

L'esprit français

Violinist Ilona Then-Bergh and pianist Michael Schäfer explore little-known French works for violin and piano in their latest contribution to Genuin's "Un!erhört" series. The first of these, Florent Schmitt's *Sonata libre*, though comprising only two movements or sections, lasts almost a half-hour in this performance. The first part, "Lent sans exagération," interweaves timbrally and tonally shifting violin melodies with a surging piano part. Harmonies shimmer elusively, suggesting perhaps more the manner of Ravel (who won the second Prix de Rome the year after Schmitt won the first) than that of Debussy. But the rhythmic complexity that both violinist and pianist bestride contributes to that sense of riding rolling waves. Throughout the movement, Then-Bergh produces an allusive (and elusive) tone that intensifies the movement's liquid effect. The second section, *Animé*, features spiky motives, and both Then-Bergh and Schäfer adapt to its more aggressive expressivity (though the first movement's harmonic fluidity extends through the second as well). The work in general pushes vigorously against the constraints of traditional tonality, recombining its elements in new ways.

The two roughly eight-minute sonatas by Jan Ingenhoven, the First from 1918–19 (Schmitt's work also comes from that period) and the Second from 1921, follow on the program. The first of these, though supposedly cast into a single movement, falls into four sections ("Prélude" Moderato; Andante con moto; Allegretto; and Finale: Tempo di Prélude) that hint at a traditional four-movement structure, but the material perhaps differs less than those titles might suggest (although the jaunty Allegretto stands out). Then-Bergh adapts to the work's sparer expression, responding to it with the kind of sympathy the duo exhibited for Schmitt's *Sonata*. The three brief movements of the Second *Sonata* seem to be constructed employing similar harmonic and melodic materials, but the central Andante con moto in this case exhibits a stronger individuality within the sonata than did the identically titled movement in the First *Sonata*. Then-Bergh plays this movement with great warmth of tone combined, again, with veiled expressivity and brings a piquant liveliness to the very brief third.

László Lajtha's *Sonate en concert*, from 1962, perhaps the most traditional harmonically of the works on the program (and the most traditional, as well, in its rhythmic combinations of melody and harmony), may contain traces of Hungarian influences; but listeners will likely find that it sounds predominantly French in its manner of expression. Passages in the first movement lead the violin into the higher registers toward the end; and Then-Bergh sounds both pure and ardent in that tonal empyrean. The slow movement enshrines haunting, rapt phrases drawn out in almost desultory meditation with a more urgently declamatory outburst at its center; Then-Bergh and Schäfer effectively encompass both these manners. The finale, the shortest of the movements, provides a concluding perpetual motion; but this one's not so kinetic as Ravel's finale for his violin sonata (or the concluding page of *Tzigane*), although they share rhythmic devices freely enough to make Lajtha's a sort of tribute to Ravel's, at least if not for the suggestions of the *Czárda* atmosphere that occasionally come to the fore.

For those interested in this repertory or these specific composers, the duo has provided a most rewarding hour's worth of music; but more general listeners may find it less ingratiating.

Recommended, therefore, primarily to listeners of the first kind, as well, of course, as to historians of the period. © 2014 Fanfare

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