



In recent years, Sally Pinkas has made a name for herself as an interpreter of Gabriel Fauré's music for piano -- and for good reason. Following in the footsteps of her highly acclaimed recording of the Frenchman's nocturnes, Pinkas' latest venture breathes life into the varied set of musical characters that comprise Fauré's barcarolles for solo piano -- a set of thirteen pieces, which span some forty years of the composer's life (1881-1921).

In the tradition of Mendelssohn's Venetian Gondola Songs and Chopin's Barcarolle, Op 60, the Venetian boat-song sheds its provincial hide for the skin of high-art under Fauré's masterful hand. As Pinkas writes in her sensitive, yet to-the-point, liner notes, Fauré was able to transform the 'naïve folk-song ... into an ecstatic waltz, a quirky frolic and an eerie drone. Notwithstanding their rhythmic uniformity, each of the thirteen barcarolles follows an individual path, similar in its undulating motion but never truly the same.' Pinkas' astute identification of this subtle variety is the first great achievement of her newest recording project; the second is her ability to bring it convincingly to the fore.

Because of his stunningly original harmonic language, Fauré is one of the few composers who can get away with writing swaths of unadorned arpeggios to great effect -- the Sanctus and In Paradisum from his Requiem Mass are exemplary in this regard. Simple on the surface, this feature of Fauré's music is deceptively difficult to perform, as the resulting textural lucidity is unforgiving to errors of any kind. If this were not intimidating enough in its own right, Fauré's work confronts pianists with an additional challenge: a supremely colorful harmony, which requires a highly differentiated array of sonic planes to convey. (It is no wonder that even the great Liszt found Fauré's music difficult to play.)

Not only does Pinkas succeed in creating a sound world of infinite hues; she also uses this world as a vehicle through which to lend each work a character of its own. From the rich and warm tone of No 4 in A-flat major, through the stark world of No 9 in A minor, to the bright and pedalled canvas of No 13 in C major, Pinkas proves to be a virtuoso in bringing out the piano's many different faces. And while her sound is somewhat contrary to the feathery impressionist wash so typical of Fauré recordings, her bold and assertive approach remains sensitive to the infinite changes in harmonic palette. It speaks volumes to Pinkas' success that one can criticize her performance only in relation to the brilliant recordings of Fauré's student, Germaine Thyssens-Valentin, whose nuanced touch was capable of superhuman tasks...

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