

## Abandon and Elevation: Luiza Borac Talks about Enescu's Piano Music

BY PETER J. RABINOWITZ

Slightly over two years ago, Avie released a widely praised recording of Enescu's Suites performed by Romanian pianist Luiza Borac. To mark the occasion, Martin Anderson interviewed the artist and some of her recording team (27:3; for reviews, see 27:3 and 28:3). Now Avie has followed up with a two-disc set containing Enescu's remaining piano works with opus numbers—the First and Third Sonatas (the Second was never written down)—filled out with four of his many other piano works that don't have opus numbers. And given the enthusiasm generated by the first release, *Fanfare* took the opportunity to engage Borac in conversation once again.

This has not, to say the least, been a quick and easy effort. Borac grew up with this music in her ears—it's often performed in Romania, even though it's largely unknown elsewhere. But she really wasn't ready to start playing it until she was in her 30s. "You need to grow up somehow to this music. Unless you pass a certain level of achievement, it's quite difficult." And even once she began studying the music in earnest, it took years before she was ready to record it. "I've spent a long time with the whole project, about four years with the Suites and the Sonatas. I needed all this time, because this is something I had to grow with: it's such great music, it's not easy to play. It takes a while to understand this way of writing and this way of composing, but it's a great reward if you do, actually, take the time and the work to do it." That's especially true with the later music: "The First Suite is quite an early work; the Second Suite again is a work of his youth. But the sonatas are different. The Sonatas are his mature works. They have his style and his language, his sound world.

"What struck me—and I think everybody who comes to study these works—is the way he writes the indications in the score. It's fascinating and amazing." His notations are detailed and complex, "and if you decide to do everything the way he indicates it in the score," there's not actually not much room for individual interpretation. "He writes everything very meticulously. It's amazing; I can only think that he had such a clear image in his mind that he wanted to help the interpreter. At first, it's a little bit scary to read the score. Then you discover that this is an enormous help in how to make it sound the way he heard it."

"Isn't this a kind of contradiction here?" I ask. "After all, when you listen to it, Enescu's music seems (in contrast to Webern's or Stravinsky's precisely notated scores) almost improvised."

"Yes," she replies, "I think this is the genius of it." For Enescu's precise makings in fact lead you to something that doesn't sound rigid at all. "Within one bar you might have several *senza rigore* and *a tempo* indications; he also gives indications that try to explore the imagination of the person who is playing, like *molto doloroso tranquillo*. If you don't do what he indicates, it won't sound . . . it won't get you anywhere. But if you go this very rigorous way, what comes out is the incredible abandon of his music, the elevation which this music creates. This is his very own special mark, so to speak."

I return to the difficulties of the music. Are they technical or emotional? "I think both. Technically, it is difficult. There are a lot of notes." More specifically, she points to the texture of the music. "He was a great admirer of Bach, he adored his music, and he played and conducted Bach all his life. As a result, the polyphony, which is going on all the time, is very rich.

“But this is not all; this is just a first level of achievement. To get to the heart of his music also takes time. It’s not just European, it’s not just Romanian, it has a universal language which you have to grow into. Although the Suite No. 1 and Suite No. 2 already exhibit his musical language, they were very strongly influenced by the music of Bach or by the music of his times, the music by his friends and colleagues, like Ravel, Fauré, and Massenet, with whom he studied. But starting with the Third Suite, he really developed his own style, which is also the style which he mastered in *Oedipe*, the opera on which he worked for many years.

Although the two Sonatas share an opus number, they were written years apart. “They are very different works, very much in contrast to each other. He composed the First Sonata while he was working on *Oedipe*; he wrote that he had to stop working on the opera because he had this Sonata simultaneously on his mind and he had to write it down. The First Sonata has many connections to *Oedipe*: there are many quotes from the opera, and there’s a dark and restless atmosphere, especially in the first movement, which is very tragic, very strange. But it is nevertheless beautiful, it’s a strange beauty. The Third is much happier, sort of joyful. He actually wrote in one of his letters that he was amazed he could write such happy music at a time when he didn’t feel at all like that. The first movement is reminiscent of Scarlatti, but it is very humorous; then there is a long second movement which is sort of contemplative; but while it’s very dreamy, it’s never sad or dark.” The third movement is “incredible,” a virtuoso closing, “very brilliant. We were talking about this during the recording: it almost breaks the technical possibilities of the instrument. The technical engineer was wondering whether the microphone could carry all of it.”

“The Third Sonata is also more Romanian in a way,” she says, but the Romanian folklore is not really “transcribed” from the folk sources; rather, as she puts it, the initial material is “spiritualized.” She continues: “But although there are works which bring this out more obviously than others, it’s to be found in all his works. For example, the last movement of the First Sonata, this *Andante molto espressivo*: it’s an astonishing work. He wrote that this is a Romanian field in the night, and personally I think this is his most wonderful music. In a way, it’s a continuation of the ‘Carillon nocturne’ from the Third Suite: it has the same evocation of the bells.” Formally, the character of this last movement gives the First Sonata as a whole an unusual shape: it’s as if he had “swapped” the last two movements. “It’s very amazing: you have the Allegro and the Presto second movement, and it ends with this *Andante molto espressivo*, which is very dreamlike, very haunting music. Actually, I don’t feel that it ends. We had long talks about how much space to allow between the Sonatas, because you don’t actually feel that this music is ending.” How much space will they leave? “As much as possible.”

Enescu is well remembered as one of the great violinists of the century; is there anything violinistic in his piano writing? “No, I didn’t find anything that could come from a violin player—which is amazing. It’s very pianistically written. The atmosphere which he creates has nothing to do with violin music, except when he quotes a folklore theme.” But perhaps it’s not as surprising as it first seems, for two reasons. First, although “he was an incredible violinist and conductor, and in demand, he saw himself, first of all, as a composer and was not happy that he had to earn his living with concerts.” In addition, “he was actually a great pianist, too. He accompanied a lot of recitals in Carnegie Hall, and he played his Sonatas in public himself, which is quite an achievement.”

As for the slighter works—well, it’s hard to call the 1907 Nocturne “slight” since, at 20 minutes, it’s the longest single movement on the set, nearly as long as whole the First Sonata; indeed, it is surely one of the most substantial Nocturnes ever written for the instrument. “It’s a

wonderful work, very romantic, but it's huge, right? I think it's a most amazing effect that he creates at the end of the B section, where he strikes almost all the keys of the piano *ffff* and then he says 'Leave everything sounding.' It was a very daring thing for that time, an incredible sound effect." Nor is the early Scherzo a breeze: "It's a very interesting piece, and very virtuosic. Quite difficult to play." Her disc also includes the *Piece sur le nom de Fauré*, "written for Fauré's 75th birthday. It's a short dreamlike piece on the melody of the name FAURE. The motive F(fa)-A(la)-U(ut, sol)-R(re, D) - E(mi) moves from one hand to the other and in various registers of the piano, like a golden thread within an impressionistic-colored soundworld." Finally, there's the Prelude and Fugue in C, "an impressive tribute to Bach." Borac points to "the serene atmosphere of the Prelude and a stunning display of his command of polyphony in the Fugue," but points out that for all in Bachian elements, the "work bears Enescu's own musical language, especially in the Prelude where he creates sonorities of strange beauty and a sense of endlessness." (...)

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