

## A Crop Of Recordings V: French Rarities by Emmanuel, Saint-Saëns, Chausson, Bizet, Magnard, Duparc and Berlioz

Steven  
Kruger

Author: April 21, 2016

[Music](#), [Recordings](#)

[Albéric Magnard](#), [Berlioz](#), [Bizet](#), [Emmanuel Villaume](#), [Ernest Chausson](#), [Geneviève Laurenceau](#), [Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra](#), [Henri Duparc](#), [Jean-Luc Tingaud](#), [John Storgårds](#), [Malmö Symphony Orchestra](#), [Marc Soustrot](#), [Maurice Emmanuel](#), [Maximilian Hornung](#), [Oliver Triendl](#), [RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra](#), [Saint-Saëns](#), [Slovenian Philharmonic Orchestra](#), [Soile Isokoski](#)

by [Steven Kruger](#) , April 21, 2016.





Maurice Emmanuel in the 1930s. Photo from Bibliothèque Musicale Mahler, fonds Maurice Emmanuel

**EMMANUEL Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2. Suite Française. Overture for a Merry Tale** • Emmanuel Villaume, conductor; Slovenian Philharmonic Orchestra • TIMPANI 1C1189 (61:38)

Every so often a release comes along which serves to remind listeners that a particular national repertory is not always so well known to us as we think. Not all beloved works cross the pond. This has a lot to do with immediacy and easily recognizable, iconic tunes. The symphonic works of Maurice Emmanuel occupy a known position of respect in France. But like those of Magnard and D'Indy, they reveal their charms more slowly than the compositions of Franck, Ravel or Debussy.

Two striking features of Emmanuel's music are its exploration of modal scales, particularly the Lydian, and the adoption of an emphatic manner of marching, originating in Lalo and taking final form with Roussel. This results in music which at times sounds like Arnold Bax or Edmund Rubbra prefiguring Hindemith! But it works far better than it sounds. Emmanuel's musical world is a gentle one, heartfelt without heart-strings, kaleidoscopic without craziness, exciting without bombast, and unified in that beautiful French manner which never confuses length with significance. It is transparent writing, characteristically shifting quickly and lightly in the winds, like Walton in a happy mood.

The gem here is the First Symphony, dating from 1918, a gentle memorial of death in war. A sweet four note motif in the quiet introduction and at the very end gradually gets under your skin, and the "running" Allegro theme of the first movement stays with one better than do similar moments in D'Indy's Second Symphony, which it somewhat

resembles. The slow movement reveals fine echoes of Chausson and the finale seems to invent Hindemith's way with bass drum thumps and snares a full ten years before anything like it would be heard from him.

The detailed and scholarly notes accompanying the CD are a bit hopeful, though, in their admiration for the *Suite Française*, comparing it to Ravel's *Tombeau*. The music evokes none of moonlit zombieness which makes the Ravel so memorable. But it is very pleasant and contains moments that resemble Walton, Honegger and Copland, which says something for cultural cross-fertilization, even in little-known music. The Overture, like many comedy overtures, may be said to be trying too hard. Lots of oompah on the tuba, and no worse than similar efforts by Bax and others. But I don't think anyone ever laughs.

The Second Symphony really does sound remarkably like late Hindemith, though one begins to suspect Emmanuel got there before the German composer. But its claim to fame as *La Bretonne* is surely based on the zest and verve of its unforgettable finale. The simplest way to put it is to say that this movement is for all practical purposes a "Bunny Hop", with a secondary melody so Sibelian it might have been penned by Howard Hanson. Not to be missed!

The Slovenian Philharmonic play their hearts out and achieve a light sonority that feels lovely and authentically French. There exists a Keith Lockhart recording of the symphonies with a German orchestra, but Emmanuel Villaume's effort here is by far the more idiomatic. Sound and performance could not be better!

**CHAUSSON *Poème de l'amour et de la mer*. BERLIOZ *Les nuits d'été*. DUPARC *Songs* • John Storgårds, conductor; Soile Isokoski (soprano), Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra • ONDINE ODE 1261-2 (64:46)**

Ernest Chausson always makes me want to fall in love with the girl next door. His music caresses with a special warm-hearted embrace — and contains little of the unprotected desperation we associate with extreme passion or neurosis. In Chausson's world love leads to happiness — or even personal disappointment and indifference — but never immolation or the collapse of Mt. Olympus. Nor does his music wrap sex in the perfume of religious sanctimony. That's a bailiwick César Franck barely escapes in *Psyche et eros*, his only real attempt at sensuality.

Chausson is hardly the first composer to enlist the ocean in pursuit of the human heart, but the sensuous romance he creates in *Poème de l'amour et de la mer* sets an important example for others to follow. The swirly metaphysical explorations of Vaughan Williams's *A Sea Symphony*, Elgar's *Sea Pictures* and Delius's *Sea Drift* would not have been possible without it.

The odd thing about Chausson's setting of these Maurice Bouchor poems, *The Flower of the Waters* and *The Death of Love*, is that the words clearly represent a man's love for a woman. Yet this work is almost always sung by a soprano. The only exception I know is Charles Dutoit's Montreal Decca CD, where baritone François le Roux gives us, I believe, the most beautiful and affectionate performance of all — that of a gentle man contemplating his exhilaration — and later the indifference it has become. The beauty of his delivery is to die for.

But the more normal custom is to perform this piece with a female singer, as found here. Soile Isokoski is now in her late fifties. Occasionally, there is just a touch of dryness in her light sonority and quick vibrato. I confess I prefer a slightly different approach, darker and more velvety. Linda Finnie, singing the Tortelier version on Chandos, is softer and more inclined to elision. It's my preferred female version. Even so, Storgårds conducts warmly and wonderfully, and Ondine has given us sound that purrs.

But there are many choices: Gladys Swarthout sings the Chausson for Monteux nearly without vibrato. And Françoise Pollet for Armin Jordan is again dark and beautiful. Another winner.

The light qualities of Isokoski's approach carry over well into the Berlioz *Les nuits d'été*, though I think it can all be done more girlishly, if memories of Crespin/Ansermet are to be trusted.

A lovely surprise on the CD is the last song, Duparc's *Chanson Triste*. It has just the touch of heartbreak in it to put a

catch in your throat. And Duparc's *Invitation au voyage* sets sail on palpable seas. (Mendelssohn is never far away.) The first Duparc song I liked less. It blares, like the opening of the Tchaikovsky Fourth. A bit overpowering. Speaking of power, anyone interested in Richard Rodgers's *Victory at Sea* and wondering where Rodgers got his idea for the main theme of his TV score need only listen to Chausson's orchestral climax beginning at 10:05. I wouldn't call it plagiarism. It's more like influence. But this is clearly where he got it.

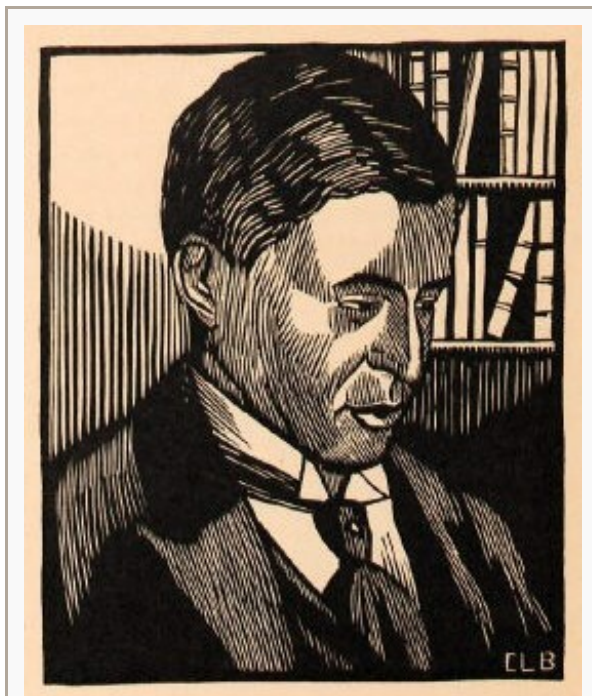
**MAGNARD Piano Trio in F Minor<sup>1</sup>. Violin Sonata in G Major** • Geneviève Laurenceau (violin), <sup>1</sup>Maximilian Hornung (cello), Oliver Triendl (piano) • CPO 777 765–2 (78:01)

It's hard to say why Albéric Magnard's music so breaks my heart. But it always does. Its special darkness is so light. Magnard belongs to the cadre of idealistic and inward-looking late nineteenth/early twentieth century French composers who left but a mature work or two in each genre. I think of Dukas and Lalo and Franck, but Chausson and Fauré seem a better comparison in terms of quality and refinement. Indeed, the two works on this CD hold a very bright candle to late Fauré and surpass Franck in harmonic interest, energy and personal intimacy by far. I'm tempted to say "intelligence." The trio dates from 1904, the sonata from three years earlier. (The Third Symphony, Magnard's best-known work, was composed in 1903.) This is music of a composer's full maturity. I would argue, in fact, that it is more structurally adventurous than Fauré — more complex yet just as otherworldly.

Magnard was a musical conservative in the same way D'Indy was. He never fully gave himself over to impressionism, sticking with Beethoven for structure and Wagner for sensuality. But Magnard's music still manages to be original and unpredictable in the best sense. He doesn't mind ending abruptly or quietly. You are always on seat's edge, not knowing quite what he will do. The Trio, for instance, fascinates at once: it begins bizarrely from the bottom of the cello range, doing one knows not quite what. It takes a while before it has fought with the piano and growled itself into a range where the violin can plausibly enter. This very opening sonority is different and new. Yet we find immediately that we are dealing with masterful structure and counterpoint Beethoven would have understood. Some of the rigor at such moments is so odd-sounding, you think of Mahler. Then suddenly, it all changes and you'll have a gorgeous countermelody. This is where Magnard stands out — the little wisp-like phrases that touch your heart like hymns and prayers — and then delicately move out of reach to some modal never-never land. Franck's votive candle-scented melodies never get close to this sort of emotion.

The stylistic calling card in both these works is a deeply personal slippery-swervy form of locomotion. It is immediately recognizable as Magnard's. You can move from the Trio to the Sonata without realizing you have changed pieces. And, I might add, Laurenceau, Hornung and Triendl reveal a fine ear for quicksilver refinement, sonorous energy and gentle tugs at the heart. The Violin sonata disappears into the night as subtly as the Fountains of Rome, rippling like a stream. I would find it hard to improve on these performances. The notes are full and fascinating, the sound ideal, without a trace of the clangorous quality sometimes affecting chamber music's more energetic moments. This is a real find with almost no competition. It's best moments are whisper-quiet. At three o'clock in the morning, music doesn't get better than this.

**SAINT-SAËNS Symphony in F Major, "Urbs Romana". La Jeunesse d'Hercule. Danse Macabre** • Marc Soustrot, conductor; Malmö Symphony Orchestra • NAXOS 8.573140 (67:25)



Albéric Magnard. Reproduction from *La Revue musicale*, Nov. 1st, 1920, Bibliothèque nationale de France

It's easy to see why this symphony won a prize in 1856. It contains all the dutiful virtues of balance and moderation a judge would wish for. But they come naturally. Saint-Saëns remains one of music's tamer geniuses, more Berger-Picard than bomb-thrower. That's the usual pattern with child-prodigies, of course. But we disparage this sort of originality at our peril. It's a lovely symphony, more richly orchestrated than the First. The finale is a set of variations which dare to conclude quietly. It's theme is unusually beautiful. (Even early Saint-Saëns contains memorable tunes.) And the piece has the good sense to avoid grandiosity. With most composers, early symphonies are the painful strivers. We do find all sorts of influences, naturally. I hear everyone from Bizet to Berwald. The slow movement is a funeral march — straight out of Liszt in a Hungarian mood. But the music coheres into something of its own. It's more interesting than early Stanford or Gounod or Lalo. There's a major composer in there waiting to come out.

The Youth of Hercules is from the same era as the Organ Symphony, beautifully put together with lots of drums and cymbals. That's not unexpected. But it might surprise the listener to hear how Wagnerian Saint-Saëns could be. The music opens with lonely chromatic moments that would do justice to Act Two of Tristan. It makes you wonder why Saint-Saëns didn't take it all further. He might have landed somewhere between Elgar and Roussel.

I like these performances very much, as I did Soustrot's recent CD of the first two numbered symphonies. The orchestra is cozy and plummy. Sound is first rate. And the Dance Macabre pleasantly rattles our bones.

**BIZET Roma. Marche Funèbre. Patrie Overture. Overture in A. Petite Suite** • Jean-Luc Tingaud, conductor; RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra • NAXOS 8.57344 (78:24)

This CD is a delight from beginning to end. The selections are not the usual bits from Carmen or L'Arlésienne but constitute a more representative sample of the effervescent Bizet's art — and a very enjoyable one. Jean-Luc Tingaud remains a conductor to watch, after his recent fine Dukas CD. And the RTÉ Orchestra play with beauty and precision, limpidly recorded.

On CD, the funeral march is up first, and as the atmospheric brass and drums kick in, I prepare myself for the proper emotions with bowed head. But after a few moments of solemnity, I notice the birds are twittering, the breezes are wafting, the lovers are strolling and this is one extremely cheerful funeral march! What gives? Well, it turns out the march is essentially the prelude to a forgotten Bizet opera with a twisted plot about love and vengeance. But as with so much French music of the mid-nineteenth century, a pretty melody and a tendency to strut around in triplets keeps the proceedings more lighthearted than perhaps intended. In any case, as the musical program continues with the Overture in A, one becomes aware that here we have music bypassed by Wagner — and perhaps a little erotically innocent as a result.

Among mid-nineteenth century French composers, the studious Wagnerians, in however softened form, were Chausson, Franck, Debussy and D'Indy. The rest took Mendelssohn for their template, threw in some percussion from Berlioz, composed monophonic Schubertian melodies and stirred the mix. For exoticism and sensuality, it would be off to the Middle East for belly-dance chromaticism. I think of Saint-Saëns's Bacchanale, for example.

But Lalo, Gounod and Bizet continued to explore the kinder, gentler side of music, with few neuroses and lots of unthreatening marches and "walking basses" to supply the excitement. Indeed, Gounod seems to be quite a presence in Bizet's sound world: one keeps waiting for Alfred Hitchcock Presents. But the real winner here from the pulse-quickening standpoint is the Patrie Overture. Audiences would love it. And the Petite Suite is so serene, it reminds me of nothing so much as a dry run for Elgar's Wand of Youth music. Roma, the major work here, is a beautiful symphony that never quite convinces you it is a symphony. It seems too much of the moment to be a rigorous exercise in inevitability. But what beautiful moments...



## About **Steven Kruger**

Steven Kruger is a former classical concert agent. For a number of years he supervised the roster of conductors at Shaw Concerts in New York City, representing such artists as Sir Andrew Davis, Sir Neville Marriner, David Atherton, Rafael Fruhbeck De Burgos, Jose Serebrier and Robert Shaw.



Born in New York City in 1947 to a German immigrant father and an American mother, Kruger is a descendant of Bach biographer Phillip Spitta. He was educated at Phillips Exeter and Princeton, and received his degree in Philosophy, but turned to music administration after a brief career as a military officer and as a stockbroker.

Early in his exposure to music, Kruger developed a special fondness for the British Symphonists, and as a concert agent was able to play a part in the revival of such composers as Elgar, Bax, Walton and Vaughan Williams during the late 1970s.

He continues today as an advocate for these and other great 19th and 20th century symphonic composers, such as D'Indy, Magnard, Schmidt and Tubin, who were at one time eclipsed by the mid-century fashion for academic music. Now retired and living in California, Steven Kruger regularly attends The San Francisco Symphony and reports upon those and other Davies Hall symphonic events. Since 2011, he has written program notes on a continuing basis for the Oregon Symphony, including their recent CD, "Music for a Time of War," and has become a regular reviewer for Fanfare.

[← Previous post](#)

[Next post →](#)