



## Reviews of *Première Rhapsodie*

**CACD77020: Som Howie *clarinet*, David Howie *piano***



Young clarinetist Som Howie was born in Australia, but now lives between Stockholm and London. This is his debut album, with his father David at the piano, and it's a marvellous introduction to the repertoire. There's the beautiful title piece by Debussy; some exciting arrangements of Romanian Folk Dances by Bartok; two core clarinet sonatas by Brahms and Francis Poulenc; and an excellent British sonata by Joseph Horowitz, written for the great Gervase de Peyer. This exhilarating album ends with two jazz pieces, including a marvellous arrangement, I have played several times since I got this disc, of Ted Snyder's *Who's Sorry Now?* A brilliant debut, not to be missed.

*David Mellor, Classic FM*

### Sheer Joy

There's something for everyone on this debut CD featuring young Australian clarinetist Som Howie with his father David on piano. Of all the discs I've reviewed, this is the one I'm most enthusiastic about. It's an amazingly demanding recital and I have no reservations about any part of it.

The disc opens with Debussy's *Première rhapsodie* - one of the best known pieces in the repertoire, and you won't get a better performance than this. The clarinetist has a lovely expansive open sound, fantastic intonation and firm control over the full range of his instrument at all dynamics. He creates the right amount of tension and relaxation in this work, his timing is judged to perfection and his fast passages are very impressive. This goes for the rest of the disc too.

Béla Kovács' *Hommage à Manuel de Falla* is the only work here that I hadn't heard before. It obviously draws on flamenco, and is a great piece when played with panache. It is a solo work and quite difficult to bring off.

Poulenc's is probably my favourite clarinet sonata, and it's very obvious that both artists here understand this work very well. In this late piece, completed, I think, just before the *Oboe Sonata*, which was his last work, one really has to be at the top of one's awareness to bring out the lightening changes of mood, especially in the two outer movements. The sheer joy that this music gives both performers is clearly evident in the opening movement. The second movement contains the right balance of lyricism, gravity and drama, never wallowing in sentiment. The third movement is a dazzling display, full of good humour, and it held my attention until the glorious last note.

This is followed by Béla Bartók's beloved *Romanian Folk Dances*. I have known this for piano, and of course have heard the violin and piano version, but this is the first time I have heard the dances on clarinet and piano, which works very well. Again the artists have captured the characteristics of these dances perfectly.

This is followed by one of the most important works in the clarinet repertoire, the F minor Sonata, which is one of Johannes Brahms' autumnal works requiring very careful interpretation to really bring it off. I heard the great John McCaw play this in recital towards the end of his playing career, and it was impressive, but young Som Howie, playing it here near the beginning of his career, delivers, to my mind, a superior performance.

The opening movement is brooding and restless, yet epic and solid at the same time. The artists delivered a very fine rendition of this most difficult movement.

The second movement represents, to me, a mature man looking back over his life - the poignancy of lost youth, but also the golden acceptance of maturity. This is a beautifully thought-out performance, with climaxes perfectly felt and some beautifully lyrical piano supporting the mellifluous, weaving clarinet.

The next movement is a waltz, joyous and graceful, with lovely gestures and a reflective and wistful middle section. The finale is lively, with some rapid changes of mood that can catch the unwary, but this performance is spot on, and the whole sonata here is very satisfying.

I think there is a version of Ravel's *Pièce en forme de Habanera* for most instruments, but I have heard none better than this performance, which was just seductive enough.

Joseph Horowitz's lovely sunny *Sonatina* from 1981 owes much to the influence of jazz. The opening movement, very stylishly played, reminds me somewhat of York Bowen, and the clarinetist obviously loves the beautiful, heartfelt second movement.

The last movement swings. I can sense the influence of Gershwin here, there's a carefree happiness, and Howie father and son seem to love performing this work.

The disc is rounded off by two little contemporary jazz pieces which both make great encores. *Who's Sorry Now?* by Ted Snyder really epitomises this disc, with all its virtuosity and flair, and is flawlessly executed by both artists.

Sid Phillips' *Clarinet Cadenza* is more lyrical and laid back, but is again beautifully executed.

I really heartily recommended this disc and urge you to buy it, if for no other reason than witnessing the joy that this father and son team express in playing together. I'm certain that we are going to hear a lot more of Som Howie.

*Geoffrey Pearce, Music and Vision Daily*

### **Definitive Performance**

Som Howie is the very definition of young virtuoso. He grew up in Sydney, Australia and grew up listening to and studying from Mark Walton at the Conservatorium where his dad, David Howie, was also Walton's regular accompanist. Both are very fine players and this disc offers much to admire; especially for young clarinetists to emulate. This is also a very substantial program containing a few clarinet 'war horses' as well as a few lesser played works and new things.

In the 'war horse' department, Howie's rendition of the Debussy, the Brahms first Sonata and the Poulenc are all very fine; indeed. The pacing in the Debussy is a little different than what is usually heard (very gradual in places; very agitato in others) and I felt similarly about moments in the Brahms. All in all, these are all very fine performances that make for very good additions to the vast collection and the discussions about whose to go hear. In fact, of these three, I enjoyed Som's rendition of the Poulenc the most.

Actually what I enjoyed the most about this collection is the addition of those works which are truly unknown or not played enough. For example, the Joseph Horowitz *Sonatina* is one of my favorite works first heard and played by the great Gervase de Peyer. Similarly, the Bartók *Romanian Folk Dances*, arranged by Székeley and Berkes, have been around for a while even in this iteration but are always worth programming. The Ravel *Pièce en forme de Habanera* is more often performed on alto saxophone (and I think works better as such) but it is a charming and sultry work deserving of more play anytime.

I had mixed thoughts on what, for me, were the three genuine novelties on this program. I was impressed with the unaccompanied work, *Hommage a Manuel de Falla* by Béla Kovacs. This work does not directly quote de Falla very much but does evoke the very Andalucian gypsy spirit that pervades de Falla's music; such as his well-known *Three Cornered Hat*. The two little jazz inspired tidbits which close this set did not do much for me, I have to admit. *Who's Sorry Now* by Ted Snyder and the *Clarinet Cadenza* by Sid Phillips were both written for Mark Walton and are clever, fun and 'showoff-y' but they are an odd and extraneous way to close this program for me. This is already a formidable and lengthy program which could have closed with the Brahms or the Horowitz, let's say, and not included those two jazz works and, perhaps, the Ravel, as well.

Som Howie is a gifted player whose abilities have earned him spots in major symphony orchestras through the world. He is a very talented young man with terrific technique and a liquid, clear tone and his father, David, is a superb pianist and truly symbiotic accompanist. My thoughts on the program are just my opinion and—in fact—if someone wanted a definitive performance of the Poulenc, Horowitz or the Bartok I would certainly not hesitate to recommend this recording for that reason, or just to hear some really fine clarinet playing at any rate.

*Daniel Coombs, Audiophile Edition*