



Fantasque - French Violin Sonatas by Fauré, Debussy, Ravel & Poulenc

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A commentator once made the observation that Fauré stood for the feminine qualities in music, in that his style was “flexible, smooth, circumspect, shimmering, and witty.” There’s scarcely wit in Fauré’s Violin Sonata No. 1, but the other adjectives are fitting; they could generally be applied to the three later French violin sonatas on this new release. Franck gave the genre of the violin sonata a new stature in France, but after the defeat of the Franco-Prussian War, there was a xenophobic backlash in Parisian musical circles. A much better predictor of the future is Fauré’s gentle dreaminess than Franck’s ambitiousness.

The much-admired German violinist Franziska Pietsch, who was born in East Germany in 1969 and began as a child prodigy, has already recorded the Franck Violin Sonata. She has had to shift into a different sound world for Fauré and the three other composers whose sonatas she plays in chronological order. The span is from 1877, when the Fauré received its Paris premiere at the rabidly nationalistic Société Nationale de Musique, to 1943, when Ginette Neveu premiered Poulenc’s Violin Sonata in Nazi-occupied Paris.

Fauré had for all intents and purposes patented a liquid style that is most apparent in the wash of sound produced by the piano in his chamber works. The constant passagework and arpeggiated chords risk monotony, and Pietsch is fortunate in having the superb Spanish pianist Josu De Solaun to partner with. This is their second album together, and both performers contribute their own voices, not to mention a vibrant musical imagination. The Fauré Sonata is delicately etched, and there’s a pristine quality about Pietsch’s varied tone that keeps the piece from cloying. It takes skill to balance the rhapsodic side of the music and a feeling of intimacy. De Solaun’s surges of Romantic euphoria are exciting when they appear, but Pietsch’s whispered phrasing is just as arresting.

Debussy began signing his compositions as “musician français” during World War I, and at the same time as making this patriotic gesture, his musical imagination became simpler (perhaps in the direction of populist appeal). I’ve tended to underrate the Violin Sonata of 1917, but during the Debussy centennial year Renaud Capuçon released a luminous, highly Romantic, and gorgeous-sounding version that was irresistible (Erato). Pietsch and De Solaun are startlingly different. They focus minutely on every phrase, injecting nuance at almost the microscopic scale, and in addition Pietsch uses a deliberately un-Romantic tone. Instead of being mannered, the result is utterly captivating, adding new dimensions one never suspected to exist. Their reading is the essence of the performer as a re-creative artist. There are moments, like the end of the first movement, that burst with bold exuberance, too. The opening of the second movement is so eerie that music which seemed fairly straightforward even from a great violinist like Capuçon acquires a kaleidoscopic

range of color and mood. The closest kindred spirit I can think of is the equally daring and innovative Patricia Kopatchinskaja (there's a strong kinship with Vilde Frang as well).

My shorthand for this style is that the violin is made to "speak" with the inflections of the human voice. As applied to the Ravel Violin Sonata, the effect is as magical as in the previous two pieces, and De Solaun shows a capacity for finding wonderfully expressive gestures in the piano part. Everyone remembers the second movement, titled "Blues," which evokes a smoky den that isn't quite in Harlem, more on the Left Bank. Pietsch's delivery is slinkier than anyone I've heard before (a compliment). The finale may be titled "Perpetuum mobile," but these performers go from a halting opening that sounds like a Motel T Ford with a balky starter to an angry buzzing wasp once the movement begins its rapid flight maneuvers.

I'd never heard the Poulenc Violin Sonata before (counting his previous attempts, it is at least his fourth try in the genre), and I anticipated something witty and slick, insouciant and clever by turns. Those might be accurate descriptions, but Pietsch responds to the historical moment in occupied Paris and adds an edge of desperate, frenetic energy that is very apt. The piece makes a good pair with the Ravel as two cabaret sonatas. Poulenc is often at his best in chamber music, and his Violin Sonata mixes cheery melodies, sentimentality, and a world-weary semblance to Edith Piaf. The present performance, like everything else here, is a wonder.

I cannot exaggerate the imagination and creative reach of this album. On the surface it replicates dozens of recordings of the Fauré, Debussy, and Ravel sonatas, but the music-making is entirely personal and unique. I'm avid now for anything Pietsch and De Solaun record.