

## Fuchs · Gál · Schubert

'The Viennese Viola'

**Fuchs** Sechs Phantasiestücke, Op 117.

Viola Sonata, Op 86 **Gál** Viola Sonata, Op 101

**Schubert** Am See, D124. An die Musik, D547.

Frühlingstraum, D911 No 11. Litanei auf das

Fest Allerseelen, D343

**Emma Wernig** va **Albert Cano Smit** *pf*

Champs Hill © CHRC163 (63' • DDD)



Back in August 2019, when nobody thought twice about filling an intimate performance

space to capacity, I attended a very fine house concert at Florian Leonhard Fine Violins given by the US-born Austro-German viola player Emma Wernig, accompanied by Albert Cano Smit. Wernig had just won the 2019 Tertis International Viola Competition's Barbirolli Prize. Even more notably, she'd also taken First Prize in 2017 at the second edition of the Cecil Aronowitz International Viola Competition, whose inaugural 2014 year had been won by former *Gramophone* One to Watch, Timothy Ridout (1/20).

Wernig's debut album, also with Cano Smit, is part of her Aronowitz winner's package. On my desk as I type is the slightly crumpled concert programme from that August evening, and it turns out that the album presents the same programme and was recorded 10 days later. A happy surprise.

The danger with going niche with your debut album is that ultimately there's a reason why the music has been consistently passed over. Yet while it's probably fair to say that neither Hans Gál nor Robert Fuchs has been wrongly overlooked for the pantheon of the greats, Wernig has chosen impeccably crafted, beautiful pieces that offer musicians plenty to sink their interpretative teeth into. Plus, as at

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the concert, her performances shine with authenticity: repertoire that's been forensically explored out of curiosity in her family heritage and where her own instrument sits within that. Add a well-crafted running order – a good move, for instance, to open with Gál's Viola Sonata, probably the most linguistically interesting piece – and this presentation of the Viennese style via a few of its less familiar voices is one you can happily lose yourself in.

The Gál Sonata begins things well. Written at the end of 1942 in Edinburgh, where he'd found shelter as a Jewish refugee from Nazi Austria, its opening *Adagio* is more warmly lyrical than reflective of recent trauma; and beyond the pleasure of Wernig's smoothly rosiny, velvety dark tones, there are her interpretation's wistful undertones to enjoy. Perhaps best of all is the *Quasi menuetto*, for the airy lilt she brings to its Viennese waltzes, and then for the complete gear change its elegiac central section represents, Wernig's lines a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of shading. It's all so natural, so sung – such an attractive waiting game as to where she'll take the colours next.

What else? In Fuchs's Viola Sonata in D minor of 1899, the sense of tight, intense conversation between Wernig and Cano Smit; the range and precision of Wernig's articulation as she meets its *Allegro's* quicksilver darting and Schubertian stormy gusts; and Cano Smit's management of the Schubertian pianistic trick of simulating orchestral tremolando. Then the perfect finish, returning to the Schubertian roots of both composers' respective brands of Viennese lyricism via Wernig and Cano Smit's own transcriptions of four Schubert lieder. Really nice. **Charlotte Gardner**