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Pas de deux

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Recording of the month

Mona and Rica Bard are an incredible new piano duo. The sisters have been playing together practically since they first sat before a piano, and they've received mentorship from, among others, the Labèques, Alfons Kontarsky, and the Duo Tal-Groethuysen. This, their debut album, deserves to be the first of many.

I'm most amazed by their unity in quieter moments; the first movement of Ravel's Rapsodie espagnole is, for me, the highlight of the disc. Oh, the softness of their touch in those first bars; the way, they instantly conjure up such vivid imagery! Only the finest piano duos make you forget altogether that you're listening to two people, not just in the most technically difficult passages but in the simplest ones too. Another moment especially impressive in this regard is the andante of Poulenc's sonata for two pianos, in which the lyricism and drama are both given full voice.

Really everything here is a delight. Scaramouche dances, tickles, burns manic energy, and in its slow movement is almost unbearably beautiful; the Bizet suite is as lively and colorful as any orchestral reading. The program itself seems a little odd, in that Poulenc's more serious sonata and elegy are at the end, while the "guilty pleasures" of Scaramouche, Jeux d'enfants, and the Rapsodie espagnole come at the beginning. Leading off with Scaramouche feels a bit like having your dessert before the soup arrives. Still, the Poulenc Élégie is more like a night-time romance than a song of mourning, but for a single dissonant outburst, so things work out in the end.

Sound quality is extremely fine, fuller and more resonant than some piano duo recordings can be, to my pleasure. The booklet notes are not always translated especially well. For instance, the artist biography says "they received important artistic impulses from the Duo Tal / Groethuysen and from Katia Labèque, Leonard Hokanson [etc.]". According to my father, Thomas Reinhart, who speaks German, "impulse" is indeed the German word for inspiration, and interestingly it's a bit of linguistic metaphor. The idea is that, as a physical impulse (like a push) drives an object into action, or into a new direction, so an artistic impulse can do the same for a human mind. It's a rather sweet thought to go with a rather sweet CD.

»audite« Ludger Böckenhoff • Tel.: +49 (0)5231-870320 • Fax: +49 (0)5231-870321 • info@audite.de • www.audite.de