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New Releases: CDs

Get Your Paws on Hoof

by Jens F. Laurson

"New Releases" posts are regular columns that feature reviews of new CDs that are, for one reason or another, truly outstanding among the many I come across every month.

Unless I miss something very obvious, Joseph Jongen is the most famous Belgian composer I know of.* Obscure stuff to most, but if you like the string quartets of Debussy and Ravel, you owe yourself hearing Jongen's quartets. The [Pavane](#) recording of these two works might be another "Chamber Music You Didn't Know You Love" column, but for now I want to direct your attention to an even less prominent Belgian composer, Jef van Hoof.



van Hoof, [Orchestral Songs, Symphony No.3, et al.](#), Hamar / Pannon Philharmonic Orchestra / Ann De Renais, Ivan Meylemans

Jef van Hoof, about whom I know little more than the fine and very nicely printed liner notes tell me, was born in Antwerp in 1886 and died there, 73 years later. To say he is "best known" for his songs and three short operas would be an overstatement – perhaps he is 'least forgotten' for them. His idiom is solidly of the late, harmlessly-romantic kind, with few chromatic twists but chock full of beauty and sumptuousness.

Phaedra Records dedicates itself to Belgian / Flemish composers and in volume 51 (!) of their "In Flanders' Fields" series they turn again to van Hoof, with his orchestrated songs and the Third Symphony in E-flat major at the center.

The music and performance are superb – one of those happy surprises in unknown repertoire I always hope for, but rarely come across. Ann De Renais is the soprano and her clear, fresh voice - an instrument that is round and very pleasant on the ears - navigates through the 11 songs with ease, accompanied by the Pannon Philharmonic Orchestra under Zsolt Hamar. The orchestra hasn't all that much to do when they support the all-important voice part in these songs, but they prove themselves empathetically capable in the May-Fire Suite (from the opera of the same name), the short trombone concerto ("Divertimento for Trombone and Orchestra), and the symphony.

Hoof's fondness for brass instruments – he was the founder of the all-brass *Antwerp Koperensemble* – comes out in his orchestral writing where they are employed in

wonderfully melodic ways rather than the brass-tastic fanfares and blaring, contrasting brass chorales to which they are all-too-often relegated.

That's certainly true of the four movement symphony in the "Eroica" key of E (with heroic postures and a second movement in "Tempo di Marcia Funebre" to make the daring parallels even more obvious). It's a rather merry work from a difficult time in the composer's life (1944-45) when his appointment as director of the Royal Flemish Conservatory under Nazi occupation came back to haunt him. Even with a somewhat aimless *Scherzo* it makes for a terrific symphony in the old-fashioned, romantic vein.

The songs show the simplicity necessary to give the folksong character of *Drei Lieder im Volkston* (to German text) its due, while otherwise reaching a near-Straussian bloom. In "The Garland Has Been Hung" (*De Crans es uutgehahnghe*), the lamenting quality and melodic flow has a distinctly Russian tinge. This is repertoire well worth looking into, even for non-Belgian sopranos. I, meanwhile, want to hear if Hoof's Symphonies 1 & 4 ("In Flanders' Fields" [v.13](#)), 5 & 6 ([v.44](#)), or his String Quartet ([v.1](#)) are of similar merit.

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(* Of course I did: César Franck, Henri Vieuxtemps, Eugène Ysaÿe, and François Joseph Gossec – not counting pre-Belgium-as-a-country Ockeghem, Josquin, and Jacob Clemens non Papa.)

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