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CLASSICAL RECORDINGS:

20TH CENTURY DUOS for Violin and Cello

Gil Morgenstern, violinist; Darrett Adkins, cellist. Engine Company Records ECR0803016; CD.

In recent years Engine Company Records, an independent label in New York, founded by Blake Morgan, has had success with contemporary artists, like the indie rock singer, guitarist and songwriter Rick Henrickson.

But recently Mr. Morgan released the company's first classical album, "20th Century Duos for Violin and Cello," with works by Zoltan Kodaly, Roger Sessions and Maurice Ravel and performed by two brilliant and musically curious artists, the violinist Gil Morgenstern and the cellist Darrett Adkins. A recording of three seldom-heard works for an unconventional combination of instruments might seem a risky venture. But the music is terrific and the performances compelling on this surprisingly exciting and excellently engineered recording.

Kodaly is probably best known as the composer who worked with Bartok exploring and documenting authentic Hungarian and Eastern European folk music. Kodaly's 1915 Sonata for Solo Cello, an audacious, moody and demanding work, is starting to become a staple of the cello repertory. This new recording should bring overdue attention to Kodaly's 1914 Duo for Violin and Cello, a formidable 25-minute piece in three movements.

The duo contains alluring passages in which earthy folkloric melodies hover atop restless accompaniment riffs. But these sections are deftly folded into an organic composition with extended stretches of starkly modern, harmonically astringent and elusive music, much like Bartok's. Kodaly explores the virtuosic possibilities of the instruments, but always to greater musical ends.

The Kodaly effectively sets up Sessions's 1978 Duo, a concentrated 10-minute work of extreme contrasts, shifting meters and rigorous manipulation of motifs. In this company, despite dreamy Impressionistic episodes, Ravel's inventive 20-minute Sonata, completed in 1922, comes across as a fully contemporary work, alive with angular counterpoint and insistent rhythmic drive.

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