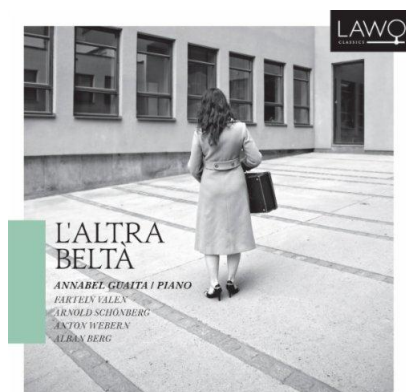


VALEN 4 Piano Pieces. Intermezzo. Preludes. Variations. SCHOENBERG 6 Little Piano Pieces, op. 19. Piano Piece, op. 23, No. 1. Piano Piece, op. 33a. BERG Piano Sonata. WEBERN Variations



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This disc is mostly about the Norwegian composer Fartein Valen (1887–1952). Its title stems from an interview with the composer: “To be moved by atonal music is to experience what Michelangelo called l’altra beltà, the other beauty.” Valen wrote in all classical forms except opera, but he rejected both conventional Romanticism and—after much study—Schoenberg’s dodecaphony. These piano pieces, written from 1934 to 1940, have links to everyone yet are beholden to none. They are polyphonic, dissonant, and often atonal, and yet they radiate warmth and elegance. If one looks for precedents, one can find hints of Scriabin, Hindemith, and certainly the Second Vienna School. Valen can hold his head high in present company, even the Berg sonata. Too small—from two to eight minutes in length—to be considered masterpieces, Valen’s pieces collectively demonstrate an individual oeuvre well worth cultivating, and their appeal continues to grow after half a dozen hearings.

Essential to Valen’s strong showing are the sympathetic performances by Norwegian pianist Annabel Guaita, a specialist in 20th-century music who is known here for her collaborations with George Crumb. She is not only comfortable with Valen’s music but deeply involved in it. Without ever appearing stressed, she brings beauty and color to music that is obviously difficult, revealing depths unexpected in such miniatures. Her approach warms Schoenberg’s drier writing as well, and glories in the Berg sonata. It does seem a bit at odds with Webern, but the sense of conviction she radiates suggests that perhaps we should rethink his music.

There is not a harsh note struck in this hour of dissonances, which is a tribute not only to Guaita’s technical prowess but to her musicianship. Brava! James H. North

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