinder* like Mozart and Mendelssohn, Roussel devoted himself to music relatively late in life, having first studied mathematics and spent several years at sea, including a stint on a frigate called the *Iphigénie*—an auspicious assignment for a future composer in the French tradition. It was not until 1894, when he was twenty-five, that Roussel began serious studies of music: he would continue to pursue musical tuition until 1908, studying for a time at the Schola Cantorum of Paris with Vincent d'Indy, one of the most influential teachers—and, among 21st-Century audiences, insufficiently respected composers—in *fin-de-siècle* France. Perhaps influenced by d'Indy's interests in music of the past, Roussel's compositional style ultimately blended healthy doses of Debussy-esque Impressionism with a strong current of Neoclassicism. With occasional performances of his four Symphonies and a small body of chamber music, along with infrequent espousal by singers such as Rita Gorr and Marilyn Horne of his opera *Padmâvatî*, Roussel's music is consigned to a prestigious but unfortunate place just beyond the boundaries of acclaim and popularity. If these works

struggle for the attention that they deserve, Roussel's music for solo piano lags even further behind.

Offering music written in the three decades between 1904 and 1934, this disc spans virtually Roussel's entire compositional career. *Conte à la poupée (A Doll's Tale)* from 1904, the earliest piece on this recording, is a tri-part lullaby written for an album compiled by the Schola Cantorum: the subtle singing quality of Mr. Armengaud's playing makes a wonderfully tranquil effect. Roussel composed his incidental music for the play *Le Marchand de sable qui passe (The Sandman)* in 1908 for the ensemble of string quartet, clarinet, oboe, flute, horn, and harp, in which scoring it was published as his Opus 13. One of Roussel's most hypnotically Impressionistic works, the music is here performed in its version for piano. Mr. Armengaud lends the magic of Debussy's *Suite bergamasque* to Roussel's music, especially in the ethereal harmonies and chromatics of the final movement. Chromaticism is also central to the development of the first movement, and Mr. Armengaud places each harmony with unerring timing and rhythmic precision. The lyrical inner movements, both touched by suggestions of wistfulness and regret, are beautifully played, the strength of Mr. Armengaud's left hand highlighting the depths of Roussel's invention.

The *Petit Canon perpétuel* dates from the spring of 1912 and finds Roussel in full command of the employment of subjects and countersubjects after the manner of the Baroque masters whose music he likely studied under d'Indy's tutelage. Mr. Armengaud's facility with octaves serves the *Petit Canon* well, and his rhythmic vitality provides precisely the energy needed to realize Roussel's complicated figurations with brilliance. Composed in the summer of 1912, the Opus 16 *Sonatine* is the most substantial of Roussel's early works for the piano.

Condensing the traditional four-movement sonata form into a free-flowing two-movement format that ushered in a new style of composition, Roussel fused Beethovenian power with characteristic French grace. An acknowledged authority on the piano music of both Debussy and Satie, Mr. Armengaud approaches the *Sonatine* with precisely the combination of virtuosity and finesse required to realize the cleverness of Roussel's writing. Perhaps intentionally evocative of the horrors of World War I and the uncertainty of its aftermath, *Doute (Doubt)* is an unsettling work that Mr. Armengaud plays with great sensitivity. *L'Accueil des Muses (The Muses' Welcome)* was composed in 1920 in memory of Debussy, and Mr. Armengaud's playing wrings all of the muted sadness from Roussel's melodic lines. Originally composed for guitar in 1925 for Andrés Segovia, whose name it bears, the piano arrangement—the work of Roussel himself—of *Segovia* played on this disc ingeniously preserves the distinct guitar rhythms of the bolero, crisply rendered by Mr. Armengaud.

The *Trois Pièces* of 1933, dedicated to and first performed by Robert Casadesus, cover a great deal of stylistic ground, from Viennese Classicism to Jazz. The pieces are sharply contrasted by Roussel, who increasingly dedicated his creative energy during the last years of his life to sharp delineation of his individual

technique. In the *Trois Pièces*, this resulted in carefully-wrought rhythmic foundations for each of the three pieces, foundations that are meticulously recreated by Mr. Armengaud. Nods to Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann are accomplished by the pianist without any suggestions of parody or heaviness. Published as his Opus 46, the *Prélude et Fugue* incorporates Roussel's final work for piano, the 1934 *Prélude*. The *Fugue* was composed two years earlier in homage to Bach, of whose music Mr. Armengaud is also a notable interpreter, and his playing expertly unites the 18th and 20th Centuries. The virtuosity demanded by the *Prélude* ripples from Mr. Armengaud's fingers with every appearance of ease, his flexible but firm sense of rhythm again serving the composer's music ideally.

Albert Roussel's name may never be spoken in the same breath with those of Debussy and Satie, but the imaginative, technically accomplished but never academic playing of Jean-Pierre Armengaud on this disc confirms that Roussel's music for piano is no less worthy of attention from the world's more insightful pianists than that of his more familiar contemporaries. Indeed, this disc, recorded in wonderfully clear sound that transports the listener to the 'sweet spot' in a small, acoustically superb recital hall, is something of a revelation: rather than compromising standards of excellence with another half-hearted recital of music by Beethoven or Chopin, this disc thrillingly allows a true artist of the keyboard—of all the pianists active in the world today, perhaps the one best suited to this repertory—to share with the listener a voyage into a sumptuous musical world. Which label other than NAXOS would take such a chance and deliver a disc as momentous as this one?

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