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**GODARD** Piano Trios: in g, op. 32; in F, op. 72. *Jocelyn: Berceuse* •  
Parnassus Tr • MDG GOLD 3031615 (59:47)

Listening to these two piano trios by Benjamin Godard (1849–95), one would never guess that he trained as a violinist under Henri Vieuxtemps at the Paris Conservatory. I say this because both works are launched by a storm of piano passagework so turbulent as to leave Mendelssohn hanging on for dear life at the dock. From this one might understandably surmise that Godard was one of the great keyboard virtuosos of the 19th century, though such was not the case. This is music that is strangely beautiful and beautifully strange, which makes it difficult to describe, so perhaps some background will help.

The Jewish Godard was born in Paris at a time when opera was all the rage and when piano and violin giants—Alkan, Chopin, Liszt, Paganini, Vieuxtemps, Wieniawski, etc.—filled Parisian salons and concert halls to overflowing. Godard, like his slightly earlier French Jewish compatriots Meyerbeer and Halévy, sought fame and fortune in the opera house, writing at least eight operas, only one of which, *Jocelyn*, seems to have had any staying power. Unlike Meyerbeer and Halévy, however, Godard did not place all or most of his eggs in one basket. He was highly prolific in a number of genres, composing a surprisingly large number of works considering his relatively short life of 46 years. Among his output are concertos for violin and piano—a Naxos recording of the violin concertos with Chloë Hanslip was reviewed by Ian Lace in *Fanfare* 31:6—ballets, overtures, three symphonies, three string quartets, sonatas for violin and cello, the two piano trios on this disc, plus numerous songs and solo piano pieces. Yet out of more than 150 works, Godard is today remembered mainly for the *Berceuse* from his opera *Jocelyn*, added as an encore at the end of the current CD. It might also be mentioned that Godard was openly hostile to Wagner and outspokenly critical of the German composer's anti-Semitism.

It's too easy, perhaps intellectually lazy even, to cite Mendelssohn and Schumann as the only influences in Godard's music and to just leave it at that, for there's much more going on here. Take, for example, the rolling, roiling turbulence that opens the 1884 Piano Trio No. 2 in F Major. Franck's A-Major Violin Sonata was still two years in the offing, but it's uncanny how closely Godard's writing presages the beginning of the second movement in Franck's sonata. There is also a degree and a type of chromaticism in this score that would not have occurred to Mendelssohn or Schumann and that is more common to the French school; I'm thinking particularly of Fauré, who, after all, was born five years before Godard. Like most works of its genre and period, a second theme, quieter and more lyrical in nature, is introduced. But here is where I believe Godard is at his weakest. The

desire and the impulse are there, the gesture sincere, but the ability to craft a memorable melody eludes him, and what emerges in its place is a kind of soft-shoe, salon-style music that bides its time until the next storm surge washes away the cucumber and cress sandwiches. Listen, for example, beginning at 4:20 in the first movement, and then to the violin's entrance 10 seconds later.

The Piano Trio No.1 in G Minor dates from 1880 and was, at one time, quite popular. Again, the piece opens in a state of tumult, with restless, agitated passagework in the piano. Here, the Mendelssohn influence is a bit more pronounced. Listen, for example, beginning at 1:54 in the first movement, to the second theme that unfolds like a Mendelssohnian song without words. The Leipzig composer is also conjured up in Godard's Tempo di Menuetto, which is actually a moderately paced scherzo. But these good-natured elves sound more like oafs, hiccupping and clumsily tripping over each other as if they've had a bit too much to drink.

I might question the Parnassus Trio's violinist, Yamel Yu, and cellist, Michael Gross, for overdoing it a bit on the portamentos in the Andante quasi Adagio and elsewhere. The potted plant is leafy enough; fertilizer is not needed. As note author Martin Bernklau observes, "The way Godard's lyrical talent sometimes borders on sentimentality in the slow movements probably engendered a favorable response in the salons."

The concluding Allegro vivace provides further evidence of French influences in Godard's music that tend to dilute the *prima facie* Mendelssohn/Schumann argument, for here we have a clear example of the cyclic techniques favored by Berlioz, Franck, Saint-Saëns, and Liszt. The trio's last movement begins with the same material that began the first movement. Godard then transforms it harmonically and rhythmically in true cyclic fashion.

As salon pieces go, the *Berceuse* from *Jocelyn*, in Bernklau's words, "is certainly not kitsch despite its popularity. It is a little gem whose tender melodic beauty has survived more than a century."

Most record labels are proud to trumpet first-ever recordings. That MDG doesn't do so in this case suggests to me that previous recordings of Godard's piano trios may have once existed. Currently, however, I find no other listings. As hinted at above, I wasn't particularly thrilled by the Parnassus Trio's somewhat raffish readings; I could imagine this music being played more tastefully and with greater refinement by a French ensemble that better understood the musical aesthetic of Godard's time and place. But we're not likely to get another recording of these works anytime soon, and technically, the Parnassus Trio is an exceptionally fine ensemble whose many excellent performances on MDG—trios by Lalo, Philipp Scharwenka, and Rheinberger—I've been enjoying for a number of years.

Recording, as always with this label, is outstanding. In the absence of perhaps more idiomatic readings, this is definitely recommended, especially to those who enjoy exploring the nooks and crannies of 19th-century chamber music. **Jerry**

**Dubins**

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**GODARD String Quartets: No. 1 in g**, op. 33; **No. 2 in A**, op. 37; **No. 3 in A**, op.136 • Qrt Élysée • TIMPANI 1C1221 (Download: 69:13)

“Strangely beautiful and beautifully strange” was how I described a recording of Benjamin Godard’s piano trios performed by the Parnassus Trio in 34:2. Other than the fact that he died at the age of 45, there are significant parallels to be drawn between Godard (1849–1895) and Saint-Saëns (1835–1921). Both composers sought success on the stage of French opera, but for one exception each—*Jocelyn* for Godard and *Samson et Dalila* for Saint-Saëns—renown in that sphere eluded them. Both composers, however, picked themselves up, dusted themselves off, and went on to display great versatility and enormous productivity in the writing of symphonies, concertos, and other orchestral works; chamber music; choral compositions; songs; and solo pieces for piano. Godard may not have written quite as much as Saint-Saëns did, but if you factor into the equation that Godard lived approximately only half as long as Saint-Saëns, it would appear that he was even more prolific, leaving over 150 titled opus numbers to Saint-Saëns’s 169. Also shared by Godard and Saint-Saëns were a musical aesthetic that looked back to Mendelssohn and Schumann and an attitude that was generally critical of the “New Music,” both of the German and French persuasions.

But it may not be surprising that Godard’s music hasn’t achieved greater familiarity than it has; for one thing, Godard and Saint-Saëns didn’t share was an equal portion of talent. This was as obvious then as it is now. Publishing a critique of Godard’s 1890 opera *Dante, René de Récy*, wrote in the *Revue Bleue*: “We last came across Mr. B. Godard with *Jocelyn*. Since then he has composed much, worked little, and reflected somewhat. Always the same spoilt child who has showed, who shows, who will forever show promise; fine things will come tomorrow. Tomorrow ... yet favor being urged on like this would never have waited until then.” This sets the background for Godard’s three string quartets, his only three works in the medium, making this not only a recording of the composer’s complete string quartets, but so it would seem their first ever.

The Quartet No. 1 in G Minor, composed in 1876, opens with a tempestuous, virtuosic movement as indebted to Mendelssohn as it is to Godard’s violin teacher, Henri Vieuxtemps. The problem is that, for all the turbulence and tumult, the melodic profiles are not particularly distinctive or memorable; or, as Jacques Tchamkerten’s liner note, translated by Jeremy Drake, puts it, “the care given to the polyphonic writing works somewhat to the detriment of the originality of the

ideas."

The strangeness referred to at the outset in the first paragraph's opening sentence may be heard in the *Andantino con variazioni* movement that follows. The theme is tinged with a bit of an exotic Middle Eastern flavor, punctuated by an odd chromatic slide, which is finally followed by a dismissive flip of a non-cadence that just stops mid-air, like the gag that goes, "Watch out for the knife!" "What kni-?" One has to give credit to Godard for originality, for this movement, with its bizarre theme and equally bizarre variations, has to be one of the most eccentric things I think I've ever heard.

The *Andante quasi adagio* movement brings with it a sense of normalcy, if one considers it "normal" for a piece composed in 1876 to sound like Schumann. That, however, does not gainsay the music's heart-throbbing beauty. The concluding *Allegro* movement returns to the Mendelssohnian maelstrom of the first movement, but tempered now by more distinctively lyrical contrasting episodes. As a finale, it's satisfyingly effective.

Written one year later, in 1877, Godard's Second String Quartet, in the sunny key of A Major, finds the composer in a more relaxed mood. The rippling triplet accompaniment now sounds a bit more French than it does German. The first movement is suffused with feelings of pleasantness and contentment. The *Andante* that follows, however, visits some haunted place, as all four instruments drone a Dorian dirge in open parallel octaves, which is then repeated by the first violin over the tentative plucks of a faltering pizzicato accompaniment. It's really quite eerie, until the spirits of comfort and consolation arrive in the guise of a lengthy fugal episode to dispel the gloom. There's something positively Beethovenian about this music, and if there's one movement in these three quartets that stands out as really special, this is it.

The scherzo is a graceful, lilting thing, which, nevertheless, is so chromatic and harmonically unusual that it defies the ear to identify its F-Major tonality until the very end. For much of the movement, I kept thinking that it anticipated Hugo Wolf's *Italian Serenade* of exactly 10 years later. With such stylistic diversity within the confines of a single work, it seems that at least one of Godard's weaknesses manifested itself as an inability to link movements together thematically, motivically, or according to some structural principle such as cyclic form, which was popular among French composers of the time. Individual movements can be arrestingly beautiful, but why they belong together in the same work may leave you scratching your head for an answer. For the last movement of this quartet, we're back to Mendelssohn, this time in a scampering mode that seems to draw its inspiration from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* music.

After these two string quartets, Godard would not return to the genre for another 15 years, writing his final Quartet in A Major, op. 136, in 1892, three years before his premature death. If contentment marked the first movement of the earlier A-Major Quartet, that feeling is now elevated to one of sublime serenity. The sense of rapt benediction carries forth into the second movement in what strikes me,

once again, as a late Beethovenian feeling of quiet ecstasy suspended in time. Unlike in his earlier quartets, Godard here seems to have outgrown the need to express himself by means of external effects and, instead, has internalized and refined his mode of expression to one of reflective reverie. Perhaps as an accidental but fortuitous consequence, this seems to have resulted in the most integrated of Godard's three string quartets, with all four of its movements coming together beautifully as a balanced whole.

It's hard to know where Godard would have gone from here, had he lived another 20 or 25 years. The trajectory of these three quartets suggests that he was perfecting his art with the passage of time and getting better at it with each new work. The musical geniuses that were so generous to Saint-Saëns may not have been as giving to Godard or to have come as early and stayed as long, but to perhaps a lesser degree they did favor him. There is much in these quartets to savor, and more than just once or twice I should think.

What can I say about the Quatuor Élysée? Earlier this year, I reviewed with much enthusiasm the ensemble's complete survey of Albéric Magnard's chamber music for this same label. A page displaying the group's Timpani releases, which appears towards the end of the album booklet, lists 15 recordings, all but one of which feature works by French composers—Franck, Lekeu, Vierne, Ropartz, Debussy, Honegger, and so on. The exception is a disc of string quartet works by Berg and Webern, but includes a token French piece by Henri Dutilleux. I find only a handful of these listed at either Amazon or ArkivMusic, and shockingly, fewer still—only the Magnard and this new Godard release—at Timpani's own web site. Even more shocking, the album note mentions that the Élysée Quartet was founded in 1995 by former members of the Anton and Ysayë Quartets, but nowhere are the four players identified by name. Suffice it to say that the anonymous musicians heard in these performances are fantastic, and I have to assume, since this is a new, 2014, recording, that the Élysée Quartet is still in business.

This is urgently recommended to anyone interested in exploring the music of one of France's lesser-known Romantic composers. You're in for a treat. **Jerry Dubins**

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### **Benjamin GODARD (1849-1895) - MusicWeb Review - Piano Concertos**

Piano Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op 31 (1875) [29:53]

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op 148 (1893) [28:35]

*Introduction and Allegro*, Op 49 (1880) [11:43]

Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra/Howard Shelley (piano)

rec. 23-24, 26-27 April 2013, Federation Concert Hall, Hobart, Tasmania

**HYPERION CDA68043** [70:13]

Benjamin Godard is one of a handful of composers who, despite a lifetime's hard work, is essentially remembered for just one work. Even that is known more for its melody, rather than by its name, or that of its composer. His life was unceremoniously cut short by tuberculosis at the age of forty-five but even so his works include some eight operas, five symphonies, two concertos for piano and violin respectively, over a hundred songs, and a wealth of solo piano music. It is his eminently-melodious *Berceuse* from the opera *Jocelyn*, first performed in Paris in 1888, that remains the composer's best-known piece for most listeners.

Fortunately Hyperion has gone some way towards redressing this blatant imbalance, with volume 63 in its epic *Romantic Piano Concerto* series, which features Godard's works for piano and orchestra. There are competing versions of the concertos on two Dutton CDs: [CDLX7274](#) and [CDLX7291](#) but coupled with other substantial works by Godard. Otherwise this issue keeps company with Godard's piano trios on [MDG](#), a recital of the solo piano music on [FC Records with Jouni Somero](#) and Chloe Hanslip's Naxos CD of the [violin concertos](#).

Godard was born the son of a businessman in Paris and, as a child-prodigy violinist, trained at the Paris Conservatoire. There he initially studied composition and harmony with Napoléon Henri Reber — who also taught Massenet. Later his violin teacher was the Belgian virtuoso Henri Vieuxtemps. Chronologically-speaking, despite his curtailed life, Godard was a contemporary of Grieg and Fauré, and specifically in terms of other contributors to Hyperion's series: the likes of [Ignaz Brüll](#), [Charles Villiers Stanford](#) and [Xaver Scharwenka](#). Much of Godard's music follows in the earlier traditions of Mendelssohn (1805-1847) and Schumann (1810-1856). His distaste for the bombastic extravagances of Wagner was a reaction no doubt coloured by his loathing of the German's anti-Semitism, Godard himself being of Jewish extraction. With the later emergence of more pioneering composers, Godard's conservative idiom meant that his reputation in any case was already fading before his premature demise.

The three works on the present CD, however, clearly exceed the technical scope of his idols, Mendelssohn and Schumann. The often bravura writing for the piano equally looks in the direction of Liszt (1811-1886) and Godard's compatriot Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921).

The *Piano Concerto No. 1 in A minor* dates from 1875, and opens with some thirteen sombre bars which contain the motif that sets off the first movement — vigorous and energetic stuff from soloist and orchestra contrasted by a graceful second theme. The ensuing *Scherzo* captures the essential nature of the Italian word — a jest or joke — and makes much use of some delightful interplay between the two protagonists. Jeremy Nicholas's pithy and most-informative sleeve-notes — translated into French and German respectively — suggest that it might easily

have become a 'hit' in the manner of Litolff's similar, but much better-known movement from his *Concerto Symphonique No. 4*. Equally the filigree writing of Saint-Saëns in his works for piano and orchestra is not far removed here. There is no doubt, though, that Godard knows how to write a good 'tune' – perhaps something shared with Massenet, via their mutual teacher. The slow movement is just one of those perfect examples, cast initially as a kind of funeral march in the minor key, before blossoming into an elegy in the major. It culminates in some highly passionate moments before finally subsiding almost to nothing. As so often can happen, the finale doesn't quite appear to live up to what has gone before, but nevertheless provides a solid conclusion to an overall charming and appealing work.

The *Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor* is a later composition (1893), written two years before the composer's death. Like its predecessor it opens with a somewhat mournful version of the first movement's main theme, but which soon opens out into a broader canvas. This theme returns at the beginning of the finale and eventually rounds the whole work off. Again there is some lovely writing in the slow movement, where Godard likes to take his soloist right down to the bottom B flat on the instrument. The ensuing Scherzo once more hints at the lightness and fleet-of-foot of Mendelssohn's and Saint-Saëns's writing in similar movements. The finale is a pianistic *tour de force* – a toccata-like movement that concludes with an imposing statement of the work's main theme, leaving the soloist to round it all off in a blaze of glory amid resounding chromatic octaves.

The *Introduction and Allegro* (1880) opens in a pompous manner, seemingly preparing the way for an academically argued section to follow. In fact for all its five minutes or so, Godard keeps his cards close to his chest, and even holds back at the start of the *Allegro* proper by interposing a short and spirited preamble from the soloist, with a number of short orchestral interjections. A sudden descending harmonic minor scale from top to bottom from the piano leads into something totally unexpected – as Nicholas describes it, 'a jaunty, toe-tapping crowd-pleaser' of a tune, which, he goes on to say, 'you might not be able to get out of your head for several days'. The main theme, with its off-beat cymbal crashes, also appears to have a definite Eastern-European, almost Klezmer feel to it, somewhat reminiscent of parts of Shostakovich's Second Piano Trio, Op. 67. It concludes with enough pizzazz surely to give the piece at least a well-deserved place in the lighter classical hit-list.

In the now more than sixty volumes of Hyperion's consistently outstanding *Romantic Piano Concerto* series, a few, perhaps might be classed more as novelties from otherwise essentially unknown composers – always entertaining, attractive, often with the all-important big tune in there somewhere, but not overly important in the overall scheme of things.

This CD of Godard's works for piano and orchestra is, though, considerably more than this. Yes, the pieces are very well constructed, and have all the requisite components above firmly in place but they certainly confirm that Benjamin Godard was far more than just a composer of small-scale salon music. He should now be remembered for all his more significant achievements, rather than for just one short piece of music, as seems to be the case at present.

Over the years it's become a *sine qua non* that each Hyperion volume features excellent performances, first class recordings, and exemplary and most informative packaging. In this respect the current CD doesn't disappoint one bit. Special mention must go to pianist, Howard Shelley, who not only copes admirably with the bristling technical difficulties of the solo part, but also manages to direct the excellent Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra as well.

Whether or not you're already familiar with Benjamin Godard, this latest addition to Hyperion's series is highly enjoyable.

***Philip R Buttall***