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News

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ORION ENSEMBLE ILLUMINATES LATE ROMANTIC RARITIES

New CD Brings World Premiere Recordings of Works for Clarinet, Piano, and Strings by Walter Rabl and Josef Labor

The Orion Ensemble makes its commercial recording debut with world-premiere recordings of late-Romantic chamber works for clarinet, piano, and strings by two long-forgotten luminaries of *fin de siècle* Vienna, both of whom knew — and composed in the classically informed style of — Johannes Brahms.

Twilight of the Romantics: Chamber Music by Walter Rabl and Josef Labor (Cedille Records CDR 90000 088) unearths two rare gems that stand alongside Brahms's own late clarinet chamber music as major contributions to the genre: Rabl's Quartet in E-Flat Major for Clarinet, Violin, Cello, and Piano, Op. 1, of 1896 and Labor's Quintet in D Major for Clarinet, Violin, Viola, Cello, and Piano, Op. 11, composed in 1900.

Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music, quoted in the CD booklet, describes Rabl's chamber works as "fresh and enjoyable compositions of considerable artistic worth, clear and simple in form, thoroughly natural and unforced in expression."

Rabl's Quartet, Op. 1, for clarinet and piano trio is believed to be the only known 19th-century work scored for precisely those instruments. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* calls the quartet "notable for its unusual scoring and skilful melodic writing."

Rabl (1873-1940) entered it in a competition held by a prestigious Vienna music society whose honorary president was Brahms. The quartet won first prize, and at Brahms's behest, it was published along with several other Rabl works.

The quartet is particularly inventive in its second movement, which incorporates a funeral march, mazurka, song, fugue, and march of triumph and involves six different tempo indications, two meter signatures, and a variety of textures. The quartet's finale explores vast harmonic territory.

Unlike Rabl, Labor (1842-1924) was never mentored by Brahms, but he frequented the same artistic circles and shared Brahms's conservative Romantic style. Among his supporters was Austria's prominent and culturally influential Wittgenstein family. Pianist Paul Wittgenstein commissioned a concerto for left hand from Labor before going on to offer commissions to Strauss, Ravel, Britten, and Prokofiev. Philosopher (and amateur clarinetist) Ludwig Wittgenstein considered Labor among "the six truly great composers" along with Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms. Among Labor's students were Alma Schindler, who later married Gustav Mahler; Paul Wittgenstein; and Arnold Schoenberg.

The first movement of Labor's Quintet, Op. 11, employs a traditional harmonic structure but traverses many keys. He frequently contrasts the sonority of the strings and clarinet with that of the piano in *concertante* fashion. The second movement opens with a folk-like melody in the clarinet that perhaps suggests his Bohemian roots. The unusually structured third movement opens with a keyboard fantasia, followed by string solos and a violin cadenza, with 16 meter changes, almost as many tempo changes, and sudden dynamic shifts along the way. The finale is a theme and variations, where each variation builds upon the last.

In her CD liner notes, clarinetist and teacher Bonnie H. Campbell speculates about why these works faded from public view. She notes that Rabl's composing career was brief: after the

1903 debut of his final composition, the surprisingly Wagnerian opera *Liane*, he devoted himself to opera conducting and, later, piano accompaniment. Labor was blinded by smallpox in early childhood, and perhaps this disability hindered him from vigorously and widely promoting his work. Lastly, both works arrived at the dawn of musical Modernism and might have seemed passé to the newest tastemakers.

Founded in 1992, the Orion Ensemble launched its first subscription concert series in 1993-94. Its artists are Jennifer Marlas, viola; Kathyne Pirtle, clarinet; Florentina Ramniceanu, violin; Diana Schmück, piano; and Judy Stone, cello. Among its other honors, the group received first prize in the festivals category of the 2000 Chamber Music America/ASCAP Awards for Adventurous Programming. The Orion is ensemble in residence at Roosevelt University's Chicago College of Performing Arts.

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Twilight of the Romantics: Chamber Music
by *Walter Rabl and Josef Labor*
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 088)

Rabl: Quartet in E-flat Major for Clarinet, Violin, Cello, and Piano, Op. 1
Labor: Quintet in D Major for Clarinet, Violin, Viola, Cello, and Piano, Op. 11

The Orion Ensemble