

# Vive la différence!



ROD BISS

MORE than anything, the French like their music to be beautiful.

It should be intellectually too but not dauntingly so, and of course it must be witty, pithy, irreverent and in the fashion of the moment.

It's not surprising that with this love of mellifluous perfection, French composers have had an ongoing love affair with the flute. Of all

instruments it is the most pure and perfect in tone, has the transparency of a mountain stream and an ancient lineage that links it to the Greek myths of antiquity.

On this new release featuring Bridget Douglas, principal flute in the NZSO, and New Zealand pianist Rachel Thomson, the music is all French and from the first half of the 20th century. It is rich in references to Greek myths, shepherds, nymphs, water and misty morning rain, and it's all delicately, tastefully, sensuously beautiful.

Yet unless you are a flute player yourself it is likely that most of the music, and even two of the composers, Philippe Gaubert and Jules Mouquet, will be strangers to you. That's not a matter for concern though; everything here is given affectionate performances that make the music as approachable as your favourite French paintings of the same period.

The six pieces that comprise Debussy's *Bilitis* were an almost forgotten appendix to his better known *Chansons de Bilitis*. He had sketched them out as incidental music for more poems by the same poet, Pierre Louys, but then put them to one



**SYRINX, French music for flute and piano**

**Bridget Douglas (flute), Rachel Thomson (piano)**  
(Trust MMT 2039)

Strong performances of little-known French flute music

★★★½

side until, years later, his publisher persuaded him to turn them into the more saleable piano duets known as the *Six Epigraphs Antiques*.

So even though the CD booklet correctly lists *Bilitis* as an "arrangement by Karl Lenski", it is probably closer to Debussy's original intentions than the later duets or their even later orchestrations. They are marvellous pieces; the flute and

piano texture suits them perfectly and is appropriate to the implications of the titles.

Philippe Gaubert's *Divertissement Grec* is a slender, graceful melody that floats over a background of chords and parallel thirds. Jacques Charpen-tier's *Pour Syrinx* is short but is one of the most evocative pieces on the disc.

There are also tracks by Jules Mouquet and Albert Roussel which live in the same world of slight but elegantly written music.

Maurice Ravel's *Menuet Antique*, the piece you are most likely to recognise, is given robust treatment – Ravel's texture is "somewhat coarse" writes Douglas in her programme notes, and you can hear in the piano part what she means.

Debussy's *Syrinx*, which gives the disc its name, is the essence of Debussy, in effect a miniature version of his *Prelude a l'après-midi d'un faune*. It is simple yet significant, succeeding in less than three minutes to capture perfectly the spirit of the nymph Syrinx.

Douglas plays with a tone that is consistently clear and bright and her phrasing breathes cool logic into the rhapsodic Debussy tracks. Thomson is a no-nonsense accompanist who often values clarity more than atmosphere; she is well matched and well balanced to Douglas's flute.

Together they give valuable performances of an interesting repertoire that you won't find in the major CD catalogues. Flautists will welcome it unreservedly – other (non-French, non-flautist) listeners may feel that there is too much on one disc of the same (ever-beautiful) sound. But we can always ration ourselves to just a few tracks at each sitting, can't we?

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