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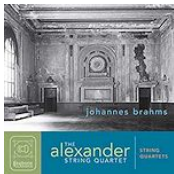
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Camille SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921)

Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso, Op.28 (1862) [9:55]
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 Violin Concerto No.3 in B minor, Op.61 (1879-80) [31:42]
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 Romance, Op.48 (1874) [7:19]
 Samson and Dalila, "Mon Coeur s'ouvre à ta voix" (1877) [18:77]
 Jinjoo Cho (violin)
 Appassionato/Mathieu Herzog
 rec. 8-10 March 2021 La Seine Musicale, Boulogne-Billancourt, France
NAÏVE V7422 [79:11]

Korean-born Jinjoo Cho moved to the USA when she was 14 and soon started to make a name for herself as an exceptional violinist. She made what appears to have been her debut recording in 2007 in a programme of Brahms, Ravel and Scott Good, with pianist Louise-Andrée Baril on the Analekta label, but I cannot see that she made any further recordings until 2018 when she released a programme of modern American music with pianist Hyun Soo Kim for Azica Records in 2018. This new release on the French Naïve label seems to be, therefore, her debut concerto recording with an orchestra, and here she collaborates with Mathieu Herzog and chamber orchestra, Appassionata. Reading all the gushing publicity about her both online and with this release, one might be surprised that she has been given so little international exposure on record, but it was probably a wise move for her to continue to develop before exposing herself to the harsh scrutiny of the CD-buying public, and in particular in the well-trodden world of concerto recordings, for this performance reveals a fine musician with a most mature interpretative outlook, impeccably clear articulation, and a simply adorable tone.

In choosing to devote this recording to the music of Saint-Saëns, she is also making a significant statement; here is a violinist for whom virtuosity and showmanship are second to musical integrity. Yes, both the *Introduction et Rondo capriccioso* and the *Havanaise* are staples of the virtuoso circuit, and the *Third Concerto* is a real mainstay of the repertoire. But what a pleasure it is to have such an insightful account of the rarely heard First Concerto, while both the *Romance* and the aria from *Samson et Dalila*, allow us to savour not only Cho's beautifully lyrical tone but also her ability to avoid sentimentality yet still convey a sense of deep loveliness. The booklet note - in French, English and Korean - is a transcript of an interview with Cho and Herzog, in which Cho describes Saint-Saëns's music as "sensuous, evocative and exquisite", qualities which she brings out powerfully in all her playing here. And while the recording was released just in time to make the tail end of the Saint-Saëns centenary remembrance, Herzog goes on to suggest that his desire to record this music stems from both a desire to celebrate a composer who "is often underappreciated in France" and to celebrate his "strength of artistic will".

Clearly there is a strong mutual bond between Cho and Herzog when it comes to performing this music. There is a lovely moment at the end of the *Havanaise* where the solo violin and orchestra seem to meld into each other, while the dramatic opening of the *Third Concerto* is superbly delivered by Cho with the orchestra simmering with tension beneath her. Of more interest to Saint-Saëns fans, however, will be the First Concerto. Cast in a single movement, it is an astonishingly condensed work which seems to cram a great many typically Saint-Saëns gestures into its 13-minute span. It works particularly well here because of the musical relationship between soloist and conductor, which allows the fleeting changes of mood and character to flow easily and without any sense of jerkiness.

The disc concludes with an aria from *Samson and Dalila* in a transcription for violin and orchestra, with a substantial part for solo viola (played here by Caroline Donin), works very well, because of Cho's ability to create a truly singing tone in the instrument's lower register. She exudes all that sensuality she credited Saint-Saëns with in her in-booklet interview, as well as a great deal of passion and emotional richness. The woodwind solos are particularly enchanting.

Marc Rochester



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