



Works for Solo Violin: Bartók - Prokofiev - Ysaÿe

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[Fanfare](#) (Huntley Dent - 2019.04.10)

The blurb for this new recital from the estimable German violinist Franziska Pietsch says that the solo violin sonatas by Bartók and Ysaÿe were the most important works in the genre since Bach. No one would seriously dispute this claim, I imagine, but the two composers worked at different levels, Bartók consciously writing with the serious concentration of Bach, Ysaÿe in the tradition of brilliant virtuosity exemplified by the Paganini Caprices. Pietsch was probably wise to separate them with the easy-going, accessible Prokofiev Solo Sonata, because Bartók created an intense, thorny piece that often assaults the ear aggressively; you need to decompress before enjoying the three-ring circus presented by Ysaÿe, which isn't to deny the charm and musicality that's also present.

The first recording of the Bartók to come my way as a reviewer (in Fanfare 38:3) was by the superb Hungarian violinist Barnabás Kelemen on Hungaroton. He captures every facet of a rich, dense, extremely varied score. Comparing the piece with the two violin-and-piano sonatas, I wrote, "Perhaps the most difficult is the Sonata for Solo Violin commissioned by Yehudi Menuhin in 1944. The dying Bartók set himself the challenge of updating Bach in an uncompromising modernist idiom. The entry point here is formal, because we get a Bach-like Chaconne and Fuga in the first two movements, followed by a slow Melodia and a virtuosic Presto finale."

Some performers, notably Christian Tetzlaff, smooth out the sonata's aggressiveness, while others, like Vilde Frang, go for broke. Either way, the listener has to brace himself. Bartók employs the violin's capacity to scrape, scratch, and wail more often than its capacity for song. Pietsch vies with Frang's take-no-prisoners approach, underlining the work's tonal extremes to an abrasive degree, risking more screech and scratch than I am comfortable with. Musically, however, she lacks Tetzlaff's wonderful ability to give us a sense of wholeness in Bartók's conception—the music shouldn't be all noise and chaos. I also admire how Tetzlaff adds warmth to the lyric passages that crop up here and there, so despite her obvious skill and commitment, Pietsch's reading wouldn't be among my top choices. It should appeal, however, to anyone who wants an explosive performance of an astonishing work.

I admired Pietsch's recording of the two Prokofiev Violin Concertos and the two sonatas with piano. She's equally sympathetic in his late Solo Violin Sonata in D from 1947. By then Prokofiev's inspiration was declining along with his health, but the solo sonata is agreeably tuneful, nimble, and upbeat. The work was commissioned by the Soviet music system as a teaching piece, so it is not technically very difficult. It was originally designed to be played by an ensemble of talented students rather than as a solo work. Pietsch's reading is less pointed and intense than, say, Viktoria Mullova's (Onyx), but it doesn't suffer by comparison, being lyrical and appealing in its own

right.

Ysaÿe's Six Solo Violin Sonatas, gathered as his op. 27 in 1923, are beloved by virtuosos, giving them scope for brilliance and Romanticism to the utmost. In the second sonata of the group, dedicated to Jacques Thibaud, the "obsession" of the subtitle refers to Thibaud's love of Bach and his habit of including the opening Preludio of Partita No. 3 in his morning practice sessions. Just as obsessive, however, is the contrasting use of the Gregorian Dies irae that captured the ear of many composers, most notably Liszt and Rachmaninoff. The juxtaposition of the two borrowings is incongruous but quite entertaining.

In the last issue Robert Maxham was enthusiastic about a performance from Maïté Louis (Continuo), who highlights the stark contrasts in Ysaÿe's quotations. She maintains a beautiful, consistent tone as well and focuses on Romantic expression to an enticing degree. I'd say that Pietsch goes one better in expressing both the moods and contrasts in the piece. She has an air of personal involvement that's captivating. The combination of excitement and presence makes this a memorable reading in all four movements, whether Ysaÿe is being misterioso or theatrical.

The program ends with Ysaÿe's Sonata No. 3, "Ballade," dedicated to Georges Enescu. Its single movement is in two sections, the first being lyrical and passionate, with almost continuous double- and triple-stops, the second, marked con bravura, moving into brilliant passagework without letting up on the double-stops. Pietsch gives an account as charismatic and captivating as in the previous sonata, which makes the Ysaÿe portion of the disc very compelling.

There's always something of absorbing value in every release I've heard from this artist, and even if Pietsch's Bartók frayed my nerves, that's a personal reaction. On every other count this disc, which has excellent recorded sound, is strongly recommended.