

Florent Schmitt on Timpani A Survey by Rob Barnett

In what we now know as the LP/CD transition years of 1980-85, the French composer Florent Schmitt (1870-1958) - a long-term friend of Vaughan Williams - owed much to the record label Cybélia and to one major LP from [Martinon and EMI Classics](#). Those Cybélias are still worth tracking down but they were never in plentiful supply. From a perspective of thirty-plus years on, Timpani now stand as the most wide-ranging representative of the Schmitt flame. Their discs feature this composer in pretty well all of the media in which this composer wrote. Of course, there are many other labels who have contributed over the last twenty years and they include Chandos, Hyperion, Marco Polo, Naxos, Grand Piano, Praga, RCA, Accord, Calliope, Auvidis-Valois, Forgotten Records, Dutton and Warner Apex. It's only a pity that those, now awkward to find, Cybélias have not been reissued conveniently in a single set. Let's have a look at these easily accessible Timpanis in six superbly laid out, recorded, designed and documented CDs. All - apart from the solo piano and choral items - are in fold-out digipacks with the booklet slotted in at the front and the disc housed in the usual click-in plastic frame firmly adhered to the card-fold. Before looking at each CD it should be borne in mind that Timpani has also brought out vintage recordings from the 78 era including the Suite en rocaille (2C2122 Pierre Jamet Collection), the Rapsodie viennoise ([4C4024](#) - Albert Wolff collection) and movements from Reflets d'Allemagne in Timpani's historic [Autographes](#) Vocaux disc (Bayreuth and Nuremberg).

Le Petit Elfe Ferme-l'Œil - complete ballet (1913) [37:59]
Intrôit, Récit et Congé for cello and orchestra (1952) [13:02]
Aline Martin (mezzo) (*Petit Elfe*); Henri Demarquette (cello)
Orchestre National de Lorraine/Jacques Mercier
rec. 2013, Arsenal, Metz
TIMPANI 1C1212 [51:10]



The first disc is the most recent. *Le Petit Elfe Ferme-l'Œil* is an orchestral ballet in a Prelude and seven movements. This is not the same thing as the seven-movement suite for piano four hands solo on 1C1159 (*Une semaine du petit elfe ferme-l'oeil*) which runs to about 22 minutes; the orchestral item comes to 38 minutes. It's in eight masterly movements, the additional one being the *Prélude*. Otherwise the titles are the same although many of the movements in the piano version are much smaller in playing time. It started out as a piano work and was expanded into a ballet by the composer. The delightful plot is based on a Hans Christian Andersen story about dreams, sleep and childhood. After the mysterious *Prélude*, which is remarkably similar at times to Dukas's *L'apprenti sorcier*, comes a very imposing and courtly *La Fête nationale des souris*; these mice must be wearing iron-shod riding boots. *La Cigogne lasse* represents a tender caressing moment that sounds like light theatre music by Sibelius with a skim of Ravel at his most hushed. *Le Cheval de Ferme-l'Œil* has the bearing of a Russian Gopak and is perhaps influenced by experience of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Bax's *Gopak* seems related to this music. *Le Mariage de la poupée Berthe* is a piece of fluttering, chiming and ultimately dreaming chinoiserie. This leads directly into the happily crashing and lyrical *La Ronde des lettres boiteuses*. This is a splendid and big-hearted movement. *La Promenade à travers le tableau* includes a tenderly sung lullaby by the Nurse to the sleeping child. *Le Parapluie chinois* ripples with oriental delights. Ravel-like touches abound. Schmitt had clearly fallen for *Ma mère l'oye* and *Rapsodie Espagnole*. The work as a whole is a cousin under the skin to the Ravel ballet but it would be good to see the Schmitt staged as a more compact Christmas season alternative to *Nutcracker*. I first heard this piece in a radio tape of a French radio broadcast by Orchestre National de France conducted by Eugene Bigot. The CD booklet includes an in-depth synopsis of the ballet keyed in to timing indications so that if you wish you can follow the plot with the music. The author is that articulate champion of the cause of neglected French composers, Michel Fleury. Timpani are well served there.

The *Introit, Récit et Congé* for cello and orchestra (1952) is one of those pieces you wish were longer but at this advanced stage in his career compression seems to have been irresistible; witness his *Janianna Symphony* (1958). I discovered it through the kindness of a French contact who sent me two versions recorded off French radio. The first had André Navarra who was I think the dedicatee and performer at the premiere. The conductor in that case was Gaston Poulet. The other may explain why the Timpani recording - its first ever - feels so sure-footed: the conductor was Jacques Mercier; the cellist, Sophie Gastinel. This is a lush yet transparently orchestrated triptych with a romantic sighing melody worthy of Walton and Hollywood. It's quite brilliant in its incandescent fireworks. Timpani present this 13-minute work in a single track.

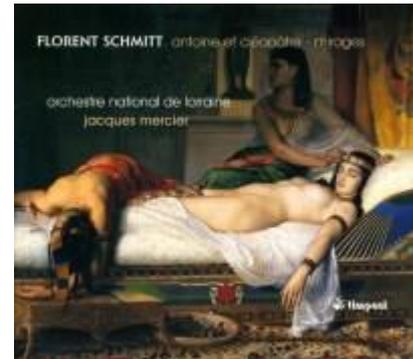
Antoine et Cléopâtre (1920) [45:20]

Mirages (1921-23) [12:53]

Orchestre National de Lorraine/Jacques Mercier

rec. 2007, Arsenal, Metz

TIMPANI 1C1133 [58:13]



The other orchestral disc came out in 2008. It offers further evidence of Schmitt's fascination with the exotic. His worklist includes many orchestral works that lean in that direction: *Tragédie de Salomé*, *Oriane et le Prince d'Amour*, *Salamambo*, *Psalm XLVII* (The Sulamite), *Selamlik*, *Danse d'Abisag* and *Cancunik*.

His full-scale music for *Antoine et Cléopâtre d'après Shakespeare* was written as an incidental music score. It was produced at the commission of Ida Rubinstein for a production at the Opéra de Paris where a new translation by André Gide added to the glamour. There are two orchestral suites, each in three sections and each with an allusive title. *Antoine et Cléopâtre* is pregnant with presentiments of great things. A lavish canvas is proclaimed in a style referencing Ravel's dawn (*Daphnis*). Similarities with other composers of that and earlier eras are there: Bax's *Spring Fire*, Rimsky and Scriabin. The music reflects the wane and wax of tides and of human fate. Schmitt produces a nice line in unhurried swoon. Brushing such dreams away we come to *Le Camp de Pompée* with high-piping trumpetry, the antiphonal opposition of trumpets and horns looking forward to Prokofiev's warlike pages in *Nevsky*. The whole movement is dominated by fanfares, rowdy or gentle, near and far, and complete or in mosaic pieces. *La Bataille d'Actium* boasts an electric tension which mingles with a *Daphnis*-style surge and urge reflective of the constant wash and backwash of moods and atmosphere. This is a very richly appointed score comparable with those of Scriabin and Griffes. The playing is well up to the mark and the venue resounds impressively whether in the barbaric crashes or in more gentle inspirations. So ends the First Suite.

The Second Suite starts with *Nuit au palais de la reine* which is glisteningly redolent of early Stravinsky at one moment and of Holst's *Beni Mora* at the next. Schmitt is in his element with *Orgie et danses* - a scene which he does with loads of electricity and impulsive urgency. He learnt some of this from the example set by Dukas in his *La Péri* but other strange images rise up: Vaughan Williams' symphonies 4 and 6 and Bax's earlier *Tintagel*. *Le Tombeau de Cléopâtre* has more exotic *Daphnis* atmosphere. After many years of neglect one of our finest conductors, Sakari Oramo, one who has a gift for inspiration and originality in programming, revived the whole score with actors at The Barbican in London on 4 October 2016.

The coupling is the two *Mirages*, the first of which is *Tristesse de Pan*. This opens with a great gulp of sound which soon resolves into the suggestion of sweet bird-song. The elysian winds blow in driven zephyrs rather than drifting relaxation. As so often with Schmitt there's a Baxian luxury about this writing (as there is with Dukas' *La Péri*) which here is comparable with Bax's Second Symphony; Do take the chance to hear Goossens conducting Bax's Second in a spanking new transfer on the new released Lyrita REAM1137. *La tragique chevauchée* is shaken by huge and crashing imaginative

effects which reach out in the direction of Ravel's *Rapsodie Espagnole*. This is a big acoustic where the sound opens out imperiously.

Mirages was originally conceived as a piano work which may well be familiar to some from John Ogdon's recording, once available on EMI Matrix 7243 5 65996 2. Schmitt produced this orchestral version in 1923 and it was premiered in Boston in 1923 by Koussevitsky.

Complete Works for Female Voices

Six Choeurs, Op. 81 (1931) [14:29]

En bonne voix (1938) [12:25]

Trois Trios, Op. 99 (1941) [7:53]

De vive voix (1955) [12:58]

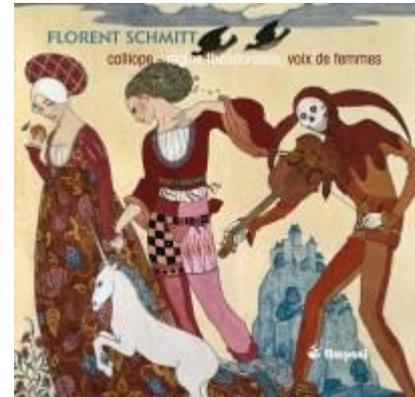
Cinq Refrains (1955) [14:10]

Ensemble Calliope Voix de Femmes/Régine Théodoresco

Marie-Cecile Milan (piano)

rec. 2001, Chapelle d'Institution des Chartreux, Lyon

TIMPANI 1C1218 [63:06]



The disc of pieces for women's choir, some with (*Six Choeurs*, *Trois Trios*, *Cinq Refrains*) and some without, piano was originally released in 2001. It came out at that time on Calliope (CAL 9307) but when that label disappeared it was promptly licensed to Timpani, just as was done with the choir's equivalent Koechlin disc (Timpani 1C1234). There are no English translations but the sung words are there and is a French and English essay by Alain Patrick Olivier. The music is sequenced in date order from 1931 until three years short of Schmitt's death. The *Six Choeurs* range from wailing "cou-cou" sounds, to deathly fear (as in Bax's *This World's Joye*), to gentle lulling, to an irresistible lilt and a rough magic. The elite choir and pianist rise up to meet and trounce the challenge every time. The lively piano is at play around the choir and is supple in its smiling incitement to action and mood. The skill of all this music recalls that of Geoffrey Bush in his delightful *Summer Serenade*. *En bonne voix* written on the brink of war has bounce, in *Princes et Bergères* there's a lavish echo and a coaxing richness. *Tournez s'il vous plaît* carries the sense of dancing rays of light striking through stained glass while *La Mode commode* is all Yuletide joy. The *Trois Trios* breathe a discontented air. Particularly striking is *L'Étang* with its subdued atmosphere anchored in deep water. The mood is offset a little by the nicely skipping *D'un mille-pattes amoureux*. The *De vive voix* (1955) collection tracks through from a sad croon to a shifting counterpoint of rhythmic patterns. *Pastourettes* with its bluff jollity rises to a kind of exaltation. *Ensermée dans le port*, with its dazzle and strange melancholia is a good preparation for *La Tour d'amour* which rushes upwards to dainty and silvery heights. The final *Cinq Refrains* combines an inventive athletic clangour and a coaxing and cajoling charm. *Gisvres-Conti* radiates sweetness. These pieces will beguile if you already enjoy the choral works of Poulenc and Ravel. They are sweet of tone and light on the aural palate. This is a little-known corner of the repertoire of a little-known composer.

Piano Quintet (1908) [55:51]

Hasards - Petit concert en quatre parties (piano, violin, viola and cello) (1929) [14:42]

Christian Ivaldi (piano)

Quatuor Stanislas (Laurent Causse (violin I), Bertrand Menut (violin II), Paul Fenton (viola), Jean de Spengler (cello))

rec. 2008, Auditorium du Conservatoire Régional du Grand Nancy

TIMPANI 1C1152 [70:40]



To mark the half century since Schmitt's death Timpani turned to the three-movement Piano Quintet and *Hasards*. The Quintet is a dreamy yet vigorously active epic which would go well with Bax's Piano Quintet. It's a huge piece - a symphonic drama writ small, but only in numbers of musicians specified. It heaves and seethes over

almost 56 minutes and three movements: *Lent et grave - Animé; Lent; Animé*. The magical hush of the central *Lent* is hemmed around by two lengthy movements which are racked by a dramatic cauldron of the emotions. The whole thing is a high watermark of the turbulent romantic style but rarely performed. I recall only a broadcast by the Music Group of London on BBC Radio 3 in the mid-1970s and an LP and then a CD from Accord with Werner Bärtschi and the Berne String Quartet. The *Lento* alone was recorded by the composer with the Calvet Quartet in the days of the 78 and was reissued by [EMI](#). The whole Quintet might perhaps have been orchestrated as a piano concerto or a symphony had things turned out differently. If so it would have served as a precursor to the more economical *Symphonie Concertante* for Orchestra and Piano, Op. 82 (1931) recorded by Huseyin Sermet (piano) and David Robertson conducting the Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo [Auvidis Valois V 4687](#). This same Sermet also contributed a Schmitt [chamber disc](#) for the same label. *Ombres - J'entends dans le lointain* (such a title!) for piano and orchestra dates from just before the *Symphonie Concertante* and was recently recorded by Vincent Larderet on [Ars Produktion SACD ARS38178](#). Larderet's Schmitt is well enough known from his [Naxos](#) disc of the solo piano music. I should add that Naxos have added valuably to Schmitt's presence in the catalogue with not only the Larderet disc but also the [Chaiquin-Halska Sonata Libre](#) on Naxos 8.573169 not to mention the [orchestral disc from Falletta](#) on Naxos 8.573521.

Hasards is in four titled movements, the whole referred to as "Petit concert en quatre parties for piano, violin, viola and cello". The *Exorde* is lighter on its feet than the Quintet. Its complex cross-rhythms continually collide and strike glancing blows. The mischievous *Zelle au pied légère* sounds as if it has escaped from its home in a fairy domain while the hiccupping *Bourrée bourasque* ends things.

Piano Works - Four Hands

Une Semaine du petit elfe Ferme-l'oeil op. 58 (1912) [21:42]

Feuillets de Voyage op. 26 (1913) [24:59]

Reflets d'Allemagne (Huit Valses) op. 28 (1905) [20:34]

Christian Ivaldi; Jean-Claude Pennerier (piano)

rec. 2008, Ferme de Villefavard

TIMPANI 1C1159 [68:02]



Schmitt's duo and piano four hands works have been recorded across four discs by the Invencia Piano Duo on [Grand Piano](#) (2010-11). Timpani's equally stylish Ivaldi-Pennerier effort gives a

convenient and very nicely recorded single disc selection. *Une semaine du petit elfe ferme-l'oeil* is in the expected seven movements: *La Noce des souris* is in hail-fellow well-met mood, stepping out on a long journey with all the morning-fresh stamina you would expect. *Le Cigogne lasse* is gently lulling and by no means as complicated as *Crépuscules* and *Ombre*. *Le Cheval de Ferme-l'oeil* is cheerfully bright-eyed while *Le Mariage de la poupée Berthe* looks back to the idyllic Ravelian scores of the 1910s. *La Ronde des lettres boiteuses* gives the image of bell-hammers rung by fairly strong-men. It's jazzily intricate and with something of the nursery rhyme about it. The steady amble of *La Promenade à travers le tableau* has a surreal atmosphere but is not complex. We end with *Le parapluie chinois*. And the Chinese harmonic clang and echo of Ravel's *Ma mere l'oye* touches this music closely. Ravel's *Laideronnette, impératrice des Pagodes* movement is the most relevant. The music echoes with bells and music-box 'rain' which is sprinkled resoundingly as if on a glass umbrella.

Feuillets de voyage in two books follows in the long tradition of topographical suites as written by Gustave Charpentier, Massenet, [Philippe Gaubert](#), as well as Ibert in more recent years. The remainder of the works on this disc are a shade less subtle than encountered on the final Ivaldi disc. *Douceur du soir*, with its image of a calming and reassuring sun-warmed evening as it darkens is followed by the bluff *Danse britannique*. Schmitt was a friend of RVW, as previously noted, but this is more Stanford than Vaughan Williams. From the second book we note *Berceuse* with its slipping into sleep, the skilled and chivalrously comely *Mazurka*, the crunchy, explosive *Marche burlesque* and *Retour a l'endroit*, unassuming in its sing-song Brahmsian ways. The final *Valse* is almost brusque.

Reflets d'Allemagne is from the same colouring book with pot plants, aristocratic damsels and hussars with hair en brosse and duelling scars. *Heidelberg* is stirring stuff - a bit of a roughhouse although there are tender scenes wreathed in climbing roses. Other German cities are evoked. *Vienna* is oddly rather Spanish, *Dresden* dreamy, *Nuremberg*, a lissom floatingly weightless indulgence and *Munich*, all breathless dancers aflutter and aflitter. There's a final coarse-handed pay-off.

The playing is as engaging as the sound quality is pleasing and the liner-note is useful. This is a very much lighter Schmitt than reflected on the other discs mentioned here. Entertaining but lighter fare.

Crépuscules, Op. 56 (1911) [16:51]

Ombres, Op. 64 (1917) [25:51]

Et Pan, au fond des blés lunaires, s'accouda Op. 70 (1921) [5:47]

Enfants, Op. 94 (1941) [13:30]

Laurent Wagschal (piano)

rec. 2015, Temple Saint-Marcel, Paris

TIMPANI 1C1219 [63:32]



Laurent Wagschal's solo piano disc began life as one of the late, lamented Pierre Dyens' Saphir Productions CD (LVC001055). It was rescued by a Timpani licence.

Schmitt must have been captivated by the play of light and dark; only six years separate *Crépuscules* from *Ombres*. Of the first set, *Sur un vieux petit cimetière* is shaken with Rachmaninovian noontide passions before fading down. The little *Neige* is a slow-motion drift to compare with the almost furious and unearthly *Sylphides* - a whirling virtuoso exercise. The concluding *Solitude* has the substance of *Sur un vieux petit cimetière* and vacillates on a knife-edge between contentment in being alone and sorrow in loneliness. Schmitt makes a feint in the direction of this static mood and then introduces pages almost as frantic as *Sylphides* before coaxing the listener back into the drifting veils.

Ombres, J'entends dans le lointain is a major piece at almost 13 minutes. It's another contemplative swirling and whirling idyll of brilliant unstable moods. A work of the highest thread-count it takes in music of ringing assertion and there's no lack of self possession. At 9:40 a very Baxian passage in that composer's most idyllic vein proclaims itself. *Mauresque* displays tremulous beauty - the tremble of water stirred from deep below the surface. *Cette ombre, mon image* is inescapably psychological - likeable and fey.

Et Pan, au fond des blés lunaires, s'accouda (And Pan amid the lunar corn leant on his elbows) is the first of *Mirages* Op. 70. It is magnificent in all its leisurely unwinding subtlety and impressive in its ascent and possession of ringing heroic fastnesses.

We finish with *Enfants* in its arrangement for piano. Striking is *De chœur* with its truly velvety bass notes. That sound is worth a prize in itself. These movements are *about* childhood rather than *for* children. *Gate* catches the same spirit as Finzi's *Bagatelles*. *Turbulent* seems self-intoxicated by a Bachian rhythmic impulse that takes delight in speed of thought. *Moustique* is a dance, rippling and ripped with vitality. *Moise - sauve des eaux* is almost ordinary and flat. Was it meant to be ordinary, for contrast? *Terrible* recalls [Dance of the Wild Men](#) by Roy Agnew - all angular, urgent and clanging with the feeling of Prokofiev and perhaps Ornstein and Cowell at their most iconoclastic.

Before we leave this composer, I recommend you have a look at [Leslie De'ath's article](#) on Schmitt. It gives a good perspective on the composer and his recorded legacy. Although only a couple of pages are dedicated to Schmitt, do also have a look at Nicholas Southon's Editions Salabert book on unusual French orchestral works. The whole thing can be read [here](#). It's no discredit to Southon that

he also addresses another forgotten masterwork: Louis Aubert's *Le Tombeau de Chateaubriand*. You can find a lot more detail on Schmitt at the well structured and smartly illustrated [Schmitt website](#).

Meantime here are six connoisseur-orientated discs presenting many facets of Schmitt's music in one of the best possible lights.

Rob Barnett

Previous review (1C1212): [Stephen Greenbank](#)

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