

'American First Sonatas'

'Anthology of American Piano Music, Vol 1'

Griffes Piano Sonata

E MacDowell Piano Sonata No 1, 'Tragica', Op 45

Reinagle Philadelphia Sonata I

Siegmeister Piano Sonata No 1, 'American'

Cécile Licad *pf*

Danacord (P) DACOCD774 (71' • DDD)



This is the first volume in a project to, as the blurb puts it, 'show the stylistic breadth, high musical quality and great originality of the best American piano works'. Such a varied programme could have sounded piecemeal and that it's not is as much down to the conviction of Cécile Licad as to the music itself.

Alexander Reinagle: who he, you might well ask? Born the same year as Mozart, he was in fact Edinburgh-educated but emigrated to the States at the age of 30. Written in around 1786, his D major Sonata is a real charmer, the first movement making its effect through high-energy figuration set against clear-cut harmonies, while the second is a lolling *Allegro*.

Edward MacDowell and the tragically short-lived Charles Griffes (cut down by the flu pandemic in 1920 at just 35) both trained in Europe. MacDowell's *Tragica* Sonata dates from 1893, a year after Dvořák had turned up in New York to head the National Conservatory of Music of America, with the aim of helping American composers find their own strain of nationalism. The piece has a kind of bardic quality suggestive of great vistas (Liszt springs to mind, but so too does Grieg). Licad is equally engaging in the sombre and sonorous slow movement as in the grand *Allegro eroico* finale.

Griffes tends to be dubbed an American Impressionist but that's hardly an apt label, and his compelling Piano Sonata, completed in 1918, is an intriguing mix of traditional form and questing harmonies, sometimes dipping into the Scriabinesque in terms of harmony and the rapidity with which the moods shift. Compared to

Ohlsson and Wehr, Licad is slightly softer-edged when it comes to the outer movements, the finale in particular, whose clangorous edginess (of which Prokofiev would have been proud) is a touch subdued. Her slow movement dreams more daring than Ohlsson's but I marginally prefer his greater sense of flow.

To end, the *American* Sonata of Elie Siegmeister, near-contemporary of Copland. Here, at last, is an overtly home-grown piece, both in its jazziness and in the bouncy bumpitiousness of the first movement. The second movement is in strong contrast, being predominantly high-lying and inward, while Licad finds plenty of energy in the finale. **Harriet Smith**

Griffes – selected comparisons:

Ohlsson (6/13) (HYPE) CDA67907

Wehr (CONN) CD4205