Violoncelle français

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Zeitung

An Impressive Debut Recording

Okay, let's go right up front here: I'm breaking my own rules. This is supposed to be a blog that reviews live arts performances, as the title clearly states. And this review is not of a live performance, but of a recording. But hey, if a fellow can't break his own rules, whose rules can he break?

My justification is that this recording features a Canadian ensemble, the Cheng²Duo, which I have reviewed four times in live performance, and in two cases playing music which is now included on this debut recording. That may be a thin rationale to some of my readers, but what truly intrigued me was the growth and development of the music over time and in the recording studio.

First, here are the links to the previous blog posts which reviewed the music involved in the CD, and included some comments about the development of the Duo's performance:

Travelling With Music
Germany, Russia and France with the Cheng²Duo

And so to the recording. This impressive CD debut, entitled Violoncelle français, presents a recital of music from France bridging across the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth century. The composers represented are Fauré, Saint-Saëns, Franck, and Debussy. The music is an intriguing mixture of small character pieces, which might be termed "salon music," one theatre piece, and two larger chamber works.

With such a blend of styles comes the need for varied styles of performance as well. The shorter character works, such as the Faure Sicilienne and Elegie, or the Swan of Saint-Saëns, receive performances in lush, rich sound that yet doesn't overpower the simpler character of the music.

Debussy's Sonata is given an interpretation of dramatic contrasts, as the music demands.

At the heart of the recording is the Franck Sonata in A Minor, and here was where I

really noticed a difference from the two occasions when I heard the Cheng²Duo perform the work live. What a totally involving account of this wonderful score! The difference is a matter of quality which is not easy to define: an increase in intensity, a deeper digging into the essence of the music, a stronger sense of the drama of the music expressed in restraint rather than excess.

I'd be intrigued to know whether this comes from the closer observation of the microphones, or from the process of the work in studio with multiple takes interspersed with listening to playbacks and discussing the results before continuing.

What was quite clear, after multiple listenings, was that this is an interpretation of the Franck Sonata to live with, and to return to frequently. This one work alone would make the recording a worthwhile acquisition, and then there are such riches in the rest of the programme as well.

The recording from the German label Audite is impressive, with clear, present sound set in a believable acoustic so the instruments are neither too close nor too distant. The CD album comes with an impressive booklet of generously detailed programme notes.

I'll close with two footnotes. One was that I also pulled out my recording of the original violin version of the Sonata for comparison. Sad to say, it's been eclipsed. I now have to go shopping for another and better recording with violin.

The other footnote is that the next recording from the Cheng²Duo is going to be a recital of music from Spain. I have a real "thing" for Spanish music – maybe I was Spanish in a previous life – so it's going to be a long year to wait for that one to be issued!

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