Pas de deux

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Fanfare (Paul Orgel - 26.03.2013)

The piano duo of Mona and Rica Bard, German sisters, make their recording debut here in a well-chosen program of French masterpieces. They play with all of the control, finesse, and impeccable ensemble of the very best two-piano teams. The SACD recording's careful, unobtrusive miking and very wide dynamic range splendidly capture the Bards' wide range of instrumental color.

The program contains two French four-hand staples: Milhaud's Scaramouche and Bizet's Jeux d'enfants. I never tire of hearing Milhaud's familiar three-movement piece, which sparkles in the Bards' performance. (It, along with Le boeuf sur le toit and La création du monde, must be Milhaud's most popular music. These pieces remain fresh, but the rest of his huge output contains a wealth of wonderful, neglected music that's due for revival.) One often hears the Bizet Jeux d'enfants, a 12-movement suite, in its orchestrated version, but the piano version is preferable and this is one of many fine recordings of it.

Happily, the Bards bypass some of the more overplayed standbys of the French repertoire—the Fauré Dolly Suite, Debussy Petite Suite, and the Ravel Ma mere l'oye— choosing to make their French program more substantial. Ravel composed the two-piano version of the Rhapsodie espagnol before the orchestral version. Though it has received many recordings, I was unfamiliar with it and find it remarkable. The Bard sisters create so many contrasting colors, control quiet dynamic levels so well, and bring such a natural Spanish lilt to the work that they make a convincing case for the two-piano version being in no way inferior to Ravel's orchestration. The opening of the "Feria" is a particularly stunning example.

Poulenc's Sonata for Two Pianos, composed in 1952-1953, is not an overly familiar work, and it is one of his most serious, much more ambitious than the Sonata for Four-Hands, particularly its slow, bell-tolling "Prologue." Concluding the disc is the gentle, melancholy Elegie, Poulenc's final work, written in 1959 when he was 60, the year of Pierre Bernac's retirement.

The booklet notes mention that the Bard sisters have received "artistic impulses" from contact with, among others, Katia Labèque, Aloys Kontarsky, and Andreas Groethuysen and indeed, they combine the qualities that I associate with some of the 20th-century's best duo piano teams: the Labèque sisters' verve and dynamism, the Kontarsky brothers' rigor and clarity, and Tal and Groethuysen's sensitivity.

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