

L'esprit français

The title of this is L'esprit Français, though the only French composer here is Florent Schmitt (1870–1958). He and the little-known Dutch composer Jan Ingenhoven (1876–1951) wrote their violin and piano pieces in the years following World War I, and the Hungarian composer Lazlo Lajtha (1892–1963) wrote his sonata in 1962. Then-Bergh and Schafer have made a career of recording music by lesser-known composers, arranging it into interesting programs. What ties this here together is that all four pieces were written in Paris.

Listening to the Schmitt and the Ingenhoven is kind of the aural equivalent of going to an exhibit of Impressionist paintings done by artists who are not necessarily French, but paint in the style of Monet and his compatriots. There is much to admire in the technique, colors, and structures of the music; but, in spite of the excellent playing it begins to grow tiresome. Listening to the Lajtha, on the other hand, is like entering a room of fresh, clean, and thought-provoking art that invigorates the eye and the spirit.

He calls on colors used by Ravel, Bartok, and Hindemith, but the music itself does not imitate. He has a unique voice. Lajtha worked with Bartok and Kodaly transcribing Hungarian folk songs, taught at the Budapest Conservatory, was the director of the Hungarian Radio, and won the 1951 Kossuth Prize for his research into folk music. In 1929 he won the Coolidge Prize for his Third Quartet.

He supported the 1956 Hungarian uprising, which caused the Communist regime to suppress his music and restrict his travel abroad, though he was able to spend May and June of 1962 in Paris writing this sonata. The government's suppression of Lajtha's music has to be the only reason that this sonata was not a staple of the 20th-Century violin literature. © 2014 American Record Guide

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