

**The Six Piano Sonatas: Sophie-Carmen Eckhardt-Gramatté.** Marc-André Hamelin, piano. Toronto, ON: Centrediscs CMCCD 16611, 2011. 2 compact discs (119:21). Contents: CD 1. Sonata No. 1 (12:29) – Sonata No. 2 (22:36) – Sonata No. 3 (26:26). CD 2. Sonata No. 4. (28:49) – Sonata No. 5 (14:27) – Sonata No. 6 (14:34). Reissue of the 1991 Altarus recording (AIR-CD-9052). \$23.98.

Eckhardt-Gramatté was a respected European composer and performer who spent the final two decades of her life as a naturalized Canadian citizen in Winnipeg. She has been adopted as a Canadian composer, although her piano sonatas display an eclectic mix of European models since they were all composed prior to her immigration to Canada. Born in Moscow, Eckhardt-Gramatté's musical training took place during the first decades of the twentieth century in Paris, Berlin, and Barcelona, where she was exposed to the major innovations of the European avant-garde; these works are influenced by the many composers whose compositions she heard and performed. A virtuoso pianist and violinist, Eckhardt-Gramatté also wrote these works to serve as showpieces for her prodigious abilities.

The compact First Sonata, written in 1923, is light and concise in texture, at times almost Baroque in its flavor; its mosaic-like thematic treatment is reminiscent of Scarlatti. Completed shortly after her taking up residence in Barcelona, it is also influenced by the ornamental and rhapsodic style of the Spanish composers of that time, perhaps more akin to Granados than Albéniz.

The next three sonatas are all large-scale, four-movement essays in neo-Romantic style. The writing for the piano is wonderful in its variety of sounds and technical display, ranging from Scriabin and Berg to Debussy and Messiaen, with an abiding reliance on Chopin in the more lyrical movements—the Nocturne of the Fourth Sonata is, in fact, an “Hommage à Chopin.” These are all effective works in their use of the instrument and their virtuosity. Individual movements stand out—the Storm movement of the Second Sonata, or the scherzo movement of the Third Sonata, or the left-hand toccata (“Bullfight of the Field Rats”) of the Fourth Sonata are all impressive stand-alone works. However, as a group, these sonatas are not as convincing from a compositional point of view, in that they do not sustain the tautness or rigor of thematic treatment necessary to project architecturally long lines. As a result, even though they are intended to be epic works in scope and pianism, they are not held together by a comparable level of compositional holism.

After a hiatus of almost two decades, Eckhardt-Gramatté returned to write her final two piano sonatas in the early fifties. Both of these three-movement works are smaller in scope, at about half the length of their predecessors, and substantially tighter in their construction. The Fifth Sonata juxtaposes tonal and serial themes, and the sonorities seem less derivative in their concept; the treatment of materials in the theme and variations finale keeps the listener engaged throughout. The Sixth Sonata plays an interesting structural “game.” The first movement is a *bis* of the tonal left-hand toccata of the Fourth Sonata; the second is a right-hand sonority piece in atonal style. The finale

then admirably combines the two previous movements in a showcase of compositional intelligence.

This recording is a re-issue of the 1991 Altarus recording; it is an excellent decision by the Canadian Music Centre to keep it available in its catalogue. It is difficult to imagine that there could be better performances of these works than those given here by the renowned Canadian pianist, Marc-André Hamelin. The formidable writing is handled by Hamelin with apparent ease. Furthermore, he does an outstanding job in capturing and projecting the contrasting styles among the various movements; for example, the lightness of texture of the First Sonata is pristine in its clarity, compared to the large Romantic sweep and sound palette of the Second Sonata. He never over-romanticizes, and he ties together the structural fragmentation through his dynamism. As a pianist who is also a fine composer in his own right, Hamelin has understood the need to tighten the formal aspects of these works, and he holds them together as well as anyone could. If there is a sense of the epic in the middle-period sonatas, it is entirely due to his grasp of the performance demands. Because Hamelin has made these works better than the sum of their individual parts, this is an outstanding CD set, and the sheer quality of the performance will reward repeated listening.

*Jon Gonder*  
*School of Performing Arts*  
*SUNY Geneseo*