Paul BEN-HAIM (1897-1984)  
Pan Op. 17, A Symphonic Poem for Soprano and Orchestra (1931) [15:16]  
Pastorale Variée Op. 31b for solo clarinet, harp and strings (1945-1948) [16:57]  
Symphony No. 1 (1939-1940) [28:32]  
Claudia Barainsky (soprano), John Bradbury (clarinet)  
BBC Philharmonic/Omer Meir Wellber  
rec. 16 December 2019 & 4 March 2020, MediaCityUK, Salford, Manchester  
CHANDOS CHAN20169 [60:45]

Emigration is not always, as one hears only too often, a good idea. For Paul Frankenburger, however, emigration chartered a new course and made his name internationally known. He was controversially dismissed from his post conducting opera in Augsburg, so he re-evaluated his life and travelled to Israel. He became Paul Ben-Haim and eventually developed his personal musical language. By the end of the 1940s, he had come to be considered the national composer of the newly established state of Israel. Even so, the first work on this disc was written whilst he still lived in Germany.  
   
Pan is a curious mixture of symphonic poem and orchestral song. It is rarely heard, and the performance here will make you wonder why. Claudia Barainsky has an ideal timbre for the sensual passion that arises from this fin de siècle text by Heinrich Lautensack, well described as “A woman speaks, in a man’s dream”. We are taken through visions of nature, boats and calm shores, stars and desire, to be engulfed by the hand of the God Pan. Responding to all this, Ben-Haim tailors his orchestra, including shimmering mandolins, into a Debussian impressionist soundscape tinged with Richard Strauss and Zemlinsky. The work sits on three tracks. The central track is a rhapsody for the orchestra alone as it countenances the mood that has been created until its final development which leads into an erotic climax. The original text and a clear translation are provided.  
  
The excellent booklet essay by Michael Wolpe gives an insight into the musical language of Ben Haim’s First Symphony: “the contrast between [his] two styles expressed the tension between the hopeful life in the new homeland and the great anxiety regarding the future of the old homeland”. The conflicts surrounding the outbreak of World War II (when the symphony was begun) can be heard in the combative nature of much of the sonata-form first movement, the lyrical, biblical landscapes of the second and the use of ideas in the third. The latter came from the composer’s until then unperformed oratorio Das Buch Joram. The finale combines the German-type chorale heard in the oratorio with dancing ethnic rhythms similar to a celebratory hora. The middle movement is so wonderfully atmospheric – with a distinct sound world of its own – that the Palestine Symphony orchestra, which first played it, suggested that it could be performed separately. Indeed, the composer gave it the specific title: Psalms. (The success of the work led five years later to Ben Haim writing his Second Symphony.)  
  
Chandos have, very unusually, printed musical extracts from all three works. This is a good and helpful idea, especially with unfamiliar music, but the quality of reproduction is very poor; a strong magnifying glass is needed to make sense of the squiggles. Perhaps I may suggest that if the company wish to pursue this course, then they take a leaf out of CPO’s book; that label’s manuscript work is distinct and exemplary.  
  
Perhaps Ben-Haim had begun to enjoy the sound of the klezmer music played notably on the clarinet. In 1941, immediately after the symphony, he produced a Clarinet Quintet with its syncopated rhythms in the finale, and a few years later a piece for for clarinet, harp and strings, which shows the clarinet in a more pastoral light.  
  
I am much smitten with the Pastoral variée. By 1948, the composer had confidently formulated his style. This theme with six variations is strongly redolent of the rustic landscape (it does most definitely exist outside the main cities, Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem, as I saw for myself on a trip to Israel in 2018). This is music of the shepherd boy on the hillside. Each variation has the word ‘calmo’ as one of its descriptors. The warm Mediterranean air, the wide vistas and the modal melodies collide into the imagination. The only fast music are two moments of dance rhythms, embedded in the last variation. The work ends in a totally untroubled atmosphere. I have come to realise that Ben-Haim is outstanding at slow, contemplative music like this. The velvet tone quality of John Bradbury’s instrument and the superb control he achieves, especially in the hushed passages, surely helps to make this performance utterly memorable. And as with the whole CD, Omer Meir Wellber shows an utter understanding of the composer’s language and of what is required to achieve outstanding results.  
  
Gary Higginson

Simply outstanding.