

## Bacevičius Piano Music, Volume 1. New

Complete Mots – No. 1, Op. 18<sup>a</sup>; No. 2, Op. 21<sup>b</sup>; No. 3, Op. 27<sup>a</sup>; No. 4, Op. 31<sup>a</sup>; No. 5, Op. 59<sup>a</sup>; No. 6, Op. 72<sup>a</sup>; No. 7, Op. 73<sup>ac</sup>.

<sup>a</sup>Gabrielius Alekna, <sup>c</sup>Ursula Oppens (pianos);

<sup>b</sup>Matthew Lewis (organ).

**Toccata Classics TOCC0134** (full price, 1 hour 3 minutes). Website [www.toccataclassics.com](http://www.toccataclassics.com)

Producers <sup>a</sup>Algis Mateika, <sup>b</sup>Judith Sherman.

Engineer <sup>bc</sup>Jeanne Velonis. Dates <sup>b</sup>October 28th,

2009, January 25th, 28th and 31st and March

24th, 2010.

Each time I receive a Toccata Classics disc to review, I am newly grateful. This is not only for the label's (and founder Martin Anderson's) adventurousness but also for its ability to attract prime performers, and to commission booklet notes that really assist the listener in understanding and appreciating the music that they accompany. On all those grounds, the present release does not disappoint.

Indeed, the comprehensive booklet note by Malcolm MacDonald is the source of much of the biographical information that follows. Vytautas Bacevičius (1905-70) was the son of a Lithuanian father and a Polish mother. Although born in Poland, he moved to Lithuania in his early twenties, and then to New York in 1940 after the Germans invaded his homeland. Once in the United States, his work as a composer continued, although performances of his music were few and far between, unless he himself performed it. (By all accounts he was an excellent pianist.) Similarly, even after the war, his music was only infrequently heard in Lithuania, as Bacevičius's forward-thinking style – or more appropriately, styles (see below) – hardly met the needs of the Soviet government. Bacevičius, then, spent the last three decades of his life in the United States, making a living mostly as a teacher. (His younger sister, Grazyna Bacewicz, self-identified as a Pole and ironically acquired greater fame by remaining behind the Iron Curtain.)

This is the first recording of Bacevičius's complete *Mots*. Apparently only three of the seven (the first, sixth and seventh) have been recorded previously – and good luck finding those recordings! In fact, the only other CD devoted to Bacevičius's music also comes from Toccata Classics – an orchestral disc which was reviewed in October 2007. Impressed by what I am hearing here, I intend to explore it.

*Mots* is French for 'words', of course. MacDonald has no explanation for this unusual title, but there is no reason to

believe that these works comprise a genuine cycle, let alone that they correspond to Christ's seven last words. They were composed between 1933 and 1966 (there is an 18-year gap between the fourth and fifth, however) and thus they trace, at least in part, the evolution of the composer's style. Bacevičius's early works suggest the influence of Scriabin, but by the time he composed the *Premier mot* he was already moving toward a freer and less tonal language. The *Deuxième*, *Troisième* and *Quatrième mots* each continues that movement, and by the time that Bacevičius composed the last of these, he acknowledged the influences of Stravinsky and Prokofiev. When Bacevičius came to the US, he toned his language down, in hopes of finding an audience. When this did not happen, he resumed and even further extended his earlier style. This can be heard in the *Cinquième mot*, composed in 1956. The *Sixième* and *Septième mots* find the composer having attained extreme rhythmic flexibility, and a clangorous dissonance more typical of Messiaen than the Second Viennese School. Atypically, the last of these is in three movements – its predecessors are single-movement works – and is scored for two pianists. (The work was originally dedicated to sister-pianists Judith and Doris Lang, who did not perform it, however.) The other outlier among these works is the *Deuxième mot*, composed as part of a series of organ works in August 1934. All in all, this is dense, challenging music and it does not leap into one's ear on its own. One understands why it did not find a large audience at the time. Even so, repeated listening reveals that these *Mots* have much to offer. If they are heavy, it is with substance, not 'filler'.

Gabrielius Alekna, who has the lion's share of performing duties here, is an award-winning Juilliard graduate who has devoted much energy to promoting the work of Lithuanian composers. (His doctoral thesis was on Bacevičius's unpublished piano works.) These are solid, highly capable performances that perhaps lack that last degree of distinction – that quality that makes listeners smack themselves on the head and say, 'Why haven't we heard this music before?'. The presence of veteran new-music advocate Ursula Oppens in the *Septième mot* is an unexpected bonus; her two hands perk matters up. In the *Deuxième mot*, New York-based organist Matthew Lewis, another Juilliard graduate, makes a good case for the agitated, mystical writing on his expressive 'home' organ in the Church of the Incarnation. Given the venue, the sound is surprisingly clean. (The piano works also enjoy clean, detailed sound.)

*Raymond S. Tuttle*

## Frith Piano Quartet

Bridge Phantasy in F sharp minor.

Lekeu Piano Quartet.

Walton Piano Quartet.

**Frith Piano Quartet** (Robert Heard, violin; Louise Williams, viola; Richard Jenkinson, cello; Benjamin Frith, piano).

**Nimbus Alliance NI6183** (full price, 1 hour 6 minutes). Website [www.wyastone.co.uk](http://www.wyastone.co.uk). Producer Annette Isserlis. Engineer Andrew Hallifax. Dates October 24th-26th, 2010.

The Frith Piano Quartet delivers committed and entirely convincing accounts of these three works, each of these pieces being notable to some degree in the output of the individual composers. Walton's Quartet is undoubtedly the most surprising, having been originally completed when he was just 17 years old in 1919; it is not only precocious but remarkably assured, and written in a language which in many respects was quite advanced for the time.

The teenage composer's handling of his material is fearless, and the writing for the instruments is admirable – indeed, rather more than that, owing to Walton not being a pianist or string player of any technical attainment. It is a remarkable work in every detail, and although the version which is known today is the much later revised version of 1976 (as used here), it appears that very little changes were made before its republication.

Frank Bridge's *Phantasy* dates from 1910 and is, of course, rather more complete in terms of compositional technique (it would need to be, as it is in one movement of around 12 minutes' duration: Walton's four-movement work is more than twice as long). Like the Walton, it deserves to be better known, and if the Frenchman Guillaume Lekeu's unfinished work appears a little out of place in this company, it certainly also deserves resurrection, not least in concert. This highly gifted young composer died in 1894 aged just 24, leaving only two movements of this work – it appears he intended a large-scale four-movement piece. The surviving movements are of excellent quality – indeed, are so finely composed as to merit performance, as does everything by this composer, although his legacy is pitifully small.

Lekeu's work was edited for publication by Vincent d'Indy and is a typical product of its time, typical in the sense of inhabiting the language of the late nineteenth-century French School, especially of the post-César Franck/Saint-Saëns generation, of whom Gabriel Fauré and d'Indy himself were leading lights. In the powerful first movement of Lekeu's Quartet it is Fauré's refined and gentle late music which is rather astonishingly foretold in the second subject; more than once, and certainly in melodic terms, I was reminded of the opening of Fauré's Op. 117 Cello Sonata of 1921.