

GRAMOPHONE Collector

PIANOPHILE CORNER

Harriet Smith delves into the dustier corners of the Romantic piano repertory, from Busch to Stanchinsky

Six discs exploring very different pianistic byways, many featuring premiere recordings.

The Russian **Alexey Stanchinsky** died in 1914 in mysterious circumstances (accident or suicide?) aged just 26. Ekaterina Derzhavina is clearly a true believer in the quality of his output, as her playing and thoughtful booklet-note demonstrate. The earliest pieces here are three *Songs Without Words*, written at 15, and if his music at times has a whiff of the young Scriabin about it, its sheer range of expression and idiom is striking. In the Op 1 *Sketches*, Stanchinsky plays with sonorities that range from the mildly Impressionist via the acerbic (No 8) to a chromatic passacaglia (No 9). He's able to make an impression in a very short space of time (as witness the grave C major Prelude) and the folk-tinged Sonata is full of striking ideas and textures, not least the mysterious second theme of the first movement, while the finale has a bustling clarity that is very infectious. Stanchinsky has in Derzhavina a first-rate advocate, alive to its colour and innovation.

Adolf Busch was born three years after Stanchinsky but outlived him by nearly four decades. Here we have his complete music for solo piano; not surprisingly given Busch's hectic performing life, most of it was written before he reached 30, with the remaining few pieces dating from the last decade of his life. Looking at the work titles, you could ascribe all this music to Brahms, and it is very much from that tradition that Busch comes, with more than a dash of Reger thrown into the harmonic mix. Toccata Classics has released two well-reviewed discs of Busch's chamber music but this is more problematic. Jakob Fichert is not helped by the boxy recording; but, more profoundly, nothing really takes flight and, from the opening Fantasia onwards, there's a distinct lack of rhetoric. Seriousness of intent is built into the fabric of much of Busch's music, but that's not to say it is



Scottish pianist Christopher Guild vibrantly brings to life the music of Ronald Stevenson

without humanity or even a touch of wit. The Sonata from 1922 (of which Rudolf Serkin was a great advocate) is the best thing here in terms of performance but its more mysterious touches in the slow movement pass for little, while the finale is a pretty strenuous affair.

On to happier matters, and Toccata's second volume of **Ronald Stevenson's** piano music impressively performed by the Scottish pianist Christopher Guild. The dual focus of this disc is works linked to folk traditions and music for the young – Stevenson feeling strongly that younger pianists needed real music. That's exactly what he provided in the *Three Scots Fairy Tales* which, with their rhythmic sleights of hand, are the equal of Bartók in his *Mikrokosmos*. That Stevenson was a great transcriber is abundantly demonstrated not only in *Rory Dall Morrison's Harp Book* but also in the *Hebridean Seascapes*, which reimagines the slow movement of Frank Merrick's Second Piano Concerto, a colouristic tour de force, vibrantly brought to life by Guild. Other people's music is joyously evident elsewhere, not least in *A Carlyle Suite* (commissioned to mark the bicentenary of the birth of

Thomas Carlyle), with its sneaky allusions to Chopin and a set of variations each of which parodies a particular style – the expressionist Recitative and March is a particularly biting affair. Guild provides his own compelling notes and he ends with a recording premiere, the touching *Lament for a Blind Harper*, movingly played.

From Scotland to Argentina and a disc of **Alberto Ginastera** from the German pianist Michael Korstick, an artist particularly associated with Beethoven (though more recently he has recorded surveys of Koechlin and Debussy). But boy, can he surmount the prodigious difficulties of Ginastera's music – not only technically but in grasping its spirit too. The vibrant *Danzas Argentinas*, Op 2, open the proceedings with aplomb; and in a classic such as the hypnotic *Malambo*, Op 7, Korstick is motoric without becoming percussive. The *American Preludes* are particularly impressive when the music is fast and furious – lyrical lines could have been sung a little more – but the sense of fun in the Op 19 Rondo is wonderfully caught and he dispatches the concise First and Third Sonatas with great élan.

There's some repertoire overlap with the Colombian pianist Pablo Rojas, who explores a wide range of **Latin American Piano Music** on his Gramola disc. In the *Suite de Danzas criollas* Royas, playing a closely recorded Blüthner, sounds a touch timid alongside Korstick, while the German finds a more natural pace for the *Milonga*, Op 3, Rojas sounding overly spacious here. Elsewhere in the recital, there's a disappointing lack of colour and sheer verve, the contrast between, say, Nazareth, Lecuona and Salgán going for relatively little. And, in Piazzolla's *Milonga del Ángel*, poetry is in short supply.

Jean Roger-Ducasse (1873-1954) was, in his time, much lauded and as a composer mixed with the A-listers, Debussy and Fauré among them. So this disc from Joel Hastings, who died last year at just 46, is a timely reminder of his composerly credentials. Roger-Ducasse's musical language is fundamentally more diatonic than Debussy or Ravel, particularly in the later works, the 1921 *Impromptu* seeming to be moving into a kind of Poulencian realm, a quality still more pronounced in the *Romance* (1923). Among the most striking pieces here is *Rythmes*, its shimmering, shifting textures most persuasively coloured by Hastings. The Prelude in A minor is yet another example – and a vivid one too – of French composers' obsession with all things Spanish, while the second of the *Quatre Etudes* is a twinklingly good-natured fugue. Altogether a fascinating snapshot of a composer who was a key figure on the French scene. **G**

THE RECORDINGS

	Stanchinsky Piano Works Ekaterina Derzhavina Profil PH17003
	Busch Complete Music for Solo Piano Jakob Fichert Toccata Classics TOCC0245
	Stevenson Piano Music, Vol 2 Christopher Guild Toccata Classics TOCC0388
	Ginastera The Piano Music Michael Korstick CPO CPO555 069.2
	Various Composers Latin American Piano Music Pablo Rojas Gramola 99115
	Roger-Ducasse Piano Works Joel Hastings Grand Piano GP724

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