

CD Review by Jerry Dubins

LAZZARI Violin Sonata in E, op. 24 Scherzo in g **ANDREAE** Violin Sonata in D, op. 4 • Ilona Then-Bergh (vn); Michael Schäfer (pn) • GENUIN 10167 (76:23)



Complete Works for Violin & Piano

Audio CD

Genuin

Opening a shipment of CDs sent for review often reminds me of the line from *Forrest Gump*: “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get,” a philosophical gem that is no less true for its being a distinctively down-on-the-plantation expression of folksy wisdom. Sometimes you bite into a wonderfully rich piece of dark chocolate with a smooth, butter-cream filling; other times, you pick a piece and break a tooth. “Which was this to be?” I wondered, quickly followed by, “Who was Volkmar Andrae?” To Sylvio Lazzari, I could not plead ignorance because I’ve encountered him before in reviewing an orchestral piece of his, *Effet de nuit*, in *Fanfare* 30:2

Josef Fortunat Silvester Lazzari (1857–1944) was a French composer of Austrian origin, born in Bolzano, Italy. In 1882, after law studies in Austria, he came to Paris, enrolling in the Paris Conservatory. There he studied under Charles Gounod and Ernest Guiraud (contributor of recitatives to Bizet’s *Carmen* and Offenbach’s *The Tales of Hoffmann*). Both Franck and Chausson recognized Lazzari’s talent and encouraged him to remain in France permanently, which he did. His output is not sizeable. It consists of a handful of orchestral numbers, half a dozen chamber works, several songs and pieces for solo piano, and four operas, one of which, *La Lépreuse* (The Leper), is about a woman who deliberately infects her lover with the disease as revenge for his infidelity. It doesn’t make for the most appetizing dinner-table conversation, and if, as they say, bad press is better than no press at all, then Lazzari’s opera achieved its goal.

While Lazzari may not have been completely unfamiliar to me, Swiss conductor and composer Volkmar Andrae (1879–1962) surely was, though not to Bart Verhaeghe, who reviewed a Guild CD of Andrae’s piano trios in 31:4. After studies at the Cologne Conservatory, Andrae took up a string of minor posts in Munich, Winterthur, and Zurich, but real recognition came in 1906 when he assumed leadership of the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra, a position he held until 1949, balancing it with his duties as director of the Zurich Conservatory. Later he worked as a composer in Vienna and distinguished himself there and abroad as a leading interpreter of the works of Bruckner. Andrae’s own output is fairly modest, consisting mainly of half a dozen chamber works, but he did also compose two operas, *Ratcliff* and *Abenteuer des Casanova*.

The title of this Genuin CD, *The Complete Works for Violin and Piano*, must surely qualify as one of the mountain-out-of-a-molehill embellishments of all time. The two sonatas on this disc, plus the Scherzo, is all the music there is for violin and piano by these two composers. That's all she wrote. And much to my surprise, the Doron Music label already recorded the Andreae sonata 10 years ago with Robert Zimansky and Boris Mersson. That disc, which will set you back \$34.99 (!) at ArkivMusic, includes sonatas by Mersson and another Swiss conductor-composer, Friedrich Hegar, who founded the Tonhalle Orchestra.

So, the time has come to pick a chocolate from the box. I begin with the Lazzari, since it's first on the disc. The first bite doesn't taste very good: a bold descending figure with the two instruments locked in unison doesn't hold much hope for anything significant to come from it, and as a friend of mine once said, "No piece ever gets any better than the promise of its first measure." It takes Lazzari almost 19 minutes of inflated romantic rhetoric to exhaust himself and the listener with just the first movement of this 42-minute behemoth of a sonata.

Soaring melodies and passages of sweeping lyricism emerge now and again to reassure us that the composer really could write gorgeous music—listen beginning at 4:01 for nearly a full minute that will take your breath away (the Franck influence is obvious)—but in between are many arid stretches of empty posturing and gesturing that cry out for an editor's red pencil.

The Lento, at almost 13 minutes, is like the first movement, only in slow motion. The sonata's concluding *Con fuoco* is not only the shortest movement—close to 11 minutes—but unquestionably its best, sustaining interest throughout with energetic, propulsive material that carries the listener forward on waves of virtuosic writing for both violin and piano. The one thing that bothers me about Lazzari's compositional technique in general is his too frequent reversion to unison passages where the violin and piano simply double each other's parts.

Next I sample Lazzari's G♯-Minor Scherzo, which turns out to be quite a lip-smacking piece of candy. If Mendelssohn scherzos evoke fairies, elves, and leprechauns, Lazzari's is more akin to Grieg's goblins and trolls.

Finally, I bite into Andreae's sonata. Not much different in content or style from the Lazzari, it at least has the benefit of being considerably shorter, just under 28 minutes in total. I would have to say of the two composers that Lazzari is the more inspired; much of his sonata gives evidence of a genuine natural gift for melody and the grand romantic gesture. It's just that he doesn't seem to know how and when to rein it in. Andreae's musical ideas, in contrast, don't seem to flow as naturally or to have any of Lazzari's memorable breath-catching moments, but technically Andreae sounds like the better craftsman. Unison writing is minimal and the counterpoint between the two instruments sounds like the work of a surer hand.

So, there you have it: one chocolate, Lazzari's sonata, with a gooey, runny center that dribbles down your chin, but is oh so sweet; and another, Andreae's sonata, with a firm center and not quite so sweet, but one that won't make you drool.

When she was only 19, Ilona Then-Bergh was already a member of the Bavarian State Orchestra, and four years later joined the Bavarian Radio Orchestra. She plays like an angel with the purest and sweetest tone imaginable, and with perfect intonation and insightful musical instincts. Her pianist partner, Michael Schäfer, displays equally expert playing and fine musicianship.

Admittedly, these are works that inhabit the distant corners of the violin-piano repertoire, but they are well worth exploring on this beautifully recorded CD. **Jerry Dubins**

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