



In Brief...

Debussy 2 Piano & 4 Mains: *Petite Suite*; *Première Suite Pour Orchestre*; *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*; *Lindaraja*; *En blanc et noir* **Philippe Cassard, François Chaplin** (pf)
Decca 476 4813, 77 minutes

This fine disc of Debussy's music for two pianos includes a version of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* transcribed by the composer himself, demonstrating his venerable ability to create nuances of colour even without the resources of a full orchestra at his disposal. Played with lightness and dexterity by French pianists Philippe Cassard and François Chaplin, this music ebbs and flows through splashes of light and dark, silver and gold, displaying Debussy's characteristic richness of texture and enchanting harmonic landscape to full effect. Cassard and Chaplin are well attuned to one another, playing with well-drilled rhythmic precision – perhaps too much so in some passages, which could benefit from a little more rubato and rhythmic freedom. But overall they present this music with excitement and charm, from the gentle rocking of the boat in the *Petite Suite* to the glittering pyrotechnics of the final *Scherzando*. FC

Massenet Complete Solo Works; includes *Grande Fantaisie sur le Pardon de Ploërmel* and *Le Roman d'Arlequin* **Stefan Irmer** (pf)
MDG 618 1729-2, 80 minutes

This is a disc stuffed to the brim with delights. Irmer is a highly sensitive pianist who presents Massenet's cruelly underrated piano works in the best light. He begins with a *Fantaisie* based on themes from Meyerbeer's *Dinorah*, which starts very much like a Liszt work in this genre before some French headiness creeps in. Irmer underplays the dreamy fantasy later on, but this remains an achievement (see also Irmer's disc of Thalberg, including two *Fantaisies* on Rossini, on Dabringhaus). Thereafter, we enter familiar Massenet territory: *Dix*

Pièces (1867) is magnificently charming (perhaps the fifth movement, an elegy, could be more interior). Yet Irmer captures the simplicity of the 'pantomime enfantine', *Le Roman d'Arlequin*. Another (unexpected) side of Massenet surfaces in the Bachian counterpoint of sixth *Impromptu*; yet another in the more advanced harmonies of the later works (*Papillons noirs* and *Papillons blancs* of 1907). Well worth the investment. CC

Bach Crossings Transcriptions for Piano Four Hands by György Kurtág **Stephanie Kai-Win Ho, Saar Ahuvia** (pf)
New Focus Recordings FCR124 DDD, 38 minutes

Piano duo Stephanie Kai-Win Ho and Saar Ahuvia have previously explored a wide range of music for both two pianos and one piano, from works by Guillaume de Machaut to Olivier Messiaen's epic *Visions de l'Amen*. It is clear from the precision and elegant phrasing on this disc that this is a tight partnership between two pianists who have developed an implicit understanding of each other's musicality. The articulation is clear and bright, and the pianists capture the lively spirit of the dance-like sections with character and class, evoking joyful images of tankard-swilling, pot-bellied revellers. The playing is well balanced between the two parts and there is a strong overall sense of musical line, with the lilting interactions and echoes finely balanced. Most of the transcriptions are by György Kurtág, with additional pieces by Franz Xaver Gleichauf and Max Reger. FC

The Red Piano **Yundi** (pf). China NCPA Concert Orchestra/
Zouchang Chen
EMI 5099908865823, 62 minutes

A Chinese pianist introducing Westerners to Chinese music is by no means a new idea – Lang Lang's *Dragon Songs* (DG) is perhaps the most famous precursor. Yet it is Yundi's playing that makes the most

cogent and persuasive argument so far. Even he cannot rescue the Rachmaninov-squared saccharine sweetness of the *Yellow River Concerto* (based on Xian Xinghai's *Yellow River Cantata*), yet this works far better than the Naxos effort, even in the finale (which reaches the heights of bombast).

The remainder of the disc is solo piano. Yundi frequently encores Chinese music, and the pieces he chooses are clearly fit for purpose, short yet often hauntingly enchanting. Yundi is charming in the *Five Yunnan Folksongs*, glittering in the Qinghai folksong *In That Place Far Away*, and does a fine imitation of a Chinese *Liberace* in Zhu Jianer's *Celebrating our New Life*. Fascinating. CC

Darknesse Visible Ravel *Gaspard de la nuit*; **Thomas Adès** *Darknesse Visible*; Debussy *Suite Bergamasque*; **Ronald Stevenson/Benjamin Britten** *Fantasy on Peter Grimes*; **Ravel** *La Valse* **Inon Barnatan** (pf)
Avie AV2256, 69 minutes

This disc features the curious pairing of three stalwarts of the piano repertoire – Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* and *La Valse*, and Debussy's *Suite Bergamasque* – with a rarely heard work by Thomas Adès and Ronald Stevenson's *Fantasy on Peter Grimes*. It is the two more unusual works that show the best side to Inon Barnatan's playing: his shimmering tremolandi bring out the sense of foreboding in the Adès, which is dark, atmospheric and contemplative, and he creates an appropriate air of drama in the *Fantasy*. But in the better-known works, the Ravel in particular, his playing lacks sparkle and subtlety of colour. The phrase 'everything but the kitchen sink' comes to mind – perhaps Barnatan should have waited a little longer before attempting to put his stamp on these giants of the repertoire. There is occasional fuzziness in the recording, compounding the need for greater subtlety of touch. FC

