

## The viola works of Darius Milhaud

Darius Milhaud is without question, one of this century's most industrious composers. Violists are forever indebted to him for the very generous amount of music he wrote for this instrument he had a particular fondness for. In addition to the music on this recording, he also wrote two concertos and the *Concerto d'été* for viola and orchestra, *Air from the Sonata* (viola and orchestra), *Élégie pour Pierre* (viola and percussion), and the *Sonatine* for viola and cello. Milhaud played the violin and the viola since the age of 5, however he later gave up performing after hearing a tape of himself and Honegger playing poorly in the world premiere of the Honegger violin duet. However his appreciation for string instruments stuck with him for the rest of his life, writing numerous string sonatas, concertos, and chamber music including 18 string quartets.

The four works on this disc were all written for a close friend of Darius, Germain Prévost, violist of the ProArte Quartet for several years. Darius first met Germain Prévost in Brussels in 1920 at a music festival organized by Paul Collaer, a musicologist and professor of chemistry whom Darius became very friendly with. At the time, the ProArte Quartet was fresh out of the Brussels Conservatoire and was struggling to position themselves as a force in the chamber music world. The members of the quartet were all moneyless, and made ends meet as they could by playing for cafes and movie theaters. Darius was particularly fond of this quartet because they had that special quality in which they could perform contemporary literature as beautifully as they could perform classical literature. Because of this quality, Darius organized their premiere concert in Paris, and for this, the quartet was forever grateful to him.

The ProArte Quartet moved to the USA in 1940 where they obtained a residency at the University of Wisconsin in Madison (my hometown), a residency which the current ProArte Quartet still holds today. After being in residence for less than a year, Alphonse Onnou, the quartet's first violinist, died. This death had a pronounced affect on Prévost, who was a very sentimental man. All four of the pieces were written for Germain Prévost to help celebrate the memory of the Alphonse Onnou. The *Sonatine for violin and viola*, written in 1941, was composed for Laurent Halleux (the second violinist) and Germain. He was very gracious of this gift, but he later commissioned his friend, Darius, for 3 more sonatas for viola and piano. Milhaud gladly accepted the offer, and thus, he wrote the *4 Visages* (1943), *Sonata No. 1* (1944), and the *Sonata No. 2* (1944).

These were all premiered in Madison at different occasions throughout the year. The *4 Visages* was premiered in January of 1944 and the *Sonata No. 1* was premiered in April of 1944, both at UW-Madison with faculty pianist Grant Johannesen. The *Sonata No. 2* was premiered in August of 1944 at Edgewood College in Madison with Nadia Boulanger on the piano. All of these pieces were composed at Mills College in Oakland, California, where Milhaud was on the composition faculty for several years.

The *4 Visages* (literally, 4 "faces" or "characters") was given its title because each movement represents a face or character, more specifically, imaginary women, each from California (where Darius lived), Wisconsin (where Germain lived), Brussels (where Germain was from) and Paris

(where Darius was from). This may have been an inside joke between Germain and Darius, both of whom were extremely fond of women, and no doubt had many discussions about women in their many worldly experiences with each other. At the end of the 3rd movement "La Bruxelloise" there is a quote from the end of the Belgian national anthem (see example). It is interesting that in the 1st movement "La Californienne" the sounds are more relaxed and Parisian, while the last movement, "La Parisienne", the sounds are more active, with the hustle and bustle one would associate with California- perhaps it is just a matter of perspective. (An interesting note- technically speaking, people from Wisconsin are called "Wisconsinites"- maybe Darius should have consulted his Farmer's Almanac!)

The *Sonata No. 1* was written after anonymous French folksongs of the 18th century. It is not clear who is actually the author of these tunes, but it has been said that Darius often times used anonymous French folk tunes in his music. He was not against doing this, as long as the composer's personality is kept in tact. This sonata is no exception to that, in fact these anonymous tunes sound very much like Milhaud could have written them himself. The 3rd movement "Air" of this sonata was also written for viola and orchestra, which Germain also premiered with the University Symphony Orchestra in Madison. This sonata tends to be the most often played by violists.

The *Sonata No. 2* is much more serious in nature, and is much more "Milhaud-like". It is the least known among the 3 works for viola and piano, but it is certainly just as strong as a piece. The 1st movement "Champetre", which means rural or pastoral, is actually my favorite movement of all the viola sonatas. Its rolling character and unique counterpoint which continually juxtaposes itself differently measure by measure makes it a real joy to play. The 2nd movement "Dramatique" is very emotional and moving, while the "Rude", which literally means "rough", as difficult in nature as it is, makes for a very exciting closer.

The *Élégie pour Pierre* for solo viola and 3 percussionists is a very short work written as a private gesture of Milhaud for the death of his close friend, maestro Pierre Monteux. Monteux conducted the world premiere of Milhaud's *Viola Concerto No.1*, with composer/violist Paul Hindemith playing the viola part. Monteux himself was a violist, and the instrumentation of this dark, mysterious token work seems appropriate. The work seems to have been written "for the desk drawer", and has not received a public premiere until the performance heard on this disk. The work remains unpublished, and is only available for viewing at the Library of Congress.

*notes by Kenneth Martinson*