

CD Review

Impromptu

Sarah O'Brien, harp
Audite, 97.807, 2022
(1 CD: 80 minutes) €19.99

The cultural symbolism of the harp has long overshadowed the nuances and idiosyncrasies of its repertoire. A historical stigmatization of the harp as a 'feminine' instrument – overabundantly frivolous and lacking in gravitas – shifted attention away from a critical assessment of its unique sonic qualities.¹ Swiss harpist Sarah O'Brien's *Impromptu* seeks to remind listeners that the harp, whose history spans thousands of years, has continued to fascinate composers and performers alike because of its beguiling resonance and timbral intimacy.²

An ideal genre for exploring an instrument's idiomatic sound, the impromptu suggests that spontaneity feels most organic when it is rooted in the familiar. In *Impromptu*, the familiar is the harp's naturally rich sonority that occurs when the strings are simply allowed to do what they do best, which is to reverberate. In the album's liner notes, which comprise an interview conducted in German between Swiss music journalist Florian Hauser and O'Brien (an English translation by Aaron Epstein follows), O'Brien says recording a compendium of harp impromptus was inspired by her fascination with 'the improvisational, that is, what arises directly in the moment. This suits the harp very well. After all, on our instrument we have no breath and no bow, we can only pluck and try to integrate and incorporate the tone color that arises afterwards into the musical content that we want to express' (p. 14). In other words, the performer's spontaneous

¹ Olga Gross, 'Gender and the Harp, Part I', *The American Harp Journal* 13/4 (1992): 30–33, and Olga Gross, 'Gender and the Harp, Part II', *The American Harp Journal* 141 (1993): 28–35.

² The American harpist Roslyn Rensch offers an overview of Western and non-Western harp history (ca. 3000 BCE to the twentieth century), organology, and iconography in *Harps and Harpists*, rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017). For period-specific literature about the harp, Hans Joachim Zingel's *Nineteenth-Century Music for the Harp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) and Mathilde Aubat-Andrieu, Laurence Bancaud, Aurélie Barbé and Héléne Breschand, *Guide to the Contemporary Harp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019) are excellent scholarly resources. For primary sources on harp technique and philosophy of sound production, one may consult various historical treatises on harp playing, including: Félicité de Genlis, *Nouvelle méthode pour apprendre à jouer de la harpe* (Paris: Mme. Duhan et Compagnie, 1811; Genève: Minkoff Reprint, 1974); Georges Cousineau, *Méthode de harpe* (Paris: Cousineau Père et Fils, ca. 1812); Albert Zabel, *Harfen-Schule* (Leipzig: Zimmermann, 1900); Lucile Lawrence and Carlos Salzedo, *Method for the Harp* (New York: Schirmer, 1929); Henriette Renié, *Méthode complète de harpe* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1946).

gesture – the immediate contact between finger and string – is entirely responsible for creating a resonating sound. It is this philosophy of sonic production, illuminated spectacularly in the impromptu, that coheres O'Brien's choices of both original repertoire and transcriptions for the harp.

Of the seven titled impromptus in the track listing, three fall within the period of the 'long nineteenth century' (1789–1914); the remaining four are twentieth-century works. O'Brien pointedly begins and ends the album with two of the most widely performed impromptus in the classical harp repertoire: Gabriel Pierné's *Impromptu-caprice*, Op. 9 (1900) and Gabriel Fauré's *Impromptu*, Op. 86 (1904). Both composed at the turn of the century, the *Impromptu-caprice* and *Impromptu* demonstrate key characteristics of late French Romantic writing for the harp: brilliant chordal and arpeggiated passages, wide dynamic contrasts, and incessant tempo fluctuations. The *Impromptu-caprice* begins with an *ad libitum* introduction that explores the registral range of the harp by building arpeggios from low to high strings that blends into idyllic trills. Following a declamation of the theme, this opening arpeggio motive returns – this time, as a preface to a lively middle section, after which the theme returns and subsequently extends into a brilliant coda. Throughout the work, Pierné connects each section with sequences of arpeggios and glissandi. O'Brien's approach to these flourishes demonstrates what she does so well as an interpreter: phrasing from the natural colour and shape of the harp's sound rather than emoting artificially or in excess. That organicism permits the improvisatory feel of the impromptu.

Fauré's *Impromptu* was composed only a few years after *Impromptu-caprice*, and its precise compositional origin is the subject of ongoing debate, owing to marked stylistic discrepancies in the style and form of the piece. Fauré had been commissioned by the Paris Conservatory to write his *Impromptu* as a solo harp piece for the end-of-year exams; while the first half of the piece is consistent with his compositional style – especially in reference to his other solo harp work, *Une chatelaine en sa tour ...* – harpists continue to discuss whether the second half was either written or heavily edited by Alphonse Hasselmans (1845–1912), the Paris Conservatory's harp professor and personal friend of Fauré.³ Hasselmans was himself a composer, mainly of the types of miniatures and florid character pieces common during the nineteenth century. Thus, the first six pages of the *Impromptu* are written quite non-idiomatically for the harp, requiring wide, awkward leaps between registers of the harp and attention to intricate voicing between hands.

O'Brien navigates these technical challenges with ease, so the differences between non-idiomatic and idiomatic harp writing may not be evident to the listener. However, it is helpful to know that contemporary harpists' understanding of idiomatic technique comes from compositions by nineteenth-century virtuosic harpists such as Elias Parish Alvars, Félix Godefroid, and Hasselmans. Fundamental to this repertoire is a right-hand dominant idiom, evident in pieces that use either a simple left-handed harmonic accompaniment with virtuosic right-hand material (cf., Parish Alvars' *Sérénade* (1846) and Godefroid's *Carnaval de Venise* (1875) or two-handed arpeggios with melody, usually played by the right-hand thumb (cf. Hasselmans's *La Source* (1898)). In the Fauré a dramatic shift occurs after a marked section break (around 4'20" in the recording) from the non-idiomatic writing previously mentioned to many pages of highly idiomatic

³ Carl Swanson, 'Who Actually Wrote the *Impromptu* of Fauré?', *The American Harp Journal* 17/2 (1999): 39–41.

cascading arpeggios. Despite O'Brien's masterful execution of both halves of Fauré's *Impromptu* – most noteworthy is the warmth of her tone that brings richness and depth to the recording – the piece does come off as bifurcated. Compared to his other known solo harp work, *Une chatelaine en sa tour ...* (1918), which is thematically and stylistically cohesive, the first half of his *Impromptu* ends indecisively, as though it still has somewhere to go. Instead, the listener encounters entirely new material in the second half; rather than merely interjecting, the latter section takes over, transforming the work into a dramatic showpiece that feels distant from its beginning. Nevertheless, one could view that incompleteness as offering a spontaneous sense of possibility; perhaps that quality makes this piece quite truly, an *impromptu*.

Much like the *impromptu* by Pierné and Fauré, Reinhold Glière's *Impromptu* (1908) relies on sweeping chordal and arpeggiated writing, albeit with a much different character that reflects Glière's background as a composer who studied and worked in Moscow for most of his career. Glière's writing in the middle section of this piece evokes not only the style of nineteenth-century Russian composer Mikhail Glinka (cf., his *Nocturne* (1828) for harp/piano), but also *The Lark* (1864), a Liszt-inspired piano arrangement by Mily Balakirev of Glinka's 'A Farewell to St Petersburg'. One feature of note that appears in the *impromptu* by Fauré and Glière is the series of full, rolled chords at the beginning of each piece, which speaks to the harp strings' unique ability to resound long after the initial plucking motion (unlike keyboard instruments, which sound when the key is depressed). As previously mentioned, O'Brien's most compelling quality in this album is her sound – namely, the beautiful suppleness that suits the effortless execution of an *impromptu* so well – and it is that sound that allows the listener to be carried through the soaring lines of Glière's *Impromptu*.

The remaining four *impromptus* are squarely twentieth-century works, increasingly departing from the nineteenth-century stylistic influences audible in the previously discussed pieces. French composer Albert Roussel's *Impromptu* (1919) chronologically follows Glière's *Impromptu*; while it bears formal similarities – for example, a declamatory introduction followed by rhapsodic melodic sections, with dramatic glissandi in between – it is clearly a modernist work. O'Brien, taking this aesthetic change into consideration, modifies her 'spontaneous gesture' appropriately, such as blocking (not rolling) chords and using a more direct attack on the strings. The result is a clean, open sound that she contrasts with the suppleness in more sensitive moments of the piece. Never a sentimental interpreter, O'Brien shines in works that demand evenness and clarity of tone and honest expression; one should be impressed by her ability to present the music *as it is*, without the distraction of too much artistic ego (e.g., excessive *rubato*, extreme fluctuations of tempi).⁴

⁴ It may be helpful to know that O'Brien has studied with the French harpist Pierre Jamet, who was a student of Alphonse Hasselmans at the Paris Conservatory and thus, her technique, which produces a round, supple sound, is well-suited to works directly associated with the Paris Conservatory harp exams (e.g., Pierné's and Fauré's *impromptus*) or by French composers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the classical harp tradition, distinct pedagogical schools emerged in the nineteenth century, due to increased adoption of the double-action pedal harp by virtuoso harpists in the UK (Wales), France, Germany, and Russia (by way of Germany). However, most nineteenth-century repertoire for harp was composed by harpists, and thus, much of it is highly virtuosic and idiomatically

Some of the standout selections on this album are pieces that allow O'Brien to explore subtleties in tone and articulation, in contrast with the late Romantic impromptus that emphasize a more homogeneously rich, supple sound. These pieces comprise twentieth-century harp repertoire by Paul Hindemith, Virgilio Mortari, and Nino Rota, as well as transcriptions of works by well-known Baroque composers François Couperin (*Le Tic-Toc-Choc*), Jean-Philippe Rameau (*Le rappel des oiseaux* and *La poule*), and Domenico Scarlatti (*Sonata in E Major*, K. 380). The common thread of these pieces lies in their background in pre-Romantic styles. Hindemith's *Sonata for Harp* (1939) follows the kind of neo-classical writing popular during the mid-twentieth century; composed in the same year, the *Sonatina Prodigio* by the Italian Mortari is also neo-classical, drawing from older musical forms such as the *gagliarda*, *canzone* and *toccata*. Similarly, the *Sarabanda e toccata* by Rota, an Italian composer famous for collaborations with the film director Federico Fellini, is a two-movement work that contrasts the style of the slow sixteenth-century French *sarabande* with a Baroque-style *toccata*. Although O'Brien does not mention this connection in the album notes, the *toccata* was, like the impromptu, meant to be virtuosic and improvisational in feeling.

O'Brien writes that her rationale for selecting these works is again rooted in advocacy for the harp's sound. The three twentieth-century pieces were all written in consultation with Italian harpist Clelia Gatti Aldrovandi, who 'was able to acquaint the composers with the harp in such a way the instrument became not only comprehensible, but also natural to them' (p. 16). In the case of the four transcriptions, her goal is to demonstrate reverberance as fundamental to creating lyricism on the harp, contrary to the common misunderstanding that Baroque music ought to be played as *secco* as possible on the harp.

If O'Brien's intention is for her listener to better appreciate the natural sound of the harp, it helps to know that sound has evolved over centuries, typically due to the changes in the construction of harps and techniques developed to accommodate those changes. She alludes to this phenomenon in the album notes: 'The harps in Couperin's time, the double harp and the baroque harps, for which Handel also wrote, were totally different instruments from those of today: completely strung, without pedals' (p. 18). Another crucial difference in these period harps – the seventeenth-century *arpa doppia* (double harp) but also eighteenth- and nineteenth-century single-action pedal harps – is lower tension that they would have been strung compared to modern pedal harps. As a result, the strings would be plucked with much less force, relying instead on a more delicate and nuanced approach that was meant to coax the qualities of sound natural

written – what harpists consider to be prototypical Romantic harp technique. In the twentieth century, 1) more non-harpist composers (collaborating with harpists) began writing for the harp, which was influential in expanding, not changing per se, its techniques, and 2) the French-American harpist Carlos Salzedo (1885–1961) codified a new approach to harp technique, aesthetics, and composition. Salzedo, who was inspired by the mannered style of Russian dancer and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky, created a technical methodology grounded in modernist philosophies and was explicitly trying to distance the harp from the (French) Romantic style; however, Salzedo's method is practised most in Anglophone North America and significantly less so in Europe. For more, see the sources by Rensch and Lawrence/Salzedo cited in footnote 2.

to the harp: a timbral richness from the abundance of overtones produced by the low strings and a bright, shimmering quality from the high strings.

With modern pedal harps,⁵ such as the one used in the recording, the string tension is much higher and the instrument body larger, permitting a heavier attack on the strings that then elicits more volume. Whether due to the harp itself or her technique, O'Brien's sound, especially in the lower register, tends to be quite robust; in the opening of Hindemith's *Sonata*, for example, that heaviness leads to a sense of gravitas (whether or not that was her interpretive choice). In contrast, she maintains the historical sonic integrity of the upper register of the harp extremely well – particularly evident in the sparkling 'Toccatà' from *Sonatina Prodigio*, which she executes with elan and enviable technical fluidity.

O'Brien rounds out this feast of sound with three lesser-known impromptus by French composers Jean Cras and Guy Ropartz and Spanish composer Joaquín Rodrigo. Cras's *Deux impromptus* (1925) is a set of contrasting movements, much like the *Sarabande e toccata* by Rota also present in this album. Cras presents the first movement as a languorous display of the harp at its most sonorous and the second movement, a technical whirlwind inspired the capricious movement of water. Ropartz's luscious *Impromptu* (1927) invokes the compositional style of Claude Debussy, and, like fellow Breton Cras, he was influenced by the folk music of Brittany. Finally, the *Impromptu* (1959) by Rodrigo, another composer heavily inspired by folk traditions (for him, of Spain), is the most ruminative and delicately textured of the seven impromptus. Set between the intellectualism of Hindemith's *Sonata* and the grandiosity of Glière's *Impromptu*, Rodrigo's *Impromptu* is a delightful palate cleanser, like a spring rainfall ending with a burst of sunlight.⁶

For listeners unfamiliar with original harp repertoire, O'Brien's *Impromptu* offers the opportunity to hear the harp played masterfully, with the range and depth that comes from years of a harpist familiarizing herself with the sound world of this instrument. Through an eclectic collection of standard and uncommon repertoire, she seeks to present the harp in its natural, impromptu state – absent of contrived techniques or mechanical interventions. As a result, during the last ascent in Fauré's *Impromptu* that mark the final moments of the album, it

⁵ The modern pedal harp uses a double-action mechanism first patented by French harp-maker Sébastien Érard in 1810. However, the size of early nineteenth-century pedal harps was still smaller, with a narrower (straight) soundboard and range of 41 to 43 strings. By the late nineteenth century (c. 1880), the American harp manufacturer Lyon and Healy was producing pedal harps with forty-five strings. In 1895, Lyon and Healy patented the extended soundboard, an important development that improved volume of sound production on the harp. Most concert grand pedal harps (e.g., O'Brien's) now have a range of 47 strings and an extended soundboard. For more on the development of the modern harp, see Rensch, *Harp and Harpists*, chap. 8.

⁶ There are at least 20 other impromptus written for the harp that are not included on O'Brien's CD, most of which are relatively obscure because they are now rarely performed. Titled impromptus that fall within the long Romantic period include works for diatonic pedal harp by Charles Oberthür (1819–1895), John Thomas (1826–1913), Ferdinand Hummel (1855–1928), and Alfred Holý (1866–1948), and works for the chromatic harp – the cross-strung, pedal-less cousin of the diatonic harp popular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – by Henri Büsser (1872–1973) and Gabriel Grovlez (1879–1944).

no longer matters that the harp is a fussy, unwieldy gilded thing; all that one hears is its glorious, clarion sound.

Noël Wan
Florida State University
nwan@fsu.edu

doi: 10.1017/S1479409823000435