

BRUCH: *8 Pieces*;
D'INDY: *Clarinet Trio*

Amici Ensemble—Naxos 557347—72 minutes

Bruch's *Eight Pieces* for clarinet, cello, and piano has long been a staple of the clarinet literature. And they are marvelous indeed—fervent romanticism, wonderful, unique harmonies, and windswept melody absolutely rule. He was an arch-conservative in many ways, much preferring the earlier romantics to the later ones (like Wagner), and all of his music carries with it a sunset glow, the feeling of warm coals on a chilly beach at night. These superb miniatures are as worthy as anything he ever wrote, including his violin concertos. Often they are separated into smaller groupings, and at least they get heard this way, but they should be played all together.

This performance is in all respects quite excellent. The sweep, the passion, the intensity are all present. What I miss is the lilt and frisson I feel when Paul Meyer and company play this on a newly re-released Apex CD (selling cheaper than this Naxos in some places). Meyer's group uses the viola instead of cello, and the higher instrument and lighter texture do much to launch this fevered work onto a new level. But this cello version is played more often, and has a darker, more ominous coloring. The Meyer is the best ever, so if you really want the essence of this work, you need him. But at these prices, grab both.

The D'Indy is a neglected work and shouldn't be. Much of Franck shines in this piece, and its classical-minded elegance often gives way to a stormy take on old forms. The overture alone is a superbly crafted piece of drama, gradually raising the curtain on what will be one of the more tuneful and romantically leavened trios you will hear. My previous favorite has been the Transatlantic Trio on 4Tay (with Eric Mandat—May/June 1998), coupled with a lovely Brahms Clarinet Trio. This one is awfully close to that, with no significant differences, and I have since found other Brahms that may supplant the 4Tay, fine as it is. But I would not want to be without their D'Indy.

Naxos has done a good job with this logical coupling. The Amici Ensemble—Joaquin Valdepeñas, clarinet; David Heatherington, cello; and Patricia Parr, piano—also turned in one of my favorite discs: trios by Rudolph, Fruhling, and Spohr (Nov/Dec 2003). These performances are uniformly excellent, and Naxos gives them superlative sound.

RITTER