



Impromptu

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The publicity for this new release states; "finally, a compendium featuring the complete Impromptus for harp." Although no expert at all on the harp in terms of its repertoire or the technique to play it, I did find that idea intriguing. As Sarah O'Brien points out in the very useful liner [in German and English only] – many non-specialists might know the works by Fauré and possibly Pierné but probably little or nothing else – well that was me described to a tee. So a one-stop-shop to hear all the other works written for harp in that form was definitely appealing. What has impressed me far more than I was expecting is just how fine all of these works are. Usually on a compendium-type recital such as this it is reasonable to expect some works to be "lesser" and others "greater". The consistent level of musical interest here is a delight. Especially since O'Brien has sprinkled the various Impromptus across the disc's generous 80 minute playing time and interspersed them with very diverse repertoire from arrangements of Scarlatti to the Hindemith Sonata. Again, such mixed programming can on occasion feel too diverse, too disparate but here it is a complete triumph – even if I have not yet quite worked out why!

Of course a major "why" is the stunning playing of harpist Sarah O'Brien caught in rich and full sound by the Audite engineers. Although this is offered in just standard CD format (O'Brien's previous Audite disc I see was a SACD) this is of demonstration class with the tonal and dynamic range of O'Brien's playing quite beautifully caught. I must admit I expected this to be a "dip-into" disc – with individual pieces attractive and interesting but perhaps becoming a little wearing to experience in a single sitting. Not so at all – the sheer range and juxtapositions of musical styles makes for a compelling listen with the totality of the recital adding to the stature of individual works. The programming is intelligent and satisfying. The two 'famous' Impromptus are used to bookend the disc opening with the Pierné Impromptu-Caprice Op 9 and closing with Fauré's Impromptu in D-flat major Op 86. In the liner – which takes the form of a "conversation" between O'Brien and Dr. Florian Hauser – Ms O'Brien makes the point that Fauré was helped by harpist Micheline Kahn to ensure that the piece was idiomatic and effective for the instrument. Elsewhere in the recital Ms O'Brien points to the influence of Italian harpist Clelia Gatti Aldrovandi who offered similar help to Hindemith, Mortari and Rota and without whom, she believes, Hindemith would not have been able to write the work he did. Wonderful though these two Impromptus are, a major part of the delight in this disc is the range of musical expression it contains. These two famous works have become a kind of aural shorthand for how a harp sounds with the music arabesquing away with arpeggios and hazy glissandi. Of course this is deeply characteristic and very beautiful but through her playing and her choice of repertoire



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The Nino Rota Sarabanda e Toccata [tracks 14-15] and the Mortari Sonata prodigio [16-18] are just two cases in point. The former opens with a neo-classical bardic sarabande with wonderfully rich and full chords and a stately elegance before the flowing toccata provides an attractive contrast. The Mortari follows similar neo-baroque lines with the opening Gagliarda reminiscent of Respighi in Ancient Airs and Dances mode. Intriguingly there appears to be almost no music by Virgilio Mortari in the recorded music catalogue [another version of this sonatina appears on the tactus label and a third performance on Naxos] although I do have sheet music of a rather nice arrangement for string quartet by him of Corelli's La Follia. These modern reinterpretations of a baroque aesthetic sit very well alongside O'Brien's own arrangements of baroque keyboard pieces. One – Rameau's La poule [track 6] is instantly familiar in Respighi's orchestral garb as part of his suite The Birds. Another – track 2 – is Couperin's charming Le Tic-Toc-Choc which bubbles along like a latter-day musical box quite delightfully. Apart from any musical merits, this piece shows the remarkable poise and control of O'Brien's playing. The balance between the leading melody line and the gentle filigree of the accompaniment is stunningly achieved. In the liner/conversation O'Brien makes the point that she plays all the music in this recital on the same instrument and that the tonal range she achieves is down to technique and a profound understanding of how to manipulate the sound from the instrument. I emailed audite to query the instrument used because it sounds so beautiful and received the following reply from Ms O'Brien herself; "The harp is a concert grand harp (so only slightly smaller than a nowadays concert grand harp) but not smaller than a concert harp. In other words: The harp is an old Lyon&Healy style 17, made in Chicago. Harps in those days were slightly smaller (in height) than the harps made today." All I can add to that is that it sounds magnificent throughout.

The placement of this Couperin work after the Pierné and before the two Jean Cras Impromptus is a good example of how skilful programming adds an intangible value to the entire disc. The crystalline beauty of the Couperin can be thought of as cleansing the aural palette before the impressionistic warmth and richness of the Cras. In recent years Jean Cras has been one of my most cherished composer discoveries but I had not yet encountered these two Impromptus and they are a pair of absolute gems. Enhanced no question by O'Brien's poised and poetic playing. The first is marked Lent and this is very much in the tradition of the kind of French Impressionism that typifies this style of music as indeed does the companion Animé. Apparently these works are now being performed as 'standards' after years of neglect which does not surprise me at all.

Familiar to the harp fraternity but less well-known outside of it is the aforementioned Hindemith Sonata for Harp [tracks 7-9]. At a total playing time just short of eleven minutes this is the longest work on the disc and another work completely new to me but it proves to be an impressive and wholly convincing work. O'Brien points out that the Hindemith, Mortari and Rota works were all written around World War II and she suggests that their use of older musical forms (the Hindemith references an 18th century poem) was "an expression of longing for a past, purportedly idyllic world". I wonder whether another consideration are the two main "limitations" of the modern harp; the fact that only eight fingers can be used at any one time and also that even with the most dextrous pedalling the rate of achievable harmonic change is slower than on other instantly chromatic instruments. Clarity of texture and relative harmonic stability are characteristics of classical and neo-classical music that are more aligned with the practicalities of harp playing. In the liner Ms O'Brien makes it clear that in her own arrangements of baroque music – the Scarlatti Sonata in E

major K.380 is another unexpected delight – she is not seeking to simply emulate a harpsichord. Clearly the two instruments share the basic principle of plucked strings but the range of tone and timbral contrasts achieved here on the harp is way beyond that of a harpsichord and O'Brien's control of that expressive range and her subtle use of rubato throughout the entire disc is of the very highest calibre.

The remaining works in the programme are a group of less well-known works even when the composers themselves are familiar names. Roussel's work is the best known of these and dates from a period of rich and original creativity. The opus number of 21 places it after the unique *Padmâvatî* and the quirky *Le festin de l'araignée* but before *Pour une fête de printemps* or the *Symphony No 2*. It has quite bare textures and harmonies but shares the improvisational quality that O'Brien sees as a defining characteristic of the harp impromptu. Again the sheer lightness and clarity of articulation here is a joy. I must admit to enjoying Reinhold Glière's *Impromptu* a lot. This is an unashamedly diatonic and song-like work that I suspect was warmly approved of by the Soviet State given its rather old-fashioned character for its 1947 composition date. The sheer depth of tone achieved on this recording is a wonder. The final *Impromptus* come from Guy Ropartz and Joaquin Rodrigo. Two works I had never heard but both again very attractive. Do not expect many/any Iberian influences in the Rodrigo – an innocent ear would have trouble placing this work's nationality but that does not detract from its appeal. Likewise the Ropartz which was published in 1927 is very much in the tradition of the preceding French works. As an aside, I wonder why no British composers wrote any harp *Impromptus*?

As should be clear by now, this is a disc and a recital that has impressed me in every respect; wonderful music intelligently programmed played with sovereign technique and musical insight, beautifully recorded and attractively presented. I will leave the last word to Ms O'Brien who says in the liner; "I want to show the harp is not just a harp or a "cliché" but a fabulous instrument" – to which I would just add fabulously played. An unexpected contender for one of my recordings of the year.

RECOMMENDED

Impromptu
Sarah O'Brien (harp)
rec. 2020, Alte Kirche Fautenbach (Achern) Germany
AUDITE 97.807 [80]



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Nick Barnard

Contents

- Gabriel Pierné (1863-1937)**
Impromptu-caprice Op 9 (1885)
- François Couperin (1668-1733) arr. Sarah O'Brien**
Le Tic-Toc-Choc
- Jean Cras (1879-1932)**
Deux impromptus pour harpe (1925)
- Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) arr. Sarah O'Brien**
Suite in E minor – Les rappels des oiseaux
Suite in G minor – La poule
- Paul Hindemith (1895-1963)**
Sonata für Harfe (1939)
- Joaquín Rodrigo (1901-1999)**
Impromptu para arpa (1959)
- Reinhold Glière (1875-1956)**
Impromptu (1947)
- Joseph Guy Marie Ropartz (1864-1955)**
Impromptu pour la harpe (1927)
- Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757) arr. Sarah O'Brien**
Sonata in E major K.380
- Nino Rota (1911-1979)**
Sarabanda e Toccata per arpa (1945)
- Virgilio Mortari (1902-1993)**
Sonatina prodigio (1936)
- Albert Roussel (1869-1937)**
Impromptu Op 21 (1919)
- Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)**
Impromptu in D-flat major Op 86 (1904)

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