

These are not the most familiar works in the violin sonata literature, and Nielsen's work catalog, in particular, can be confusing due to the three different numbering systems applied to his compositions. Since the release at hand gives both the opus and FS numbers, I've taken the liberty in the above headnote of correcting what appears to be a misprint in the album's table of contents for the Violin Sonata No. 2, which gives the correct opus number as 35 but the incorrect FS number as 34. It should be, and is, FS 64. The two sonatas were respectively composed in 1895 and 1912, when Nielsen was 30 and 47.

Nielsen's A-Major Sonata, FS 20 (aka op. 9) was officially published as No. 1, but as we learned from a 44:6 review by Andrew Desiderio of a Naxos CD containing all of the composer's music for violin and piano on a single disc of over 88 minutes, Nielsen composed more for the two instruments than is generally known, including an earlier Sonata in G Major, dating from 1881–82. The violin, after all, was Nielsen's instrument. His sonata that ended up being designated No. 1—the first of the two we have here—didn't fall on very receptive ears at its premiere. The calendar still had five years to go before it ushered in the 20th century, but Nielsen seems to have arrived there ahead of schedule. As Edition Silvertrust puts it, "For the time, it was considered quite modern because of its then shocking tonalities and abrupt changes of subject.

A case in point is the searching and powerful first movement, *Allegro glorioso*, which begins in A Major and within two measures suddenly moves into E Minor." I would add that Nielsen also engages in a good deal of rhythmic complexity, with the violin and piano often seeming at odds with each other as to the meter and placement of the bar lines. At its core, however, beats the heart of a young, energetic Romantic spirit filled with the promise of a fulfilling future before him. I don't know how anyone could find the first movement's secondary theme anything but rapturously beautiful, especially as played here by Mihaela Oprea. The prayerful second movement is moving enough to make the angels weep, but the prayer does become more urgent and even demanding—as in "you will" as opposed to "will you?"—as the movement proceeds. A toccata-like rhythm in the piano pervades the finale, while over it the violin part seems to want to engage it in a more smoothly spun lyrical dialogue. Incompatible as the two may sometimes seem, they do actually partner and complement each other in an exuberant, if somewhat askew, dance, confirming that opposites do attract. In their performance, Oprea and Bahr are as celebrants at the joining in joyous matrimony of this odd couple.

Nielsen's Second Violin Sonata wasn't greeted with any more enthusiasm than his first. In terms of its harmonic vocabulary and devices—i.e., chord structures, progressions, dissonance, and ambiguity of tonality—the piece isn't really that much more daring than the earlier sonata or for its time. Yet, Nielsen's techniques are now put in service to a new and different style, one that's suggested by the odd tempo marking of the first movement, *Allegro con tiepidezza*, a word that translates as "tepid" or "lukewarm." It's amusing to think that a composer, other than Erik Satie, would instruct his players to adopt a manner and tone resembling that of milquetoast, but it turns out that Nielsen's directive, at least in part, is misleading, for the movement veers wildly and repeatedly between highly agitated passages and contrasting furtive passages that seem to want to steal away and hide in shame from the angry outbursts, as if they didn't really mean it and they're sorry. In the end, the anger is mollified, and the movement ends in a well-tempered tepidness. Chris Morrison, writing for *allmusic.com*, quotes composer Robert Simpson who described the sonata's second movement as "in character heroic and tender by turns." The finale begins as a waltz in blue, which is to say that it's tinged with a melancholy that takes on an almost surreal quality as it progresses. It rises to impassioned heights mid-movement, and eventually just peters out with the piano playing a passage of rapidly repeating bass notes that begins forte and gradually diminuendos to a fade-out and silence.

Nielsen's Sonata No. 2 was composed in Denmark in 1912 at the same time that Debussy was working on Book 2 of his *Préludes* for Piano in Paris, Stravinsky was about to shake the musical world to its foundations with *The Rite of Spring*, and the same year in Berlin, Schoenberg's signature Expressionist piece, *Pierrot lunaire*, received its first performance. Whether Nielsen was aware of the developments taking place in continental Europe at the time, I don't know, but I mention this because the music of his Second Violin Sonata is not quite like anything else I can think of from this period. It's as if he was forging his own individual style independent of the many other voices in the vanguard of 20th-century music. I won't pretend that Nielsen's sonatas are easy listening. Clearly, they're not written in a style designed for mass consumption and public appeal, as are the composer's quite popular symphonies, but if the sonatas are ever to become mainstays of the mainstream repertoire, Mihaela Oprea and Jakob Alsgaard Bahr have made a giant stride towards that goal with these exceptionally probing, illuminating, and beautiful performances.

George Enescu's Violin Sonata No. 3 (1926) has fared much better in the popularity contest than either of Nielsen's sonatas. The tagline to the piece says why: *dans le caractère populaire roumain* (in Romanian Folk Style). It's a *modus operandi* Enescu cultivated to notable effect—and success, I might add—in his much earlier and not quite as tart and tangy *Romanian Rhapsodies* of 1901. Now, in the sonata, Enescu's musical vocabulary is no longer as well-mannered and urbane. It strikes me as closer to that of Bartók and to the unvarnished, uncensored speech of the sturdy, if unwashed, rural Romanian farmers, peasants, and Gypsies. All of which is to say that there are some pretty ear-curling dissonances and sour harmonies.

That notwithstanding, the piece enjoys considerable popularity and a star-studded history of recordings: Enescu himself, twice, once with Dinu Lipatti; Menuhin, twice, both times with his sister, Hephzibah; Rafael Druian, Christian Ferras, Ida Haendel, and Isaac Stern. Most of them date back to the LP age, and some even further back to the age of 78s. But more recent violinists—Lorenzo Gatto and Philippe Graffin, for example—have kept Enescu's Third Sonata before the public. Critical consensus has favored Stern's very personal, palpable way with the piece above all others. I have his mid-1990s Sony recording with Alexander Zakin, and I get the appeal it has. Still, not taking anything away from it, I find the current performance by Oprea and Bahr to have a frisson about it that draws me into its ethnic soul, which strikes me as having much in common with the music I associate with the Eastern European shtetls.

Carl Nielsen and George Enescu were not fellow travelers chronologically, geographically, or musically, but they were both violinists with a complete command of the instrument and its technical capabilities and expressive potential. Their works on this disc are from different worlds, yet they seem to complement each other in ways that are very satisfying.

Mihaela Oprea and Jakob Alsgaard Bahr both appear to be newcomers to *Fanfare*. Oprea is Romanian-born and almost entirely Romanian-trained, though she completed her studies with Danish violinist Kim Sjøgren at the Royal Danish Conservatory in Aarhus. It comes as no surprise that Enescu's sonata is in Oprea's genes and blood, and you can hear it in her every turn of phrase and the way she teases the tone of her instrument to maximum seductive effect. Bahr was a piano student at the same conservatory in Aarhus, but it was at the Sønderborg Music Academy, where he was accompanying one of Oprea's students, that Mihaela and Jakob first met. A musical friendship was born, and in 2018 they made their first recording together, a CD of Danish and Romanian pieces (Danacord 831). The Nielsen/Enescu album is their second recording as a duo, and it's a must-have for all who love violin and piano music and who appreciate the music of these two composers. **Jerry Dubins**

