



**BAX: *Rhapsodic Ballad*. LIGETI: *Sonata for Solo Cello*. DALLAPICCOLA: *Ciaccona, Intermezzo e Adagio*. CASSADÓ: *Suite for Solo Cello* / Rohan de Saram, cel / First Hand Recordings FHR49**

Released in celebration of the cellist's 80th birthday, these 2015 recordings of solo cello pieces by four varied composers is an interesting one. It opens with the very unusual *Rhapsodic Ballad* by Arnold Bax, unusual because he was much better known for his orchestral works than for chamber music. Yet the harmonies he uses vacillate between the conventional and the modern, which adds interest to the piece.

Next up is György Ligeti's solo cello sonata, and de Saram plays it almost as well as Elena Gaponenko, the extremely talented Russian cellist-pianist. This is one of the composer's earlier, more Bartók-and-Kodály-influenced pieces, but it still bears the mark of his unique musical mind, particularly the unusual, edgy second movement.

Another pleasant surprise is the quite modern-sounding *Ciaccona, Intermezzo e Adagio* by Luigi Dallapiccola, which is wonderfully modern in its harmonic trappings as well as tightly constructed, encompassing three pieces. Particularly interesting, to me, was the *Intermezzo* with its edgy pizzicato and edge-of-the-string bowing. In the "Adagio," the cellist plays slightly out of tune (on purpose) to create a microtonal effect.

By contrast, the Cassadó *Suite* is almost conventional-sounding, more tonal if not melodically regular or enticing to lovers of Italian film or pop-classical music. De Saram plays it with vigor and an excellent tone, giving the music a firm muscular core and bringing out its Spanish influences. This is particularly evident in the second-movement "Danza" with its allusions to folk dance music. In the last movement, the dance element again enters the picture a little after the 2:30 mark, and this time almost sounds like flamenco.

This is an excellent album, one of the finest solo cello recordings I've ever heard. Highly recommended!

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