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Classical CDs Weekly: Dukas, Peter Fribbins, Monteverdi

Fin-de-siècle delights from France, contemporary British chamber music and vocal treats from the Italian Renaissance

by [Graham Rickson](#) [1]Friday, 28 February 2014

Dukas: *L'Apprenti sorcier*, *Velléda*, *Polyeucte Les Siècles*/François-Xavier Roth
(Musicales Actes Sud)

Some artists are so prolific that sorting the wheat from the chaff is an impossible task. This isn't the case with Paul Dukas - an intensely self-critical composer who destroyed many of his completed works. It's a surprise to discover that he lived so far into the 20th century, his Paris Conservatoire composition class pupils including a young Olivier Messiaen. Much of what survives is magnificent, though there's only one masterpiece on this latest live recording from François-Xavier Roth's enterprising period-instrument outfit. *L'Apprenti sorcier* remains a marvel; as deft and witty as any tone poem by [Strauss](#) [4], and much more concise – which may explain why it's seldom heard in concert. *Les Siècles'* instruments are authentic, but it's hard to judge whether the playing style is what Dukas might have envisaged. This performance is technically brilliant, though surely contemporary audiences would have endured a grainier, more haphazard sound, with wobblier winds and brass. The vibrato-free string sound is a pleasure though – there's a fantastic sense of mystery before the final thump, and the Master's theatrical return a few minutes before the close, expressed via terrifying brass chords, is chilling. Magical stuff.

The cantata *Velléda* formed Dukas's unsuccessful attempt to win the Prix de Rome in 1888. A veiled *Prélude* brims with assurance. Dukas subsequently achieves wonders with a fairly hokey libretto, Roth's performance making the work sound like a mini opera. Jean-Manuel Candénot's villainous Ségenax gets all the best tunes, and the curt, melodramatic close is a fitting payoff. Roth also throws in the *Polyeucte* overture from 1892. [Wagner](#) [5] and [Tchaikovsky](#) [6] are the obvious influences, but the piece still sounds fresh and distinctive. Recorded sound is excellent, and unusually sober sleeve art – Actes Sud's covers are

usually bold, lurid affairs.

Peter Fribbins: Dances & Laments *Turner Ensemble etc* (Guild)

Peter Fribbins' *The Zong Affair* will probably have most listeners scratching heads at the title before they've pressed the play button. Could this opus be based on a little-known Frederick Forsyth novel, or an early Len Deighton spy thriller? Er, no. The sleeve notes and a spot of Googling reveal that this gravely eloquent piece is a septet inspired by Turner's 1840 painting *The Slave Ship* – itself a grisly depiction of the legal massacre of 142 slaves by the crew of a British slave ship in 1781. Fribbins's brooding, pungent music can seem too frenetic in places, though brilliantly scored. The most affecting sections are the brief moments of frozen stillness near the centre, and the downbeat coda, its irregular bass thumps suggesting a faltering heartbeat. Like many contemporary British composers, Fribbins has a day job as an academic. And the fact that you probably won't have heard of him is a matter for regret, as the music collected on this anthology is consistently engaging. The five movements of the violin and cello duet *Dances & Laments* seem to allude to the English pastoral tradition but have their own flavour. There's a beguiling, Dante-inspired piece for cello and piano, at its best in the slower outer sections. Fribbins's angular melodies are magnificent, and only their unpredictability prevents one from attempting to sing along.

Some of the same romanticism is at play in the piano trio *Softly, in the dusk*, suggested by a D H Lawrence poem. There's an impressive moment four minutes in, when the violinist soars above cello triplets. In lesser hands this could resemble corny pastiche, but here it sounds terrific. *Porphyria's Lover* was inspired by a Browning dramatic monologue, idiomatically scored for flute and piano. Performances throughout, drawn from a variety of performers and locations, are excellent. Enjoy this disc in one sitting, and wallow in the final organ piece, a magisterial slow fugue closing with a sonorous, satisfying cadence.

Monteverdi – Heaven and Earth *The King's Consort/Robert King* (Vivat)

We begin with a 40-second toccata from Monteverdi's *Orfeo* – little more than a succession of triadic cornett blasts over a sustained bass note. It's incredibly simple, but so evocative, and a brilliant curtain-raiser for what amounts to a Monteverdi greatest hits collection. The music assembled here is a choice selection of madrigals and operatic extracts, performed by a stellar cast. Every track delights, and you leave this disc bowled over by Monteverdi's versatility – a composer able to invoke sensual delight as well as deep tragedy. Listening to tenors Charles Daniels and James Gilchrist duetting in the bitter *Interrotte speranze* should be enough to convert any sceptic; the way in which the voices share a line, then dividing and reconvening is emotionally affecting and technically brilliant. They're equally good in the catchy *Zefiro torna* – initially singing over an endlessly repeated jaunty chaconne. Just as you're about to drift off, Monteverdi abruptly changes direction, slowing down to heart-stopping effect.

Sarah Connolly [7] is outstanding in *A Dio, Roma*, and the wonderful Carolyn Sampson shines in the madrigal *O come sei gentile*. The blend of voices in the *Lamento d'Arianna* is worth the disc price on its own, only capped by the extended closing sextet *Hor che 'l ciel, e la terra* – eight of the most astonishing musical minutes you'll experience. The closing cadence will leave you reeling. Sensitively accompanied, well-annotated and with superb sound – a remarkable CD.

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