Recently, in Fanfare 32:6, I reviewed the first four volumes of Divine Art’s excellent series showcasing the music of Eric Chisholm (1904–1965). There, I provided a précis of Chisholm’s activities. As I explained then, “Piobaireachd” refers to the classical music of the Highland bagpipes of Scotland. Chisholm was proud of his Scottish heritage, and parallels between his excavations and those of Bartók run deep.

The eight pieces from Piobaireachd display Chisholm’s imaginative treatment of his material. The first, “The Bells of Perth,” begins with distant bell sounds whose overtones soon add up to significant clusters. Of note is the darkly brooding No. 17, “Lament for King George the Third,” and the sheer loneliness of No. 20, “Too long in this condition,” the latter based on a tune composed in 1715 by Patrick Mòr MacCrimmon. Chisholm transforms the rather obvious use of rolled chords to simulate harp strumming in No. 21, “A Lament for the Harp Tree” into something altogether magical. A sort of slightly toned down Sorabji is implied in the wonderfully titled No. 22, “Squinting Peacock’s Flame of Wrath.” When I was writing my concluding comments for my extended Chisholm review referred to above, I used the word “intriguing” to sum up this music, and if anything this issue underlines this aspect of his music. Chisholm is never content just to take a tune and set it simply; his voice is always there. Most poignant of the initial bunch of pieces is the final, incomplete No. 23, “The Lament for the Children,” which begins by building up ever so slowly from subterranean bass chords. When the tune is heard, it appears at an unusually high pitch. The piece ends in mid-phrase.

The Fifth Sonatina sounds distinctly neo-Classical after that. The gentle counterpoint that runs through the first movement, Menuet, is based on a 1452 original by Conrad Paumann, but with the odd twist of Chisholm’s courtesy. The composer moves back in time even earlier in the next movement, Berceuse, which is “after a thirteenth century two-part dance.” There is an inner core of strength to the movement’s middle section (parallel fifths) before the finale, “The Jew’s Dance” bursts onto the scene. It is based on a “misreading” of an original Hans Neusiedler lute piece by Davidson and Apel (Historical Anthology of Music, published 1946), wherein the lute’s tuning was misunderstood. Chisholm turns defect into virtue. The Sixth Sonatina also plunders Davidson and Apel’s tome. (The book was fondly referred to simply as “HAM” back in my university days—good to see someone at least puts a copy to good use.) The central movement of the Sonatina No. 6, an Aria derived from a Gervaise Pavane d’Angleterre, is both dignified and, simultaneously, remarkably beautiful.

The score of Cameos is full of mysteries. Some of the themes are unidentified, and some of these early movements survive only in sketch form. Initially, the effect is of Impressionism, but Chisholm soon moves into his own, classification-resistant world. No. 18, “The Spring Lamb,” surprisingly threatens to burst out into quotation of Debussy’s “Puck” before changing its mind at the very last moment. Most of this piece is ruminative in nature, with the honorable exception of the 27-seconds “Seumas Beg,” the penultimate offering.

The last work of any substantial duration on the disc is the Sonatine écossaise, a piece composed in 1929, then revised in 1951. Here, Scottish melodies follow each other naturally in a sort of intuitive sonic daisy chain. The central Lento hinges on a song of farewell (“MacCrimmon will never return”) and is Chisholm at his best. The music is hauntingly evocative, and exquisitely delivered by McLachlan. The final four pieces are varied. A reel provides the basis for Harris Dance, a virtuoso piece that would function well as an encore; the Tango is as delightful as it is unexpected in this context. The piece of pastiche that is Sonata “Elektra” is unashamedly bombastic. Finally, Dance Bacchanal (1924) is magnetically rugged and energetic.

Booklet notes by John Purser are exemplary in their detailed knowledge and their usefulness. The fine recording captures every nuance of McLachlan’s excellent pianism. Recommended. Colin Clarke