



CD Review by [Colin Clarke](#)

**HOME** • Karisa Chiu (vn); Zhu Wang<sup>1</sup> (pn) • CEDILLE 90000239 (70:46)

**SIBELIUS** <sup>1</sup>5 Pieces, op. 81. **DEBUSSY** <sup>1</sup>Violin Sonata. **READ THOMAS** *Incantation*. **CYRIL SCOTT** (arr. Kreisler) <sup>1</sup>*Lotus Land*, op. 47/1. **FAURÉ** <sup>1</sup>Violin Sonata No. 1

The concept of “home” is central here, in the sense of things that hold importance to a person. Many of the pieces here have a sense of yearning; perhaps the lateness of the Debussy signifies “home” in a spiritualist, post-death sense, too. It does mean, though, that this set of fascinating pieces can nestle together on one disc, in some fabulous performances.

Sibelius’s op. 81 offers charming salon pieces which, as Calvin van Zytveld’s excellent notes suggest, “warrant extensive listening for how deftly they convey the stylistic and formal expectations of the urbane genres they represent, while also incorporating flashes of Finnish folk music.” It is a brave beginning, in that the violin’s initial flourishes in the first piece, a mazurka, demand the players leave their cards on the table. Violinist Karisa Chiu is firm of intonation. Chiu and pianist Zhu Wang’s performance of the “Rondino” contains the essence of this mini-rondo’s outward-facing joy before the drawing room returns for a nostalgic valse, its melody of the highest order. Chiu’s way with ornaments is most appealing, while Wang finds fine harmonic shading in the piano contribution. There is a nice sense of abandon to the piano spreads of “Aubade” (crowned by violin pizzicato). It is the final “Menuetto” that offers an opening out of scope, and of heart, and Chiu allows her violin to sing.

There is much competition here. Fenella Humphries makes a fine first on Resonus with Joseph Tong; my discovery here was Kaija Saarikettu and Hui-Ying Liu on Finlandia, a performance that grips from first to last, while Tamsin Waley-Cohen and composer/pianist Huw Watkins provide much enjoyment, and illumination. It is difficult to beat the sheer character of Pekka Kuusisto with Heini Kärkkäinen on Ondine, and Kuusisto’s slight edge of tone offers a touch of rusticity (see *Fanfare* 28:4).

It is quite a way to the rarefied intimacy of Debussy’s late Violin Sonata. This is an individual performance, consistent in intention throughout in offering maximum detail. Wang is

laudably careful with the sustaining pedal (this is rare in Debussy playing these days), and the result is that late Debussy feels as significant as the late periods of Beethoven and Liszt, for example. While the piano took generally something of a back seat in the Sibelius, it is very much a partner here, cocreator as opposed to accompanist. The “Intermède” is one of the finest performances I have heard; and just listen to how Çedille’s recording captures the body and presence of Chiu’s pizzicato. There is something very gentle and simultaneously dignified about this performance. Yes, Stern/Zakin (originally on CBS LP) still hold sway for me, and for a modern recording Isabelle Faust and Alexander Melnikov on Harmonia Mundi (*Fanfare* 42:5), but this is another performance to live with, to absorb, and continually to return to. Chiu and Wang seem to have internalized this piece deeply; their combination of late Impressionism and utter clarity, throughout, is unique.

In *Fanfare* 47:1, Andrew Desiderio waxed lyrical about Clarissa Bevilacqua’s performance of Augusta Read Thomas’s 1994 *Incantation* on Nimbus, a remarkable soliloquy written for violinist Catherine Tait, who performed it just weeks before dying of cancer. He is right, this is a fine account, although Nimbus’ recording feels a little airless. Stefan Hersch on an all-Read Thomas disc is warmer and more convincing, his “swoops” almost vocal. Chiu finds, instead, a sense of leave-taking, and a fragile one at that, as if the music could break into wailing at any moment, but somehow holds back with its whispered, finely sculpted lines. Chiu less performs this piece, and more channels it. This is one of the finest solo violin performances of anything I have heard; I wonder what Chiu’s solo Bach is like.

In total contrast comes Kreisler’s arrangement of Cyril Scott’s *Lotus Land*, a cross between the salon music of the Sibelius and an exotic day out; Chiu’s extreme upper register is jaw-dropping (as is the hand-over between violin and the piano’s swooping glissandos). Finally, Fauré’s Violin Sonata No. 1. Here, there is some loss of detail in the piano, sadly, and while the Debussy might have fearsome opposition to overcome (and holds its own here magnificently), this cedes to Francescati/Casadesus, while in the modern era Judith Ingolfsson and Vladimir Stoupel carry a recommendation on Accentus (see my review in *Fanfare* 40:5). That said, Chiu and Wang’s lean *Andante* carries many of the advantages of their Debussy, with its clarity of texture. The exultant rhythmic play of the Scherzo is well done here. Contrasts abound; the finale feels, in its warmth, something like a homecoming. Very apt for this disc, then.

Definitely, this is Want List material, and is currently shortlisted as such. Karisa Chiu and Zhu Wang are top-flight interpreters of this repertory; I look forward to hearing more from each. **Colin Clarke**

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