

CLASSICAL

by Ivan Hewett

Seductive sounds of a golden era



BELLE ÉPOQUE

Annelien Van Wauwe;
Orchestre National de Lille, cond.
Alexandre Bloch
Pentatone

★★★★★

Belle Époque is an enticing name for an album, evoking images of Paris in its most pleasurable and

luxurious period. Musically, the belle époque meant the gorgeous operatic fantasies of Massenet, often touched with orientalism, the Grecian gracefulness of Satie, saucy cabaret songs, and – eventually – the impressionism of Ravel and Debussy.

The spirit of that era is summoned on the debut album from Belgian clarinettist Annelien Van Wauwe, one of those gifted and personable young artists to whom prizes and awards cling like burrs to a pullover. She became a BBC New Generation Artist in 2015, and in 2018 joined the roster of the Borletti-Buitoni Artists, a very enlightened scheme which supports



SPIRIT OF THE AGE

Annelien Van Wauwe's debut album is full of charm

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young artists at the critical stage between conservatoire and the professional world.

As Van Wauwe reminds us in her liner notes, her native country is a cornucopia of art nouveau, and it's that sinuous aspect of the belle époque that informs her album, with a touch of populist cheerfulness. Much of the music has a melodic suppleness that might remind you of an art nouveau design, above all the first piece on the CD, Debussy's *Première Rhapsodie*. It makes a seductive start, with Wauwe's first note

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burgeoning from silence while the orchestra shimmers around her, and she is equally responsive to the music's sudden feline leaps into a wholly different mood.

Van Wauwe takes a generous interpretation of belle époque; the biggest piece on the disc is actually the 1st clarinet sonata by the Viennese composer Johannes Brahms, but in the subtly coloured orchestration by Luciano Berio – played with soft-edged tenderness by the Orchestre de Lille under Alexandre Bloch – it certainly takes on a French *douceur*.

The three-movement *Rhapsodie* by Manfred Trojahn is a surprising choice, as it was composed in 2002 and is an intriguing

marriage of a belle époque sound-world with a modernist sensibility. The other surprise is the *Introduction et Rondo* by Charles Widor, best-known for his joyous organ Toccata, which often accompanies newly married couples down the church aisle. This piece is very different. It seems touched by the spirit of the French café-concert, and you could almost imagine its main melody sung by a French chansonnier like Charles Trenet. It makes a delightful ending to a CD that is full of charm.