

Phil's Classical Reviews

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Fauré: 13 Barcarolles, Dolly Suite
Sally Pinkas, piano
MSR Classics

From the paucity of my reviews, you may gather, correctly, that I haven't been terribly fond of the piano music of French composer Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924). As it turns out, I just hadn't heard enough of it played by the Israeli-born American pianist and scholar Sally Pinkas. As she shows us in the present program of Barcarolles, Fauré was a master of the subtlest lyrical and rhythmical effects, which he used to conjure up a range of moods that can be nostalgic or gently melancholy without descending into the *fin-de-siècle* torpor that characterized so many of his contemporaries.

The Barcarolle originated as a Venetian gondolier's song, as its lilting sway and moderate 6/8 time would indicate. In Fauré's treatment of the genre, consisting of 13 barcarolles over a long span of years (1880-1921), he avoids the monotony its gently rippling and rocking effect might impart by occasionally switching to a 9/8 meter in the episodes. But he does a lot of other things besides, and Sally Pinkas is keen to recognize the subtleties of Fauré's style, such as his increasing use of syncopation, layered textures and rhythmic uncertainty, combined with glowing tone color and expressive freedom as the years progressed. Some of these Barcarolles, such as Nos. 2, 3, 8, and 12, embody a definite *joie de vivre*; others, such as No. 5 are bolder and more overtly dramatic, pensive (No. 9) or nostalgic (No. 13).

There is a tendency among critics to view Fauré's development as a progress from romantic to impressionist, and finally one who was susceptible to modernistic influences. That needs to be taken with a grain of salt. As I listen to Sally Pinkas' highly engaging performances, I get the impression of a composer who could vary his approach to a given genre but was remarkably true to himself throughout his career.

Together with her duo partner Evan Hirsch, Pinkas does a splendid job of re-creating the world of childhood imagination contained in Fauré's Dolly Suite for piano duet, Op. 56. This was a labor of love by the composer for the singer Emma Bardac, with whom he had a liaison of several years beginning in 1892. The "Dolly" of the title was Emma's daughter Héléne, who was suspected of being Fauré's child, though the evidence may be considered inconclusive. Like the Children's Corner Suite, which fellow composer Claude Debussy wrote for Claude-Emma, *his* own daughter by Mme. Bardac, the "Dolly" suite reflects an unsentimental view of the world as experienced by a real child. The "Berceuse," or cradle song, is rather energetic for that genre, a mood replicated by the vibrant activity of the "Kitty-Valse."

"Mi-a-o," despite the feline connotation, was Dolly's infant attempt to pronounce the name of her brother Raoul. "Le Jardin de Dolly" is a walk through an enchanted garden, and "Tendresse" (Tenderness) is slow and dignified, though not unduly sentimental. The concluding piece "Le pas Espagnole" is an ebullient and extroverted Spanish dance that Pinkas and Hirsch invest with all the brilliance and color it deserves, including the smartly struck accents that kick off each of its major sections.

