Faure - Piano Music (Angela Hewitt) [2013]

1. Thème et variations Op 73 | Thème [1'58] 2. Thème et variations Op 73 | Variation 1 Listesso tempo [0'58] 3. Thème et variations Op 73 | Variation 2 Più mosso [0'53] 4. Thème et variations Op 73 | Variation 3 Un poco più mosso [0'48] 5. Thème et variations Op 73 | Variation 4 Listesso tempo [1'25] 6. Thème et variations Op 73 | Variation 5 Un poco più mosso [0'48] 7. Thème et variations Op 73 | Variation 6 Molto adagio [1'50] 8. Thème et variations Op 73 | Variation 7 Allegro moderato [0'53] 9. Thème et variations Op 73 | Variation 8 Andante molto moderato [1'27] 10. Thème et variations Op 73 | Variation 9 Quasi adagio [1'17] 11. Thème et variations Op 73 | Variation 10 Allegro vivo [1'16] 12. Thème et variations Op 73 | Variation 11 Andante molto, moderato espressivo [2'47] 13. Valse-caprice No 1 in A major Op 30 [7'22] 14. Valse-caprice No 2 in D flat major Op 38 [7'43] 15. Nocturne No 5 in B flat major Op 37 [8'35] 16. Nocturne No 6 in D flat major Op 63 [9'12] 17. Nocturne No 13 in B minor Op 119 [8'29] 18. Ballade pour piano seul Op 19 [15'07] Angela Hewitt – piano

This recording is the latest release in Angela Hewitt's highly regarded series of solo piano music by French composers, the list of which has included Rameau, Couperin, Chabrier, Messiaen, Ravel, and most recently Debussy. I have marvelled at her recorded work to date and was quite eager to have the opportunity to acquire and review this recording. It seemed only natural and a matter of time for Hewitt to release an album of piano music by Gabriel Fauré, and we learn from the first line of the pianist's album notes that this had been her idea for quite some time.

Fauré's oeuvre for solo piano include thirteen Nocturnes, thirteen Barcarolles, six Impromptus, four Valses-Caprices, and a number of other significant works including Romances sans paroles, Ballade in F# major, Mazurka in B flat major, Thème et variations, and Huit pièces brèves.

Hewitt has thoughtfully selected compositions that date from different stylistic periods of Fauré's

life. She opens with the Thème et variations in C sharp minor, composed in 1895, which is Fauré's longest work for solo piano and one of his greatest. Hewitt's playing here is sublime: from the moment she declares the solemn, march-like opening of the theme, we are captivated by her lyrical phrasing and sensitive use of rubato, tight control of dynamics, and articulate fingerwork. Each of the eleven variations has its unique contours, colours and textures. She effectively communicates the nervous energy of the second and third variations, haunts us with the eeriness of the sixth, touches us with the serenity of the ninth. The tenth variation ends with a climactic resolution in C sharp minor, leading us to believe that the work is over; however, out of the decaying sound of that seemingly final chord emerges the last variation in the major mode - harmonically rich and compellingly beautiful. As Aaron Copland described it: "How many pianists, I wonder, have not regretted that the composer disdained the easy triumph of closing on the brilliant, dashing tenth variation. No, poor souls, they must turn the page and play that last, enigmatic (and most beautiful) one, which seems to leave the audience with so little desire to applaud."

Next are two of Fauré's four Valses-Caprices, composed around the time of his marriage and lighter and more playful in mood. These are charming works full of colour and contrast: tender, at times melancholy, melodies are juxtaposed with joyous, animated, rowdier passages. In the latter, Hewitt really brings out their dance elements, providing a strong rhythmic foundation while brilliantly executing lines of rapid fingerwork. The Nocturnes, which many agree to be some of the most beautiful works ever written for solo piano, were composed across a span of forty years, and Hewitt has chosen to record three of her favourites, each representative of a different phase of Fauré's life. After listening to these selections, I only wish that she had recorded the entire set. In her hands, these miniature musical tone poems, with their myriad moods ranging from tranquillity to animation to introspection, are given fresh life, and it is clear that Hewitt has truly assimilated these works. No. 13, Fauré's last work for solo piano, has a philosophical, metaphysically searching nature which is reminiscent of the slow movements of his chamber works such as the Piano Trio in D minor and String Quartet in E minor, both of which were also written in his final years. Rather leaving us on a fatalistic note, Hewitt takes us back to Fauré's more youthful days and completes her album with the lyrical and uplifting Ballade pour piano seul.

Hyperion's recording engineers have beautifully captured the sound and dynamic range of Hewitt's Fazioli concert grand piano. Bass notes which figure prominently in nearly all of these piano works have a deep, rich resonance. The venue, the same used for most of Hewitt's recent solo recordings for Hyperion, gives the recorded piano's sound just the right amount of air without being overly reverberant. The album notes were thoughtfully prepared by the pianist herself and provide both historical context as well as personal insight into this collection of works.

Those of you who have loyally followed Hyperion's discography will be aware that this album of Fauré solo piano works is not the label's first. Kathryn Stott, another champion of Fauré, recorded the complete piano works in a four-disc set, including works for four hands (with Martin Roscoe), for Hyperion in 1994. These were also excellently recorded and critically praised at the time of their release . One cannot discuss the recorded piano works of Fauré without mentioning two other artists who have recorded their entirety, Jean-Philippe Collard and Paul Crossley. I would also recommend the recordings of Germaine Thyssens-Valentin, the Franco-Dutch pianist who was a student of Fauré at the Paris Conservatoire. Although these mono transfers, now available on the Testament label, cannot compare to the superb engineering of the album in review, they are nevertheless historically significant and worth exploring.

Hewitt's Fauré Piano Works, a valuable addition to the Fauré discography, is a delight from start to finish and one to which I will certainly return with pleasure. This is pianism of the highest calibre faithfully captured with first-rate engineering. -- Albert Lam, MusicWeb International

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