
DANCES FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA • Joel Fan (pn); Christophe Chagnard, cond; Northwest Sinfonietta • REFERENCE 134 (69:13)

PIERNÉ *Fantasia-ballet*. **CASTRO HERRERA** *Vals-Capricho*. **CHOPIN** *Grand Concert Rondo, "Krakowiak."* **SAINT-SAËNS** *Caprice-Valse, "Wedding Cake."* **WEBER** *Polonaise brillante*. **GOTTSCHALK** *Grande Tarantelle*. **CADMAN** *Dark Dancers of the Mardi Gras*

It is unlikely that this collection, as utterly charming as it is, will spark a revival of obscure 19th-century single movement works for piano and orchestra. But what a brilliant presentation we have here: Music that cannot help but delight, delivered with the utmost elegance by soloist and orchestra alike.

Okay, to be precise, the wonderfully titled *Dark Dancers of the Mardi Gras*, by the Pennsylvania composer Charles Wakefield Cadman, was written in 1933, but it certainly reflects the sensibility of an artist with one foot planted in another century. Its concession to "modernity" lies in the jazzy rhythms, and the fun, splashy sound of the work reflects Cadman's pioneering work as a Hollywood film score composer. Much of the rest of the program features music inspired by dance, including two waltzes and a polonaise. I was especially enchanted by the ebullient and colorful *Vals-Capricho* by the Mexican composer Ricardo Castro Herrera. Gabriel Pierné's lush fantasy is equally seductive, all the more remarkable in that he was just 21 when he composed it in 1884. Gottschalk's *Grande Tarantelle* was created as a showpiece for the composer, considered the first American superstar of the piano, and it is good, gaudy fun, although probably the work on this CD least likely to bear up under repeated hearings.

The best-known pieces here, though hardly chart busters, come from Chopin, Weber, and Saint-Saëns. All three are beautifully constructed and satisfying works, so it is something of a mystery that they are not better known and performed. The Chopin, in particular, though not exactly poorly represented on recordings, is seldom performed in concert, so far as I know, although it would seem to be a perfect program opener or filler. It is a lovely early work, completed by the 18-year-old just before he left Poland forever, infused with folk music wedded to an already formed mastery of form and a singular grasp of melodic architecture.

Anyone familiar with Joel Fan's previous Reference Recordings outings will expect to hear an ease of execution and an especially crisp and lucid sense for texture. That he delivers. What is remarkable about this collection is the restraint and tastefulness he brings to music that, under the wrong hands, could come off as bombastic. This is my first encounter with Cristophe Chagnard and the Northwest Sinfonietta, but they are fully equal to Fan's aplomb, rendering this collection with a true sense of joy. This may not be music that will haunt your dreams (or maybe it is), but it is delectable as a cool summer breeze. Go ahead and treat yourself.

Peter Burwasser