

just bought the rights to release some recordings by Carlos Païta, the Argentinian conductor, whom I venerated, I really venerated. I met his son in Switzerland, and I now have the rights to recordings of some symphonies which have never been widely heard: Shostakovich's Eighth, and Mahler's Sixth and Second. I won't make any money from it, but I'm governed by conviction. I love music so much that it doesn't matter than it's going to cost me money.

It's the wine which pays for it, isn't it?

Exactly! It's the wine which helps me finance all that. I couldn't have done it 25 years ago. Thirty, 35 CDs: I pay for the recording, the editing, the pressing—I even pay my musicians; everyone gets a fee, even if they normally wouldn't. It's costly, but I am happy to do it, and so it doesn't really cost me after all. It's a passion, and I'll stand up for all my discs, every one. There's a story behind every one of them, and every time I release one, I'm sure it's going to turn the world of recordings on its head. It's pretentious, of course, but everything I do is animated by this mental energy, and if it doesn't do too well in the media, well, too bad, it's not so important—though it's better, of course, if it's well received.

So that's the story. Thanks to the *Statut des vins*, which has become very important [it certifies the quality of French wines—Ed.], and because of my profession, I can finance my musical passions without being held back by any media or financial considerations. I really do what I want to do, and I'm convinced that what I am doing is important for the history of recorded music.

JOACHIM HAVARD DE LA MONTAGNE *Les Complies. Office de Prime* • Joachim Havard de la Montagne, cond; Claire Louchet (sop); Danielle Michèle (alt); Jean-Louis Serre (bar); Philippe Brandeis (org); Ch et Ens Instrumental de la Madeleine • LE PALAIS DES DEGUSTATEURS 032 (66:00)

Le Palais des Dégustateurs (PDD) offers two sacred works by the French composer, organist, and conductor Joachim Havard de la Montagne (1927–2003). The recordings, conducted by the composer, were made in 1993 at the Paris L'église de la Madeleine. Born in Geneva, Montagne studied in Paris at the École César Franck. In his liner notes, Alexis Galpérine acknowledges various influences Montagne pursued both during studies and throughout his life. They include Gregorian chant, modal writing, and early music, as well as the works of such French composers as Fauré and Saint-Saëns. Montagne was music director of L'église de la Madeleine, where he founded the Choeurs et Ensemble Instrumental de la Madeleine (featured on this recording). Montagne also shared his musical gifts with the Paris Sainte-Marie des Batignolles and Sainte-Odile churches, and the Copernic synagogue. Montagne was a member of the Commission of Sacred Music of the Diocese of Paris, serving alongside Olivier Messiaen and Jean Langlais. He was also the general secretary of the Union des Maîtres de Chapelle, then led by Henri Büsser.

The PDD release features Montagne settings of night and morning prayer services, scored for vocal soloists, chorus, orchestra, and organ. The recording's liner notes offer no discussion of the two compositions (*Les Complies, Office de Prime*). Nor are there texts and translations. The musical influences I previously mentioned are evident in both works. Those who gravitate to the sacred compositions of Fauré, Duruflé, or for that matter John Rutter, will find themselves in familiar territory. If Montagne breaks no new ground, his music is unfailingly elegant, expressive, and ever respectful of the beautiful qualities inherent in his featured vocal and instrumental forces. The composer-led performances are heartfelt and most attractive, with a transparency and seamless blending of voices and orchestra. The 1993 recording presents a most pleasing balance of detail and a sense of the church's grand space. This is a lovely and enriching disc. **Ken Meltzer**

Tickling the Ivories with the Spina-Benignetti Piano Duo

BY JERRY DUBINS

Partners in marriage and music, Eleonora Spina and Michele Benignetti decided to make a go of it as a piano duo in 2013 and immediately met with critical acclaim. Within a year's time, word

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had spread and the couple found themselves winning international competitions and swamped with invitations from near and far to appear in concert. Among their many wins and awards have been a Gold Medal at the Manhattan International Music Competition in New York and at the Global Music Awards (USA). They also took prizes at numerous competitions dedicated to chamber music and piano duo performance, among which were the Pietro Argento Competition (Italy), London Piano Masters—Royal College of Music (UK), and in France both the Virtuoso Grand Prize Competition and Concours Musical de France.

By 2019, they had toured China, France, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. They became recording artists—their album, *Lifetime*, garnered gold medals at the 2017 Global Music Awards for both Best Album and Best Emerging Artists—and before that (2015) their recording for Brilliant Classics of the complete works for two pianos by Brahms received a good deal of critical praise and press attention. The album was reviewed in *Fanfare* 39:3, and when you’ve made it into the pages of *Fanfare*, you know you’ve arrived. Since 2017, Eleonora Spina and Michele Benignetti have been official Yamaha Artists.

Your most recent release is a recording of four hand piano works by Schubert. Let me amend that. Two of the three works were originally composed by Schubert for piano four hands. The remaining work, a very famous one, the “Trout” Quintet, is by Schubert, but is performed by the two of you in a transcription by Hugo Ulrich. I was surprised to learn—though I guess I shouldn’t have been, that Ulrich—who was born a year before Schubert died—made quite a name for him himself transcribing chamber and orchestral works for piano four hands, for which there was much demand in the 19th century. Eleonora, let me start with you. Perhaps you could tell us some more about Ulrich and his transcription of the “Trout.”

Eleonora Spina: Hugo Ulrich was a very prolific composer, one of the most appreciated of his generation. He made his fortune working for Peters Publishing, realizing a lot of transcriptions of orchestral and chamber music works. It’s quite interesting to have a look into his process of adapting the original score for a piano duet rendition, like in this case. As we both performed, several times, the original version of the “Trout” Quintet, we knew that the challenge of presenting this transcription for piano duet was very tough, but at the same time we were fascinated by the idea of exploring our capacity of creating a variety of sounds, articulations, and phrasings, with a focus on the balance between voices and registers, trying to reproduce the beauty of the original version with strings. In the constant search of a greater loyalty to the original, we added a few parts and elements to enrich the piano duet texture. Those parts are inexplicably missing in Ulrich’s transcription. At the end of the day, it’s a very virtuosic piece that brings out the best of our piano duo.

This one’s for Michele. I mentioned that I was a bit surprised to learn that Ulrich’s transcription dates all the way back to the latter half of the 19th century. I guess that’s because I would have thought that a transcription of a work like Schubert’s “Trout” Quintet would have been commissioned by you from an arranger alive today. But then I realized what a lucrative business such transcriptions and arrangements were back then. In doing my homework for your album, I even discovered that another transcription of the “Trout” exists by Czerny. Can you speak at greater length about the demand for these four hand piano works during the 19th century and their importance as a means of familiarizing the growing affluent middle class with the chamber music and orchestral works that were not originally conceived by their composers for piano four hands?

Michele Benignetti: Yes, you are perfectly right: There is another transcription of the “Trout” Quintet made by Carl Czerny. I think there are a few recordings of this version. I might say that Czerny’s work is a little less accurate than Ulrich’s transcription. As Eleonora said, Ulrich was extremely prolific in transcribing chamber music and orchestral works. I’m referring to his transcriptions of Beethoven’s strings quartets and Haydn’s symphonies, for example. His works have been extremely important in order to familiarize people with orchestral and chamber works in “live” performances they might otherwise not have been able to hear. For music lovers, it was absolutely a treat to play those works in a piano four hand version, especially at the time of salon music in Europe.

I think those transcriptions were absolutely important in the history of the art of piano duo playing. Little by little, composers started to write piano four hands or two-piano versions of their pieces,

developing the repertoire and the importance of this particular form of chamber music. I'm thinking of Franz Liszt, for example, who wrote the symphonic poem *Les préludes* for orchestra, of course, but then also for two pianos and piano four hands. Or Ravel's *La valse*, written for orchestra, and at the same time for two pianos and, by his great friend Lucien Garban, for piano four hands.

And then, a third major step in the process of evolution of the art of piano duo playing occurred: great composers started composing their own transcriptions of monumental orchestral works, improving the writing. For example, Hans von Bülow wrote an amazing transcription of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* Overture. We are really fascinated by this process and those works and we will dedicate our next album, scheduled to be recorded this December, to piano four hand transcriptions, presenting works by Liszt, Wagner, and Ravel.

For all of that, I think the work of Ulrich has been so important, not only in a divulgative way but also because his work has certainly improved the art of the piano duo, giving a new impulse and a new energy to this particular form of chamber music.

When it comes to Schubert, his F-Minor Fantasy looms large in the repertoire of works for piano four hands. It may even be the most important and greatest work of its genre. Like a number of his late works, though, it seems to have a very dark side to it, a feeling I sensed that you picked up on in your recording. Can each of you offer your thoughts on the piece? From Mozart to Messiaen, Bizet to Boulez, Dussek to Debussy, Czerny to César Cui—and the list goes on—the repertoire is inexhaustible, and those are just a very few of the works originally composed for piano duo; it doesn't even begin to cover the even larger landscape of transcriptions and arrangements.

MB: Schubert wrote a lot of pieces for piano four hands—amazing pieces. I think he was the greatest composer for piano four hands of the 19th century, especially because his pieces were so meaningful and deeply moving, and extremely well written. The Fantasia is certainly one of the most well-known works in the history of music. And because of that, it was extremely hard to take the decision of recording it. There are so many great recordings of this work.

We studied the score deeply when we were students in Graz and Maastricht. And we played it often during our concerts. We were interested in pointing out the sadness of this work.

Schubert was in a very dark moment of his life. His illness was sapping his strength, and he had so many other worries, including financial debts, to drag him down. This Fantasia was his tentative way transcending his own condition and his physical and intimate pain. He was in a fight—a futile one, tragically, for his life.

ES: On a technical level, there are a lot of influences in this piece—Rossini and Paganini, for example. Schubert's admiration for Rossini's operatic genius marks the composition, especially the second movement, *Largo*, where his love for the Italian style is most obvious. At that time, Schubert attended one of Paganini's concerts when the Italian virtuoso was playing the *Adagio* from his Violin Concerto No. 2. Schubert was fascinated by the sublime, angelic chant and the counterpoint he heard in the piece. One finds those elements echoed in the Scherzo and Finale of the Fantasia.

Before moving on, is there anything else you'd like us to know about your new Schubert album?

MB: I would like to mention the beauty of the Eight Variations, D 813, that Schubert wrote together with the Grand Duo Sonata, D 812, during a happier time in his life. The Variations is such a virtuosic piece, but as always in Schubert's music, the work strikes a perfect balance between the purity of its melody, its virtuosity, and its lightness and poetry. Its richness of harmonic invention surprises the listener.

I might have missed it, but as far as I can tell, your award-winning Lifetime album didn't make it to us here at Fanfare for review. So, tell me about it, starting with what's on it.

MB: *Lifetime* was recorded in 2017 for Sheva Collection (a UK label) and contained Mozart's Fantasia, K 608, for piano four hands; Rachmaninoff's *Fantaisie Tableaux*, op. 5, for two pianos; and Barber's Suite, op. 28, "Ballet Suite." It's a beautiful program with a great variety of composing styles. It has been an important album in our musical journey, because Rachmaninoff's First Suite was the first piece we ever studied together as a duo. This piece is sublime and we love the music of Rachmaninoff. We did a lot of work for this album and we are so happy that this recording received some very good awards.

In addition to Lifetime, your Brahms album, and now your most recent Schubert album, have you made any other commercial recordings?

ES: Yes, in 2021, we recorded the album, *Visions* for Sheva Collection. It contains marvelous works. First is a piano four-hands sonata by Mussorgsky, a piece he wrote when he was very young. It's a lot of fun to play and hopefully very interesting to listen to. Then we have César Franck's *Prélude, Fugue, and Variation, op. 18*, transcribed for piano four hands by Abel Marie Decaux. This piece is probably more familiar in the piano solo transcription by Bauer or Friedman. The Decaux is an absolutely premiere recording of this version for piano duet—it's an extremely interesting discovery. The third piece is Rachmaninoff's *Six Morceaux, op. 11*, for piano four hands. Like the Mussorgsky, this too is a piece from the composer's youth, but it already contains many elements that are important in Rachmaninoff's music. We love to combine this piece with the *First Suite* for two pianos in our recitals. There are so many connections between those works. To complete the album, we have Poulenc's *Sonata for Piano Four Hands, FP 8*, a sparkling piece with lots of energy. It, too, was originally an early work, composed in 1918, but was revised by Poulenc over 20 years later in 1939 and published by Stravinsky's editor in London, Chester.

For a professional piano duo, such as yourselves, there's more repertoire out there than you can cover in a lifetime—pardon the pun. There are original works composed for the medium, transcriptions made by composers of their own works, and of course, transcriptions made by someone other than the composer who wrote the original work. An amusing thought occurred to me. Since the two of you are a married couple, I wondered if half of the keyboard on your piano is monogramed "his" and the other half "hers." But that actually led me to a more serious query. Obviously, there's a notable difference between your Schubert and Brahms albums. The Schubert is for a piano duo performing on a single instrument, what we refer to as piano four hands. But the Brahms works are for four hands as well, only they're scored for two pianos. How are they different in terms of technical issues, such as coordination between the two players?

MB: I think that playing four hands on the same keyboard is one of the finest forms of chamber music and one of the most difficult. The physical element is really present. The space can be an issue, and pedaling is also a very demanding part. Playing really together, creating a beautiful sound, needs a lot of practicing and a total dedication. Piano four hands is an intimate process. For this reason, I feel that the Schubert album has been a long and important project that absorbed a lot of our energies, with a lot of preparations and studying, especially for the "Trout" Quintet.

We feel that playing two pianos actually is much easier, once you've explored the piano four hands. It's more pianistic in a very strict sense. We were really young when we recorded the Brahms album and we remember vividly how we felt the responsibility to approach those monumental works (*Sonata op. 34b*, and "Haydn" *Variations op. 56b*) for a discography project.

We used to play those two works a lot in our concerts, and the recording was a logical outcome. When you play works for two pianos you can feel the power and the emotions that you might experience playing some piano concerto. We love playing both combinations, and we think especially for the audience it's really interesting to have both versions of the piano duo playing.

In light of what you just said about how, when playing works for two pianos you can feel the power and emotions you might experience playing some piano concerto, might you and Eleonora consider at some point joining forces with an orchestra to perform the double concertos by Bach, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Bruch, Poulenc, and others?

MB: We have in our repertoire all of the concertos for two pianos and orchestra, and also the very few concertos for piano four hands and orchestra (Czerny and Kozeluch). We think that playing with an orchestra is definitely one of the greatest experiences for a pianist. We've already had a few experiences in the past, mainly as individual soloists. Speaking about future projects, we are looking forward to the upcoming concert seasons to perform concertos for two pianos with major orchestras in South Africa and in Europe. Plans are underway.

I understand that in addition to your busy concert schedule, you're also both professors who are teaching now in France at the Cité de la Musique et de la Danse in Soissons, and that you have led masterclasses in Italy and China, at the Summer International Academy of Colombes in Paris,

at the Summer Music Academy of Flaine (France), at Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music in Melbourne, and at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. It sounds positively dizzying. Who are the students that come to you? Where are they from, and at what level of advancement are they?

ES: At the Cité de la Musique et de la Danse in Soissons, where we have our professorship, we teach piano students. We are really passionate about teaching. It's very interesting because we work with children who are starting their musical journey. We bring them up to a professional level. It's a privilege having the chance of shaping young minds, of trying to develop their potential and create new opportunities for them.

We are very often invited to give masterclasses of Piano and Piano Duo in some of the most important universities around the world—for example, Conservatorio Nacional and UNAM in Mexico, University of Pretoria and, as you mentioned, Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music in Melbourne and at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. This is a fantastic opportunity to meet students, most of them already on a professional level, coming from different musical lineages, and to share our experiences and ideas with them. Michele is currently teaching also at the Conservatorium of Music “Franco Vittadini” in Pavia.

This is a very crucial part of our life. Teaching is such an important mission especially nowadays. The fact that we combine the artistic and performing activity with our teaching positions I feel is something really essential for students in order to inspire them, providing them with an example.

What are your near-term and long-range career and recording plans? What might we expect and look forward to from you?

MB and ES: We just finished performing in Mexico, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. We've been there since last October. There is a vibrant music life in Mexico and we also were happy to collaborate with great musical institutions such as the UNAM Faculty of Music, Conservatorio Nacional, and Universidad de Costa Rica.

In December, as we mentioned before, we will record our new album, *Transcriptions*, for piano four hands. In 2024, we will perform in Europe, playing our beloved Brahms Sonata for Two Pianos, and, of course, pieces from our upcoming album. We are supposed to be coming back to Australia in October 2024 with many recitals, masterclasses, and interesting collaborations across the country. Other projects are under development. It will be nice to have some projects in North America one day, but at the moment we don't have any plans for that yet.

↓ **SCHUBERT** (transcr. Ulrich) **Piano Quintet in A**, D 667, “Trout”. **8 Variations on an Original Theme in Ab**, D 813. **Fantasia in f**, D 940 • Michele Benignetti, Eleonora Spina (pn) • ULYSSES ARTS 220030 (80:06) Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

The Spina-Benignetti Piano Duo—Eleonora Spina and Michele Benignetti—has received prior notice in *Fanfare* 39:3 for an album of four-hand piano works by Brahms. For those works, the arranger and the composer were one and the same. Here, in contrast, one of the works, Schubert's ever-popular and beloved “Trout” Quintet, is heard in a four-hand piano transcription, not by the Quintet's composer but by Hugo Ulrich. It's not as you might surmise, however, a recent effort undertaken on behalf of the Spina-Benignetti Duo. To the contrary, Ulrich (1827–1872), who was born just one year before Schubert's death, and who lived to be only 45 himself, was not just an arranger of countless orchestral and chamber works for piano four hands—for which there was a voracious and highly lucrative market throughout the 19th century—but also a composer who was highly regarded by his contemporaries. As far as I've been able to ascertain, none of Ulrich's own original compositions, including a Symphony in B Minor from 1852, has been recorded, but a number of his four-hand piano transcriptions, including the present one of Schubert's “Trout” Quintet, have been. Nor was Ulrich the only one to cash in on the demand for four-hand arrangements. There is another recording of Schubert's “Trout” Quintet in a four-hand piano transcription by Czerny, performed by Caroline Clemmow and Anthony Goldstone. It would be interesting to compare the Czerny and Ulrich “Trout” transcriptions if I had the Clemmow/Goldstone recording, but alas, I don't.

Now, I cannot say in all good conscience that I would ever find a piano transcription of Schubert's “Trout” Quintet a satisfying substitute for the work's original scoring, which I've taken enormous plea-

sure in not only as a listener but as a player. But I'm cognizant of the times and purpose for which such transcriptions were produced. There were no recordings to listen to in the 1800s and no classical music radio stations broadcasting "live" performances—in fact, no radio, no TV, no phones, no computers, and, indeed, no electricity. The letter and spirit of the Schubertiades were kept alive by talented amateur musicians who got their hands on published musical works and spent evenings making music in gas or candlelit parlors for small gatherings of family members and close friends.

Duo piano arrangements of chamber and even orchestral works played a central role in these musical get-togethers, for few parlors in the homes of those talented amateurs and music lovers were without a piano. You might not be able to afford the latest model horse-drawn carriage, but a piano was evidence that you had made it into the ranks of the new and growing affluent middle class. Have you ever wondered where they all went, all of those thousands upon thousands of pianos? I remember my maternal grandmother had a big, heavy upright piano in her living room. No one played it. It was just a piece of furniture that gathered dust. I have no idea what happened to it after she passed away. Is there a piano graveyard somewhere, where they can be heard duetting their sad lays as they rust and molder away?

Ulrich's "Trout" is exactly what it purports to be, a transcription, not an arrangement, which is to say that to the best of my hearing, it preserves the integrity of Schubert's original scoring for violin, viola, cello, double bass, and piano. Nothing is added or subtracted. The duo piano team of Spina and Benignetti are equally respectful of the score, coordinating their interlocking parts in a way that achieves optimum balance between the voices. I would only say that their tempos strike me as being a bit on the brisker side of what I'm used to, but that may have been an accommodation to the piano's lesser ability than the original string instruments to sustain the lyrical line.

The other two works on this disc were not in need of anyone to transcribe them, for they were composed by Schubert, as is, for piano four hands. In the discographic ledger of Schubert's works, a piece with only 20 or so outings on disc could be considered a rarity. Yet that is the case for the composer's Eight Variations in A \flat Major on an Original Theme, D 813. Quite possibly its best-known recording is the 2014 "live" one from Berlin, performed by Martha Argerich and Daniel Barenboim, though personally I prefer an earlier recording I have of the piece with Barenboim and Radu Lupu, the latter a pianist whose Schubert I've always found to be especially sensitive and insightful.

The Variations is no mere bagatelle. It's jampacked with lots of "learned" contrapuntal devices and Schubert's imaginative harmonic twists and turns. But the march theme on which the piece is based is rather prosaic and a bit flimsy to support the weight of eight hefty variations that go on for 18 minutes. As is often the case with Schubert, he didn't know how or when to stop. Spina and Benignetti make a real showpiece of the fast-paced variations, but it's not their fault that the piece bogs down in the slow movements. When it's all said and done, I think that the comparatively few recordings of D 813 are testament to the fact that this is second-drawer Schubert.

Definitely top-drawer is what follows. Alongside the final three piano sonatas, the Fantasia in F Minor, D 940, is one of Schubert's authentic masterpieces, and in the genre of piano music for four hands, without question, his greatest work. In 9:4, John Ditsky reviewed from LP what, in his opinion, was then the *ne plus ultra* recording of the Fantasia. The players were Radu Lupu and Murray Perahia. John Wiser seconded Ditsky's opinion in 10:2, choosing the disc, by then a CD, for his 1986 Want List. That recording, on CD, has been on my shelf at least since then, and I have never found another one to better it.

To say that in Eleonora Spina and Michele Benignetti I've at last found a performance to better the Lupu and Perahia would be like uttering a sacrilege, so I won't say it. Instead, I'll say that while Spina-Benignetti aren't better, they're different, and in ways I find very satisfying. Theirs is a reading that tends to externalize rather than internalize the intense emotional turmoil, fear, denial, anger, and grief Schubert must have experienced during that last year of his short life, once he faced the fact that the death sentence he was living under was immutable.

The F-Minor Fantasia mirrors in form the *Wanderer Fantasy*, composed in the same fateful year. Essentially, it's a single, continuous movement that feels like a freeform fantasy in an uneasy alliance with elements of a four-movement sonata form. But no sonata form of the period would un-

dermine the tonal structure the way the Fantasia does. The opening movement, in which the main theme that dominates the entire work, vacillates between F Minor and F Major, is not entirely unlike the theme that ushers in the finale of Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata.

But then, for the Largo that follows, Schubert turns to the distant key of F# Minor, one half step above the tonic key of the work's main theme and abiding tonality. The harmonic stress is palpable. Once again, as in that other work from 1828, the String Quintet, which I've discussed previously in detail, Schubert sabotages the tonic with the key one half-step above it. It's a brutal act of assault.

Turn then to the final page of the Fantasia. It will end in F Minor, but not before a violent eruption of chords in bar 567, three bars before the end, that rends the harmony from its moorings and rips the music asunder. Spina and Benignetti don't downplay the rage and fury of it. Lupu and Perahia don't exactly smooth it over either, but their vision of the work feels more forgiving and a little less end-of-days. Spina and Benignetti's reading strikes me as damning and dooming. The final cadence is not the expected V-I (dominant to tonic), but IV-I, the so-called "Amen," plagal cadence, but with an unusual major sixth added to the minor-key IV triad: Bb-Db-F + G. If the G were taken as the root of the chord—G-Bb-Db-F—you'd have the normally occurring diminished triad in a minor key on II but with an added minor seventh, a II₇ chord. This alternative analysis could be seen as an example of Schubert's bent for cadential resolutions that substitute progressions from II (the supertonic) to I for the more common V-I or IV-I.

In either of the above cases, it's not a conclusion that ends in peaceful acceptance and thanksgiving. It casts a tragic pall over the piece, which the Spina-Benignetti's players make palpable. It's a mood I find entirely in keeping with Schubert's physical, mental, and emotional condition in that last year of his life, as he turned out one masterpiece after another over the course of those final days and weeks.

I can't say that the absence from your library of Ulrich's transcription of the "Trout" Quintet is a hole that needs to be filled. Let's be honest: There was a time when such four-hand transcriptions served a purpose, but that time is long gone. Nor would you be shamed and shunned for not owning a recording of Schubert's Eight Variations on an Original Theme. As well played by the Spina-Benignetti Duo as these two works are, it's my personal opinion that they're not essential. The *Fantasia*, however, is, and this performance of it by Eleonora Spina and Michele Benignetti is indispensable. Therefore, it's deserving of the highest recommendation. **Jerry Dubins**

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From Ulysses Arts comes a recital of music for piano four hands, performed by the Spina-Benignetti Piano Duo (Eleonora Spina and Michele Benignetti). The recording opens with the "Trout" Quintet (1819), as arranged by Hugo Ulrich (1827–1872). Two original piano four hands compositions follow: Schubert's Eight Variations on an Original Theme in A_b (1824), and his Fantasia in F Minor (1828). Schubert composed his "Trout" Quintet in response to a request by Sylvester Paumgartner, a wealthy businessman and amateur cellist who lived in Steyr. Paumgartner made two specific requests to Schubert: that the scoring of his new work replicate Johann Nepomuk Hummel's 1802 Piano Quintet (piano, violin, viola, cello, double-bass), and that the piece include a theme and variations movement based upon Schubert's song *Die Forelle* (The Trout), D 550 (1817). Schubert agreed, and one of the most beloved works in the chamber repertoire was born.

Arrangements like Ulrich's allowed those who didn't have access to five expert instrumentalists the welcome possibility to hear (and perform) Schubert's delightful music. But a recording of the arrangement is subject to different criteria. Schubert composed this work with a specific combination of instruments and resulting sound world in mind. Ulrich's arrangement is attentive to, and respectful of, Schubert's original creation. And the Spina-Benignetti Duo's account of the Schubert/Ulrich "Trout" is fleet, keenly and elegantly articulated, and immersed in the work's lyrical riches. Nonetheless, the charm of Schubert's sonic world is greatly compromised. What is airy and transparent and colorful in the original becomes monochromatic and earthbound in Ulrich's arrangement. There are many superb recorded accounts of the "Trout" Quintet as Schubert conceived it. This recording of the Ulrich arrangement, for all the musicians' admirable efforts on its behalf, must be

relegated to the status of a curiosity.

No such reservations attend the remainder of this program. Spina and Benignetti provide a winning account of the Eight Variations on an Original Theme. Once again, the performers' sharply-honed synchronicity and elegant articulation and phrasing yield great dividends. And the Spina-Benignetti Duo adroitly fashions the unfolding of the performance so that each variation both shines individually, and is a natural outgrowth of what preceded it. Like many of the masterworks of Schubert's final years, the Fantasia in F Minor explores a myriad of contrasting emotions. Loneliness and desolation often play a central role in these compositions, as in the Fantasia's opening measures, whose melodic profile and key of F Minor parallel Barbarina's brief cavatina "L'ho perduta" that opens the final act of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*. The Spina-Benignetti Duo offers a rapt and moving account of the Fantasia. The artists embody Schubert's stern evocation of the Baroque in the slow-tempo episode. The Fantasia's scherzo and trio section teem with energy. The final portion's grand fugue is expertly sculpted and articulated, resolving to a heartbreaking, *sotto voce* reprise of the work's opening. This is a worthy performance of a late Schubert masterwork, and overall a fine recital, most certainly worthy of consideration. Access to the recording is available at: spinabennetti.com. **Ken Meltzer**

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Eleonora Spina and Michele Benignetti began their musical partnership in 2013. They have made some highly regarded discs, including a Brahms Piano Sonata No. 2 and Haydn Variations that I enjoyed (Brilliant 94956, Jan/Feb 2016, *Fanfare* 39:3). A recent disc entitled *Visions* has the two pianists at one piano for Rachmaninoff, Mussorgsky, Poulenc, and a rare version of a Franck organ work (Sheva 277). Their training was in the Netherlands, Austria, and France, where they currently make their home.

There is not a more important or prolific composer of piano duet music than Schubert. Mozart made the first significant contributions of original music written for two pianists at one piano. Brahms also wrote a lot for the medium—many great original works, and a large number of transcriptions of his chamber and symphonic music. Had Schubert lived a longer life, he might also have taken to arranging some of his music for piano duet, but he was so full of original ideas that we can only be grateful for all of the duets he was able set down on paper. While duet music is most always written for performance in a small environment like a drawing room, I am looking forward to Uchida and Biss on the main stage next spring at Carnegie Hall playing an all-Schubert duet recital.

The Fantasia in F Minor is universally ranked among Schubert's best works. The Variations on an Original Theme is also a substantial, superb work that has a rather plain theme with quite inventive variations. Spina and Benignetti's playing offers performances here that rank up there with the luminaries like Badura-Skoda and Demus. Their ensemble, especially in the ever-present dotted rhythms, is truly as one. These two pieces would be reason enough to get this disc. Another, even more compelling one is the world premiere recording of the "Trout" Quintet as arranged for piano duet. It is both a well-known masterpiece and an arrangement that sounds quite natural in a convincing duet performance.

Hugo Ulrich (1827–1872) is the arranger of the "Trout." His score was first published by Peters c. 1870. He made over 235 transcriptions for piano and piano duet, including most of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven symphonies and quartets. Many of these are available online at IMSLP.org. I cannot conceive of just copying out all of his transcriptions, let alone creating all of the arrangements from full scores. In days before IMSLP and other sources, where so much is readily available on line, I remember the work it took me to make a piano reduction of one scene from a Strauss opera for which I only had a library copy of the full score.

Spina and Benignetti readily admit to touching up Ulrich's arrangement here and there. I have done the same when preparing to play duet versions of orchestral repertoire in concert. Most of these arrangements are done for practical purposes and have given many pianists the chance to learn great music. They are not typically designed as concert pieces. Once the decision is made to add a major work to your duet repertoire, the original full score is likely to be a constant reference. That this recording sounds so well with four hands at one piano is a testament to the pianists. This is a

Schubert piano duet recital to enjoy over and over. The recorded sound is bit distant, but I am used to hearing piano duets from a performer's perspective. The excellent program notes by Benignetti complete the package. **James Harrington**

Playing the Unheard: An Interview with Brian Thornton

BY MARC MEDWIN

If cellist Brian Thornton's career, nearing three decades, exemplifies anything, it involves that often nebulous but vital place where music intersects with social issues. There is no question about the Cleveland Orchestra cellist's immersion in what might be labeled as the Western European canon. He teaches, he performs internationally, and his list of premiers is long and impressive. To understand his dedication to tradition, simply listen to his trio of discs for Steinway and Sons to hear his ravishing tone and air-tight grasp of form in chamber music of Brahms and Debussy. However, his versatility and passion go way beyond any prescribed traditions, not to mention transcending both warhorses and platitudes. Broadly speaking, his engagement encompasses issues relating to disability, physical and mental health, gender, sexuality, and race. The Denver native's formative experience with his teacher, the concentration camp survivor Lev Aronson, whom Thornton met upon moving to Dallas, proved pivotal to his activism, a connection he makes in the email interview he was so gracious to grant. Indeed, Thornton founded the Aronson Cello Festival, its 2022 iteration just having taken place at the Cleveland Institute of Music at this writing. While our focus during the interview is primarily, and understandably, on *Sirventès*, Thornton's new disc for New Focus of music by Iranian women composers, the ways in which his various interests connect to this most recent compendium are clear and compelling.

Reflecting on my exchange with Brian Thornton, I kept returning to that space in which music and those forces attendant to it coexist. In many ways, *Sirventès*, and the musical concerns it embodies, is symptomatic of our turbulent times. Fortunately, individual voices are now not only being heard with increasing frequency but also in the context of the issues they raise, which have traditionally remained disturbingly tacet if addressed at all. What is so refreshing about conversing with Thornton is that he seems remarkably secure as a kind of conduit. I'm reminded of interviews with legendary saxophonist John Coltrane, in which the veteran performer speaks of music as a reservoir into which we all dip, a kind of communal fount of wisdom and experience continually replenished by the sharing of ideas in a space nourished by them. Whether he's addressing the musicianship of his collaborators or his interactions with the composers chosen for this new and vital recorded offering, Thornton willingly subjects his own aspirations to those in his immediate environment and, by proxy, to intersecting communities forming a larger dialogue. In achieving this, in tandem with his superb musicianship, he shares in that most elusive and important accomplishment he attributes to Lev Aronson on the Aronson Cello Festival homepage. In illuminating hitherto underexplored corners of the literature, he turns darkness into light.

I want to thank you very much, first of all, for taking the time out of what is obviously a very busy schedule to have this conversation with me! Your new disc, Sirventès, highlights works by the Iranian Female Composers Association. I'm certain that Fanfare readers would be curious to know how you decided on this project's theme and substance.

In 2017, I read about the Iranian Female Composers Association (hereafter ICFA) in a *New York Times* article and was deeply inspired by the lengths to which they had to go even to have their art heard and experienced. These words continued to resonate long after I finished reading: “[composer and IFCA co-founder] Niloufar Nourbakhsh had the general feeling of ‘growing up in a country that actively veils women’s presence through compulsory hijab or banning solo female singers from pursuing a professional career.’” In my career as a classical musician, my work most often amplifies voices of white, male composers, many of whom have been dead for many years. Thinking about