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Works for Clarinet and Piano by Schumann, Debussy, Saint-Saëns, Poulenc and Arnold

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EAN: 4022143975362

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International Record Review (Raymond S. Tuttle - 2012.04.01)

RECORD REVIEW

Arthur Campbell and Helen Marlais are husband and wife and both are on the teaching faculty at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This CD was recorded north of the border, however, in Alberta, and in two sessions, together spanning exactly six years. As the present release is identified as the first volume in a projected series, one hopes that future volumes will not be released at Six-year intervals!

Representing German, French and British composers, and a period of 113 years, this programme offers many opportunities for the performers to point up the contrasts between these works, as well as the ways in which they resemble each other. If there is a fault with this generally fine release, it is that Campbell and Marlais do not do this as much as they might. Overall, while the playing is at a very high level in terms of technique, it is a little muted emotionally.

Take, for example, Schumann's three Fantasiestücke. These are terrific pieces, full of melancholy (the first), fancy (the second) and passion (the third). Performers should not hesitate to make Schumann's highs very high and his lows very low; I think there is more risk in underplaying his music than in overplaying it. Campbell and Marlais, perhaps in fear of exaggerating, mute the emotional extremes in these pieces. The result is very 'proper' but I would argue that such reserve goes against the grain of the music. A quick listen to Reginald Kell reveals almost identical tempos in the first two pieces (he is quite a bit faster – correctly so, I think – in the third), but a very different sound and approach throughout. Kell's brighter sound, with more 'ping' and vibrato, draws back the curtain and reveals that this music is not quite, well … normal. On the other hand, Marlais is a more positive piano partner than the one assigned to Kell.

Two years earlier, Kell also recorded Debussy's Première Rapsodie – like Campbell, in the version for clarinet and piano. Kell and Campbell both finish the piece in a few seconds over eight minutes, yet there is a world of difference in how they get from Point A to Point B. Again, Kell's sound is more forward and exciting. This is partly due to the recording, hiss be damned. (Audite's engineering is velvety and balanced.) Much of it is due to Kell, himself, however, who moulded the sound of his clarinet the way that the best singers do with their voices. Kell and Rosen are more spontaneous than Campbell and Marlais, whose reading, with everything in its place, reminds us that Debussy composed the Rapsodie as a test piece. Turning to a British player with a wonderfully French name, Gervase de Peyer is a little more controlled (or should I say 'controlling'?) than Kell, but he too, when compared to Campbell, has a more enlivening flicker in his sound and in his interpretation. Last but not least, Martin Fröst's reading combines Campbell's straightahead tone with a more emotionally volatile response to the music.

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These differences, generally speaking, also extend to the sonatas by Saint-Saëns and Poulenc – all cornerstones of the repertory, Campbell and Marlais seem best suited to the former, a work which exudes rectitude and comfortable propriety. (In the last movement, Saint-Saëns does run a little wild, as he had a tendency to do in his last movements!) Here, the evenness of Campbell's tone production is an asset. On the other hand, Campbell and Marlais don't have as much fun as the other performers do with Poulenc's often cheeky and even outrageous sonata. It is interesting that both of these sonatas came from the very end of each composer's life, yet there is little stock-taking or navel-gazing in either of them!

Malcolm Arnold's Sonatina, even more than Poulenc's Sonata, was made for fun. Surprisingly, Campbell and Marlais are even more explosive here than de Peyer and Pryor, yet the latter pair capture a mocking quality in the outer movements that eludes the present performers.

The booklet notes are interesting. I did not know, for example, that Colin Davis started his musical career as a clarinettist, and that he premiered Arnold's Sonatina.

I don't want to make too much of my negative comments. By most measures, this is an admirable CD, and if the combination of works is appealing, then don't hesitate. Do, however, treat yourself to some of the alternatives, in the individual works that appeal to you most.

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