

Refuge , Music Web

The first time I encountered young German violinist Liv Migdal, was when I had the pleasure of reviewing her CD of music by [Józef Wieniawski](#), accompanied at the piano by her father, Marian. Much in the spirit of salon music, it was a highly entertaining CD with immediate appeal from the very first hearing.

There could scarcely be greater contrast between the three Wieniawski works recorded earlier, and the three recorded on Migdal's recent release on the German GENUIN label. Simply called *Refuge*, it consists wholly of three unaccompanied violin sonatas from Johann Sebastian Bach, Paul Ben-Haim, and Béla Bartók respectively. Migdal's own sleeve-notes, in both English and German, do go some way in helping the listener to appreciate, and empathise with, the personal and innermost emotions expressed which Miss Migdal succinctly encapsulates as '...Using the voice of my instrument to express the utmost at heart...'.

But before going on to explore this latest CD in detail, I feel it apposite to refer once more to my Wieniawski review. Liv and Marian Migdal were not only father and daughter, but they were also a very talented and successful Piano and Violin Duo in their own right. Sadly, however, the Wieniawski was recorded only some six months before Marian passed away after an illness. The often-inconsolable grief any of us feels at times of loss could, no doubt, appear even more intense when this loss is not only personal, but musical, too – as in an intimate performing partner. However, performers – and composers alike – can often turn these otherwise traumatic life-experiences into a source of additional inspiration, and which I think is certainly discernible in parts of the new CD.

While there are, of course, three composers involved here, Migdal starts by adding one more name to the mix, American-born violinist Yehudi Menuhin, who spent most of his performing life in Britain. It will be seen that he will provide some kind of common link between the sonatas recorded. Migdal's commentaries on each work aren't analytical from the musical standpoint, but it's rather like reading a travel-writer's innermost personal thoughts, while you're merely admiring the same view out of the carriage window.

Migdal opens with Bach's Sonata for Solo Violin No.3 in C, which begins with an *Adagio* in 3/4 time, where virtually every crotchet (quarter-note) pulse note is marked, over which the violin weaves its ingenious melodic and harmonic web, by way of complex double and multiple stoppings. Migdal informs us that, in the Bach Sonata, she is using a baroque bow, which not only impacts on the bowing technique as such, but which additionally implies the use of baroque playing practices of the time, particularly the question of vibrato. Effectively vibrato is extremely sparingly employed, which can initially cause a mild cultural shift, until the listener has acclimatised to the sound. Some eminent players favour vibrato – Arthur Grumiaux on Decca 438736-2, or Yehudi Menuhin on Warner Classics 567197-2 – while others like Alina Ibramigova on Hyperion CDA676912 don't. For a kind of 'best of both sides' approach, Christian Tetzlaff on Ondine ODE12992D shouldn't be disappointed. Migdal chooses a tempo where there is sufficient onward motion, but where more-florid passages don't feel unduly rushed. There is an extremely wide dynamic range, as the music ebbs and flows from one climax to the next, before coming to rest on the dominant, leading straight into the second

movement, marked *Fuga*.

This fugue lasts over twelve minutes and, according to Migdal, bears a melodic similarity with the chorale melody *An Wasserflüssen Babylon, da saßen wir mit Schmerzen* (By the waters of Babylon, there we sat in grief). Migdal conjectures whether the allusion here was occasioned by the sonatas having been completed in 1720, the year his first wife, Maria Barbara, died. For me, though, and no doubt a number of listeners of a similar age and origin, the melody may sound, unintentionally, of course, uncannily like the traditional English nursery rhyme and singing game, '*London Bridge is falling down*'. Irrespective of this, nevertheless it's a stunning creation, full of great ingenuity and invention. How Bach manages to keep the listener on the edge of their seat for over twelve minutes, using only four violin strings, once more confirms the composer's true greatness. Migdal rises to the challenge, despatching this fugal colossus with great aplomb, but ever mindful of the polyphonic construction, and always ensuring that subject material 'sings through', by skilfully balancing the dynamics of the other voices.

Unsurprisingly this challenging and draining movement is followed by a less-technically-demanding and shorter *Largo*, a profoundly personal utterance. After this comes what amounts to be a triple-time *perpetuum mobile* in rapid semiquavers (sixteenth-notes) – a simple binary-form movement with both halves repeated. Again the playing is flawless, and the clear definition of the melodic outline is never compromised at any part, because of Miss Migdal's painstaking attention to matters of articulation, phrasing, and other details in the score.

Bach's first two solo sonatas clearly make considerable demands on performers, but his Sonata No 3 is considered to be in a class of its own. It is so taxing on every front that even the usually unflustered Jascha Heifetz apparently used to break out in a cold sweat and suffer nervous bow-shakes when playing it. It is a work of such out-and-out mastery, perfectly shaped and balanced, that, in fact, any flaw in the performance would stick out like a proverbial sore thumb. Needless to say this was never going to be the case in Migdal's altogether stunning performance.

At this juncture, if you were to follow the order of the three works as shown at the front and rear of the CD booklet, you would now be expecting to hear the Ben-Haim Sonata next, and then the Sonata by Bartók. However, here in the body of the booklet, Miss Migdal opts to write next about the Bartók, leaving Ben-Haim until last.

Following his first meeting with Hungarian composer Béla Bartók at the end of 1943, Menuhin could see straightaway that, while Bartók was in financial straits, he was too proud to ask for any kind of handout. So, later the same day, Menuhin asked Bartók whether he might accept a commission to write a solo sonata for him, which Menuhin duly premièred in New York a year later. Significantly, Bach's Sonata No.3 for solo violin also formed part of that same programme.

But when Menuhin first saw the score, he felt that the work was unplayable, not only because of the immense technical difficulties of virtually every kind, and more, but, for Menuhin, this new musical language, which would include micro-intervals – quarter-tones, for example, halfway between C and C#, and thus unavailable on a conventional piano keyboard. There was, in fact, some written communication between violinist and composer during the sonata's evolution, and Bartók did compromise here, by writing a

regular chromatic version of the same passage, which Menuhin opted for at the première. However, Migdal plays the original version of the fourth movement, complete with quarter-tones. For his part, Menuhin did describe the work as 'perhaps the most aggressive and brutal piece of music in his repertoire'.

If you are coming to this work for the first time, I would very much suggest downloading a freely-available score to follow as each of its almost 27 minutes unfolds. Unless you don't read music at all, you will surely find it a rewarding and enlightening experience, and even though the writing sounds so complex and involved, being a single stave to follow does make things somewhat easier than you might imagine. Either way, it's hard to think that it was written now almost 80 years ago.

Like the Bach, it's a four-movement work and there is more than a mere passing structural similarity, even if, of course, it doesn't share the same musical language. The opening *Tempo di ciaccona* harks back to Bach's own famous example in D minor, but it is imbued with the intervals and harmonies of Bartók's native Hungarian folk music. The ensuing *Fuga. Risoluto, non troppo vivo* does start out as a four-part fugue, but it is not a strict example of this long-established contrapuntal form beloved of Bach, since each episode introduces something new to the subject material. The *Melodia Adagio* which follows, again parallels the similarly-placed movement in Bach's Sonata No.3, while the Finale, marked *Presto*, tends to vacillate between a very quiet, yet rapid 'bumblebee-like' passage played with the mute, and an eminently more cheerful melody. In essence, three contrasting themes occur during the closing movement, all of which come together again in the final coda.

From the opening *forte* four-part G minor chord at the start of the Bartók, Migdal leaps forward in time almost 300 years, and within seconds the listener finds themselves in a completely different sound world, to say nothing of the harmonic and melodic ramifications, such is the way she totally transforms her playing, and approach. Even if Menuhin's adjective 'aggressive' might be applied only very sparingly to parts of Bach's Sonata, 'brutal' it certainly isn't. Here Liv Migdal's performance is absolutely superb, and, in what is already quite a marathon for solo violin, she combines great power, phenomenal accuracy, and a highly-developed sense of dynamic contrast with an equal ability to deliver often angular lines still with such a smooth and silky legato. More than all this, though, while she appears to make light work of its bristling technical difficulties, never once does this diminish the composer's personal sense of struggle and severe hardship.

Paul Frankenger was born in Munich in 1897, and was assistant conductor to Bruno Walter and Hans Knappertsbusch, and then served as conductor at Augsburg, before devoting himself to teaching and composition. However, threatened by burgeoning anti-Semitic hostilities, Frankenger decided to emigrate to the then British Mandate of Palestine after the Nazis took power in 1933. Here he changed his name to the Hebrew form, Paul Ben-Haim – 'Son of Heinrich', where he had an ongoing influence on the musical development of his newly-adopted country, which became known as the State of Israel in 1948. Simply put, Ben-Haim would seek to meld elements of European late Romanticism, with Middle Eastern overtones, and produce a style uniquely his own not unlike that of Ernest Bloch.

At a concert in Tel Aviv back in 1951, where Yehudi Menuhin had included the Bartók in

his programme, the violinist asked Ben-Haim to write a solo work for him, giving the composer complete free rein as to matters of form or language, but with just the one stipulation that 'the work should be difficult!' Ben-Haim took just three days to compose the sonata, which Menuhin then hailed as 'excellent'. Two months later, Menuhin premièred the work at Carnegie Hall, the same venue where he had first performed Bartók's Sonata eight years earlier. A few years ago I had the pleasure of getting to know some of [Ben-Haim's chamber music](#), and I was very impressed with what I heard then. I was therefore hoping that his Solo Violin Sonata would be equally as enthralling.

Ben-Haim's Violin Sonata is in just three movements, and, like Bartók's work, is in the same key of G, although only Ben-Haim confirms this in his title. With the Bartók, it's more the case of being a tonal centre, than a key as such. Ben-Haim's writing is eminently more approachable on first hearing, than the Hungarian's, and, being some ten minutes shorter overall, makes somewhat fewer demands on the listener.

The title of the opening movement – *Allegro energico* really sums up the Sonata's overall character to perfection, and is something that Migdal sounds so very much at home in, which then she communicates so effectively to the listener.

The heart of Ben-Haim's sonata is the hauntingly-ethereal slow movement, simply marked *Lento e sotto voce*. Played *con sordino* (with the mute applied) it's just under six minutes of pure magic, repose, and indeed the absolute epitome of 'refuge'. It's like sitting in an empty place of worship, and letting the music wash over you, The performer may well be focussing on a troubled period or incident in their life, as indeed might the listener too. The individual situations will surely be different, but Ben Haim's music here emanates pure love, consolation, and some optimism for the future, perhaps in the manner of the cantor in Jewish worship.

The finale is essentially cast as a dance, of the kind you would often encounter in the Balkans, and usually referred to as the *hora*, or *horra*. As the tempo marking, *Molto allegro*, would suggest, it's a real *tour de force* of electrifying vitality, interspersed with some calmer, more retrospective episodes, where the composer makes use of modal scales, which occur in Hebrew prayers and Klezmer music alike, and folk music from the area.

As the CD booklet doesn't go into any great analytical detail about the music, for those who might like to know, here is just a little specific information on modal scales encountered with some frequency in this part of the world. On a piano keyboard such a scale – often referred to as 'Fraigish', or 'Freygish' – would involve the following notes in ascending order: C – D flat – E – F – G – A flat – B flat – C, if the mode were started on C.

Once again, Migdal's attack is fast and furious, but she always allows the music to breathe, especially in the more reposeful episodes. All in all, then, it's just more superb playing from a seemingly indefatigable performer, but which equally never seems to tire on the listener.

For me, the Sonata by Paul Ben-Haim is the real treasure here, and, I think, fully confirms his position as Israel's national composer, albeit an opinion that I had already formed, when I first reviewed his Chamber Music CD. While Bach's violin works are already well-represented in the catalogue, Liv Migdal brings fresh insight and an

idiosyncratic approach to her performance. I would also add that, for me, I enjoyed the Ben-Haim somewhat more, as a piece of music, than I did the Bartók sonata. The performance was equally as polished and accomplished, but at times I felt that the slightly more concise dimensions of the Israeli work had a significant edge over the Hungarian's more rambling discourse, which did, I think, occasionally sound more like a demonstration of every technical effect and playing device that's possible on a solo violin.

My only very slight reservation refers back to CD track-order. Chronologically-speaking, and to accord with the neat little storyline that appears to link these works in Miss Migdal's short essay, it should be Bach – Bartók – Ben-Haim. I feel that ending with the Ben-Haim would probably have had an even greater impact overall than finishing with the Bartók.

Refuge is still going to be a hard act to follow, and, should you require any further convincing, the actual transfer to disc is second to none. Close-miked, it appears as if you can almost 'see' the player a short distance in front of you, and while this gives you access to every noise involved in note-production, it never distracts, and, if anything, further enhances both the sheer sound of every note, and the almost indescribable splendour of the performance as a whole.

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