

resonant acoustic does him few favours. But more than that, I'm unconvinced that he is a natural Schubertian. Sample the slightly faster Christian Zacharias in the *cantabile* slow movement of D537 and you find a sonorous warmth that is lacking in the Naxos set. Nebolsin is better suited to the more driven moments but it's all a little unsmiling. Ultimately it's akin to looking at a black-and-white photo of a Cézanne still life. The contours are strongly defined but at the cost of the endlessly fascinating detail.

Harriet Smith

'Fantasies & Impromptus'

Fauré Une châtelaine en sa tour, Op 110.

Impromptu, Op 86 Gilèrè Impromptu

Pièrné Impromptu-caprice, Op 9 Roussel

Impromptu, Op 21 Saint-Saëns Fantaisie,

Op 95 Spohr Fantaisie, Op 35. Variations on

Mehul's 'Je suis encore dans mon printemps',

Op 36 Verdalle Impromptu No 2 Snoer

Fantasy on the Dutch Folksong

'Wien Neerlandsch bloed'

Lavinia Meijer *hp*

Channel Classics © . CCSSA31711 (72' • DDD)

A suitably fine collection of mainly French music for the harp



Lavinia Meijer here offers a delightful sequence of pieces for solo harp by mostly French composers. The harp has long been a favourite instrument in

France and it was a Frenchman, Sébastien Erard, who, in the early years of the 19th century, introduced the double-action harp, so allowing a full chromatic range of notes to be played. All these pieces in different ways exploit that development.

Meijer opens with the *Impromptu-caprice* of Gabriel Pièrné, who was persuaded to write this charming piece for a harp competition in 1885, introducing a display of fireworks. It was more predictable that Louis Spohr would write for the harp as he married a harpist, who inspired this *Fantaisie*, a set of variations on "Je suis encore dans mon printemps", a melody taken from an opera by Méhul.

Saint-Saëns's *Fantaisie* was written in 1895, commissioned, like the Pièrné, to be played at a harp competition. This, too, is charming, with plenty of arpeggio work and some exquisite *pianissimos*, beautifully played. The Impromptu of Fauré was inspired by a poem of Verlaine, "Une châtelaine en sa tour", with broken chords and hints of medieval music.

Gabriel Verdalle and Johannes Snoer were both harpists who wrote pieces for their own use, not great works but ones which effectively exploit the harp's potential. One can imagine that both Verdalle's tuneful Impromptu No 2 and Snoer's *Variations on a Dutch Folksong* are very attractive to virtuosos.

Albert Roussel's Impromptu is a spectacular piece specifically written for the great French harpist of the interwar years, Lily Laskine, while the easily tuneful Impromptu of Reinhold Glière illustrates in its approachability how he managed to survive throughout the Soviet era. An excellent collection for anyone who loves the harp.

Edward Greenfield

'Monologue'

Bořkovec Sonata Klusák Monologue

'Ubi vult'. Partita Smolka The Mist of

Depression Vycpálek Suite, Op 21

Jitka Hosprová *va*

Supraphon © SU4049-2 (61' • DDD)

Unusual Czech repertoire for viola, passionately played



Lacking as they do the extensive Classical and Romantic solo repertoire enjoyed by violinists and

cellists, viola players

are often on the lookout for new pieces. Jitka Hosprová has put together an interesting programme of Czech music and gives convincing accounts of all five works, distinguished by fine, robust tone and emotional commitment. She has got under the skin of each piece, finding a connection between its style and her own passionate manner of performance.

Pavel Bořkovec's Sonata (1931) combines straightforward rhythms with more complex melodic and harmonic formulations. It's a strong work, suggesting in places the idiom of Hindemith. The Suite by Ladislav Vycpálek (1929) is considerably more expressionistic and virtuosic. Its finale relies too much on a not-very-distinguished motif; otherwise it's a powerful piece with a striking slow movement – a low-lying cantilena interspersed with enigmatic double-stops in a higher register.

The most unusual work is Jan Klusák's *Monologue* (1987), in effect a 21-minute cadenza. Somehow, Klusák manages to sustain interest without any very clear structural guidelines, and Hosprová, with her excellent sense of timing, creates an illusion of spontaneous improvisation.

The highlight of the programme, for me, is the *The Mist of Depression* by Jaroslav Smolka. Dating from 1985 and taking as its starting-point Smetana's final sketch for his projected *Twelfth Night* opera (which was to be called *Viola*), Smolka projects a ferocious air of desperation and dislocation – a feeling of trying in vain to maintain mental clarity. The final detuning of the instrument has a devastating effect.

Duncan Druce

'Piano Works by The Mighty Handful'

Balakirev Islamey Borodin Petite Suite.

Scherzo Cui Nocturne, Op 22 No 3

Mussorgsky Pictures at an Exhibition

Rimsky-Korsakov Scherzino, Op 11 No 3.

Three Pieces, Op 15 – No 1, Valse;

No 2, Romance

Philip Edward Fisher *pf*

Chandos © CHAN10676 (81' • DDD)

Music by Russia's Famous Five that needs greater range and incisiveness



Whatever command and authority that pianist Philip Edward Fisher brought to his excellent Naxos recording of Handel's

Keyboard Suites last year, he hits and misses in Russian music. Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* needs far more dynamic range than Fisher is willing to concede, while his casual observance of details and diffident sense of transition add up to interpretative vagueness and a rather bland whole.

The ferociously dispatched final measures of "Gnomus" would have been more effective had Fisher truly accelerated over the course of those preceding bass-register trills. "Il vecchio castello" is slow enough to be a sunken cathedral. "Bydlo" is not so relentlessly steady and concentrated as it ought to be.

Then there's Fisher's laboured repeated notes and enervated opening theme in "Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle", so different from Yefim Bronfman's decisive declamation and fluidity. Why does Fisher start the ostinato pattern of "The Market Place at Limoges" a shade under the tempo into which he settles? Here Bronfman's suppleness and cumulative power prove superior, not to mention Ashkenazy, Berman, Rudy and Richter. The way to build and maintain momentum in the opening octaves of "Baba-Yaga" is to keep them steady and observe the accents and dynamic indications. In this regard Fisher's little speed-ups serve no clear expressive purpose.

Fisher's largely undifferentiated touch wears thin throughout *Islamey*, which lacks the lightness, contrast and diablerie typifying the work's best long-playing era recordings (Katchen, Pletnev, Campanella, to name a few). He rounds off the Cui Nocturne's edges and undersells the playful rhythmic snap of the Borodin Petite Suite's two mazurka movements. However, he comes to life as he dispatches the rapid passagework in Borodin's Scherzo and Rimsky-Korsakov's Scherzino with effortless, feathery élan and gorgeous dabs of tone colour. An uneven release, all told. Jed Distler