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Raretés Françaises Vol. 15 (2 CDs)

“Yehudi Menuhin enjoyed a unique position outside his greatness as a violinist. The political upheavals of the twentieth century caused some famous musicians to protest on behalf of freedom, including Toscanini’s refusal to conduct in Mussolini’s Italy and Pablo Casals’ highly visible self-exile from Franco’s Spain. The issue of freedom versus tyranny didn’t occupy Menuhin as much as his advocacy of humanitarianism. He toured the Nazi death camp at Bergen-Belsen after World War II and gave two recitals with Benjamin Britten in a displaced persons camp; he also made himself a lightning rod by being one of the first Jewish artists after the war to perform under Furtwängler. If you are attuned to this inspirational quality, which Menuhin’s students and fellow musicians responded to strongly, it seems to emerge in his performances as well.

As an admirer who considers him a musical hero, I hear something special in St. Laurent Studio’s release of a live concert from the Salle Pleyel, Paris in 1971. Menuhin, like Joseph Szigeti and Christian Tetzlaff, makes the violin ‘speak’ in gradations of tone that aim at the same expression as the human voice rather than beautiful tone for its own sake. This makes even his later performances - Menuhin was 55 at the time of this concert - an opportunity to appreciate his gifts, despite a much remarked upon decline in his technique. Whether or not technical issues play a critical part in your response to this generous 2-CD set is an individual matter, naturally. I had no trouble hearing the musicianship behind some passing flaws in intonation.

In chamber music, particularly in later years, Menuhin liked to make it a family affair, which included his sister Hepzibah, who accompanies him here in the Debussy Violin Sonata, and son Jeremy, who is the pianist in the Fauré Piano Quartet #1. Also part of the immediate circle were the cellist Maurice Gendron and pianist Jacques Février. Menuhin may not be closely associated with French repertoire, but he made a studio recording of the

Debussy sonata with Février in 1974 for EMI, and there is a live recording with Benjamin Britten from much earlier, at the 1959 Aldeburgh Festival, when Menuhin's technique was more secure and Britten served as a wonderfully imaginative pianist.

Here in Paris, Hepzibah might not be Britten's equal, but she offers spirited accompaniment, and Menuhin, who is closely miked, provides the kind of tonal variety and nuance that I so appreciate from him. The reading has real presence, and Menuhin applies both intensity and delicacy. The Violin Sonata is very late in Debussy's career and represents a deliberate simplification of style. It's a challenge to add an extra dimension to the music, but Menuhin does.

He has a more equal partner in Ravel's strikingly unusual Sonata for Violin and Cello. The score occupied Ravel between 1920 and 1922 and was dedicated to Debussy, who had died in 1918. The spare instrumentation limits the composer's remarkable gift for instrumental color, but the second movement, marked 'Très vif', uses an ordinary technique like pizzicato to create a strangely ominous mood, which Menuhin and Gendron throw themselves into with a will. Throughout there is a powerful presence in their playing, and a sense of abandon that one might not identify with Menuhin. (This same performance can be found in Warner's 7-CD box set, THE MENUHIN CENTURY.)

The two big ensemble works are the Fauré Piano Quartet #1 and Chausson's Concerto for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet, the former being much more common on disc than the latter. (Menuhin made studio recordings of both works, but my cursory investigation didn't disclose that either performance made it to CD - Menuhin's recordings from every period have been reissued so often that there's always a chance that my information is wrong.) Except for a change in violist, the lineup for the Fauré is the same as the HMV stereo LP account, which dates from 1971, the same year as this concert. Son Jeremy was only 19 at the time, and he finds himself in august company. Without being a model of polished execution, this live performance is carried along by its vibrancy and a palpable joy in making music.

I found it a delightful listen, and the Chausson concerto, with the noted French pianist Jeanne-Marie Darré, exudes passion and conviction. (The pianist in the studio account was Louis Kentner.) In CD or digital format the Chausson is a particularly important addition for Menuhin collectors, and as remastered by Yves St.-Laurent, the recorded sound is very good FM broadcast stereo for the time; there is virtually no tape hiss and no other sonic irritants at all. Darré's piano playing is eloquent, and the whole performance is inspiring.

Darré returns with Février as a piano duo in the bonus material that fills out CD 2 which comes from a 1958 recital in Brussels. Fauré's Dolly Suite is played with the utmost charm. Ravel's delicate *Ma mère l'Oye* is given in the original 1910 suite of five movements for piano duet. This performance is a model of refinement and complete understanding of Ravel's idiom. Necessarily the mono sound is limited - the pianos are far forward in a dry acoustic, which makes their tone rather hard—but it is very listenable in YSL's clean remastering.

This release is Vol. 15 in the series of 'Raretés françaises' from St. Laurent Studio. As prodigious as this label's output is in every genre, it has proved to be a unique source for French recitals by famous performers. This new release is treasurable in every musical respect and honors Menuhin (and company) as the invaluable artist he was. Strongly recommended."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE