

BEN-HAIM Piano Quartet in c, op. 4.¹ *Two Landscapes for Viola and Piano*, op. 27.² *Five Pieces for Piano: Canzonetta (No. 4)*, op. 34.³ *Improvisation and Dance for Violin and Piano*, op. 30.⁴ *Clarinet Quintet*, op. 31a⁵ • ARC Ens: ¹Benjamin Bowman (vn); ^{1,2,5}Steven Dann (va); ^{1,5}Bryan Epperson (vc); ¹David Louie (pn); ²⁻⁴Dianne Werner (pn); ^{4,5}Erika Raum (vn); ⁵Joaquin Valdepeñas (cl); ⁵Marie Bérard (vn) • CHANDOS 10769 (77:05)

Here is a long overdue collection of chamber works by Israeli composer Paul Ben-Haim (1897–1984). Only the C-Minor Piano Quartet on this disc is noted as a premiere recording, but to the extent that recordings of any of the other pieces heard here exist, they're few and far between. Among the five works on the disc, only the *Improvisation and Dance* shows up in the *Fanfare* archive in a 30:6 review of a Hyperion CD containing several violin and piano works by Ben-Haim, performed by Hagai Shaham and Amon Erez. Otherwise I'm not finding any other current listings for the pieces on this disc. Perhaps I just didn't look hard enough.

Ben-Haim's bio, briefly, is as follows: He was born Paul Frankenburger in Munich, studied composition under Friedrich Klose (a former Bruckner student), and served as assistant conductor to Hans Knappertsbusch and Bruno Walter. In 1933, Ben-Haim emigrated to the British Mandate of Palestine, settled in Tel-Aviv, Hebraized his name (which means "son of life," not "to life," as it's sometimes incorrectly translated), and became an Israeli citizen in 1948 when the country declared its independence.

The Piano Quartet, composed in 1921 by the young Frankenburger while still in Munich, is easily described. It's the next piano quartet Brahms would have written had he lived another 24 years. Everything about the piece—the gestural language, the melodic material, the thematic development, and the piano patterns and figurations—evokes the spirit of Brahms, except for one thing, the harmonic context with its somewhat more liberal application of dissonance, parallelism, and freer approach to progression, which suggest that Ben-Haim had received some exposure to Fauré, Debussy, Ravel, and, according to the note, Richard Strauss and Max Reger. Nonetheless, for all its youthful susceptibility to the musical influences that would have been part of Frankenburger's German world, his piano quartet is a masterful and powerful work, at times turbulent and tragic, and at other times meltingly poignant. In three large movements, it's a big, late Romantic work of nearly 30 minutes' duration. The performance of it by the ARC Ensemble's players is nothing short of magnificent. But it's such a compelling work, I can't imagine it not being taken up by others and becoming part of the standard piano quartet repertoire.

By the time Ben-Haim came to compose the *Two Landscapes* for viola and piano, respectively titled "The Hills of Judea" and "The Spring" in 1939, he'd been living in Israel for six years, and his style had already radically changed as a result of adapting to his surroundings and embracing his Jewish culture. We now hear in these two short musical sketches the familiar sounds of nomads in the desert and the exoticisms we tend to associate with the Hebraic melos.

Alone among the pieces on this disc, the *Improvisation and Dance*, also composed in 1939, is the one that has enjoyed a bit more exposure on disc. As noted above, it was included on Hyperion's CD (67571), coupled with works by Bloch, and it can be heard in an all-Ben-Haim program of works on a Centaur CD (2766), which also contains the composer's arrangement of the last movement of his Clarinet Quintet, op. 31a (on this disc) as the *Pastorale variée* for Clarinet, Harp, and String Orchestra, op. 31b. Ben-Haim dedicated *The Improvisation and Dance* for Violin and Piano to Zino Francescatti. Whether he ever recorded it or not, I don't

know, but Francescatti did record Ben-Haim's G-Major Sonata for Solo Violin in 1958, a recording that has circulated on more than one label, but is currently available on an Orfeo CD (711081).

The Improvisation movement is a kind of free-flowing *dolente* thing, marked *Molto rubato*, and evoking that image, once again, of a camel caravan wending its way across the desert dunes. The Dance movement, as you'd expect, is an animated, spirited, strongly accented rhythmic piece that sounds like a bunch of riled-up shtetl Klezmerim going after a marauding mob of Bartók's Rumanian peasants.

In 1944, Ben-Haim composed a set of five piano miniatures, published as Five Pieces for Piano, op. 34. Considering that the timing of the disc is a generous 77 minutes, it's churlish to complain that Dianne Werner gives us only one of the pieces from the group, No. 4, titled "Canzonetta," but you can hear the entire set, for free no less, in a number of YouTube performances by half-a-dozen different pianists. The style Ben-Haim adopts for these pieces is best characterized as Impressionistic.

Originally written in 1941, the Clarinet Quintet was revised in 1965, and, as mentioned above, Ben-Haim rescored its last movement, a set of variations, for clarinet, harp, and string orchestra, assigning it the same opus number, but with a "b" appended to it. Like the piano quintet that opens the disc, the clarinet quintet is a large three-movement work lasting over 27 minutes, but unlike the much earlier quartet, the quintet is in a dissonant, occasionally almost atonal language that's more difficult to penetrate in just one or two hearings. But the score's Romantic impulses do break through to the surface now and then, reminding us once again of Ben-Haim's musical roots.

On that subject, there remains some controversy regarding Ben-Haim's bona fides as an authentic Israeli composer. Not all commentators and critics accept Ben-Haim as either a true Israeli composer or even a particularly significant composer. An in-depth on-line paper by Ronit Seter in in Volume 9 (2011) of *Israeli Studies in Musicology Online* (biu.ac.il/hu/mu/min-ad/11/Seter-Hirshberg_Ben-Haim.pdf) cites a number of sources that advance the opinion that Ben-Haim, not entirely unlike Ernest Bloch, was essentially a European Romantic who colored his works with Hebraic-sounding melodies and harmonies without making a real effort to explore the more modern "art" music of some of his Israeli contemporaries, like Josef Tal, for example. What I read in this, however, is sour grapes. The crux of the criticism seems to me to be not that Ben-Haim wasn't Jewish or Israeli enough but that he wasn't modern enough, that he retained his Romantic roots far into the 20th century, resisting the various avant-garde movements, and that he continued to compose music that's beautiful and deeply moving.

That can certainly be said of the works on this disc. The players that make up the ARC Ensemble give deeply committed performances of every one of them, and Chandos' usual wide-range and deep sound stage add excellent dimensionality to the recording. Urgently recommended. **Jerry Dubins**