

A portrait of Sarah O'Brien, a woman with long brown hair and green eyes, wearing a dark blue top. She is positioned in front of a dark background with a golden, ornate column on the left. The word "audite" is in the top right corner.

audite

Sarah O'Brien

IMPROMPTU



GABRIEL PIERNÉ (1863-1937)
Impromptu-caprice, Op. 9 6:18

FRANÇOIS COUPERIN (1668-1733)
arr. Sarah O'Brien
Le Tic-Toc-Choc 2:27

JEAN CRAS (1879-1932)
Deux impromptus pour harpe
I. Lent 6:22 II. Animé 3:40

JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU (1683-1764)
arr. Sarah O'Brien
Suite in E Minor
V. Les rappel des oiseaux 3:05
Suite in G Major / G Minor
IV. La poule 3:38

PAUL HINDEMITH (1895-1963)
Sonata for Harp
I. Mäßig schnell 5:02
II. Lebhaft 2:24
III. Lied. Sehr langsam 3:28

JOAQUÍN RODRIGO (1901-1999)
Impromptu para arpa 3:58

REINHOLD GLIÈRE (1875-1956)
Impromptu 4:10

JOSEPH GUY MARIE ROPARTZ (1864-1955)
Impromptu pour la harpe 4:08

DOMENICO SCARLATTI (1685-1757)
arr. Sarah O'Brien
Sonata in E Major, K. 380 2:59

NINO ROTA (1911-1979)
Sarabanda e Toccata per arpa
I. Sarabanda 5:06 II. Toccata 2:30

VIRGILIO MORTARI (1902-1993)
Sonatina prodigio
I. Gagliarda 1:57
II. Canzone 1:16
III. Toccata 2:12

ALBERT ROUSSEL (1869-1937)
Impromptu, Op. 21 6:58

GABRIEL FAURÉ (1845-1924)
Impromptu in D-Flat Major, Op. 86 8:45



After your first solo CD featuring rarities for solo harp, your second album is now available. This time you present the complete impromptus written for solo harp. In addition, you perform other original works as well as a few arrangements – music from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Why did you choose this repertoire?

It had long been clear to me that I wanted to record the complete original impromptus for harp, supplemented by other works.

What do I like to play, and what is particularly interesting to hear? What presents many facets? I was especially fascinated by the theme of impromptus, since it contains the improvisational, that is, what arises directly in the moment. This suits the harp very well. After all, on our instrument we have no breath and no bow, we can only pluck and try to integrate and incorporate the tone colour that arises afterwards into the musical content that we want to express.

We play the well-known works, the im-promptus by Gabriel Fauré, Gabriel Pierné, and Albert Roussel. Other impromptus are less familiar, or even completely forgotten. The fact is that harpists tend to shy away from making recordings of the very common repertoire, particularly Fauré and Pierné.

Why is that?

Because there is the prejudice that there are already countless recordings of these two pieces. Which is not true. Precisely because people always think the pieces are so well-known, almost nobody records them. It is the same with the Hindemith Sonata. We know it well, and it is ubiquitous, in exams and in auditions – but it is not often present in recordings. In addition to the impromptus, I also wanted to record pieces that have grown with me since my studies, in addition to a few “retrospectives” of the French and Italian past.

Which works are original works and which are arrangements?

I arranged Couperin, Rameau, and Scarlatti; all the other works, along with the impromptus, of course, are original. All of these harp impromptus on a single CD – this can be called a compendium. Though certainly some other impromptu will still surface at some point which is no longer played and which perhaps has not been printed for a long time. Ultimately, however, it is not just about recording all the impromptus. They have to be musically convincing, and I have to like them or relate to them.

The impromptus of Gabriel Fauré and Gabriel Pierné are in the public awareness, Roussel less so, and Ropartz or Cras...

Yes, why is one composer played and the other not, or only rarely? There are differing life circumstances or professional paths. Especially in the harp literature, we often play not-so-famous composers. Maybe because the harp was just too little known?

Guy Ropartz is one the composers who are largely underappreciated today, a Massenet pupil, friend of César Franck, and later director of the Strasbourg Conservatory. You have rediscovered his impromptu.

Yes, it was forgotten for a long time. Ropartz also wrote a quintet for flute, string trio, and harp, but I have neither seen nor heard this impromptu. Then another rarity: Joaquín Rodrigo. A well-known composer, but his impromptu is hardly ever played. Jean Cras is another example: he wrote a great quintet, once again for flute, string trio, and harp, which is heard now and then. But both impromptus had been forgotten for years and were no longer published. A few years ago this changed; they were reprinted, were included in a competition or two, and now they are suddenly known again. Beautiful pieces.

... which you frame with Fauré and Pierné.

Yes, Fauré and Pierné are the two “big names” of our impromptus, and I deliberately placed them at the beginning and at the end. Pierné is written completely naturally for the harp... And Fauré is one of our great repertoire pieces. He was fortunate enough to have such a good musician on hand, the harpist Micheline Kahn, that he soon wrote her a second solo piece. The influence of a harpist on composers is decisive.

This was another decision regarding the selection of works. There was the Italian harpist Clelia Gatti Aldrovandi, who worked extremely effectively and intelligently with the composers. With Hindemith, for example, who wrote his Harp Sonata together with her. She also worked with Mortari and Rota, and Rota dedicated his *Sarabanda e Toccata* and later also his Harp Concerto to her. She was very active, and was able to acquaint the composers with the harp in such a way that the instrument became not only comprehensible, but also natural to them. With Hindemith this is very noticeable, and I am convinced that he would not have been able to write the piece as he did if she had not assisted him. What was also important to me was the idea that these works were written in 1939 and 1945, that is, during an extremely difficult time...

These three pieces from the twentieth century were composed directly before and after the Second World War. Do you not find it surprising that the composers sometimes hark back to very old forms?

Yes, that is interesting. In neoclassicism – immediately after the First World War – composers often reverted back to the classical period, but now they looked back much further, to the gaillard, canzone, toccata, sarabande. Though different, it was undeniably also an expression of longing for a past, purportedly idyllic world. This is in fact the case with Hindemith as well. In his Sonata, the last movement, “Lied,” is based on a text by Ludwig Christoph Hölty (1748–1776), with its romantic idealization:

Friends, when I am dead, hang up
my little harp behind the altar,
where the wreaths of many dead young girls
are shimmering.

The friendly sexton will then show visitors
the little harp, rustling with the red ribbon,
wound around the harp,
that flutters under the golden strings.

Often at sunset, he says in wonder, the strings
sound all alone, as soft as the hum of bees;
the children playing in the churchyard
heard it and saw how the wreaths were trembling.

What does a piece need in order to suit the harp well?

A conception of the sound, that is the most important thing. The composer has to feel and grasp the instrument in terms of its sound, and not simply think: oh, I am writing now like for the piano, and then it will work. That does not work at all, not only because we play with eight fingers instead of ten or have no direct chromaticism. It is a completely

different instrument. The whole attitude on the instrument is different and it cannot be transferred 1:1. Although the appearance of the score looks very similar to that of the piano literature.

You arranged the two Rameau pieces, the two Scarlattis, and the Couperin. What are the challenges here?

I first try to play everything as close to the original as possible. This is how you do justice to the piece. And then maybe there are places where I have to rewrite something a little because of the unavailable direct chromaticism, or use enharmonics. Adapt a trill, for example, or use various ornaments.

Indeed, why exactly these pieces from that time? With Rameau it is the two (very different) types of birds / bird songs and the direct connection to the title (in *La poule*, Rameau himself wrote under the first notes of the piece: “co co co co co cocodai”). To “sing” this with multiple note repetitions is a wonderful challenge. Just as it is in Couperin, to play the very fast note repetitions and still be melodic.

Scarlatti presents similar (technical) demands – but it is, for me, one of his most lyrical sonatas, which can be played so beautifully on the harp.

Essentially, you have to get away from wanting to sound like a piano or a harpsichord?

Yes. There are simply different parameters, which of course sound different on the harp. The harps in Couperin’s time, the double harps and baroque harps, for which Handel also wrote, were totally different instruments from those of today: completely differently strung, without pedals. Then came the single-pedal harp, then the double-pedal harp, and it continued to develop. At the moment, unfortunately, the instruments are only getting bigger and bigger... and their sound often more blurred and hazy.

For example, the question often arises how secco, in other words, how dry can we play? Do we have to immediately dampen the reverberation?

In the past, the sound was not very dampened or “dry,” as is often thought today. A baroque harp or lute has a lot of reverberation. There is always a compromise: how, when, and how much to dampen? Doesn’t it quickly seem artificial when I take away the sound I just made?

Do you play all the works on this CD on the same harp?

I find changing the sound on the same instrument to be an exciting challenge. I can adjust my playing style depending on the piece. Because a string has the maximum amplitude in its middle when vibrating. If I play further down, the vibration becomes smaller and the sound more precise, more articulated.

As the Theatre Director says in Goethe’s ‘Faust’: “So in our narrow playhouse waken the whole wide circle of creation...”

You may not be wakening quite the whole circle of the creations for harp on this album, but certainly a large part. You combine impromptus with arrangements and well-known with completely unknown works...

And I think it is a nice compilation for everyone who likes to listen to music, not just harp music. In the end, I want to show that the harp is not just a harp or a “cliché,” but a fabulous instrument.

Interview:

Dr. Florian Hauser / Sarah O’Brien

translation: Aaron Epstein



SARAH O'BRIEN

In her programmes, Sarah O'Brien frees the harp from its narrow romantic framework and gives it an independent voice, from baroque to contemporary literature.

Sarah O'Brien had been principal harpist of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam and the Munich Philharmonic for over 20 years, when she decided in 2014 to focus on teaching and devoting more time to her students. After positions at the Mozarteum Salzburg and the Rotterdam Conservatory, she is now professor of harp at the Zurich University of the Arts and the Hochschule für Musik in Basel. Her students are prizewinners of international competitions and winners of orchestra positions.

In addition to numerous guest professorships and courses, Sarah O'Brien is a jury member of international harp competitions and a specialist expert in auditions and appointment committees.

The prizewinner of the Concours d'Execution Musicale (CIEM-Genève) and winner of the study award of the Ernst Göhner Foundation studied with Catherine Eisenhoffer (Geneva) and Susann McDonald (USA). Further studies with the great harpist Pierre Jamet, who himself had worked with Debussy, complemented her education.

Her position as principal harpist of two of the world's most renowned orchestras has led her on tours through Europe, Asia and the USA as well as in all great concert halls worldwide.

She performed as soloist with the Concertgebouw Orchestra under Bernard Haitink and Hans Vonk, with the Munich Philharmonic under Hartmut Haenchen, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande under Fabio Luisi and Arpad Gerez, the Radio-Sinfonieorchester Basel and the Polish National Radio Symphony, the Zurich and Basel Chamber Orchestras and many more.


Sarah O'Brien has worked regularly with such composers as Luciano Berio, Heinz Holliger, Mauricio Kagel, Wolfgang Rihm, Hans Zender and Klaus Huber.

Numerous CD and radio recordings as soloist and chamber musician as well as with orchestra document her artistic work. Furthermore, she enriched as a guest speaker various radio productions with her expertise and is an lector for new editions of harp literature.



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recording:

June 29 – August 02, 2020

recording location:

Alte Kirche Fautenbach (Achern)

recording format:

pcm, 96 kHz / 24 bit

executive producer:

Dipl.-Tonmeister Ludger Böckenhoff

recording producer / editing:

Dipl.-Tonmeister Markus Heiland

photos:

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art direction and design:

AB-Design, Detmold

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