

## **In Search of the Thrift Store Sonata**

By Allan Kozinn March 6, 2005

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### **MUSIC**

INDEPENDENT record labels thrive on the cachet that comes of quirky individualism and on finding salable material that the majors have missed.

Classical music has its share of idiosyncratic labels, and perhaps the oddest is Arbiter. It was started nine years ago by Allan Evans, an obsessive, opinionated collector of antique piano, violin and orchestral recordings, as well as unusual blues and world-music discs, which account for a growing part of the label's catalog.

Mr. Evans, 48, describes himself as a musical archaeologist, and Arbiter as a label meant to revive great performances that are either long forgotten, having been swept aside as recording technology developed, or that had such limited circulation that they were never widely known. Arbiter also releases radio concerts, unissued studio recordings and private tapes.

Many of its 50 CD's are by musicians any classical music listener with an interest in historical recordings would know. "The Chaliapin Edition," a sonically refurbished set of recordings by the renowned Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin, recently reached the 5th of its projected 12 volumes. Recordings by the great conductor Bruno Walter and the revered pianist Mieczyslaw Horszowski are also centerpieces of the Arbiter catalog.

But some releases have had even specialists scratching their heads. Arbiter's two latest issues are by obscure pianists, Iren Marik and Madeleine de Valmalète. Each proves a remarkably communicative musician, but their additional attraction for Mr. Evans is that they represent a style of personalized pianism that is no longer common. And both are direct links to composers of the early 20th century.

Valmalète, who died at 100 in 1999, was admired by Ravel, and the centerpiece of her disc, "Rediscovered Master," is a luminous 1928 account of his "Tombeau de Couperin." A singing tone and the vital rhythms of the work's neo-Baroque dance movements cut through the surface noise of the old 78's.

Ravel's "Jeux d'Eau" and Debussy's "Feux d'Artifice" from the same year are equally magical for their balance of delicacy and power. And a few Mozart recordings made in 1992 show not only that her technique was fully intact 64 years after her first sessions but also that she was a thoughtful, dramatic Mozartean.

Marik's work is documented in a two-disc set, "Bartok in the Desert." Born in Hungary in 1905, Marik studied briefly with Bartok. She settled in Virginia after World War II and later moved to California.

She didn't bother much about her performing career after the 1950's, but she made some extraordinarily fluid, communicative recordings of Bartok, Liszt, Kodaly and Brahms for the tiny labels Zodiac and Draco. Mr. Evans found the Zodiac LP in a Chelsea thrift shop in 1978 and the Draco disc in a specialty shop a few years later.

Curious about Marik, he traced her to Independence, Calif., and befriended her. She left him her private archives, about 100 hours of recordings, when she died in 1986.

"Bartok in the Desert" includes selections from the Zodiac and Draco LP's, as well as some of Marik's unissued tapes. And if the private performances are not always flawless, they capture a persuasive musicianship, deeply rooted in a Central European interpretive style.

"Why did it take me so long to get this out?" Mr. Evans asked, anticipating a question during a telephone interview from his home in Queens. "I didn't have Arbiter until 1996, and it was also around then that it became easier to copy tapes to compact discs.

"But what made me get this set out, finally, was 9/11. When that hit, I realized that I had her entire archive here, and I was terrified that if something else happened, those recordings could be destroyed. So I copied them and sent the originals to the International Piano Archives at the University of Maryland."

Mr. Evans traces his approach to rediscovering early-20th-century musicians to his years as a teenage radio listener in the late 1960's and early 70's.

"When I was growing up," he said, "you could turn on the radio and hear John Lennon co-hosting a show, and you could hear world music, classical music and jazz played at full length, not just reduced to jingles. One day, I heard a program that James Irsay hosted on WBAI, in which he played some 78's he found in a thrift shop.

"One was by an unknown Polish pianist named Ignaz Friedman, and it was such a shocking experience to hear Chopin played with such grandiloquence, rhythm and imagination. I tried to find out more about him. But there was nothing available: no information, no recordings. And I thought: 'This Friedman is one of the greats. Why is he so little known?'"

Mr. Evans, who studied composition at the Mannes School and now teaches courses in world music and historical recordings there, spent 15 years writing a biography of Friedman. He is still shopping for a publisher. Along the way, he produced a set of Friedman's complete recordings for Pearl, an English historical label for which he produced about 100 recordings before he started Arbiter.

"I began to wonder," he said, "if Friedman is an example of someone from a lost culture whose work was documented but now unknown, how many important musicians were not documented?"

One pianist whose commercial recordings were few, but whose recital tapes revealed a masterly interpreter, was Horszowski, who died in 1993 (at 100, like Valmalète). After preparing a recording of Horszowski's 1940 recital at the Vatican for Pearl in 1994, Mr. Evans decided to go his own way.

His next Horszowski project, concert recordings of Mozart sonatas, became the first Arbiter release. Beethoven and Bach recitals by Horszowski followed, as did discs devoted to Walter Giesecking, Benno Moiseiwitsch, Vladimir de Pachmann and Leo Sirota, all legends among piano collectors.

Other restored rarities include a compilation of recordings by the pianist and composer Ferruccio Busoni and his students, and a collection featuring the violist and composer Paul Hindemith playing Mozart, Bartok and Beethoven.

And one fascinating disc brings together recordings conducted by Richard Strauss (from 1929), Felix

Weingartner (from 1914) and Oskar Fried (from 1924-25). Mr. Evans says he has perfected a proprietary system for lifting sound from the groove walls of 78-r.p.m. discs, and thanks to the clarity of his transfers, a listener can hear the brass and woodwind instruments that were added to give string lines greater heft for the old recording horn.

The Arbiter catalog is nothing if not eclectic. New music, though not plentiful, is represented in mid-1970's concert recordings of David Borden's "Continuing Story of Counterpoint" and "C-A-G-E, Part 3."

Recently, Mr. Evans started a subsidiary, World Arbiter, to release blues and world-music recordings. The blues discs connect to another chapter of his life: his high school days, when he would cut class and ride to Jamaica, Queens, for guitar lessons with the Rev. Gary Davis. "The Sun of Our Life," a collection of Davis's improvisations and songs recorded in the mid-1950's, was Arbiter's blues debut. A compilation of 26 recordings from the 1920's by Blind Lemon Jefferson was the second release, and Mr. Evans promises that more will follow, including discs exploring the blues roots of gospel.

World Arbiter has also dabbled in Indian ragas, a Sufi trance ceremony and "Lost Sounds of the Tao," a recital of music for the qin, a Chinese stringed instrument. But its most striking offering so far is "The Roots of Gamelan," devoted partly to recordings made in Bali in 1928, and partly to duo-piano transcriptions by the composer Colin McPhee, recorded with Benjamin Britten in 1941.

"These are the first recordings of the gamelan, and they had incredible consequences," Mr. Evans said. "Colin McPhee had some friends in Paris who brought the recordings back from Bali in 1929, and when he heard them he gave up Western music, moved to Bali and began transcribing the music and writing books about it. What McPhee did interested composers like Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass, and led to the creation of Minimalism.

"So that's the after-effect. But there's more. When Edward Herbst, the musicologist who wrote the liner notes, brought these recordings back to Bali, he found that the grandchildren of some of the players who were recorded in 1928 are now prominent gamelan composers. They had never heard these recordings, and they included a piece that no one

knew. So in a way, this is a repatriation project. Everyone thinks of world music as going somewhere and taking the music out. We're bringing it back."

Mr. Evans says a big hit for Arbiter is a disc that sells 2,000 copies. Clearly, running the label doesn't pay his rent, and he recently transformed it into a nonprofit corporation. It is supported mainly by his day job: Mr. Evans and his wife, Beatrice Muzi, run the Escuela Italiana, an Italian language and culture school in Greenwich Village.

"I can't think of a recording that we haven't broken even on," he said. "But this is an arts organization. It's not a business in any way. I do it because the culture is at stake."

MUSIC Correction: March 13, 2005, Sunday An article last Sunday about Arbiter, a nonprofit record label directed by Allan Evans, misidentified the language school in Greenwich Village run by Mr. Evans and his wife, Beatrice Muzi. It is Scuola Italiana, not Escuela Italiana.