

# AMERICAN RECORD GUIDE

## MAY/JUNE 2013

### *La Viola*

KEAL: *Ballade*; SOULAGE: *Solo Sonata*; DECRUCK: *Sonata*; LE BEAU: *3 Pieces*; HARRISON: *Sonata; Lament*;  
FUCHS: *Sonata Pastorale*; CLARKE: *Sonata*  
Hillary Herndon; Wei-Chun Bernadette Lo, p  
MSR 1416 [2CD] 124 minutes

All of the music on this recording of music for viola and piano and for viola alone was written by women who lived and died in the 20th Century. With the exception of Minna Keal's 1929 *Ballade*, which has a very colorful piano part, but confines the viola to its somewhat dull middle register, everything is written to exploit the best qualities of the instrument.

The best known composer is Rebecca Clarke, and her *Viola Sonata* (1919) is one of the most often studied, performed, and recorded pieces of the 20th Century viola literature. Clarke was a violist, and she understood many of the instrument's most intimate secrets. She also understood the secrets of the piano, and one of the things that makes this reading so enjoyable is Lo's exceptional sensitivity to color and texture. I also admire the brisk tempo these musicians take in II.

The American composer Lillian Fuchs (1901-95) was more of a violist than a composer. Her *Sonata Pastorale* is an attempt at doing for the viola what Ysaye did for the violin—but, in spite of Herndon's excellent reading, the piece is not terribly memorable.

Luise Adolpha Le Beau (1850-1927) was a German composer who had nice Schumann inspired musical ideas, but didn't really understand the viola that well. These musicians and the recording engineer do a fine job working around the balance problems in I and II.

The rest of the composers here are new to me. Marcelle Soulage (1894-1970) was born in Peru and grew up in France. She began her studies with Nadia Boulanger at 14, and after winning a first prize at the Paris Conservatory she joined the faculty. I imagine that Soulage might have played the viola, because her (1930) solo sonata sounds very well on the instrument. There is a remarkable fugue at the end that has little actual counterpoint but a lot of implied counterpoint (it brings the fugue in Bach's Fifth Cello Suite to mind).

Fernande Decruck (1896-1954) studied at the Paris Conservatory at the same time as Olivier Messiaen and Jacques Ibert and later founded the publishing company Les Editions de Paris. She wrote this gorgeous sonata in 1943 as a work for either alto saxophone or viola and piano.

Pamela Harrison (1915-90) studied with Gordon Jacob and Arthur Benjamin at the Royal College of Music and continued composing while teaching Dalcroze Eurhythmics at a school for girls in Somerset. Her mournful 'Lament' was published in 1963. Her sprightly and very British-sounding sonata (1946) was performed several times in her lifetime (including a BBC radio performance by Watson Forbes), but it was not published until after her death.

Hillary Herndon, who is on the faculty of the University of Tennessee, and Wei-Chun Bernadette Lo, who teaches at Sewanee University in Tennessee, have done a great service to music lovers by making this recording, and they have done a great service to violists (who are always looking for good music to play) by seeking out these pieces and playing them so beautifully.

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