

**BERKELEY** Sonata for Violin and Piano. Short Pieces for Piano. Andantino for Cello and Piano. Pieces for Clarinet. Mazurka for Piano, op. 101b. Duo for Cello and Piano. Preludes for Piano. Concertino • Schirmer Ens • NAXOS 8.557324 (61:36)

This release features everything from chips off the workbench to moderate-sized works, all of it bearing the hallmark of impeccable craftsmanship that was a feature of Berkeley's music.

The Short Pieces for Piano of 1937 recall Poulenc in their easy charm that neither contains depths nor pretends to any. Written in 1945, the six Preludes for Piano bring Fauré and Ravel to mind, both in the modal writing and highly idiomatic use of the instrument. The tone is more varied than in the earlier collection, and the overall effect, one of emotional breadth and refinement. If the Andantino for Cello and Piano possesses an apparent vocal line, it's because the work is actually a transcription of a soprano solo from Berkeley's *Festive Anthem*; and Berkeley was right to save this songful little excerpt from the usual fate accorded such works. The three Pieces for Clarinet solo were written in 1939 but not published until 1983, and dedicated to Thea King—a handy thing to keep in your portfolio, when you wish to compliment an outstanding clarinetist with more than words. At 1:24, the 1982 Mazurka is the shortest composition performed here. Composed in honor of the 250th anniversary of Haydn's birth, it is a wonderful example of Berkeley's subtle, transparent, late manner, though I've yet to understand the connection between Poland and Haydn.

Among the longer works, the Duo for Cello and Piano from 1971 is a stark, almost ghostly piece with an emphasis on pointillistic counterpoint, and at 6:19, easily the largest, most complex movement on this release. The four-movement Concertino of 1955 emphasizes elegance and austerity; even the last movement, a *vivace* rondo, is grim-faced despite its typically Berkeleyian rhythmic verve. Finally, the Sonata, written in 1943, possesses a weight of incident and seriousness entirely beyond its duration. Not that it foregoes the composer's customary lightness of touch, but the sober, often forcefully direct manner of the piece displays a side of Berkeley not heard elsewhere on this CD.

Although Naxos listed bios for all five members of the Schirmer Ensemble—pianist Len Vorster, flutist Masahide Kurita, clarinetist Deborah de Graaff, violinist Elizabeth Sellars, and cellist David Berlin—it states nothing in this release about the group itself. I suspect this is the Schirmer Ensemble founded in Australia in 1997, with an objective of promoting the publications of G. Schirmer, the music-publishing house. As such, it has a mobile base of performers, drawing upon various musicians in the Melbourne SO. The impression I get from this release is of a suave, technically admirable group that displays only a generic sense of style, and little of the intimate give-and-take found in musicians who play this repertoire together frequently. As a stopgap, they are suitable, but there's definitely more content to be mined here.

Keith Anderson's liner notes are decent, but the sound is problematic. The clarinet pieces, the Mazurka, and the two works for cello and piano are all well-balanced and competently recorded, but the rest are bass heavy and thickly resonant, with what may be the sound of an air-conditioning system in the background. In addition, the piano is too prominent in both the Sonata and Concertino, to the detriment of the other instruments.

My preference in the Concertino remains with the Endymion Ensemble (Dutton CDLX 7100), an album that otherwise duplicates little of the above but does everything with a more Gallic flair. Still, if you want the more obscure items here, there are few choices; and the budget price is attractive.

**Barry Brenesal**