Saint-Saëns
Ysaÿe

Rare transcriptions for violin and piano

Saint-Saëns *Caprice brillant*
Chopin/Saint-Saëns Nocturne in E major
Saint-Saëns *Caprice d'après l'Etude en forme de valse*
Chopin/Saint-Saëns Nocturne in E♭ major
Chopin/Ysaÿe Waltz in E minor
Chopin/Ysaÿe Ballade No. 1 in G minor
Saint-Saëns *Fantaisie* for violin and piano after Weber's *Oberon*
Saint-Saëns *L'Air de la pendule*
Saint-Saëns *Fantaisie* for violin and harp

Philippe Graffin *vn* Pascal Devoyon *pno* Catherine Beynon *hp*
Hyperion CDA67285 (77 minutes: DDD), £13.99
Notes, texts and translations included.

The current trends for anything original and unmediated – be it health food or historically informed performance – are well established to the extent that it is sometimes hard to see merit in unoriginal or expedient forms of presentation. Originality is widely considered to be a key element in any artistic endeavour: invention and novelty join forces to motivate the creator and excite the public, who incessantly expect an intake of new experience the newness of which is defined by their own logic and impressions.

Performances of new or unknown works fit into this mindset, but performances of arrangements or transcriptions of old and known works face a different kind of challenge, for such performances are often seen to corrupt the originality of the works whose transcriptions they are. The aim of such performances might seem then to be focused on revealing the ingenuity of transcription, so that familiar pieces receive a new interpretation by means of their arrangement. However, in some cases, the appreciation of the transcription, itself considered as a compositional skill, can be undermined by the limited reception of the original. Perhaps it is then no wonder that transcriptions are less popular in our own times.

From this point of view the recently recorded and released disc *Saint-Saëns and Ysaÿe: Rare transcriptions for violin and piano* (Hyperion CDA67285) by Philippe Graffin (violin) and Pascal Devoyon (piano) can be seen as a courageous attempt at resurrecting the repertoire of transcriptions as a genre. The disc's first item, Saint-Saëns's *Caprice brillant*, was written when the composer was still in his twenties and the work is best known in its orchestrated form as the last movement of the Third Violin Concerto, written some twenty years later. The relationship between the two is mainly thematic: familiar tunes appear in the same order as in the Concerto, but the version for violin and piano contains more episodic material and a richer harmonic palette. But the greatest difference between the two versions is the role the piano plays: the melodic materials are shared equally between the two instruments, cadences are embellished in a Lisztian fashion with a frequent use of rubato, and the variety of texture

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prefigures that of Fauré's violin sonatas. Furthermore, the fact that this is chamber music gives both performers a space to be spontaneous and virtuosic in the manner of the Romantic tradition. In other words, there is more Romantic bravura in the *Caprice brillant* than in its more Classically flavoured realization in the Concerto. The present recording successfully brings out this character through highly accomplished playing by both performers – their musicality and spontaneity of interaction render this youthful work a very interesting concert piece in its own right.

I am a little confused about the authorship of the third item on the disc, Saint-Saëns's *Caprice d'après l'Etude en forme de valse*, which, according to the notes, is the version for violin and piano of Ysaÿe's transcription for violin and orchestra of a study for piano by Saint-Saëns. All the three transcriptions by Ysaÿe recorded here show evidence of the imagination with which he uses the violin as an expressive medium. Ysaÿe was one of the more experimental composers writing for the violin: he explored and developed his compositional vocabulary by notating specific nuances and technical processes of fingering and bowing. The result is a new style of violin-writing that is idiosyncratic in a traditional sense as well as an acoustical sense, in which technical devices create a broader and more translucent sound-world than normally associated with nineteenth-century virtuoso violin-writing – a quality that marks Ysaÿe out from his contemporaries. Philippe Graffin is particularly impressive in conveying this translucency, keeping well under control all the technical challenges Ysaÿe imposes.

Four out of the nine items in this recording are transcriptions of Chopin's piano music – two each by Saint-Saëns and Ysaÿe. These are mostly 'adaptations' for violin and piano and faithfully trace the melodic and harmonic features of the original. However, the change of instrumentation results in a marked perceptual difference in terms of the atmosphere and pathos of the work. The soliloquy of the original is now shared between two performers, and so what was private is transformed into a conversation. This is particularly felt in Ysaÿe's transcription of Ballade No. 1 in G minor, undoubtedly the best-known source material presented in this disc and, to the pianist who performs it, one of the most intimate passages of all music. The transcription is, however, no less interesting for this change of circumstances. For much of the work the sustained quality of the melodic line is emphasized against the pulsating accompaniment, making it somewhat easier and more comfortable to listen to, and consequently lighter in tone.

This change in the reception of a work through transcription reminds us of something that was a common practice in the nineteenth century: the joy of music-making. Music lives not only in the written form but also in its performed form, which includes all transformations of the written into sound. Furthermore, there is pleasure to be experienced in the course of making these transformations. Small-scale chamber music is not only a means of introducing scaled-down versions of large works that would otherwise seldom be performed. Small-scale chamber music, and *salon* music in particular, possesses a style of communication that no other form of music-making does. It is closely related to the kinetic movement of performers, their physicality and their relationship with each other. The reality of music-making beyond the realm of abstract music becomes integral to the appreciation of that music which in its turn requires this spontaneous link with every performance context as part of its intrinsic value as an aesthetic object. The present disc of transcriptions

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promotes this pleasure of music-making – of the aspect of musical experience that one cannot derive from simply listening to it, but one can gain through the act of performing it and through the appreciation of this act.

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