


**FEATURE REVIEW** by [Christopher Brodersen](#)

 **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



It's rare to find a pianist who is equally at home in the concert hall and in the classroom, but Rebecca Penneys is such an individual. Recently retired from the piano department at the Eastman School of Music, she is now quite unselfishly dedicating her retirement years to running the Rebecca Penneys Piano Festival, or RPPF, a tuition-free summer festival-cum-workshop founded in 2013 that attracts aspiring young pianists from around the world. Included on the Blu-ray disc is an interview with the artist, broken up into four segments interspersed between the musical selections, in which she explains the history and workings of RPPF.

Penneys is certainly no slouch at the piano, as her many glowing reviews will attest—one Polish critic labeled her “a genius at the piano.” Included on this Blu-ray disc is an intense performance of the Brahms Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, op. 5, one of the toughest nuts in the piano repertoire to crack. Switching gears, Penneys gives us an introspective performance of Debussy's Images from 1894, a suite of three movements for piano marked Lent, Sarabande, and Trés vitæ that was first published in its final form in 1977. The musical offerings conclude with the Siete canciones populares españolas of Manuel de Falla, arranged by Ernesto Halffter. Penneys seems to have no trouble at all slipping into the Spanish idiom.

Throughout I was drawn to the magical sound of her Steinway D grand, which dates from 1891. Technically it's a “transitional” instrument; with its metal frame and cross-stringing in the bass it resembles modern Steinways, but its hammers are unlacquered, which is probably the main reason behind the beautiful upper register; that, and the pianist possesses the requisite expressive, caressing touch. You won't hear any banging and clanging on this disc, even in the most dramatic moments of the Brahms. It's the sort of piano playing that is all too common these days, but thankfully, the complete antithesis of how Rebecca Penneys plays.

The visual component, missing from regular sound recordings, is most welcome here. It was fascinating to study Penneys at work: the concentration, the economy of motion, all of which heighten the viewer's appreciation of the music and give the performances a sense of occasion. (The music is virtually error-free, and remarkably, consists of straight run-throughs with no discernible patches or edits). We are treated to three different camera angles, including one from above and to the side that affords a clear view of her hands. The sound, in conventional stereo, is acceptable.

An excellent, engaging portrait of a highly accomplished pianist who has dedicated her life to the “care and feeding” of aspiring young pianists. Warmly recommended.

**Christopher Brodersen**

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