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A masterpiece is born

John Terauds

James Ehnes *Homage* (Onyx)

★★★★(out of 4)

To say that this is one of the most amazing recordings of violin music ever made doesn't even begin to do justice to what James Ehnes has accomplished here. He tosses this collection of showpieces off so smoothly that it's easy to underestimate the feats of technique and control involved to make the music so polished.

Of the 21 regular tracks on the CD, 18 belong to violins, featuring such 19th- and early 20th-century chestnuts as Manuel de Falla's *Suite populaire espagnole* and Maurice Ravel's *Piece en forme de Habanera*. There are several arrangements of encore pieces by violin legends Fritz Kreisler and Jascha Heifetz and even a nod to Edwardian melodrama in Edward Elgar's once-ubiquitous *Salut d'amour*.

The viola highlight is Ralph Vaughan William's evergreen *Fantasia on Greensleeves*. Long-time Ehnes collaborator Eduard Laurel sparkles at the piano in the accompaniments.

For listeners with keen ears and sophisticated audio equipment, the producers have included nine comparison tracks for the violins using excerpts from the *Scottish Fantasy* by Max Bruch.

For the three violas, it's the lovely solo passages from *Harold in Italy* by Hector Berlioz.

Then there is the DVD, which reprises the full CD program with video taken in the recording studio. Ehnes is not a physically demonstrative player, and his feet never move from the two Xs marked for him on the studio floor, so you're not going to gain much from watching the music. But the historical commentary and the interviews are fascinating.

The booklet also includes copious commentary and notes compiled by Ehnes.

