

INTERNATIONAL RECORD REVIEW

DECEMBER 2007

Works for Viola and Piano. Bridge Allegro Appassionato, H82. Miniatures, Set 2, H88 – No. 1, Romance. Miniatures, Set 3, H89 – No. 1, Valse Russe (both arr. Michael Lieberman). Chopin Étude in E, Op. 10 No. 3, 'Tristesse' (arr. Lieberman). Waltz No. 3 in A minor, Op. 34 No. 2 (arr. Vadim Borrisovsky). Prokofiev Romeo and Juliet, Op. 64 – Five Pieces (arr. Borrisovsky). Schumann Adagio and Allegro in A flat, Op. 70. Swain Song at Evening. Tchaikovsky None but the Lonely Heart, Op. 6 No. 6 (arr. William Primrose). Nocturne, Op. 19 No. 4. The Seasons, Op. 37b – No. 4, April; No. 10, October. Aveu passionné in E minor (all arr. Borrisovsky). Tertis Sunset (Coucher du Soliel). Vaughan Williams Romance. Wieniawski Rêverie in F sharp minor. Helen Callus (viola); Phillip Bush (piano). ASV CDDCA1184 (full price, 1 hour 15 minutes). Website www.sanctuaryclassics.com. Producer/Engineer Markus Heiland. Dates March 2007.

Immediately distinguishing this recital is the distinctive timbre that Helen Callus elicits from her instrument – this is neither a darker-toned violin nor an anaemic-sounding cello. Also impressive from the start, in the movements from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, is the evenness of Callus' phrasing and production of sound. With unforced dramatic impetus and natural intensity, these excerpts do not sound 'reduced' (partly because of the sympathetic transcriptions and partly due to the spirited and heartfelt performances) and one does not miss the orchestra. Furthermore, the recording is focused and airy and allows a good balance between the instruments – a real duo sharing the same space rather than being presented as a soloist and an accompanist. Pianist Phillip Bush is sensitive, respectful and characterful.

This release mixes original works for viola and piano and transcriptions for the medium. Of the former, Vaughan Williams's *Romance* (left in manuscript and not published until after 1962, four years after the composer's death) is deeply eloquent and rises to quite a bitter climax – as if all of the composer's anguish at the world's troubles (then as now) is intensified into this six-minute, innocently titled miniature. It's a magnetic and quite chilling piece. Such awareness was shared by Frank Bridge – and one senses this even in his lightest fare, the charms of 'Valse Russe' and (another) 'Romance', for example (as

transcribed), and particularly in *Allegro appassionato* (and original work for viola and piano – the viola was Bridge's instrument) that over its two minutes opens up significant emotional entreaties.

Of the other English composers, Freda Swain (1902-85), a pupil of Stanford, is represented by *Song at Evening* and Lionel Tertis (a notable violist, of course) by *Sunset*. The Tertis follows the Swain and two such similar pieces just avoid canceling one another out; but each is a delight and Tertis's in particular has imploring and appealing melodic contours while being regretful and without milking the emotion.

Of the transcriptions, the two Chopin piano pieces fare quite well. The *Waltz* retains its reclusive nature, although some of the viola's expression (whether transcribed or as interpreted) seems a little self-conscious (as does, elsewhere, some of Callus's use of portamento). The *Étude*, which begins so familiarly with the piano alone, proves to be soul-touching, especially in Callus's unaffected playing, the central section's agitation an artless release. The transcriptions of Tchaikovsky (four by Borrisovsky, one by Primrose) are slightly more problematical. The music itself is lovely, but – if passing to an instrument not sanctioned by the composer – the pieces seem to demand the cello (especially 'None but the Lonely Heart'), although the spring freshness of 'April' works quite well and *Ardent Declaration* comes off best of all, the viola helping the music to soar. After the somewhat doubtful Tchaikovsky arrangements, Wieniawski's only work conceived for viola, *Rêverie*, seems to fit hand-in-glove, the intensity of the instrument's lower strings richly exploited; the piano writing is virtuosic, too. It's a deep work, reflective and uneasy, and is eloquently brought off here.

Schumann's *Adagio and Allegro* is usually heard on cello and piano or horn and piano (and, according to Lewis Foreman in his booklet note, is 'best known in the version arranged by Ernest Ansermet with orchestra accompaniment' – maybe, maybe not, but, as a Schumann and Ansermet *aficionado*, I cannot recall coming across it!). Here the music blossoms persuasively on the viola, its dusky but delicate tone ideal for the *Adagio* and with no technical encumbrance to limit the athletic vitality of the *Allegro* (the latter without a separate track). This work could have ended the disc in lively style (whereas that honour is assigned to Chopin's *Étude*) and the five Tchaikovsky pieces could usefully have been dispersed (but not the Prokofiev).

These are small criticisms, however, as is mentioning Callus's occasional touching of an open string and the odd extraneous sound emanating from her instrument. All in all, this is a most pleasing recital, very well presented.

-Colin Anderson