Eckhardt-Gramatté at 100: A Review of Three Recordings


Solo violin works by S.C. Eckhardt-Gramatté. Violin Solo Suite No. 3 ("Suite de Mallorca"), E. 50; Violin Solo Suite No. 2, E. 43; Concerto for Solo Violin, E. 57; Caprice No. 1 ("Die Kranke und die Uhr"), E. 47. Nandor Szederkenyi, violin. Karpatica MK10201.


Composer, pianist and violinist Sophie-Carmen (Sonia) Eckhardt-Gramatté was born in Moscow in 1899 and three CD releases commemorate the centenary of her birth. The Winnipeg-based Eckhardt-Gramatté Foundation has released a two CD set comprising reissues of archival and commercial recordings, as well as a previously unreleased recording of a previously unrecorded work. As an added bonus, a "candid" recording is included of Eckhardt-Gramatté composing at the piano. The second release, by violinist Nandor Szederkenyi, contains three substantial works for solo violin, only one of which was previously available in a complete recording. Finally, Jasper Wood’s performance of the complete violin caprices is the first recording of these extraordinary vignettes on CD. These three recordings considerably enrich the Eckhardt-Gramatté discography and should win a much wider audience for this versatile and important composer.

The reissues of modern commercial recordings on S.C. Eckhardt-Gramatté 100—A Centenary Celebration include the Molto Sostenuto, Triple Concerto and Symphony-Concerto. The archival recordings, made in 1932, 1952 and 1955, comprise the slow movement of the Piano Concerto No. 1, Markantes Stück and Piano Sonata No. 5 respectively. These recordings, appearing for the first time on CD, were previously released as part of the 4-LP series, E-Gré Plays E-Gré. Vier Weinachtslieder, taped on Nov. 26, 1994, has never before been released.

The works represented here span more than 40 years, from the Piano Concerto No. 1
of 1926 to the Symphony-Concerto of 1967, and represent each of the composer’s major stylistic periods. Four of the seven works are concertos and the *Christmas Songs* constitute Eckhardt-Gramaté’s only foray into choral music, so the sampling is not representative of the composer’s output as a whole. That the many important chamber works and pieces for violin are not represented is compensated for, to some extent, by the Szederkenyi and Woods releases.

The second movement of the Piano Concerto No. 1, known as *Konzertstück*, enjoyed a life independent of the first and third movements. It was performed by the composer in Lübeck in 1927 and was featured on the occasion of her North American concerts in 1929, with the Philadelphia Orchestra led by Leopold Stokowski and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra led by Frederick Stock. It was not until Jan. 27, 1932, that the entire Piano Concerto No. 1, conceived for the most part in Barcelona in 1925-26, received its premiere with Berlin Symphony Orchestra conducted by Ernst Kunwald. It is the broadcast of the second movement from this performance that is released here.*

As the booklet notes explain, by the 1950s Eckhardt-Gramaté had become uncomfortable with the overtly romantic nature of the *Konzertstück*. It is, indeed, a rhapsodic, deeply felt movement, closer to Rachmaninoff than anything else she ever wrote. There are problems with the recorded sound, as Stephen Willis and Gerald Parker noted in their review of the original release of the performance,² but this is music that deserves to be heard. Until a modern recording is made, this archival recording must suffice.

*Molto Sostenuto* (1952) is an arrangement for string orchestra of the slow movement of the String Quartet No. 1 (1938). A brief truncation occurs within the first 25 measures and, near the end, a 14-measure “Festoso” is replaced by 26 measures of new material. The movement is otherwise unchanged except for the addition of double basses, which do no more than reinforce the cellos. The String Quartet No. 1 was performed by four different ensembles in the 12 years following its premiere and was, in its day, one of Eckhardt-Gramaté’s most frequently played works. In our own time, for reasons of quality, accessibility and brevity (about 10 minutes), although not necessarily in that order, the *Molto Sostenuto* is still frequently heard.

In this performance the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra is led by Mario Bernardi, a conductor long associated with Eckhardt-Gramaté’s music. Bernardi conducted several performances of the Triple Concerto in the 1970s (see below), led the premiere of the *Konzertstück* for cello and orchestra in 1981, and conducted the First and Second Piano Concertos in the mid-1990s. The recorded sound is sumptuous and the performance of this moving and intense work is superb. Eckhardt-Gramaté’s texturally complex and harmonically craggy music is, admittedly, sometimes tough going, but this warm and Brahmsian work will reveal an ingratiating, often overlooked aspect of her eclectic oeuvre. A couple of details in one passage are perplexing: both the *mezzo piano* at the key change at m. 23 and *ruhig* at m. 30 are ignored. It is questionable whether these effects could ever sound as the composer evidently intended them. The *animando* and *poco stringendo* markings in mm. 23 and 29 respectively make *ruhig*,⁴ in particular, an odd request.
In 1942 Eckhardt-Gramatté began work on her Piano Concerto No. 2, which became the first of a series of five concertos completed between 1946 and 1951. Two of these works, the Triple Concerto and Markantes Stück, are included on this recording. They are products of the composer’s final years in Vienna and mark the beginning of her third major period, spanning the decade 1949 to 1959, in which neoclassicism tempers the unbridled romanticism of her earlier works.

The Triple Concerto has received numerous performances by several orchestras. Mario Bernardi and the National Arts Centre Orchestra took the work on tour in 1974, performing it in Ottawa, Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary, Edmonton and Windsor. By the time the recording was made, the orchestra, conductor and first-desk soloists were obviously comfortable with the work and turn in a fine performance. The balance between the soloists, and between the soloists and orchestra, is excellent and the sometimes workaday tutti’s are as interesting as they can be. The virtuosic writing for the soloists is uniformly well managed and it is likely that whatever limitations the performance reveals lie with the work itself. The second movement, in which the solo instruments are typecast in a kind of burlesque, comes off best. There is, incidentally, a cut in the second movement (from mm. 103 to 131) and again in the finale (from mm. 44 to 107).

Markantes Stück is a reworking for two pianos and orchestra of material from the finale of the Piano Concerto No. 1. Markantes Stück received its première in Vienna on May 18, 1952 and it is likely this performance which is presented here. The 10-minute work, with its sprightly themes, simple ternary form and fast-paced brilliance, is immediately appealing and the recording is all that could be asked for, both in terms of the performance itself and sound quality.

In the late 1940s official recognition came to Eckhardt-Gramatté with increasing frequency. Her Piano Concerto No. 2 won a prize in a competition sponsored by the Wiener Musikvereins in 1947 and Markantes Stück tied for third place among orchestral works in a competition organized by the Verein der Musikfreunde (Vienna) in 1949. In 1950, when the Oesterreichisches Staatspreis was awarded for the first time since the beginning of the war, Eckhardt-Gramatté’s Triple Concerto received an honourable mention.

The Piano Sonata No. 5, completed in 1950, marks a “major shift in Eckhardt-Gramatté’s compositional voice. . . . The sonata is tightly controlled, and although virtuosic, it is comparatively lean in texture and economical in its thematic resources, which recur in various guises throughout the work.” Although the Bassoon Concerto, also completed in 1950, met with only grudging approval on the occasion of its American première, the Piano Sonata No. 5 was accorded an overwhelmingly positive reception in both Europe and America. It had been 22 years since the completion of the Piano Sonata No. 4 and, with the exception of the Piano Caprice No. 6, 13 years since Eckhardt-Gramatté had written anything for solo piano. In the late 1940s, however, she had begun to perform again on a modest scale after a hiatus of several years and it was her return to the piano that inspired the writing of the Piano Sonata No. 5. The work was commissioned by the International Society for Contemporary Music and was given an award by its Austrian chapter in 1951.
Eckhardt-Gramatté’s recording of this work, taken from a CBC Distinguished Artists’ broadcast from 1955, is magnificent. Even the sound is superior, given that the recording was made almost a half-century ago. The composer’s playing is rhythmically charged, clean and intense, and if certain passages are more effective in Marc-André Hamelin’s hands (Altarus Records AIR-CD-9052 [CD]), an equal number are more successfully played by the composer (the *molto stringendo* at the end of the second movement, for example). Hamelin’s recording is hampered, too, by an over-reverberant acoustic, so that the incisiveness of the composer’s recording is lacking. Karin Redekopp Edwards, who studied with the composer, has made a fine recording of this work that should be heard by anyone interested in this repertoire (Eckhardt-Gramatte Foundation EGF 100D [CD]). Nonetheless, Eckhardt-Gramatté’s performance remains definitive, and it is terrific to have it released for the first time on CD.

Shortly after her arrival in Winnipeg on Oct. 24, 1953, Eckhardt-Gramatté set to work on her only choral composition, *Vier Weihnachtslieder* (Four Christmas Songs), with texts by her second husband, Ferdinand Eckhardt.

The first song, “Weihnacht, fern von der Heimat” (“Christmas, so far from the homeland”) deals in feelings of nostalgia and isolation from family and friends. The second song, “Ub’rall Lichter!” (“Bright Lights! All ’round bright lights”) recounts the composer’s cheerful impression of the Christmas lights decorating Winnipeg’s homes and streets. (In Europe, coloured outdoor light bulbs were all but unknown, except for advertising.) The third song, “In der weinachtlich geschmuckten” (“In the cosy home adorn’d for Christmas”) tells of festive homes on Christmas day, while the final song, “Welch’ ein Morgen! Kommt und Schaut!” (“Lovely morning! Come behold it!”) begins by describing the glistening snow and concludes with a plea for peace: “Whether doubtful or believing/See the wonder of this day/Hand in hand let’s all together/Join in song throughout the world.” At “hand in hand” there is even a short musical reference to the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (m. 39, soprano 1). The songs are sung in German and texts and translations by Paul von Wichert are provided (in a font too small to read). The songs were originally conceived *a cappella*, but the composer was persuaded to add instrumental parts to all but the first song. Throughout, the choral writing is extremely complex, owing to its resolutely instrumental idiom. The songs are scored for six-part chorus (Soprano I and II, Alto, Tenor, Baritone and Bass) with some *divisi* and occasional solos. The final song combines a six-part solo choir with a six-part tutti choir. That a student group of only 19 singers (The University Singers E-Gre Ensemble) even attempted this work is to its credit. Henry Engbrecht’s direction is first-rate and, although the songs are unlikely to receive many future performances, there is an archival value in having them on disc. This is surely one of the strangest works Eckhardt-Gramatté ever penned, as abstruse as the *Konzertstück* and *Molto Sostenuto* are approachable. The “humming” introduction to the second song is especially eerie, and not what one is generally looking for in Christmas music.

Eckhardt-Gramatté’s first 12 years in Canada were not nearly so productive as her
periods in Spain and Austria. She composed only on commission and completed, on average, one major work every two years. This situation changed with Canada’s centennial in 1967, when many composers benefited from a resurgent interest in the arts in Canada. The frequency with which Canadian compositions were played rose dramatically and many new works were generated by grants from the Centennial Commission. Eckhardt-Gramatté received four commissions and, between 1966 and 1968, she completed the Nonet, Piano Trio, Woodwind Quintet No. 2 and Symphony-Concerto for piano and orchestra.

The lengthy and complex Symphony-Concerto received its broadcast premiere on Jan. 4, 1968, with Anton Kuerti and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra conducted by Otto Werner. The Symphony-Concerto won for the composer a new and wider audience when it was recorded in 1968 by Kuerti with the CBC Festival Orchestra led by Alexander Brott.

The Symphony-Concerto was performed publicly for the first time on June 25, 1969, again with Kuerti as the soloist and the CBC Festival Orchestra led by Alexander Brott. The audience’s response to the 34-minute work was enthusiastic, but the critics from Toronto’s three major newspapers were divided in their opinions. Although Ken Winters of the Telegram, John Kraglund of the Globe and Mail and William Littler of the Daily Star did agree on some points—that the work was overlong but nonetheless virtuosic and, in this sense, a bit old-fashioned—there were few commonalities in their final assessment of the work. In fact, the very points on which they did agree led to different appraisals of the work’s ultimate worth. What Winters perceived as “headlong persistence” was called “ceaseless thumping” by Kraglund. The latter likened the work to a musical soporific, while the former opined that it “…seizes the listener by the collar and shouts its message straight into his face. Like it or not, it’s strong stuff.” To Winters, because the Symphony-Concerto was free “…from the intellectual idleness which seems to have invaded Canadian music like a communicable paralysis,” Eckhardt-Gramatté was “…atoning for practically an entire country…” It seemed to Littler that the work recalled “a Hyde Park Sunday at election time” and to Kraglund as if the composer sought to re-create “the Russian wars sometimes favoured by Shostakovich and Prokofiev.”

Kraglund was not alone in drawing parallels between Eckhardt-Gramatté’s work and the works of others. Littler thought that the Symphony-Concerto had its roots in Gershwin and Khachaturian, and Winters noted that although it stemmed from a “lively Busonian intellect,” the keyboard writing was as pianistic as Prokofiev’s. Michael Grobin suggested that while the Symphony-Concerto “has the full structure of a Rachmaninov or Prokofiev concerto, the composer has deliberately shorn off the entire melodic element.” Claude Gingras was less charitable. He “found it regrettable that Kuerti waste[d] his talents on platitudes such as Madame Eckhardt-Gramatté’s Symphony-Concerto (sic).”

In contrast, Kuerti believed that the Symphony-Concerto exudes Eckhardt-Gramatté’s personality and that:

in this and other senses she’s a very successful composer. One of the really difficult things to achieve and one of
the measures of success as a composer... is “Are you really expressing something which is not only original—that’s not so important—but which is authentic, which comes from your own heard and your own mind?” I have no doubt that this is true of Madame Eckhardt-Gramatté.19

Despite Kuerti’s enthusiasm, the fact remains that the Symphony-Concerto is not a strong work: its length, textural density and almost hysterical ferocity mitigate against its critical success. Kuerti does his best to bring the work to life. His virtuosity is astounding and the percussive brilliance of his tone is what the composer must have had in mind. On the other hand, the orchestral support he receives is less than ideal. Right at the outset, the brass and chimes are not in sync and should have been re-recorded. Other minor but vexing inaccuracies mar the remainder of the performance. The strings sound consistently thin, but the frequent divisi writing is partly to blame.

The composer’s preface to the second movement, which reads like the assembly instructions for a Japanese toy, sheds little light on this static and overlong movement. In fact, both the first and second movements could have benefited from some judicious editing. Although the composer believed that cuts to the first movement would be tantamount to amputation, she did not carry the analogy far enough. Amputations are generally carried out with the overall health of the patient in mind. Eckhardt-Gramatté aficionados might notice a reference (unintentional?) to the opening of the Piano Sonata No. 6 at m. 104 in the second movement. At other points, such as m. 92 in the third movement, the Triple Concerto is recalled.

It is regrettable that Eckhardt-Gramaté’s first two piano concertos are not available on CD, since both are much stronger works than the Symphony-Concerto. In the early 1990’s Shirley Sawatsky and Marc-André Hamelin performed the first and second concertos respectively, the former with the Winnipeg Symphony and the latter with the Winnipeg Symphony and Calgary Philharmonic. The release of these performances would have constituted a much more significant contribution to the Eckhardt-Gramaté discography than the re-release of this imprecise performance of the problematic third concerto.

Eckhardt-Gramaté composed four suites for solo violin, the first three in the early 1920s and the last in 1968. Of the two suites recorded by Szederkenyi, who was first prizewinner of the 1979 Szigeti International Violin Competition, only the second and third movements of the Violin Solo Suite No. 3 (“Suite de Mallorca”) have been recorded before.20

Szederkenyi’s recording of the complete Suites Nos. 2 and 3 is a major addition to the Eckhardt-Gramaté discography and, when compared against the excerpts recorded by the composer, the listener is made immediately aware that the Eckhardt-Gramaté has found a new and convincing advocate. Szederkenyi’s playing is very different from the composer’s. One could wish for more dynamic inflection in the first movements of both suites, for more abandon in the finales, or for more give-and-take in the “Badinage” of Suite de Mallorca, but these are no more than matters of taste. The plaintive “Arriette” of Suite de Mallorca
is especially well played—preferable to the composer's much freer interpretation—and the many double and triple stops in the last three movements of Suite No. 3 are impeccably in tune. In short, these are authoritative performances of substantial works.

The Concerto for Solo Violin, completed in Barcelona in 1925, is a mammoth work, comprising three movements plus epilogue and lasting over a half-hour in performance. The composer's own recording, made for Odeon in 1934, has twice been released on LP. As John Boulton wrote in 1982, Eckhardt-Gramatte's playing "is wonderful; there is no question of her complete mastery or of the shining distinction of her style... [I]n listening to [the Concerto] one thinks instinctively a little of Paganini and much more of Bruch and Wieniawski. It deserves to be played—but not so much as its composer deserves to be heard."23

Alongside this historic recording, Szederkeny's stands proudly on its own merits. Certainly, Eckhardt-Gramatte's playing is more rhapsodic, with exaggerated agogics and much tempo rubato. In the first movement, she is more playful in the a piacere episodes and, in the second movement and epilogue, her uncanny imitations of the clarinet and oboe respectively, are more successful than Szederkenyi's; in both instances, she simply doesn't play softly enough. The composer, too, seems more at home in the eerie tremolando passages in the third movement (beginning at mm. 83 and 395), although the weird, whistling harmonics that Szederkenyi elicits at m. 395ff are arresting in their own way. As the only recording of this important work available on CD, even a merely passable performance would have been welcome. As it is, Szederkenyi's wide dynamic range, full-blooded fortissimos, solid technique and instinctive grasp of this complex music make his recording a worthy modern-day counterpart to the composer's own brilliant performance. Further, Szederkenyi's full-bodied sound and the superb quality of the recording makes the limitations of 1930's recording technology all the more evident.

Jasper Wood's recording of the Ten Caprices for Solo Violin supersedes the long-unavailable Francis Chaplin LP from 1984 (Discopedia MBS 2018). The Caprices, composed over a ten-year period from 1924 to 1934, abound in technical challenges and in this one respect are indebted to Paganini. Beyond this, however, each is a character piece whose program is mirrored by its title. The notes which accompany the CD explain the genesis and programmatic content of each work, but it is inaccurate to ascribe them to Jasper Wood since they do no more than paraphrase the published score (Brandon University School of Music Press, 1993).

There is sufficient variety in these Caprices, and such differentiation in Wood's approach, so that the 50-minute set can be enjoyed at one sitting. The poignancy of No. 1 ("Die Kranke und die Uhr"), a gentle lament for a convalescent friend, is a perfect foil to the dance-like exuberance of No. 2 ("Scherz"). The rhapsodic pieces, like Nos. 4, 6, 7 and 9, contrast with the more rhythmic ones, like Nos. 2 and 5, and so it continues throughout the set. However, as Tamara Bernstein observes, "Ultimately, the metaphor of isolation inherent in the genre—a 'social' instrument trying to be complete on its own—is what sings most poignantly in these pieces."24
Particularly effective are the two most overtly programmatic pieces in the set. No. 6 ("El Pajarito") depicts a bird's increasing frenzy at its confinement in a cage and No. 7 ("Le départ d'un train") was inspired by the composer's ill husband's departure on a train. No. 7 is, incidentally, much more effective in this, its original version, than in its later manifestation as the Konzertstück for cello and orchestra (1974). Of historical interest are Nos. 5 ("Danse Marocaine") and 8 ("Elegie"), which, with orchestral accompaniments, were featured on the composer's American concerts with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Chicago Symphony in 1929.

The composer's performance of four of the Caprices is included in volume 3 of E-Gré Plays E-Gré, the late Francis Chaplin delivers first-rate performances of all ten Caprices, and No. 1 receives a finely-chiselled reading on the new Szederkenyi release. Nonetheless, Jasper Wood's performances take a back seat to none of these. They are exemplary in every regard and Analekta's recorded sound could not be better.

Analekta's catalogue is widely distributed; information concerning the availability of the other two releases can be obtained from The Eckhardt-Gramatté Foundation, eckgrfdn@egre.mb.ca.

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Endnotes

1. Molto Sostenuto previously released on Centrediscs CMC 2887 [33]; Triple Concerto previously released on CBC SM 272 [33] and Radio Canada International ACM 21 [33]; Symphony-Concerto previously released on RCA Victor LSC-3175 [33], Radio Canada International RCI 328 [33], CBC SM 107 [33] and Radio Canada International ACM 21 [33].

2. E-Gré Plays E-Gré: A Documentary of the Composer, Violinist and Pianist S. C. Eckhardt-Gramatté Performing Her Own Compositions. Discopaedia (WRC 1-1596-99 [33]). Included is the complete Piano Concerto No. 1, not just the slow movement.


4. Tranquillo in the quartet version.

5. Because of the distribution of the piano writing between solo and obbligato parts, it was a comparatively simple task for the composer to cast the work for two pianos without orchestra. It is in this form that the work was introduced to Canada (by Diedre Irons and Lorne Watson) in March 1961.

6. Markantes Stück, in an earlier form and under its original title, Groteskes Stück, was to have been premiered during the second International Music Festival in Vienna on June 27, 1946. Whether or not this performance took place is unclear.
7. Several sources, including the booklet to this CD, imply that the composer won first prize. In fact, the first prize was awarded to Joseph Marx, second prize went to Armin Kaufmann, and third prize was shared by Eckhardt-Gramatté, Felix Petyrek and Hanns Jelinek.


9. Although the composer sanctioned three cuts for radio performance, none are made here.

10. “Ob ihr zweifelt, ob ihr glaubet/seht das Wunder dieses Tags/Lasst die Hand uns alle reichen/lasst uns singen laut hinaus.”


21. Eckhardt-Gramatté omits the pizzicato chordal opening and closing.

22. Discopaedia (Masters of the Bow) 1031 [33] and Radio Canada International ACM21 [33].


25. No. 1 (recorded 1943) and Nos. 4, 5 and 6 (recorded 1932).