


## Ben-Haim

New

Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 4<sup>a</sup>.  
Two Landscapes, Op. 27<sup>b</sup>. Improvisation  
and Dance, Op. 30<sup>c</sup>. Clarinet Quintet,  
Op. 31a<sup>d</sup>. Five Pieces for Piano, Op. 34 –  
No. 4, Canzonetta<sup>e</sup>.

ARC Ensemble (<sup>d</sup>Joaquin Valdepeñas, clarinet;  
<sup>d</sup>Marie Bérard, <sup>a</sup>Benjamin Bowman, <sup>cd</sup>Erika  
Raum, violins; <sup>abd</sup>Steven Dann, viola; <sup>ad</sup>Bryan  
Epperson, cello; <sup>a</sup>David Louie, <sup>bce</sup>Dianne Werner,  
pianos).

Chandos CHAN10769 (full price, 1 hour 17 minutes).  
Website [www.chandos.net](http://www.chandos.net)  Producer David Frost.  
Engineers Carl Talbot, Tim Martyn. Dates January  
14th-16th, 2013.

History is full of Jewish citizens who through  
force of circumstance, lived under or adopted  
non-Jewish names. Paul Ben-Haim (1897-  
1984) is a striking example of one who made  
the reverse gesture: born Paul Frankenburger  
in Munich, he made a timely move to  
Palestine in the 1930s, later settling in Tel  
Aviv and Hebraizing his name to Ben-Haim  
(sometimes Ben-Chaim) – Son of Haim, after

father Heinrich. Although his name is possibly  
the best known among Israeli-resident  
composers (as distinct from the numerous  
expatriates like Ernest Bloch), his music,  
though widely admired, is nevertheless little  
known. Maybe I live a too sheltered life,  
but this wholly admirable Canadian-based  
disc – ‘ARC’ stands for Artists of the Royal  
Conservatory (of Toronto) – is the first music  
of his I’ve actually heard.

I was glad to make its acquaintance. The  
disc is arranged more or less in chronological  
order and so opens with the substantial  
(near half-hour) C minor Piano Quartet of  
1920-21. Its magnificent opening movement  
is inescapably influenced by Brahms and early  
Richard Strauss: its restless chromaticisms  
prompt booklet note writer Simon Wynberg  
to mention Reger, though to me it lacked any  
trace of that composer’s turgidity and I was  
carried along by its unflagging propulsion.  
The slow movement, startlingly, is in F sharp,  
and its declamatory motifs invoke the spectre,  
probably inescapable these days, of *Ben-Hur*.  
Those two opposed keys are summed up by  
the tritone with which the finale opens: it  
quickly settles on C major to establish some  
genial thigh-slapping rusticity which recurs  
to close the movement after an interval of  
searching chromaticisms. The piano part is  
spectacular (David Louie does it handsome  
justice), the string parts are meaty, and in a  
medium scarcely over-stuffed with repertoire  
it seems astonishing that after a single  
broadcast in 1932 the work seems not to  
have been played again until late 2012. Maybe  
the composer and others wanted to disown  
this Germanic part of his career.

The following *Two Landscapes* of 1939 for  
viola and piano inhabit a totally different  
world, one more familiar both to Jewish-

music lovers (the austere keening of  
the first piece, ‘The Hills of Judea’,  
includes microtones and recalls Bloch)  
and violists, whose repertoire is already  
well stocked with lamentations. The  
purposeful mutterings of the second  
piece dissolve delightfully at the end.  
Next comes one of the *Five Pieces* for  
piano, Op. 34 (1944), the first item so  
far, I think, to be already available on  
CD elsewhere: the whole set comes  
from David Holzman on Albany 283  
and from Pnina Salzman on Music In  
Israel MII-CD-19. The ‘Canzonetta’  
supplies a welcome change of texture  
and Dianne Werner projects this  
surprisingly British-pastoral-sounding  
piece with tenderness – though  
greedily I would have also liked the  
‘Toccata’ (No. 5 of the same set),  
a much sought-after piece online and  
an exciting work.

The *Improvisation and Dance* (1939  
again) were dedicated to Zino  
Francescatti, whose playing style  
is adroitly caught and which provide  
the expected lamentations and fireworks

en route. So many other violin-and-piano  
works cover this ground that perhaps it’s  
no surprise that I could track down only  
two alternative recordings, from Hagai  
Shaham and Arnon Erez on Hyperion  
CDA67571 and the Duo Montefiore on  
JMC-CD-23 (Jerusalem Music Center). The  
disc closes as it opens, with a substantial  
piece: the 27-minute Clarinet Quintet dates  
originally from 1941 and was revised in 1965.  
Long gone is the Germanic propulsiveness  
of the Piano Quartet: the quintet inhabits  
an atonal sound-world exploiting octatonic  
scales, and on first hearing has a few frankly  
dull moments, notably during the closing  
variations. The second-movement *Capriccio*  
entertainingly alternates Ravelian all-pizzicato  
scherzo-ism and folkish melodies inescapably  
festered with Middle Eastern augmented  
seconds. Joaquin Valdepeñas and friends  
acquit themselves with distinction and with  
only the faintest sense of strain in some violin  
stratospherics. The Music in Israel label offers  
a rival version (MII-CD-15) dating from  
1995, which I have not been able to hear.  
Score and parts seem to be available from  
Theodore Presser; for other works try Israeli  
Music Publications.

Readers, like me, eager to explore Ben-  
Haim further, will find *inter alia* 16 versions  
of the solo Violin Sonata to choose from  
(including one from Shaham on the above-  
mentioned Hyperion disc), three each of the  
two symphonies (variously coupled), the  
Violin Concerto (one of them from Itzhak  
Perlman) and the Concerto for strings,  
Op. 40. However, the *Concerto Grosso* of  
1933, admirably quoted in most biographies,  
seems not to have been recorded since 1957;  
a pity if so. Does any IRR reader know  
differently?

Michael Round

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