

FEATURE REVIEW by **Jerry Dubins**

📺 BRAHMS Piano Sonata No. 3. DEBUSSY *Images oubliées*. FALLA *7 canciones populares españolas* (trans. E. Halffter) • Rebecca Penneys (pn) • FLEUR DE SON 58037 (Blu-ray: 74:40) & Interviews



Rebecca Penneys: A Personal and Musical Portrait

DVD; NTSC
Fleur De Son



While pianist Rebecca Penneys turns up in a number of previously reviewed albums, both as soloist and in duo with violinist Ruggiero Ricci, I'm guessing that her name doesn't come up in dinner table conversation for most readers. Therefore, a little background is in order.

A professor of piano at the Eastman School of Music since 1980, and Professor Emerita since July 2017, Penneys has been a guest artist, keynote speaker, and pedagogue nationally and internationally for over 40 years. Her current and former students include prizewinners in international competitions and hold important teaching posts on every continent. Concurrent with her busy teaching and lecturing schedule, Penneys has maintained an active concert schedule.

Since 2001, Penneys has been Artist-in-Residence at Florida's St. Petersburg College, and since 2015 a Steinway Artist-in-Residence at the University of South Florida. The Florida connection figures prominently in this Blu-ray (also available as a DVD) release. In 2013, Penneys established and inaugurated the Rebecca Penneys Piano Festival (RPPF) at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Held in July, in the University's all-Steinway facility, the RPPF is entirely donor sponsored and is open, tuition-free, to aspiring college-age pianists, 18 to 30, from around the globe. A smaller version, RPPF-Mini, is held in January on the Gibbs campus of St. Petersburg College. It's billed as a short "boot-camp" for pianists 21 to 31, to assist them in their transition from students to teachers/performers.

This new release is Volume One in a series that will explore the life of renowned pianist Rebecca Penneys. She states her mission thusly: "My passion has been about living a life in music through teaching and performing. As I experience my eighth decade, the DVD project gives me an opportunity to present various composers and personal comments on subjects that are very near and dear to me. These are my gifts to young pianists and piano teachers, and to a future I will not see or hear. I feel inspired exploring relationships between motion and emotion with sound, the voice of the piano, as the primary carrier of emotion against a backdrop of different performance traditions. Each release has a particular emphasis that I hope future generations of pianists and piano lovers will cherish. On Volume One, I perform some of my favorite works by Brahms, Debussy, and Falla, and I also describe vision, mission and legacy themes of the Rebecca Penneys Piano Festival."

In short, the Blu-ray disc at hand is Penneys's "gift of love," and profound commitment to the piano, to the festival she founded and actively participates in as teacher and mentor, and to the aspiring future pianists and teachers that pass through the program. The segments of the disc labeled "Interviews" are a bit misleading, for there is no interrogator posing questions to Penneys. These are monologues in which it's just Penneys facing the camera and speaking in the most sincere tones about her love of music and the piano, her lifelong dedication to teaching, and the vision, goals, and mission of Rebecca Penneys Piano Festival. These monologues, lasting between three and five minutes, are interspersed between the three musical works Penneys performs—

Brahms's Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Debussy's *Images oubliées*, and Manuel de Falla's *Seven Popular Spanish Songs* in a transcription for solo piano by Ernesto Halffter. As everyone is surely aware, Brahms's three piano sonatas are among the composer's earliest published works. They were written by the 20-year-old Brahms in 1852–53, and for reasons no one knows, he never wrote another piano sonata, though his works for solo piano in other genres are many. The sonatas are big, ambitious, and bravura works, completely in character for a young composer full of grits and wanting to make his mark. The technical requirements are very demanding, treacherous even in the wide jumps from one end of the keyboard to the other.

Penneys's playing is nothing short of amazing. She takes the leaps and bounds in her stride without a wince or straining motion to betray her composure. By her own admission, Penneys has been playing Brahms's F-Minor Sonata for years, and she expresses her special regard for and devotion to the work. With every performance of it, she tells us, new secrets reveal themselves to her. So it's no wonder that her reading of the score is not just note-perfect but deeply communicative.

An intimacy is brought to the fore by Penneys reading of the first two numbers of the Debussy, *Lent* and *Sarabande*, though I have to say that the concluding number, *Très vif*, a toccata-like piece, would not be out of place as a brilliant, virtuosic show-stopper in any salon program, especially as it's played by Penneys.

In their original guise, Falla's *Seven Popular Spanish Songs*, composed in 1914–15, are actual songs for voice and piano. Madrid-born composer and conductor Ernesto Halffter (1905–1989) had a long relationship with Falla, which included composition lessons. Halffter's arrangement of Falla's *Seven Songs* for orchestra is well known, but apparently he also transcribed them for solo piano as well, which Penneys performs as her concluding number on the disc.

As mentioned, this is Volume One in a series of DVD/Blu-ray discs Penneys is producing to explore her life and loves in music. Based on this first volume, I have to say that it's a life and love well worth sharing. This is a real treasure and highly recommended to anyone who wishes to enter the remarkable world of Rebecca Penneys.

Jerry Dubins

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