

GRAMOPHONE *Collector*

HARP FANTASIES

Jeremy Nicholas listens to four discs on which four harpists explore the history and reach of their enigmatic instrument



Harp discoveries: Nicole Müller introduces Jeremy Nicholas to Henriette Renié and Carlos Salzedo

Margret Köll is one of today's foremost historical harp exponents. Her mission on 'L'arpa di Partenope' is to introduce us to early Baroque harp music from Naples. May I suggest that, for those of us unfamiliar with 16th-century Neapolitan harp music (most of us) and the 14 more or less obscure composers featured here, to spread the word effectively she needs to hold our hand a little more firmly. There is scant information on any of the music and, though the 20 tracks are an adroit mix of dance movements, toccatas and more contemplative fare, there is not much that distinguishes one from another. Köll is billed as playing a double harp yet the instrument she plays is a 2007 copy of the Barberini harp, housed in a Rome museum, which is a triple harp. I'm confused.

When you play on the harp a piece that was conceived as a two-hand work for keyboard, you have to persuade the listener that it was originally written for the harp. A large amount of solo harp repertoire draws on such transcriptions. Some are more successful than others. Two that really don't work begin **Nicole Müller's** recital 'Rêves et Danses'. Bach's *French Suite* No 3 in B minor, like the other five, relies on the clear definition of two separate voices dancing round each other, equality of note production

and crisply executed ornaments. It may present an interesting technical challenge for a harpist but without these elements firmly in place it becomes no more than that. Similarly, the harp cannot deliver the rhythmic éclat of a work like Rameau's 'L'Égyptienne' as successfully as the harpsichord. The latter part of Müller's programme consists solely of original works for the harp. Here she is far more convincing, including two delightful works (discoveries for me): *Légende après 'Les Elfes'* by Henriette Renié (1875-1956) based on a poem (helpfully reproduced in the booklet) by Charles Leconte de Lisle, and *Chansons dans la nuit* by Carlos Salzedo (1885-1961).

Another extended (12'36") and colourful work by Renié ends **Sivan Magen's** recital 'Fantasien'. *Ballade fantastique*, written in 1913 and based on Edgar Allan Poe's gothic *The Tell-Tale Heart*, is 'a highly ambitious example of programme music that helped free the harp from the unhelpful trappings of its salon repertoire' (Alexander Riley's first-rate booklet). Magen begins with his own arrangement of CPE Bach's *Fantasia* in E flat, Wq58/6. Listening blind you would swear that it was simply a work from the standard harp repertoire that had previously escaped your notice; likewise Magen's arrangements of four Intermezzos by Brahms, who, in common with most major composers, wrote nothing for solo

harp. These make up for the omission. I urge you to hear Magen playing Op 117 Nos 1 and 2 – and Mozart's *Fantasia* in D minor, K397, a work surely indebted to CPE Bach. Harpophiles and bravura-fanciers in general will not fail to fall for the *Fantasia on Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin* by the Russian harp virtuoso Ekaterina Walter-Kühne (1870-1930). Magen seems destined to be the Zabaleta *de nos jours*, with a paintbox of colours allied to fabulous dexterity and nuanced phrasing. The recording (Philip Hobbs in The Menuhin Hall) has real presence and depth.

Whereas the CD cover for Nicole Müller's disc pictures her with her harp in a gloomy sylvan glade, **Elizabeth Hainen** has parked hers in a field of lavender or possibly borage – aptly so, for the general mood of the music is pastoral impressionism, butterflies and summer meadows. The exception is the final (and longest) work in the programme, another inspired by Edgar Allan Poe: *Conte fantastique* by André Caplet is based on *The Mask of the Red Death*. This, Hainen tells us, is only its second recording in the original 1908 version for string orchestra (it's usually heard in the 1923 version for string quartet). It's a fascinating work which sounds like the soundtrack to a silent movie or, as Hainen suggests, a Hitchcock thriller. 'Les amis' (the disc's title) is also the first disc to exclusively pair Debussy with that of his devoted friend. Caplet's two Divertissements for solo harp, one *à la française*, the other *à l'espagnole*, are well worth investigating. The harpist's own arrangement of Debussy's *Petite Suite* for two pianos will surely be taken up by others. The same composer's Sonata for flute, viola and harp and the *Danse sacrée et Danse profane* provide further welcome variety of texture in this beautifully recorded programme. **G**

THE RECORDINGS



Various Cpsrs 'L'arpa di Partenope'
Köll
Accent **ACC24192**



Various Cpsrs 'Rêves et Danses'
Müller
Acoustic Music Records **319 1517-2**



Various Cpsrs 'Fantasien'
Magen
Linn **CKD441**



Caplet. Debussy 'Les amis'
Hainen, Khaner, Diaz; IRIS Orch / Stern
Avie **AV2285**