

Pietsch | De Solaun

audite

Fantastique



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GABRIEL FAURÉ

Violin Sonata No. 1 in A major, Op. 13

- I. *Allegro molto* 10:27
- II. *Andante* 6:43
- III. *Allegro vivo* 4:09
- IV. *Allegro quasi presto* 6:30

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Violin Sonata in G minor, L. 140

- I. *Allegro vivo* 5:17
- II. *Intermède: fantasque et léger* 4:33
- III. *Finale: très animé* 4:36

MAURICE RAVEL

Violin Sonata No. 2 in G major, M. 77

- I. *Allegretto* 7:58
- II. *Blues. Moderato* 5:21
- III. *Perpetuum mobile. Allegro* 4:01

FRANCIS POULENC

Violin Sonata, FP. 119

- I. *Allegro con fuoco* 7:02
- II. *Intermezzo. Très lent et calme* 7:10
- III. *Presto tragico –*
Strictelement la double plus lent 6:00

FRANZISKA PIETSCH violin

JOSU DE SOLAUN piano

**FANTASQUE:
FRENCH VIOLIN SONATAS (1876 - 1943)**

“A magic floats above everything...”

Paris, 1877, *Journal de Musique*

Camille Saint-Saëns reviewing the premiere of Fauré's A major Violin Sonata

Fauré Violin Sonata (1876)

Ravel Violin Sonata (1927)

Poulenc Violin Sonata (1943)

Debussy Violin Sonata (1917)

When Franziska and I talked about what to record next, it was clear to us that we had an urgent need to explore totally different musical realms and emotional landscapes than those framed by the Strauss and Shostakovich sonatas of our previous disc – that is, those of exuberant celebration and austere tragedy. In a conversation about our favorite repertoire, we immediately thought of Debussy and his world of aphoristic dreams; of Poulenc's mix of sardonic humor with subtly hidden but heart-felt *gravitas* and sensuality; of Ravel's eclectic, pastoral and melancholic urbanity; and of Fauré's nostalgic finesse and aristocratic verve. Soon, a circle started to form in front of our eyes, tied by all of these masters, and we found ourselves magically immersed in the manifold world of French violin sonatas, held together by the red thread of the fantastical, the wondrous and bizarre, the outlandish and bitter-sweetly nostalgic, the multifarious and humorous, and even the warmly tragic. Indeed, *Fantastique*, fantastical, is the marking chosen by Debussy to start the world of clownish pantomime that is invoked in the second movement of his Violin Sonata, and this is indeed the essence of this record: faces, masks, and the infinite and poetic distance between the two.

The music on the disc spans almost seventy years, and coincides with a period of relative peace and cultural splendor in France: the Third Republic, that is, the political regime between the fall of Napoleon III (1870) and the German occupation of 1940. One can argue that this was a sort of Golden Age for music, and that these composers were some of its paramount heroes. Musical composition in the country at this time, in fact, had gained a kind of renewed depth and loftiness, in part as a response to the lost Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871.

In 1876, five years after the war, Gabriel Fauré was scarcely 31 years old. He had just finished his A major Violin Sonata at a time when chamber music was of less interest to the general music public than such things as grand opera performances and other big spectacles. Until the composition of his first Violin Sonata, Fauré had basically been a composer of songs. He would not write another violin sonata until forty years later, at the very end of his life, and this first essay in

the intimate duo genre is a work full of impassioned lyricism and the exaltation of romantic youth, albeit always tastefully and unobtrusively subdued by a sense of elegance and refinement. In fact, when he wrote the sonata, four years had passed since his failed engagement to Marianne Viardot, an event that would soon become pivotal in his own biographical self-identity and that would influence a lot of the sense of the tragic in his music.

Examples would include not only the juvenile ardor of this sonata but also the slow moment of the C minor Piano Quartet, for example, written in close proximity to it. The Violin Sonata is imbued with the elations of youthful imagination, tenderness, and even an amorous joy, but also of darker-hued colours, of moments where romance and twilight mix mysteriously; it is music full of a kind crusading fervor and of the spirit of spring, but also of a sincere and sweet serenity at times.

Saint-Saëns had been one of Fauré's early advocates and mentors, and he introduced the composer to the music of Schumann, Liszt, and Wagner, among other more modern artistic phenomena. He also helped him to get some of his first positions as a church organist, a profession that would provide him with a steady income for forty years and that would influence his music in subtle and deep ways throughout his compositional life (also in the Violin Sonata). But more importantly for us, in 1872, when Fauré was 27 years old, it was also Saint-Saëns himself who introduced Fauré to the great singer Pauline Viardot and to her musical circle and artistic salon. Fauré then dedicated many of his songs to her, and went on to fall deeply in love with her daughter, Marianne, who would break off her engagement with the composer after only three months, an event that, as mentioned before, devastated him totally. Fauré, some years later, thus dedicated this first Violin Sonata to Marianne's brother, the violinist and composer Paul Viardot, in a final gesture of approximation to Marianne that proved futile.

The Viardot family was indeed very well-connected and their artistic circle included or had included at some point people such as George Sand, Ivan Turgenev, Alfred de Musset, Frédéric Chopin, Hector Berlioz, Franz Liszt, and other such figures of the time. Fauré soon became a regular of their circle in the 1870s, and the sonata is a testimony of this exciting time in the life of the composer where he was integrating his *École Niedermeyer* training into a personal, distinct voice of his own, a voice that combined the austerity of modality and liturgical chant, with the almost Wagnerian chromaticism and tonal ambiguity of late 19th century music. The sonata was his first important chamber work and to this day one of his most frequently performed and beloved compositions. In it, Fauré indeed makes a very original and eclectic blend of ancient and modern musical idioms and techniques, making use of the church modes of medieval and Renaissance music, organ textures, operatic lines, the chromatic harmony of late 19th century learned through his study of the music of Schumann, Liszt and Wagner, and also a certain neoclassical restraint in the elaboration of formal proportions, a mix of things altogether very different to the kind of music that was being written in France at the time.

The sonata starts with a glowing and rapturous first movement that commences its turbulent but elated energy *in medias res*, almost à la Schumann, catapulting itself fearlessly into a musical discourse of great fervor, mellifluous vocality and aristocratic subtlety. The first theme is a long, wide-arching melody that unfolds with urgency over many measures. It sets the tone for the ardent atmosphere of the whole piece. The second movement is a barcarolle, a genre that, following Chopin's well-known masterpiece, would become paramount in Fauré's œuvre – he would write no less than thirteen solo barcarolles for piano, and

would use this historical musical type in many of his works for other instruments. It is my impression that the barcarolle suggested to Fauré both the gentle lilt of romance and the swaying of obsessive introspection. In the Violin Sonata, this barcarolle is soft-spoken, full of silent sorrow, introspective and reflective. The mood is of dark languor: the hypnotic, swaying, drowsy rhythms pointing always towards unfulfilled longings and thwarted desires. The third movement is a chirpy Mendelssohnian scherzo, full of the supple life of forest fairies, elves, and the magic of lightness. It sparkles with zest and buoyancy, and sprightly skedaddles its way with tongue-in-cheek humor, joyous speed and teasing virtuosity until it reaches a middle section that invokes the bygone, melancholy days of an idealized Renaissance past, a wistful Parisian blend between a gavotte and a minuet that would be prophetic of much of the music that Ravel wrote, and that also looked back at Schumann in its subtle touches of nostalgia. Its evanescent, scintillating spirit has captured the imagination of performers and audiences alike for more than a century, and at its premiere, this movement was encored many times. To conclude the sonata, Fauré wrote a gentle and tender tarantella-like rondo, full of sweetness, serenity, and occasional bursts of passion. It crowns this masterpiece, leaving the listener with a feeling of charming freshness, as well a feeling of longing.

And from a work written during the spring of life, Fauré's first important composition, we move on to Debussy's swan song, his very last composition, the 1917 Violin Sonata. This is a very different work to the Fauré, whose music Debussy sarcastically described as being "fit for seaside casinos". Here, all elements of *belcanto* melodism or of drama have been eradicated, in favor of a more epigrammatic, concise, oblique, even elliptical style, nude of any sign of poetic rhetorics.

It took the composer a whole year to write the work, while Europe was in the midst of war, Russia in the midst of its Revolution, and while he was suffering from the colon cancer that would eventual kill him the following year, despite submitting himself to an invasive operation, radiation therapy and drug treatments. He had struggled with the disease since 1909, already for eight long years, and it made him live a period of total personal anguish that, coupled with the instability created by the war and a series of very problematic love affairs with women, created a very special matrix of personal contradictions and paradoxes under which the sonata was composed. Depression was mixed with nationalistic fervor, mystical undertones were mixed with the street music of low culture, the sublime and the ridiculous always rubbing elbows. Indeed, the sonata subtly alternates between sadness and moments of luminous joy, between outbursts of radiance and somber moods, in a style that in its penchant for *ostinati*, aphoristic statements, and non-fluid, cinematographic cuts, tries to clearly distance itself from the Austro-German canon of organicism and motivic sequentiation. It is also music that tries to crystalize into sounds the timelessness of dreams – a very different conception of the passing of time, one having more to do with the myriad nuances and fleeting essence of a moment, kind of like photography or painting, than with the drama and dialectical struggle of hardly won teleological goals. Indeed, as he explained in letters, his model for the work was the French sonata of the eighteenth century and not the classical German sonata. The sonata was, in fact, part of a projected cycle of six sonatas for various instruments dedicated to his wife, Emma Bardac. Unfortunately, though, only three of the sonatas could be finished before the composer's premature death

The Violin Sonata itself starts with a kind of deliberate archaism, a mysterious and dreamy liturgical austerity, a modal atmosphere that rejects dramatic vocolity. Contradictions start when this austerity is undercut by danceful arabesques and melismas of an orientalist flavor as well as by the sounds of gypsy folk

music. In fact, Spanish musical allusions appear all over the movement, inextricably intertwined with ascetic Gregorian chant melodies and Schéhérazade-like lines. Debussy imagined an idealized, Mediterranean, Graeco-Roman musical past towards which he turned her, in trying to avoid anything having to do with Wagner or continental Romanticism. The reference to Spanish music, Hungarian music, liturgical chant, and other such methods, were ways of deflecting from Romanticism. The second movement invokes the world of *commedia dell'arte*, so beloved of Debussy, the world of acrobatic harlequins and pierrots, of sad clowns and pantomimes, but also of street music, of both sultry cabarets and nocturnal ragtimes. Again there are contradictory sentiments here, the music shifting from humour, to irony, to heartfelt statements, and to pastoral grace at the end. The languorous *glissandi* here could be said to point towards the influence of Hungarian gypsy violinist Béla Radics, whose playing Debussy once had heard in a Budapest nightclub years before. The last movement uses tremolos and *ostinati* to convey a mysterious kind of motion, a rippling effect, almost like the cinematic passage of time. It starts with a strange recollection of the first movement theme, slowing building up to tumultuous happiness in the form of a tarantella: again the Mediterranean as an Arcadian past, here portrayed in music that scampers around with a kind of vital enthusiasm, very much, even bizarrely at odds with the Debussy's state of mind and circumstances at the time. Despite the melancholic and nostalgic air of a lot of the music, the piece ends in a mood of boisterous optimism.

Ravel, like Debussy, didn't like to wear his heart on his sleeve in the music he wrote, at least not openly, despite being a student of Fauré, who by contrast did occasionally allow himself to do so (like in the Violin Sonata presented here). However, in contrast to Debussy, one can sometimes feel a very discrete surfacing of tender vulnerability and child-like nostalgia in Ravel's music. The music, if not impassioned like Fauré's, is also not aphoristic like Debussy's. It inhabits the world of children's fantasies and loves the exotic, the infinitely nuanced, and the pastoral.

By the time he started his Violin Sonata in 1923, Ravel's health was in rapid decline. He was almost sixty years old, and had spent the war years as a lorry driver. He also suffered constant insomnia and found himself for years intensely mourning the death of his mother, to whom he was very attached. Like Debussy in his violin sonata, here we find Ravel too at the end of his life. It took him four long years to finish the work, which again mixes the pastoral, the liturgical, the music of African-Americans (as opposed to Spanish or Hungarian gypsy music), and the brilliant virtuosity of the institution of the public concert into a very heterogenous and eclectic whole. In fact, this ingenious logic of discontinuity and mixture of incommensurable opposites is a red thread that connects all of the music in this album.

Like in the Debussy's first movement, in Ravel's first movement there are intimations of ancient organum techniques which invoke a kind of oracular, mystical tranquility, this in contrast with the more earthy yet delicate pastoral bliss of the beginning, achieved by a clever mixture of different ancient modes, something Fauré and Debussy also did in their works. The music alternates between the pastoral, the liturgical, and moments of almost plastic beauty, like the coda, where one can almost hear the constantly shifting light, in an effort to stage in sound a landscape of Arcadian serenity, an ancient world with none of the individualistic, expressionistic and dramatic *pathos* of the semitone, none of the chromaticism of late Romantic music – a world more at peace with nature. Here again, like Debussy, Ravel finds refuge in ancient modality for the excesses of turn-of-the-century music. Like in Debussy, the formal sensibility here has a definite neoclassical streak to it. And like in Debussy too, soon the low-brow culture of street music is used as a respite that satirizes the pompous ideals of

nobility and purity of high-European culture. This is exactly what happens in the second movement, a Blues inspired by Jelly Roll Morton's *Black Bottom Stomp* that after *pizzicati*, *glissandi*, complex ornaments and high string positions that imitate the tone of African-American singing, builds to an ecstatic, almost orgasmic climax that very soon later evaporates into a nocturnal puff of street smoke, in a gesture almost analogous to *film noir*. The sonata ends with a virtuosic *tour de force* for the violin, a *moto perpetuo* that nods to both the glorifications of mechanical motion typical of the Futurism of the time, as well as to the exuberant, decadent excesses of the Roaring Twenties, with its hustle-bustle and vitality, in a kind of clever and subtle satire of the violin virtuoso.

Like Debussy's Violin Sonata, Poulenc's Violin Sonata was written during wartime, this time World War II, in the years 1942 and 1943. In this sense, war is another red thread of the disc, specifically, how creative minds deal with the problem of making art under such circumstances. But not only – how artists deal with the problem of making art under moments of anguish, depression, and instability. It is strange that for one of his most tragic creations, Poulenc turned to the violin. Strange because he deeply disliked the cultural symbols associated with the violin, its semantic baggage, that is, the idea of Romanticism, of singing, of vocality, of sweetness and tenderness, of a hero virtuoso, of the *prima donna*, as he called it.

He associated the string sound to a kind of fake sentiment and always favored during his career writing for woodwinds and piano most of the time, which he thought as being more cool in temperature – just like Stravinsky and others influenced by neoclassical ideologies – that is, more apt to expressing sarcasm and irony, a rhetorical distancing with emotion that in effect is a form of secret mourning.

He took even further Ravel's and Debussy's creed of mocking high culture and of mixing incommensurable musical *topoi* together to create kaleidoscopic juxtapositions that felt more in touch with urban modernity and the fragility of 20th century life. And he took even further Ravel's satirization of the violin by having the piano here carry the main melodic interest and making the violin not the main voice, not the *prima donna*, but the main harbinger of interjections, interruptions, commentaries, grotesqueries, digressions, cuts, and contrasts of colour and texture.

The piece was famously dedicated to the memory of the outstanding Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (1898 - 1936) – a victim of the Spanish Civil War, and a homosexual like Poulenc, who could in his art, like Poulenc too, masterly mix and interlock soul and flesh, the sacred and profane, another red thread of this album. There is in the sonata a general sense of emotional ambiguity, of dramatic ambivalence, of bitter-sweetness, of deep melancholy mixed with joyous premonitions, darkness and light alternating rapidly. One can hear, for instance, the ingenious mixing together of a theme based on Tatyana's "Letter Scene" from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, together with a much lighter and songful violin melody that smells of Parisian cabarets and nocturnal escapades. Or in the last movement, music that smacks of circus acts together with French chansons and moments of dark introspection and deep tragedy. Or in the second movement, an evocation of Spanish guitar music together with a melodic style more typical of Parisian chic behaviors. The piece stands as subtle reflection on human tragedy, but first as tragedy, then as farce...

Hence concludes this disc that in its sharply edged contrasts ultimately portrays very different ways by which humans, and great artists, relate to universal human emotions, mainly the tragic..



FRANZISKA PIETSCH

At first glance, Franziska Pietsch's career seems to have been a fairy tale of good fortune. Born into a musical family in East Berlin – both her parents were violinists – she was celebrated as a child prodigy. Under the tutelage of Prof. Werner Scholz from Berlin's Hanns Eisler Hochschule for Music, Pietsch began at a young age to win contests such as the Bach Competition in Leipzig and made her debut at Berlin's Comic Opera at the age of eleven. There followed a number of years in the "Virtuoso Circus", as she calls it in hindsight. She performed the violin concertos of Bruch, Lalo, Sibelius, and Paganini with the finest orchestras in East Germany; at the age of 12, she made her first recordings for the East German Radio (including Sarasate's Gypsy Airs). But this fairy tale ended abruptly in 1984 when her father defected to West Germany during a concert tour. Two years would pass before his family was allowed to join him, and these two years would change the course of Franziska Pietsch's life. From one day to the next, she was on her own, as all state-sponsored studies and scholarships were suspended.

"And so, at the age of 14, I was forced to ask myself a number of truly fundamental questions. Why do I want to be a musician? What does music really mean?" Franziska Pietsch found answers in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. For an entire year, with no instruction whatsoever, she devoted herself exclusively to his solo works, distancing herself quite consciously from the "circus" life of a child prodigy.

After moving to West Germany in 1986, she continued on this path, supported by her teacher and mentor Prof. Ulf Hoelscher. She completed her years of study with the legendary violin teacher Dorothy DeLay at the Juilliard School in New York.

Franziska Pietsch returned to Germany in 1992 determined to expand her musical horizons beyond the solo literature, turning towards all forms of music-making, and especially the great symphonic masterpieces. For more than ten years, she was the concertmaster of prestigious orchestras such as the Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg, the Sinfonieorchester Wuppertal, the WDR Sinfonieorchester, and the orchestras of the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf and the opera in Frankfurt. At the same time, she continued to perform as a soloist throughout Europe, Amer-



ica, and Asia. In 2010, Pietsch gave up her activities as a concertmaster to devote herself exclusively to chamber music.

By the end of 2019, Franziska Pietsch will have recorded eleven albums in only eight years for the audite label. With the Trio Testore, she recorded a.o. the complete piano trios of Johannes Brahms. In 2014, Franziska Pietsch decided to focus on the chamber music formation closest to her heart, the string trio, founding the Trio Lirico together with violist Sophia Reuter and cellist Johannes Krebs; this ensemble recorded the works of Max Reger for CD. Pietsch's performances and recordings with pianist Detlev Eisinger (e.g. sonatas by Grieg, Franck, and Prokofiev) have been praised by international critics and nominated for the German Music Critics' Prize and the International Classical Music Awards.

In 2017, Franziska Pietsch felt the time had come to attempt once again to express her years of musical and personal experience through the great violin concertos. She recorded both Prokofiev concertos with the Deutsches Sinfonieorchester Berlin under the direction of Cristian Măcelaru. She has felt a deep connection to this composer since her childhood: "It is not only the sometimes dark and melancholy sound colors, which possibly speak to my Czech and Polish roots, but perhaps also Prokofiev's own life, his search for an individual artistic identity under a totalitarian regime."

The Prokofiev recording - released on audite as well - was a huge critical success and was nominated for the International Classic Music Award and won the "Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik" awarded quarterly.

In her solo CD with works by Bartók, Ysaÿe and Prokofiev, released in autumn 2018, once again the artist demonstrated her broad artistic range and received great critical acclaim.

Franziska Pietsch continued her successful collaboration with audite also in 2019. In spring, she introduced the Spanish pianist Josu De Solaun as her new piano partner in the recording of sonatas by Richard Strauss and Dmitri Shostakovich. The next recording of the Trio Lirico followed in autumn, presenting works by Schnittke, Penderecki and Weinberg.

Franziska Pietsch plays a violin by Carlo Antonio Testore (Milan) of 1751.



JOSU DE SOLAUN

Spanish pianist Josu De Solaun is a First Prize winner of the XIII. George Enescu International Piano Competition in Bucharest (succeeding legendary pianists such as Radu Lupu and Elisabeth Leonskaja), the XV. José Iturbi International Piano Competition and the First European Union Piano Competition held in Prague. He is the only pianist from Spain to win the Enescu and Iturbi competitions in their respective histories.

Josu De Solaun has been invited to perform in distinguished concert series throughout the world, having made notable appearances in Bucharest (Romanian Athenaeum), Venice (Teatro La Fenice), Saint Petersburg (Mariinsky Theatre), Washington, DC (Kennedy Center), New York (Carnegie Hall, Metropolitan Opera), Princeton (Taplin Hall), London (Southbank Centre), Paris (Salle Cortot), Leipzig (Schumann Haus), Taipei (Novel Hall), Mexico City (Sala Silvestre Revueltas), Prague (Nostitz Palace), Rome (Academia de España), Menton (Festival de Musique de Menton), and all major cities of Spain.

Beginning at a young age, Josu De Solaun has performed in France, Georgia, Italy, Russia, Ukraine, Canada, Germany, Japan, China, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, the Netherlands, Mexico, Chile, and Switzerland as a recitalist, chamber musician, and concerto soloist.

He has concertized with many international orchestras such as Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra of Saint Petersburg, Rudolf Barshai Moscow Chamber Orchestra, George



Enescu Philharmonic of Bucharest, National Radio Orchestra of Romania, Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra, Orquesta Sinfónica de Bilbao, Orquesta de Valencia, Real Filharmonía de Galicia, Spain's Radio and Television Orchestra (RTVE), Orchestra Filarmonica la Fenice of Venice, Bari Symphony Orchestra of Italy, American Ballet Theatre Orchestra of New York, Sioux City Symphony Orchestra, Monterey Symphony Orchestra and Mexico City Philharmonic Orchestra, among many others.

His performances have been broadcast on Spanish National Radio and TV, Taiwanese and Czech National TV, as well as on New York's WQXR, Princeton's WPRB, and Chicago's WFMT.

Josu De Solaun's repertoire includes rare piano concertos like Bernstein's Symphony No. 2 *The Age of Anxiety*, Giuseppe Martucci's 2nd Piano Concerto, Britten's *Diversions*, Hummel's A Minor Piano Concerto, Constantinescu's Piano Concerto, as well as the complete concerti of Liszt, Rachmaninov, Prokofiev, and Bartók. In addition, his passion also belongs to chamber music – as for the literature itself but also for the non-verbal communication between musicians.

He has recorded the complete works for piano of George Enescu and *Les Noces* by Stravinsky with JoAnn Falletta as conductor. Future releases will include an album of Czech piano music, and concertos by Liszt and Bartók.

Josu De Solaun is a graduate of the Manhattan School of Music, where his two main teachers and main musical influences have been pianists Nina Svetlanova and Horacio Gutiérrez.

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audite

e-mail: info@audite.de

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