



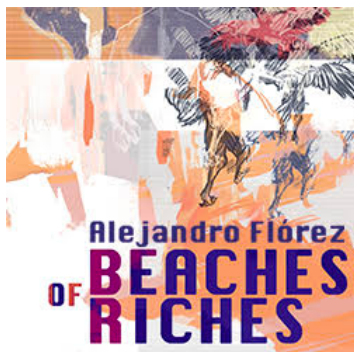
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CD Review by Jerry Dubins

CHAUSSON 5 Fantasies, op. 1. Piano Sonata in f. Poème de l'amour et de la mer: Interlude, op. 19 (trans. Salabert). *Quelques Danses*, op. 26. *Paysage*, op. 38 • Barry Tan (pn) • SHEVA 343 (53:53) Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

I daresay that this new album by Los Angeles-based, Canadian pianist Barry Tan will be terra incognita for many readers and, in at least one case, for all readers and even my *Fanfare* colleagues. It surely was for me. When it comes to the music of Ernest Chausson, familiarity tends to extend mainly to only a handful of his works: the Poème for Violin and Orchestra, the Concert for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet, the Symphony in B ♭, and for those who have dipped a bit further into his catalog, some of his songs—the *Chanson perpétuelle*, for example—perhaps his string quartet (completed by d'Indy), his piano quartet and piano trio, and for dedicated opera buffs, the composer's opera, *Le Roi Arthus*.

But Chausson and music for solo piano? What was someone smoking? Come to find out it was no mistake; Chausson did write some pieces for piano, though not many, and recordings of them are few and far between. Take *Paysage* and *Quelques Danses*, both of which Tan includes in his program. There is exactly one entry for the former and a mere handful for the latter in the *Fanfare* Archive, and one of them was reviewed as far back as 18:6, over 30 years ago!

Or, in the case of the *Poème de l'amour et de la mer*, which has many entries in the Archive, but is not a work for piano and never was. It's an extended work for voice and orchestra in two parts separated by an orchestral Interlude, which is here presented in a downsized arrangement for solo piano by the French publishing house of Salabert, which subsequently merged with the larger and more prominent house of Durand.

The biggest surprise of all in Tan's Chausson album is: a recently rediscovered Piano Sonata in F Minor, which apparently is being heard on record for the first time in this performance. If you search the *Fanfare* Archive, you will find a quite recent recording of Chausson's Sonatines for Piano Four Hands, op. 2, performed by Stephanie McCallum on a Toccata Next CD reviewed by James Harrington in 45:5. But you will not find an entry for the Sonata in F Minor Tan has included in his program because there isn't one. The work was never published in Chausson's short lifetime, existing only in manuscript until its first printed edition was issued in 2021.

So recent is its coming to light that IMSLP would seem to have some catching up to do. If you Google "Chausson Piano Sonata," you will find the full score in manuscript form online. But if you Google "Chausson List of Works," the Sonata does not show up in IMSLP's complete catalog of the composer's compositions. The lag may have to do with the fact that the online version is viewable only in its original

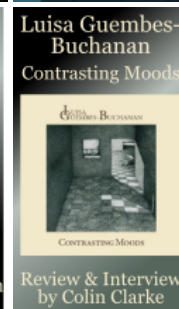
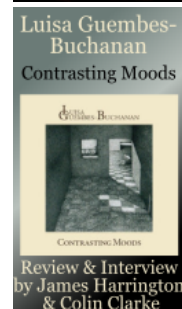
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manuscript form, which can be quite difficult to decipher for all of the crossings out and illegible scribbling. The printed edition has not yet been made available for online viewing.

What is known of the work is that it was composed in 1880, and it's a full, four-movement sonata in the key of F Minor. Chronologically, it's contemporary with Chausson's earliest known compositions, among which is his op. 1, the Five Fantasies for solo piano (1879–1880), which is also included on Tan's disc.

These very early works coincide with Chausson's enrollment at the Paris Conservatory to study composition under Massenet. While his studies under the famed French opera composer went well enough, Chausson sought something or someone that would truly inspire him and fulfill a deep spiritual yearning he had.

Paradoxically, that someone turned out to be César Franck, whose own personal yearnings were not exactly of the spiritual kind. Nonetheless, Chausson gravitated toward Franck, who, at the time, was also teaching classes at the Conservatory, and who may well have led the young, impressionable Chausson to embrace carnal pursuits as divine revelation in its purest form. When you hear the Sonata, you'll understand what I mean.

As noted above, the Sonata is in four movements, yet it's banded on the disc in only three tracks. Curiosity getting the better of me, I emailed Barry Tan to ask him why. He replied promptly and most cordially, even taking a screen shot of the page in the newly printed edition on which the third movement ends. And sure enough, though it's virtually impossible to make out in the original manuscript version online, there's an *attacca subito* marked at the end of the movement, which instructs the player to launch the finale without pause. Barry thus felt that the two movements were connected as one and were best combined on a single track.

As for the music, if you don't believe that Chausson was influenced by the more hedonistic Franck, you need only listen to this sonata for proof to the contrary. It sounds nothing at all like Chausson's later pre-Impressionist works. If anything, it outdoes Franck in the libido department. It's a thrusting, heaving hosanna to what may have been Chausson's loss of virginity and realization that the lecherous old Franck knew a thing or two about music and life.

Joking aside, I couldn't believe Chausson had composed something as Romantically glorious, enraptured, and intoxicating as this. Let me retract that for a moment, because some of his songs soar with similar ardor, something I've noted before about the composer's vocal style. Melody, gorgeous and nonstop, pours forth from the piano, and the notes spill from the keys as if 88 of them aren't enough. On top of its indescribable melodic and harmonic beauty, the work is equally a dazzling virtuoso showpiece. It sounds like it takes 20 fingers to play it, and Tan has them in reserve.

I simply cannot fathom how a piece of music this stunning could have remained in limbo, unpublished, for 141 years. But now that it finally has been, and that Barry Tan has recorded it in a performance that will sweep you off your feet, this is one of those discoveries you must experience while you still have

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Editorial by
Joel Fiegler

breath to draw, though I take no responsibility if listening to it takes your breath away.

Tan has included yet another rarity in his Chausson album, the Five Fantasies, which some sources designate as op. 1, while others maintain that no such opus number exists in the composer's catalog. Whether or not there has been a previous recording of the work, I don't know, but if there has been, it escaped *Fanfare's* hoovering, and AI states that "There do not appear to be any recordings of Ernest Chausson's Five Fantasies, op. 1. The composer likely destroyed this early work, as indicated by musicological sources." Well, if the work was destroyed, we have Barry Tan to thank for resurrecting and recording it. And as the pianist confirms in his album note, the "*Cinq Fantasies*, op. 1, is an early work that Chausson withdrew after its initial publication, but which holds valuable insight into his formative compositional style during his student years."

I can affirm that these five pieces sound nothing like the Sonata. Except for the last of them, which is a bit more animated, the first four are in a slowish tempo, rhythmically disjointed, melodically sparse and austere, and harmonically barren, evoking a mood of mystery and uneasy expectation. I'll avoid saying that Chausson was wise to withdraw the work, but there's not much more to be extracted from these pieces on repeated hearings. Tan is correct, I believe, in attributing the Fantasies to the composer's formative compositional style. Clearly, as a student, he was experimenting with a variety of techniques in search of a distinctive voice of his own; this wasn't one of them.

With *Paysage* (Landscape) and *Quelques Danses* (A Few (or Some) Dances)—a title that tempts one to ask "How many?" or "Which ones in particular?"—we're on a bit more familiar ground—but not by much, for there appears to be at least one recording of *Paysage* and four or five of the *Danses*. Both works were included on a forementioned Doron recording performed by Michel Bourdoncle and reviewed by Martin Anderson in 18:5. Anderson described *Paysage* as "autumnal." It's an adjective often associated with Brahms's later works, and I'd agree that Chausson's "Landscape" paints a scene of falling leaves, loneliness, and a mood of nostalgia and introspection, but the musical ingredients that make up Chausson's piece, especially the harmony and rhythm, are not those one finds in any of Brahms's recipes. Still, as mood-setting music goes, *Paysage* is a very beautiful piece that casts its spell most effectively.

The answer to the above question about the *Quelques Danses* is four. There are four dances that make up Chausson's op. 26: *Dédicace* (Dedication)—is that a dance?—Sarabande, Pavane, and Forlane. To quote Martin Anderson once again, he uses the word "archaizing" to describe Chausson's four-movement dance suite, a term one often encounters in reference to Impressionist pieces that put an antique gloss on Baroque styles and forms, perhaps the best-known example of which is Ravel's *Le tombeau de Couperin*. Needless to say, Chausson could not have heard the Ravel when he composed his *Quelques Danses* in 1896, for Ravel's suite only came into being between 1914 and 1917, by which time Chausson had died.

In any case, I'm no choreographer, but if these four numbers be dances, I think that even Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers

would have had a hard time doing a two-step to any of them. These are highly stylized dances, much in the manner of Couperin's harpsichord suites. The two slow numbers, *Dédicace* and *Sarabande*, are of a rhythmic irregularity and complexity to throw even the prima ballerina off balance. And the faster *Pavane* and faster still *Forlane* would require a dancer with more than two feet.

In any case, *Quelques Danses* is among Chausson's late works, evincing his transitioning into a style that resembles in equal parts mid-to-later Fauré and early Debussy. Tragically, his life was cut short 1899 at the age of 44 in a freak bicycle accident. There's no doubt that had Chausson lived longer he would have metamorphosed into a full-fledged French Impressionist composer, along the lines of Debussy or perhaps even Roussel or Gabriel Pierné.

There were cross-currents and controversies swirling around at the time as to what actually constituted musical Impressionism and who should be credited with its early stirrings. Debussy was not necessarily the first. Ernest Fanelli (1860–1917) was a French composer during this transitional period whose works are often cited as being the precursors to Impressionism.

But the term has come to be applied to so many composers and such a diversity of styles that it has become almost meaningless. What stylistic traits are shared by Satie and Florent Schmitt? Yet they're both categorized as Impressionist composers. Chausson, on the other hand is not, though based on a not insignificant amount of his music, he was certainly headed in that direction.

Winner of the Grand Prize at the Concert Artists International Competition and the Best-Canadian work prize at the Vancouver International Music Competition, Barry has performed as soloist with the University of Victoria Symphony Orchestra, the Vancouver Philharmonic Orchestra, the Harmonia Chamber Orchestra, the University of Southern California Symphony Orchestra, and the Vancouver Metropolitan Orchestra. He currently serves as Assistant Professor of Music at Pepperdine University, Seaver College in Malibu, California.

Barry has collaborated with renowned artists such as Emanuel Ax, Leonidas Kavakos, Kiril Gerstein, Andris Nelsons, and Yo-Yo Ma. He has led masterclasses at prestigious universities. His own studies at the Schulich School of Music at McGill University under full scholarship, and at the University of Victoria where he was awarded the President's Scholarship and graduated with distinction, led to further training at the Salzburg Mozarteum and to earning his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Southern California.

Tan's list of activities and credits is a very long one, involving concerts, recitals, festival appearances in the U.S. and abroad, awards, grants, teaching, and recording for radio broadcasts. This, I believe, is his first commercial recording for the Italy-based Sheva label. For the *Sonata and Fantasies*, Tan plays a Bechstein in Italy; for the other half of the program, he plays a Steinway in Burbank, California.

If you don't buy another release this year, please do yourself a favor and buy this one. You will be repaid tenfold when you hear Chausson's *Piano Sonata*. Barry Tan has made it

Jerry Dubins

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