



hopak-style trumpet theme in the finale (at around 2:00). Certainly this is more characterful than the oft-recommended account by Dmitri Alexeev and Philip Jones with the English Chamber Orchestra (on Classics for Pleasure), which sounds matter-of-fact and rather too 'tasteful' in comparison. But better still is Marshev's performance, more alert than Uhlig's to the music's ironies and to its parodies as well as showing a keener sense of comic timing, aided and abetted by the suitably brash style of trumpeter Jan Karlsson and the alert playing of the Helsingborg SO.

Daniel Jaffé

Ruggles *Evocations: Four Chants for Piano. Visions. March. Parvum Organum. Valse Lente. Mood*. Organum**. Toys***. Ich fühle deinen Odem***. Windy Nights***. Prayer***. Exaltation. Angels.*
Donald Berman (pf); ***Daniel Stepner** (vn);
****Christopher Oldfather** (second pf);
*****Susan Narucki** (soprano).

New World Records 80629-2 **559** 53 minutes **DDD**

Carl Ruggles is a problem for us. An American experimental composer who created a tiny output of austere and maddeningly inscrutable pieces, his reputation rests largely on the advocacy of later colleagues like Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison. Ruggles was a New Englander to his core and a friend of Charles Ives who, apparently, admired his music enormously. But he was also a notoriously prickly sourpuss whose racist and anti-Semitic views frequently alienated those who wanted to champion his cause. And so the problems multiply – 'Creation is soul-searching. Nothing is ever finished,' he famously wrote, but part of Ruggles's problem in bringing pieces to successful conclusions lay in his unstable compositional technique. The likes of Cowell, Nicolas Slonimsky and pianist/musicologist John Kirkpatrick were all drafted in to whip Ruggles's scores into shape before performances. Compositional process equalled constant agony for Ruggles and he was deeply needy, his talent for misanthropy throwing his life into conflict and frustration.

Yet despite it all Ruggles remains mesmerising and impossible to dismiss. He could, in his inner ear, add up a mass of twisting dissonant counterpoint like no other composer. His lines had burnished clarity and he knew how to ape urgency via inner dialectic and



argument. Donald Berman, who previously 'uncovered' Charles Ives for New World, bases this recording on the pioneering editorial work on Ruggles's music undertaken by John Kirkpatrick. Ruggles often wrote one bar-to-a-page, with conventional notation petering out into diagrammatic representation. Berman's sleeve note wrestles with his conscience, wondering aloud whether 'finishing' Ruggles actually does his aesthetic a disservice. Well, I'm pleased he did – *Evocations* is probably the best known of Ruggles's piano works, but our knowledge is greatly enhanced by the bizarre twists of the *Valse Lente* and the steely construct of *Parvum Organum*. The more we know, the more pointed his riddles become.

A key paradox is between the music's tortured creation and its improvisational flow, and Berman exploits this tension between continuity and disjuncture ruthlessly. Even climatic sections, like those in *Visions*, stubbornly lead nowhere – these are climatic contours of material rather than of emotion. Berman's hard sonic and intellectual edge suits the challenges Ruggles meted out perfectly. Problems never solved, but investigated with forensic expertise.

Philip Clark

Fontaine *Seasons.*

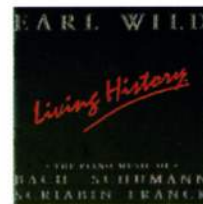
Bruno Fontaine (pf).

Ambrosie AMB 9974 **559** 78 minutes **DDD**

Here is a truly unique disc – and one that in its intellectual and technical force stands comparison with Keith Jarrett's iconic 1975 Cologne concert, albeit without the latter's cumulative intensity.

Like Keith Jarrett, Frenchman Bruno Fontaine is equally at home in the jazz and classical repertoire, both solo and chamber (he has recorded the complete cello and piano works of Fauré for Ambrosie). He is also a conductor, arranger and composer, and his eclectic tastes are reflected in these twelve improvisations, recorded with 'no preparation, no planning, no editing, no correcting'.

All but two are based on original material – or perhaps no material. The exceptions are the first, which, as if in homage to Jacques Loussier, is a kind of meditation on the opening Prelude from Bach's '48', alternating snatches of that work with 'dreamy' flourishes



in the piano's upper and lower registers, and the sixth, which toys with Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* theme. Elsewhere there are echoes of Barber's Sonata (second movement) and Mussorgsky's *Pictures* (Bydlo) and sonorities reminiscent of Prokofiev, Ravel, Scriabin and Shostakovich (in his light vein). These are all wrapped in a variety of rhythms, textures and harmonies – from march to waltz, from smoky smooch to spiky scherzo, from the diatonic to the atonal. Fontaine has the control and virtuosity required to convey the varying moods he imagines, and the recordings are suitably atmospheric.

Neither the disc's title nor the names of the four 'trptychs' (each comprising three 'movements') – nor indeed the esoteric booklet note – is of any help in understanding the music, which defies description and creates a world of meaning entirely its own. (There are no seasonal connotations as in Vivaldi's and Tchaikovsky's eponymous works.)

Any recording of improvisation is necessarily a paradox, in that it can be heard only once as a spontaneous creation; thereafter its flights of fancy are trapped by predictability. It is a measure of Fontaine's achievement that his inspirations withstand repeated listening, constantly challenging our ideas about the nature of jazz and classical music.

Joe Laredo

Chopin Complete scherzos and ballades.

Earl Wild (pf).

Ivory Classics 75001 **559** 68 minutes **DDD**

Bach Partita no.1 BWV825 in B flat. **Scriabin** Piano Sonata no.4 op.30 in F sharp. **Franck** Prelude, Chorale and Fugue. **Schumann** Fantasiestücke op.12.

Earl Wild (pf).

Ivory Classics 75002 **559** 74 minutes **DDD**

This recording of the complete scherzos and ballades was made in May 1990 on Wild's preferred piano at the time, a Baldwin. The scherzos are bold and dramatic. In the B minor scherzo there is a well-defined contrast between the violent outer sections and calm central section, while the E major scherzo is delightfully playful with its sky-rocketing arpeggios. In this, and elsewhere, Wild's clarity of articulation is remarkable. Other pianists may choose to find more menacing drama in the ballades, but Wild

