

DEBUSSY *Préludes*, Book I. **MURAIL** *Cloches d'adieu et un sourire. Territoires de l'oubli* • Martine Vialatte (pn) • CIAR003 (73:28)

This recording bears the title *Echos et résonances*. The liner notes suggest that the title refers explicitly to each composer's use of the piano's pedals: whereas Debussy's *Préludes* require "a subtle mastery of the pedals," Tristan Murail's *Territoires de l'oubli* "carries this innovative vision of resonance to the extreme" by requiring the pianist to employ the damper pedal through the entirety of its 28 minutes.

Murail was a pupil of Messiaen and is associated with spectralism. It is thus no surprise that his two pieces on this disc are full of intriguing sonorities, a wide range of textures, and a generous panoply of bell-like effects. His work, in this regard, is a natural companion to Debussy's. But I find the four-minute *Cloches d'adieu et un sourire* to be exponentially more successful than the massive *Territoires de l'oubli* that closes the program. The *Cloches*, written in 1992 in response to Messiaen's passing, achieves the reflective, meditative effect of wind chimes responding to the breeze. Not every moment is gentle; even in the first 15 seconds, an emphatically accented tenor-range melodic fragment and a clustered bass chord roar onto the landscape. But it is easy to hear these gestures as supporting the filigree that ricochets from them; and the fading of this filigree into repeated chords feels like a natural return to equilibrium. Gusty as some of the winds in this piece are, they form what is to me a thoroughly coherent, unfailingly interesting, and genuinely attractive landscape. Martine Vialatte's performance is vivid, sensitive, even tender at times. It is a bit more impetuous than Matthew Odell's and has greater contrast in sonority than Herbert Schuch's. Of these three options, I find Vialatte's most to my taste, though Schuch captures the somber circumstances of its composition most acutely.

The *Territoires*, dating from 1977, is Murail's largest single-movement work. The program notes on this recording compare it to "a mobile of Calder, [in which] moving layers progressively fade out overlapping with each other, interfering with one another to create an immense playground." From this perspective, the piece accomplishes what it sets out to do. It is constructed as a series of tableaux, connected in what strikes me as a stream of consciousness. A section of the piece may seem to get "stuck" in a static repetition of one chord, and this chord then reveals itself as the basis for the next section. But stasis predominates within each section as well; the piece begins with a rapid treble tremolo of a minor ninth, and this tremolo continues through much of the first five minutes. A variety of sonorities and gestures emerge around it, but these themselves are often static: an undulating minor third in the low bass and a repeated bell tone in the tenor range, for example. Moreover, the extensive scope of the piece allows for indulgences that the *Cloches* would not accommodate: about halfway through the piece, a welter of clusters recedes to reveal those initial minor ninths, which repeat slowly, sparsely, for a solid minute and a half, punctuated only by the occasional high treble cluster and low bass tone. That's a long time to listen to a single harmony—particularly in a piece that depends for its effect on the shifting of sonorities rather than on the dramatic development of musical ideas.

In the Debussy, Vialatte makes bold, clear choices that differentiate her from her competition. I disagree with many of her choices, but they are well considered and confident, so I respect them. As in her performance of the *Cloches*, she favors impetuosity and forward momentum. Her tempo on *Voiles*, for example, is a full 20 clicks faster than Debussy's metronome marking. Whereas many performances of this prelude suggest sails lazily billowing under a gentle breeze, Vialatte's sails surge and swell as their accompanying boat bobs on some rather sizable waves—a refreshing approach to this familiar piece, if perhaps not exactly in

keeping with Debussy's concept of it. Equally refreshing is Vialatte's attention to inner voices in *Des pas sur la neige* and her evocation of sonorously tolling bells in *La cathédrale engloutie*, which are clearer and more expressive than in many of the recordings I have encountered. But Vialatte's risks fall short in several places. The figuration that opens *Le vent dans la plaine* comes across as violent and uneven rather than as energetic; her rubato in *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* seems halting rather than spontaneous; and much of the brilliant passagework in *La danse de Puck* is strident. Several times, Vialatte hits the cracks between keys when she plays a loud octave or makes a wide leap; I suspect she approaches the keys from above rather than beginning and ending her playing from the surface of the keys. I also suspect that the microphone is a bit too close in the Debussy; though I do not hear damper sounds and other extraneous noises associated with close microphone placement, the hushed playing that provides such welcome contrast in the Murail pieces is entirely absent here. Also worth noting is that Vialatte performs the Debussy on the 102-key Stephen Paulello Opus 102 piano, whereas she performs the Murail pieces on a Steinway. This may account for a richer tone but should not preclude the lower end of the dynamic spectrum.

I have significant criticisms of both Murail's *Territoires de l'oubli* and of much of Vialatte's Debussy interpretation. But Vialatte's pianism is mature and artistically developed; readers who find my description of it intriguing will be glad to have this disc in their collection.

Myron Silberstein

Three stars: Mature performance with significant flaws