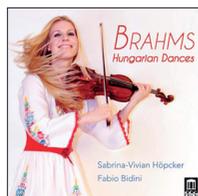


GRAMOPHONE

USA CANADA SOUNDS OF AMERICA

A special eight-page section focusing on recent recordings from the US and Canada



GRAMOPHONE *talks to ...*

Sandro Russo

The Italian pianist discusses his album 'Images et Mirages', an anniversary tribute to Debussy

How did you choose the specific homages to Debussy by Schmitt, Dukas and Falla?

I came across these homages while exploring *Le tombeau de Claude Debussy*, the collective work written as a posthumous tribute to the master in 1920. While some of these pieces don't speak to me, those by these three composers intrigued me from the start. I wasn't so interested in finding homages that were imitative of Debussy's style, but in works that assert their own language.

Why did you select Debussy's Images?

The two books of *Images* sit in the heart of Debussy's piano oeuvre and the conciseness of their three-movement structure enables a unique blend of past, present and future. The middle movements of both sets are indeed a revisitation of ancient times and all of these pieces stand as milestones in the development of 20th-century piano-writing. They are also representative of Debussy's innermost artistic world.



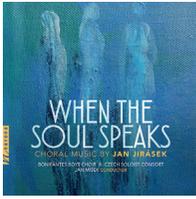
Is Leonard Borwick's arrangement of the Prélude à L'après midi d'un faune rewarding?

Without question! Borwick's arrangement exalts the pianistic nature of the work and has a certain voluptuousness. I was aware of three other transcriptions, but I chose Borwick's because it's the most faithful to Debussy's two-piano version and the one that best recreates a 'French sound'.

Which pianists have inspired you?

Definitely Michelangeli, specifically his *Images*, which was one of the first recordings to make an impression on me in my early teens, and must have influenced my own interpretation. Later, Zimmerman's recording of the *Préludes* and, for different reasons, Debussy's own piano rolls had a similar impact.





Jan Jirásek's current representation on disc is quite modest, his most popular recorded work undoubtedly the austere *Missa propria* (1991-95), sung here – as on Catalyst (nla but reissued by ArkivMusic) – by a *cappella* boys' chorus; the version for girls' chorus (1997) is available on Navona's 'Parallel Worlds' (NV6101), which similarly includes an alternative version of the motet cycle *Mondi paralleli* (2006-09).

Missa propria catches one's attention as well as any better-known modern liturgical setting. Structured as a triptych, after an impressive *Kyrie eleison* Jirásek (b1955) dispenses with the *Sanctus*, embeds the *Miserere* within the *Gloria* and concatenates the *Credo* and *Agnus Dei*. There is an over-reliance on vocal portamentos in the later sections, a trait not repeated in the lighter-toned *Mondi paralleli*, seven brief settings of Latin texts (the *Miserere* again, *Benedictus*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*, *Te Deum* and *Dona nobis pacem*) interspersed with phrases from Buddhism, Islam and Judaism. After the Mass's sombre tones it makes valuable textural contrast, but its avowedly inclusive message should not be overlooked.

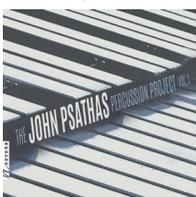
Most exciting of all, though, is the motet-triptych *Tam, kde sláva nepřestává* ('Where glory ends not'), derived from three of the oldest pieces of Czech music and concluding in an electrifying battle for chorus, flutes, bass trombones and drums based on 'Ye who are warriors of God'. This and all the works are winningly performed, captured in bright, clear sound. A little short-measure at 46 minutes but well worth buying. **Guy Rickards**

Psathas

'The John Psathas Percussion Project, Vol 1' Aegean. Corybas. Drum Dances. Jettatura^a. Matre's Dance^b. Muisca^c. Piano Quintet^d

^dDaniel Koppelman *pf* Percussion ensemble (Justin Alexander, Brian Baldauff, Tommy Dobbs, Emma Gierszal, Justin Lamb, Melinda Leoco, Brian Nozny, Ryan Patterson, Luis Rivera) /

Omar Carmenates ^{ac}vibraphone/^amarimba/^bperc Navona © NV6204 (62' • DDD)



I first encountered the music of John Psathas, a New Zealand composer

of Greek heritage born in 1966, on Evelyn Glennie's 'lively and tonally varied' album 'Drumming' (Catalyst, 7/96, reviewed by Rob Cowan). The work featured there, *Matre's Dance* (1991), is a vivid duet inspired by an episode in the later *Dune* novels by Frank Herbert.

Conceived originally as a violin solo, its transformation into a percussion-and-piano duo was wholly convincing. It reappears here – as with all seven works – in an authorised arrangement made in 2015 by Omar Carmenates, Professor of Percussion at Furman University, Greenville, South Carolina. And it works terrifically well.

That is a tribute to the quality of the performances by the crack percussion ensemble gathered together by Carmenates, a superb player evident enough in his solo playing: vibraphone in *Muisca* – which started out as a guitar duo – doubling on marimba in *Jettatura* (originally a 1999 piano solo) as well as the percussion soloist in *Matre's Dance*. However, this really is an ensemble disc, appreciated most fully in the ensemble works, the opening *Corybas* and concluding *Aegean* (both created as piano trios in 2011), which weave their mesmeric percussive way more convincingly than their original guises.

Several of the original versions of the works have been recorded already and/or are accessible in YouTube recordings. These new, superbly rendered performances match any of their competitors. This is especially true of the Piano Quintet, where – as in *Muisca* – the string-based parts set down in 2000 are transmogrified into a wholly new work, whereas in *Drum Dances* (1993) the original piano accompaniment is relatively straightforwardly transcribed for percussion. Navona's sound is top-notch. We all need a little bit of percussion in our lives, and this fits the bill splendidly. **Guy Rickards**

'Images et Mirages'

'Hommage à Debussy'

Debussy *Images*. *Lindaraja* (arr Roger-Ducasse). *Nocturnes - Fêtes* (arr Leyetchkiss). *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune* (arr Borwick). *Three Songs* (arr Attwood/Ericourt) *Dukas La plainte, au loin, du faune ... Falla* *Hommage à Debussy Schmitt Mirages*, Op 70 - À la mémoire de Claude Debussy **Sandro Russo** *pf* Steinway & Sons © STNS30105 (71' • DDD)



Here's a late entry among 2018's numerous Debussy anniversary

offerings, featuring pianist Sandro Russo in *Images* Books 1 and 2, alongside myriad transcriptions plus pieces by other composers written in homage to Debussy. 'Reflets dans l'eau' gains contrast and nuance as it progresses, if never quite attaining the liteness and shimmer of Michelangeli or Moravec. By contrast, the steadiness and classical reserve of 'Hommage à Rameau' is right on the money. Russo controls the swirling patterns of 'Mouvements' perfectly, yet I miss the sheer exhilaration and harmonic shadings distinguishing the Bavouzet and Aimard traversals. Somehow Book 2's relatively abstract idiom elicits more responsive and flexible pianism from Russo, which was also the case for Stephen Hough's 2018 *Images* cycle, notably in the playful accents and petulant crescendos of 'Poissons d'or'.

Russo casts diverse light and shade on the intricate piano-writing throughout Schmitt's tribute piece, while idiomatically peppering up the little Dukas tribute with just the right dose of sultry spice. In the Dukas, the pianist keeps the decorative filigree and gently insistent tolling repeated notes in consistent three-dimensional perspective. The variety of colour that he draws out of Leonard Borwick's *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune* transcription impresses even more when you realise how discreetly Russo pedals.

Anyone who can get through the difficult and cruelly exposed hurdles in Vladimir Leyetchkiss's transcription of 'Fêtes' with Russo's relaxed aplomb has my admiration, but I wish he had imparted more bite and momentum to the central march section. Yet Russo's effortless foreground/background delineation of *Lindaraja* in Jean Roger-Ducasse's solo version makes you forget the original two-piano scoring. Expertly crafted and musically satisfying as the Attwood and Ericourt song transcriptions may be, one still loses the conversational character of Debussy's word-settings. Once again, Russo reveals a knack for unusual and ear-catching programme concepts and for writing succinct, informative booklet notes. A fine release, overall. **Jed Distler**