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Independent critics reviewing classical recordings and music in concert

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American Record Guide
# American Record Guide

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June 26-July 30
Women composers (Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn, Amy Beach, Rebecca Clarke, Helen Grime, Gabriela Lena Frank, Gabriela Smith, Kaija Saariaho, Augusta Read Thomas, Caroline Shaw, Joan Tower, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, and Hildegard von Bingen’s complete Ordo Virtutem) and world premieres (by William Bolcom, Kati Agocs, Hanna Lash, Chris Rogerson, Daniel Schlosberg, Christopher Tonkin) span Chamber Music Northwest’s Summer Festival as they mix with familiar works from solos and duos to octets and concertos at various locations in Portland OR.

July 1-16
Opera Saratoga covers three eras in two weeks with full productions of André Gretry’s Zemire et Azor (Beauty and the Beast), Verdi’s Falstaff, and The Cradle Will Rock (in more ways than one) by Marc Blitzstein when it’s conducted by John Mauceri at the Spa Little Theater, in Spa State Park in Saratoga Springs NY.

July 1-August 26
The world premiere of The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs by Mason Bates and an opera rarity, The Golden Cockerel by Rimsky-Korsakoff are highlights of the Santa Fe Opera’s season that also includes Handel’s Alcina, Donizetti’s Lucia da Lammermoor, and Johann Strauss II’s Fledermaus at the Santa Fe Opera House.

July 16-30
A rotation of pianists from Jerome Rose, Jeffrey Swann, and Victor Rosenbaum to Vladimir Feltsman, Alexander Kobrin, and Steven Mayer serve up 14 concerts in 14 days at 8 pm the International Keyboard Institute & Festival at Hunter College in New York City.

July 20-30
Three main classical events at New York’s Lincoln Center Festival: the Bolshoi, Paris Opera, and New York City Ballets perform Balanchine’s three Jewels at the Koch Theater with Andrew Litton conducting the NYC Ballet Orchestra. The Bolshoi Ballet performs The Taming of the Shrew to Shostakovich’s music with Igor Dronov conducting the Orchestra. And soloist Joan La Barbara joins husband Morton Subotnik, who controls the electronics for two of his works, Silver Apples of the Moon (50th anniversary) and Crowds and Power (world premiere).

July 22
Anne Akiko Meyers is soloist in the concert premiere of Samuel Jones’s Violin Concerto. Music Director Gerard Schwarz also conducts the Eastern Music Festival Orchestra in Ein Heldenleben by Richard Strauss at Guilford College’s Dana Auditorium in Greensboro NC.

July 26-August 2
Three performances of Britten’s Burning Fiery Furnace at St. James United Methodist Church and three of a double-feature of Amy Beach’s Cabildo and Douglas Moore’s Gallantry at the Williams Stables Theater in Central City CO add spice to the season’s repertoire of Bizet’s Carmen and Mozart’s Cosi Fan Tutte at the Central City Opera House.

July 28-August 6, plus 19
More operas rarities see the light of day at Bard College’s Fisher Center in Annandale-on-Hudson NY: Dvorak’s Dimitrij in five fully staged performances, plus one concert performance of Moniuszko’s Halka on August 19 with Leon Botstein conducting soloists, chorus, and the American Symphony Orchestra.

August 4-12
Music Director Cristian Macelaru takes over the Cabrillo Festival, the US’s longest running festival of new orchestral music, this year with works by 15 composers, including premieres by Michael Gandolfi, Clarice Assad (Ad Infinitum with Evelyn Glennie), David T Little, Gerald Barry (Piano Concerto with Jason Hardink), and Jake Heggie (Moby Dick Suite). Concerts are at the Santa Cruz (CA) Auditorium.

August 10-11 & 13-14
Tanglewood’s Festival of Contemporary Music presents works by 23 composers in four concerts, mixing the music of established masters (including Thomas Ades, Henri Dutilleux, David Lang, György Ligeti, Nico Muhly [a world premiere], Huang Ruo, and Terry Riley) with works by younger colleagues. Concerts take place in Tanglewood’s Ozawa Hall in Lenox MA.
Remote Drones and Two Organ Concertos
Richard S Ginell

Deborah Borda, the president and CEO of the financially flourishing Los Angeles Philharmonic, shocked L.A. and the music world in March when she abruptly announced that she would decamp to the New York Philharmonic in September. No one expected it, and many are wondering whether the L.A. Phil will be able to stay on its current progressive—and lucrative—course with someone else in charge.

In the meantime, Borda was in town in April to witness perhaps the most audacious brainstorm that the L.A. Phil has come up with yet under her regime, the Reykjavik Festival. Lasting officially from April 7 to 17, yet sprawling into overtime in May and early June in order to include Iceland’s most famous musician, the singer-songwriter Björk, the festival promised to obliterate the boundary lines between so-called classical and so-called pop music.

That’s the way things are done in Iceland, where the country’s small population (about 330,000), a concert tradition that is less than a century old, and its isolation in the North Atlantic Ocean have created a musical community that tends to stick together and interact.

“We’ve all known each other for a very long time,” says author Arni Heimer Ingolfsson, the leading authority on Icelandic music, who turned out to be a terrific lecturer at the pre-concert events.

The Icelandic language—almost impenetrable to outsiders—is almost unchanged, it is said, since the days of the Vikings a millennium or so ago, which makes it possible for Icelanders to easily read ancient runes and find vocal folk-music roots for present-day transformations. There is strong government support on the Scandinavian model for music in Iceland too, with plenty of music education in the schools. And Icelandic music, at least the pop variety, is now spreading southward toward Europe and America.

Very interesting, you say, but given a series of concerts seemingly so far out of the usual symphonic mainstream as to be off the edges of a flat earth, how would the L.A. Phil be able to fill the seats of Walt Disney Concert Hall? That’s what I was thinking when I requested press tickets a month-and-a-half in advance, only to be told that the three main concerts of the festival (April 13-15) were sold out. Esa-Pekka Salonen, the L.A. Phil’s ever-curious, ever-growing conductor laureate and festival co-organizer, was going to conduct, but that didn’t explain the sold-out signs. Rather, that was due to the presence on the bill of the rock
band Sigur Ros, which has a fan base in Southern California. The hall was filled with young, casually dressed (usually in hipster black), smartphone-toting rock music fans, most of whom I suspect had never heard a symphony orchestra concert.

When it was all over—or even before it was all over—an alert listener looking for patterns and generalizations had no trouble seeing most current Icelandic music—whether symphonic, chamber, rock, pop, folk, or cross-breeding—as of a piece. There were lots of sustained, often quiet drones that created bleak, distant soundscapes. The tempos were usually broad, and the structures unfolded ever so slowly with minimalist techniques, microtones, slithering and skittering effects, and the like helping things along. Composer Anna Thorvaldsdottir came right out and said it (through the voice of Ingolfsson): “Life itself comes with an internal drone.”

If there is a single word that evokes Icelandic music for me after attending the festival and hearing several recordings by the composers and artists before going, it would be “remote”: By that I mean that the music speaks, first, of the distance Iceland stands from continental Europe and North America and, second, of the strangeness of its landscape. Even the rock and pop music, whatever its volume level (and it got plenty loud—enough to require earplugs), seemed to be coming from someplace far, far away.

Each of the three main concerts was a marathon in itself, beginning at 6:45 pm and lasting to 11:30, with three breaks. Over in the BP Hall, which is usually reserved for lectures, a female quartet called Nordic Affect held forth first on a portable stage, armed with different programs for each night. As a period-instrument ensemble, Nordic Affect has a peculiar dilemma: there is no Icelandic baroque music to play! So they commission new compositions for harpsichord, violin, viola, and cello. Much of what they played fell under the generalization of Icelandic music stated above. Indeed, in Úlfur Hansson’s Pyo the audience was asked to supply the drones by humming or singing wordlessly. One piece, Maria Huld Markan Sigfusdottir’s Clockworking, was supposed to have been partly inspired by Pete Seeger; an accompanying video in fuzzy black-and-white showing working men swinging their axes brought to mind the mythological folk-song hero John Henry. But my ears only heard more Icelandic drones.

If the 20-member a cappella choral group Schola Cantorum Reykjavik is any indication, the vocal arts in Iceland are in terrifically healthy shape. Once the audience was in the main hall, Schola Cantorum treated them to a 15-minute set of Icelandic choral music (again, each program was different). Some pieces reverted to harmonies of spacious parallel fifths from ancient times; others used more contemporary techniques. (Gunnar Andreas Kristinsson’s Vinatta, a world premiere, displayed Bernstein-like syncopations.) All were beautifully, even ravishingly, sung.

Following the choral prologue, Esa-Pekka and the Philharmonic played for almost half-an-hour each night, two Icelandic compositions per set. Hlynur Adils Vilmarsson’s BD veered toward the avant-garde with sliding strings and col legno effects galore, as Salonen caught and pushed the rhythmic momentum toward its close. Festival co-organizer Daniel Bjarnason’s Emergence (a US premiere) did precisely what its title implied, most tellingly in the long third movement, where the slithering strings gradually built a chorale into an organ-like full-orchestra statement before fading into the darkness. Both pieces are available on the Iceland Symphony’s “Recurrence” album (on Sono Luminus), but in Disney Hall I could now hear the intricate details. With an orchestral snap or two and a lot of delicate details, clusters, and microtones, Thorvaldsdottir’s Aeriality produced its own set of drones, slowly, slowly trying to get somewhere before ending up where it began. Haukur Tomasson’s Piano Concerto No. 2 (US premiere), with its droplets of notes to begin, bongings of mallet instruments, and gentle cadenzas, was an agreeable vehicle for Vikingur Olafsson, Iceland’s lanky young piano star who had just released an album of Philip Glass’s études on DG. Sigfusdottir’s Aequora was mostly mellow and beautiful, again building on slow, sustained distant drones.

I’ll deal with the sixth orchestra piece in a bit, but first, a few comments on the main idea behind these concerts, the collaboration between Salonen, the LA Phil, and Sigur Rós. First of all, the band’s default mode—soaring, slow, ethereal washes of sound topped by the falsetto voice of lead singer-guitarist Jon por Birgisson—doesn’t really need a massive sym-
pharmacy orchestra for back-up, but at the same
time it can comfortably accommodate all of
that extra freight. With the latter in mind, the
festival commissioned eight composers
(Daniel Bjarnason, Dan Deacon, David Lang,
Missy Mazzoli, Anna Meredith, Nico Muhly,
Owen Pallett, and Pali Ragner Palsson) to write
orchestral arrangements of eight Sigur Ros
songs.

Most of the time, the arrangements con-
sisted of a mere inflation of what was already
there with some corroboratory detail, and it
took until the third time through the set to get
the balances between rock band and orchestra
onto something resembling an even keel. The
only real thrill I got from their collaboration
happened in Palsson’s great wide-screen
chorale treatment of the ‘Takk-Glosoli’ med-
ley, which alone was worth sitting through the
Sigur Ros-LA Phil set for on three separate
nights (“takk” is Icelandic for “thank you,” by
the way). As for Sigur Ros’s solo sets that
closed each night, one pass was enough; let’s
just say that ear fatigue from murky amplifica-
tion set in well before their 50 minutes were
up.

And now for the sixth orchestral piece, one
that for all intents and purposes stole the
entire show. It was a spectacular Organ Con-
certo by the first major composer Iceland ever
had, Jon Leifs (1899-1968), and the only major
historical piece (1930) on a festival that relent-
lessly stressed the present. It was also the most
radical element, beginning with a gigantic dis-
onsonant blast by James McVinnie on the Disney
Hall pipe organ and then, via a neo-baroque
passacaglia, building back up to a series of cir-
cus-like over-the-top climaxes. During the fest-
vival Salonen had been eschewing the use of a
pedal that runs through the ‘Ho usatonic’
section of the hall and revving up the Philhar-
monic as it came off its adventures in Iceland.

Why this terrific piece hasn’t been pound-
ed into the repertoire by now (it wasn’t even
recorded until 1999—on BIS) must have some-
ting to do with Iceland’s isolation from the
mainstream. Yet now that Icelandic musicians
are no longer outliers on the world music
scene, I hope other brave organists and
orchestras with pipe organs will take it up.

It’s not often that orchestras will program
organ concertos, especially contemporary-
sounding ones and on consecutive weeks, but
that’s right in line with the LA Phil’s habit of
unexpectedly doing the unexpected during the
Borda regime. So on April 20, with David
Robertson on the podium and Paul Jacobs on
the pipe organ, the orchestra gave Christopher
Rouse’s 2014 Organ Concerto, a co-commis-
sion by the orchestra, its West Coast debut
(world premiere Mar/Apr 2017). As if it were a
pre-arranged handoff from Leifs, Rouse’s piece
also begins flamboyantly with a blast from the
organ, with the orchestra joining in on the fun.
Now jaunty, now reverent, with three continu-
ously-playing movements in the traditional
fast-slow-fast sequence, the piece veered
between tonality and atonality before coming
to a (predictably?) smash-bang coda. In the
manner of Charles Ives, Rouse built a massive
cataclysm of sound about a third of the way
through that abruptly fell off a cliff into a
pianissimo passage. Like the Leifs concerto,
Rouse’s is about 20 minutes long, and it was 20
minutes enjoyably spent, after which Jacobs
added Bach’s Prelude and Fugue in A minor, S
543, played fast and evenly.

Overall it was a good night for Robertson
(known to some at the St Louis Symphony as
D-Rob), coupling Rouse with Three Places in
New England by the great American iconoclast
Ives, and the most overplayed work by an
American-inspired foreigner, Dvorák’s New
World Symphony. Indeed, Robertson was in
unusually animated form on the podium even
for him, putting on a show for the schoolchild-
ren who were crowding the Orchestra Rear
section of the hall and revving up the Philhar-
monic as it came off its adventures in Iceland.

In Three Places Robertson produced a
depth, warm sheen of polytonal threads in the
strings in the ‘St Gaudens’ section and led
‘Putnam’s Camp’ in really swaggering style that
came to a raucously rowdy head as the com-
peting sections of the orchestra collided. And
at last I could hear—and feel—the bass organ
pedal that runs through the ‘Housatonic’
finale.

As for the Dvorák, Robertson got the LA
Phil to attack the piece with unusual vigor,
force, and clarity while turning the Largo into
deep-breathing exercises in phrasing, with
huge pauses near the end as we waited for the
other shoes to drop. The piece sounded
reborn—and with that, can we please now give
it a rest for a little while?
Two Takes on Salonen’s New Cello Concerto

Yo-Yo Ma in Chicago and New York

Chicago Symphony
John Von Rhein

It was perhaps inevitable that Esa-Pekka Salonen and Yo-Yo Ma would one day collaborate on a new work. They share a questing spirit that carries them far beyond the sphere of ordinary musicians inhabit, Salonen as one of our most thoughtful composers and probing conductors, Ma as one of our most eloquent virtuosos and committed citizens of the musical world at large. Thus the world premiere of Salonen’s Cello Concerto, which they introduced at the Chicago Symphony’s concert March 9, was like twin forces of nature coming together.

The 2017 work, a Chicago Symphony co-commission with the New York Philharmonic, London’s Barbican Center, and Hamburg’s Elbphilharmonie, plays loosely with traditional concerto form but fills that free-form structure with the kinds of things Ma (the CSO’s invaluable creative consultant) does better than any cellist around. It is as much a showpiece for his stupendous instrumental gift as it is a study in opposing forces—think quiescent clouds of lyricism giving way to punchy hyperactivity and back again.

Those forces are finally reconciled over the course of the half-hour piece, which ends with Ma climbing to a vertiginous high B-flat on the cello’s A string, as if he were reaching for the stars. Cosmic imagery—racing comets and the “stylized chaos” of the universe, to quote the composer—in fact plays a central role in Salonen’s compositional thinking, as does throwing fearsome technical challenges in the cellist’s way and daring him, with a good-natured wink, to surmount them—which of course he did with amazing nonchalance.

The opening movement had the cello gradually emerging from a nebulous orchestral haze to engage in quiet dialogs with various orchestral instruments, including an aviary of woodwinds. The music tended to meander, but the sounds were ravishing. Real-time sound processing was a key element of the central movement: wispy cello lines and glissandos were electronically looped by an offstage sound designer to produce ghostly echoes that mingled with the acoustical sounds. Too bad these acute subtleties were almost ruined by audience coughing; I also wondered how much they really added to the piece.

The most directly appealing movement was the finale. Cascades of knotty double stops from the cello led to a frenzied free-for-all that had Ma and CSO percussion principal Cynthia Yeh (playing bongo and conga drums) trading furious riffs, with accelerating waves of brass and percussion to send the music hurtling to the double bar. A nanosecond burst of electronics, and the packed house was up on its feet, clamorous in its approval.
But did it hang together as a piece? My ears were seduced again and again by this or that gorgeous harmonic color, this or that brilliant stroke of instrumental engineering, without anything quite sticking in the mind. Perhaps the musical through-line will be more evident at later hearings in New York, London, and Hamburg.

I won’t soon forget the cellist’s way of making even the most acutely interior musings blaze with intensity, or the lucid control with which Salonen the conductor served Salonen the composer. The Chicago Symphony was in fighting fettle as well. I’m sure other cello virtuosos will want to take up Salonen’s concerto in due course, but none is likely to surpass what its dedicatee brought to the first performance.

For the second consecutive week, Salonen introduced the Chicago audience to a John Adams work in honor of the composer’s 70th birthday and closed with one of the big, early Stravinsky ballet masterpieces.

Stravinsky’s influence (his Song of the Nightingale in particular) in fact permeates the pages of Adams’s Slonimsky’s Earbox (1995), a supercharged little post-minimalist romp that pays homage to the Russian author, conductor, and lexicographer Nicolas Slonimsky, one of the great characters in 20th-Century music. This was its first CSO performance, and it was enjoyable to hear Adams’s colorful orchestral apparatus going full tilt.

The exacting control that marked Salonen’s handling of the Adams piece and his own music did not spoil the spontaneity of Petrouchka, in the 1947 version. Sharply etched rhythms, finely enamelled detail, and flexible pacing placed this masterpiece more in the symphonic than the balletic realm, but there could be no gainsaying the brilliance of the playing.

New York Philharmonic
Jack Sullivan

In Esa-Pekka Salonen’s new Cello Concerto, performed on March 17 with the New York Philharmonic, Yo-Yo Ma demonstrated a charisma that draws listeners irresistibly into complex music. He grabbed his instrument in a carnal embrace, his eyes blazing, wrapping his body around his cello as if they were one entity, producing an astonishing variety of colors and effects. This was a long, difficult piece full of dense harmonic clouds and jagged rhythms; but the audience gave it a standing ovation, probably more for the performer than the concerto, but either way good for classical music, which needs audiences cheering new symphonic pieces. The sold-out crowd was young as well as old, a testament to what Music Director Alan Gilbert has achieved in his tenure, and there was a palpable buzz in the air. At intermission I heard an older male subscriber say of Ma, “He can play anything!” and a young woman say, “He was just up there jammin’!”

With its hotly syncopated rhythms, intricate orchestral layers, and tonality spiked with imaginative dissonance, the Cello Concerto resembles other recent Salonen works commissioned by the Philharmonic such as Karawane and the Piano Concerto. The first movement, described by Salonen to the audience as “the birth of consciousness out of chaos”, offers the work’s most beautiful music, full of searchingly lyrical cello lines, trilling woodwinds, and star-like showers from high percussion—a dramatic contrast to the gritty, frantic finale, which ends in the cello’s highest register, as the violin does in Salonen’s 2009 Violin Concerto. The concerto certainly presented strong ideas, and the surround-sound tape loops at the end linger in my memory—one of several striking effects.

In the middle was a long, mysterious slow movement with a ghostly cello whispering to an alto flute. This exercise in near-inaudibility was compared by Salonen to “sitting on your porch with something nice in your glass”. But there was a bit too much in that glass, and the other movements were overstuffed as well. The concerto went on too long for what it had to offer, gradually losing its point and its shape. After the concert Rebecca Young, violist with the Philharmonic, contrasted it with Lera Auerbach’s “very concise” Violin Concerto premiered by the Philharmonic the week before (and reviewed in this issue).

Berlioz’s Symphonie Fantastique, which came after intermission, is also full of special effects, including eerie scratchings, glissandos, and dissonance—far more radical for 1828 than Salonen’s concerto is for 2017. Over-programmed as it is, the Berlioz can still deliver a visceral wallop, as it did in this performance where the Philharmonic’s go-for-broke brass and slithery strings, not to mention Markus Rhoten’s shockingly brutal timpani at the end,
Four US Orchestras Show Their Individuality

Charles McCardell

The March Madness Final Four concept took on a new meaning in Washington DC with the advent of the SHIFT festival, held from March 27 to April 1. Four orchestras made the cut: the Boulder Philharmonic, North Carolina Symphony, Atlanta Symphony and Chorus, and the Knights, a small orchestral collective from Brooklyn. This wasn’t a competition; each organization presented an evening concert at the Kennedy Center along with assorted events around town. The Boulder folks took advantage of the springtime weather and blooming cherry blossoms in the Tidal Basin area for some pop-up chamber music performances. The Carolina contingent offered unCHAMBERed, a modern classical-indie-rock fusion at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and vocal soloists with the Atlanta Symphony appeared at the National Gallery of Art. On the night before their Kennedy Center show, the Knights played at the Hamilton, a popular location not known for booking classical acts.

There were other musical activities on the groups’ calendars, to supply a range of experiences. This was critical to SHIFT, a collaboration between the Kennedy Center and Washington Performing Arts that has been years in the making. The point is to celebrate the hundreds of orchestras across the country by allowing some to strut their stuff in the nation’s capital. Amid all the pre-concert speechifying that included remarks by congressional members from the corresponding states’ districts, we were informed that SHIFT is not an anagram. This challenged certain minds to apply these letters in ways that might describe a group or an individual piece.

Each orchestra handed out bandanas for patrons needing more than applause to show their enthusiasm. No one worked harder to encourage people to wave them than the Boulder Philharmonic, who opened the series with a “Nature & Music” program. The East Coast premiere of All the Songs That Nature Sings by Stephen Lias commemorates the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service and took advantage of a large screen to present animated landscape photography of Rocky Mountain National Park. The visuals were stunning but tended to compete with, rather than complement, the music. So Lias’s work seemed like an extended promotional piece for the Colorado Tourism Office.

The geographical locus moved from the mighty Rockies to the comparative molehills of the Appalachians for Jeff Midkiff’s mandolin concerto, From the Blue Ridge. Midkiff, who hails from Roanoke, Virginia, has been playing mandolin since childhood. He’s also a clarinetist with extensive orchestral experience. His concerto is a conventional three-movement design that opens rather ominously in D minor and later settles in to a homecoming mood by using the popular melodies of ‘Wildwood Flower’ by the Carter Family and Bill Monroe’s ‘Roanoke’ as jumping-off points. Things take a sharp turn in ‘The Crooked Road’ finale, with a drum set and timpani laying down some jam-session grooves. The first
of his two cadenzas saw Midkiff engaged with the concertmaster in a heated exchange that spoke the same bluegrass language. If Midkiff hadn’t already impressed the crowd with his fluid picking, then his encore arrangement of ‘Monroe’s Hornpipe’, taken at breakneck speed, sealed the deal.

A brief detour to ‘Ghosts of the Grasslands’ from *Symphony to the Prairie Farm* by Steve Heitzeg found the Boulder Philharmonic turning cinematic with some whistling, a bit of acoustic guitar, percussive buffalo-bones clattering sounds, and squeaky toys used to simulate prairie dog barks. In theory, the rustic feel of this piece should have been the perfect set-up for Aaron Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* but the Frequent Flyers aerial dance troupe from Boulder that joined the orchestra took the ballet in a new direction to dizzying heights. It also made one ponder if, in this instance, SHIFT meant, “Sure hope it flies tonight.” The gravity-defying artists put on an impressive display. Five dancers spent most of their time suspended 25 feet or so above the stage. A large central ring accommodated three aerialists in various formations; some dancers shimmied up and down sashes in sleek synchronized motions, occasionally twisting themselves into makeshift cocoons. There was no story line—not that we expected one. And for anyone whose eyes weren’t riveted overhead, a fine orchestra also participated. Music Director Michael Butterman and the Boulder Philharmonic had little choice other than to play second fiddle in such an eye-popping production.

Green Colorado bandanas yielded to a Carolina Blue variant with the arrival of the North Carolina Symphony, led by Welsh-born Grant Llewellyn, who’s been at the helm since 2004. Though based in Raleigh, the NCS serves many communities. To reflect this outreach, all of the participating musicians easily doubled the size of their Boulder and North Carolina predecessors combined. Music Director Robert Spano and his gargantuan cast offered *Creation-Creator*, a sprawling oratorio by Christopher Theofanidis that was premiered by the Atlanta Symphony and Chorus in 2015. The 15 sections analyze the creative process with texts
that represent philosophies from around the world and through the ages, as expressed in the areas of music, poetry, science, and theology. A daunting task, but this group was prepared.

They surely weren’t ready for the several blasts of feedback screech that greeted the audience and orchestra members as they strolled on stage to take their places. The tech crew solved the problem quickly; with five vocal soloists and two narrators joining the orchestra and chorus, there was no place for any random noise outbursts. An elevated platform angled higher toward the back and situated in front of conductor Spano gave the soloists visibility, at the expense of pushing some of the string players up close to the stage doors. The orchestra was dressed in black; the chorus wore black and white; the vocalists stood out attired in white, complete with lab coats. Texts, movement listings, and images—notably, a camera covered in ice or in ashy ruin—appeared on the overhead screen, a looming fixture at the entire festival.

Spano handled this assembled multitude with an assuredness that one had to admire, considering the musical forces and staging elements involved. While a lot of the texts are declamatory, there were plenty of opportunities for the vocal factions to shine—mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke and the chorus’s pensive approach to ‘An Unknown Woman’ based on a Verlaine poem; the dark glory of ‘In the Eternal’ (text by St Augustine) delivered by a capella chorus; orchestra, chorus, and soloists weaving the thoughts of Bach, Van Gogh, Keats, Rilke, and Beethoven, among other figures, into a unified whole in ‘An Angel in the Marble.’ Two welcome segments helped bring the piece down to earth. Shannon Eubanks, as the 17th Century author Margaret Cavendish, boasted about being a great artist without excessive suffering. ‘The Creation’ by Harlem Renaissance poet James Weldon Johnson found narrator Steven Cole striding across the stage—with a stop at the conductor’s podium—to deliver his message.

The SHIFT festival concluded on a much smaller scale with the Knights. Artistic Directors Colin and Eric Jacobsen believe that music-making should be an adventure, and the audience should feel like a participant. The Knights have collaborated with Yo-Yo Ma, Gil Shaham, Wu Han, and the Mark Morris Dance Group. For their Kennedy Center debut, they were joined by the San Francisco Girls Chorus, directed by Lisa Bielawa. In light of their modern approach to concerts, it was refreshing, if a bit odd, that the Knights were the only orchestra among the four to include works pre-dating the 20th Century.

Vivaldi’s Gloria in D proved to be an excellent and logical choice, since it was written for the choir of a girl’s orphanage and music school in Venice. There was something charming about hearing these not yet fully developed voices and witnessing the absolute joy on
some of the girls’ faces as they stepped out for solos or blended with the choir. They followed with Psalm 13 (Herr, Wie Lange) by Brahms, another prolific composer of works for female chorus. Once again, the young ladies delivered a convincing performance.

The Knights returned to the present with Bielawa’s My Outstretched Hand (2016), which was inspired by 19-year-old Montanan Mary MacLane’s autobiography. Dialogs between vocal factions, numerous hand gestures, and the orchestra itself singing with the chorus supposedly made Bielawa’s case that we should treat young people’s emotions with respect and really listen to what they have to say. In a piece commissioned by the San Francisco Girls Chorus for this concert appearance with the Knights, Remembering the Sea (Souvenir de la Mer) by Aaron Jay Kernis darkened the mood as a response to terrorist activity worldwide in the past couple of years. A song-like opening movement between a young girl and her departed mother moves to a violent, explosive ‘Dies Irae’ section, then ends with the voices asking questions that go unanswered.

The Knights switched gears for an upbeat original closer, the collaboratively composed Ground Beneath Our Feet, which builds from a ground bass line that evolves to support a free flow of Irish, salsa, raga, and gypsy music, capped by a sing-along. A drum set and bongos figured in this crossover jam. Violinist Christina Courtin grabbed a baritone ukulele to lead the vocals. But wait, there’s more! The Knights and the chorus brought down the curtain with Courtin’s song, ‘Love Is a Season,’ winding up the festival on a positive, upbeat note.

SHIFT fulfilled its mission to give wider exposure to US orchestras in one central location. The Boulder Philharmonic and Atlanta Symphony drew well; the Knights and the North Carolina Symphony didn’t. A pep-rally atmosphere connected the Boulder and Carolina nights. The Atlanta struck hard and decisively; the Knights simply did their thing, Kumbaya moments and all. SHIFT 2 already has DC’s National, Fort Worth, Albany, and Indianapolis Symphonies lined up for 2018. One suggestion for the planners: When the overhead screen is not in use, please turn it off. That means not displaying the SHIFT logo. No one wants to stare at a glorified test pattern.

### Aaron Jay Kernis’s Violin Concerto

First Two US Performances

[Aaron Jay Kernis’s new Violin Concerto had its world premiere at the Toronto Symphony’s New Creations Festival on March 8 with soloist James Ehnes, Peter Oundjian conducting. The next two performances of it were with the Seattle and Dallas Symphonies, both of which are reviewed here. Even though his publisher G Schirmer lists an earlier 11-minute Violin Concerto from 1996, this new one is assigned no identifying number. —Editor]

#### Seattle Symphony

Melinda Bargreen

Many violinists might call it unplayable.

The new violin concerto by American composer Aaron Kernis had its American premiere in Seattle March 16-18. It is a large-scale, densely scored work of such staggering difficulty that the audience in Benaroya Hall was left gasping in the last bars of the third and final movement. Kernis himself calls the finale “hair-raisingly difficult” in his program notes.

Composed specifically for James Ehnes and commissioned jointly by four orchestras (Toronto, Seattle, Dallas, and Melbourne), the concerto is about 30 minutes long. It requires not only a profound technical agility from the soloist but also an unusually full orchestra for a concerto, right down to a big brass section complete with tuba, as well as three bassoons, piano, celeste, and a generous percussion section. Its quicksilver changes and complexity make it a tremendous challenge to conduct; Seattle’s Music Director Ludovic Morlot was an able and committed interpreter.

Densely scored and extremely busy, this is a work that spans the wistful, otherworldly atmosphere of Messiaen, the angular rhythms of Bartok, a taste of jazz, and solo lines that combine heartfelt passion with off-the-charts technical requirements. Sometimes the sheer volume and complexity of the music can become a bit overwhelming; the score is
mighty in scale and liberally peppered with showpiece cadenzas. At the risk of sounding like Emperor Joseph II (who was said to have judged that Mozart’s *Abduction from the Seraglio* contained “too many notes”), let’s just say that this new work could possibly set a record for the largest number of notes in a violin concerto. Clearly this magnum opus is a major statement for Kernis and also for its dedicatee.

Premieres do not always win fervent applause, but the Seattle audience greeted Ehnes’s final volleys of double-stop runs and bravura riffs with a lengthy standing ovation, loud cheers, and whistles. A highly popular figure in Seattle, where the 41-year-old Canadian-born violinist has been performing regularly since his teens, Ehnes directs the Seattle Chamber Music Society’s Summer and Winter Festivals and plays in several of the concerts. He is an outspoken and active advocate for new music, particularly of American composers; and he believes we have entered “a new golden age” where lyricism and tonality are accepted alongside more experimental compositional practices. This trend, Ehnes believes, is healing the disconnect between performers, presenters, and audiences. Certainly that seemed the case in Seattle with the new Kernis work, which was enthusiastically received by all three entities.

Ehnes said in an earlier interview that, during the composition and development of the concerto, he and the composer were in regular, almost daily touch, sharing ideas and questions. “A bit of virtuosity is part of the package [for Kernis’s concerto],” the soloist added with his usual modesty. “He knows I’m eager to stretch the limits. This spurs the development of experimental techniques; he writes very challenging music as a rule. It has been an exciting process.” Exciting for the audiences too.

The Kernis concerto was not the evening’s only novelty. Morlot opened the program with a limpid and flexible account of a seldom-heard Debussy work, ‘Cortège & Air de Danse’ from *The Prodigal Son*. Seattle’s music director is often at his best in the French repertoire; here he craftedpliant, subtle lines and shimmering surfaces, enhanced by the lovely flute solos of the orchestra’s Associate Principal, Jeffrey Barker.

Following the Kernis concerto, and offering a considerable contrast to it, was a particularly dulcet reading of Beethoven’s familiar Symphony No. 6 (*Pastoral*), marred by a few uneven entrances. Morlot programmed all of Beethoven’s nine symphonies and five piano concertos over the past two seasons. Though he sounds more stylistically at home with the works of his countryman Henri Dutilleux, which he has recorded, the Beethoven cycle was a noble effort and an audience-building one.

**Dallas Symphony**

Wayne Lee Gay

Dense, intense colors and evocative rhapsodic form dominate American symphonic composition these days; Aaron Jay Kernis, a full-fledged participant in the current color orgy, often applies the ear-catching strategies and imaginative effects of this current neo-romanticism to the traditional concerto genre, as in his latest contribution, a violin concerto composed for James Ehnes.

This newest candidate for the concerto repertoire, while making its rounds of major orchestras, turned up on Dallas Symphony concerts of April 6, 7, and 8, with guest conductor Gustavo Gimeno filling in for Music Director Jaap van Zweden, who bowed out citing family concerns. Although, at 31 minutes, this new work is by no means the longest concerto in the violin repertoire, Kernis clearly brought monumental ambitions to the piece, producing an epic aura principally through a fully developed three-movement structure and confident use of the same lavish orchestral characteristic used in much of his music. It’s a tribute to both Kernis’s command of orchestration and Ehnes’s always dependable musicianship that balance between soloist and the fairly massive orchestral force was never a problem.

The opening movement, a Chaconne, developed around urbane muscular material—evocative, one might dare to observe, of the dark scoring of old-fashioned film noir. Kernis ranges wide in this movement, briefly recalling the perpetual-motion gyrations of old-fashioned violin virtuosity before falling back to a calm narrative quality; this adventurous cur-
tain-raiser, which is as long as the ensuing two movements combined, closes bravely with a single pizzicato whisper from the soloist.

A chorale-like orchestral introduction opens the second movement, titled ‘Ballad’, where the violin soloist soars into a warmly impressionist section, interrupted by a violent episode before floating toward its close. Kernis finally succumbed to his penchant for clever name-giving for the final movement, combining toccata and martini (the composer calls it “a musical martini” because it leaves you with a buzz) into 'Toccatini'; here, rapid-fire virtuosity from the soloist gives way to a spacious orchestral landscape, lapsing into Broadway-style good humor to close what felt very much like a musical pilgrimage.

Ehnes delivered a solid, beautifully committed reading, which the orchestra matched in its constantly shifting, demanding score. Of course, the question that greets any new orchestral work looms—particularly one so handsomely launched by major orchestras and a clearly dedicated soloist: is it a potential addition to the repertoire? In terms of engaging the listener's interest, the answer is a definite yes; motion and activity were constant and engaging. In terms of creating breathtaking moments of emotional involvement, the answer is not so certain. To drag out the old and very true cliche, time will tell.

Beethoven’s Egmont Overture and Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 5 were overblown, poorly-paced performances. Somers’s Louis Riel & Canada’s 150th

Stubborn Music, Great Drama, History Redressed

Bill Rankin

Before the turn of the millennium, Canada had produced just one full-length opera with a Canadian storyline. Harry Somers's Louis Riel, written to honor Canada's 1967 centennial, depicts the fraught relationship between the Metis nationalist Louis Riel, who was determined to give his marginalized people on the plains of Canada political respect and cultural dignity, and a fledgling Canadian state bent on expanding westward in the late 19th Century with its well-documented disregard for the indigenous peoples of the Canadian frontier. Riel staged two uprisings against the central government's encroachment, the last of which led to his execution in 1885.

The opera had a few additional performances after its debut, including a short run in Washington DC to help commemorate America's bicentennial in 1976. The Canadian Opera Company, where the opera had its premiere, remounted the work from April 20 to May 13, this time to mark Canada's 150th anniversary.

The original production had no direct influences from actual indigenous communities, and certainly no indigenous performers. This time around, as Canada is making slow progress toward acknowledging and redressing the harm it did to native peoples, the production seen at Toronto's Four Seasons Centre was considerably more politically correct and inclusive than the original that was produced at a time when the Metis were referred to as “half-breeds”.

In this co-production with the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, where Louis Riel had three performances in June, director Peter Hinton added a silent group of Metis and other aboriginal supernumeraries who represent the witnesses to the history the Riel story recounts. There were other nods to the indigenous peoples’ connection to the story, including Metis folk singer Jani Lauzon's opening song, 'Riel Sits in the Chamber 'o State,' and surtitles in

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English, French, Michif (the Metis language), and Cree. This last gesture was admirable, but it made for a visually busy flow of text scooting across the screen.

Even with all these efforts to bring a contemporary sensibility to the new production, the original musical and historical statement of the work was maintained.

Somers’s music is of its time, a blend of spikey, mostly obstinate resistance to conventional melody, even when the central emotion of a scene is tender and reflective. A political campaign ditty in Act 2, left alone, would have set the right tone for the scene; but Somers couldn’t resist a little polytonal overlay to undermine a conventional political moment. Sure, the moment was conflicted, but in Somers’s musical universe every moment was ripe for dissonance, hurtling sometimes toward cacophony.

No dramatic vocal moment—and there were many in this seminal Canadian story of resistance and heavy-handed racist “justice”—was without an almost perverse atonal smack-down of tonal conventions. Riel’s story exudes themes of obsession and martyrdom (Riel likens himself to the biblical David at the end of Act 1), but the angular serialistic idiom Somers insisted on often limited its capacity to convey the intimate moments not soaked in rage or anguish. The score is full of aggressive brass and percussion, which makes a point but also immerses the drama in torturous heat where warmth is in order. And sometimes it seemed Somers ignored the needs of the singers: orchestral exertions blared as a singer was completing a narrative point. Projection of Mavis Moore’s libretto wasn’t the problem; insensitive orchestration was.

The cast of singers was excellent. Baritone Russell Braun created a Riel both inscrutably insular and zealously inspirational. His soul-searching wrestling matches with his God and his struggle with his vision for his people were compelling, and Braun made Somers’s music as wrenching and defiant as intended. His unrepentant posture at his treason trial brought Riel’s defiance to a splendid climax.

Baritone James Westman played Canada’s first prime minister, Sir John Macdonald. Much of Westman’s work was jagged recitative rather than conventional singing. Costume designer Gillian Gallow put Macdonald in a clownish red-plaid suit, which he wore in every scene, even though the arc of the story spanned 15 years. Bass Alain Coulomb as intermediary Bishop Taché exuded the requisite gravitas.

The personal relationships in the opera are perfunctory, but what time characters had to define their secondary roles was well served. Soprano Simone Osborne, as Riel’s wife, performed an indigenously tinged lullaby, the Kuyas aria that contrasted beautifully with Riel’s agonizing outpourings. (This aria is still controversial since it was plucked for the opera from a collection of west coast native songs without permission.)

Allyson McHardy as Riel’s mother, in her few scenes, brought some semblance of emotional balance to her son’s headlong mission; her pleading with Riel not to execute Thomas Scott (Michael Colvin), a rough-edged, bigoted, Protestant rabble-rouser, brought some strong female influence to the drama.

The vocal aspects of the opera followed the modernist tack of the score much of the time, giving the singers serious challenges both technically and aesthetically; and all met the demands impressively. The orchestra, under its director Johannes Dubus, made the Somers score their own—no mean task, I’m sure.

A COC subscriber sitting next to me would have felt better entertained by Puccini’s Tosca, which the company was presenting towards the end of the Riel run, but she wasn’t critical of the music. She was pleased that a Canadian story had appeared on a Toronto stage in a milestone year—a patriotic gesture long overdue.

American Record Guide

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Consistent Performances, Inconsistent Halls
Robert Markow

Four years ago the Taiwan Philharmonic made its second visit to Europe under the banner "A Glorious Return" [Mar/Apr 2014], a long-awaited follow-up to its first-ever tour in 1997. Now the orchestra has returned to Europe on a five-country six-city tour: Brussels, Warsaw, Linz, Berlin, Vienna, and Lyon. Between the European jaunts of 2013 and 2017 the Philharmonic also visited Korea, China [Mar/Apr 2016], and the US and Canada [Mar/Apr 2017], making it one of Asia’s most traveled orchestras. I accompanied the orchestra in its latest foreign foray (March 18-31), a tour that, like the previous one to Europe, was another glorious return.

Shao-Chia Lü, music director of the Taiwan Philharmonic since 2010, has fashioned the orchestra into a marvel of technical perfection and musical beauty. All the qualities I noted in this orchestra’s 2013 tour are still in place: a full, rich, cultured tone; balance both in sections and the entire ensemble; avoidance of any harsh, raucous, or coarse sounds; rhythmic precision; careful attention to dynamic contrasts; and well-regulated articulation. Everyone enters at precisely the same time; there are no stragglers. A sense of total self-assurance pervades their playing. Back stands of each string section work as vigorously as the front stands. The tour revealed a remarkable level of consistency—no single concert stood out as better played than the others; it was more a matter of halls that sounded different.

When I first wrote about the Taiwan Philharmonic in July/August 2011, the brass were its great glory. In the intervening years, that “great glory” has shifted to the strings, which now play with a richness, depth, and unanimity of sound that brings back memories of the Philadelphia Orchestra in the Ormandy years. As always when it travels, the Philharmonic brought along music of its homeland. Music by Gordon Chin (b. 1957) opened each concert. Taiwan’s best-known folk song, ‘Longing for the Spring Breeze,’ in a sumptuous arrangement for strings by Tyzen Hsiao, served as the encore. In between were a concerto (either Prokofieff’s Violin Concerto No. 2 with Ray Chen or Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G with Alexandre Tharaud) and a symphony (either Dvorak’s New World or Shostakovich’s No. 5). Yes, they are all warhorses, but when performed as well as I heard on this tour, the pleasure came as much from the quality of the playing as from the music itself.

With rare exceptions, one does not find in Lü’s interpretations anything much out of the ordinary. Overstatement and exaggeration are not his style. What one does get is solid, deliberate, exceptionally well-honed performances that combine intense lyricism with power. Lu pays scrupulous attention to details of rhythm, balance, and dynamic contrast—not always given in this age of rampant superficiality. Hearing thrice-familiar repertory under Lü’s baton brings not a sense of “Oh, that again”,...
but rather “Oh, that’s how it should sound!” I heard him conduct the Shostakovich four times in close succession and found myself wanting more—the performances were that good.

An intrinsically lyrical approach underlines nearly everything Lü conducts. He attributes the rich, warm sound of his string section partly to his pursuit of lyricism. His lyrical infusion did not come overnight. “I am a man in slow tempo”, he told me. “You can’t change things quickly. I try to create an environment for the right style. All music must be in style, with the right feeling. This takes time to develop. I think of myself as a gardener, trying to make my garden look better each year, watching things grow and become more beautiful.”

Every note in a musical line has a purpose, and every phrase, section, and episode has a place in the larger picture. Lü has mastered the art of knowing exactly how to pace the unfolding dramatic structure so that there is never any doubt as to where the climax is.

It is no secret that happy, contented musicians play better, and the tour itinerary was obviously designed with this in mind. It was paced so that there was always at least one day between performances. There were four-star hotels in each city. The atmosphere was consistently genial and casual, despite the military precision with which the entire operation unfolded. Musicians seemed constitutionally incapable of passing a shop without stopping to look—and buy. At home the orchestra is the NSO, National Symphony; in Europe it becomes the National Shopaholics. And could these guys ever eat! Fresh, buttery croissants—difficult to find in Taipei—were especially popular at the breakfast buffets.

**BRUSSELS:** Except for the few who toted violins and horns on their backs, the musicians had not seen their instruments for several days. The first concert had them still jet-lagged, nervous, and tired from a three-hour afternoon rehearsal. Nevertheless, pros that they are, they gave an exemplary performance. The concert opened with Gordon Chin’s Symphony No. 3 *(Taipei)*, written in 1996 and recorded for Naxos. Extensive program notes made much of the various motifs that run through the symphony, presumably giving it a programmatic content that related Taiwan’s historical struggle against outside forces. But these motifs did little in fact to tell a tale. It is easier to hear the symphony as a display of orchestral virtuosity. There was enough percussion writing to keep five players very busy with two sets of timpani, several mallet instruments, and such exotica as wind chimes, sus, police whistle, and cowbells. It is a complex, densely written score, filled with conflict and tension, but also incorporating episodes of inspired lyricism. The third movement in particular consists of visceral, high-octane music emanating the kind of primal energy that brings to mind the opening of Bartok’s *Miraculous Mandarin* and the ‘Danse Sacrale’ from *The Rite of Spring*.

Henry Le Boeuf Hall was sold out. Eight years earlier, Ray Chen had won the Queen Elisabeth Competition in this city, and undoubtedly many in the audience at his victory were back to hear him again. He played Prokofieff’s Violin Concerto No. 2 with immense power and self-assurance, but after a while the uniformity of approach became overbearing, and his abundant scooping and swooping became an annoying mannerism.

As the theme of Belgium’s Klara Festival this year was “Home, Sweet Home”, Dvorak’s *New World Symphony* with its ‘Goin’ Home’ melody in the second movement was the almost inevitable choice for a symphony. Why the English title for the festival? Because rendering it in either French or Flemish in this fiercely bilingual country would have offended speakers of the other language.
WARSAW: Warsaw surprised many, including me, with its modernity, cleanliness, and the overall gaiety of the people. Again the hall was sold out, with many young people in the audience and a dressy crowd. The Philharmonic, I was told, was the first major performing arts organization from Taiwan ever to visit Warsaw. The hall, Filharmonia Narodowa, is a classic shoebox design from the 1920s, but the sound did not embrace the listener as it did in Brussels; nor did it deliver the clarity I was expecting. Again the symphony was the Dvorak, and again the orchestra showed off its magnificent woodwind section, both as soloists and as perfectly matched pairs in the duets. One never gets the feeling this orchestra is trying to prove itself; it’s about the music, not about them.

LINZ: The Brucknerhaus seems to have taken its inspiration from one of Bruckner’s symphonies. It’s long. There are only 24 rows of seats that are laid out in an elongated arc parallel to the apron of the stage. The stage itself is so wide that seven stands of first violins fit easily in one row, with room for more. Obviously, I thought, this was going to be an acoustically challenged hall, and it was in many ways; but I sat in the top center of the balcony where the sound truly bloomed. There I enjoyed the first of four memorable performances of the Shostakovich Fifth. Among the pleasures were solos from principal flutist Anders Norell, whose huge golden tone reminded me of William Kincaid, legendary flutist of the Philadelphia Orchestra with Stokowski and Ormandy; timpanist Ting-Chuan Chen, who supplied rock-solid support on perfectly tuned, crisply articulated drums; and principal trumpet Nicolas Rusillon, as powerful a player as his counterparts in Chicago or Vienna.

BERLIN: The Taiwan Philharmonic has played in Berlin on each of its three visits to Europe. On the 2013 tour it played in the Philharmonie to a nearly full house. This time it played in the smaller Konzerthaus (about 1,500 seats), which saw a rather disappointing number of concertgoers, but they included the largest number of Chinese to attend any of the six concerts. Among the musical luminaries attending was Günther Herbig, the Philharmonic’s much-beloved Conductor Laureate, who treated the entire orchestra to dinner on its day off. But the hall in Berlin was disappointing. Though built in the classic shoebox design, boasting 14 splendid chandeliers and dripping with ornate decoration, the Konzerthaus lacks warmth, bass response, and ambiance. The audience applauded after the first movement of the Prokofiev concerto.

VIENNA: Vienna’s Konzerthaus is also a shoebox, but this one works. In fact, it was the best hall of the tour. Here the sound truly filled the entire volume of the hall. Basses were rich and full; the overall sound was clear and well balanced and spacious. The dressy crowd applauded three times between movements and contributed a chorus of bravos at the end. The best performance of anything on the tour was the slow movement of the Shostakovich Fifth, which Lü led with mesmerizing tension. One could luxuriate in the mellow, full-bodied warmth of the strings, much as one savor a great old Burgundy. The softest notes seemed encased in a magical aura, a scarcely vibrating body of sound more felt than heard.

LYON: Last stop was the Auditorium Orchestre National. It is appropriately termed an auditorium, not a hall. The stage is vast enough to accommodate Mahler’s Symphony of a Thousand with room to spare. Like the hall in Linz, it is fan-shaped but much larger. Most rows contain from 80 to 95 seats spread across the width of the hall, nearly forming semi-circles. Does this work acoustically? No, except for the seats at the back of the top balcony, where the orchestra sounded magnificent and, strangely enough, even closer than in Row 1 on the floor. Lyonnais flocked to the concert. French pianist Alexandre Tharaud probably helped sell the 2100 seats. It was the largest audience of the tour. It was also the most casually dressed by far—not a tie in sight—and gave one of Asia’s greatest orchestras an especially warm reception on the eve of its return to Taipei.
Ludovic Morlot, 43, announced in April that he will leave his position as music director of the Seattle Symphony in 2019 after eight seasons. He said he will continue to conduct the orchestra beyond then but did not mention any further plans.

Conductor Andrew Litton, 58, artistic director of the Minnesota Orchestra’s Sommerfest since 2003, will step down at the end of this season. In 2015 he became music director of the New York City Ballet.

Andres Orozco-Estrada, 39, music director of the Houston Symphony since 2014, extended his five-year contract for an additional three years until 2022.

Louis Langrée extended his contract as music director of Lincoln Center’s Mostly Mozart Festival by one more year through this summer, which will be his 15th year. He is also music director of the Cincinnati Symphony and chief conductor of the Camerata Salzburg.

John Morris Russell, 57, conductor of the Cincinnati Pops since 2011, extended his contract an additional two years through 2021.

American Francesco Lecce-Chong, 30, became music director of the Eugene (OR) Symphony on July 1 with a four-year contract. He is assistant conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony and was associate conductor of the Milwaukee Symphony from 2011 to 2015.

Kayoko Dan, who turns 39 this year and has been music director of the Chattanooga Symphony & Opera since 2011, extended her contract another five years until 2022.

Greek conductor Teodor Currentzis, 45, will become chief conductor of Germany’s SWR Symphony in 2018. The orchestra is the result of a merger in 2016 of the Stuttgart Radio with the Southwest German Radio (Baden-Baden) orchestras. Currentzis founded the Musica Aeterna Ensemble and Chamber Choir in Novosibirsk in 2004; it is now the first orchestra of Russia’s Perm State Theatre of Opera and Ballet, of which Currentzis is artistic director.

François-Xavier Roth, 45, will become the second principal conductor of the London Symphony this coming season, joining Gianandrea Noseda, whose appointment was announced a year ago. Roth succeeds Daniel Harding, who is leaving after 10 years. Roth is currently music director of the city of Cologne, leading both the Gürzenich Orchestra and the Cologne Opera.

German conductor Karl-Heinz Steffens, Norwegian Opera’s Music Director, will resign when his contract expires next year. He made the announcement in April while in his first season and two months before the arrival of controversial incoming General Manager Annilese Miskimmon, saying that “fruitful dialog” with her about the company’s artistic development was impossible.
Scottish conductor **Christopher Bell** will become artistic director of the Washington (DC) Chorus this season, succeeding Julian Wachner. Bell is also music director of Chicago’s Grant Park Music Festival Chorus.

According to a statement issued by Opera North on April 18, Serbian conductor **Aleksandar Markovic**, who turns 42 on August 7, “resigned effective immediately” after just seven months as music director. Even though the termination is effective in July, the statement said that by mutual agreement he would not return to the company.

**Deborah Borda**, 67, will return to her home town to become president and CEO of the New York Philharmonic on September 15, following 17 highly effective years in the same positions with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. On March 28 LAPO Executive Director Gail Samuel became acting president and CEO; Borda remained as an advisor to the LAPO board until June 1.

**Pianist Jon Kimura Parker**, 57, will become artistic director of Calgary’s Honens Piano Competition in January. He succeeds Stephen McHolm, who departed from Honens in 2016 in steps, first as president, then as artistic director, after 12 years.

**Daniel Gustin**, director of the Gilmore Keyboard Festival and Awards since 2000, will retire next year. He came to Gilmore after a 30-year management career with the Boston Symphony.

**Judy Iwata Bundra** becomes the chief academic officer and dean of the Cleveland Institute of Music on July 17, following a 30-year career at Chicago’s DePaul University School of Music, where she most recently served as interim dean.

**Jacob Yarrow**, 45, became the executive director of Sonoma (CA) State University’s Green Music Center in June, succeeding Zarim Mehta, 78. He came from the University of Iowa’s performing arts center, where he was program director for the past eight years.

**Mark Blakeman** will be the executive director of Oklahoma State University’s McKnight Performing Arts Center when it opens in 2019. He departed in May as president and CEO of the Tuscon Symphony after three years.

**Rory Jeffes**, a California native, becomes the new CEO of Opera Australia on July 31. He came from the Sydney Symphony where he was managing director. He replaces Craig Hassell, who became CEO of London’s Royal Albert Hall in February.

Winners at the 2017 Montreal International Music Competition, this year for piano, were Hungarian **Zoltan Fejervari**, 30 (first prize, $30,000 plus $50,000 career development grant); Italian **Giuseppe Guarrera**, 25 (second prize, $15,000); and Italian **Stefano Andreatta**, 25 (third prize, $10,000).

**Flutist Claire Chase** is the recipient of the 2017 Avery Fisher Prize of $100,000 for her work as “soloist, collaborative artist, and activist for new music.” The Brooklyn resident has performed the world premiere of more than 100 works for flute (many written for her), and was executive and artistic director of the International Contemporary Ensemble until 2016, a group she co-founded in 2001 and with whom she performed in more than 50 concerts a year.

**American soprano Nadine Sierra**, 28, was awarded the non-competitive 2017 Richard Tucker Award in April. The $50,000 award is given to an American singer at the threshold of a major international career.
German bass Kurt Moll, 78, died in Cologne following a long unnamed illness. From 1970 to 2006 he performed at the world’s major opera houses, including more than 125 times at the Metropolitan Opera, and made scores of recordings.

French conductor Louis Fremaux, 95, died at his home in France on March 20. He was the first music director of what is now the Lyon Orchestra, the predecessor for nine years to Simon Rattle at the City of Birmingham Symphony, and then chief conductor of the Sydney Symphony from 1979 to 1982.

American mezzo Kristine Jepson, 54, died of cancer on April 21. She was the first to sing the role of Kitty Oppenheimer in John Adams’s Doctor Atomic in 2005.

German tenor Endrik Wottrich, 52, died suddenly at home in Berlin on April 26 while talking on the phone to friends. According to Norman Lebrecht, he had collapsed several times during the previous months, but a cause was not found. He was best known for his roles in Wagner’s operas.

A new contract with the musicians of the Pacific Symphony in Costa Mesa CA was announced in March. It gives a 10.4% wage increase over five years, but, more important for an orchestra whose musicians are paid per service rather than a set salary, the contract went from no guarantees to a three-tier system that guarantees the number of rehearsals and performances musicians will get in a season. This allows musicians to plan their year financially and to plan freelance work around their schedule.

The Fresno (CA) Opera, founded in 1998, cancelled the remainder of its season on March 7 and filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy (liquidation).

Obituaries

Italian conductor Alberto Zedda, 89, died in Pesaro on March 9. The Rossini specialist was one of the founders of Pesaro’s Rossini Opera Festival. In addition to conducting in Europe’s main houses, in the US he conducted at the Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City Operas.

Composer Francis Thorne, 94, co-founder of the American Composers Orchestra in 1977, died in hospice care in Canaan CT on March 7.

James Wilkinson, 72, who served the Pittsburgh Symphony for over 40 years and was president and CEO from 2011 to 2015, died on April 16 at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center from medical complications. As a former financial analyst for US Steel, where he managed more than 60 collective bargaining agreements, his skills at negotiating musicians’ strikes and contracts for the PSO that satisfied all sides were legendary.

Chinese composer Du Yun, who lives in New York, was awarded the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Music for her opera Angel’s Bone, a work that turns “a wide range of styles into an allegory for human trafficking in the modern world”. The $15,000 prize is given to a work that had its world premiere in the US in 2016.

Recipients of the 2017 Avery Fisher Career Grants of $25,000 are the Dover Quartet, winner of the 2013 Banff String Quartet Competition; American violinist Chad Hoopes, who turns 23 this year and is a member of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center’s Two Program; American violinist Stephen Waarts, who turns 21 this July; and Chinese-American pianist Haochen Zhang, 27, winner of the 2009 Van Cliburn Piano Competition.

American Record Guide
Bolcom: *Dinner at Eight* (world premiere)

St Paul

It was an awful time for America: 1932, the Great Depression. We see the old newsreels of families wandering the streets of Manhattan holding up homemade signs: “Why can’t you give my Dad a job?” “Four children for sale.”

In the penthouses high above the city, things were better, of course, but not much. People were jittery, as if they were walking on thin ice. A prominent socialite, Millicent Jordan, throws a dinner party and everything goes wrong. The food is burned, the guests of honor cancel, and in short order we’re apprised of two failed marriages among the other guests as well as a business swindle, a fatal illness, one or two cases of serial adultery, and a suicide. Trouble in Paradise.

George S Kaufman and Edna Ferber chronicled these foibles of the rich in the hit play *Dinner at Eight*, which opened on Broadway in that difficult year, 1932. The classic all-star movie version with Jean Harlow as the not-so-dumb gold digger Kitty Packard came along a year later.

And now, courtesy of Minnesota Opera, we have an opera version with a sparkling, imaginative score by William Bolcom and a deft, astute libretto by Marc Campbell that opened March 11 at the Ordway Music Theater in downtown St Paul.

The production, staged with thoughtful flair by Tomer Zvulun and smartly designed by Alexander Dodge, made much of the locale. Manhattan itself almost became a character in the opera. A closely detailed aerial view of the city was the back drop, newsreels were projected at the start of each act, and interiors had a chic 30s-style art deco look. It wouldn’t have seemed odd if Fred and Ginger took a quick twirl across the Jordans’ living room.

Typical of Bolcom’s work, the score draws on a wide range of idioms—marches, waltzes, tangos—along with tangy harmonies and atmospheric etches. Though *Dinner at Eight* is definitely an opera, Bolcom’s music feels in places like a Broadway musical of the early 30s.

Each of the main characters delivers a strong self-defining aria or partial duet. The Jordans’ daughter, Paula, who is having an affair with a washed-up silent-screen actor, Larry Renault, has a gorgeous ballad in the first act, a lament concerning her rocky romance—the kind of number that used to be called a torch song (“He needs me, Needs me badly”), fervently sung here by Siena Forest.

There are comic moments, to be sure. Bolcom’s chattering woodwinds give those scenes an extra lift. A solo cornet playing what sounds like an old Neapolitan folk tune during the Packards’ quarrel adds a touch of irony.

But the tone, more often than not, is one of sadness and regret—more so than in the play. (The opera is based on the play rather than the movie.) Each of the characters is losing something or afraid of losing something. Bolcom’s subtle orchestration is especially telling in the darker moments: the soft, ominous brass chords leading to Renault’s suicide scene; the sudden trombone solo when Oliver Jordan leaves the doctor’s office, having learned of his fatal heart disease. It’s as if he’s imagining his heart exploding.

The use of minor characters to sing a prologue before each act (“The party goes on, Like it or not”) was both clever and useful—they pushed the sets around.

Continued on page 25
Glass: *The Perfect American* (US premiere)
Long Beach Opera

Philip Glass’s controversial portrait of Walt Disney, *The Perfect American*, would seem to have been destined for Los Angeles, the city where the Disney brand got rolling. But Los Angeles wasn’t buying. Despite its yen for contemporary operas, the Los Angeles Philharmonic wouldn’t touch it, their concert hall having been built with Disney money and bearing his name. Los Angeles Opera wouldn’t go near it; their home is right across the street from Disney Hall.

So the fearless Long Beach Opera swooped in and claimed the US premiere of Glass’s 25th opera, four years after its world premiere at Teatro Real in Madrid [May/June 2013]. The company always manages to more than make do with limited resources, and they didn’t need Disney money (not that they would have been given it) to make a convincing case for this fascinating opera.

The Madrid production (available on an Opus Arte DVD—March/April 2014) took place in an undefined space, but here director Kevin Newbury placed his entire production in a brightly lit 1966-vintage hospital room loaded with period medical artifacts. A pattern of squares bordered with white LED tubes formed a background screen where images from the past were shown.

Walt Disney’s restless energy was captured by baritone Justin Ryan; he couldn’t keep still, always scurrying around doing things even as he was gradually weakened by lung cancer. The level-headed financial brains of the company, Roy Disney, was sung by another baritone, Zeffin Quinn-Hollis, whose voice was of similar quality; you could believe that they were brothers. Suzan Hanson was an emotional Lillian Disney; and the opera’s fictional disgruntled animator-union organizer, Wilhelm Dantine (possibly modeled on a Disney animator from the 1940s, Art Babbitt), was clearly sung by Scott Ramsay.

The pit orchestra, led by Artistic and General Director Andreas Mitisek, took its time to warm to Glass’s minor-key minimalist patterns. But eventually the musicians revealed how expressive and eloquent Glass’s musical responses to texts have become over the decades when the material suits the method.

The flashpoint of controversy about this opera lies in Rudy Wurlitzer’s libretto, which includes some unflattering aspects of Disney. Sometimes he is depicted as a self-promoting owner of a brand name who takes all the credit for his employees’ contributions. He baits hippies, equates unions with Commies, and spews racist beliefs as he debates the malfunctioning audio-animatronic robot of Abraham Lincoln from the “Great Moments with Mr Lincoln” attraction at the 1964 New York World’s Fair. The robot was depicted here as a wreck of scraps and shards lying on a hospital bed.

It’s not bunk, really; some of what Glass-Wurlitzer’s Disney says are paraphrases of actual quotations from biographies of the media mogul. But the hot-button portions of dialog mask the truly visionary qualities of Disney in his last year, and to correlate that with the blustery reactionary in his pajamas and robe might have made for an even deeper, more thought-provoking opera. Nevertheless, as it stands, *The Perfect American* remains endlessly engrossing, and Long Beach Opera’s production had enough power to draw us in.

RICHARD S. GINELL
Blanchard: Champion
Washington National Opera

On Saturday night March 24, 1962 millions of boxing fans tuned in to “Fight of the Week” on ABC and saw 24-year-old welterweight challenger Emile Griffith beat Benny “the Kid” Paret to within an inch of his life at Madison Square Garden. Paret died 10 days later, just weeks after his 25th birthday. This was their third meeting, the tiebreaker, and the fourth bout by Paret in less than a year. Months earlier, he had been knocked out in a vicious contest with middleweight champion Gene Fullmer. The New York State boxing authorities cleared Paret to fight Griffith, so the welterweight title match was on. End of story.

Not for Griffith. He tried to visit Paret in the hospital but was rebuffed. Griffith eventually returned to boxing, winning and losing titles before retiring in 1977. He struggled as a bisexual athlete competing in the most brutal of mano a mano sports. At the pre-fight weigh in, Paret reportedly dropped the gay slur maricon on Griffith. He would’ve taken Paret’s head off right there, but Griffith wanted a victory, not blood on his hands. The nightmare of this event haunted him for the rest of his life.

When we first encounter Griffith in Champion, he’s an old man suffering from dementia and under the care of his adopted son, Luis. While he can’t remember where he put his shoe, Griffith’s memories of his life are vivid and unsparing, if a bit wayward. They interrupt why he’s dressing up today—to seek forgiveness from Benny Paret, Jr. Bass Arthur Woodley, bass-baritone Aubrey Allicock, and treble soprano Samuel Grace represented the three faces of Emile as senior citizen, prize fighter, and youngster with credibility and distinction. The flashbacks allow them to interact onstage, all three appearing together sometimes. It’s an effective story-telling method to show how the mind of a broken man imprisoned by his troubled past connects the trapping child laborer from St Thomas with the hat maker and bon vivant turned pro boxer in New York.

Among the strong cast, hometown favorite Denyce Graves as Griffith’s mother, Emelda, had two big moments but only took flight in the second aria, ‘Far Away and Long Ago’. She was accompanied by string bass only—a stark combination that worked especially well when she dropped into her lower register. WNO bass player Nathaniel West did the honors, stepping out solo from the piano-guitar-bass-drums jazz quartet that augmented the orchestra. On the March 4 opening night performance at the Kennedy Center Opera House, bass-baritone Wayne Tigges, playing Griffith’s manager Howie Albert, epitomized the concept of opera as a team sport. The ill singer couldn’t continue after his first scene, but he walked the role, while baritone Samuel Schultz, in his WNO debut, filled in from the side of the stage. This bit of choreography sat well alongside the staging of the fight itself, a slow-motion freeze-frame battle where the barrage of uppers that destroyed Paret wasn’t exaggerated. At the beginning of Act II Griffith approaches Paret in his hospital bed, and the comatose fighter reverts to his training regimen, singing while he jumps rope. Tenor Victor Ryan Robertson pulled off this tricky maneuver with ease.

Champion, which Terence Blanchard calls “an opera in jazz,” blends various idioms effectively. Some of the scenes could have been trimmed, particularly the finale after Griffith’s meeting with Paret, Jr. Nonetheless, from hat maker to haymaker, man-child to child-like man, Emile Griffith is a tragic, sympathetic figure. His story is worth telling, and Blanchard and librettist Michael Cristofer have made a strong case for promoting Griffith from the sports arena to the opera stage. [World premiere reviewed Sept/Oct 2013—Editor]

CHARLES MCCARDELL

Jorge Martin: Before Night Falls
Miami

Before Night Falls is pungent and unsettling, a very modern opera with a decidedly verismo feel and a powerful message about freedom. It was commissioned by Fort Worth Opera, which presented the premiere in 2010 [Sept/Oct]. For this, its second outing last March, Florida Grand Opera used the original production by David Gately. The libretto, which Martin wrote together with Delores Koch, is in English and is based on the memoir of Reinaldo Arenas, one of Cuba’s most important poets and novelists of the 20th Century (Koch had earlier translated...
the memoir). Arenas died of AIDS in 1990 in New York at the age of 47, and the memoir was published posthumously. In 2000 an award-winning documentary film by Julian Schnabel was based on the same source. Arenas was not well known in the US in his lifetime, but the memoir and film reached large audiences.

Raised in poverty by a single mother in rural Cuba, Arenas became a soldier in the Cuban revolution but later became a dissident and outcast, both because of his desire for artistic freedom and his flamboyant homosexuality, which the regime punished brutally. Unable to publish in Cuba, he arranged to smuggle a manuscript of his novel to Paris, where it was published and won a award. He was repeatedly imprisoned as a “pervert”; his friends were forced to denounce him, and he was forced to sign apologies. He finally fled to the US as part of the Mariel boatlift in 1980 and lived in New York until he died.

Arenas’s memoir celebrates his uncompromising quest for freedom, both political and sexual. Even in English translation, it mixes up profound poetry with gritty, salacious details of his sexual exploits in a warm and masterly way, drawing readers in to this passionate man. Schnabel’s movie managed to retain and even amplify the book’s rich texture.

The juicy details, daringly presented by Martin and integral to his memoir, have been primly snipped out of the libretto. Instead, whenever it’s time for a sex scene, young male dancers arrive on the stage. But their athletic choreography (by Yanis Pikieris) is generic, and the audience only learned what was going on from the response of people who break it all up: first a chorus of Arenas’s aunts and later the police. If it’s short on sensuality, the text is long on pretentious repetitive passages and cliches about freedom. Didactic lines like “Life without freedom is no life at all” rang false and eventually drained the night of energy.

But Martin’s wonderfully varied score redeemed the opera, especially his writing for the orchestra. Often there were echoes of Verdi and Puccini. Cuban sounds abounded, especially a staccato rumba beat depicting island life, which transformed nicely into the tap-tap-tap of Arenas’s typewriter. There were moving choral numbers. Yet it was the dissonant modernist passages that were most effective of all.

Gately’s simple production made good use of projections by Peter Nigrini, which quickly moved the action across a range of scenes from beach to prison to Manhattan.

The role of Arenas requires considerable stamina. He is on stage for almost the entire opera, a character who is a despondent, angry outsider. Elliot Madore, a good-looking 29-year-old Canadian baritone, turned the role into an intense tour du force. The role of Victor is a composite—first an officer in the revolution, then a policeman and jailor. Much of his singing is declamatory, and some of the text is especially awkward. Bass-baritone Calvin Griffin nailed it with a portrayal gripping in its cruelty and cunning.

Arenas’s best friend, Pepe, who finally betrayed him, was portrayed by tenor Javier Abreu as shallow and carefree. Tenor Dinyar Vania gave a convincing portrayal of Ovidio, an aristocratic literary figure who was Arenas’s mentor. Martin introduced two “muses”, the Moon (soprano Elizabeth Caballero) and the Sea (mezzo Melissa Fajardo), who sang some of the richest music, especially as they encouraged Arenas to write his memoir. Caballero doubled as Arenas’s mother.

Christopher Allen, resident conductor at Cincinnati Opera making his FGO debut, handled the far-ranging, lush score with dispatch.

JAMES L. PAULK

Bolcom—from page 22

The final scene—dinner, at last—though well staged by Zvulun, was muted and uneasy, as it was in the play. It would have been nice to linger a while and hear the dinner conversation.

Zvulun’s cast couldn’t be faulted. They were outstanding, all singer-actors of high accomplishment: Mary Dunleavy and Stephen Powell as the Jordans, Craig Irvin and Susannah Biller as the Packards, Andrew Garland and Adriana Zabala as Dr Talbot and his wife, Brenda Harris as Carlotta and Richard Troxell as Larry Renault. Victoria Tzykun designed the plush costumes and Robert Wierzel the lighting. Conductor David Agler paced the show expertly and drew a bright performance from the orchestra.

The opera and the production are the latest installment in the company’s exemplary New Works Initiative. It is a co-production with the Atlanta Opera and the Wexford Festival in Ireland. Dinner at Eight, it’s worth noting, is Minnesota Opera’s 45th premiere.

MICHAEL ANTHONY
Respighi: *La Campana Sommersa*

New York City Opera

The reincarnated New York City Opera pulled off what might be its biggest success so far with a rather unlikely project, itself a reincarnation: the staging of *La Campana Sommersa* (The Sunken Bell), a largely forgotten opera by Ottorino Respighi. Three of the things the old NYCO did best were finding and producing neglected operas; using clever, frugal productions to save money; and, especially, discovering and supporting talented singers and bringing them to the fore in major roles. All were on display in this performance, seen April 4 at the Rose Theater.

Following the company’s bankruptcy in 2013, a new team headed by opera veteran Michael Capasso has struggled to rebuild it, handicapped by financial constraints. Now in its second season, the revived company does seem to be gaining momentum, and there was much to admire in the way *Campana* came together.

Respighi is best known for a few of his orchestral works, especially the tone poems *Fountains of Rome* and *Pines of Rome*. But he was quite prolific in his time (he died in 1936), writing a total of nine operas and a number of art songs.

*Campana* is part of an entire genre based on myths and fairy tales that emerged early in the 20th Century. A few, like Dvorak’s *Rusalka*, stayed in the repertory; but most quickly faded into obscurity. *Campana* came to the Metropolitan Opera in 1929, two years after its premiere, and has apparently not been heard in New York since.

The plot is a bit convoluted. Rautendelein, who seems to be some sort of fairy girl, falls for Enrico, a human bell maker. Saved from illness by Rautendelein’s magic, Enrico leaves his wife and family to join Rautendelein, then obsessively sets out to build a mysterious temple. The abandoned wife commits suicide, followed eventually by a remorseful Enrico. This all happens in a fog of mystery and is surrounded by subplots. The story sometimes seems like a mash-up of *Tannhauser* and *Rusalka* but with a strong Italian sensibility. The noblest characters are Enrico’s wife and family and priest. But if a traditional hero is missing from *Campana*, so are villains. Even the oddest characters are somewhat sympathetic.

Respighi surrounded the story with an engaging post-romantic score with echoes from both German and Italian opera. The rich-textured orchestral writing is the work of a master at the top of his game. And if his vocal line doesn’t often open into opportunities for display, it is expressive and solid.

The production, shared with Sardinia’s Teatro Lirica di Cagliari, had an old-fashioned feel, despite the extensive use of projections. Pier Francesco Maestrini, the director, somehow resisted any temptation to camp it up; his rendering was faithful to a fault. It worked well, with the opera’s quirks adding to its charms.

Continued on page 29
Montemezzi: *Love of Three Kings*
Sarasota Opera

On a visit to British Columbia in 1996 I noticed that Victoria’s Pacific Opera was performing *The Love of Three Kings* by Italo Montemezzi (1875-1952). Alas, my stay in Victoria was only overnight, and I had to miss it. I also missed the Sarasota Opera’s production of it in 2003, so it was heartening to see that they were bringing it back this year. As a new resident of the Tampa Bay area, I was determined not to pass on this rarely performed opera the third time.

This last production of the season took place on March 26 at the historic downtown Sarasota Opera House. While Montemezzi’s only known opus stands on the fringe of the repertory, it is a powerful opera, rich in lyricism, well orchestrated, and able to hold one’s interest in three brief acts.

Its first performance was at La Scala in 1913 conducted by Tulio Serafin; and its success attracted the Met who, under Toscanini, took it up less than a year later. It held sway for a quarter century at that institution under a host of renowned singers and conductors, but vanished almost without a trace after that. Stylistically it is verismo but with a touch of Wagner. Others claim that it shows the influence of Debussy, but I don’t hear much of that. In any case, the “Three Kings” really turn out to be one king and two princes.

As King Archibaldo, Kevin Short, repeating his success from 2003, had a stentorian, rock-steady bass-baritone voice and was dramatically aided by Joanne Middleton Weaver’s make-up, which enabled him to see while appearing blind to the audience. Although sightless, the king suspects that his son Manfredo has a faithless wife in Fiora but is unable to identify her lover. Short literally owned the role and was incredibly effective as both singer and actor. His big Act I aria ‘Italia, Italia’, where he remembers the beauty of the medieval Italian landscape of his youth, brought the house down and carried the conviction that we all feel for remembered treasures of our past.

Archibaldo (who has a suppressed hankering for the lass himself) eventually strangles Fiora (echoes of Verdi and Desdemona) and with astonishing ease tosses her lifeless body over his shoulder and carries her off. This impressive feat, accompanied by music of trenchant, almost surreal, footsteps must have taken some practice and had a shocking, chilling effect on the audience.

Princess Fiora, believably sung by the statuesque soprano Elizabeth Tredent, had another steady, sonically rich, and dramatically effective voice. She also was required to
remain quiet and not move for all of the time she had to play dead at center stage. Her acting (and that of the entire cast) was well beyond the normal stand-and-belt-forth seen in many operas. Praise for that goes to Stage Director Stephanie Sundine, who gave her cast something natural to do at all times—no mere posturing in this production.

Marco Nistico as Manfredo, frustrated by his wife’s failure to return his love, and Matthew Vickers as Prince Avito, the true recipient of her affections, both had resplendent tenor voices. Better yet, they looked their parts and were believable in their actions and reactions. Several sustained love duets between Fiora and Avito rose to impassioned heights both musically and emotionally. If the prolonged love-death seemed melodramatic as each prince in turn kissed her lips, on which King Archibaldo placed poison to catch her lover, it was not beyond the acceptable limits of opera dramaturgy. When the king realizes that he is responsible for the death of his son, the opera comes full circle in showing that irony and tragedy can occur without the presence of real evil. Even in the human fallibility of Princess Fiora, if “love conquers all”, it was logical that her resistance be futile.

David Gordon’s Gothic set designs were masterly, and the costumes by Howard Tsvi Kaplan were appropriate for the time and place. The chorus, in their short Act III appearance, was well trained. The orchestra performed with distinction, especially in the many solo passages. Artistic Director and Principal Conductor Victor DeRenzi held it all together with the assurance of the master who has just taken us through the complete canon of Verdi’s operas in the previous 28 seasons.

For next season DeRenzi has planned Eugene d’Albert’s Tieland, not performed in this country for almost a century, as well as Bellini’s Norma and Puccini’s Manon Lescaut, part of a new series called “Beyond Verdi: Italian Masters”.

On a disturbing note, at the final performance of Kings only about 15% of the audience was below the age of 60.

ALAN BECKER
Violist Rebecca Young told me after the concert that, though she normally doesn’t care for contemporary music, she was compelled by this “very imaginative” piece. The New York Philharmonic audience, often indifferent or hostile to new works, apparently agreed: Auberbach’s mesmerizing concerto got a standing ovation—something that rarely happens at these subscription concerts, even though Alan Gilbert has commissioned a number of worthy pieces—surely more than any Philharmonic music director since Pierre Boulez.

Mahler’s Symphony No. 4 is another kind of blissful dream, one far more innocent and childlike. Gilbert coaxed uncommonly crystalline sounds from the Philharmonic, aided by the relentlessly bright acoustic in David Geffen Hall. The gentle attenuations of soprano Christina Landshamer seemed part of a determination to move as far from Mahler’s usual mortality-obsessed turbulence as possible. Of course, Mahler could not keep the darkness at bay entirely; he briefly invokes Death on the fiddle in what he calls his “uncanny” scherzo, but this sweetly flowing performance made it hard to imagine that he really meant it. Given the terrifying nature of our current world, that is just as well: we need concerts like this.

Ranjbaran and Warnaar Concertos (recorded)

Nashville Symphony

“What did you think of that flute concerto?” an enthusiastic Roger Wiesmeyer, Principal English Horn of the Nashville Symphony, asked me in a recent email.

The work that prompted his query was Behzad Ranjbaran’s flute concerto, which the Nashville Symphony performed in mid-April at the Schermerhorn Symphony Center. Wiesmeyer’s zeal was understandable. Ranjbaran’s three-movement 27-minute concerto proved to be an original, daring, and intensely musical work. The piece left no emotion, no instrumental timbre unexplored; and I suspect it will occupy a prominent place in the repertoire of the modern flute concerto.

Ranjbaran, an Iranian-born American composer who now teaches at the Juilliard School, composed his concerto in 2012 for the Philadelphia Orchestra’s principal flutist, Jeffrey Khaner. In his program note, Ranjbaran wrote that he found inspiration for his concerto in the “melancholic tone of the ney”, a traditional Persian bamboo flute. The spirit of this ancient instrument was clearly present in the concerto. It made itself known in the long, meditative flute soliloquies that occupied much of the first movement. Ranjbaran juxtaposed these quiet, Persian-inflected melodies with brilliant, virtuosic sections, fiery passages that allowed the flute to soar above the large orchestra. The second movement, marked Adagio cantabile, unfolded as a kind of song without words, with the flute engaged in sensuous dialog with the orchestra. In the final movement the flute and orchestra joined battle, with a relentless, driving race to the end.

The Nashville Symphony recorded its performance of the Ranjbaran concerto for release on the Naxos label, and it couldn’t have hoped for a more exhilarating rendition. Principal Flutist Erik Gratton gave an authoritative reading, playing fast passages with virtuosic intensity and lyrical sections with deep feeling. Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero and the
orchestra supplied colorful, dramatic accompaniment.

This drama, by the way, was not only heard but seen in the opening night performance. As Gratton neared the finale’s spectacular coda, his score began to slide slowly off his music stand. Sensing the impending disaster, Concertmaster June Iwasaki leapt to action, leaving his seat and grabbing hold of the score. His quick reflexes saved the evening, allowing the concerto to conclude without missing a beat.

When it comes to contemporary American music, the Nashville Symphony has long served as the Naxos label’s unofficial house orchestra. In 1999 the ensemble became the first American orchestra to record for Naxos’s American Classic series with the orchestra’s late, great Music Director Kenneth Schermerhorn leading the group in Howard Hanson’s Symphony No. 1. It came as no surprise, therefore, to find them recording an additional work, Brad Waraara’s Horn Concerto, at the same concert.

A noted horn virtuoso who won a seat in the Rochester Philharmonic while still an underclassman at the Eastman School of Music, Waraara finally made his mark as a Hollywood composer and arranger; the turbocharged soundtracks in all those “Fast and Furious” movies were composed by him.

In the Horn Concerto Waraara slowed the pace considerably, creating a short 18-minute three-movement work that called to mind the pulsating minimalism of John Adams one moment, the lyrical warmth of Richard Strass the next. The opening movement, appropriately called ‘Tintinnabulations,’ opens with chiming percussion, which sets in motion a churning, oscillating orchestral accompaniment a la Adams. The solo horn joins in with a series of energetic, joyful tunes. In the second movement, ‘Elegies: Lamentation,’ the horn explores the depths of loneliness and despair. The mood shifts dramatically in the finale, ‘Tarantella,’ which playfully quotes famous horn melodies from Brahms, Mozart, and Strauss. Principal Horn Leslie Norton gave a fully satisfying reading, playing every note with a warm tone and flawless technique.

Guerrero concluded the program with Beethoven’s Symphony No. 2. His interpretation of this quintessentially classical symphony was clearly informed by the early-music movement. His tempos overall were on the fleet side, with the famous Larghetto sounding almost like a romanza. The Scherzo and Finale were played with gusto, earning a rousing ovation from the packed hall.

JOHN PITCHER

Busoni: Piano Concerto
Boston Symphony

For only the second time in its history, Boston’s Symphony Hall reverberated with the considerable sonorities of Ferruccio Busoni’s remarkable 70-minute piano concerto with men’s chorus. In the late 1980s Christoph von Dohnanyi, Garrick Ohlsson, and the Cleveland Orchestra performed the work in Symphony Hall while on tour. The Boston Symphony had the composer as a piano soloist many times between November 1891 and February 1911, yet they had not played the concerto until these March concerts.

Was this (in)famous concerto worth the wait? I have to say yes and no. Its “infamy” rests on the absolutely fiendish demands made of its soloist. The pianist who confronts this score plays almost non-stop for 70 minutes with more notes per square inch than any other concerto—and those notes are played at great rapidity and great volume at almost every moment. Only a few virtuosos take on this concerto, so its appearances in concert halls are rare. In these performances Kirill Gerstein was the undaunted soloist, and the orchestra was expertly conducted by Sakari Oramo, 51, who succeeded Simon Rattle as music director of the City

30 Music in Concert
Gerstein was remarkable, constantly erupting with cascading volleys of rich and effulgent sound from one of the BSO’s newly acquired Steinway concert grands. No matter what the volume generated by the BSO in its colorful accompaniment, Gerstein was always audible and musical, with astounding stamina and virtuosity. “Heroic” is the word that comes to mind. Oramo was a sympathetic accompanist, ever mindful of the challenges of maintaining transparency in Busoni’s thick orchestration.

As merely one example of the unusual nature of this music, the concerto’s fifth and final movement is a setting for six-part men’s chorus of a text titled “Aladdin” by the Danish poet Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger that describes the musical vibration of an Arabic temple whose “pillars of rock begin to make deep, soft music.” The chorus sings, “Lift your hearts to the eternal power; feel Allah near, see his deeds!” The men of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus rose resplendently to the occasion. Their tone grew rich and full as they warmed up and idiomatically declaimed the German text.

Overall, Busoni’s concerto is a true “occasion,” but its variegated content is only fitfully engaging. After a while I became inured to the constant arpeggios, glittering passagework, and the often somewhat turbid sonorities of the orchestra. There are reminders of Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Liszt, and even Mahler that peek through Busoni’s adept yet dark orchestration. The work is fascinating, unique, and definitely worth hearing, but I’m not awaiting another hearing with any particular enthusiasm.

The concert had opened with a relatively terse work composed three years after Busoni’s sprawling concerto, Sibelius’s Symphony No. 3 (1907). The choice of this particular work neatly solved the problem presented by the Busoni: what to perform with it? Sibelius is a master of Nordic color, and the symphony’s astringent and cool character was an ideal foil for the super-abundance of the Busoni. No. 3 is among the least often performed of the composer’s seven symphonies; it offers no huge peroration such as are heard in the more popular Nos. 2, 5, and 7. Yet No. 3 offers many charms of a more delicate and subtle nature, fascinating on their own and fascinating as a herald of the later works. Oramo and the BSO limned its qualities into a coherent and elegant presentation; but, despite a detailed and beautifully played performance, its felicities did not erase memories of Colin Davis’s 1973 and 1976 performances with the BSO.

JOHN EHRLICH

Cameron Carpenter, organ
Buffalo Philharmonic

The Buffalo Philharmonic’s labeling of its March 10-11 concerts as “Organ Virtuosity” was fitting, inasmuch as the current whiz-bang organist Cameron Carpenter was the orchestra’s soloist, JoAnn Falletta conducting.

Carpenter is riding a wave of publicity and prominence. It was not always so for organists. In early 78-rpm days the only prominent recording organists were Albert Schweitzer and E Power Biggs, both considered highly proficient but only academically appreciated. The element of organ theatricality was introduced by Virgil Fox in the 1950s, taking advantage of stereo recording’s new, broader sonic boundaries to build enthusiastic and vastly wider organ audiences.

Many others followed. But Carpenter, sporting his signature Mohawk hair-do, is currently king of the crowd with his immense touring organ that numbers some 38 portable speaker enclosures. Carpenter’s virtuosity was made visual as well as audible with a huge screen over the console revealing the artist’s dazzling technique on both the five-manual console and the pedals below.

This visual dimension was truly engrossing and held the large audience in its thrall. But it became progressively more apparent that the thunderous applause and spontaneous shouting were more a response to the performance than to the music. And maybe that’s OK from an audience-building point of view.

Music in Concert
With the orchestra reduced just to strings and timpani, Poulenc’s Organ Concerto (1938) opens with a blazing Bach-like episode whose gravity seemed to permeate the rest of the performance. Somewhat diminished in this organ-centric view of the concerto were its sophistication and its engaging French insouciance.

Bach’s Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor really showed off the resources of the huge organ. Its vast array of stops seemed capable of creating almost any sonic ambience. Seldom visited, however, was the conventional pipe-organ sonority. Carpenter’s registrations changed often and were always appropriate to Bach’s message, never raucous simply for effect. In retrospect, a sense of electronic power lingered in the memory. The soloist seemed to be going for clarity and articulation and succeeded, but in the process I didn’t detect the small nuances that keep Bach’s persistence from verging on the mechanical.

Fond of unexpected encores, Carpenter followed with what seemed his own improvisation on music from Wagner’s Meistersinger, a delightful romantic romp.

Falletta deftly designed this program to be bracketed by two French works, opening with an under-appreciated mini-masterpiece, the brass Fanfare from Dukas’s La Peri. It was simply superb. And at the end was Saint-Saens’s majestic Organ Symphony. Here the organ is used to wonderful effect as an integral ensemble instrument adding subtle colors, especially delicious in the beautiful Adagio, one of Saint-Saens’s finest creations. And in the roof-raising finale it was all-stops-out, with Carpenter and the audience reveling in the superb fortissimo organ-orchestra balance.

That should have been it. But Carpenter halted the applause to offer two more short encores, concluding with a wildly galumphing piece in racing triplets and toe-tapping counterpoint. Wonderful.

HERMAN TROTTER

Andsnes-Hamelin Piano Duo
Carnegie Hall

It was a big event—most sections of Carnegie Hall, save the highest balcony, were sold out well in advance. The New York classical radio station, WQXR, broadcast the concert. Lief Ove Andsnes and Marc-André Hamelin were playing their program for the 11th time in a month. They had already been in six European countries and three big cities in the US. Chicago and Washington DC followed New York to complete the joint concerts for the time being.

Reviews of these concerts only confirmed what I saw in New York on April 28: a pair of world class pianists, at the top of their abilities, fully in tune with their music and each other. The program noted that they have recorded the Stravinsky works for Hyperion, due for release later this year. Given the success of this concert tour, both with audiences and critics, I count myself among the many who look forward to the recording.

Opening with Mozart offers no room for cover—anything less than perfect ensemble is noticeable. Their dead-on playing and musicality were keys to this great performance. The eight-minute Larghetto and Allegro for two pianos, completed by Paul Badura-Skoda, was a perfect way to begin. Hamelin and Andsnes passed melodic phrases back and forth in the Larghetto, then took off on a sprightly Allegro, reminiscent of Mozart’s great Sonata for Two Pianos, composed at the same time.

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orchestra), written for the composer to perform with his son Soulima, is firmly in his neo-classical style and made for as smooth a transition as possible from 1781 to 1931. Hamelin and Andsnes were in their element with the motive rhythms and acerbic harmonies in Stravinsky’s favorite of his compositions.

Debussy’s *En Blanc et Noir* finished off the first half of the program in a very different harmonic and textural idiom. Again, the pianists’ ensemble was remarkable, especially in the marked, risoluto single line played by both simultaneously in the first movement. I have commercial studio recordings where these notes are not always as perfectly together as they were in this concert. With an exceptional variety of touch and tempo flexibility, the pianists built a multi-dimensional sound palette for a work strongly influenced by World War I. The second movement’s imposing march, based on ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God’, was won over at the end by a subtle quote from ‘La Marseillaise’; all carefully and clearly balanced. Debussy’s third movement is dedicated to Stravinsky, and, in a nice programming touch, I discovered that the first performance of the piano version of *The Rite of Spring* was played by Debussy and Stravinsky.

Although almost all ballets first appear in some piano version so that choreography and rehearsals may begin while the orchestration is completed, Stravinsky’s four-hands version of *The Rite of Spring* has taken on a life of its own. It is now at the core of the duo piano repertoire. Stravinsky noted that this first published version (1913) could be played at one or two pianos. At one piano, some musical compromises have to be made because the score cannot be played as written. At two pianos, with pianists of this caliber, there are still some choices to be made, but nothing important is missed, and the sonic effect of two pianos is better suited to the music, especially in a large place like Carnegie Hall.

Two seasons ago I was very impressed by Martha Argerich and Daniel Barenboim, who recorded this in concert. Andsnes and Hamelin gave a performance that I would have expected from the elder duo about 25 years ago; it had more overt virtuosity and plenty of on-the-edge-of-your-seat excitement. The final Sacrificial Dance built to a tremendous climax and brought the audience immediately to its feet.

The encores were all lighter Stravinsky: ‘Madrid’ (one of Four Etudes for orchestra, transcribed for two pianos by Soulima Stravinsky), plus ‘Circus Polka’ and ‘Tango’ (both arranged for two pianos by Victor Babin). The audience wore itself out with curtain calls. As I walked out into a very warm New York evening, the memories of pagan Russia lingered.

JAMES HARRINGTON

Barbara Nissman, piano
Troy NY

Ginastera, Bartok, and Prokofieff were the enticements for the March 19 recital of pianist Barbara Nissman, presented by Troy (NY) Chromatics at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall. But it was Liszt’s Sonata that anchored the afternoon and proved the most surprising piece on the program. Nissman’s interpretation of the Liszt revealed rich, overlooked passages and thereby emphasized her extraordinary talent.

Most readings of the Liszt seem to be exercises in weight and speed by overeager virtuosos. Nissman, 72, clearly felt that she had nothing to prove. She certainly knows the piece well enough, having recorded it several times over the course of her long career. In brief opening remarks to the audience, she described the sonata as a touchstone in her life and “a barometer that gives me an idea of where I’m headed’. For the next 30 minutes or so, she headed to a heavenly place.

American Record Guide

Music in Concert
Nissman certainly held her own in terms of sheer volume and velocity, but she was unusually generous with calm and serenity as well. Midway she displayed a joyful sense of abandon. For the audience it was a journey of continual discovery. Besides the familiar stormy dialogs, the music contained suggestions of hymns, marches, and lullabies. Where have those things been hiding?

Though the Liszt wasn’t the concert opener, everything else seemed to follow in its path. First up was Ginastera’s Sonata No. 1. This was also familiar ground for Nissman, who knew and worked with the composer. In fact, his last piece, the five-minute long Sonata No. 3, was dedicated to her. As for the No. 1, most of its four movements are raucous, driving, and very Latin. Inside the countless percussive chords with their blunt modern harmonies, Nissman brought out an inner cavern of sound.

After intermission came two short works by Bartok. The explosive Allegro Barbaro was a tour de force. But by this point we were already familiar with Nissman’s grand technique. Again, the gentler music was the most captivating. In the ‘Musiques Nocturnes’ from the Out of Doors Suite, which Nissman described as a kind of orchestra of insects, there were tender flecks of color and beautiful fragile textures. She certainly never plucked or stroked any of the piano strings, yet she somehow produced incredible moments of buzzing and vibrating.

Prokofieff’s Sonata No. 6 was the finale to the ambitious program. The oversized counterpoint in the opening Allegro was complex but also clear. It felt like Nissman was driving simultaneously in three or four divergent and interlocking lanes of traffic. (There were no collisions.) The closing movement was big on display but had the familiar and relentless feeling of being on trial with little chance of salvation. After the hope and beauty that came earlier in the concert, it was a bit of a downer.

Two encores made up for that. Liszt’s Consolation No. 3 is a ravishing tribute to Chopin and finally gave Nissman a chance to play some sustained legato. After that, she returned to where she started with a little song transcription by Ginastera.

JOSEPH DALTON

Emanuel Ax, piano
Rochester NY

Emanuel Ax, like Murray Perahia, is a pianist I view through a “before and after” perspective: Perahia’s fulcrum was a hand operation in 1992, after which he couldn’t play for several years; Ax’s was a later-in-life interest in newer music. “Before”, both artists seemed restricted, contained, reserved in their breadth of expression; “after”, they seemed set free. Their range of colors and emotions have made them far more engaging and, indeed, personal.

On April 17 at the Eastman School of Music’s 444-seat sold-out Kilbourn Hall, it immediately became clear that form and flow were Ax’s sine qua non concerns; the structure of every work he played was never in doubt. How puzzling, then, that he sounded distinctly like the pianist of yore.

From Schubert’s second set of Impromptus, D 935, to Chopin’s four Impromptus and Sonata No. 3, his characteristic mellow tone was immediately familiar, but this time its source became clear: chords and arpeggios exquisitely balanced for his purposes (to produce absolutely clear, even arpeggios), a light use of rubato, and a constant use of pedal with lifts that articulated the melody line (but nothing else—no bass notes, no counter-melodies in the arpeggios). He never varied this basic approach; his balances emphasized nothing in particular, and, in fact, the one basic tone color never varied all evening. (While listening the next morning to the DG recording of Mikhail Pletnev’s 2000 Carnegie Hall recital, I said, “We didn’t hear tone colors like that last night”, to which my spouse replied, “No, we didn’t!”)

Even near the end of the ‘Grand Valse Brillante’ (one of his two encores), he brought out only the melody line, failing to project its par-
allel harmony of a sixth that so beautifully colors it.

Like a true pro, Ax progressed through the evening’s two glitches (flubbed grace notes right off the bat in the Schubert, and a short memory glitch in the sonata’s first movement) without batting an eyelash. One friend who’s more into drama than music described Ax’s professional superiority by saying, “He’s so ‘one’ with the music that he doesn’t even have to think.” True, but I also felt Ax also doesn’t even hear the many elements he misses, such as using pedaling to highlight a bass line or a counter-melody in the arpeggios in Chopin’s first two Impromptus. In fact, he avoided calling attention to the bass lines all evening, making them just more mellow notes. He was a middle-of-the-road player: no extremes, nothing jarring, just melody and the severely over-pedaled mush that accompanied it. Even the two middle movements of the sonata, a Scherzo and a Largo, were pedaled to death, the Largo with a plodding gait. Ax’s was a very homophonic approach with no terraced levels.

True, there was one extreme: he seamlessly swelled to extremely loud passages in the middle of some of Chopin’s impromptus, and he played Sonata No. 3 extremely loudly from start to finish. But there were no subtle “extremes” like poignancy in Schubert’s Impromptu No. 2, or either a sarcastic or a buoyantly tripping approach to Impromptu No. 4 (either option is valid); instead he projected disciplined objectivity but neither mood nor atmosphere. His playing never approached a whisper all night until the first of his two encores, the Nocturne, Op. 15:2.

The only new music on the program was the second of three Impromptus (2016) by Samuel Adams, composed to be played between Schubert Impromptus, D 935. Ax placed it before the sonata on the program’s second half. It’s harmonically traditional with even more arpeggios than in the Schubert, but with a lovely mid-section of held notes that clear the air and return again in the coda. But even here Ax’s over-pedaling didn’t allow the air to clear enough.

Five nights later Ax brought this same program to Carnegie Hall, the conclusion of his spring recital tour that began in California.

GIL FRENCH

Elina Garanca, mezzo-soprano
New York

Latvian mezzo-soprano Elina Garanca has one of the most sumptuous voices in the business. A tall, elegant blonde beauty, she has a luminous presence which makes the deep sound of her voice and her serious, dignified air come as a surprise. Her March 19 Carnegie Hall recital pleased a well-filled house eager to luxuriate in her world-class instrument; I left with ears happy but a soul less than satisfied by an afternoon of sameness.

A known quantity in New York, Garanca made her Met debut in 2008 as the feisty Rosina in The Barber of Seville. She has become the Met’s main Carmen and will finish the current season in the pants role of Octavian in Der Rosenkavalier. Now singing heavier roles like Santuzza in Cavalleria Rusticana, she is scheduled to add Eboli in Don Carlos to her repertoire in September. The recitalist we heard was more Santuzza than Rosina, offering torrents of luscious, plummy sound but few shifts of feeling.

The first half of the concert was devoted to Brahms, beginning with seven songs about love—poignant, poetic, chaste. Seven more Brahms songs veered into gloomier territory, with a succession of disappointed or heartbroken maidens. The sound was luxurious and
the technique admirably controlled; but her German lacked character, her expressive range was frustratingly limited, and her program lacked an emotional arc.

The second half began with three of Henri Duparc’s best-known songs: lush, romantic evocations of longing in different forms. More substantial in scale and in vocal demands, these call for a sensuality of interpretation as well as voice. Garanca has the means to do these justice, but for her they’re a work in progress at the moment (in an interview on the Carnegie website she indicated that these were new to her). While the brighter timbre she chose was appropriate to the French, the sound of the French was barely distinguishable from the German. Consonants all but disappeared, and vowels were often unrecognizable. ‘Au Pays Ou Se Fait la Guerre’ suited her default mood, but the more sensual ‘Ecstase’ and ‘Phydilé’ didn’t quite catch fire.

Best suited to the singer’s instrument and temperament was the final set of eight Rachmaninoff songs. Even without knowing Russian, I could recognize characteristic throaty sounds of that language, though I still missed the bite and spice of consonants. The natural melancholy of texts like ‘I Have Grown Fond of Sorrow’ and ‘Night Is Mournful’ fit her well; and Rachmaninoff’s writing allowed her to show off long legato lines, deep chest notes, and blazing high climaxes. Turbulent piano interludes set up big expressive passages, though passion and anguish were hard to tell apart. Pianist Kevin Murphy supplied agile, well-calibrated support—not too deferential.

Garanca wore two dresses: a simple navy blue V-neck sleeveless lace gown and a fuller skirted, strapless black satin with a floral appliqué and a sheer silvery stole.

After encores by Brahms and Schumann, she ended with a cheerful song, ‘Aizver Actinas un Smaidi’ (Close Your Eyes and Smile) by Jazeps Vitols, a Latvian composer who studied with Rimsky-Korsakoff. It would have been nice to hear some lighter repertoire for relief. As of this writing in March, it’s hard to imagine how she will handle Mariandel’s hijinks in April in the third act of Rosenkavalier at the Met.

SUSAN BRODIE

Zuill Bailey & Ying Quartet
Rochester NY

On a table in the lobby of the Eastman School of Music’s Kilbourn Hall lay copies of the Ying Quartet’s new Sono Luminus album titled “Re-Imagined”. It contains the two works where cellist Zuill Bailey joined them for their April 2 concert: arrangements of Schumann’s Cello Concerto and Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

The afternoon’s most stunning performance was the opener, Prokofieff’s Quartet No. 2. This is first violinist Robin Scott’s second season with the Ying Quartet, but in just that short time he has completely transformed its sound, as cellist Paul Watkins has made the Emerson Quartet adopt a deeper, warmer timbre and breadth of personality. Right from the opening notes what a joy it was to hear second violinist Janet Ying finally, after over 20 years, find her voice and project a sound that fully matched Scott’s rich, deep, mellow warmth. Violinist Philip Ying and even cellist David Ying (always the sibling with the warmest and most projected tone) are also now the perfect tonal, temperamental, and stylistic match for Scott.

They took Prokofieff’s first movement at an easy tempo, as the melody bounced from player to player over a bagpipe-like accompaniment. They moved with consummate style and total ensemble as if saying, “We have nothing to prove here; just enjoy the Kabardinian folk music.” (As Philip quipped in his brief introductory remarks about the second movement’s love song, “I have to be careful not to say ‘Kardashian love song’”) Again in the middle movement Janet projected her voice beautifully as Scott’s bow bounced subtly and articulated the rhythms of the long lyrical line. Together they were ethereal in their high registers as Philip and David twittered lightly like spring
birds chirping away. The finale—furious one moment, naive the next—was keenly nuanced as they brought out tonal echoes of Prokofieff’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Ensemble, style, and concept seem total now for the Ying Quartet.

Where the Ying’s now tonal unanimity didn’t pay off was in the arrangement they and Zuill Bailey made (in consultation with composer Philip Lasser) of Schumann’s Cello Concerto. Here the Dover Quartet, with their instruments’ four distinct tonal qualities that they magically blend into a united sound, would have worked better. Contrast, not blend, would have brought out the flavors necessary to better project Schumann’s rhythms and harmonic movement; indeed, a string bass would have helped mightily to convey the bass line underneath Bailey’s extremely rich sound. But Bailey himself was wanting. This work depends on the long arch that defines each movement; Bailey instead chopped its long stretches into shorter, very lovely phrases, thus losing grasp of the music’s overall form and emotional unity. Also, instead of articulating fast runs, he often made them sound like masked blurs.

Beethoven’s Violin Sonata No. 9 (*Kreutzer*) was performed here in an anonymous arrangement that Philip Ying said was created not long after Beethoven wrote the work. What was surprising was that no one was really “the soloist” here, not Scott (though he did get more melodic lines than the others), and certainly not Bailey, who was an equal partner with David Ying. Rather, the solo violin line quite ingeniously was passed around among all the players. As Philip warned at the start, it would take time to break free of our usual way of listening and settle into this new “re-imagining”—an adjustment the long repeat in the first movement allowed me to absorb. The textures in the first movement were not as clear as when played by violin and piano, but here I fault the arranger (he was no Mozart), not the players, who projected plenty of details, especially with their perfect tuning and tight ensemble.

Even with the best violinist and pianist, the second movement, a theme and variations, can easily become tediously repetitious. It was here I felt this arrangement worked best, with the piano part split among five rotating players, allowing added color. This was especially true in the potentially tedious variation where Scott played an endless string of 16th notes with supreme technique, flowing rhythm, and musicality (after which one woman whispered, “Wow!”). In the finale, taken at a really fast tempo, only Scott was able to articulate clearly. Overall, it felt rushed—a flurry of notes minus the serious expression that makes it genuinely exhilarating. As with the Schumann, the audience response was appreciative but somewhat muted by Rochester standards—only two curtain calls, few cheers, and no encore.

**Tafelmusik:**  
*“Circle of Creation”*  
Seattle

All too often, the quest for baroque-era authenticity can produce sober, earnest results on the concert stage—but not when Tafelmusik is in town. Famous for their multimedia concert presentations that link music with movement and visuals, this 15-member ensemble drew a rapt Seattle audience into the world of Johann Sebastian Bach with their “Circle of Creation” program.

The production on March 11 in the warm acoustic of Seattle’s 1200-seat Meany Theater (on the University of Washington campus) first appeared two years earlier and has been presented often on tours, but here it seemed as fresh and spontaneous as any premiere. Designed and scripted by Alison Mackay, the group’s double bass player, the all-Bach program combined informative and dramatic narration, strikingly effective images, innovative...
staging, and (of course) great music, played with considerable flair by the ensemble. Jeanne Lamon, first violinist and Tafelmusik’s music director from 1981 to 2014, gave the group subtle but effective cueing and leadership.

Narrator Blair Williams, a bit too resoundingly amplified, knit the program together with his introductions, explaining details of the stunning images shown overhead on a large screen: artisans and their materials from Bach’s time and from ours, historic maps and close-ups of instrument-makers’ work; beautiful and relevant artwork (including the famous Bach portrait by Elias Gottlieb Hausmann). In that portrait, Bach is shown holding a small piece of manuscript paper that includes the first eight notes of the bass line of the Goldberg Variations. Then, on the overhead screen, as those notes were displayed and discussed, the first variation was performed by harpsichordist James Johnstone.

Instructive tidbits were dropped into the narrative, informing the audience (for instance) that one-fourth of the human brain is devoted to the details of operating our hands. But one never had the sense of being in the lecture hall instead of the concert hall.

The program had its moments of levity, too. A performance of the Andante from the cantata Sheep May Safely Graze was accompanied by a succession of slides on the screen depicting cute woolly sheep—safely grazing. Afterwards we saw a pile of coils of sheep intestine and details of the process that turns those intestines into gut strings. It was a bit creepy, but fascinating. So were the images of artisans painstakingly hand-winding the brass strings used in keyboard instruments.

What set Tafelmusik apart, though, was not just the brilliance of this show with its confluence of history and art and artisanship but the immense zest and authority of their music-making. The 15 expert players had memorized all 22 works on the program, and they moved about the stage as they played, often in a way that illuminated the structure of the music (for example, the two oboists strolled toward each other upstage as they played a prominent theme). Sometimes a few players briefly stationed themselves in the audience for startling stereophonic effects. The happy listeners could almost imagine themselves in Zimmerman’s coffeehouse, a short walk from Bach’s Leipzig home, where some of this music was probably heard for the first time.

MELINDA BARGREEN
Haas: Concerto Grosso No. 1 for four alphorns (US Premiere)
Los Angeles Philharmonic

The Los Angeles Philharmonic has not one but two of the world’s most talented, fastest-rising female conductors in hand: Principal Guest Conductor-Designate Susanna Mälkki and Associate Conductor Mirga Grazinyte-Tyla (everyone here calls her just Mirga [MEER-guh]). For Mirga her Los Angeles assistantship appears to be just a stepping stone toward a major career; she landed the City of Birmingham Symphony music director job in 2016.

I heard Mirga at Walt Disney Concert Hall on April Fools’ Day, and, no fooling, the wispy-thin 30-year-old Lithuanian cut quite a striking figure on the podium. She worked without a baton, alternating between sharp jerking motions and flowing, imaginatively sculpted patterns. She wasn’t afraid to levitate off her feet in climactic passages, and she crouched down low, almost on her knees, in order to make quiet points.

And yes, she got a response out of the LA Phil, generating electricity even in repertoire as poised as Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 24 and Haydn’s Symphony No. 31 (Horn Signal). In the Mozart, her life force was at first a little too much for veteran pianist Stephen Kovacevich, who was pursuing a soft-pedaled agenda in Mozart that hardly ever got above mezzo-piano in volume. As a result, his gem-like touch was often drowned out, though Mirga toned it down a bit later in the piece.

Central on the agenda, though, was the US premiere of a concerto grosso written for the Hornroh Modern Alphorn Quartet by the Austrian composer Georg Friedrich Haas (who now teaches at Columbia). Haas seems like an amiable, soft-spoken sort; but his vision is dark, having been raised in the Austrian Alps, which he found frightening and claustrophobic.

Exactly half an hour long, the concerto seems to stay in one place for half its length. The four alphorn players blew long sustained unison notes, chords, and microtonal clusters on their long-necked instruments as the orchestra surrounded them with repeated notes in massive crescendos or variable rhythms and pitches. Eventually the alphorns were permitted to play slow scales and even some conventional harmonies without microtonal ingredients. My overall impression was of a somber, largely unchanging soundscape similar to the sort of thing that has propelled John Luther Adams into the spotlight. While the alphorns weren’t all that loud, they were sometimes intense enough to call for earplugs.

After all of that, plus an encore where quartet member Balthasar Streiff played a steerhorn accompanied by his three friends on alphorns, it was time for the LA Phil’s four horns to show their stuff in the Haydn symphony, which Mirga led with brio and fluid
grace. Following Haas’s alphorns with this was good, unusual programming; we rarely hear the Haydn, with its very difficult horn parts and solo opportunities for other principal players.

Mirga is a good fit for the progressive-minded LA Phil, but already she belongs to the world.

RICHARD S. GINELL

Boyer: Ellis Island: the Dream of America
Costa Mesa CA

The Pacific Symphony’s annual American Composers Festival is usually the most enterprising event on its calendar. But since symphony orchestras book their events months and years in advance, there was no way to predict how enterprising the 2017 festival would turn out to be.

The centerpiece of the concerts April 6 to 9 was Peter Boyer’s popular musical narrative about immigration in the first half of the 20th Century, Ellis Island: the Dream Of America. The PSO had previously performed the piece outdoors in 2005, and, according to Boyer, the Orange County dates would be its 168th through 171st performances overall. So it wouldn’t have been a real news-making event in itself.

But two things happened after the concert was announced. First, Donald Trump and his anti-immigration agenda made news nationally. Then in February PBS agreed to film the concerts for its Great Performances series—the first time the PSO has ever won such national attention. That triggered an ambitious expansion of the piece’s multimedia possibilities. Instead of just showing still pictures in the Prologue and Epilogue on a small screen, vintage photos of immigrations past were blown up on a giant 72- by 24-foot curved screen in Segerstrom Concert Hall and then cross-faded, Ken Burns-style, during the work.

So events made this a big deal, and PBS couldn’t have found a more likely topic for its audience. Using seven actors to recite actual testimonies from seven immigrants from seven countries (as transcribed from the Ellis Island Oral History Project), the piece zeroes in on the fact that we all have family histories and are all immigrants; and the emotions that it raises are universal and personal at the same time. Boyer mostly tries not to get in his characters’ ways, limiting the sweeping film score gestures to the orchestral interludes and subtly heightening the emotions of the narratives, not without a few grains of humor.

The piece would have been far more meaningful, though, if the actors’ words had been more intelligible through the fog of excess reverberation. While conductor Carl St Clair and his orchestra made a fervent case for the score, it is the immigrants’ testimonies that give this piece its power—listen to Boyer’s Naxos recording for proof.

Interesting music by California-based composers cropped up in the first half. John Adams’s Dharma At Big Sur, which adapts the form, time scale, and even the drones of an
Indian raga to honor Lou Harrison and Terry Riley, was served up by the fellow who first performed it, electric violinist Tracy Silverman. He and St Clair took a more leisurely approach than he and Esá-Pekka Salonen did at the piece’s world premiere at Disney Hall in 2003.

Frank Ticheli’s whoop-dee-doo of fractured rhythms and blue notes, Blue Shades, was heard in its orchestral version (it’s usually recorded by wind bands). And 16 students from nearby Chapman University commuted with Riley’s In C in the lobby before the concert. As a one-evening mini-survey of left-coast thinking, one could have done a lot worse.

RICHARD S GINELL

The New Jersey Symphony has a very bright future. Given that its home is less than 20 miles west of Lincoln Center in mid-town Manhattan, forging its place in the artistic community centered in and around New York is not an easy task. It is officially the state orchestra and serves New Jersey from its base at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark. There are five other regular concert locations and at least seven different places where summer “in the park” concerts are regularly given. The current orchestra personnel roster owes much to Neeme Jarvi (2005-9) and Jacques Lacombe (2010-16). Now nearing the end of her first season, Music Director Xian Zhang has supplied a level of excitement and energy that is rarely seen these days.

Zhang’s appointment as the 14th music director of the NJSO, with an initial contract of four years, makes her the first woman in that position. This is only one of many firsts for the 43-year-old conductor, who was born and educated in China and has been a US resident since 1998. Her excellent musical and personnel skills and creativity in programming are already apparent. NJSO musicians, staff, and audiences have been loud and clear in their praise for her. I wholeheartedly agree.

Over the past year I have seen Zhang lead five concerts, one as a guest conductor, the remainder as music director. High points included a good amount of excellent Tchaikovsky and the beginning of what I expect to be very satisfying sets of Beethoven’s symphonies and concertos. Her marvelous Symphony No. 7 last March bodes well for Nos. 5 and 6 next season.

Along with her liberal use of orchestra personnel as soloists, Zhang has proved to be a superb collaborative accompanist in a wide range of concertos. Concertmaster Eric Wyrick and principal cellist Jonathan Spitz were soloists in Beethoven’s Triple Concerto with pianist Pedja Muzijevic. The trio also opened the concert with a movement from a Haydn piano trio that was the basis for a movement in that evening’s Symphony 102. Also, Principal Trumpet Garth Greenup joined pianist Lukas Vondracek for a brilliant Piano Concerto No. 1 by Shostakovich.

On April 7 and 9 Principal Tuba Derek Fenstermacher played Vaughan Williams’s Tuba Concerto in Newark (in between was a performance at the State Theater in New Brunswick). His virtuosity was expected, but the beauty of his tone was exceptional. The concert also included Saint-Saëns’s Carnival of the Animals and Ravel’s Bolero, both of which have significant solos for many in the orchestra. In Carnival the two young pianists from the Curtis Institute did not look up at the conductor very often; Zhang deftly cued both, one with each hand, and held things together with remarkable precision.

The concert opened with Tan Dun’s Internet Symphony, a six-minute work commissioned by Google and YouTube that requires a huge orchestra and uses themes from Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony. Four large auto wheels hung on a rack in back of the orchestra supplied a unique sound from the percussion section. It was an effective and enjoyable opener to a quite memorable concert.

JAMES HARRINGTON

Xian Zhang, New Jersey Symphony Newark

The American Record Guide
Moderation

As I get older I have come to see that one of the most important ethical principles is moderation. It is not a principle of Christian Ethics—not at all. It is more Greek (Aristotle). But think about it in light of what we know now.

People who eat too much suffer for it; people who eat too little miss out on so much and thus also suffer. People who drink too much suffer for it; people who drink too little very clearly miss out on the health benefits as well as the pleasures of alcohol. If they avoid it at all costs and drink "soft drinks" instead, they will suffer for it. "Soft drinks" are bad for you; beer and wine are good for you. On the insane theory that soft drinks can’t hurt you people are drinking way too much of that stuff—they drink it like water, whenever they have a slight thirst, or perhaps just to pass the time, even while driving—and the result is diabetes and obesity. It is a fact, also, that low-sugar soft drinks are bad for you. Artificial sweeteners stimulate the appetite and make you eat sweeter things. They also have an effect on the body similar to sugar. That’s the point: they fool the body into thinking "sugar", and that causes a number of unwanted reactions.

New studies show that low-salt diets are not good for you. People who try to cut salt out of their diet are not doing themselves any good and are probably doing harm. The same goes for fats: we need them. You will eat less of a full-fat ice cream than of a low-fat one. The fat makes it more satisfying and makes you content with less. Low-fat foods are usually more sugary, to compensate. Eggs and butter are good for you. Again, moderation is always safe.

Actually, even too much water is bad for you: tell that to the "hydration" fanatics who are sipping water all the time. We had an employee like that once; she certainly spent a lot of time on the toilet. Where I swim I see women who keep a bottle of water by the pool and drink some after every lap or two. To me they look really silly. Are they afraid of becoming dehydrated in 20 to 30 minutes in the pool?

Too much exercise—especially in sports—is bad for you. The body needs rest between heavy bouts of activity. Haven’t you noticed that exercise fanatics age faster? But too little exercise kills people.

Americans are definitely suffering from lack of sleep; but people who sleep too much do not live longer. The 8-hour figure still applies, and almost anyone who gets less loses effectiveness and alertness—and if he drives he becomes a menace to all the rest of us. We seem to have designed our culture to make people get up too early. Schools almost all start way too early. It is especially bad for high schools to start early.

Americans are cleanliness fanatics. None of my Dutch relatives took more than one bath a week. Again, there’s a happy medium. If you have dry skin, it’s best never to take hot showers and to use as little soap and shampoo as possible. Moderation means getting clean enough not to smell or look greasy, but it can’t possibly mean a shower or more a day with soap and shampoo. That washes away all the natural body oils and natural odor. That in turn raises the divorce rate. Mammals pair off by natural odors, and that is one of the things that makes for loyalty. And overwashed hair looks terrible and has no gleam to it.

All kinds of obsessions are unnatural. We all know the housewife who thinks she has to clean the whole house every day. Whatever for? And we all know many people whose house is a mess. There is a huge middle ground—moderation. Remember, too, that obsessive cleanliness is part of the cause of asthma and allergies. Children need to be exposed to dirt and germs to develop a healthy immune system.

In recent years we have seen a new category of addiction: sex addiction. Well, it’s no surprise in a sex-saturated culture. Again, sex is great—in moderation. Remember, too, that obsessive cleanliness is part of the cause of asthma and allergies. Children need to be exposed to dirt and germs to develop a healthy immune system.

Periodically I stumble across the odd person who is so obsessed with sex that it is a primary reason for their life. They are the Puritans out there that sex is one of the healthiest activities and is basically self-limiting. Better to have lots and lots of sex than to eat lots and lots of food or drink way too much water or alcohol. The number of fat people in our society is shameful. People cannot control their appetite for food. What good does it do them to feel virtuous because they find it easy to control their sex appetite? These are the people who sip soda all day long, even when driving, but are proud that they never touch beer or wine. Well, the beer and wine drinkers are usually thinner and healthier.

Americans are proud of their “freedom”, but they are mostly slaves of their appetites.
and desires. Most of the people I know cannot control their appetites—and I know a pretty well-educated bunch! “Freedom” apparently frees them from all restrictions and self-discipline. How can that be good? It excuses immaturity: most adults you meet are like children who were never properly disciplined. Well, there’s another case for moderation. Obsessive control over your children is no better than having no control, and vice-versa.

You can make your own list. Science backs Aristotle: moderation in everything is good and extremes are bad.

**Junk**

Most common products in this country are junk. They are not well made and not made to last, because the company makes more money if you have to replace them every year or two. Examples: garden tools, hoses, weed whackers, kitchen tools, vacuum cleaners, flashlights, electric shavers—all of these and more were better 60 years ago than they are now. Notice that when the phone company was responsible for the indoor phone wiring it was made to last and did last. As soon as the customer was made responsible the only wiring you could get was flimsy garbage—still the case. We also have to replace phone cords every year or two, and we can’t find anything that lasts. Our best phone is an old dial model. Clothing is similar. Most clothing bought here falls apart pretty quickly (or fades horribly), but I am still wearing ALL of the clothing I bought in Thailand in 1995. I am still wearing slippers I bought in Mexico for $3 around the same time. Slippers bought in America at five or ten times the price fall apart in a year. I suspect most clothing you can buy in this country is not made here, but the point is the same: Americans are used to and accept a very shoddy level of workmanship.

Sales staffs are huge, but help staffs are tiny. They will gladly sell you any of their products, but then you are on your own, because it is very difficult to get help using their products or repairing them. Customer service managers admit to reporters that their procedures do not allow satisfactory customer service. They are designed to discourage callers, and you are routinely “put on hold”. Often this is designed to get rid of you—how long can you wait? You will wait a long time and hear lots of commercials repeated endlessly, along with “our representatives are busy helping other customers”; but you suspect there aren’t many “representatives”, and when you eventually get one he’s not much help. At least twice a week we try to deal with people who don’t know what they need to know to help us. Incompetence is normal these days. And, by the way, incompetent Americans have learned that “friendliness” is generally accepted as a substitute. The inane American smile covers much stupidity, as does cheerful sweetness on the phone.

The delaying tactics on the phone include making you enter a number that never gets thru to the “representative” and a constant tape that says “your call is important to us”. If my call were really important to them they would have more people answering the phone, and they would be better trained. Often the problem you are having is their fault, but once they have sold you something they just want you to go away.

Often the phone people have no other resource than the company’s web site—which you have already found useless and unwieldy. The first person you talk to at almost any company will be no help at all. Recently I talked to five people at one company and not one of them was any help. And, of course, getting to any human being at all takes a lot of time. (Some companies hide the telephone number!) No one cares if you waste YOUR time, but they all seem to resent it if they feel you are wasting THEIR time.

I have recently run into the nonsense of passwords. You can’t just go on a website and buy something. Often you are required to register, with a user name and password. I won’t do that; for one thing, keeping track of all the passwords I already have has become impossible—and the other thing to consider is that once you register the company can bother you all they want and sell your name to other companies that want to pester you.

This is idiotic. Are they interested in my business? Do they want to sell their products? Then why make the customer do all that extra work? Why not make it easy for the customer to buy something from your website? But it is actually getting more difficult and frustrating. Maybe that is because the computer generation apparently just loves sitting in front of their machines. These saps have hastened the demise of customer service, because they willingly do all the work that the sellers used to have to do. I want to shout at these businesses that if they want my business they have to work a little and make it easy for me. I will not jump thru computer hoops to buy something.

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Of course, they will never hear what I have to say, because there is no way to “contact” them—or, if there is such a thing, ostensibly, I find that no one is listening. They only want obedient consumers—conforming customers—and apparently there are plenty of those.

Then there is the continuing and worsening problem that the big stores always carry LESS variety, not more. They impress gullible Americans with their size, but the selection is terrible. Most of the fruit I eat has to come from farmers and small stores, because much of the fruit in supermarkets is not good. Most of the staples we live on are bought elsewhere, because the super stores will only stock items they can sell in huge numbers—thus forcing most of their customers to conform or else spend hours hunting for what they want. If you think (and decide) for yourself, life in this country has become quite difficult—and don’t blame the government!

We need a strong government to counteract the negative force of the strong corporations. We need regulation, because increasingly we are made victims by big business. And big business just gets bigger and thus less concerned about the individual customer.

Speaking of junk, we have been sent publicity for a new opera that “synthesizes the power of opera with the grittiness of street rhythms, electronic dance music, rap, and gospel”. No thanks! If this is how our music will live on, it will not live on.

You know the desperate need many people have to think that they are “with it”—that is, the latest trend. Many of these trends peter out, and many are just a glimpse on the horizon. It is simply false that classical music lovers are not buying CDs—and the downloaders and streamers will admit that less than 1% of their business is classical. But some musicians are possessed by the fear of being out of date—a very silly fear, and unfounded (but quite common). I hate the way people jump on bandwagons if they look like the Next Big Thing. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Orchestras do it all the time with subscriptions. (They are selling fewer big subscriptions, so they direct their marketing elsewhere—thus encouraging the disturbing trend.) But the people who run our orchestras usually don’t understand the classical music lover.

Word Police: verbs & nouns

I recently read in a reputable journal about "the world’s total spend on health care". Another verb has become a noun! This is happening all the time, to the point where one expects the language will lose the distinction entirely.

Nouns are being used as verbs, too. Only the latest dictionaries mention "foreground" as a verb, so we don’t allow it. I don’t like "detail" as a verb either. Both "message" and "text" are strictly nouns; their use as verbs is new and no good in writing. "Finesse", on the other hand, has long been both noun and verb, though some of us still avoid the verb.

I just read a news item about "President Obama’s last ask", and on a website I read "If you plan to hotel in Manhattan..." Sometimes writers in our field talk about "a great listen"—not in ARG. Nor would we call a book a "great read".

From reading magazines I note that "transitioned" has now replaced "morphed" as the trendy word for "changed" or "became" or "turned into" (see J/F 2016: 177). Well, I was getting sick of "morphed", but "transition" is not a verb.

Our internet server tells us that they now "calendar" for their customers. Economist recently used "baseline" as a verb. Science Daily referred (redundantly and bureaucratically) to "a study that probes" instead of simply "a study of". "Probe" is a favorite journalism cliche that started out as a noun with a rather specific meaning. Thanks to the computer industry, a lot of these technical words are taking over from better traditional words.

We have made a short list of nouns that are often used as verbs (beyond the above): floor (as in "floored the orchestra’s fundraising campaign"), zero, access, leverage, source, reference, headline, bookend, background, showcase, gift, favorite, privilege, parent.

Ray Hassard reports that "platform" is a verb now on the Long Island Railroad. English is degenerating into Chinese.
Thomas Ades's Asyla (1997) is a four-movement symphonic work written when he was 26 and is considered his First Symphony. It is written in a modernist trance-like style, thoroughly atonal but in a hothouse romantic expressionism that might be termed "late century British Berg". Like Berg, Ades's modernism is sometimes tempered by less iconoclastic elements, using insistent ostinatos derived from British "club music". The dramatic finale climaxes with blaring minor triads. The first movement opens with a nondescript horn melody which continuously develops. II opens with a likewise nondescript flute melody which opens out into a dreamy march, ending up with agitation and sick glissandos until it ends in dreamy mush. III seems to be a scherzo of sorts, consisting mostly of intensely non-humorous jazz, interrupted by angular pointillist gestures. One gesture approaches laughter. After a slam, the movement ends in more dreamy mush. The finale consists of quiet breezes, distant bell-like resonances, and somber minor tonality ending with sad dissipation.

Tevot (2005-6), considered his Second Symphony, refers to Noah's Ark and the basket Moses floated through the Nile in—as a metaphor for the earth carrying our species through the rivers of time. It is essentially a one-movement tone poem with an introduction, an allegro, and a long, slow finale. The first half of the piece is dramatic and comparatively angular, the second half sleepy and often utterly beautiful as the raft drifts through the water. Mahler seems to overlook the scene. Ades freely uses whatever harmonic language is at his disposal, ranging from dense British modernism to a romantic, eventually majestic post-tonality. The effect is impressive, though the mind wanders sometimes.

Polaris (2010) is a 15-minute piece that "explores the use of star constellations for naval navigation" (composer’s words). The work is built around eight tonal ostinato figures continually blossoming until a dramatic climax and glittering ending.

The program closes with Brahms (2001), a setting of a hilarious poem by Alfred Brendel on the subject. The famous descending thirds of the Fourth Symphony are used as material floating through the dreamlike narrative of the composer's ghost, haunting Mr. Brendel in his studio. The piece is, like Brendel's poem (in German), charmingly effective, and Ades captures it perfectly. Mr. Johnson does it justice. This is a worthwhile release, though all of it has been recorded elsewhere. Check indexes. Text and translation. This was all recorded in concert.

AHO: Bassoon Concerto; see FAGERLUND

William Alwyn (1905-85) was a solid hewer of symphonies and movie scores. His credits for the latter include Odd Man Out, Shake Hands with the Devil, and The Winslow Boy. These quartets will add to his reputation. Quartet 10 has a title—En Voyage—and its movements do too. It celebrates a Pacific Ocean trip he took in 1932. In I, ‘The Departure’, the main theme resembles—sometimes too closely—‘Auld Lang Syne’. There are bridge passages using fourths and fifths, which eventually come to the fore so much as to blur the line between themes and accompaniment. This isn’t a liability; the movement is outstanding. II, ‘Sea Birds’, has bird-calls over triplet figures. Some are raucous, but seagulls can be tough customers. The trio has a catchy tune in an irregular rhythm. III, ‘The Lonely Waters’, has the strings muted for the entire movement. An ostinato in fifths sounds like a dance episode. The extended use of deceptively simple triads looks forward to the minimalism of Philip Glass. The music is desolate in mood, yet wholly beautiful. IV, ‘Trade Winds’, has a forthright tune over chattering 16th-notes. It’s contrasted with a languorous melody. The extroverted opening returns before dissolving into fragments ending on a sustained note for the viola.

Quartet 11 (1933) has a dotted cello figure that Alwyn amplifies into a main theme, followed by a smoother melody. Their development is consummately skilled; you hear Alwyn
the future symphonist. The movement is arranged so that everyone gets choice lines. The texture breaks for a good tune with eloquent harmony. The movement tapers to a high note under which the cello recaps the opening theme. II, like III in Quartet 10, is all muted strings. It has a melismatic theme with an appoggiatura-like accompaniment. The center section annotator Andrew Knowles rightly describes as “soft and mysterious”. In III the main theme emerges from rising and falling figures, becoming, to say the least, fully harmonized. It was 2013 before this fine work was heard in its entirety.

Quartet 12, Fantasia, (1935) has fanciful melodies that immediately flower outward. It’s like the aural equivalent of watching a plant blossom in a stop-motion movie. The movement then becomes more exploratory and dissonant. Its wayward tonality and use of percussive ostinatos resembles Bartok. Over a dissonant pedal, thematic phrases enter and depart; but the ending, if enigmatic, is conciliatory. Quartet 13 has a grandiose, expansive beginning, by turns passionate and desolate. The music borders on the funerary, and the density of the writing pushes the medium to its limits. Alwyn, aware of this, later prepared an edition for string orchestra, horns, and timpani called Tragic Interlude. II begins like a true scherzo full of whimsy. The tunes are approachable, though their accompaniment is pretty acerbic. The movement has almost too many good ideas and treatments. Its center portion is slower and even richer in substance. The scherzo resumes, but the slower part repeats itself under an accented trill till the final resolution.

All four works get top-notch performances, with a completely supportive recording.

O’CONNOR

BACH FAMILY: Organ Pieces
David Yearsley
Musica Omnia 609—59 minutes

It is hardly surprising that JS Bach’s sons were well trained in the art of organ playing, and we have contemporary testimony to their mastery of the instrument. What we do not have is a large body of organ compositions from them. In producing what he calls a “Family Portrait” of Bach and his sons as organists, David Yearsley cannot trot out a program of rarities they composed for the instrument. Instead, the greater part of the program consists of transcriptions by Yearsley himself. The only original organ pieces here are the JS Bach Prelude & Fugue in C (S 547) used to frame the program and the two pieces by CPE Bach: his expansion of his father’s chorale prelude ‘Ich Ruf zu dir’ from Orgelbüchlein and a Fantasy and Fugue in C minor that must have sounded very old-fashioned at the time, as it is in the traditional baroque organ idiom. The program also includes the first movement of JS Bach’s Concerto in D minor after Vivaldi, a transcription that WF Bach naughtily claimed as his own.

Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach is represented by Yearsley’s transcription of a Romanza from a 1792 concerto and a fugue by Yearsley based on a subject that survives only in a 19th-Century thematic catalog. Wilhelm Friedemann Bach was hailed as one of the greatest organists of his day, but hardly any of his compositions for the instrument survive, and some attributed to him have proved to be spurious. Yearsley plays his own transcription of WF’s orchestral Sinfonia in D minor, consisting of an elegant adagio and imposing fugue. Johann Christian Bach, who served as an organist at Milan Cathedral before moving to London, is represented by an Andantino in C originally for string trio, though its authenticity is in doubt. Yearsley expands on the organ works of JS Bach with his transcription of the second movement of the trio sonata from The Musical Offering.

The program is played on the 2011 Munetaka organ in the Anabel Taylor Chapel of Cornell University, where Yearsley teaches. It is an instrument of two manuals and pedal. The recorded sound is very agreeable, with excellent presence and clarity. It appears that the instrument is better suited to music in the traditional baroque genres than to the lighter idiom of the later 18th Century. The quiet stops produce a tone that is too breathy and thick for, say, the JCF Bach Romanza or JC Bach Andantino. Such pieces sound out of character. They are too obviously transcriptions.

At one point in his notes, Yearsley mentions “tonight’s program”. I take this to mean that the recorded program was originally a recital with a theme. It reminds me of a recording by him that I reviewed some years ago: “The Great Contest” (Loft 1028; Jan/Feb 2003). There the listener imagines an organ competition involving JS Bach, GF Handel, and Domenico Scarlatti. And that recording also combines original organ works with transcriptions.

GATENS
This Bach family program has two concertos by Johann Sebastian (1052 in D minor and 1056 in F minor), one in F minor attributed to Johann Christian, and one in D minor by Carl Philipp Emanuel (W 23). For a small centerpiece, harpsichordist Jean Rondeau offers his arrangement of a slow movement from a sonata in G by Wilhelm Friedemann. The finale of Emanuel’s concerto is filled with funny stops and starts, as is typical of his style. The startling ending is sure to make audiences smile or laugh.

The ensemble Dynastie is a string quartet and bass. There is a bassoon added for Christian’s and Emanuel’s concertos. Their performances are perky, with a strong rhythmic drive. 1052:1 is in cut time, and this performance really lets us know that, charging relentlessly. III likewise dashes ahead, the 3/4 meter making a strong feeling of one beat to a bar. It never lets up until the harpsichord solo three pages from the end, where we dive into Christian’s even more turbulent concerto. The slower moments are richly ornamented and with conventional swelling from the strings.

So goes the rest of the program. If Bach and his sons also played Zimmermann’s coffee house with this tremendous zest, the patrons scarcely needed to buy caffeine. Listen to this in the morning, and you’re ready to “ride horses all day and put them away wet.”

That said, I also feel that something is missing. The delivery is impressive, yet one-dimensional: the notes are fast and short and loud. There could be more finesse and grace. This isn’t a stock-car race or a rock concert, where adrenaline is the thing. I want to hear more pathos in the slow music and more relaxed muscles in the fast music. 1056 should make me weep, but here it just makes me nod that it was nice. To hear what 1056:II can really do, listen to Alfred Cortot’s 1937 and 1948 recordings of it as a piano solo.

The recording was made on the 2000 Paul Fritts organ (2 manuals, 39 stops) in the chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary. The ear is assaulted by an overblown sound that suggests the recording was made too close and with excessively high levels. Turning down the playback volume helps somewhat, but it still sounds in-your-face close even when quieter. The organ itself may bear some of the blame. Even the quiet stops sound raw in tone, making subtlety and delicacy in the intimate slow movements almost impossible. Imagine a poetry reading for the hard of hearing where everything is shouted.

Iain Quinn’s playing is technically competent, but largely without personality. There is very little dynamic contrast. For the most part forte equals strident while piano equals squeaky, and both at about the same volume.

This recording sent me back to one I reviewed many years ago by Reinhardt Menger playing a 1791 instrument by Johannes Oestreich at a church in Hesse (FSM 96 509; Sept/Oct 1991). Menger performs three of the sonatas plus a Prelude in D and a Fantasy & Fugue in E minor. In the first place, the organ seems to be recorded at a respectful distance, and the tone itself is refined and appealing. Menger makes real and effective dynamic contrasts, and he allows the music to breathe with an engaging

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flexibility of tempo that contrasts with Quinn's impersonal rigidity.

In the course of a mostly favorable review of a recording by Roland Münch (Christophorus 110; July/Aug 2001), John Barker expressed his admiration for the recording by Herbert Tachezi (apparently no longer available), whose interpretation of the CPE Bach sonatas he described as “mercurial and perceptive”. In reviews of more recent recordings, Gregory Hamilton was favorably impressed with Yuval Rabin (MDG 906 1875; Nov/Dec 2015) as was Michael Unger with Davide Pozzi (Fugato 54; May/June 2015). Thomas Trotter includes the four Anna Amalia sonatas in his recording of CPE Bach organ works (Regent 314; Mar/Apr 2010), and while I found much to admire in his performances, I still prefer Menger.

**GATENS**

**BACH, CPE: Trio Sonatas, W 145-148, 150**

*Infusion Baroque*

Leaf 212—63 minutes

This is the debut disc for Infusion Baroque, a quartet of young women specializing in baroque music on period instruments, based in Montreal—Alexa Raine-Wright, flute, Sallynee Amawat, violin, Andrea Stewart, cello, and Rona Nadler, harpsichord. It brings together a good sampling (not all) of the trio sonatas for flute, violin, and continuo, which date to the very earliest moments of the composer’s career, in 1731 (earlier, for example, than the sonatas for flute and continuo), and which were revised in 1747. (W 150, which opens the program, is a later work, composed in 1747.)

My friends know that I prefer CPE to his severe father, and the reason is the deep feeling expressed, especially in his slow movements, of which there are five fine examples here (all five works are fast-slow-fast). Listen to the line from the flute that opens the Andante in W 146—first a moderate downward resolving appoggiatura, then a very long upward, chromatic yearning, with only a brief resolution, and finally an inflection up to A-flat...with a downward minor scale bringing it all to its resolution—an emotional journey in only 20 seconds, and taking advantage of the coloristic possibilities of the one-key flute.

The young musicians do a fine job with this demanding music, making a debut that augurs well for future projects. I look forward to more from them.

**MOORE, T**

**BACH: Anna Magdalena Notebook**

Cipriana Smarandescu, hpsi; Furio Zanasi, bar Continuo 113—71 minutes

JS Bach collected or composed this anthology of music for his wife and children to enjoy at home. Some of it is by his young son Carl Philipp Emanuel. Other composers are from outside the family.

Most of the album is solo harpsichord. Smarandescu tries too hard to make the short pieces impressive, often playing too fast or over-ornamenting them in ways that don’t make sense. This easy music doesn’t need to be filled up with fast scales and twitchy ornaments out of character. She also relies too much on an aggressive staccato touch in the right hand, over a legato bass. She omits the early versions of two French suites and two partitas that are in the book; so do most other recordings.

Zanasi’s singing is attractive. There are only four short pieces for him, plus the ‘Schlummert ein’ aria from Cantata 82. His tracks are mastered louder than the rest of the album.

Smarandescu plays a French single-manual harpsichord. The temperament is Werckmeister 3, but several of the notes are adjusted higher for half the program. It sounds crude to me.

The last 15 minutes bring us a suite in G by Christian Petzold, dated 1726. That gives important context for the two minuets that everyone has heard many times before (especially the parents of Suzuki violin or piano students). It’s printed in a Vienna Urtext Edition, but I have not been able to find any other recordings of it. It’s simple and fills out its dance formulas nicely, like some of JKF Fischer’s suites. Smarandescu’s performance of it seems too fast in almost every movement. She also messes up the rhythms in the second half of the Gigue, rushing the dotted figures.

Unless you must have this Petzold suite, I’d recommend putting your Magdalena money toward older recordings where the music is performed with more grace. Elizabeth Anderson (Move 3304 from 2006, not reviewed) brings out the varied characters of the pieces better. She has the vocal pieces sung by her son, a boy soprano. The recordings by Belder, Leonhardt, and Kipnis are also more charming than Smarandescu’s.
**BACH: Art of Fugue**
Balint Karosi, hpsi, org, clavichord
Hungaroton 32784 [2CD] 81 minutes

Mr Karosi is a doctoral candidate at Yale, the winner of the 2008 Bach competition (Leipzig) and Cantor of St Peter’s Lutheran Church in New York. For reasons not fully explained, he performs most of the work on organ, with a few pieces on harpsichord (none strikes me as particularly appropriate), and one (the Canon alla Decima) on clavichord—plausible but unnecessary and sonically distracting because it differs so much from everything else.

The organ performances are fine but often give the impression that if one plays all the right notes in a uniform tempo the musical interpretation takes care of itself. And there are registration choices that strike me as decidedly odd, for instance the very light Contrapunctus 9 (which I think is one of the more extroverted of the fugues) and the excessively heavy Contrapunctus 10 (one of the more lyrical, introverted ones).

There are better recordings available: for organ, Kei Koito on Temperaments (Nov/Dec 1999) and Joan Lippincott on Gothic (July/Aug 2012); for harpsichord, Gavin Black and George Hazelrigg (two harpsichords) on Phoenix (Jan/Feb 2010) and Robert Hill on Hanssler (no review). Richard Troeger is the only artist I know who recorded the work on clavichord (Lyrichord; Nov/Dec 2005). All of these recordings are available as of this writing.

**BACH: Cello Suites**
Istvan Vardai
Brilliant 95392 [2CD] 2:14

It has been a year since I was sent a recording of all of Bach’s cello suites to review. That is unusual; there have been several complete collections every year.

These are perhaps the greatest works in the cello literature. No one has even attempted to write collections of solo cello music of this scope or variety. They work their way up in difficulty from the relatively straightforward Suite in G into grander and more demanding music, ending by tuning the A string down to G in Suite 5 in C minor and adding a high E string to Suite 6 in D. Most cellists take on the greater task of playing Suite 6 on only the usual strings, making the high-register passages more demanding. That is what Vardai does, and he makes it sound very effective that way.

Vardai’s performance style relates to early music techniques in using very little vibrato and a good deal of added improvisation. His style in that area is pleasant, though not much in terms of musical variety, using the same figures in many different contexts. They are not disturbing in themselves and do not ruin Bach’s originals, but some other cellists have shown greater imagination. Sneak a look at the Cello Overview in March/April 2009 and at the Bach review in September/October 2013.

This recording is pleasant in sound. Vardai has made a name for himself over the last few years, and this project won’t hurt his reputation a bit.

**BACH: Chorales of Luther**
Helmuth Rilling
Hanssler 16031 [2CD] 110 minutes

It is the 500th Anniversary year of the Reformation, and the father of the Reformation was Martin Luther. All the Protestant reformers were strong on music. Calvin commissioned composers to write tunes for all the psalms (150 of them!). He wanted each psalm to have its own tune to aid in memorizing them—when you hear the tune the words come back to you. Luther had much the same thought and started out making German poetry of the psalms and setting them to tunes he thought would be memorable. He published the first hymnal in 1524, and he wrote a number of hymns in the following years—words and music, but with some help from composers Johannes Walther and Paul Speratus. (He also notoriously used some tavern tunes.)

What we have here is settings by Bach of Luther’s own chorales. There are 27 tracks, but some chorales are repeated in different arrangements. Many are from Bach’s cantatas. Organ settings are from his books of chorale preludes. The booklet lists Luther’s ten most important chorales, all of them set by Bach, all of them here.

Helmuth Rilling recorded most of these in Stuttgart, but one track (Ein Feste Burg) was recorded in Bloomington, Indiana by an American choir (under Rilling). All the Stuttgart material has been previously issued, including, of course, all the Bach cantatas.

In this household we are used to the cantatas—have always had at least one complete set of them, usually Rilling’s—and it’s a little
disconcerting to hear these bleeding chunks. But it is a reminder what a team Luther and Bach made (200 years apart!) and what a difference they have made to the history of music—especially sacred music. It’s not only Lutherans who sing these chorales, you know; the first hymnbook in England was translations of Luther’s hymns, and some of them turn up in almost every hymn book today.

**VROON**

**BACH: Flute Sonatas; Partita; BACH, CPE: Flute Concerto in D minor**

Robert Aitken; Greta Kraus, hpsi; Vancouver Chamber Orchestra; John Eliot Gardiner

Doremi 6611—76 minutes

The sonatas that open this program—S 1030, 1031, and 1032—originally appeared on a Sine Qua Non LP released in 1979; the arrangement of the lute partita, S 997, is from a collection recorded a decade earlier, in 1969; and the CPE Bach is a concert performance from 1981. Of the three, I find the 1979 set the most attractive. Aitken (b. 1939) was a student of Rampal and Gazzelloni, and though this set is on modern instruments, it is clear that his approach has had some influence from the aesthetics of period instruments—his tone is compact, dense, and with relatively little vibrato. The shape of the line is beautifully controlled, especially in the slow movements. Even though these sonatas are for obbligato harpsichord, rather than continuo, Greta Kraus is clearly in an accompanimental role here.

The Partita, with a large, though distant, sound from the harpsichord, and the CPE Bach, with a rather tubby sound from the orchestra in a resonant acoustic, are not quite as appealing. An interesting document of where we were 40 years ago.

**MOORE, T**

**BACH: Goldberg Variations**

Beatrice Rana, p

Warner 58801—78 minutes

Alexander Puliaev, hpsi

Perfect Noise 1601—79 minutes

The recording by Beatrice Rana is from sessions in November 2016. It has already become a best-selling classical album in the UK. She is still in her early 20s. The performance reminds me of the greatness of Ekaterina Dershavina’s recording, also made in her 20s. Both of these amazing pianists convey the pure joy of life through Bach’s music. Dershavina makes most of her playful points through varied articulation (my preference). Rana relies more on big crescendos and dynamic voicing, sounding more conventionally pianistic.

Rana’s touch is often delicate, but without making the music seem precious or fragile. She also lets the music dash forward robustly. Nothing sounds difficult. Her control of rubato sounds natural, as a response to Bach’s creativity. Without changing the notes, she finds ways to invest the repeats with further depth and subtle emphases. In the variations where she does embellish the repeats, it’s always tasteful. The performance is richly nuanced, yet flows easily. She’s better at this piece than Glenn Gould was at 22, and she doesn’t hum. I heard a BBC radio broadcast in January where she had played it in a Wigmore Hall concert. That too was astounding: straight through with great accuracy. She’s the real thing, with no editing.

I won’t waste any more of your time with a closer analysis. There is nothing more you
need to know. Just go get it, and enjoy the beauty and spontaneity of everything she does. This should be essential for anyone who cares about Bach or the piano.

Let’s turn now to the instrument for which Bach wrote the piece, a two-manual harpsichord. Alexander Puliaev plays a Mietke copy by Volker Platte (2012). Collectors who know the 1990s recordings by Pierre Hantai, Glen Wilson, Kenneth Weiss, and Pieter-Jan Belder will find the same virtues here with Puliaev. The tempos and articulations are lively, the added ornamentation is minimal, and the music proceeds with forthright good cheer. Nothing eccentric happens. Each of these performers judiciously omits a repeat or two to keep the whole program under the 80-minute time limit of a single CD. Puliaev’s omission is in the final restatement of the Aria.

Everything in the sound and performance is reliable perfection, with no surprises. He uses the buff stop in Variations 19 and 20. If you leave the room and come back, you can be secure knowing that the liturgy of Bach’s composition has been recited accurately, whether you as a listener were there or not. Puliaev’s interpretation has that Apollonian objectivity. I’ve listened to it five times and still can’t think of how it stands out from excellence that is available elsewhere. There are more than 100 other recordings.

Bob van Asperen (1990) plays an original Mietke and brings out more nuances in the musical phrases. Richard Egarr (Sept/Oct 2006) explores what he calls “cantabile heaven”. I reviewed an interesting set by Erich Traxler (July/Aug 2016) and Christine Schornsheim’s two recordings (Jan/Feb 2017). Mahan Esfahani’s (Mar/Apr 2017) has effective flair. And so on. I have not yet heard Belder’s 2017 recording.

If Puliaev’s nimble performance were the only recording of the piece that I had on harpsichord, I’d find it more impressive. The only disappointment is that it seems generic. The perfection gets boring. Beatrice Rana on piano does something in every phrase to renew interest, making the piece grab us for 78 thrilling minutes, creating a life-changing experience. Puliaev lets Bach’s music speak plainly without a personalized profile, as if it’s something to be appreciated without getting too close to it.

**American Record Guide**

**Bach:** *Inventions & Sinfonias;* 6 Preludes; Duets
Vladimir Feltsman, p
Nimbus 6223—75 minutes

Feltsman offers an uneven program, but the plusses outweigh the minusses. The Inventions are ho-hum to annoying—sometimes resembling Glenn Gould at his worst. The Sinfonias are a different story, shot through with interpretive variety and nuance of phrasing. One of the high points is the E-flat Sinfonia; I never thought I’d hear a more sensitive performance than Gould’s (Nov/Dec 2006), but Feldman introduces very expressive ornamentation and rubato, and the superior sound seals the deal.

I also enjoy the more virtuosic readings of the A-minor and E-minor sinfonias. (Too often pianists play them slowly and pedantically, like very bad students sight-reading them for the first time.) By the way, I caught what I’m fairly sure are mislearned notes in the first invention and the B-minor Sinfonia. As for the rest, it’s fine but not very exciting or surprising.

**HASKINS**

**Bach:** *Italian Concerto;* Partitas 1+3; Duets+
Rafal Blechacz, p
DG 4795534—66 minutes

Mr Blechacz won the 15th Chopin Competition in 2005. After previous recordings of Chopin, classical sonatas, and other repertory, he has turned to Bach. (In general we like his performances: see July/Aug 2007 & May/June 2010.) His technique is more than adequate to the task. But with the exception of a few selections—Myra Hess’s transcription of ‘Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring,’ the first of the four duets, and II of the Italian Concerto—I find little remarkable or memorable. So let me begin by concentrating on the considerable merits of these three performances. The tone is beautiful, the phrasing imaginative, the shape of the overall pieces varied and musical. I always sense an artist who understands the romantic heritage of the grand piano and is not afraid to employ it for a composer whose music has sustained a variety of performance approaches—and for whom a fresh interpretive approach is now long overdue.

Things change drastically in fast movements, which often click by with too much uniformity in tempo, volume, and articulation. Particularly disappointing are Duets 2-4.
These works come from Bach’s later years, were included with the chorale preludes in Clavierübung III, and require more nuance and lyricism than Blechacz gives them. The other readings (Partitas 1 and 3 and the Fantasy and Fugue in A minor, S 944) are fine but differ little from other similar programs and are sometimes marred by unimaginative choices. The merciless non legato playing that appears too often in the Minuet from Partita 1 and elsewhere is tiresome and dull. The fugue from S 944 is much too fast and has almost no expressive shape as a result.

The recorded sound becomes slightly more reverberant for the Partita 3, and once again the ridiculously fast tempo for the gigue robs the music of all its understated mystery and lyricism. Hearing the performances I like, and reading the reviews from my colleagues, I know Blechacz could be more responsive to the music’s content and am absolutely mystified that he isn’t.

HASKINS

BACH: Lute Suites
William Carter
Linn 445—66 minutes

This release is titled “Bach Reimagines Bach.” It is an interesting way to consider the process of transcription. In the canonical lute works by Bach, two suites were originally written for solo violin (S 1006a) and solo cello (S 995). Another work is the fugue from the first violin partita (S 1001). Carter postulates, with some circumstantial support, that the rest of the suite was, indeed, transcribed and submitted for publication, but was lost. He did the other three movements, following Bach’s example, and the results are just fine.

Carter’s playing is clean and elegant. Tempos tend to be relaxed, as is usual for lute compared to guitar. Apart from a few rushed slurs (Keaton’s 2nd law: A slur changes a note’s articulation, not its duration), he is technically solid. My primary complaint is that the performance lacks imagination. His range of sound, both dynamic and timbral, is too constricted; and the performance lacks the tension and release that needs to build and resolve in these suites. This is a problem in a performance that is predicated on imagining what happens when an abstract set of notes is realized in two or more different ways—the instrument realizing is only the beginning of the possibilities when a musical score is brought to life in space and time.

Mr Carter studied guitar with Bruce Holzman and lute with Pat O’Brien and Nigel North. If you want to see what can happen with these specific works in inspired performances, go to Mr North’s recording of all of the solo violin and cello works (J/A 2015).

KEATON

BACH: Lute Suites
Andras Csaki, g
Hungaroton 32772—73 minutes

Carter performed three suites arranged mostly by Bach for lute from other sources. This is the four canonical suites for lute—including the one Bach arranged from his Cello Suite 5 and Violin Partita 3. There is still considerable overlap, but Csaki plays on guitar, Carter on lute, so there are also significant differences.

I reviewed Csaki’s debut on Naxos (J/F 2011), a wildly ambitious program that included Suite 4 from this set, the Britten Nocturnal and the Castelnuovo-Tedesco sonata. I was struck by his virtuosic command, but also by his individual musicianship—temps were not what one expects, but all were effective.

Each of the suites is given a satisfying performance. Csaki ornaments unevenly—sometimes not at all, sometimes extensively. The ornamentation is mostly more elaborate scalar passages rather than trills or turns—more of a practice of the Corelli age than Bach’s. I prefer my Bach as is—unlike Handel, when he wanted an ornament, he usually wrote one in. Csaki’s ornamentation is effective, though a bit distracting. But apart from that, the performances are clean and expressive.

Two recent releases are even stronger. Johannes Monno (M/J 2017) gives us all the Bach lute works, not just the suites, in transcendent, beautiful performances. And if you want just the suites, there is a really joyous traversal of this magnificent music each played by a different performer, all students of Stefano Grondona (M/A 2017).

KEATON

BACH: Mass in B minor
Christina Landshamer, Anke Vondung, Kenneth Tarver, Andreas Wolf; Bavarian Radio Chorus; Concerto Köln/ Peter Dijkstra
BR 900910 [3CD] 101 minutes

The Mass is on the first two discs, and the third contains a long (77 minute) introduction to the piece. (The timing in the heading reflects the Mass only.)

July/August 2017
This is a period instrument performance with all the trappings that go with the style. On the positive side are the finely sprung rhythms and the enthusiasm we sense from the singing. Indeed, for lovers of period style, this is an excellent job. The soloists and chorus are excellent; and the orchestra, except perhaps for the horn, is crisp, alert, and satisfying. I particularly admire the choral singing, which is well shaped and detailed. Spots like the articulation in Kyrie I seem a little too obvious; but in the Sanctus, where the triplet rhythm has wonderful sweep, the singing is completely satisfying. The soloists are more than adequate, and Anke Vondung’s ‘Agnus Dei’, sung very softly, is especially touching. In short, everything is very well prepared, and there are no weak links.

At the same time, though, we have to notice that everything moves along so swiftly, allowing no moments for contemplation, that the performance tends to sound faceless. Some movements, like the ‘Laudamus’ are “stunt-fast”; I just don’t see how Bach (or we) can gain from such a race. Fast movements like the ‘Gloria’ or ‘Cum sancto’ (which, like the ‘Laudamus’ is almost laughingly fast) have lots of excitement, but with a slightly slower pace they could gain real majesty.

The liner notes report that the Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung, on the occasion of first publishing the score of the Mass in 1818, described it as “the Greatest Musical Work of All Times and All People”. A little hyperbolic, perhaps, but I wish these performers had taken some of the AMZ’s enthusiasm to heart and realized that you find much more when you don’t hurry through everything.

When I was listening to the ‘Gratias’ I had a flashback to Randall Thompson, with whom I studied fugue in college, saying he thought this piece was the finest fugue ever written, no doubt because of the sensational series of stretto entries near the end, culminating with the high trumpets. I wonder if dear Professor Thompson would say the same on the basis of this recording. I apologize for harping on so, but the B minor Mass is more about Faith than Performance Practice.

The third disc, lasting almost as long as the Mass itself, is a lecture with musical examples on the genesis of Bach’s work, which was assembled near the end of his life from music as early as the 1724 ‘Sanctus’. It seems to be a very interesting background to the piece, intended for a general audience; but alas, it is in German with no accommodation in the liner notes or elsewhere for English speakers. And indeed, it is curious to hear Bach’s Latin text translated into German.

If you want the B minor with period instruments, I would continue to recommend Richard Hickox’s recording on Chandos, which runs about seven minutes longer than Dijkstra, resulting in a more majestic, monumental look at Bach’s masterpiece. On the other hand if you like the style represented by Dijkstra, this is very well done.

ALTHOUSE

BACH: Organ pieces
Fantasia & Fugue in G minor; Italian Concerto; Prelude & Fugue in B minor; Trio Sonata 6 in G; Toccata, Adagio, & Fugue; Passacaglia & Fugue
Christopher Houlihan
Azica 71314—80 minutes

Prelude & Fugue in G; Preludes on Liebster Jesu; Concertos in D minor & C; Partita on Sei Gegrüssen; Prelude & Fugue in C, S 547
Masaaki Suzuki
BIS 2241 [SACD] 71 minutes

Both of these recordings of organ pieces by JS Bach are very fine, but they represent markedly different approaches. The contrast is instructive.

Christopher Houlihan is a rising young star in the North American organ world, acclaimed for his many performances in the US and Canada. He was a student of Paul Jacobs at Juilliard and also studied with John Rose at Trinity College, Hartford, CT, and with Jean-Baptiste Robin at the Regional Conservatory in Versailles. He is currently an artist in residence at Trinity College, where this recording was made, and director of music at the Church of the Holy Apostles in Manhattan.

The organ in the chapel of Trinity College is an instrument of three manuals and 79 ranks built in 1971 by the Austin Company of Hartford. Specifications are not given here, but they can be found on a page of the American Guild of Organists website, where the instrument is described as French classic. The notes with this recording describe it as American classic, and I think that is more accurate. This is clearly an eclectic instrument based on classic choruses but with an abundance of other colors to make it versatile enough to play most of the organ repertoire. Individual registers may be based on French models, but the instrument is certainly not imitation Clicquot.

Houlihan’s program consists of some of the best known of Bach’s larger free composi-
tions plus the performer's own arrangement of the Italian Concerto from *Clavierübung II*. He plays in the orchestral style that was pretty much standard in the first half of the 20th Century. One of his more striking interpretations is of the Prelude & Fugue in B minor (S 544), a work that may have been written for the funeral of Princess Christiane Eberhardine of Saxony. The prelude is played quietly as an understated lament with shifting tone colors. The fugue is treated as a large-scale orchestral crescendo. Houlihan often solos out lines in the fugues, though this seems somewhat at odds with the principle of a fugue as a web of theoretically equal melodic lines.

In the Trio Sonata in G (S 530) Houlihan nicely avoids the besetting problem of playing the trio sonatas on a large instrument: using registrations that are too heavy, thus making the music sound ponderous. Here the registrations are light and bright. He favors brisk tempos, and in the outer movements less speed and more articulation might have made the metrical structures clearer.

His arrangement of the Italian Concerto is not altogether convincing. The harpsichord gives the ritornellos of the outer movements a sparkle and transparency that I regard as an essential part of the music. The full organ treatment trades transparency for heft, and I think it a bad trade. The voice used for the right hand solo in II is just too thick for such a delicate melody.

Readers who like the orchestral approach to the Bach organ works will be delighted with this recording. It is a style of playing that Houlihan executes with consummate mastery. It is perhaps too tempting for some artists to indulge in the manipulation of organ apparatus as an end in itself rather than the servant of the music. Houlihan is not entirely exempt from this criticism, but I have heard far worse. I am increasingly convinced that the anachronistic imposition of shifting tone colors and intricate console acrobatics do nothing to enhance Bach's organ writing. At worst, the coloristic effects tend to distract attention from the music itself, falsifying its essential character. So this may not be a style of Bach playing that I find congenial, but there is no denying Houlihan's extraordinary achievement in this his first all-Bach recording.

Masaaki Suzuki is probably best known as founder (1990) and director of the Bach College Japan and for his many recordings with them of Bach's sacred vocal works, including all of the cantatas, recorded in the chapel of Kobe Shoin Women's University, where the present recording was made. Suzuki is also an accomplished harpsichordist and organist, and this recording is the second volume in his series of the Bach organ works. I was very much impressed with the first volume (BIS 2111; Mar/Apr 2016) played on the historic Schnitger-Hinz organ at St Martin's Church, Groningen. I observed then that Suzuki's playing is eminently sane but far from dull. In contrast with Houlihan's orchestral approach, Suzuki adopts a more historical performance practice in keeping with the instruments he plays. At the same time, he avoids the brittle, frigid style perpetrated by some players who seem more interested in "authenticity" than in the music itself. On the contrary, Suzuki's mastery of articulation and agogic nuance imparts a coherence and animation to the music that allows it to speak eloquently without anachronistic overlay.

The Marc Garnier organ (1983) in the Shoin Chapel is an instrument of four manuals and 33 stops. In contrast with the Hartford Austin played by Houlihan, Garnier’s instrument is decidedly French classic. The great and positif are the chief manual divisions. The récit consists of only a corнет mixture and trompette, while the echo has only a cornet mixture. The pedal division is small and depends on couplers for adequate support in larger registrations. Within these constraints, the instrument proves to be an admirable vehicle for these works. The quieter registers are heard to particular advantage in the chorale partita. The organ’s tone is darker than one might expect of an instrument of this kind. It is well recorded at a respectful distance, but with good presence. The meantone tuning produces a fair number of sour moments that may bother some listeners.

I am especially impressed with Suzuki’s performance of the Concerto in C (Grosso Mogul) after Vivaldi. With its long stretches of repeated figures and slow harmonic rhythm, it can be tedious. Suzuki demonstrates how it ought to be played. He gets beneath the busy surface and shows us how this music moves. It is not my favorite work on the program, but it is possibly the acid test of the performer’s artistry. His performance is a revelation.

GATENS
**Bach: Partitas**

Richard Egarr, hpsl
Harmonia Mundi 907593 [2CD] 154 minutes

I find Egarr a reliable if not always top-level performer and the sound of Harmonia Mundi always excellent for harpsichord recordings. After listening to this program many times, I must admit that it will not stay in my collection. Enthusiasts of period performance will no doubt be disconcerted when I share the reason why: additional ornamentation and improvisation. Egarr adds an unusual amount of these extras in the repeats of all the movements (and sometimes a bit the first time around as well). Often the ornamentation distracts from the music because it seems to be added in a very predictable and systematic way. In one very common pattern, he takes two notes and repeats them at double the rhythmic value. The effect doesn’t always sound like Bach to me (especially when the two notes are part of a chord, as in the Allemande from Partita 1), and it’s done so often that by the end of the recording it reminds me of a kind of nervous tic or an extended bout of hiccups.

For these works, then, I’d turn elsewhere: Staier on German Harmonia Mundi (Nov/Dec 1996), Rousset for Oiseau-Lyre (Sept/Oct 1994), Kirkpatrick on DG Archiv (no review but see Nov/Dec 1995), and Vinikour on Sono Luminus (Mar/Apr 2017).

**Bach: St John Passion**

Nicholas Phan (narr), Jesse Blumberg (Jesus), Jeffrey Straus (Pilate), Amanda Forsythe, s; Terry Wey, ct; Christian Immler, bar; Apollo’s Fire/ Jeannette Sorrell
Avie 2369 [2CD] 108 minutes

This recording grows out of a semi-staged production of Bach’s oratorio given in Cleveland and New York in 2016. The singers in the character roles sang from memory and interacted on a raised platform in the middle of the orchestra. For some of the crowd scenes, part of the chorus was stationed in the aisles among the members of the audience. As director Jeannette Sorrell observes, the St John Passion is as close as Bach came to writing an opera, and this production aims to be as operatic as the work will allow. Obviously, the visual aspect of the production has little bearing on an audio recording, but the dramatic objective does influence the performance.

The facile way of being dramatic is to deliver the recitatives with urgency and vehemence, and this generally translates into speed. This performance is better than that, but not entirely exempt from criticism on this ground. After the opening chorus, the narrator sounds so agitated in merely setting the scene that he detracts from the moments when agitation would be telling. Anyone interested in the drama of the St John Passion needs to consider seriously the 1971 recording directed by Benjamin Britten with Peter Pears as the Evangelist (London 443 859; Mar/Apr 1996). It is sung in English with modern instruments, and so is far from a model of period performance practice, but it displays a profound understanding of the work’s dramatic trajectory and emotional intensity.

Sorrell generally favors quick tempos, but is not afraid of very slow ones where appropriate, as in ‘Es ist Vollbrach’. I believe her treatment of the chorales is too subjective. She bends the tempo at phrase endings to make them more expressive, and the breaks for mid-phrase commas seem to me disruptive and affected. I have long felt that there are three categories of material in the Bach passions: the dramatic in the form of recitatives and crowd choruses, the contemplative in the arias and ariosos, and the corporate voice of the faithful in the chorales and framing choruses. The chorales need to be steady and dignified, with careful shaping of the phrases, but without subjective excess. The chorales are supposed to be doubled by the orchestra, but here the second stanza of ‘Wer hat dich so Geschlagen’ from Part I is sung unaccompanied, as is ‘Er Nahm Alles Wohl in Acht’ from Part II. The final chorale begins unaccompanied. The orchestra enters quietly about halfway through, and there is a long crescendo to the conclusion.

The singing and playing here are first rate. Readers looking for a first recording of the St John Passion could do far worse. This is not the place for a comprehensive overview of recordings of this work—and I confess that I have not heard them all—but there are some that I find particularly worthy of mention. John Eliot Gardiner with the Monteverdi Choir, English Baroque Soloists, and outstanding solo singers (SDG 712; July/Aug 2011) strikes an impressive balance between drama and poise. Philippe Pierlot and the Ricercar Consort (Mirare 136; Sept/Oct 2011) demonstrate that this work can be performed convincingly with a very small orchestra and only eight singers.
Masaaki Suzuki and the Bach Collegium Japan (BIS 921; Sept/Oct 1999) may not be as strong dramatically as some others, but he excels in the heartbreakingly meditative quality he brings to the arias.

Apollo's Fire is a Cleveland-based baroque orchestra founded in 1992 by Jeannette Sorrell. In this performance she directs from a chamber organ. There is no harpsichord. The booklet lists 23 singers including the soloists.

GATENS

BACH: St Matthew Passion
James Gilchrist (Evangelist), Stephan Loges (Jesus); Monteverdi Choir; Trinity Boys Choir; English Baroque Soloists/John Eliot Gardiner
SDG 725 [2CD] 161 minutes

Gardiner recorded the St Matthew about 30 years ago, around the time when the period instrument movement was gaining a foothold in our understanding of baroque music. That performance, reviewed enthusiastically by Stephen Chakwin (M/J 1990), stripped the piece of religious sanctimony and told the passion story as a real drama, quick cutting with sharp juxtapositions. Tempos were universally swift, and the spirit of dance could often be felt. It was undeniably a wonderful accomplishment; and for many, including me, it became the benchmark dramatic approach with period instruments. Since then his approach has come closer to the norm, at least in the period world, but I would still lean toward Gardiner because in his way he served the devotional requirements of the Passion very well.

This performance is the last of a series of 16 conducted by Gardiner over a seven-month period in 2016; this finale took place in Pisa on September 22. Two fine soloists were brought in for the roles of Evangelist and Jesus, but the other roles and solos were taken from the chorus, which numbered 28. The singers had the whole work memorized, and the notes tell us that a modicum of stage movement was admitted, even though the work was hardly “staged”. All Gardiner wanted was ‘a bare concert stage (not a picture frame) peopled with choristers freed from their scores and soloists interacting with the obbligato players, moving to and from their allotted positions in a simple dignified choreography’. This indeed would be wonderful to behold since the chorus, singing without scores, could easily become part of the dramatic action.

This final performance, seasoned with more than a dozen predecessors, has a settled, unified feel that comes from deep acquaintance with the piece. Part of this unity comes from the use of ten choir members for the solo parts—all except Jesus and the Evangelist. These singers may not be quite the match of the soloists in Gardiner’s earlier recording, but their appearance as representatives of the choir (and hence deeply in the drama) contributes greatly to the dramatic whole. The “name” soloists (Gilchrist and Loges) are also excellent. Also fine are the Monteverdi Choir and the English Baroque Soloists, who sing and play at top level. In the many chorales Gardiner goes the interpretive route: dynamics and tempo fluctuate with the meaning of the texts. (Some conductors do them straight, much as a congregation might be singing hymns.)

I’ve spent some time wondering if I preferred this performance to the Gardiner of 30 years ago. The earlier issue had better soloists and clearer sonics. Here the soundstage is homogenized, with little sense of the two choirs and orchestras. The present issue, though, has the advantage of chorister-soloists—I realize I’m playing both sides here!—and the whole performance is a few minutes slower, which I count as a real advantage. I guess, then, I would come down in favor of the later, 2016 performance.

Downsides? Much as I admire Gardiner’s work, I don’t often find myself deeply moved by his interpretation. The crowd choruses are wonderfully precise (and ‘Sind Blitze, sind Donner’ is astonishingly fast), but when virtuosity pokes through, the message of the Passion can be obscured. Occasionally (e.g. the final statement of the Passion chorale, ‘Wenn Ich einmal soll scheiden’) I noticed I had a moist eye, but in this piece I would expect more such moments. And the soloists, whom I’ve described in positive terms, sing consistently with almost no vibrato. After a while I wanted more warmth. Gardiner’s tempos, though not as swift as some, will seem unfeeling to people who still like Klemperer (or Richter, for that matter); and some movements, e.g. ‘Gebt mir’, just are too fast—a lament recast as a triumph aria.

Nonetheless, if you’re into the period thing, this would be my choice. The CDs are accompanied by an extensive 112-page booklet with texts and interesting notes by the conductor.
**BACH: Trios**
Yo-Yo Ma, vc; Chris Thile, g; Edgar Meyer, db
Nonesuch 559649—60 minutes

This was sent without liner notes, and the only listing of its contents is on the CD itself. There is also no indication of what instruments are involved—only the names of the players are listed.

I must say this is a pleasant program, though it is mostly arrangements of pieces from Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier, Art of Fugue*, and various chorales. The only pieces that come close to their original scorings are Trio Sonata 6 in G, S 530, and Viola da Gamba Sonata 3 in G minor, S 1029.

These fine players seem to be having a happy time with all of this material, and Bach has written music that can be done in a number of ways and still sounds like him, even with guitar and strings instead of keyboard. In other words, though this is not a recording of Bach as he was, it is close enough to the original notes to be satisfying. The recording is clear and well balanced.

_D MOORE_

**BACH: Violin Sonatas, S 1014-19**
Chiara Zanisi; Giulia Nuti, lpsi
Arcana 426—95 minutes

The violin is too loud and has a rough tone. When I turn up the volume to hear the harpsichord lines (2/3 of the music), the violin seems too close to the microphones. The tempos are mostly fast and unbending. Zanisi and Nuti have excellent dexterity and intonation, but the music needs more than that. Their interpretation sounds impersonal and boring. It’s as if they were afraid to take any interpretive chances with Bach’s music. The alternate movement for Sonata 6 is included as an appendix. In this identical program, Schayegh and Halubek (J/A 2016) make these sonatas dance with imagination. That’s the big thing missing here.

_B LEHMAN_

**BACH: WTC I**
Annehelena Schluter, p
Hanssler 16027 [2CD] 116 minutes

Too many things are wrong with this release for me to recommend it in good conscience. The piano is recorded at a distance in what appears to be a large, empty hall, so the sound is bathed in a kind of hazy ambience that soon becomes tiring. The performances are not quite mechanical, but almost. A gentle non-legato is used almost ceaselessly, and tempos are mostly moderate, so the pieces all sound more or less the same. (The very slow F-sharp-minor prelude is a notable exception.) More damning, however, is that the pieces seem drained of passion and joy: they are understated and bland, like an electronic clock with a too-obviously chic minimalist design. Every now and then there’s a mislearned note, and more often than I’d like Ms Schluter adds an odd flourish on the final note (sometimes approaching a standard Baroque ornament, sometimes not). Some listeners might appreciate her approach as gentle and playful; I find it maddening. I prefer David Korevaar’s performance on MSR (Jan/Feb 2011) and (though less than I used to) Maurizio Pollini on DG (Mar/Apr 2010).

_HASKINS_

**BACH: Well-Tempered Clavier**
Dina Ugorskaja, p
Cavi 8553503 [5CD] 309 minutes

There probably can’t be a perfect recording of either book of the WTC by a single pianist, let alone both. And I don’t agree with every choice Dina Ugorskaja makes. For instance, the D-minor and G-major fugues in Book I are a bit too hard-bitten and non-legato. In general she favors slow to moderate tempos, a constantly changing but musical approach to the phrasing, and an approach that refreshingly embraces the modern grand piano.

One of her most magnificent performances is the E-flat prelude from Book I. Some keyboardists play the opening passably and then inexplicably take the tempo much faster once both subjects of the double counterpoint are combined. Ugorskaja plays the whole thing slowly and majestically—exactly as it should be. In the G-minor fugue, where non-legato is more appropriate (but by no means required), she improves the overall effect with various shadings of tone, occasional rubato to emphasize one entry over others, and a careful shaping of the sections of the fugue so that each varies in character slightly compared to the others.

She maintains her composure and control in the more difficult Book II. I love her incisive approach in the E-minor prelude and fugue; once more her articulation is a little more clipped than necessary, but it works for this piece; the beautifully recorded piano—where
the close but never claustrophobic mixing adds just the right level of ambience—ensures that the lovely range of tone she achieves always sounds perfect.

Some more historically-minded listeners may prefer the cooler approach of Hewitt’s second recording (Hyperion, no review) or the more precious and anemic style of Schiff (ECM, Jan/Feb 2013). But after hearing Ugorskaïa, I can happily retire both those sets. I cannot stop listening to this release, and since it is the last one in the reviews on my desk this month, I can continue to revel in its endless nuance and surprise. You should too.

HASKINS

BALAKIREV: Symphonies 1+2
Philharmonia, Moscow Symphony/ Herbert von Karajan, Gennady Rozhdestvensky
Praga 250 363—78 minutes

These venerable performances of Mily Balakirev’s two symphonies are reissues. The Karajan is a monaural EMI recording with the Philharmonia from 1949. The 1966 Rozhdestvensky reading is in stereo from Melodiya.

Balakirev was the leader of the Russian group known as “The Five”; they composed in a nationalist way as opposed to the academically oriented German school. (The rest of “The Five” was Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin, Modeste Moussorgsky, and Cesar Cui.) Balakirev was the only professional musician and the only one familiar with the German style of composition. His influence was strong and his teachings effective, but he irritated the group to the point where they eventually moved on from him.

Balakirev was not the composer that Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, and Moussorgsky were; and I find his symphonies pedestrian and less original than theirs. Steven Haller admires them, and his reviews are worth reading. His advice on recordings parallels my own (Jan/Feb, May/June, Sept/Oct 1992; Nov/Dec 1994; July/Aug 1999).

If you want both symphonies on one disc this Praga would suffice, but note that the Karajan is a monaural recording from 1949. It sounds amazingly good, but the symphony benefits from a stereo recording like the classic Beecham on EMI. Beecham was a champion of the work, and his recording is the best in interpretation, playing, and sound. The Karajan is along the same lines, though not quite as impressive in terms of opulence and spirit. If Praga had remastered the Beecham, they’d have a hands-down winner.

The Rozhdestvensky reading of the Second is a Haller favorite and justifiably so. As he noted, the conductor wears his heart on his sleeve, all to the service of a symphony that (in my opinion) is not as good as the First. I have an EMI pressing of the LP, and the Praga remastering compares very well with it.

If I were going to buy one pairing of Balakirev’s symphonies, I would go with Svetlanov’s first set on Melodiya. His Hyperion remake with the Philharmonia is not bad, but it is slower and doesn’t have the fire of the earlier one. Sinaisky is OK, but I agree with Haller that the Chandos sound is not always as clear as it should be for these works.

HECHT

BALAKIREV: Tamara; see RACHMANINOFF

BARTOK: Piano Sonata; Folk Songs from Csik; Sonatina; Slovak Rondos; Etudes; 2-Piano Sonata
Cedric Tiberghien; François-Frédéric Guy, p; Colin Currie, Sam Walton, perc
Hyperion 68153—66 minutes

This is one in a series of Bartók recordings by the French pianist Cedric Tiberghien. The program starts with the solo sonata, and I instantly felt there was something seriously wrong. This is a brutal, percussive work that needs to be performed accordingly, as Zoltan Kocsis did brilliantly (Decca 478 2364). Tiberghien pulls the music this way and that, introducing all kinds of hesitations, rubatos, and unwarranted subtleties that disrupt the machine-like rhythm. The music sounds eviscerated and unsteady, made of plasticine rather than steel and concrete.

It is much the same with the following short pieces, some of which are of more gentle character but based on folk songs and dances that need an incisive rhythm and a simplicity of expression that Tiberghien does not seem to be capable of. He fusses too much with the music and thereby dilutes its character. Stay with Kocsis by all means, who plays faster and is more straightforward.

Sang Woo Kang reviewed an earlier Tiberghien Bartók disc (Sept/Oct 2016) and remarked that “he is able to create a small world out of every phrase”. He may have meant this as a compliment, but I think it is exactly the problem I was referring to. Tiberghien is without doubt a highly sensitive artist with a
large expressive vocabulary, but the creating of small worlds is not what Bartok requires. He needs a steady rhythm first and foremost.

In the final work, the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, Tiberghien is naturally constrained by the required coordination with the other pianist and the percussionists. It is a good performance, but again Zoltan Kocsis and Dezso Ranki on Decca seem preferable to me. They sound more idiomatic and have greater drive—they are 2 minutes faster overall.

REPP

BARTOK: Concerto 3; see STRAVINSKY

BAX: I Sing of a Maiden; This Worldes Joie; FINZI: My Lovely One; God Is Gone Up; Welcome Sweet and Sacred Feast; Let Us Now Praise Famous Men; Lo, the Full Final Sacrifice; Magnificat; IRELAND: Greater Love Hath No Man; Ex Ore Innocentium; Te Deum in F

Daniel Cook, org; Westminster Abbey Choir/James O'Donnell

Hyperion 68167—74 minutes

Here are sacred choral works by three important English composers who flourished in the first half of the 20th Century. They may seem minor and obscure figures compared with a giant like Vaughan Williams or younger composers like Britten or Tippett, but each had a distinctive voice that left an enduring mark on the repertory.

The greater part of this program is devoted to works by Gerald Finzi (1901-56). He was an agnostic of Italian-Jewish ancestry, but he very consciously identified himself with English culture, traditions, and literature, and this included the music of the Anglican Church. It is noteworthy that four of the six pieces by him recorded here take their texts from English metaphysical poets of the 17th Century—a characteristic manifestation of his literary sensibilities. His most typical writing is tender and introspective, with a touch of melancholy; but even at his boldest—for example, 'God Is Gone Up' with a text by Edward Taylor (c1642-1729)—his music seems to sound a note of vulnerability that I find irresistible.

Arnold Bax (1883-1953) is known chiefly for his symphonies and tone poems, but he was a master of a cappella choral writing. The two works recorded here reflect his fascination with medieval religious poetry. In his notes Jeremy Dibble observes that Bax emulates the techniques of vocal polyphony in works like these, but with a "kaleidoscopic vocabulary of chromatic harmony". They are certainly not antiquarian exercises.

John Ireland (1879-1962) was the only composer of the three who spent a considerable portion of his career as a church organist and choirmaster: at St Luke's, Chelsea, 1904-26. The three pieces recorded here derive from late Victorian and Edwardian church music, perhaps best represented by the works of his teacher, Stanford. Ireland’s 'Greater Love Hath No Man' (1912) has established itself as a solid part of the Anglican repertory. It was commissioned by Charles Macpherson as a Passion-tide meditation for St Paul's Cathedral, but with the outbreak of World War I in 1914 it became associated with the nation's mourning for the war casualties, and it has been a mainstay of Remembrance Day services ever since.

The performances here are of the highest technical standard. Choral tone, discipline, and intonation are all excellent. Hyperion’s engineers have outdone themselves to produce a recorded sound of stunning and sumptuous beauty. To cite but one example, the performance of Finzi’s ‘God Is Gone Up’ is perhaps the most energetic imaginable; and the sound of the organ’s solo tuba in its opening fanfare reminds us that this is the place where British monarchs are crowned. Organist Daniel Cook plays well accompaniments that can be as daunting as the most demanding solo repertory. You will not go wrong with this.

GATENS

BAX: In Memoriam; see ELGAR

BEETHOVEN: Piano Sonatas 8, 14, 23

Sunwook Kim—Accentus 30409—60 minutes

It is hard to make a fresh statement with these “greatest hits” of Beethoven. Kim shows an understanding of the underlying harmonies and demonstrates incredible technical command and intelligence. These are solid textbook recordings. It’s a good textbook, but perhaps the music needs more interpretive flexibility.

The Pathetique has a labored opening. Though there are dramatic effects, Kim needs to keep up the intensity more—it falls just a little bit short. The Moonlight is good, but has a slightly brisk pace, a tempo choice which recurs the Appassionata. His playing is crisp and firm: there is no personal indulgence.

This doesn’t stand out, but not because it’s bad playing—by no means. I just want something more than “textbook”.

KANG
The young Armida Quartet plays Beethoven with friendliness and elan; I and II are enjoyable, but III lacks much-needed intensity because they use almost no vibrato. The movement should be tragic, but it falls flat. Both pieces have good phrasing and dynamics but no emotional or spiritual depth.

The Miro Quartet, which takes its name from the Spanish artist, was founded in 1995. Since then, they have garnered several awards and in 2005 were the first ensemble to be given an Avery Fisher Career Grant. Since 2003 the group has been quartet-in-residence at the University of Texas. Their recordings of other Beethoven quartets have been praised here (M/J 2006, S/O 2013).

The quartet here, Op. 130, was originally in six movements, the last being a lengthy, 15-minute fugue. Beethoven later removed that and published it separately as Grosse Fuge, Op. 133. He substituted a simpler, more conventional finale. On this recording the first six tracks are the original version (with fugue), and the seventh track has the other finale. You can have it either way.

Whatever your choice, you’re unlikely to be disappointed. The Miro is a very fine group, almost flawless in intonation and execution. A careful check with headphones, where small indiscretions are more obvious, showed remarkable clarity in inner parts and splendidly accurate ensemble. Their playing, like most modern quartets, tends to be direct, rather than reflective; but the Cavatina is the only movement where I would have appreciated more emotion and deeper expression. Balances are very good, and the sonics are first rate.

Beethoven was a composer of many moods, and while I often prefer performances that emphasize the shocking and explosive side of his character, these gentler interpretations by Pierre Fouchenneret and Romain Descharmes have much to recommend them. These are warm, easy-going readings that are very appropriate to this music. Good sound.

James Ehnes and Andrew Armstrong take a somewhat similar approach to this music, but their playing is a bit more energetic. I also find their timing and nuances better. I suspect that this might be the first installment of a set, so watch for further releases.

The ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has often been made into an opera. Yet only two have made it into the standard repertoire: Claudio Monteverdi’s 1607 Favola d’Orfeo and Gluck’s 1762 Orfeo ed Euridice (and its 1774 French version).

Ferdinando Bertoni (1725-1813) may have

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been familiar with Gluck’s Italian version. He certainly was familiar with Ranieri de’ Calzabigi’s libretto for Gluck. He set that libretto too.

At one time Bertoni’s aria ‘Che disse, che ascolte’ was substituted for Gluck’s setting in his opera. Bertoni’s opera is much shorter than Gluck’s, clocking in at 79 minutes compared to Gluck’s 110.

The celebrated castrato Gaetano Guadagni had created the role of Orfeo for Gluck. He created a kind of cottage industry of reworkings, pasticcios, and new settings of the Orpheus legend—starring himself, of course.

The cover is really silly. What does a black-and-white photo of a very young, petulant girl have to do with Orpheus?

PARSONS

BLOCH: Solo Cello Suites
with From Jewish Life; Meditation Hebraique, Nocturnes
Chiara Enderle, vc; Matthias Enderle, v; Hiroko Sakagami, p—Migros 6290 — 68 minutes

with DALLAPICCOLA: Ciaccona, Intermezzo, Adagio; LIGETI: Sonata
Natalie Clein, vc
Hyperion 68155 — 64 minutes

Here is an interesting pair of discs played by female cellists. Enderle’s program is devoted to the music of Ernest Bloch; Clein blends the solo suites with other contemporary composers’ solo works.

So how does it come off? Enderle’s playing is a bit hard to follow in the solo suites. She has a nice improvisational approach, but the frequent triple stops are not clear in the bass notes, so one tends not to hear the entire chord. In music as harmonically complex as Bloch, that is a problem. There are also a few notes that are not played as written in my score—not perhaps very important ones, but enough to contribute to the general feeling of inexactitude that pervades these performances. The other Bloch works are earlier and more effective.

Clein’s treatment of the suites is similar, but she is a bit more virtuosic and excited in the rapid sections and her treatment of the triple-stops is a bit clearer. I would like to have these works held together rhythmically to a greater extent than either cellist manages here, but this is a somewhat more convincing approach than Enderle’s.

Moving back in time we find a disc from 2002 by Emmanuelle Bertrand (Harmonia Mundi 901810; M/J 2004)—another all-Bloch program containing Meditation Hebraique, From Jewish Life, Nirvana and Nigun. That is even more satisfying than the new recordings since she holds her tempos together more consistently and her phrasing gives us a better idea of the shape of the phrases and their relationship to each other.

In a 2014 reading by Miranda Wilson (Albany 1534; M/J 2015) these are coupled with works for solo cello by Daniel Bukvich, a Montana composer. They are also the least polished performances. Tempos are on the slow side and the phrasing is not really stirring.

My favorite for the suites is Bertrand. If that is not easy to find today, Clein is the second most convincing. All are recorded well, but these suites require a depth of interpretation and technical excellence to make them work. It is interesting that all of these programs are played by female cellists and that two of the three suites are dedicated to another—Zara Nelsova.

D MOORE

BORTNANSKY: Concertos; Cherubic Hymn; SCHNITTE: Choir Concerto
MDR Radio Choir/ Risto Joost
Genuin 17450—55 minutes

Here’s a German choir at work in the Russian choral tradition, and they achieve impressive results. The music of Dmitri Stepanovich Bortniansky (1751-1825) straddles East and West, with the cosmopolitan sound of the European idiom mixing with the deep, veiled sonorities of Russian Orthodoxy. Concertos 9 (‘This Is the Day’) and 24 (‘I Lift Up My Eyes’) are performed along with an exceptionally beautiful Cherubic Hymn inspired by The Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom. If you would prefer Dmitri Stepanovich performed and recorded with more snap, crackle, and ethnic wobble, you could seek out Valery Polyansky and the Russian Symphonic Capella on Chandos (July/Aug 2000; March/April 2001). Those releases offer the package tour to Mother Russia. But if you’re just as happy to lean a bit westward while taking in Bortniansky’s music, this handsome singing should do nicely.

Alfred Schnittke’s 38-minute setting of Gregory of Narek’s 10th Century Book of Lamentations is accorded a ringing (and wringing) account by the choir from Leipzig. The basses rumble convincingly, church bells peal, and imposing walls of dissonance are created, then breached. Again, though, you can head back to the Rodina with Polyansky and the Capella who are even deeper, darker,
BOSSI: Organ Pieces
Marco Ruggeri—Cremona 9028—76 minutes

Marco Enrico Bossi (1861-1925) is a relatively unknown Italian composer who wrote orchestral, chamber, piano, and vocal works, as well as numerous pieces for solo organ and organ with instruments. Only his Scherzo in G minor and Giga (originally for orchestra) are likely to be found on organ recital programs. Aside from the Scherzo and the Toccata di Concerto, I found most of this uninteresting—lots going on but not much happening.

Ruggeri is a competent player and makes as good a case as possible for this music. He plays on an 1895 2-manual Lingiardi organ which is touted as symphonic in style. There are some lovely soft stops, but the console is extremely noisy, the mixtures exceedingly bright, and the recording close-miked. I would like to hear this repertoire on a bigger organ with a wider range of color and dynamics—a truly symphonic organ. No notes on the music.

BOULANGER: Songs; Piano, Cello, Organ Pieces
Nicole Cabell, s; Alex Shrader, t; Edwin Crossley-Mercer, b; Lucy Mauro, p; Amit Peled, vc; Francois-Henri Houbart, org
Delos 3496 [2CD] 108 minutes

Nadia Boulanger is remembered mostly as the gifted teacher of many composers. The redoubtable, slightly tyrannic teacher lived to be 92 and her influence on her pupils and other teachers is still felt to this day. She habitually insisted that her sister Lili was the composer; she herself composed music for only a short time. No less than Gabriel Fauré, her former teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, said to her, “I’m not sure you did the right thing in giving up composition.” Carol Rosenberger, director of Delos and a former pupil of Boulanger, and pianist Lucy Mauro have done music lovers a great service in bringing so many of these unknown pieces to the public, many for the first time.

In the eloquent words of producers Lindsay Koob and Lucy Mauro, “Boulanger’s meticulously crafted works are composed mostly in a late romantic style: essentially tonal with often profuse chromatic elements and occasional dissonance, as quite a few of her contemporaries did. Her music also shows impressionist elements and the influence of Debussy and Fauré. Yet her music is highly original, revealing a compositional voice that was entirely her own. Her work conveys a convincing array of moods, effects, and potent emotions—while revealing a keen sense of harmony, color, and artistry.”

The soloists are excellent. One can hear immediately that bass-baritone Edwin Crossley-Mercer has an advantage over Nicole Cabell and Alex Shrader as a native French speaker. Crossley-Mercer’s sinuous, sexy voice makes one want to hear more of him in this repertoire. Nevertheless, Cabell and Shrader have been well-coached in their French. Cabell’s voice has a throbbing vibrato that took my ears a little while to get used to. She enunciates clearly and manages well in music that is perhaps a little low for her and doesn’t ask her to soar to high notes. Shrader’s beautiful voice has darker colors than I would have suspected given his operatic roles. He too manages the texts well without sounding quite as comfortable as Crossley-Mercer does. Pianist Lucy Mauro accompanies superbly. Much of the color of Boulanger’s settings is in the piano part, and Mauro supports and leads her soloists without ever overshadowing them. Her traversal of Boulanger’s piano works is very good. I encourage any student of this repertoire to get hold of these pieces and bring them to the public so we can hear them more often.

Cellist Amit Peled plays the works for cello and piano (with Mauro) exquisitely. Francois-Henri Houbart does justice to Boulanger’s organ works. There are detailed notes in the booklet about all of these pieces, including each of the songs, with texts and translations.

I hope other singers and instrumentalists will take up this composer’s cause.

BOYLE: Clarinet Pieces
Fraser Langton; Rosalind Ventris, va; James Willshire, p—Delphian 34172—60 minutes

In this Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) production, noted Scottish composer and composition professor Rory Boyle (b. 1951) supervises premiere recordings of his works.
for clarinet and piano: the Sonatina (1979), dedicated to his composition teacher Lennox Berkeley; the Four Bagatelles (1979), a set of tongue-in-cheek showpieces; the metrically tricky Tatty’s Dance (2010), a birthday present for his wife; Dramatis Personae (2012), a three-movement semi-programmatic work inspired by psychology; and Di Tre Re-e-io (2015) for clarinet, viola, and piano, an homage to Swiss composer Arthur Honegger and his haunting Symphony No. 5.

To complete this project, the composer asks two musicians he knows very well: RCS graduate and BBC Philharmonic clarinetist Fraser Langton and RCS professor and acclaimed pianist James Willshire. In the concluding trio, they are joined by the young up-and-coming British violinist Rosalind Ventris, whom Fraser met in 2012 at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada. The program also includes a previously recorded selection, Burble (2012), an a cappella whirlwind of extended devices written for Langton during his graduate studies.

Boyle writes in an accessible neo-modernist aesthetic, crafting angular, searching themes, ethereal harmonies, quirky, disjunct rhythms, and exploratory structures. Whether lonely, joyful, nervous, or chaotic, the emotion in his scores is genuine and palpable, and he exploits the full capabilities of his instrumental forces to reach his audience. His clarinet oeuvre is demanding for everyone involved, requiring intensity, control, keen sensitivity, a staggering range of dynamics, and an almost virtuoso-like command.

Langton is a reliable champion of Boyle’s music. He sports a pleasant tone, a nice legato, brilliant technique, impressive dynamic extremes, and an honest and enthusiastic demeanor. Slow passages are tense and mysterious, and fast movements have drive and urgency. At the same time, the British dialect in his timbre causes fraying and spreading at loud volumes, turning his low register tubby and his high register harsh and muddy. His phrasing, too, can be somewhat plain and nondescript, as if hesitant to venture beyond a surface reading.

The supporting cast is solid. Willshire handles all of Boyle’s obstacles with gorgeous touch, aplomb, and gusto; and Ventris plays with a wonderfully dark and resonant tone that makes the surreal and haunting Di Tre Re-e-io one of the high points here.

BRAHMS: Ballades, op 10
with Variations, op 18b; Fantasies, op 116
Denis Kozhukhin
Pentatone 5186568 [SACD] 57 minutes

with Paganini Variations; 2 Rhapsodies; Piano Pieces, op 119
Jonathan Plowright
BIS 2137 [SACD] 82 minutes

Denis Kozhukhin is one of the finest pianists of the young generation. I have heard him repeatedly on BBC Radio 3 and always been impressed with his serious musicianship, not to mention his technique, which is largely taken for granted today. He is an example of a major competition winner (Queen Elisabeth, 2010) who really has much to offer and whose career has flourished as a consequence. Rob Haskins (Jan/Feb 2015) and Lawrence Hansen (Nov/Dec 2016) reviewed two previous recordings of his and had some reservations. I have absolutely none about this Brahms release. I think these are model performances, exhibiting thorough musical understanding and technical mastery, and they have been recorded in splendid sound.

Kozhukhin’s playing does not have a strong individual flavor, but that is not a drawback when the artistic level is so high. Rather than imposing himself, he steps back and places all his resources at the service of the music. If he continues to tread this narrow uphill path, he may one day be mentioned in the same breath as such illustrious but also self-effacing predecessors as Emil Gilels, Radu Lupu, and Murray Perahia.

The liner notes by Jörg Peter Urbach are excellent. I only wonder why Kozhukhin, in a brief personal note in the booklet, calls the contrasts in the Brahms fantasies “sickening”. Does he have a weak stomach? I find them most palatable, especially when served up by such an expert chef.

The British pianist Jonathan Plowright, who is familiar to me mainly from his fine recordings of neglected Polish music, is recording all the Brahms solo works, and this is Volume 4. Listening to his Ballades right after Kozhukhin’s, I found Plowright’s interpretations gentler, more deliberate, less flowing, and leaner in texture. They did not hold my attention as strongly as Kozhukhin’s. The long drawn-out murmuring of the fourth Ballade can easily drag, and it does a bit here. Plowright often seems to be holding back a bit.

The other works on his program confirm these impressions. He takes the first piece of
Op. 119 at an extremely slow tempo. It sounds almost static and should be more flowing. In the second piece the middle section is stiff rather than sweet, and dynamic contrasts are rather too large. The third piece has a playful character that Plowright misses by playing in strict time. In the final Rhapsody, too, the arpeggiated part in the middle does not sound spirited enough, and there is not enough momentum.

I compared the Two Rhapsodies, Op. 79, with André Laplante’s excellent 1994 recording (Analekta 23011), a full-bodied and expressive account similar to how Kozhukhin might play those works. Plowright’s interpretations lack tension and poetry. They become mechanical sometimes, and soft passages are bloodless; yet his touch gets hard when the music gets loud. He is some 2 minutes faster overall than Laplante, who takes more time for expressive purposes.

Finally, I compared Plowright’s Paganini Variations (Books I and II are separated, with the other works in between—not a bad idea) with Julius Katchen’s from 1965 (London) and Yuja Wang’s from 2010 (DG). Any pianist who can master this extremely challenging work must be admired, and Plowright certainly gives a fine account of it. Nevertheless, it does not match the two rival readings, which are more brilliant and several minutes faster overall. Katchen plays with characteristic impetuosity that sometimes leaves technically difficult passages rushed and hazy. With Wang, however, there is absolute clarity of detail achieved by a transcendental technique coupled with sound musicality. A difference with Plowright is already evident in the theme: Both Katchen and Wang start out forte, as marked in the score, but lower their dynamics slightly in the repeats—a nice touch. Plowright, by contrast, plays the whole theme at an unvarying mezzoforte. Thus he makes the theme sound perfunctory, when in fact it should be a fanfare announcing great things to come. A few of the variations also fall short of expectations: I:4 is very slow and stiff; I:5 is not singing; I:12 is very slow; II:4 (waltz) is not charming enough; II:9 (octaves) is rhythmically distorted. II:8 sounded unfamiliar to me; it turned out that Plowright plays an alternate version, supplied in small print by Brahms, that I have never heard anyone else play. That is not a criticism, of course; but his interpretation once again strikes me as too reticent, slightly rigid, and not among the very best.

Plowright clearly has done much thinking about Brahms’s music. In a lengthy interview in another magazine he explains some of his interpretive decisions in the Ballades. But to my ears his Brahms is somewhat shallow and lacks the warmth so essential to this composer. Paul Althouse reviewed Volume 3 briefly (July/Aug 2016) and thought he had “seldom heard playing this compelling”.

BRAHMS: Requiem
Renate Arends, s; Thomas Oliemans, bar; Rotterdam Symphony Chorus, Hague Philharmonic/Jan Willem de Vriend
Challenge 72738 [SACD] 61 minutes
I begin by reminding you dutifully that the most affecting Deutsches Requiem you can buy isn’t this one. That honor still goes to Otto Klemperer on EMI. For depth, for Schwarzkopf and Fischer-Dieskau at their best (this pair is good, not great), and for the majestic power of Brahms’s counterpoint (the energy here droops a bit in VI), Klemperer reigns supreme. Sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper.

That said, I’m a little surprised by how much I like this January, 2016 concert performance recorded in The Netherlands. I usually prefer a slower, echt spiritual approach to the Requiem (even Barenboim is OK with me), and Maestro de Vriend here clocks in nearly 8 minutes faster than Klemperer. So what attracts me? For starters, the orchestra and choir sound wonderful and were recorded with great skill. The engineers were governed by the “High Quality Musical Surround Mastering Principle”, and please don’t ask me to explain what that means. But whatever they did, it created vivid and powerful sound that makes Brahms gleam even more irresistibly than usual. Add the power of the performance to the power of the engineering, and you get moments of awesome might. (’Den Alles Fleisch’ and the transitions into the big contrapuntal interludes later in the work will pin your ears back.)

But something else was working as I listened, and it took me a while to figure out what it was. What dawned on me is that I am moved by how youthful this performance is. It is a Brahms Requiem that doesn’t sound as though the wisdom of the ages is being passed down from all-knowing elders to young-uns so desperately in need. Here, the spiritual content is imbued with the optimism of youth and the positive energy it engenders. Maybe it’s me, maybe it’s how I’m feeling, maybe it’s what
we’re going through in the country right now. Whatever it is, I’m moved by what I hear. So while this Brahms may not speak with the grandeur of Klemperer or Levine, I was ripe for its uplifting message and feel fortunate to have heard it.

GREENFIELD

BRAHMS: Piano Concerto 1; Violin Concerto; SCHUMANN: Piano Quartet
Emanuel Ax, p; Frank Peter Zimmermann, v; Concertgebouw Orchestra/ Bernard Haitink
RCO 17001 [2CD] 116 minutes

The orchestral performances here were recorded in 2010 concerts in the Concertgebouw; the Schumann, played in Amsterdam’s Waalse Kerk, is from June 2016. Perhaps most notable in the orchestral pieces is the return of Haitink, who was the chief conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra from 1961 to 1988, with an appointment as Honorary Conductor in 1999. When he conducted these concerts, he was 82. Now 88, he is continuing on, and I see he has concerts scheduled for May 2017 in Munich and London—music of Bruckner, Mahler, and Beethoven.

I had long thought of Haitink as a solid conductor—reliable, but not particularly exciting. But when I saw him in Boston I found plenty of passion and involvement with the music. In these two concertos he offers lots of strength and weight in the orchestral introductions, as well as expert accompaniment afterward. In the violin concerto Haitink’s somewhat sober approach contrasts with Zimmermann’s youthful impetuosity, but I never felt this was a conflict. Zimmermann plays with an eye to virtuosity, but key spots like the first movement cadenza and coda are beautiful and memorable.

Emanuel Ax, another musician I have tended to tuck into the category of “dependable and reliable”, plays the first concerto with passion and great tonal beauty. He and Haitink seem in perfect agreement. Both concertos, then, even if they do not replace deep favorites (for me Fischer in the violin concerto, Kovacevich in PC 1), are extremely fine, and I enjoyed them beginning to end.

The Schumann piano quartet (not the better-known quintet) is a fine piece, coming at the end of the composer’s chamber music year (1842). The players are Ax and three strings from the RCO Chamber Soloists. Here too is another very good performance, rich in that youthful spirit that infects all of Schumann’s music. This is a piece worth knowing: a great opening movement with a theme that suggests Finlandia, followed by a touching slow movement and a heavily fugal finale.

An excellent release, then, but a strange one. Disc 1 has less than 40 minutes of music, and a piece of chamber music by Schumann fits awkwardly with Brahms orchestral music. Couldn’t this have been all Brahms and all Haitink? The RCO must have loads of good material in their vaults. As it is, it’s hard to figure who they think is going to buy this collection.

ALTHOUSE

BRAHMS: Piano Quartet 2; MAHLER: Piano Quartet
Anton Barakhovsky, v; Alexander Zemtsov, va; Wolfgang Emanuel Schmidt, vc; Eldar Nebolsin, p
Naxos 572799—60 minutes

It was only a few months ago (M/A 2017) that I reviewed these players in the other two Brahms piano quartets. I found their playing “rich and expressive, unmannered and technically secure”. Here it is no less impressive. Tempos in the Brahms are in the normal range, slow enough to allow details to register, quick enough to move along what is already a long piece. The pace is very similar to Ruth Laredo and the Shanghai Quartet (Arabesque 6740), though the Laredo group plays with more volatility and less serenity than these people. And neither of these groups plays with the depth and the very slow tempos of the Borodin Trio (Chandos 8809). The Borodin wrings every morsel of significance out of Brahms—so much so that one could reasonably want a little more directness. Barakhovsky’s group, then, can be recommended for people wanting a straightforward, honest approach to Brahms.

Mahler’s quartet, written in 1876 when he was a 16-year-old student, has only one movement, but it certainly is a worthy piece. It sounds more like Brahms than the style we know from Mahler’s symphonies. It’s a conventional late-romantic piece, using motivic ideas exhaustively, much as a student might do to show command of established style. This, then, makes a fitting companion to the Brahms. As I said of the earlier release, “a fine job all around”.

ALTHOUSE

American Record Guide

65
What went wrong in the Brahms? The engineering is horrible! The piano sounds like it was recorded in 1934, not 2014; and the string quartet sounds like it’s playing in a closet. The whole ambience is compressed, without air. To get the sound anywhere near tolerable I had to turn the bass up practically all the way.

What about the performance? The first two movements are truly lovely. Menachem Pressler, who was 90 when recording was made in 2014, is supremely musical. The tempo—or I should say, the style—is very relaxed, unhurried, gingerly, comforting. The piano is perfectly balanced with the quartet, and notes seemed beautifully articulated initially, until I realized that the second violinist and violist don’t project themselves enough in quiet sections. There’s power aplenty when the music is dramatic. In II Pressler’s balance when playing thirds and sixths is exquisite; and his shift from the A-major to the E-major section is utterly delicate and subtle, especially as the players almost imperceptibly quicken the tempo (poco stringendo as Brahms asks).

My problem in the last two movements is with the interpretation. The Scherzo is simply not assertive enough. It requires stronger accents and fuller bows. It’s too polite, too sweet. And in IV stylistically they are too legato, especially the first violinist. This is music with edges of folk style, like the finale to Piano Quartet 1. The modulating “development” sections are too coddled, too gentlemanly. And the presto finale is simply too slow; it lacks a flagrant panache.

By contrast, the engineering for the Schumann, recorded in 2016, is perfectly fine. No turning of knobs needed. One basic problem here is that the Pacifica have no breadth of tone color. Whether fast or slow, loud or quiet, they always sound the same, and the music becomes colorless. Also, in I they’re too gentlemanly. When Schumann builds a head of steam, the Pacifica underplays the accents, and their style remains legato. I said to myself, “Come on! Let go! Let ‘er rip!” The same is true in the Scherzo—not enough muscle, as if they’re picking their way through a mine field. III here is very pastel, and the second violinist doesn’t project the crucial triplets that are essential to the drama. And all those notes in IV are played without any personality. The Pacifica Quartet here sounds like a pastel low-drama ensemble; perhaps it needs some freshening.

The first thing to note is that this is a small orchestra—52 musicians. I have always thought that in Brahms, the more the merrier. Why play this big-sounding music with a large chamber orchestra? True, the engineering makes them sound richer than one would expect from such a small orchestra, but it’s not enough.

And then there are the tempos, which seem to stress liteness and liveliness. The majesty is missing.

I know a number of recordings of the first serenade—a longtime favorite of mine. Muti and Kertész were very good, but Slatkin in St Louis (in 1986 on RCA—J/F 1988) was gorgeous. We have reviewed around 30 recordings of the first serenade. Slatkin takes 50 minutes; this one is more like 43 minutes—most of the difference (4 minutes) is in the Adagio movement, which here is an andante.

In Serenade 2, I still prefer Michael Tilson Thomas with the London Symphony (Sony; May/June 1992). Again, the orchestra sounds larger (though not as large as St Louis), and the tempos are slower. The music unwinds at an easy, “normal” tempo. Here it seems pushed.

If you prefer faster tempos and have long disdained the serenades as thick and sluggish, you should try this recording. The sound is beautiful, the conductor lively.

The Sextets, particularly the first, are among the most attractive, accessible pieces of Brahms—or, for that matter, of any composer you can name. With the wonders of modern technology we have these pieces at our fingertips. In Brahms’s day, though, such was not the case. It could be hard to hear this music. (I’m pretty sure there weren’t any string sextets sitting around in 1860 looking for repertory—any more than there are today!) Since performances were hard to come by, Brahms, as was common in the period, made arrangements of the sextets (in this case for piano four hands).
domestic use and wider recognition. Around the same time, though, arrangements were made for piano trio, not by Brahms, but by a fine colleague, Theodor Kirchner (1823-1903). The composer was very pleased with the effort, and these were published as Brahms’s work. If you know the originals the arrangements sometimes sound a little “off”—mainly, I think, when clear thematic material is not present. Almost all the time, though, I could easily be convinced this was the original medium; they sound right.

The Trio Jean Paul does a great job with these pieces. Their playing is on the big side, so their tempos are a little slower than rivals I checked. In any case they have full measure of these works, and they sound terrific. That said, I certainly would prefer a recording with the original scoring. These would make an agreeable change of pace; but most of all, I hope this recording will spur other trios to take Kirchner’s arrangements into their repertoires. The list of great trios is not so long that it wouldn’t be enhanced by these two glorious works.

ALTHOUSE

BRAHMS: Symphony 4; Alto Rhapsody; Song of Destiny
Ann Hallenberg, a; Collegium Vocale Gent; Champs-Elysees Orchestra/Philippe Herreweghe—Phi 25—66 minutes

It is 120 years since Brahms died, and it strikes me, listening to this, that his spirit is gone. This is an utterly unromantic performance of his great Fourth Symphony. The orchestra is about 50 musicians—way too small for Brahms (at least so it was thought for the past 125 years). There is no body to their sound and absolutely no majesty. Needless to say, the conductor is not interested in such matters. Every movement is among the fastest ever, though the sheer tempo is not the problem. For example, I and III are no faster than William Steinberg, whose Brahms I have always treasured. The slow movement (II) is certainly the fastest I know, except for Sir Adrian Boult, whose Brahms I can’t stand. IV is thumpy and crude and never smooth or connected. Yes, it is a hard thing to put across (a passacaglia), but here it falls flat.

So the symphony rates at or near the bottom of any list. I can’t imagine anyone falling in love with Brahms while listening to this utterly routine performance. It’s not even ordinary; it’s inferior to ordinary, despite the players, who are quite good in themselves.

The “alto” in the Alto Rhapsody is really a mezzo, and her low notes are ugly. Otherwise the voice isn’t bad, but the vibrato is sometimes too insistent. I can’t imagine choosing to listen to this in preference to the dozens of other recordings.

Both of the choral pieces sound much better than the symphony. They were recorded in Poland, the symphony in Eindhoven, Holland. The Schicksalslied is the best thing here, but I wouldn’t recommend buying a 66 minute program for a mere 16 minutes of music.

VROON

SCHUMANN: Violin Sonatas; SCHUMANN: Sonata 1, Allegretto
Ingolf Turban; Gabrielle Seidel-Hell, p
Oehms 1867—71 minutes

These works were recorded in concert at the High School for Music and Theater in Munich on April 13, 2016. They do not have the last degree of technical polish that they would have were they recorded in a studio. Another factor to consider is that the recital was apparently organized to display the relative virtues of several violins. Sonata 1 is played on a violin made by the great French violin maker Nicolas Lupot in 1808. Sonata 2 is played on a Stradivarius of 1721, and Sonata 3 and the Schumann Allegretto are played on an instrument by Martin Schleske from 2009. Switching instruments like that in the course of a recital can disorient a musician, and to Ingolf Turban’s credit, his playing is fairly consistent.

The interpretations are not individual but resemble most others I have heard. These are fine performances; they just aren’t unusually probing. The best sets of the Brahms sonatas that I know are by Barnabas Kelemen and Tamás VASY (N/D 2004) and, with qualifications, Sergey and Lusine Khachatryan (J/F 2014).

MAGIL

BRAHMS: Clarinet Quintet; see MOZART

BRITTEN: Hymn of St Columba; Jubilate Deo; Hymn to St Peter; Antiphon; Missa Brevis; Te Deum in C; BYRD: O Lord, Make thy Servant, Elizabeth our Queen; Nunc Dimittis; Ave Verum Corpus; Laudibus in Sanctis; Praise our Lord, all ye Gentiles; Quomodo Cantabimus
Jesus College Choir, Cambridge/Mark Williams
Signum 481—67 minutes

In his notes to this recording, Philip Borg-Wheeler observes that, while William Byrd (1540-1623) and Benjamin Britten (1913-76)
were among the most brilliant and celebrated English composers of their times, each was something of an outsider: Byrd as a Catholic, and Britten as a pacifist and homosexual. One may claim that the tensions arising from such positions are reflected in conscious artistic choices and subtle shades of expressive significance in their works. Perhaps such biographical premises are an inadequate rationale for a musical program, but one can hardly deny that both composers, each in his own way, demonstrated a profound understanding of how to write for the voice.

Byrd is represented by several pieces from his Gradualia, polyphonic settings of mass propers probably intended for the clandestine celebrations at the Essex estate of his patron. The one “official” composition here is the anthem ‘O Lord, Make thy Servant, Elizabeth our Queen,’ probably an early work written while Byrd was organist of Lincoln Cathedral. The eight-part ‘Quomodo Cantabimus’ is Byrd’s reply in 1584 to the eight-part setting by Philippe de Monte (1521-1603) of the opening verses of Vulgate Psalm 136, ‘Super Flumina Babylonis.’ Byrd continues with the next four verses of the psalm. 30 years earlier, when Byrd was only 11 years old, he probably met De Monte, who had traveled to England in the entourage of Philip II of Spain for the king’s marriage to Queen Mary.

The pieces by Britten range chronologically from his Te Deum in C (1936) to ‘A Hymn of St Columba’ (1962). All have organ accompaniment, and each displays the composer’s freshness of invention and imaginative use of vocal resources. The choral works by Byrd are unaccompanied; but as an interlude in the program, organ scholar Bertie Baigent plays ‘The Queen’s Alman,’ one of the many keyboard works by Byrd in the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book.

The choir of Jesus College, Cambridge, may not be one of the best known of the English choral foundations; but on the evidence of this recording it is worthy of high regard. There are, in fact, two choirs with overlapping personnel. The Chapel Choir is a classic ensemble of men and boys that can trace its history to the late 15th Century. After a lapse, it was refounded and endowed in 1849. The College Choir was formed in 1982 following the admission of women undergraduates. The adult men sing in both choirs. Mark Williams was their director from 2009 to 2016. In January of 2017 he took up an appointment as Informator Choristarum, Organist, and Tutorial Fellow at Magdalen College, Oxford.

The performances here display excellent choral blend and discipline. The choirs sing separately for most of the program, but they combine for Britten’s ‘Hymn to St Peter’ and Te Deum in C. Britten’s Missa Brevis is sung by the boy choristers. As expected, the women of the College Choir sing with straight tone that blends well with the boys. The singers seem to be at home with both composers. The Byrd performances are particularly noteworthy for coherence of phrasing that brings out the music’s forward motion. A few years ago I reviewed their recording “War and Peace”—music associated with Remembrance Sunday (Signum 328; May/June 2014), and found it very impressive. One can only hope that Mark Williams’s successor will maintain his high standard.

GATENS

BRITTEN: Nocturnal; see HENZE; Sinfonia da Requiem; see STRAVINSKY

BRUCH: String Quintets; Octet
Nash Ensemble
Hyperion 68168—63 minutes

These three works were written shortly after Bruch’s 80th birthday on January 6, 1918; the composer died less than three years later, in October 1920. These pieces represented a departure for Bruch, who had been known for orchestral and choral music, not chamber works. All of them are attractive pieces in late-romantic style. But they show no influence of the revolutionary tendencies of his time; and indeed they sound as though they could have been written half a century earlier. They resemble Brahms, but somehow the music isn’t very memorable; we could say it isn’t particularly inspired. Nowhere in the music, though, did I sense the work of an elderly composer making valedictory statements. If Bruch felt the approach of his death, he didn’t allow that sentiment to invade his slow movements—or any other movements, for that matter. Both quintets are with two violas. The octet (which began life as a third quintet) is for four violins, two violas, cello, and bass.

The Nash Ensemble is a British chamber group that was founded in 1964. Since its beginning more than 30 musicians have been with the Nash; personnel depends on the repertory, and, of course, many have retired from the group over the years. In this record-
ing the leading light is violinist Stephanie Gon- 
ley, who plays with finesse and spirit, so as to 
bring life to these pieces. The playing indeed is 
all anyone could ask for, and for anyone inter-
ested in late Bruch (or chamber music of this 
period) it is great to have all these pieces 
together. Others would do better to stick to 
Brahms or something more adventurous from 
the early decades of the 20th Century.

ALTHOUSE

BRUCKNER: Symphony 2
Salzbug Mozartum/ Ivor Bolton
Oehms 447—72 minutes

Bolton’s Bruckner series has gotten warm 
notices from almost every direction. This 2 is 
probably the last (or among the last) in the 
series, depending on how far he chooses to go 
into the symphonies with numbers lower than 
1 (or takes the Kurt Eichhorn route and 
records several versions of the works: last time 
I checked Eichhorn had 4 recordings of ver-
sions of this symphony available and was 
probably prevented only by his death from 
recording more of them). Bolton’s is a worthy 
performance, but let’s look at what it is a per-
formance of.

Even by Bruckner standards, this sympho-
ny has a confusing history. At the moment it 
appears that there are six versions of it: 1872; 
an 1873 version prepared for the first per-
formance—it changed the order of the inner move-
ments, replaced the difficult high horn solo in 
the Adagio with a clarinet solo; an 1876 ver-
sion that made a series of minor changes; an 
1877 version which appears in two rather dif-
ferent editions by Haas and Nowak and a 
definitive cleanup edition by William Carrigan; 
and an 1892 edition published by Doblinger 
with a series of (slight) revisions made by 
Bruckner.

What we get here is Carrigan’s 1872 ver-
sion. I reviewed a recording of this edition in 
a boxed set by Dennis Russell Davies (M/A 
2011); and there are readings by Gerd Schaller, 
Georg Tintner, and Simone Young, as well as a 
few private-label transcriptions of concert record-
ings. Bolton is better than Davies in this 
piece. He uses flowing tempos and an orches-
tral sound built on the limitations of his forces 
(not very different from Davies: an Austrian 
ensemble with light but sweet strings, decent 
winds, and sturdy brass and percussion). 
Bolton is warmer and more expressive than 
Davies, though their tempos are similar.

The 1877 version is the one most recorded. 
You can find it done by Giulini, Inbal, Jochum, 
Karajan, Maazel, Muti, Skrowaczewski, and 
Solti. Yet this earlier version with Scherzo pre-
ceding Adagio, that daring horn solo, and a 
host of other fresh ideas, sounds better-pro-
portioned and more interesting than the later 
versions (something I seldom write about a 
Bruckner symphony).

There’s nothing to complain about in this 
performance, and the sound is superb—just 
the right balance of reverberation and clarity. I 
got little out of the notes, which didn’t give 
detailed reasons why this edition of the piece 
was used.

This is the best recording of the best ver-
ion of this symphony.

CHAKWIN

BUSH: Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime; 
Trumpet & Piano Concerto
David Johnson (Savile), Lynne Dawson (Sibyl), 
Alan Watt (Septimus), Donald Maxwell (Anar-
chist), Anne Pashley (Lady Windermere); Musi-
cians of London/ Simon Joly; Patrick Addinall, 
tpt; Hamish Milne, p; BBC Philharmonic/ Bryden 
Thomson—Lyrita 1131—74 minutes

Geoffrey Bush (1920-98, not Alan Bush) was 
born in London. He began piano lessons at 7 
and wrote his first piece at 10. At Salisbury 
Cathedral school he developed a love for En-
glech choral music. As a student at Lansing Col-
lege he was a classical scholar, discovered the 
work of Oscar Wilde, and studied composition 
with John Ireland (who became a lifelong 
friend). Later he studied composition and the 
classics at Balliol College. After tending to 
evacuated children during World War II (Bush 
was a pacifist), he taught music at Oxford and 
London Universities and Kings College. In 
addition to composing and teaching, Bush 
edited editions of British music and worked as 
a pianist and organist. He also wrote the book 
Musical Creation and the Listener and collabor-
ated on a detective story with Bruce Mon-
tgomery. (His father, Christopher Bush, wrote 
detective novels.) His compositions include 
two symphonies, stage, choral, and church 
music, chamber works, and songs. He also 
 wrote six operas, all with chamber ensembles.

When struck with the idea of composing an 
opera based on an Oscar Wilde work, Bush 
considered The Importance of Being Earnest 
before settling on the short story, Lord Arthur 
Savile’s Crime. He called his opera “a study in 
love, duty, and counterpoint in one act” 
(1972). This recording is from a 1986 BBC 
broadcast.
Lord Arthur is told by a palm reader that he is destined to commit a murder. Arthur was planning on marriage, but decided to hold off until he carried out the murder. I will leave it there in case you have not read the story, which I encourage you to do. Like the story, Bush's opera is a delightfully sardonic and witty satire of the British upper classes. Its one act is in three scenes with two orchestral interludes. The text is mostly sung or in recitative, with a few spoken passages, all in English. Its busy neoclassical style suggests Britten (perhaps Midsummer Night's Dream), Hindemith in the vigorous rhythm (but not the German composer's quartal harmony and trademark cadences), and Stravinsky (the busy piano part reminds me of Petrouchka). The brilliant orchestral interludes suggest Bush's two symphonies, particularly the First.

The opera captures Wilde's literary style with music that is incisive, quick, and responsive to the text. The quick-witted orchestra depicts every action and seemingly every word on stage—sometimes shifting instantly on a ten pence. Bush is not a melodist. Aside from one early aria, the vocal music is angular, with a fair amount of large leaps, but I do not think it is atonal. Everyone's diction is excellent, so if you have a good audio system, you should be able to listen comfortably without reading the libretto, especially if you know the story.

The cast is top-notch. The stars are the excellent Lord Savile of tenor David Johnson, who fittingly sounds like Peter Pears, and an orchestra that plays its difficult music with panache. One might not think a work like this would bear up under repeated hearings, but it might be just the thing when you seek the lift of snappy wit and very clever writing.

Concerto for Trumpet, Piano, and String Orchestra (1962) is an orchestrated version of the Sonata for Trumpet and Piano (1945). The work doesn’t “sound” like Hindemith, but his influence is clear, particularly in the way Bush's writing for the trumpet is usually either declamatory or lyrical, leaving the piano to deal with the difficult technical displays. Hindemith is also present in the rhythm and in several figures here and there, though, as in the opera, not in the harmony. My guess is that Bush was familiar with Hindemith’s Trumpet Sonata from 1940, though actually the works are quite different. In the Toccata, the piano writing is flowing and linear, with two interesting cadenzas; the trumpet is powerful and military. Annotator Paul Conway speaks of the fittingly titled Nocturne as in “the composer’s expressive and bluesy manner”. I hear it as a dialog between a lyrical, sometimes wistful trumpet and a more animated piano. Most of the Concerto's technical virtuosity is saved for the vigorous Finale, especially in the piano. The work is extremely well played. Trumpeter Patrick Addinall has the right powerful sound, and pianist Hamish Milne plays his part with elan.

The sound is excellent in both works, as are Conway's booklet notes.

**Buxtehude: Trio Sonatas**

La Reveuse—Mirare 303—69 minutes

This program includes several unpublished trio sonatas from the famous Düben Collection, now in the Uppsala University Library in Sweden. The sonatas in A, G, D, and B-flat are late works of Dietrich Buxtehude. There is another Sonata in D by Dietrich Becker, a contemporary of Buxtehude. The anonymous D-minor Viol Sonata comes from the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Two of the six sonatas on the program bear the names of dance movements, which suggests the influence of Corelli’s chamber sonatas.

Buxtehude's Sonata in A is quite a virtuosic piece, making equal demands of both the violin (Stephan Dudermel) and bass viol (Florence Bolton); the level of skill among the musicians Buxtehude had to work with in Lübeck must have been high. A series of variations on an ostinato figures prominently in the closing Passacaglia movement, again showing technical demands—multi-stopped strings in this case.

The prominence of ostinato movements in three of the sonatas that follow shows just how common it was to include a movement that suggested the practice of improvisation, even in composed music.

The Chaconne in Becker's Sonata and Suite in D is laced with quick passages for the violin and viol. The anonymous sonata in D minor for 'Ivildigamb'—according to Bolton probably for a large viol such as a G violone, bass viol, or cello—concludes with a virtuosic Passacaglia. And then the Sonata in G from Buxtehude's Op. 2 has a gorgeous Passacaglia for violin and bass viol in the third movement. The way he has the violin and bass viol weave their parts around one another shows great inspiration.

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July/August 2017
BYRD: Sacred Choral; see BRITTEN
CASELLA: Divertimento; see Collections

CAVALLI: Vespers; Antiphons & Sonatas
Monteverdi Chorus; La Piffarescha; Bruno Gini
Dynamic 7782—62:32

Time was when Pier Francesco Cavalli was one of the great figures of the unknown recesses of the mid-17th Century, with a large production of operas for Venice, a few of which had been exhumed by Raymond Leppard (La Calisto, with Janet Baker, L’Egisto, L’Ormindo). Although his operas are still rarer than hen’s teeth on American stages, there have been at least nine recordings in the last seven years, as well as half a dozen discs devoted to his less-important sacred works.

Bruno Gini’s recording of the Vespers for the Blessed Virgin Mary (one of three published by Cavalli in the year before he died, along with Vespers for Sundays, and Vespers of the five Laudate according to the use of San Marco) is recorded with fairly large forces (two choruses, two instrumental choirs, two organs), in a very large space with a long reverberation time (the sound has scarcely died away before the next attack), and with a microphone placement that is relatively distant, so that there is not much close detail and a considerable acoustic haze. Acoustics are better for the four seasonal Marian antiphons from 1656 that end the program. The Monteverdi Choir seems to a good ensemble of amateur, rather than professional singers—acceptable tone and tuning, if not at the highest level.

MOORE, T

CESTI: Orontea
Paula Murrihy (Oronte), Sebastian Geyer (Creonte), Guy de Mey (Aristea), Juanita Lascarro (Tibrino, Amore), Xavier Sebata (Alidoro), Simon Bailey (Galone), Mathias Rexroth (Corindo), Louise Adler (Silandra), Katharina Magiera (Giacinta), Monteverdi Continuo Ensemble, Frankfurt Opera/ Ivo Bolton
Oehms 965 [3CD] 175:45

Antonio Cesti (1623–69) belonged to the high-water generation of opera composers in the Venetian tradition and style. His operas were widely admired in their day, but Cesti’s reputation has slipped under the shadow of his elder contemporary, Cavalli, at least at present.

Oronte was perhaps his most effective opera. It was composed for the Hapsburg Archduke of the Tyrol and first performed at Innsbruck in 1656. Its libretto is all too typical of Baroque theatrics. To recount its plot would take almost as long as listening to the opera itself. Suffice it to say that it is about the amorous tetrangles and pentangles swirling around the court of the imaginary queen of Egypt, Oronte—who herself is about the most fatuous person involved. When the entanglements are worked out at the end, Oronte gets the rather opportunistic painter-king. Alidoro; Corindo gets Silandra; and Giacinta gets the boot.

Cesti’s score is a model of transitional style. That is to say, the later Neapolitan formula strictly distinguishing between recitative and aria had not yet become established, and the basic texture here is the earlier monodic style of flowing solo writing. That could easily result in solo monologues of considerable lyric beauty—Cesti was a fine tunesmith. Ensemble and choral sections still cling to an essentially madrigalian character.

In addition, the dramatic structure was not a matter of the later choice between opera seria and opera buffa, but followed Venetian formulas combining elements of both serious and comic. The best example of the latter is the clowning character Galone, who is stumbling drunk much of the story and a real bumbler in general. Other Venetian figures abound: a travesty tenor as an old woman (Aristea), and a soldier (Tibrino) sung here by a soprano. Of course, the latter may have been a castrato role, as were Alidoro and Corindo (countertenors here).

For all the distant conventions to accommodate, there is a lot of lovely listening in this score, and the cast here is admirable. Murrihy is a full-bodied title character and Adler is a contrasting ingenué, with strong work by Magiera as the hapless Giacinta. Bailey has a ball with the comic Galone. Of the countertenors, Sebata is a very lyrical Alidoro, Rexroth a more rough-hewn Corindo; the bass Geyer is an appropriately authoritative Creonte.

Bolton has by now established himself as a veteran exponent of Baroque opera and leads a flowing performance. The instrumentation seems to me a bit generous, and I wish some information could be given about the scoring choices in this performing edition.

The recording was made at performances at the Frankfurt Opera in 2015, and the sonics are vivid. (From the booklet photos, though, I am glad this is not a video documentation of what looks like a rather wacky piece of regietheater.) The booklet gives German and English notes and synopses, with the full Italian libretto, but NO TRANSLATION.

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There have been at least two earlier recordings of this opera, one led by Rene Jacobs for Harmonia Mundi (never reviewed). Alas, I no longer have that for comparison, but it is apparently deleted anyway. So it is good that this new one is satisfactory.

**BARKER**

**CHOPIN: Piano Pieces**

Michel Block—NIFC 629 [2CD] 99 minutes

Angela Hewitt—NIFC 631—73 minutes

This is a fascinating study. The recordings are from the Chopin Competition in Warsaw in 1960 (Block) and 1980. Neither of these people won top prize or even made big news. Mauricio Pollini won 1960, but Arthur Rubinstein considered Michel Block the better pianist and created a special prize for him. The newsmaker in 1980 was Ivo Pogorelich, who was also denied top prize but was championed by Martha Argerich—quite publicly.

All these performances are from the actual competitions. The only piece they have in common is Sonata 2 (Op. 35). The Block album includes a concerto—No. 2.

I knew Michel Block very well, and I always thought he was one of the best interpreters of Chopin—though his playing was controversial, even at the competition. He was 22 years old, and he already had his own style and his own ideas about music. I can’t say that his approach to Chopin changed greatly as he grew older. It varied, of course—he was a moody person and pianist; it sometimes got much slower but was always his own way with the music. It is very romantic; he gets carried away. As he got older it got even more romantic, more sensitive. The touch is almost pure tone, especially in his 1990 recording of this sonata (July/Aug 1991 & Nov/Dec 2000). In fact, if you can find that later recording you will hear him at his best—and it’s partly vastly superior engineering.

He was born in 1937 in Belgium, but he grew up in Mexico and studied in New York. When I knew him, in the 1990s, he was teaching at Indiana University in Bloomington—quite close to Cincinnati. He was not generally performing in public, but he was still making records, and we reviewed them (see our index). I think no matter who reviewed his recordings we always praised them. This man was a profound introvert who simply absorbed the music and made it his own, without reference to any other interpretations.

Angela Hewitt is best known today for her Bach, but her Chopin was much appreciated at the 1980 competition. She certainly seems to know what she is doing here at the age of 22, though she has played very little Chopin since. But I am never impressed by her playing—I simply find her approach to music insensitive and mechanical. She is fully in control, and nothing seems tentative; but it doesn’t feel like Chopin to me. She makes it sound like music in general. It seems to me that that’s the way she plays everything: It’s just grist for the mill, work for the hands and the wrists, extremely well done but never inspired. In the sonata that they both play, she sounds “normal” and unremarkable; and she makes Michel Block sound eccentric and quirky. But Block got even more eccentric as life went on. Hewitt takes 5:15 for the first movement of the sonata here. Block takes 7:15. In 1990 he takes 9:48! The other movements (except the brief finale) are also expanded greatly by 1990—and I love it.

The Second Piano Concerto (F minor) is actually much faster here than any other recording I have—but Michel often said to me that conductors forced tempos on him that he didn’t want, so he stopped playing with orchestras. In fact, there may not be any other concerto recordings by him, so his fans may want this.

So this is an interesting contrast, but Hewitt still sounds the way she did then. Block just got better and better (or, some would say, more self-indulgent and over-romanticized). He died in 2003.

**VROON**

**CHOPIN: Nocturnes; Mazurkas; Polonaise-Fantasy**

David Fray, p
Erato 58964—68 minutes

Fray’s Chopin is patient and stolid, sensitive to the nuances of the work and never harsh. His playing is introspective, low on pyrotechnics, with tones on the hushed side. His great technical command is apparent; but, more important, he shows the good sense and restraint needed for playing Chopin with depth. The rubato in Nocturne No. 2 makes for added poignancy. The voicing in the Polonaise-Fantasy stands out. He is able to play the right hand with utmost clarity while giving presence to the left hand. The sound is well-balanced, and the soft passages are especially sensitively played.

My only quibble: it seems that his strength is in the more seductive and lyrical Chopin

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works, and I want more fire in some Mazurkas, where his playing seems too level.

**CHOPIN: Preludes; Sonata 2**

Julien Brocal, p—Rubicon 1001—65 minutes

It would take some amazing artist to unseat my favorites in this repertoire. 30-year-old French pianist Julien Brocal may not quite do it, but he definitely measures up well against the many keyboard giants. That he has Maria Joao Pires in his corner is strong testament to his qualities as a performer.

Brocal sees the Preludes as a flowing entity and pauses little between them. In general what I hear is poetic, expressive without exaggeration, and free flowing in dynamics and use of rubato.

It would seem that he is either shy or somewhat reluctant to release much data on himself. But Brocal the pianist is the real thing.

There is plenty of drama in his playing, as the angry recitative of Prelude 18 shows. He is also not averse to using the old trick of having the left hand precede the right—especially in the chords of Prelude 19. Above all, his playing has a naturalness about it where the flow is maintained at all times. His playing can also be quite thrilling, as in Preludes 22 and 24.

Sonata 2 hardly begs for yet another recording, but here's one with the drama intact and delivered with drive. It's a powerful interpretation, and one that slows but does not milk the lyrical episodes. The 'Marche funebre' trods its path with seriousness but does not become a caricature of itself; Brocal exploits contrast to the fullest. The ghostly Presto finale has just the right amount of pedal so that it does not become a mere blur on the landscape. This is definitely not just another performance, but one that belongs with the finest available.

While the notes will not win any awards, the engineers have made the Yamaha CFX sound magnificent, though the pianist deserves part of that credit.

Not Rebecca Clarke, but Rhona Clarke, born in Dublin in 1958. The short Third Piano Trio opens the program, and it's the most interesting piece here. 'Tenderly' reminds me of Gavin Bryars but without the stamp of post-minimalism. Clarke is more dissonant, but she has a similar coolness that doesn't quite conceal the hint of a smile. 'Expectantly' is quicker; it is a constant tug of war between pointillism and snippets of melodies. *Gleann Da Loch* (Glen of Two Lakes) is a rhapsodic, willful nine-minute piano piece with whispered thoughts, ringing bells, and vine-like strings of notes grown wild. Sorabji would approve.

The even-shorter Second Piano Trio has a meditative I with the strings playing mysterious but warm lines over slow, nearly atonal piano chords. It is in mixed meter with the rhythms of a restrained but insistent Bartok. *Con Coro* is for violin, cello, and tape; it starts with sampled Gregorian chant that soon gives way to oceanic growling, then come whistles and glissandos, jittery pizzicatos, and finally tonal drones. The piece is all about atmosphere.

The Fourth Piano Trio is disjoint and very dissonant; though it has some humanity, it is rather faceless and aimless. A cello meditation, 'In Umbra', ends the program quietly. The Fidelio Trio is fine musicians with an excellent sound. The engineering makes the piano sound recessed, but that's a minor problem. Notes are in English.

**CLEMENTI: Piano Sonatas; see MOZART**

**COUPERIN: Apotheosis of Lully; Tenebrae Lessons**

Katherine Watson, Anna Dennis, s; Arcangelo/Jonathan Cohen

Hyperion 68093—70:35

Since these two works represent very different genres, this review will be in two parts.

Part I: François Couperin was well aware of both the roots of the French style in the works of Jean-Baptiste Lully and his own appreciation for the newer styles of Italian music. In his two Apotheoses for Corelli (1724) and Lully (1725) he sought to render musical homage to his two musical models. These two works also
expressed his own aesthetic hope that the two styles could be reconciled, as he invoked in the subtitle to the publication that included the Apotheosis of Corelli, Les Gouts-reunis (the reunited tastes).

In the recording of the Apotheosis of Lully, Arcangelo follows the model of London Baroque (Bis 1275, 2003) and uses only two violins and continuo (here viola da gamba, lute, and harpsichord). Most of the earlier recordings of these works are discussed in my review of the recording by the Ricercar Consort (Sept/Oct 2012), though I have since also heard the very stylish and elegant recording by Musica ad Rhenum (Jan/Feb 2006), which very much follows the larger instrumentation and style of the Kuijken’s recording from 1987, but also omits any added narration.

In terms of instrumentation, the recent recording by Gli Incogniti (Jan/Feb 2015) also uses only string instruments (two violins, viola da gamba, and continuo), but since it is both stylish and allows for listening to Couperin’s homage without the narrated titles, it has a critical advantage. Unfortunately, when preparing the narration for this new release, no one noticed that no other recording included someone speaking “Saillie”, which is merely the title of the second movement of the “Sonade en Trio” which “follows” the first.

Part II: Though Couperin was not a prolific composer of church music (like, for example, Marc-Antoine Charpentier or Michael-Richard de Lalande), he did write a number of smaller-scale compositions, a few of which were meant for his cousin, Marguerite-Louise Couperin (1675-1728), who, though a woman, had royal dispensation to sing sacred works for the court. The best known and most often recorded are the Tenebrae Readings for Holy Wednesday, written in 1714 for the Holy Week liturgy at the Abbaye Royale de Longchamp, a fashionable convent that would hire singers from the Paris Opera but also charge for a seat in the church. Since the readings from the Lamentations of Jeremiah were distributed among the Matins offices for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, but usually in the middle of the night, French tradition moved them to the previous afternoons; hence Couperin’s reference to Wednesday for the Maundy Thursday readings, from Lamentations 1:1-14.

Couperin divided his text into the traditional three lessons and composed the first and second lessons for a single soprano and the third for two sopranos. Often, as in this new release, two singers alternate in the first two lessons and combine for the third. A few recordings have been made with counter-tenors (May/June 1992, July/Aug 1995 see TALLIS, and Mar/Apr 2006).

On this new release, Katherine Watson sings the first and Anna Dennis, with a slightly darker timbre, the second; when combined in the third lesson, they are well matched but are subtly different in timbre, which is very evident where the voices cross over each other. Both have clear and flexible voices, and both manage the intricate trills and turns of French ornamentation with ease. The continuo, played by Jonathan Cohen (organ), Thomas Dunford (lute), and Anne-Marie Lasla (viola da gamba), is supportive and unobtrusive.

This is a very stylish performance, using French Latin pronunciation, and every bit as good as the recording led by William Christie (Sept/Oct 1997), also with French Latin but harpsichord for continuo. Some earlier recordings use traditional ecclesiastical Latin, such as the ones by Christophe Rousset (July/Aug 2000), though that means ignoring a few of Couperin’s explicit articulation markings. A favorite of mine was by Laurence Bouley (Musifrance 45012).

So, in conclusion, “A chacun son gout.”

Cras: Intimate Poems; Dances; 2 Impromptus; Landscapes
Jean-Pierre Ferey, p
Skarbo 1153—70 minutes

Cras balanced a life as a naval officer for the French Navy and a life as a composer. Ferey and others (as the liner notes tell us) speculate that his music was influenced by the rhythms of the ocean. These works were composed roughly between 1902 and 1925.

These are simple poems that use simple harmonic language. The Intimate Poems are charming, and Ferey’s playing is clean and articulate. Some of the passages could be more even, though, such as the left hand scalar passages in the second Intimate Poem. Poem 4 tells a very similar story, with slow harmonic changes. I am not sure about the dynamic markings, but these works tend to be played with very little changes in dynamics. Dance 1 is similar to the poems and more meandering and evocative than one would expect.

These are not very playful or energetic works and have little variety of texture. They are interesting works, and I would like to hear...
them on a concert program with contemporaries of Cras.

KANG

CZERNY: Organ Pieces
Prelude and Fugue in A minor; 20 Short Voluntaries; 12 Intermediate Voluntaries
Iain Quinn
Naxos 573425—75 minutes

Buried in Czerny’s over 800 opus numbers are four for the organ, three of which are heard on this program. These collections were a result of his visit to England in 1837 and were meant to meet the demand for voluntaries, which function as prelude, offertory, and postlude in the Anglican church service. This is pleasant, tuneful, well-crafted music influenced by the Bach-Mendelssohn tradition. The Prelude and Fugue is a substantial piece and contains a fine fugue.

Quinn is Assistant Professor of Organ at Florida State University and is an elegant player who does justice to this music. He plays on a 2000 Baroque-style Paul Fritts organ at Princeton Theological Seminary, which is suited for Czerny’s music. Notes on the composer, music, and specification.

DELCAMP

CZERNY: Piano Concertos (2);
Rondo Brilliant
Tasmanian Symphony/ Howard Shelley, p
Hyperion 68138—73 minutes

A Czerny review pretty much writes itself. Say it with me: piano figuration resembling his innumerable technical exercises, a decided lack of inspiration, forgettable melodies, solid and stolid construction. There’s more to the man, though, in that his sighing, cantabile secondary themes and slow movements anticipate the improvisatory effusions of Chopin, as did the concertos of Hummel, Ries, and John Field. As I noted in my last review of Czerny (J/A 2015), for a pedagogue who emphasized equality of right- and left-hand virtuosity, he certainly neglects the left hand, giving his pianism a rather hollowed-out timbre. Even the cover art of this Volume 71 in Hyperion’s “Romantic Piano Concerto” encyclopedia shows repetitive, lazily ascending four-note broken chords in the left hand—he’s not even trying. His orchestration is effective enough and akin to Ries, Hummel, and early Beethoven.

Shelley plays fast sections clean and dry, emphasizing the etude-like aspects of Czerny’s art: fleet runs and passages in thirds, fourths, octaves. But he’s more turned on by and plays with limpid repose the ornate and lyrical second subjects and slow movements.

Sound is on par with the first 70 volumes in this series. If you like these transitional concertos that find full expression in the works of Chopin and beyond, you’ll like this disc. These are Czerny’s Op. 28 and Op. 214, in F major and A minor.

WRIGHT

DACA: El Parnasso
José Hernandez Pastor, ct; Ariel Abramovich, vihuela
Arcana 316—61:20

In 1576 Estevan Daça (or Daza, 1557-58-after 1590) published his collection of music for voice and vihuela titled El Parnasso. It was divided into three sections: the first contained 22 fantasias for vihuela, the second arrangements for 13 Latin motets, and the third an anthology of 25 Spanish songs and two French chansons. In the second and third sections, Daça developed a method to indicate the notes to be sung as they were encoded in his tablature for the vihuela. There are some ambiguous passages where different scholars have made different choices, but Pastor and Abramovich have made very intelligent decisions.

This new recording includes four of the fantasies and 22 of the Spanish songs, including the unique romance, three sonnets, and 18 villancicos. In the excellent booklet essay by John Griffiths, he offers detailed information about Daza’s place in the history of Spanish music for the vihuela, and José Hernandez Pastor writes a short overview about the literary quality of the lyrics for these works. There are complete texts and translations, though the Spanish and English are in separate sections.

Pastor is among the better countertenors of the younger generation, and has excellent diction and a sensitive understanding of the dance-like style of these songs. I am even more impressed by Abramovich’s skill, consistent tone quality, and clarity in bringing out the polyphonic textures in both the fantasias and songs. This recording is a significant addition to recordings of renaissance Spanish music.

BREWER

DALLAPICCOLA: Cello Pieces; see BLOCH
DEBUSSY: Songs; see Collections
What if Mozart, Moussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, and Wagner were brought to life again in the 20th Century? Exact clones made from surviving genetic artifacts like hair and bone. What if these clones were secretly made by a particularly precocious genetic scientist with a love of music named Alex Rosenthal, who escaped Germany and the Nazis in 1940 and settled in Russia? And how do human clones, with memories of their “first” lives, fare in their second lives?

That’s the starting point of Vladimir Sorokin’s original libretto for Leonid Desyatnikov’s opera premiered in 2005 at the Bolshoi. There’s a lot to unpack here, including the age-old question of whether eternal life would really be good for human beings. I’ll start with the easy stuff.

Melodiya has given this recording the first-rate treatment all around. It appears to be a studio production made in 2015, rather than a concert performance, and the sound is excellent. It’s crisp and clean but not antiseptic, with solid but not booming bass, a three-dimensional sound stage, and an overall sonic character that flatters the human voice, which is always a plus in an opera recording! One curiosity: the outside of the booklet says “ADD.” Is that just a typo, or does this really spring from analog master tapes? At any rate, the sound is superb.

The lavish bound booklet, with lots of color photos from the original 2005 production, contains the full libretto in original (Cyrillic script) Russian and an eminently readable English translation that is indispensable for understanding at least some of the nuances of the text and its wry Russian humor. (Even so, I’m sure a ton of allusions and other points of humor went over my head.)

There’s a good introductory essay by Tatiana Belova followed by a synopsis of the story that I found helpful for getting my bearings in this piece. Not that it requires a whole lot of tenacious navigation, despite some absurdist elements in the libretto. I kept thinking of Shostakovich’s Nose as I was listening to this, though Sorokin and Desyatnikov go lighter on the satire (but there’s still plenty here). One more curiosity: the outside of the booklet has an “18+” notation, which I take to be a warning that this opera may not be for “younger or more sensitive audiences.” There are a few bits one would probably rather not have to explain to the kids or grandkids...

The piece is neatly broken into five tableaux, each of which centers on one of the composers. Scientist Rosenthal appears only in the first three, never quite grasping the enormity of what he has done and the full consequences of playing God. Or does he? He does take a childlike delight in having his five favorite composers alive and living with him as his “children”, and perhaps just as much glee at the thought of how great artists could be cloned repeatedly to live on forever. But he also doesn’t make provisions to clone himself in perpetuity.

Even while living with him, the clones, or rather “duplicates”, as they’re called (because, according to Ms Belova’s notes, the word “clone” didn’t exist in the 1930s when the story starts) are troubled. Wagner has bad dreams involving a swan (of course!) and Tchaikovsky is both thrilled at the chance to meet his god-like hero Mozart in person, yet also has reservations about him being an ordinary flesh-and-blood human being. Tchaikovsky has a dialog with the duplicates’ nanny that echoes Tatiana’s relationship with her nurse in Eugene Onegin. And to further merge art, history, and fantasy, Tableaux 4 and 5 include a character named Tanya (Tatiana). It’s all a bit disorienting but not really confusing.

One of my favorite scenes comes at the end of Act I (Tableau 2) when Stalin, Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Boris Yeltsin show up and announce their views on how cloning will benefit or not benefit the Soviet State. In keeping with their dull, pedestrian sentiments, all of these characters speak their brief speeches, rather than sing. It’s the kind of parody of Officialdom (Communist or otherwise) that Shostakovich did so well.

There’s a lot of lively work for the chorus both here and at the beginning of Act II, which takes place in Three Stations Square in Moscow. But wait! Before our little timeline of 20th Century Soviet (and Russian Federation) leaders there’s a ballet of dancing toys. After Yeltsin puts in his appearance, the shocking news arrives that Rosenthal has died and, as the ominous voice of the piece’s occasional narrator announces “The State has no money for...
your upkeep", the duplicates prepare to face the world alone. It doesn’t go so well, but that’s all I’ll say. I won’t drop any spoilers to ruin your journey of discovery with this piece.

Then there’s the music. Desyatnikov has written a particularly accessible, enjoyable score that offers the most important thing many modern-day operas lack: variety. If you caught the Met’s production of *L’Amour de Loin* this past season, you were probably all too aware of latter-day composers' tendency to latch onto a few rhetorical devices and milk them. Desyatnikov does not do that. He varies the tone and the mood; sometimes the music is lively and robust, sometimes wonderfully delicate and ethereal.

Despite the obvious temptation to resort to pastiche, there are no direct quotes from any of the five composers, though somehow Desyatnikov manages to evoke each one’s style while never ceasing to sound like himself. He and Sorokin have also managed to master another critical talent for dramatists, even operatic ones: pacing and brevity. Scenes do not overstay their welcome; and the plot, or rather plot-like sequence of events, keeps moving forward to a not too drawn out conclusion in the fifth and final tableau. I kept listening not because I had to write this review but because I wanted to find out what happened next!

I hadn’t heard any of Desyatnikov’s music before this. I’m not going to do a lot of “sounds like” comparisons. I’ll say this: if you are comfortable with the major 20th Century Russian composers—Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Khachaturian (all right, he was Armenian), Shchedrin, Sviridov, and their contemporaries—Desyatnikov will not pose any challenges. That’s not to say his sound is derivative. It’s quite unique—and worth hearing.

In the first half of the piece, the Rosenthal character carries a lot of the weight, and Pyotr Migunov is certainly more than up to the task. His deep, booming, seemingly bottomless Russian bass expresses both the comic and the melancholy sides of the character. Likewise, the singers who take on the composer-duplicate parts dig deeply into the personality of their characters. Nobody seems hard pressed by the music, and they all seem comfortable in their parts. It’s no surprise that Desyatnikov made Moussorgsky a bass, and I got a kick out of Wagner, in contrast—a piping, adolescent-sounding mezzo-soprano.

Nurses and nannies have long been the butt of stage humor, and Kristina Mkhitarian gets plenty of comic effect from her part. As the neurotic prostitute who retires from her profession to marry Mozart, Irina Rubtsova brings dramatic and vocal chops to the part of Tanya.

It’s been nearly 40 years since I discovered the operatic art form through a telecast of Gounod’s *Faust* from the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Over the years I’ve heard a fair number of “new” or at least recently composed operas, and the overwhelming impression has been that the art form had several centuries of fertile creation, and that’s over now. Most latter-day attempts to prove the opera’s viability as a “living” art end up accidentally proving that its era ended somewhere between the two world wars. Many of the new efforts I’ve heard have been earnest and well-meaning, but weak soup when compared to the hearty fare of the 18th and 19th Century giants. Most are quickly forgotten after the last notes fade way. Desyatnikov’s *Children of Rosenthal* is the first one that impresses me enough to say it really is worth hearing (and seeing) again in more productions.

HANSEN

**DOWLAND: Lute Pieces**
Michele Carreca
Continuo 110—61 minutes

Michele Carreca studied with Hopkinson Smith, among others, and now lives and teaches in Rome. This album is called “Mr Dowland’s Fortune”. He gives a well-balanced program of 25 pieces selected from the about five hours of John Dowland’s available solo music. He plays from Diana Poulton’s edition. There are dances, song arrangements, and a few fantasias. Dowland was famously melancholy, but Carreca makes him sound bright and cheery. He often brings out the soprano line louder than the inner parts. His performances hold the interest well, partly because he makes things sound emphatic. The dance pieces have lively articulation, but are not too fast. There is serenity where appropriate.

Aficionados will want the rest of Dowland’s solo music, too, with its courtly Elizabethan elegance. There are at least three comprehensive sets available at low prices: by Nigel North, Paul O’Dette, and Jakob Lindberg (S/O 1995). All are well played and include full documentation of the music. North’s and O’Dette’s series were issued first as single discs (ARG reviewed only a few of each), then repackaged in boxed sets.
For anyone new to Dowland’s lute music, I’d recommend getting both this Carreca recording and Smith’s album, “A Dream” (J/A 2005). There are only four or five pieces in common. Smith’s delivery sounds more casual and spontaneous, closer to improvisation, but also with a wider expressive range. Both albums include good biographical notes and musical analyses. I have also O’Dette’s recent remake of his favorites (2014, not reviewed), and Ronn McFarlane’s (N/D 1992). Both of those are single-disc selections that duplicate about a quarter of Carreca’s program. Carreca makes his rhythms and dynamics bumpier than O’Dette and McFarlane. He sounds more detail-oriented.

It’s hard to overdose on Dowland’s music, even when going through those five-hour sets. The compositions are brilliant.

B LEHMAN

**DRAESEKE:** *Quintet; Scene; Horn Quintet*

Andreas Grunkorn, vc; Georg Pohle, hn; Birgitta Wollenweber, p; Berlin Soloists Ensemble; Brunnunger Quartet

CPO 555107—76 minutes

The first quintet here (Op. 77) uses two violins, a viola, and two cellos. I, marked “slow and dark”, aptly begins with a doleful, probing theme. The mood becomes more genial and is well developed with audibly effective counterpoint. To an unusual degree you hear a continuous web of music. The texture is broken by hesitant solo lines, which then converge to some dense harmonies before their final resolution. II, the scherzo, has a peculiar trilling theme over a pizzicato backup; its marking is “prickly”. The trio has a sweeter melody, with smoother phrasing. When the “A” portion returns, Draeseke adds a good straightforward tune to the mix. The slow movement has a sinuous violin melody, thickly harmonized and of mounting intensity. This makes for a movement of seamless poignancy. Dissonant clusters sometimes interrupt. After the motion is restored, the movement shudders to silence. Draeseke marked the finale “slow and dark; fast and fiery”. A probing introduction gives way to a fast 12/8 meter. The music recalls the finale of his *Symphonia Tragica* in its impression of gathering forces. The rapid music suddenly slows; the voices enter one by one in counterpoint with one another till a wistfully serious postlude.

The *Scene* (1889) is actually an arrangement of a duet from Draeseke’s opera *Bertrand de Born*. Thus some of the music is a dialog between the players. The effect is one of dry material, well developed. The Horn Quintet (1888) begins in Schumannesque whimsy, followed by a soulful melody. Its construction, as usual with Draeseke, is tight, aided by some gripping inner viola parts. It is more Schubertian, with delicately voiced interchanges. The end is nearly Mahlerian in its emotion. III, the longest movement, is episodic. It has several starts and seems more like a collection of scherzos than just one. The opening of the finale refers in its rhetoric to the beginning of the entire work. The horn, whose part up to now has been harmonically useful but dull, finally gets a chance to shine with some bravura independent parts, including colorful use of grace-notes.

Recorded sound is fine. Christoph Schluener’s notes include excellent biographical information.

O’CONNOR

**DRYMANS:** Sacred Pieces; see KENNIS

**DUTILLEUX:** Symphonic 2; Timbres, Espace, Movement; Mystere de l’Instant

Lille Orchestra/ Darrell Ang

Naxos 573596—63 minutes

Since this album competes with recent recordings of these works (on two different albums) by Ludovit Morlot and the Seattle Symphony (Jan/Feb 2016 & Mar/Apr 2017), let’s get two possible misperceptions out of the way. First, the Lille National Orchestra, founded in 1976, here sounds world class, every bit a match for the Seattle Symphony. Second, Singaporean Darrell Ang, 37, is superb. In fact, my spouse, who’s been to Singapore often, brought him to my attention two years ago after seeing him conduct the Singapore Symphony, saying he knew exactly what he wanted and so did the orchestra. And, for a bonus, though the sound here doesn’t have the exceptional breadth and depth of the Seattle recordings, if I hadn’t compared the recordings, I would have found the Naxos sound rich, warm, and ambient.

Symphony 2 has the nerviousness of William Walton’s symphonies: short rapid figures of 8th, 16th, 32nd, and even 64th notes repeated against long-held slowly moving half-notes and held whole notes. I couldn’t help thinking of the best recordings of Charles Munch, when he was wild-animal hot and impulsively excited (his performances were never the same from one night to the next).
Indeed, it was Munch who gave the first six out of nine outings of this symphony with four different orchestras, starting with the Boston Symphony’s premiere in 1959 (pity that RCA never recorded it).

To cut to the chase, while I highly praised Morlot’s recording of Symphony 2, it is Ang who matches Munch’s type of forward-leaning excitement; Morlot, even in this work, is too much the gentleman. In II especially, with its echoes of Stravinsky’s Symphonies of Wind Instruments, Ang makes the composer’s genius for orchestral colors flow and grow to climax and ethereal denouement as he maintains tension even at an andantino tempo. And what transparency the conductor brings to the score! Yan Pascal Tortelier’s Chandos recording with the BBC Philharmonic falls midway between Morlot and Ang.

Timbres, Espace, Mouvement (20 minutes) is subtitled Starry Night because it’s Dutilleux’s reflections inspired by the Van Gogh painting. It does sparkle because the orchestration, with no violins or violas, relies very much on woodwinds and brass as well as delicate percussion. Starry skies indeed fit I’s opening three minutes; in fact, the entire movement consists of short rapid figures as described above, only here hovering around G-sharp as its anchor. II, for cellos only, moves chromatically, and III reflects I in character. I find in the work a unity of language—not repetition ad nauseam but a manner of harmonic anchoring and use of patterns that not merely repeat but grow toward resolution, especially with Ang’s Munch-like dynamism.

This was especially true in Mystere l’Instant, even though it consists of 10 sections in 15 minutes. I disagree with the superb liner notes that say, “Unusually for this composer, these movements are separate entities completely unrelated to each other. The idea of ‘seizing the moment’ is a notable departure for a composer for whom the ‘progressive growth’ of thematic material is a hallmark of his mature style.” On the contrary, I find the 10 sections highly united, almost like a theme and variations or, rather, variations on harmonies and patterns that quickly become familiar. Morlot’s and Ang’s overall timings here are the same, but Ang has the more compelling style. Morlot is a bit heavier and not as fleet. It’s not about tempo but style.

When I told my spouse, who loathed this music, that I had just compared the Lille and Seattle recordings of Mystere, I was told that it like comparing slamming doors. I too won’t be listening to these works for pleasure, but I nonetheless derived a distinct pleasure in “learning the sound” of Dutilleux, just as I can hear a few seconds of a piece and say that it’s by Tchaikovsky or Dvorak or Mozart. Whether written in 1959 (the symphony), 1978 (Timbres), or 1989 (Mystere), Dutilleux is, as the liner notes imply, a composer of great substance and maturity with a voice of his own.

FRENCH

DVORAK: Symphonies 6+7;
Othello Overture
London Philharmonic/ Yannick Nezet-Seguin
LPO 95 [2CD] 99 minutes

I listened first to Symphony 6. It seems leisurely—never rushed, but never fired up, either. The sound of the orchestra is gorgeous but would never be mistaken for a Czech sound. After hearing this whole symphony I felt that it was too laid-back and had no fire or urgency—or ecstasy.

No. 7 is a more Brahmsian piece and needn’t sound particularly Czech. But Dvorak used the word “Maestoso” for the first movement, and this conductor has no idea how to achieve that. Just before five minutes in, for example, it should swell and spread—but he just plows thru it. It is sad that our leading young conductors seem incapable of majesty. It’s an essential quality of romantic-period music.

II is labelled Poco Adagio—it’s not a full-fledged Adagio, but here it is very slow—slower than any other recording (except Giulini, who actually takes a few seconds longer, and whose recording I have never liked). It doesn’t build momentum. For example, about 4 minutes in there’s a kind of climax that doesn’t come off here but can be thrilling in the great recordings.

III doesn’t flow the way it ought to—again, the conductor prefers to sound “bouncy” where others are smooth. The overall impression is frivolous. IV just plows its way. The lovely cello theme 6-1/2 minutes in goes for naught. It’s not that care is not taken over some details—there are some pleasant episodes—it’s just that the overall shape of the music is missing. Architecture?

The great recordings of 7 are Szell (above all), Previn, Pesek, Inbal, and maybe Flor and Dorati. Any of them will impress the music on you much more effectively. The great recordings of 6 are Belohlavek (above all), Kubelik, Macal, Serebrier, and maybe Neumann (he has the right sound but a little less excitement than the others).
Despite the beauty of the sound and playing, this cannot be considered a great recording of either symphony. The conductor simply doesn’t speak Dvorak.

**DVOŘÁK: Symphony 9**

with *Hero’s Song*

NDR Elbphilharmonie/ Krzysztof Urbanski

Alpha 263—61 minutes

with 2 Slavonic Dances

Houston Symphony/ Andres Orozco-Estrada

Pentatone 5186574 [SACD] 54 minutes

Mr Urbanski, in his early 30s, doesn’t bother shaping the melodies or balancing the orchestra’s choirs in either Dvorak’s 9th or the late tone poem *Hero’s Song*. He takes fast, no-nonsense tempos and sticks with them beginning to end; and he renders orchestral textures into a thick and glutinous slurry. In the booklet he summarizes his approach in two words: simplicity and respect. I would say careless and heartless.

After Urbanski, Mr Orozco-Estrada sounds like an artist of the highest order. His Symphony 9 takes 46 minutes, 5 minutes longer than Urbanski, but doesn’t feel sluggish. He slows way down for the tender flute solo in I, but it happens before you know it—his accelerandos and ritards are very subtle. It’s interesting to study the various ways Orozco-Estrada conceals his rubato. He balances orchestral sections beautifully so Dvorak’s important brass and woodwind details sound clearly through the strings. And he captains a big orchestra with 58 plush strings and double winds. I like all his tempo choices; they sound very natural. He manages the closing moments of the finale perfectly, burying the awkward galumphing arched brass figure beneath the triumphant cut-and-thrust of the strings. It’s too bad no one at Pentatone noticed that only *Hero’s Song* among Dvorak’s five late tone poems remains unrecorded by this label, because the two Slavonic dances (Op. 46:3 & 46:5) make for skimpy fill; and Orozco-Estrada’s flexible, secure tempo management would have been welcome in the episodic tone poem.

It’s a concert performance, and sound is warm and clear but rather close for Pentatone. Big climaxes, don’t bloom effortlessly but are pushy and monolithic. There are enough perceptive details held together by eloquent flow to say I’m impressed by Orozco-Estrada.

**ELGAR: The Spirit of England; Voice in the Wilderness; Grania and Diarmid; BAX: In Memoriam**

Joshua Ellicott, narr; Jennifer France, Rachel Nicholls, s; Madeleine Shaw, mz; Halle Orchestra/ Mark Elder

Halle 7544—68 minutes

Elgar’s *Spirit of England*, finished in 1917, was his last major choral effort. He sets three poems by Laurence Binyon; ‘The 4th of August,’ ‘To Women,’ and ‘For the Fallen.’ The music is often quite desolate, with impressionist harmonies. Elgar’s scoring is, of course, always up to the job. It’s not at all a jingoistic work; that aspect of Elgar was always exaggerated. The predominant feeling is one of regret. When Binyon’s text speaks of “the barren creed of blood and iron”, Elgar quotes a bit of the demons’ music from his *Gerontius*. He cautioned Ernest Newman, who was doing program notes, not to dwell on the anti-German rhetoric. Elgar was in conflict here. He had many friends and admirers in Germany—think only of August Jaeger (Nimrod of the *Enigma Variations*) or Richard Strauss. Not to mention that Germany recognized his genius before England did. The best music is for the
last poem, containing what are for most Britons Binyon's most affecting lines: "They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old. Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them." The notes supply full texts and you'll need them. The performance is a good one, with some rich sounds, but the words are mostly incomprehensible. Much of this isn't the fault of the singers, but of the idiotic traditions of singing "good" English—"lawnes" rather than lances, with the dawn ever brrrrreaking etc.

A Voice in the Wilderness (1916) is a melodrama—a spoken text with musical accompaniment. It was once a popular medium, with examples by Liszt, Nietzsche, Schilling, and Strauss. Elgar used words by the Belgian poet Emile Cammaerts. His text describes a lone soldier passing through the devastated landscape of rural Belgium. He hears a young girl singing from one of the wrecked houses (thus the work requires a soprano soloist). Joshua Ellicott narrates his part with a working class accent—dropped H, etc. His character in real life probably would have been an NCO.

The Grania and Diarmid excerpts are competently done, especially the funeral march. Madeleine Shaw sings Yeats's lyrics with beauty and feeling.

Bax's In Memoriam, also known as An Irish Elegy commemorates the men who died in the 1916 Easter Rebellion. Some were friends of the composer, thus his lament is for a rebellion in a war. I've always liked the piece, but tended to regard it as second-rank Bax. Elder's interpretation made me change my mind. It's essentially a large-scale funeral march, developing to an impressive peak with some harsh clashes from the inner voices. One of its themes Bax later recycled for his movie score to Oliver Twist. Elder's reading deepens the mood of tragedy; we feel the weight of what was lost. When it was first composed there was concern that an English audience especially would have no sympathy with the piece. Thus its premiere came in 1998. By now, audiences will more appreciate its intensity of feeling and dignified beauty. As recidivist Brit historians seem to be recycling every shopworn myth from WW I—I'm surprised we haven't had a gilt bound reprint of the Bryce Report—at least we can hear that some of the music arising from those calamitous years retains its worth.

O'CONNOR

Elgar: Symphony 2; Carissima; Mina; Chanson de Matin
Liverpool Philharmonic/ Vasily Petrenko
Onyx 4165—70 minutes

Russian conductor Vasily Petrenko's best known body of records is almost certainly his complete Naxos set of Shostakovich symphonies with the Liverpool Philharmonic. I have not been impressed with performances I have heard from that, and I didn't expect much from his recording of Elgar's First Symphony with Liverpool. Elgar's symphonies do not travel well to begin with, and I did not know of a single good recording of one from a Russian conductor. Petrenko's first-rate reading changed that (May/June 2015).

His Second is even better. It is glorious in the literal sense of the word: "marked by great beauty or splendor" (Webster's Third). Other adjectives can be applied to recordings of this work: noble, majestic, rich, deep. Some terms work for different parts of the work: mysterious, spooky, sad, poignant, somber, cheerful, terrifying, stirring, resigned, etc.; but "glorious" does fine for this whole performance in one way or the other.

I have sometimes been disappointed in the Liverpool Philharmonic, but it is excellent in the First Symphony, and, well, glorious in the Second, particularly in its rich, luxurious string tone. The recording is worthy of it.

One thing this symphony is about is ebb and flow, and Petrenko's execution of that quality is unerring. His is one of the longer performances, but he is able to extend what he has to naturally, bearing down just enough in the slower, quieter passages. The result is more probing and often more generous than some performances. The various moods of the first movement can be difficult to control, but you would never sense that here. There are many fine elements: the strong opening, the slower second theme, a "ghost" section that contrasts without calling attention to itself, and some excellent pianissimos. A sense of wonder and reminiscence lead to the reappearance of the first theme, which is nicely mysterious before a joyful ending. It is not hard to believe that this movement reflects the infatuation Elgar was said to have had with Alice Stuart-Wortley.

Many Elgarians believe the Larghetto reflects Elgar's grief over the death of King Edward VII, though this reading is less funereal than most and displays a strong undercurrent of life. It begins with a wonderful slow march that is very effective up to its more elo-
quent than usual conclusion in the trombones. The only drawback is the oddly pasty tone of the oboes in their famous passage.

Rondo Presto is slightly aggressive and quite powerful but retains the fullness that characterizes the whole performance. The stormy midsection is slightly congested and less harrowing than usual, not surprising in a performance that avoids extremes. The finale opens in high spirits, with a touch of trouble underneath. The processional led by the high violins is nicely done, the passage after the last processional really sings, and the ending is at once resigned and content.

There are many excellent recordings of this work—Barbirolli, Boult, and others cited in our English Symphonies Overview (Sept/Oct 2010). This one has enough qualities to make it a worthy addition even to a well stocked Elgar collection.

The performances of the three shorter works are every bit as good. The three pieces might seem anti-climactic, coming after such a powerful piece as the Second Symphony; but the major work’s quiet ending actually seems to usher them in. The booklet notes are sparse but adequate.

FARKAS: Early Hungarian Dances; Sly Students Suite; Timon of Athens Suite; Intrada, Passacaglia, Saltarello; Tower Music; Contrafacta Hungarica; Musici per Ottoni; Mischievous Tune
Budapest Wind Symphony/ Laszlo Marosi
Toccata 349—76 minutes

Ferenc Farkas lived a long life (1905-2000), was a prolific composer, and is regarded as the most important composition teacher of post-WW II Hungary. Some of this music is workaday, some remarkable.

The program opens with Early Hungarian Dances (1943), arrangements of 17th Century pieces, some of which sound Italian, others Hungarian. In a similar vein but more aggressively arranged is Contrafacta Hungarica (1973), where Farkas added complexity, counterpoint, and ever-changing instrumentation to simple 16th-Century music.

Intrada, Passacaglia, Saltarello (1982) begins with strong chords in an unusual progression. The Passacaglia has a dignified ground bass consisting of descending fourths working their way down, stepwise, while some surprising things take place among the high-pitched instruments. The Saltarello presents technical challenges this band handles with authority.

Two works for brass are offered. The sextet Musici per Ottoni (1982) has a rollicking I, lyrical II, and a III that is the same Saltarello as above. I am quite taken by ‘Tower Music’ (1967), a powerful work for 11 brasses. This reading is excellent.

The album ends with ‘Mischievous Tune’ (1949), by turns rambunctious, beautiful, and sonorous.
Excellent readings. I recently raved about works composed by this fine ensemble's conductor, Laszlo Marosi (Jan/Feb 2017).

KILPATRICK

**FASOLO: Annuale Opera Ottava**
Organ Alternatim Masses
Luca Scandali, org; Ensemble Bella Gerit/Simone & Enea Sorini
Tactus 590701—77 minutes

Composed by the Franciscan friar Giovanni Battista Fasolo (c 1598-c 1664), this 1645 volume's full title explains exactly its use as “the yearbook [annuale] that contains all an organist must do to respond to the choir through the Year”. Alternatim masses have a mix of music for alternating choir and organ (Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, and Deo Gratias here) and pieces for solo organ (Modulatio after the Epistle; Modulatio for the Offertory; Elevation; Modulatio after the Agnus Dei).

Listening to this music today gives us the opportunity to appreciate the mass texts in a thoughtful and decelerated way. I find the musical interpolations far from mere interruptions, because they expand the reach of familiar texts that are often recited quickly, mumbled and by rote. Musical variety also keeps us engaged in the meaning of the words, as the settings are by turns sinuous and chromatic (typically at the Elevation, the moment where the congregation’s eyes are on the consecrated sacraments), imitative and dance-like (after the reading of the Epistle), solemn, stately, and grand.

Organist Luca Scandali and the Bella Gerit choir complement each other very well and effectively use changes in registration, volume, and color to animate the music. The organ in the San Domenico church in Cortona, Tuscany was built in 1547 by Luca di Bernardino (Cortona), the Voce Umana stop was added in 1760, and the organ was restored in 2007 by Marco Fratti (Modena). Its pitch is A=432 and the temperament is meantone.

I recently reviewed two other fine recordings of organ alternatim masses by Claudio Merulo (Brilliant 95145, N/D 2016) and Giovanni Salvatore (Brilliant 96146, J/F 2017). Notes, bios, stoplist in English; no texts.

FAURE: Piano Pieces
Hannes Minnaar
Challenge 72731 [SACD] 77 minutes

Instead of just one genre of the composer’s piano music, Minnaar gives us a well balanced recital drawing from the Nocturnes, Barcarolles, Preludes, and other pieces. In addition we can see his entire program on the DVD supplied at no additional cost.

The young Dutch pianist has won prizes from the Queen Elisabeth Competition and International Music Competition. He studied at the Amsterdam Conservatory and has taken master classes with Menahem Pressler and Ferenc Rados.

This claims “surround sound”, though I’m not certain what that means with a solo piano. In any case, the audio is crystal clear and rather bell-like. Some may find things a bit too clear if their preference is for a more mellow sound.

The beauty of the playing and the subtle shading achieved by the pianist are very impressive. The Op. 73 Variations are especially appealing. I have nothing but praise for this recital, but it must be admitted that the subtlety of Fauré will not initially appeal to everyone. The music often stands on the periphery of harmonic clarity, and modulations are so refined as to almost stretch the possibilities. The colors are not primary, but lean towards the pastel, in shades not often experienced. This is music that reveals its beauty with repeated hearings.

For a selection of Fauré piano music I would recommend Pascal Rogé on Decca. The performances are lovely and the selection is balanced. It also includes more of the plums than Minnaar does. Still, if money flows plentifully this new one is of high quality, and there is the bonus DVD.

Praise for the pianist’s own notes, and for giving us another outstanding Fauré recital worthy of serious consideration.

BECKER

**FELDMAN: 3 Voices**
Juliet Fraser—Hat Art 198—52 minutes

For John Cage
Josie ter Haar, v; John Snijders, p
Hat Art 160—69 minutes

Listening to Three Voices, which I had not heard before, my first impression was intense dislike: the music sounded like the soundtrack for a film about exotic island sirens, but per-
formed amateurishly or recorded badly or both. It pains me to say this about a composer that I love. And certainly Juliet Fraser is a fine performer and is giving the score the attention it deserves. The boxy acoustic of the recording doesn’t help much—in fact, such a sound bothered Ian Quinn when he reviewed a performance by Accroche Note on Empreinte Digitale (Nov/Dec 2006). He recommended, as I do, Joan LaBarbara’s performance on New Albion (no review), which is still available. LaBarbara’s feeling for the work is more expressive—there’s a clinical quality to Fraser’s that warms my heart very little.

The account of For John Cage was originally released in 1997 and seems not to have been reviewed. For late Feldman, this piece has considerably more variety—perhaps something that was in Feldman’s mind as he composed, since it is a tribute to Cage. I find myself contrasting it with two other of my favorite Feldman works, For Samuel Beckett and Palais de Mari. And yet the music is recognizably in Feldman’s manner and the variations seem inevitable in the best way. The performers are expert and the sound pristine.

HASKINS

FINZI: Sacred Choral; see BAX

FIocco: Petits Motets 2
Scherzi Musicali/ Nicolas Achten
Musique En Wallonie 1682—74 minutes

There were a few musicians in the Fiocco family. This is Joseph-Hector (1703–41), born in Brussels where he, his father, and brother worked as musicians in the Chapel Royal before Joseph-Hector moved to work at Antwerp Cathedral.

Six motets are here, each with four to six movements. The vocal parts require high technical skill, and all the singers and musicians of Scherzi Musicali are up to the task. For example, an elegant ease belies the virtuosic demands of ‘In Caels Assumpta,’ and ‘Tuos De Tartaro’ sweeps us along like an opera finale. Sometimes, as in ‘Proferte Cantica’ (an homage to St Cecilia), the tempo is a bit too fast and the ensemble becomes somewhat scrappy.

I’m glad to hear this spirited sacred music, full of forms and gestures that would not be out of place in the 18th-Century opera house: virtuosic arias, vocal ensembles, sinfonias, dramatic accompaniment to recitatives, obbligato instrumental parts, etc.

This is nicely packaged as a CD-sized hardcover book, with notes, illustrations, texts, and translations. Scherzi Musicali’s Vol 1 of Fiocco motets (M in W 1054) was released around 2009 but not reviewed in ARG.

C.MOORE

FISCHER: Lute Pieces
Hubert Hoffmann
Challenge 72740—62 minutes

The Partitas in D minor, C, and C minor offer a glimpse into the mind of the student, collector, and burgeoning composer of lute music living in the high Baroque period. Ferdinand Fischer was born in Kuchl in 1651, studied theology in Salzburg, and became a monk at the Abbey of Kremsmünster in 1677. While engaged in his duties as a priest, he began to collect lute and other music from various sources, ostensibly for his own edification.

The results of his adaptations may be found among the works in his four books of tablatures. The partitas from the works of others are woven together with his own ideas. Scholars have traced quotations and whole works of music to French and German composers (whose authorship he sometimes cites), some of them well known, like Muffat, Biber, and Denis Gaultier. It is often difficult to distinguish Fischer’s own work from these, but the Passacaglia on track 19 may be such a piece. It is a remarkable collection, beautifully performed by Herbert Hoffmann. Notes are in English.

LOEWEN

FRANCAIX: Heure du Berger; see THUILLE
FRANCK: Cello Sonata; see BEETHOVEN

FRICKER: Quartets
Villiers Quartet—Naxos 571374—70 minutes

This illuminating release presents the three string quartets of Peter Racine Fricker, a British composer who is rarely heard here but definitely worth exploring. These quartets come from different parts of his career, from the 1940s to the late 70s; yet each is in his characteristic style: tense, tightly constructed, and quasi-tonal, with haunting lyrical moments. There is 70 minutes of music here, most of it pretty gray, but full of character and interest. Best to listen to one quartet at a time.

Quartet 1, from 1948, is a compact one-movement work with varying textures, from elaborate polyphony to sparse melody and

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accompaniment. Ideas are striking and easy to follow. I hear a bit of Bartok here, in the work's edginess and unified structure; but the searching melody that sings out in the middle sounds British. A long sigh ends the piece—simple and eloquent. The Second, from 1952, is more expansive in its development, but has the same brittle expressiveness. The intricate double fugue in the middle of the first movement threatens to steal the show. No. 3 from 1976 is the most striking, with a driving allegro feroce, a desolate adagio, and a quietly sinister allegro inquieto.

The Villiers Quartet, which champions British music, plays with just the right combination of force and restraint: a slight understatement, a bit of British reserve, serves this music well, and that's how they consistently play it. Listen to the opening of the scherzo in Quartet 2, where the delicate playing makes Fricker's dark moodiness palatable. These musicians refuse to indulge in loud, expressionist effects: everything is done with subtlety and transparency, enhanced by Naxos's warm recording.

FROBERGER: Harpsichord Pieces
Anne Marie Dragosits
Divox 71602—64 minutes

The parade of new Froberger albums continues, celebrating the 400th anniversary of his birth (1616) and 350th of his death (1667). This one offers a typical selection. There are three toccatas, four suites, the Mayerin Variations, and Froberger's ruminative meditation on his own death.

It's an international project. Dragosits is Austrian, but recorded this in England. The harpsichord is Italian, built by Girolamo de Zenti in 1658. Most of the music is in a French style.

Her performance is expert, but this album doesn't seem essential. The tempo rubato is in the right places, the phrasing is fine; but I don't hear much expressive intensity. Froberger was like a 17th Century Chopin—the music has to inspire our feelings. Dragosits keeps it more politely reserved than that.

This harpsichord has a “short octave” layout in the bass, not fully chromatic. That makes it easier to reach some big stretches, but it also forces Dragosits to change some of the bass lines. It sounds jarring to me, even though she has chosen notes that fit the harmony. Most often she plays the bass notes a third below the notes written, breaking up the prevailing stepwise motion of the bass line. This might not bother anyone who doesn't already know the pieces.

FUMAGALLI: Organ Pieces
Ascetica Musicale; Sonatas in D, B-flat; Capriccio Alpa Sonata; Tempo di Sonata-Breve Fantasia; Emulazione; Ripieno; Scherzino; Marcia Villerrecia
Marco Ruggeri
Brilliant 95468 [2CD] 133 minutes

Polibio Fumagalli (1830-1900) was an Italian organist and composer who taught at the Milan Conservatory, where his pupils included Marco Enrico Bossi and Pietro Yon. He came from a musical family; his brothers Disma, Adolfo, and Luca and niece Carla were all concert pianists and prolific composers for the piano.

Disc 1 contains a collection of 15 pieces published in 1878 that reflect the influence of the Chopin, Schumann, and Mendelssohn ‘character piece'. In the 1880s Fumagalli met Saint-Saens at a concert at the Conservatory. Following the concert he declared that it was impossible to perform the great European organ works on an Italian organ because of the short pedalboard and divided keyboards. This unleashed a great controversy, which eventually led to the reform of Italian organ building and organ music.

Disc 2 contains pieces that are a result these reforms and demonstrate Fumagalli’s move away from the “character piece” in favor of a style that reflected modern ideas.

On Disc 1 Ruggeri plays on a large 2-manual 1885 (restored in 2003) “orchestral” style instrument by Bernasconi, which has a short pedalboard and divided keyboards typical of the earlier style of organ-building. On Disc 2 he plays on a smaller 2-manual 1892 Bernasconi (restored 2010), which has an extended keyboard and pedalboard in keeping with the reforms. Not everything is of interest, but there are some delightful moments where Ruggeri plays with great elan.

Notes on the composer, music, and organ specifications. An interesting discovery of an unknown composer.

DELCAMP

It has been a constant trait of our species to be willing to do without thinking what we are not willing to think about doing.

OLIVER O’DONOVAN
GALLAGHER: Piano Pieces
Frank Huang
Centaur 3522—78 minutes

Jack Gallagher, born in Brooklyn in 1947, studied with Elie Siegmeister, Robert Palmer, and Burrill Phillips; he is a professor at the College of Wooster in Ohio. Ira Byelick reviewed an earlier release (Naxos 559652, Mar/Apr 2011) and thought that the pieces would be appealing to a mass audience; he said, though, “If you enjoy being challenged and prefer depth to ease, shy away.” Gallagher’s Symphony No. 2 (Naxos 559768, May/June 2015), at 63 minutes, was far too long for its material, but Quiet Reflections was genuine and enjoyable.

This program is different. Quartal harmonies are prominent, and their angular sound inevitably evokes Hindemith. His sonata, though, is much more flowing than Hindemith and very lyrical. The central slow movement is fragrant and dreamy and often sounds improvised; it is one of the loveliest, most affecting pieces I’ve heard in quite a while—intellectually engaging, too. III is dramatic and invigorating; its Only flaw is that the themes and melodies aren’t the most attention-getting. It is still interesting, though. Pianists would do well to take a look at this piece; I’ve been toying with carving enough time out of accompanying to do a solo recital, and I would seriously consider putting this appealing piece on the program.

Evening Music is gentle and warm. The Sonatina is serious but never frowning; the first movement has a sunny, slightly arid quality that reminds me of Ben-Haim’s Sonatina. ‘Berceuse’ is mostly in Mixolydian mode but (dare I say it?) mixes Lydian in as well. Over the last two decades, Lydian mode has become a terrible cliche in movie scores and concert works; it’s a lazy way for a composer to sound spunky or charming. Gallagher, saints be praised, uses Lydian tastefully without slathering it on just to appear all perky and pretty. The ten-minute Nocturne has a rather busy texture, and Mr Huang could counter that if he pulled the tempo back in the opening; as it is, it feels a little pushy.

The Sonatina’s ‘Berceuse’ is also one of the Six Bagatelles, and it isn’t repeated in that set. The bagatelles and Six Pieces for Kelly have an Eastern European accent; they are pleasant diversions, as is the short ‘Pastorale.’ The driving ‘Malambo Nouveau’ has almost the manic intensity of a tarantella. ‘Happy Birthday, April’ is a congenial and jazz-tinged waltz; I’d be tickled pink if someone wrote me a present this tasty.

The whole recital is likeable, and it never panders to anyone or tries to be trendy. The engineering is generally good, though it varies from piece to piece; the Sonata has a good atmosphere around the piano, while the other pieces are drier and have the instrument further forward. Everything was recorded in two days at Chicago’s WFMT studios, so the microphone placement probably changed. It is difficult for less-known composers to get above-average performances of their music, and Gallagher is lucky with Huang—the pianist is engaging and thoroughly musical. Centaur Records is a label where musicians can get self-financed recordings published and distributed. In other words, they don’t sign performers and produce the recordings themselves. So, when a release of theirs comes my way, I brace myself, because the sound and performances are so inconsistent. But this is the best thing I’ve heard from Centaur in a few years. Notes by the composer in English.

ESTEP

GINASTERA: Piano Pieces
Michael Korstick
CPO 555069—79:55

Although titled “The Piano Music”, this is not quite the complete piano music, since it omits Sonata No. 2, Op. 53 (reasoning that “a mathematically oriented approach” causes the work to be “lacking melodic interest”). Nor does it include the withdrawn items among the Piezas Infantiles of 1934.

The piano oeuvre of Ginastera has had at least three previous complete traversals, most recently from the young Italian pianist Mariangela Vacatello on Brilliant (May/June 2016). I’m surprised that Korstick didn’t include Opus 53, since his pristine interpretations lean more toward the steely and abstract than the romantically lyrical—and both aspects are part of Ginastera’s art (compare his ‘Milonga’, for example, with the much slower, more tragic, and highly inflected reading by Pablo Rojas—reviewed in collections, this issue). The piano sound is also quite dry—good for clarity, but not so much for warmth and beauty of tone.

MOORE, T

July/August 2017
GIORDANO: La Cena delle Belle
Rita Lantieri (Ginevra), Marco Chingari (Neri), Fabio Armiliato (Giannetto); Piacenza/ Gian Paolo Sanzogno
Bongiovanni 2068 [2CD] TIME

Umberto Giordano’s fourth opera, Andrea Chenier, is produced occasionally, his Fedora even less. Of his other ten operas there is hardly a trace. Giordano was a proponent of the verismo (realism) school. During his lifetime his operas were often produced, but with the decline of verismo his fortunes declined too.

La Cena is a poema drammatico in four acts. The libretto is by famed Italian playwright Sem Benelli, who is most remembered for his libretto to Montemezzi’s opera L’Amore dei Tre Re (1913), one of the best librettos ever. The premiere of La Cena was in La Scala, December 20, 1924, conducted by Arturo Toscanini.

The story is one of madness, real and feigned, lust, sibling rivalry, and mistaken identity in Florence in the time of autocrat Lorenzo il Magnifico. The title has been (mis)translated in a variety of ways: Feast of Jests, Feast of Fools, Feast of Blows, Mockery Supper. The New Grove Dictionary of Opera calls it “The Supper of Jests.”

The nobleman Tornaquinci is hosting the eponymous meal in order to reconcile Giannetto Malaspina and brothers Neri and Gabriello Chiaramontesi, who dishonored and beat Giannetto and threw him into the Arno River. Also attending is Ginevra, Neri’s mistress and the object of their quarrel. Giannetto hints that Gabriello is in love with Ginevra. Although “reconciled” Giannetto and Neri ply a series of practical jokes on each other. The tragic denouement comes when Giannetto convinces his friends that Neri is mad. This allows Giannetto to visit Ginevra. Neri hears of the plan and tracks down the pair. In a rage Neri kills Ginevra and then, mistakenly, his own brother, Gabriello.

Giordano’s music is a jarring combination of dissonance and romanticism. Violent, dramatic music is contrasted with the tender music of the two love duets for Ginevra and Giannetto. Giannetto’s music is truly demanding, relentlessly high of tessitura, strongly passionate, and lengthy, requiring great stamina.

This December 14, 1988 performance from Piacenza promises much. Armiliato lives up to his star billing. He roars through the music like a leopard on the prowl ready to devour any singer daring enough to challenge him. He is as relentless as the music. Poor Lantieri squawks and squeals. Chingari poses no threat. The rest of the huge cast rings in joyously.

Notes and an Italian-English libretto can be found at the Bongiovanni website.

GLASS: Violin Sonata; Concerto; Morning Passages; Escape!
Amy Dickson, sax; Catherine Milledge, p; Royal Philharmonic/ Mikel Toms
Sony 41194—57 minutes

The sound of Glass’s music has long been connected to the saxophone, but his recent music has favored other instruments for the most part. Amy Dickson has done us all a favor, then, with her marvelous arrangements of two big violin works for her instrument. Her playing is flawless—I might quibble that the interpretations are a little too restrained for my taste, but at least they’re never merely mechanical. Expert collaborations from pianist Milledge and the Royal Philharmonic. Sony’s sound is excellent.

GLAZOUNOV, KHACHATURIAN: Violin Concertos
KABALEVSKY: Colas Breugnon
Philippe Quint, v; Bochum Symphony/ Steven Sloane
Avanti 1047 [SACD] 61 minutes

Wow! This was a sleeper, though only because I wasn’t expecting the solo work to be so resplendent and the interpretations to be so compelling. Quint really “gets” the Glazounov better than just about any violinist I’ve heard in it. He embraces it with an expansive, rich, beautiful violin tone—the kind it’s supposed to have but doesn’t always get. I’ve never quite understood why so many recordings of this work miss the mark. (Concert performances, too: we had an earnest young soloist convey mostly earnestness in it with the Des Moines Symphony a season or two ago.) All it seems to require is a straightforward romantic approach of the exact same kind the Tchaikovsky concerto calls for. And that’s what Quint gives it, ably supported by Mr Sloane and the Bochum Symphony, a not very large ensemble (13 first violins, 11 second) that also puts out a pleasantly full-bodied, warm tone.

In the past I’ve said that Viktor Tretyakov and Fedoseyev (Nov/Dec 2014) have a solid handle on the Glazounov, but Quint and Sloane really build the case for it as one of the
Great Romantic Violin Concertos, which the earlier performers don’t quite manage. And Melodiya’s 1980s digital sound really sounds dated next to Avanti’s vibrant SACD sonics. (Also left in the dust is the even older Melodiya with Semyon Snitkovsky and Rozhdestvensky released here by Mobile Fidelity on CD.)

Quint digs right into the short opening movement and carries us along on the momentum of his fluid playing through to the big central Andante that forms fully half of the concerto. In his hands the short finale doesn’t even seem perfunctory.

The momentum continues in the long opening movement of the Khachaturian. Think of the old Kogan/Monteux (RCA) recording but in spacious, up-to-date, full stereo sound. Other performances tend to meander in I, and the listener’s attention sometimes wanders, too. Quint and Sloane do not let that happen for a second. They make this movement one big, completely coherent dramatic arc from first note to last. And while they propel the music forward, they don’t make it sound driven.

Sloane shapes the atmospheric opening of II lovingly and lets his players show that Mr Quint is not the only source of a full, rich tone on the stage. The violin enters and, again, there’s lyrical effusion aplenty to be enjoyed here—but it’s not just beautiful sounds for the sake of sounding beautiful. This is a breathtakingly expressive traversal of the slow movement, languorous and sensuous but also architecturally coherent. The finale is a nimble, impish romp unmarred by any hint of empty mechanical display. This is one of the most exciting accounts of this work I’ve ever heard.

As if fresh, vital, top-drawer accounts of the two concertos isn’t enough, Sloane and his players open the program with one of the most popular orchestral curtain raisers of all time. The Kabalevsky overture is as bursting with energy as the finale of the Khachaturian.

So here we have it: the proverbial “lightning in a bottle” captured beautifully on a hybrid SACD with sound that reminds us that not all the best recordings were made in the past. Our Editor chews us out for declaring this early in the year that a particular album will be on our “Best of” list for the year, so I won’t do that. I will say Quint, Sloane & Co. will come up for serious consideration when I compile that list. This sleeper is a keeper!

HANSEN

GLUCK: Arias; see Collections

GOLIJOV: Cello Concerto; see Collections

GRAINGER: Folk Music
Claire Booth, s; Christopher Glynn, p
Avie 2372—58 minutes

An enduring part of Percy Grainger’s legacy is his work in the early years of the 20th Century collecting and arranging British folk songs. Booth and Glynn have spent years exploring that legacy and have released a wonderful sampling of these arrangements. Of the 18 songs in this program, 7 are for piano solo.

Having dismissed the Australian-born composer, arranger, and piano virtuoso since my youth as an eccentric “semi-classical” composer, I was taken aback by how much I liked this. This album is one delight after another.

The performances are excellent. Booth’s light lyric voice caresses the songs lovingly while Glynn’s flexible phrasing adds tender nuance to his playing. About half way through the program is a particularly wonderful sequence of ‘The Sprig of Thyme’ (sung), ‘The Sussex Mummers’ Christmas Carol’ (played), ‘The Twa Corbies’ (sung), and ‘Irish Tune from County Derry (Danny Boy)’ (played). ‘Early One Morning’ is a strikingly fine setting with a piano introduction in a minor key that yields to the relative major when the voice enters.

The longest song of the program, ‘Hard-Hearted Barb’ra (H)Ellen’ shows daring accompaniment that carries the drama of the tale with vivid and varied writing from strophe to strophe. As a rousing finale to the program Booth joins Glynn at the keyboard in what is probably Grainger’s most celebrated piece, ‘Country Gardens’.

Notes and texts.

R MOORE

GRANADOS: Goyescas
Yoonie Han, p
Steinway 30067—55 minutes

Because Goyescas are among some of my favorite works, I’m very picky with my Granados, but Han does not disappoint me. Goyescas requires a firm hand, fluid phrasing, and colorful harmonies. ‘Los Requiebros’ manages to shimmer brilliantly: every single note is crisp, but this does not compromise the flexibility and seamlessness of Granados’s rich textures. The rubato is tasteful. She lingers over the ends of phrases, bringing attention to
the lyrical lines. I like her more cautious approach to ‘El Fandango’ at the beginning, and it allows the piece to unfold with richness and depth. ‘El Amor,’ meanwhile, is extremely expressive and poetic. Well done.

**KANG**

**GRIEG: Violin Sonatas**  
Haik Kazazyan; Philipp Kopachevsky, p  
Delos 3523—68 minutes

For years I have lamented that there was no worthy alternative to the magnificent set of these sonatas by Augustin Dumay and Maria Joao Pires. At last there is. Haik Kazazyan and Philipp Kopachevsky have a natural feel for this rich, unashamedly romantic music. They are not as heavily nuanced as the other duo, but their simple and straightforward interpretations are not wanting in any department. If you want a second set of these works with a different approach, this is worth hearing. Very good sound.

**MAGIL**

**GUYOT: Te Deum; Motets**  
Cinquecento  
Hyperion 68180—63:31

Jean Guyot (c1520-88) was first employed at the Collegiate Church of St Paul then at St Lambert’s Cathedral in Liege. He was called in 1563 to Vienna by Emperor Ferdinand I, but returned to St Lambert’s in 1564 following the death of his patron. His earlier works, mostly published by Tielman Susato, are in a style of imitative polyphony similar to Clemens non Papa and Pierre de Mancicourt. Later in his career, and certainly at Vienna, he began writing music for up to 12 independent voices, perhaps reflecting the greater resources available at the Imperial court.

This new recording includes a selection of motets by Guyot extending from his early ‘Amen, amen dico vos’ (printed in 1546) to his late six-voice setting of the Te Deum. Since the five core members of Cinquecento (countertenor to bass) are joined by a guest countertenor, David Allsopp, they are limited to works in four to six voices. That said, the 17-minute alternatim Te Deum, found only in a single manuscript copied after 1591 at Munich by Guyot’s former student, Jean de Fosses, is very inventive. While many of these motets (and especially the Te Deum) would benefit from a larger ensemble, the singers of Cinquecento have a full and rich sound, well blended but with each part clearly present. The booklet contains a very informative essay and texts and translations.

**BREWER**

**HAAS: Song Cycles**  
Anita Watson, s; Anna Starushkevych, mz; Nicky Spence, t; James Platt, b; Lada Valesova, p; Navarra Quartet  
Resonus 10183—69 minutes

Seven Songs in Folk Style, Op. 18 (1940), by Pavel Haas (1899-1944) is a stunning set of miniatures in 15 minutes depicting the joys and sorrows of love: a jilted lover as much as saying “Screw you—there are lots of good fish in the sea”, a lover’s gift lost, a courting couple, broken promises, a promise (of sex) collected, etc. My favorite is of a lass mourning her love with tears enough to flood a meadow and sighs strong enough to ring the church bells (slyly evoked in a long piano solo). In fact, piano solos make up at least a third of most of these highly inventive songs. The harmony is tonal, but the spiky style reflects the tonalities from the Czech-Hungarian-Romanian-Bulgarian pool of folk sounds in those country’s Christmas carols.

The seven songs are shared by the soprano and mezzo, who sing with a bright, direct Eastern European timbre. Ukrainian Anna Starushkevych has a strong vibrato tempered with poignant straight tones that make the texts ache with meaning. Australian Anita Watson’s lovely voice is just as expressive. Both are perfectly balanced with Czech pianist Lada Valesova, whose piano lines reveal the texts as strongly as the singers do. The invention here makes me want to fall down and worship Pavel Haas.

This album contains two early and two late works from Haas’s career. The liner notes claim that this is “the first commercially available recording” of Fata Morgana, Op. 6 (1923). It uses erotic texts from “The Gardener” by Rabindranath Tagore. What a pity that tenor Nicky Spence, the Navarra Quartet (formed at the Royal Northern College of Music in 2002), and the pianist are recorded so closely that the highly congested sound is ugly—it was impossible to appreciate the music, which is very much in the impressionist style of Debussy. The texts are desperately passionate, as is the inventive instrumentation, but to no avail. The performers seem to be perfectly acceptable, but the sound ruins all possible appreciation.
It’s an especial pity that, at 31 minutes, this takes up almost half of the album.

An even earlier cycle (three songs in eight minutes) from Haas’s student days with Leos Janacek, Chinese Songs, Op. 4 (1921), is deeply moving. ‘Sadness’ reflects on the ruins of a once beautiful kingdom, ‘On the River’ comments on tranquil passing scenes, and ‘Spring Rain’ speaks for itself as Haas goes well beyond Debussy’s staccato style and develops a wide-ranging piano array to illumine the texts, gorgeously sung by Starushkevych, who cuts her powerful vibrato down to tenderly whispered straight tones.

Profoundly moving are Four Songs on Chinese Poetry, composed in 1944 in Terezin concentration camp, after Haas had been separated from his wife and daughter and his father had died in the camp. Its 16 minutes alternate between a profound sense of loss and the joy that nature brings (bamboo groves, “the moon perched on a stone”, geese flying across the Milky Way, “the clamoring chatter of magpies awakening the new day”). British bass James Platt’s deep, rich, expressive voice is again supported by Haas’s ingenious piano writing, which gives the text ambience, and is beautifully played and perfectly balanced.

Note that Four Songs on Chinese Poetry was Haas’s last song cycle before he was moved from Terezin to Auschwitz, where he died on October 17, 1944. Note too that it has no opus number. For what it’s worth, this performance convinces me that, as despairing as Haas’s circumstance must have been, even in Terezin he still must have had exposure to the unquenchable powers of Nature to stir his finally unquenchable soul. Put him down on the list of composers I would love to have met, especially since his most personal self is on display in these vocal works.

Ignore the poorly engineered Fata Morgana. The album is worth it for the three song cycles of supremely poetic texts, brilliant piano writing, and poignant performances. Anyone—performer or listener—who’s aching to freshen their vocal recital repertoire need look no further.

FRENCH

HANDEL, VIVALDI: Arias
Julie Boulianne, Clavecin en Concert/ Luc Beausejour—Analekta 8780—59 minutes

Here we have another album of Baroque opera arias assembled as a display vehicle for a relatively new singer. Most often it is from Handel’s operas that selections are taken, but here the works of Vivaldi are also represented.

The selections by Handel come from the operas Ariodante, Rinaldo, Imeneo, Giulio Cesare, and Arianna in Creta. There is also a brief orchestral excerpt from his Lotario. On the Vivaldi side, there are arias from two serenatas, his La Fida Ninfa and Andromeda Liberata, plus three-movement orchestral sinfonias from the operas Armida al Campo d’Egitto and L’Incoronazione di Dario.

Boulianne is a French-Canadian mezzo-soprano who makes a very strong impression here. Her voice has a wide and evenly-defined spread. She is fully equal to virtuosic demands, but I find particularly appealing her warm and expressive treatment of slow arias. That is demonstrated handsomely in the familiar ‘Lascia ch’io Panga’ of Handel and ‘Alma Oppressa’ of Vivaldi—in fact, the album’s title.

The accompaniments are supplied by Beausejour’s ensemble, whose name is deceptive. It consists, in fact, of ten string players, plus oboe and bassoon, with archlute and harpsichord (Beausejour himself). They acquit themselves handsomely in the non-vocal items.

I did find it interesting to have the theatrical work of these composers set side by side. It points up vividly the very different dramatic styles of the two composers—Vivaldi’s intense emotionalism against Handel’s more varied and probing characterization.

The one fault here is that the booklet gives NO TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS, only tiny synopses of the individual arias—a shortcoming that hinders appreciation of Boulianne’s careful characterizations.

BARKER

HANDEL, VIVALDI, MOZART: Dixit Dominus
Maria Matheu, Hanna Bayodi-Hirt, s; Anthony Roth Costanzo, ct; Makoto Sakurada, t; Furio Zanasi, b; Capella Reial de Catalunya, Concert des Nations/ Jordi Savall
AliaVox 9918—68:44

This is not one of Savall’s elaborately themed CD-Books, though it is packaged in a book-bound album of standard CD size. It belongs rather to the series of “Academies” concerts from 2011 to 2016. The music in this one comes from performances in May and June of 2015. The order of selections is Vivaldi-Mozart-Handel, but I have arbitrarily chosen to file it under Handel.

His setting of the popular Vespers Psalm...
(109 or 110) is the earliest item here. It was composed in Rome in 1707 and is generally acknowledged as Handel’s first great choral masterpiece—it is certainly the standout item here. Vivaldi’s setting, R 595, seems to date from 1717 while he still served as music director at the Pieta foundling home. From 1774 come the isolated Vespers components, the opening Psalm and the concluding Magnificat, constituting Mozart’s K 139. They are the shortest pieces here, but the most richly scored (brass and timpani plus the strings).

One does not think of Savall as a choral conductor, but he knows his 20-voice chorus and his 19-member orchestra well and gets rousing, bubbly performances from them. His soloists are uneven, however, and somewhat compromise the total effect. These are, to be sure, enjoyable performances, but all this music can be had in other recordings, with particular competition in the Handel.

This combination of works is not unique either. Not long ago I reviewed a Harmonia Mundi release (807587: J/A 2013) that combined the Handel score with a different Vivaldi setting and one of his finest cantatas—a program that might be measured seriously against this new one.

Good multilingual notes, full texts and translations, and 33 pages of promotion of other AliaVox releases.

**H A N D E L:** Harpsichord Pieces
Bridget Cunningham
Signum 478—73 minutes

The programming seems promising. It’s part of a series about Handel’s travels. The theme is his visit to Ireland in 1741. There is almost an hour of music by Handel, mostly excerpts from bigger pieces not originally for harpsichord. Other composers (Geminiani, Roseingrave, Carter, and Anonymous) fill out the last 20 minutes.

Unfortunately, the execution makes this project disappointing. Cunningham registers her harpsichord heavily. This gets tiring, and the treble unisons are distractingly sour most of the time. Her touch doesn’t have much variety in the way she releases notes. The interpretations are dull. She often makes the music sound clumsy with rhythmic insecurity. The overture of Messiah is especially awkward. The piece that goes best is William Babell’s arrangement of Handel’s Lascia ch’io Pianga. I can’t justify buying this for those five minutes alone. The last two pieces—Cunningham’s own arrangements of Irish tunes that Handel knew—sound as if they don’t belong in a classical album.

The thick booklet has problems, too. The essay has plenty of interesting historical information, but is disorganized. The writing style is an illegible mess. The run-on sentences are awful.

Volume 2 is advertised as “coming soon”. It will have orchestral and vocal pieces. I hope it will be more coherent than this. Maybe she is a better conductor than harpsichordist.

B LEHMAN

**H A N D E L:** Messiah
Hanna Herfurtner, Gaia Petrone, Michael Schade, Christian Immler, Salzburg Bach Choir, Vienna Bach Consort/ Ruben Dubrovsky
Gramola 99135 [2CD] 118:18

Not only Everybody’s Brother-in-Law makes recordings of Messiah but even second cousins get into the act.

Dubrovsky acquits himself as a very intelligent interpreter. He is in tune with current performance styles, bringing great exuberance and even excitement into his direction. (His final choruses are really rousing.) His soloists are all very good singers, who are very generous, even extravagant, in their embellishments (especially in cadences).

Numbers are not given for the performers. The chorus seems to be of modest size but with excellent discipline and sonority. The period orchestra is incisive and responsive. Dubrovsky chose to use oboe or horn doublings at his discretion.

This recording was made at a concert on March 10, 2016, but without the drawbacks such circumstances might create. In fact, the sound is outstanding in clarity and balances.

Taken on its own merits, this is an enjoyable performance. But soloists and chorus alike display Germanic accents; if damaging, that is at least incongruous. More seriously, the text used is a throwback to some of the earliest recording practices of the past. In Part II the now-common restoration of as many as four numbers (even including the chorus ‘How beautiful are the feet’) is avoided. Worse, Part III is reduced from 10 numbers to a scanty 5—dropping a recitative and duet, a chorus, and an air. Such deletions are simply unacceptable nowadays.

The booklet gives the words with translations, but wastes space on a silly, myth-making
essay by Stefan Zweig and annotations of useless blather, of the kind suggesting that Handel wrote nothing other than this oh-so-sublime work.

Really, this release simply cannot be taken seriously amid all the competition.

BARKER

HANDEL: Serse
Anne Sofie von Otter (Serse), Elizabeth Norberg-Schulz (Romilda), Sandrine Piau (Atalanta), Lawrence Zazzo (Arsamene), Silvia Tro Santafe (Amastre), Giovanni Furlanetto (Ariodate), Antonio Abete (Elviro), Les Arts Florissants/ William Christie
Erato 59006 [3CD] 165 minutes

This is a reissue of a set that was recorded in 2003; it appeared on the Virgin label as 45711. When I reviewed it, among a number of Handel sets (M/A 2005), I compared it to earlier recordings and concluded that it was the leading recording of the work at the time.

Since then, things have changed on two counts. First, in 2009 DG reissued a 1965 recording, made in Vienna under Brian Priestman, that had originally been issued by the old Westminster label in a 3LP set. That wonderful performance, with a vocally superlative cast, was one I (and others) had long hoped to be reissued (3CD 477 8339; not reviewed).

The other new factor is the appearance of a recording made in 2013 under Christian Curmyn (Chandos 797, 3CD; not available for review). Curmyn’s cast is an excellent one. He matches Christie in giving the title role, written for a castrato, to a mezzo-soprano (Anna Stephany) and the part of Arsamene, written for a “travesty” mezzo who specialized in male roles, to a countertenor (David Daniels). The females give their characters honest individuality: Rosemary Joshua (Romilda), Joelle Harvey (Atalanta), and Hilary Summers (Amastre). Brindley Sherratt is a sturdy Ariodate, and Andreas Wolf attempts some clowning as Elviro.

Comparing the Christie and Curmyn performances is instructive. The latter is fully committed to current period-style performance: the strings are stringently vibratoless, the pacing is strict, and the singing style emphasizes accuracy and even a degree of objectivity. There are dramatic moments, but sometimes there is also a certain antiseptic quality to it all. Christie has, of course, been an archpriest of period performance, but her performance adds a degree of warmth and flexibility to idiomatic stylistliness, with a bit more dramatic character. Among the singers, Von Otter is at her best in expressive power, and Norberg-Schulz is handsomely eloquent. This time around, I appreciate more the zaniness of Abete’s Elviro.

In that last role, I still cherish Owen Brannigan for Priestman. And, indeed, the rest of his cast delivers beautifully etched and sung portrayals. Priestman leads a modern-instrument performance, and his singers are of a generation not fully committed to Baroque literature. Nevertheless, they are all a joy to hear: Maureen Forrester (Serse), Maureen Lehane (Arsamene), Lucia Popp (Romilda), Marilyn Tyler (Atalanta), Mildred Miller (Amastre), and Thomas Hemsley (Ariodate).

All three of these recordings are splendid presentations of this opera. I urge all serious Handel lovers to obtain the old Priestman set for its vocal beauties. Between the other two, I think Christie is still the choice in period-style recordings.

Note that the DG reissue and the Chandos newcomer contain full libretto and English translation. Erato’s booklet has skimpy notes and synopses, but NO LIBRETTO OR TRANSLATION, thereby undermining this revival.

BARKER

HANDELLE: Cypriot Vespers; see Collections

HANSSSENS: Clarinet & Orchestra
Eddy Vanoosthuyse, cl; Milan Pala, v; Eric Speller, ob; Slovak Sinfonietta/ Herman Engles
Phaedra 92094—65 minutes

The product of a Belgian musical family, Charles Louis Hanssens (1802-71) followed in the footsteps of his father and his uncle as a composer and conductor. An accomplished cellist, he wrote a number of chamber pieces in his adolescence, and early in adulthood he finished two operas and three wind concertos. At age 26 he joined the faculty of the Brussels Royal School of Music, and while the Belgian Revolution of 1830 led many to wonder if he was loyal to the ruling Dutch or the nationalistic Belgians fed up with high unemployment, his Requiem in memory of his fallen countrymen secured his reputation.

Afterward he took the baton and became a champion of Beethoven and Wagner. In February 1849 in Brussels he led the Belgian premiere of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9, and through the 1860s he established a strong Wagner tradition in the Belgian opera houses. He also assisted with the burgeoning of the orchestral canon, beginning with Haydn and
Mozart and culminating in his own time with Berlioz, Gounod, and Meyerbeer. At the time of his death, Hanssens boasted a remarkable catalog of choral pieces, operas, cantatas, oratorios, masses, ballets, symphonies, orchestral fantasies, and concertante works.

Half of these concertante works were inspired by the Brussels clarinet virtuosos Joseph Blaes and Frederic Franck. In 1836 and 1837 Hanssens completed two clarinet concertinos for Blaes and a Fantasy in B-flat major for violin, clarinet, and orchestra for Franck. In 1841 he wrote for Blaes a Concertpiece for oboe, clarinet, and orchestra; and in 1843 he visited the clarinet one last time in his brief Solo for Clarinet and Orchestra.

The Fantasy is notable for its use of scordatura, a Baroque device that tunes a string instrument up or down a certain interval to create a brighter or darker tone, special effects, or ease of key. While composers from Bach to Vivaldi to Mozart employed it well, the draw-create a brighter or darker tone, special effects, rarely welcome in the sonic warmth and backs in string tension and in tonation made it rarely welcome in the sonic warmth and splendor of the romantic era. With the exception of violin virtuosos such as Paganini and a handful of passages in Schumann, Brahms, and Saint-Saens, scordatura slept through the 19th Century and awoke in 20th Century orchestral and chamber music—Mahler, Strauss, Ravel, Stravinsky, Respighi, Bartok, Kodaly, and Ligeti, among others.

In the Fantasy Hanssens directs the violinist to tune his strings up a half step so that both the violin and the B-flat clarinet can engage in a display of technical fireworks: open strings for the violin and the key of C major for the clarinet. Another possibility would be the casting of the Fantasy a half step lower to A major and requesting the clarinet in A, as Mozart does in his Clarinet Quintet and Concerto and Rimsky-Korsakoff in Capriccio Espagnol. Did Hanssens consider this option or did he honestly prefer the brilliant character of B-flat major and the B-flat clarinet? In any case, his use of scordatura as late as the 1830s is interesting.

However unusual these works may be, Brussels Philharmonic principal clarinet and international soloist Eddy Vanoonsthuyse believes Hanssens and his music for clarinet and orchestra deserve a wider audience, and here he performs the Solo, the two concertinos, and the two concertante works. His guest soloists are Flemish Philharmonic principal oboe Eric Speller and Czech violinist Milan Pala; and his collaborating orchestra is the Slovak Sinfonietta of Zilina, led by Flemish conductor Herman Engels.

If Maestro Hanssens hinted at a taste for the dramatic in his programming for the stage and the concert hall, his catalog here confirms it. Like Mozart, he treats the instrumentalists as vocalists; and, like Weber, he uses the concerto as a theatrical vehicle. He prefers lively set pieces over profound utterances; but like Gershwin, his skillful thematic manipulation and vivid scoring allow him to capture audience interest and craft a singular movement or tone poem of surprising duration.

Vanoonsthuyse leads with his fine tone, terrific stage presence, emotional investment, and amazing fingers; and although his unusually responsive set-up is a bit precarious, he easily cuts through the composer’s operatic textures. Pala and Speller are excellent, complementing Vanoonsthuyse with exquisite phrasing, control, and technique. Engels and the Sinfonietta deliver generous helpings of romantic vigor and grandeur while giving the soloists space to work, though the orchestra hits some rough spots in timbre and intonation.

H ANUDEL

H ARVEY: Choral Pieces
All I Am is Thee; Kyrie for the Magdalene; O Be Joyful; O Mother Earth; Recordare; Evanescence; Carol Eventide; Ye Dying Gales; Of a Mountain; In Paradisum; Calm Hours
Amy Haworth, Tui Hivr; Nicholas Trapp, s; Latvian Radio Choir, Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir; Polish Radio Symphony, Sinfonietta Riga/ Kaspars Putnins, Sigvards Klava, Tomasz Szymbus, Richard Harvey

Altus 12— 43 minutes

At any moment over the past few decades, you could find Richard Harvey (b 1953) sitting in at recording sessions with London’s rock stars, crafting a recorder concerto for Michala Petri and a guitar concerto for John Williams, or composing the ‘Kyrie for the Magdalene’ that became part of the score for The Da Vinci Code. He also has taken his place as an heir to the English choral tradition.

Not all our readers will admire Harvey’s choral fare unreservedly, for he writes as though the Dolby speakers have kicked in and the credits are rolling. When the souped-up echoes in the recording combine with the pop-like sweetness of the melodies, things can become pretty cloying pretty fast. Still, this is music a lot of people like; and when you come
across selections that take it easy on the sweets (‘Ye Dying Gales’ and ‘Evanescence’, for example) you won’t have trouble figuring out why. The guy can write a song.

I’m gathering this was a low-budget affair (no notes, no texts, no booklet) but there’s nothing at all chintzy about the Latvian singers, who sound lush and plush under four different batons. If I were a choir director on the lookout for something warm and fuzzy enough to charm my choir and my audience, I would seek out Richard Harvey.

GREENFIELD

HAWES: Choral Pieces
Revelation; Beatitudes; The Word; Peace Beyond Thought; Let Us Love; The Lord’s Prayer; Be Still; Quanta Qualia
Leslie De’Ath, p; John Johnson, sax; Elora Singers/ Noel Edison
Naxos 573720—64 minutes

Patrick Hawes (b 1958) is Composer-in-Residence at Classic FM, Britain’s main classical music station, and he has written for the likes of Julian Lloyd Webber, Voces8, and the Choir of New College, Oxford. Currently he is at work on a major choral work—The Great War Symphony—which will be premiered at Royal Albert Hall in 2018. All the works on this program are recent, and only ‘Quanta Qualia’ has been recorded before.

Revelation and Beatitudes are extended sets of songs inspired by New Testament writings. The mood of both is placid and prayerful, but varied enough to convey the shifting messages and moods of the texts. In Revelation we hear the anticipation of the Savior’s presence in ‘Coming With the Clouds’, the devout hush of ‘I Saw a New Heaven’, and a dualistic ‘Alpha and Omega’ that manages to be subdued and majestic at the same time. A pianist comes on to accompany the eight Beatitude verses from the Gospel of Matthew. Again the tendency is toward soft and lyrical, but with enough changes of affect to bring the innocence, optimism, and quiet courage of the apostle’s blessings to the fore. There’s also a nice Lord’s Prayer and an attractive ‘Quanta Qualia’ where the sax and a solo soprano are called on to float out the mellow congeniality of the text.

Lindsay Koob and I have admired this Canadian chamber choir in the past, and they are fine here. They gave the world premieres of Revelation and Beatitudes and sing the music like they own it. Texts are included.

GREENFIELD

HAYDN: Cello Concertos; MOZART: Horn Concerto, K 447
Norbert Anger, vc; Dresden Kapellmeister/ Helmut Branny
Querstand 1619 — 65 minutes

The two Haydn cello concertos are well known and often recorded. Anger plays them with taste and polish, taking the finales of both works a bit faster than normal but playing with such effortless accuracy that it works beautifully. His balance with Branny is remarkable and, all in all, these are some of the most enjoyable performances of these fine pieces that I have heard in some time.

The pseudo-Mozart concerto is not as good, though that is the fault of the arranger, the famed cellist Gaspar Cassado, who justifiably felt that a French horn was not the master of technical prowess that a cellist should be. He changed the key from E-flat to D and proceeded to alter a good many of Mozart’s melodies to make them sound lighter and more virtuosic—unfortunately at the expense of the original mood of the work. I don’t want to hear that piece again, no matter how well played it may be on cello. Otherwise, this is a fine Haydn disc.

D MOORE

HAYDN: Piano Sonatas 21, 23, 28, 34, 46
Marcus Becker
Cavi 8553369—73 minutes

This is the fifth Haydn sonata recording to come my way in the last few months. What accounts for this sudden popularity? Certainly the old master deserves it, as his works are consistently inventive, varied, and beautifully crafted. Here is another nice selection, performed excellently by a highly regarded German pianist. The playing is crisp and clean, and Becker seems to be having fun, too. He also wrote the perceptive booklet notes. This release is as enjoyable as Einav Yarden’s (Jan/Feb 2017), and there is no overlap of programs. Haydn lovers should snap up both.

REPP

HAYDN: Piano Sonatas 26, 31, 32, 37, 46; Fantasy 4; Capriccio
Francesco Corti, hpsi
Evidence 31—82 minutes

These sonatas are usually played on piano, but are here on harpsichord. It brings out the rhythm most prominently. Corti has sorted out the way Haydn sets up logical sequences of
events and then throws surprises at us. He has terrific comedic timing, inserting small pauses to make sure the listener pays extra attention to the next gesture. I also hear spots where he goes off-score to repeat a phrase with different emphasis, or in another register, as in an improvised speech. It’s a brilliant performance with plenty of drive and subtleties.

The last piece in the album is based on a folk song about eight butchers trying to castrate a pig. Corti inserts some startling sound effects near the end, adding to the humor. These were made by someone squeezing a dog toy that is in the shape of a pig. (I had to ask.)

The booklet has many photos of Corti. His web site offers generous samples from his earlier solo albums, and will probably have some from this one by the time you read this review.

Robert Hill made another great album of Haydn sonatas on harpsichord (Jan/Feb 2002). The only overlap with Corti’s set is Sonata 46.

Helene de Nervo de Montgeroult was born around Mozart’s time, though in France. Born into an aristocratic family, she managed to survive the French Revolution despite her background (and perhaps because of her compositions) and went on in 1795 to be the first woman professor at the Paris Conservatoire. She published two volumes of music, though she was soon forgotten. Jerome Dorival’s liner notes tell us that she may have been the missing link between Mozart and Chopin.

Stern performs these works fluently and gracefully on an 1860 Pleyel Concert Grand. The Etudes sound rather easy and straightforward, with plenty of echoes of Bach. They seem like sound pedagogical tools with moments of inventiveness. Piano Sonata 9 echoes Mozart yet foreshadows romanticism. I wonder why I had not heard much of her music before.

Editions of her scores are available through Editions Modulation.

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able for its sheer beauty, without sacrificing any intensity. Koim is just as beautiful, even more intense—indeed, his Nocturnal is the most intense I’ve ever encountered. Tolonen’s Britten is just too underplayed.

This is a good way to get all three masterworks on one disc, but don’t miss Dieci or Koim.

KEATON

HIGDON: Viola Concerto; Oboe Concerto; All Things Majestic
James Button, ob; Roberto Diaz, va; Nashville Symphony/ Giancarlo Guerrero
Naxos 859823—63 minutes

Two concertos and a symphonic suite by Jennifer Higdon.

The Viola Concerto (2014) is a romantic work redolent of Barber and packed with long-lined melody and endless lyricism. The faster music (the scherzo-like II and the contrasting sections of the gentle finale) shows a lighter side, but the overall sentiment is contentment.

The Oboe Concerto (2005) is also essentially in three movements, but played without pause. Like the later Viola Concerto, lines are long and gently lyrical, the faster sections playful and somewhat knotty. The lovely finale is clearly American in outlook.

All Things Majestic (2011) is a suite of four pieces inspired by her time out west at the Grand Teton Music Festival. As might be expected, the music is wholly American, infused with the spirit of Copland and Barber (Ms Higdon teaches at Curtis, as Barber did). Like everything else on the program, the music is appealing, but I’m beginning to get the impression that the composer is over-commissoned and engaging in some excess note-spinning. Who’s to blame her? Although none of this will offend anyone, I find other Higdon more vibrant and fresh.

GIMBEL

HOLST: Chamber Music
Barbara Gruszczynska, Harim Chun, v; Aline Saniter, va; Katharina Kuhl, vc; SooJin Anjou, p; Eva Maria Thiebaud, fl; Nicolas Thiebaud, ob; Patrick Hollich, cl; Matthias Seeker, bn; Pascal Deuber, hn
Farao 108098—80 minutes

English composer Gustav Holst (1874-1934) means something different to almost every musician and music lover. Orchestral audiences celebrate his magnificent symphonic suite, The Planets (1920). Wind band aficionados are indebted to him for his beautifully crafted Suites for Military Band (1911) and his brooding and introspective late tone poem Hammersmith (1930). Musicologists regard him as a proponent of the English folk song tradition and a participant in the brief flowering of early 20th Century English nationalism.

His chamber music, though, is often forgotten, perhaps because he completed most of it early in his career. On this release, the Ensemble Arabesques, founded at the 2011 Arabesques Festival in Hamburg, Germany, performs five of Holst’s works for small groups. Drawn from the three major orchestras in the Hamburg area, the ensemble turned an initial one-time collaboration six years ago into regular festival appearances and recordings.

The Quintet in A minor (1896) for oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, and piano and the Sextet in E minor (1900) for violin, viola, cello, oboe, clarinet, and bassoon are serious and ambitious statements from the composer’s student days at the Royal College of Music in London. The Wind Quintet (1903), a rare romantic entry in the genre, foreshadows neo-classicism with Baroque-like structures, but it lay undiscovered until 1978 and unpublished until 1983. And while the Three Pieces (1910) for oboe and string quartet also look backward in form and content—like the Quintet, it has a minuet—the Trio (1925) for flute, oboe, and clarinet looks forward, defined by the austere harmonies in The Planets and Hammersmith.

Do Holst’s chamber efforts belong in the same conversation as his large-scale triumphs? The musicians of the Ensemble Arabesques give a resounding affirmative, delivering skilled, resonant, and committed performances at the highest professional and collaborative level.

In their hands, Holst is no mere pupil; he is a quickly budding craftsman dialed into the pulse of the times. Like Stanford, he absorbs the weight and sonority of the German tradition that had long set the European standard; like Vaughan Williams he adds the immediacy, warmth, and vigor of a new and revived English countenance; like D’Indy he finds inspiration in the past; and like Mahler he seeks a distinct soundscape almost symphonic in scope.

The curious scholar will relish exploring a unique byway in fin-de-siecle European music; the casual listener will welcome fresh additions to the chamber literature. Either way, the 80 minutes of this program will feel more like 8.

HANUDEL
**HOLST:** *Planets;*  
**STRAUSS:** *Also Sprach Zarathustra*  
National Youth Orchestra/Edward Gardner  
Chandos 5179 [SACD] 80 minutes

The National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain was founded in 1948 and draws musicians age 13 to 19 from all over the United Kingdom. It meets three times a year and gives a concert after each session. One is an annual televised appearance at the BBC Proms in Royal Albert Hall. The concert recorded here is from the 2016 Proms. The orchestra is a huge one, about 160 musicians, and it sounds huge in SACD, with a large string section plus doubling of winds and brass.

Technically, these young players are amazing. What may be more impressive is their mature approach to music making and the sophistication of their phrasing. Both performances are solid and straightforward. The main difference between this orchestra and a professional ensemble is the latter’s more sophisticated and larger sounding strings and full-toned solo playing. The reinforcing of parts is noticeable, but less so than you might expect. One can assume that as these players mature, their sound will grow and mature with them.

*Planets* is solid. 'Mars' is on the light side, but some of that may be the conducting because the climaxes are powerful. 'Venus' is one of the more transparent and less misty renditions, with a concentrated string sound and light woodwinds. It reminds me a little bit of Delius. The opening horn solo is small but beautifully centered in tone. 'Mercury' is light and deft with excellent soft playing. The slightly fast 'Jupiter' could use more weight, as the brass is sometimes buried in the complex passages. The sleek big tune would benefit from more gravitas, but this is not the first recording to go for lightness here.

Things step up a little beginning with 'Saturn.' The opening is excellent, the trumpets have a little more presence than they have had up to now—the doubling helps—and the trombone chorale is unusually sweet. The first trombone part is not doubled, making a solo out of the passage, with three seconds and two bass trombones. That suggests that a fair amount of thought went into how parts were reinforced. 'Uranus' is strong and spirited, and it is good to hear a real pianissimo at the end. 'Neptune' could challenge a young orchestra with all its soft attacks, but this orchestra is amazingly good at that, especially given its size.

*Also Sprach Zarathustra* is not as lush and Germanic as many performances, but it is exciting and cleanly executed. The opening fanfare produces its usual grandeur, but it is badly marred by an organ that resonates annoyingly with the rest of the orchestra. The problem comes up later, too, but it is especially bad in the prelude. The strings could be fuller in places, the furious places are furious, and there is expression when called for. The clear reproduction of the basses in ‘Von der Wissenschaft’ is a plus, and that clarity is maintained as the subject is passed up through the basses and the rest of the strings. That is impressive in any orchestra, let alone a youth group. My only complaint is that the trumpet and oboe solos could be louder, but some of that might be owing to the size of the string section around them. The violin solos are nicely executed, though I am sure the player will do more with them as she matures.

The sound is cleaner more detailed, and less reticent than many Chandos recordings. The only drawback is that organ problem in *Zarathustra*.

If these were your only recordings of these works, you would not be bad off. Of course, lovers of *Planets* will want Previn, Mehta, Boult, etc. (British Orchestral Overview, J/F 2010). Lovers of *Zarathustra* will probably want something more Germanic: Kempe, Karajan, or Haitink, Pretre, Reiner (Strauss Overview, May/June 2005).

There are many great professional musicians out there. Many of these players will join them, but will there be groups for them to play in and audiences to hear them? How sad that our supply of musicians is growing, but audiences are not. A friend affiliated with one of the Boston youth orchestras told me that playing in that orchestra may be the high point of those players’ lives. He said it with a touch of sadness.

HECHT

**HONEGGER:** *King David*  
Christophe Balissat, narr; Athena Poullos, Prophetess; Lucie Chartin, s; Marianne Beate Kieland, mz; Thomas Walker, t; Lausanne Vocal Ensemble; Suisse Romande Orchestra/ Daniel Reuss  
Mirare 318—72 minutes

Honegger’s *King David* is a special pleasure of mine ever since I heard the famous Dutoit recording with Christiane Eda-Pierre and Eric Tappy (March/April 1993). Honegger uses compositional techniques ranging from Gre-
gorian chant to baroque to jazz with a libretto that is sometimes contemplative and fiercely dramatic. I’ve seen it staged at least once and got to sing in the chorus another time.

This new recording is superb. Daniel Reuss leads his forces with all the fervor and drama one could want, and he is abetted by an excellent chorus and soloists. Lucie Chartin may not have the distinctive vocal personality that Eda-Pierre or Suzanne Danco (in the Ansermet recording) have, but she sings beautifully. Marianne Beate Kielland and Thomas Walker also sing extremely well and have a grasp of the French language that many non-native speakers don’t possess. As the Prophetess, Athena Poullos “goes for it” to use the American vernacular and turns in a spine-tingling performance. The narrator, Christophe Balisat, tells the story clearly with a well-modulated baritone that is most impressive. The sound is excellent and full text and translations are supplied. If you enjoy this work, you’ll want to add this performance to your collection.

REYNOLDS

IRELAND: Sacred Choral; see BAX Violin Sonata; see Collections

IVES: Piano Sonata 2
Thomas Hell; Sabine Raynaud, fl; Stefanie Dumrese, va—Piano Classics 112—49 minutes

Ives’s Concord Sonata is one of the most monumental American piano works in form and difficulty. Compared to recent recordings by Marc-Andre Hamelin and Jeremy Denk, Hell’s rendering of this odd, experimental sonata (with the optional parts for flute and viola) is just as riveting. An effective interpretation is one that embraces the jagged edges and thorniness of Ives’s textures and weird harmonies—and sometimes Hell is a little too silky smooth and charming. The more delicate, lyrical(ish) moments are his forte. Some of the dense cluster chords demand more rawness. But he should be given credit for this polished and graceful recording.

KANG

IVES: Symphonies 3+4; Orchestral Set 2
Melbourne Symphony/ Andrew Davis Chandos 5174 [SACD] 71 minutes

This is the third volume of the Ives series with Andrew Davis and the Melbourne Symphony. In my review of Volume 2 (Holidays Symphony and three shorter works, July/Aug 2016), I wrote that Davis conducts “grown up” Ives, as opposed to the insouciance of someone like Bernstein, hastily adding that there is nothing wrong with Bernstein. Davis emphasizes the symphonic side of Ives’s music, building carefully and steadily. The sound is typical Chandos: full and rich, but not always detailed.

Davis’s performance of the Fourth Symphony (Thomas Brodhead edition, 2011) joins the Fourths by Leopold Stokowski and Andrew Litton as my favorites. (I’m less fond of Dohnanyi than I used to be.) The reading is large in scale with the usual symphonic breadth that Davis finds in Ives. ‘Prelude’ begins with a muscular piano and sounds like the powerful and thickly scored work that it is. The chorus is more prominent than in some performances, which is fine. ‘Comedy’ is outstanding. Slowish tempos work to positive effect in a movement depicting a rail journey from Earth supposedly to Heaven. The opening is eerie, and the ghostly string passage before the train pulls slowly and powerfully out is chilling. From there, Davis’s slow tempo continues to prove effective, presenting the movement logically and clearly without losing power and complexity. The passage toward the end with the piano figures against quiet strings in the background is gripping, and the conclusion delivers the expected punch. On the downside, Davis’s ‘Fugue’ is one of the weakest I’ve heard. For some reason he adopts a fast tempo, pressing forward as if he is uncomfortable with the Yankee reverence. He seems determined to push through it, though he does make the requisite slowdown at the end. He is back on solid ground in the well scaled Finale.

I conclude with a pet peeve. Ives’s Fourth is scored for four trombones, but he calls for just one (or a horn) in ‘Fugue’. Every performance I know but one, including Davis, complies. The exception is that old wizard Stokowski, who uses the whole section (verified by a video of the performance), and the effect is resplendent. After hearing that, every other ‘Fugue’ sounds anemic to me.

A conductor can treat Ives’s Third Symphony (Camp Meeting) as a chamber orchestra work or on a larger scale. The latter is Davis’s approach, and it works pretty well. I is smooth, flowing, and symphonic with no loss of energy. His similar take on II maintains the spirit, but the performance would benefit from more definition and detail. The slightly artificial sound quality here might be part of the problem. III is rich and warm. This perform-
ance joins my list of favorites with Bernstein, Hanson, and Stern.

Davis is good enough in Orchestral Set No. 2 to be a fine supplement to the James Sinclair recording that I reviewed and praised (S/O 2008). (Both use Sinclair’s edition.) Sinclair is outstanding in the first movement tribute to Stephen Foster. It is mysterious, close-miked to its advantage, and the bass that I once thought might be too much makes it that much better. Davis’s recording is more distant, with far less bass. It sounds almost impressionist. I prefer Sinclair, but Davis is good. Both are good in II. Davis’s recording is closer this time, and his reading is brighter in tone and bolder than Sinclair’s. Davis wins out in III, set in Hanover Square. His treatment of the bells and distant chorus at the beginning is slightly more effective than Sinclair’s, but where he clearly outpoints that recording is in his much slower buildup to the climax when the fate of the Lusitania has really sunk in and is reacted to by the crowd.

The booklet notes are a fine addition to a strong entry in this series. One warning: the index of titles on the back of the box is correct. The one on the disc is not.

JARNACK: In Memory of the Lonely;
see LAKS

JIA: Chamber Pieces 2
Les Amis Shanghai—Naxos 579011—70 minutes

Joubert: Organ Pieces
Reflections on a Martyrdom; Prelude on Old 100th; 6 Short Preludes; Prelude on Picardy; Prelude on York; Recessional; Passacaglia & Fugue
Tom Winpenny—Toccata 398—56 minutes

John Joubert was born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1927. His musical education was nourished by the rich Anglican music tradition at the Diocesan College. In 1950 he was appointed Lecturer in Music at Hull University and in 1962 at Birmingham University, where he stayed until he retired in 1986. His compositions have won him international acclaim and include symphonies, oratorios, concertos, operas, chamber, and keyboard works.

The short, hymn-based pieces are cast in the same mold as Bach’s Orgelbüchlein, with the Anglican hymn taking the place of the Lutheran chorale. The Bachian influence is also present in the excellent 1961 Passacaglia and Fugue, which employs varying textures, polyphonic ingenuity, and an effective dramatic sense. The large-scale 1997 Reflections on a Martyrdom is a programmatic work that uses material from his earlier cantata The Martyrdom of St Alban, commissioned by St Albans Abbey in 1968. The four movements act as reflections on the trial and execution of St Alban in the 3rd or 4th Century.

Winpenny (J/A 2016; J/F 2017) again delivers fine performances on the 1962 Harrison and Harrison (rebuilt 2007-9) in St Albans Cathedral. Excellent notes on the composer and his music (by Joubert and Winpenny), and organ specifications.

American Record Guide
**Joubert:** Choral Pieces
- O Praise God in His Holiness
- O Lorde, the Maker of All Things
- There is no Rose
- Incantation
- Pilgrimage Song
- 3 Portraits
- Be not Afraid
- Sonnet
- This is the Gate of the Lord
- Autumn Rain
- South of the Line

Nicholas Wearne, org; Matthew Firkins, timp; Harry Bent, Stephen Plummer, Miriam Kitchener, George Kirkham, perc; Domonkos Csabay, Gyorgy Hodzso, p; Birmingham Conservatory Chamber Choir/ Paul Spicer

Somm 166—80 minutes

Choral music is at the heart of Joubert’s output and has earned him a place of considerable respect in British music. ‘O Lorde, the Maker of All Things’ and ‘There is no Rose’ are the most familiar to organists and directors and have become staples of the Anglican repertoire. This recording also includes several secular works in their first recordings. The most interesting and effective is South of the Line for chorus, two pianos, and percussion. It is a setting of poems by Thomas Hardy written in response to the Boer War; they evoke compelling and dramatic music from Joubert.

The Birmingham choir is composed of 24 auditioned students and delivers superb performances, including some fine solo singing, of this difficult and challenging music. Excellent notes on the music and texts.

**Kabalevsky:** Colas Breugnon; see Glazounov

**Kaijus:** Quartet 7; Sibelius: Quartet; Tiensuu: Rock

Kamus Quartet
Alba 383—57 minutes

“Different Voices” is a prosaic title for this fascinating release where the Kamus Quartet performs two world-premiere works by Finnish composers working in the tradition of Sibelius, whose quartet is also included. These composers are part of a robust post-Sibelius lineup of artists such as Rautavaara and Salonen.

Jouni Kaipanen’s piece is the more “traditional” in that it returns to the polyphonic and dialogical roots of the quartet in Haydn and Mozart. Inspired by a novel by Volter Kipli and the quartets of Bartók, the piece works through somber layers of sound; but the melodic line, somber and eloquent, is always there. The young Kamus players, never at rest in this busy music, are captured in a transparent acoustic that makes them sound like more than four instruments. Harmonies are basically non-tonal but more in the near-tonality of Berg. The work is rhythmically alive, continually alternating fast, slow, and syncopated sections. In the exquisite ending, the strings sigh and tremble into the stratosphere.

Jukka Tiensuu’s Rock begins with a playful plucked figure thrumming along with silvery harmonics shining above. The mood is decidedly less sober, with a hint of magic and fantasy. Textures are more unified—a “single tapestry”, as the notes have it—as if the four strings are a single instrument.

The performance of the Sibelius is warm, nuanced, and in the fast sections, light and lilte. This is mature Sibelius, compact and organic, which gives it a kinship with the newer pieces. Otherwise, I’m not sure the latter would be easily recognizable as having a Sibelius lineage. Again, the transparent recording allows all voices to be heard.

Lydia Kaipabadse is a contemporary composer of Russian and Greek ancestry whose music as portrayed here is entirely written in modal minor keys. Most of it is for violin, viola, cello & double bass—an interesting combination. The only pieces scored otherwise are the two songs, ‘Spellbound’ (text by Emily Bronte) and ‘Eldorado’ (Edgar Allan Poe). These are sung with beauty by Jess Dandy and accompanied by the quartet. Concertino is an 11-minute work for cello and bass viol in four movements lasting about 12 minutes.

All of this music was written between 2004 and 2015, though you wouldn’t guess that to hear it. It is distinctly influenced by styles of the Renaissance and seems almost totally modal. These musicians of the Sound Collective play it with beauty of tone and conviction. If the unvaried style attracts you, go for it! It attracted me at first, but it is too much in gloomy minor modes to keep my attention.

**Kakabadse:** The Coachman’s Terror; Dance Sketches; Concertato; 2 Chamber Songs; Cantus Planus; Recitativo Arioso & Variations

Jess Dandy, mz; Sara Trickey, v; Sarah Jane Bradley, va, Tim Loewe, vc; Ben Griffiths, db
Divine Art 25149—69 minutes

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**Sullivan**

**D Moore**
KAHKIDZE: Christmas Trilogy; Moon Dances

Alexander Kniazev, v.c; Gustavi Choir; Mdzlevari Boys Choir; Tbilisi Symphony/ Vakhtang Kakhidze—Cugato 27—63 minutes

Georgian composer Vakhtang Kakhidze (b. 1959) studied composition in Tbilisi and in Moscow (orchestration with Edison Denisov) and has become prominent as a conductor (currently of the Tbilisi Symphony).

His wonderful Christmas Trilogy (2003) is a collection of three pieces for the holiday in various styles (Baroque and folk styles from Georgia, Russia, and Germany) for chorus, boy choir, and orchestra. It’s a joyful work with hints of Tchaikovsky, Bach, and Rachmaninoff; but it is unmistakably of its time and place. The opening Gloria is tuneful and utterly irresistible: I couldn’t stop smiling and wanted to sing along. The Elegy is filled with characteristic chant and drones, uncomplicated but moving. The big finale is alternately celebratory, prayerful, and Christmassy, often gentle and beautiful, sometimes a little corny. There is a wild peasant dance played with virtuosity by this enthusiastic orchestra; there is some rough singing by the kids. It is hard not to love. The audience loved it also, as can be heard from the applause.

Moon Dances (1994) is a four-movement suite for cello and orchestra, lovely but inconsequential concert pieces (played without pause). The opening ‘Blues’ is more of a prayer than anything remotely American. The following ‘Waltz’ could be a Tchaikovsky outtake, the limping ‘Scherzo’ easy and cheery. The closing ‘Rondo’ is joyous.

Although this will certainly not explode the new music scene, you would need to be made of steel not to enjoy it. Unfortunately there are no texts or translations; that might prevent this release from getting much attention over here, but that would be a shame, particularly when the holidays roll around in December and listeners need something new to give to their music-loving friends as a stocking stuffer. But don’t wait, unless you are too much of a pretentious modernist to enjoy it.

GIMBEL

KAPRALOVA: Piano Pieces

Giorgio Koukl—Grand Piano 708—65 minutes

Czech composer-conductor Vitezslava Kapralova was a versatile and adventurous artist who died too young to realize her full potential but left behind some impressive music. Her piano pieces are modern but not especially modernist—romantic in spirit but forward-looking in harmony and structure. She has a youthful exuberance—her favorite marking is Vivo—and even the slower music conveys a sense of snap and freshness. The early Sonata Appassionata has a smoldering, melancholy sensibility in I; II is a wistful theme and variations. A gnarly, contrapuntal Vivo ends the piece with clangorous, bell-like chords.

The sonorous tone of pianist Giorgio Koukl is ideal for this piece, and he plays the others forcefully as well. The April Preludes, by turns brittle, mysteriously caressing, and impishly grandiose, represent a decisive harmonic advance; tonality is stretched but not abandoned. Martinu, Kapralova’s mentor, friend, champion, and lover, greatly admired the Variations sur le Carillon De L’Eglise St-Etienne-Du-Mont, and one can see why. The theme is extremely simple, but the variations are dazzlingly unpredictable, including a virtuosic mini-etude and a haunting chorale.

Kapralova could work in varying idioms, as shown by the skillfully crafted neo-Baroque Praeludium and Crab Canon. Even the early Five Piano Pieces, composed when she was a teenager, are worth hearing. The second, a cantabile moderato, is exquisite; the finale, a jagged, rumbly funeral march, all too soon became her own.

The album ends with five miniatures: Autumn Leaves, Two Bouquets of Violets, a Festive Fanfare, a Little Song, and an Ostinato Fox. These go by in precious seconds. We can only wish there were more to the brief life and career of this remarkable composer. Clearly, she was only getting started.

It is another under-appreciated piano composer. The recording of Koukl’s Steinway D, made in Lugano, is big and sonorous. Karla Hartl of the Kapravola Society, founded in 1998 to promote the composer’s music and “to build awareness of women’s contributions to musical life”, is responsible for the authoritative notes.

SULLIVAN

KENNIS; DRYMANS: Sacred Pieces & Sonatas

Utopia & Euterpe Baroque Consort/ Bart Rodyns Phaedra 92093—54 minutes

This new release includes previously unrecorded works by the Flemish composers, Willem Gommaar Kennis (1717-89) and...
Christoffel Drymans (1738-97). The three sacred works by Kennis are relatively modest in scale; the Salve Regina includes two violins, but the Magnificat and Te Deum are scored only for voices and continuo, as is the setting of the Maundy Thursday Lamentations by Drymans. Both composers have created variety through effective contrasts in texture between the full choir and soloists and with different styles, sometimes suggesting a recitative or a more operatic aria. These are interesting compositions in the galant style of the middle 18th Century and are performed one-on-a-part by the six singers of Utopia. While they blend and balance well, these works would have benefited with more contrast between a choral sonority and the sound of the soloists.

For a number of reasons the recordings of the two sonatas by Kennis are disappointing. They are not as virtuosic as Kennis’s somewhat older contemporary, Pietro Locatelli, but share the galant style and elaborate passage work. The effectiveness of the interpretation of the Trio Sonata Op.2:1 in B-flat is marred by the omission of the clear dynamic markings in the original edition. In the violin sonata Op.3:6 in G with Maia Silberstein, she omits all repeats. In the first movement this is rather significant because Kennis supplied an ornamental elaboration specifically for the repeats; but Silberstein has created a mixture of the two, often omitting the more virtuosic double-stop passages.

While the instrumentalists of the Euterpe Baroque Consort are good, they lack the technical polish to make these works sparkle. The booklet is informative, but only Latin texts are supplied.

BREWER

KHACHATURIAN: Symphony 2; 3 Concert Arias
Julia Bauer, s; Schumann Philharmonic/ Frank Beermann
CPO 777972—72 minutes

I’m a bit surprised to have another new recording of Khachaturian’s vast, sprawling, ambitious symphony so soon after the Yablonsky (Nov/Dec 2016). Yablonsky offers a very fine representation of the score, if one doesn’t want to go to the trouble of tracking down the composer’s own recording with the Vienna Philharmonic (Decca).

CPO’s new offering wouldn’t fundamentally change my recommendations, except another recording has come to my attention and has significantly changed my views. After the Yablonsky review was published, one of our readers, Edward Presson, was kind enough to e-mail me some comments that included mention of a Stokowski recording on EMI. I didn’t remember it, and I am sure I had never heard it. I immediately acquired a copy, and I have to say it IS a remarkably exciting performance. Stokie grabs the piece by the throat from the first note and doesn’t let go until the end of the finale 45 minutes later. He takes the listener on a dramatic ride full of thrills and excitement and more than one moment where a crash seems inevitable (but doesn’t happen)—musical brinkmanship at its best.

Beermann’s interpretation avoids brinkmanship and definitely burns at a lower temperature. It is quite similar to Yablonsky’s. The Robert Schumann Philharmonic is a splendid sounding ensemble, though it may not quite have the polish and rich tone of Yablonsky’s Russian Philharmonic. CPO’s sonics are also on par with Naxos’s, though the sound here is a bit more resonant, perhaps reflecting the Lukaskirche in Dresden. In comparison, Stokowski’s Symphony of the Air (ex-NBC Symphony) sounds positively scrappy and a bit undersized in a boxy space. That impression might be caused partly by a dry, rather closely miked, edgy sound. Both Naxos and CPO offer sonics that are richer and more sumptuous.

Like Yablonsky, Beermann keeps the long first movement moving and prevents it from breaking down into disjointed episodes, even if he doesn’t attain the edge-of-the-seat intensity that Stokowski does. Beermann drives his players to put plenty of punch and urgency in the scherzo-like II, but it is not up to Stokie’s level of very Shostakovich-like insistent fury. Beermann and his players do convey the restlessness of the slow movement—this is, after all, a war symphony—without missing out on the few moments of lyrical repose toward the end.

Like the first movement, the finale can get episodic, but Beermann propels it forward without sounding pushy. And he builds the finale to a crushing climax. He, like Yablonsky, has the advantage of a broader, fuller orchestral sound, adding a sense of inevitability and massiveness in IV that Stokowski replaces with restless energy. Different interpretations are still very satisfying.

The best all-around recording may still be Khachaturian’s own, with a balance of urgency and massiveness that merges the best of

July/August 2017
Yablonsky, Beermann, and Stokowski. The composer also had the sumptuous Vienna Philharmonic and Decca’s superb Sofiensaal stereo sound.

I’ve never encountered the Three Arias before. The name “aria” might imply large, dramatic set-pieces, as from an opera. These short works are more an exercise in exploring the voice as an instrument, rather than a deep dive into the dramatic welding of music and text. In his album notes, Kosimo Prutkov points out a similarity in the treatment of the voice to Glieere’s Concerto for Coloratura and Orchestra, which had been published just before Khachaturian composed these songs in 1946. They add up to a lyrical, if not particular-ly taxing 20 minutes of music for the listener—a sunny interlude after the storm-tossed symphony. Russian vocal music can sound harsh, but Julia Bauer sings the solo part with what seems like just the right blend of sweetness and tartness. The texts are by three Armenian poets, translated into Russian.

KHACHATURIAN: Violin Concerto; see GLAZOUNOV

KLETZKI: Symphony 2 MAREK: Sinfonia
Mariusz Godlewski, bar; Polish Radio/ Thomas Rosner
Musiques Suisses 6289—73 minutes

Pawel Klecki (1900-73) was born in Lodz, Poland and lived there during the First World War while playing violin in the local orchestra. In 1917 he went to Warsaw where he studied philosophy and violin. After serving in the Polish army from 1919 to 1921 he moved to Berlin where he studied with Ernst Koch and westernized his name. Wilhelm Furtwangler, his mentor and advocate there, appointed the young man guest conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, but Kletzki was forced to flee the Nazis for Italy in 1933. Arturo Toscanini recommended him for a professorship at the Academy in Milan, but the rise of Fascism drove Kletzki to the Soviet Union, where he served as music director of the Kharkov orchestra from 1937 to 1938. His bad luck contin-ued when purges in that orchestra signaled a move to Switzerland, where he struggled until Ernest Ansermet hired him as assistant conductor of the Suisse Romande Orchestra in 1943. That same year, Kletzki gave up composing for conducting, perhaps because the horrors he was living through, exacerbated by the Holocaust murders of most of his family, numbed his inspiration. Whatever the case, he had a strong career on the podium as a guest conductor and as music director of the Dallas Symphony, Liverpool Philharmonic, Bern Symphony, and, beginning in 1967, the Suisse Romande (right after Ansermet).

His surviving compositions include three symphonies (one source says four), four quartets, and concertos for piano and violin. Many of his scores were lost in the war. The Nazis destroyed the ones he left behind in Germany. Before fleeing Milan for Switzerland, he buried the rest in a box under the basement floor of his apartment building. The building was later bombed, and he assumed those scores were lost as well, but they were unearthed several years later and delivered unannounced to him in Bern in 1965. Kletzki refused to open the box, and they remained sealed until his wife made them available after he died in 1973.

His early works were in the post-Mahler and Strauss realm, but his style toughened as he lived through Fascism and war. His Second and Third Symphonies (1926 and 1939) draw an interesting picture of this trend. Reviewing the Thomas Sanderling recording of the Third, Mark Lehman wrote of its Germanic weight, lithe muscularity, punchy rhythms, and thick, polytonal harmony (Nov/Dec 2004). Stephen Estep called the Thomas Rosner recording “tough and turbulent”, adding “It’s a Herculean task to portray restlessness in music without creating it in the audience, and Kletzki doesn’t quite manage it.” Both found the Third worthwhile but not for everyone. I would add the word “pedestrian”.

Symphony No. 2 is another matter. It stretches tonality pretty far, but it is an interesting and attractive work. It is less thorny and hard boiled than the Third. The music is heavily and forcefully rhythmic, but it is also more harmonically and texturally inspired than the later work. In I, an angular theme sets off an angular fugue. A quiet section is broad, ruggedly lyrical and chordal, but still angular. Another is exploring and reflective, leading to a burst of frustration. What seems like a long recapitulation (the movement is almost 19 minutes long) is set off by the horns’ powerful statement of the fugue theme and that is followed by a return to the quiet section. This is music that wanders about but at the same time seems tightly constructed. The ending is proud and defiant.

The Andante Sostenuto begins reflectively then breaks out into a fugue in the spirit of the
previous movement, the business of I apparen
tly not completed. The material alters be
tween reflection and outbursts until finding
peace at its end. The Scherzo combines hard,
workmanlike fugal sections with two themati-
cally related playful trios. The finale, set for
baritone and orchestra, is the treasure here.
The text is from Swiss writer Carl Stamm, and
the music is much closer to the rich romanti-
cism of Mahler and Zemlinsky’s Lyric Sym-
phony than to the earlier movements. This
finale could stand alone and is the most elo-
quently and appealing part of the symphony.

Czeslaw Marek (1891-1985) was born in
Przemyśl, Poland but raised in Lvov. He stud-
ed composition in Vienna with Karl Weigl and
in Strasbourg with Hans Pfitzner. He accepted
a piano professorship at the Lvov Conservato-
ry but fled to Prague when World War I broke
out. He moved to Switzerland in 1915, where
he began a career as a piano virtuoso before
returning to composing. He tried the director-
ship of the conservatory in Poznan, Poland but
quickly returned to Zurich. Marek quit com-
posing in 1933 and devoted himself to teach-
ing.

The Marek works I know are romantic in
an approachable, pleasant way that I associate
with Scandinavian romantics of that time. Sin-
fonia is atypical. Marek entered it in the 1928
International Schubert Competition. It fin-
ished second and was well accepted for a
while before falling out of the repertoire, prob-
ably because a Polish composer did not appeal
to the Nazis. It was rediscovered in the 1990s
and hailed by critics. This is its second record-
ing.

It is in one movement in sonata form. Marek
called it a “synthesis of neoclassical ten-
dencies with a lyricism related to early roman-
tic spirit and derived from Polish folklore”.
Annotator Chris Walton describes it as
“French-Slavic, impressionist-inspired neo-
classicism”. It does maintain a neoclassical
clarity, but it is larger in scale and more emo-
tional than works usually characterized as
neoclassical and sounds closer to post-Mahler
and Straussian neoromanticism. The most
obvious influences are Szymanowski and the
folk-like works of Bartok. Marek’s half-hour
Sinfonia is a big, complex, and vibrant gushing
of romanticism by a large orchestra. It is not
filled with memorable melodies, though the
Polish folk tunes, often treated in Bartok’s folk
style, are attractive. There is no denying that its
emotional content, complexity, and variety of
color sweep the listener along and repay repeated listening.

Anyone interested in accessible 20th Cen-
tury music should enjoy these works. The per-
fomances are first rate, and the sound is full of
color and presence. The booklet notes are well
written. More detail about the composers and
music would be welcome, as would a transla-
tion of the Stamm text.

Knowles: Guitar Concerto: Visiones de
Andalucia; Poetry Serenade (excerpt); Poco
Rondo; A Fond Farewell
Craig Ogden, g; James Gilchrist, t; Opera North/
David Angus
Rubicon 1002—60 minutes

Let me say this initially: this music is very
beautiful and best enjoyed without reading the
notes (except the poetic texts). I did not know
Brian Knowles (b. 1946) before this. He is a liv-
ing, Irish-born composer, probably best
known for a song series, Poetry Serenade,
where he sets some of the greatest poems in
the English language. He really has the sound
of a film composer. He excels at the big,
romantic gesture, though he relies too much
on unison with the soloist (as does Puccini).

The problem with the notes is that they set
up the wrong expectations. The concerto is
compared to the Rodrigo Concierto, and it shouldn’t be.
Rodrigo’s concerto is profound, an expression
of the highest virtuosity. This work sounds
quite simple, which is no criticism. It may take
a place as Guitar Student’s First Concerto
That’s Not By Vivaldi. The orchestration lacks
Rodrigo’s magic and subtlety—it’s very wind-
heavy, and at first I thought it might be for
symphonic band. To his credit, he makes no
attempt to match the Rodrigo Adagio—aban-
doning all attempts to sound Spanish. The
movement actually recalls Dvorak in spots,
which I found quite delightful. The last move-
ment returns to Spanish sound. Both I and III
rely very much too much on a mi-mi-re-mi turn,
repeated too many times.

The notes describe the lone solo, ‘Poco
Rondo’, as “fiendishly challenging”. It’s not. It
sounds like a fairly easy Andrew York piece. No
problem with that, and it is quite charming.

The last work, A Fond Farewell is also for
guitar and orchestra. It is achingly beautiful—
it begins with a guitar solo, then the orchestra
comes in, in unison (and at the guitar pitch).
Eventually, the orchestra goes beyond, and it
all leads to a climax with a huge wash of
The best work here is the set of eight songs from *Poetry Serenade*, where Ogdon is joined with famed tenor James Gilchrist. His singing is impeccable, always blending beautifully (though this might also have been helped by the studio). The melodies are lyric and expressive, the guitar parts rather simple. The exception is ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day’, with a nifty guitar interlude in the middle that does indeed sound quite challenging. The poetry is by the greats—Shakespeare for four of the eight songs, the rest from Shelley, Byron, De la Mare, and Burns.

Ogdon handles this music impeccably—he is a well-established virtuoso and can handle far more challenging material than this (M/J 2008). Again, this is pretty music, if not terribly deep, and there’s nothing wrong with that.

KEATON

**Koffler: Piano Music; String Trio; Schöllhorn: Spur**

Martin von der Heydt, p; Zebra Trio; Ensemble für Neue Musik/ Johannes Kalitzke

CPO 777979—78 minutes

Jozef Koffler (1896-1944) was a Polish composer who perished in the holocaust, together with a good number of his works. Fortunately, some compositions have survived, and several recordings have been issued in recent years. This was my first encounter with his music, and I liked it instantly.

After listening to the first work (Trio, Op. 10), I looked at the booklet and was surprised to discover that Koffler wrote in a dodecaphonic style. This string trio is so engaging that I did not even notice the absence of tonality, let alone the use of all 12 pitch classes (which one is not likely to perceive anyway without studying the score). His music is expressive and very gestural, short motives traded between the instruments or employed in contrapuntal fashion. Rhythms are free and varied, and dissonance is minimized by a light and transparent texture. This trio also appeared on an earlier release (Channel 31010, Jan/Feb 2011); that was reviewed by Mark Lehman, who also was impressed.

Three of the four following piano works are similar in style and just as pleasurable. *Musique-Quasi una Sonata*, Op. 8, consists of five short movements, each with a different character. It seems more like a suite to me than a sonata, and indeed the liner notes point out that each movement is based on a different tone row. So be it. What I heard was not tone rows but an interesting melody in unison octaves decorated with arpeggios, followed by a kind of two-part invention, then two dance-like movements, and finally a slow and quiet ending.

The Sonatina, Op. 12, is also light-textured, with a slow movement between two faster ones, and distinctly neoclassical in style, as Mr Lehman also observed in 2011. Ge found the work “cheerful and charming”, as did I. *Variations on a Waltz* by Johann Strauss, Op. 23, are based on a melody from the *Emperor Waltz*. The theme undergoes many contrasting variations. Towards the end there is a long pedal point, which I can assure you consisted of only two tones, not 12. I suspect Koffler used Schoenberg’s compositional system rather freely and adapted it to his style.

The fourth piano work (Op. 6) is from the composer’s pre-dodecaphonic, tonal period, and it is very tonal. It is a suite of 17 Polish folk songs, culled from a larger collection by the pianist, Martin von der Heydt. Koffler’s arrangements are charming, light-textured, and inventive. He often uses register changes, and while Bartok’s example may have had some influence, Koffler’s harmonies are more innocent and less dissonant (except in a vigorous final piece).

I wonder what led Koffler to change from tonality to the 12-tone system. Clearly, his style belongs aesthetically to the 19th Century, and it is a testimony to his skill that he was able to write such engaging music even after relinquishing tonal centers and harmony. But did Schoenbergian techniques make any positive contribution to the aesthetic appeal of his music? If he had stuck with tonality, would his later pieces perhaps have been even more enjoyable?

The final work on this recording is intended as a tribute to Koffler, a kind of rewriting of his Op. 23, but not in a tonal style. Called *Spur* (Trace), it is by a living composer, Johannes Schöllhorn (b. 1962), and played by a chamber
ensemble. The liner notes say Schöllhorn is “playing a game of sorts with the original material, which, as in a palimpsest, shows through”. He “considerably enriches the material, enveloping the whole in sophisticated combinations and sound colors”. Unfortunately, by enriching Koffler’s music, Schöllhorn has lost some of its simple charm and expressiveness. Far from boring, Spur nevertheless struck me as distinctly less appealing than Koffler’s original. Its sonic realm is clearly mid-20th Century, with strings scraping and meowing, a clarinet shrilling, and dissonances enhanced.

The performances are excellent, as is the sound quality. Martin van der Heydt, a specialist in extremely complex 20th Century music, brings as much dedication, sensitivity, and superb musicianship to Koffler’s piano music (which does not sound technically demanding) as he presumably does to Ligeti and Xenakis. The booklet contains fine photographs, artist biographies, an informative essay in German, English, and Polish, and a splendid Schiele painting on the cover.

KESLING: Piano Sonatas 29-32
Kemp English, fp
Grand Piano 732—69 minutes

Since Leopold Kozeluch (1747-1818) wrote more than 50 keyboard sonatas, this series still has a way to go. Its closest competitor is Jenny Kim on Brilliant. These are premiere recordings, the last two published in the year of Mozart’s death. Each of them is of minor interest, though their point of departure is Clementi and Mozart.

The music is conventional for its period and falls short of any measure of sheer genius. While there is craftsmanship with occasional flashes of real creativity, mostly it’s just predictable, dull, and boring.

In discussing an earlier volume (M/A 2014) one reviewer likes the “large sound, tempo choices, and dynamic contrasts”. Another reviewer reporting on Jenny Kim’s recording (J/A 2015) finds her “well suited to the task” but finds the sound too reverberant and too weighted down by mid-range frequencies and calls the music decidedly second-rate.

The use of fortepianos will set off an alarm for some people. As both English and Kim employ the instruments, you should know that the sound is loud, clattery, ponderous and just plain ugly. In addition, it sounds like English’s instrument is coming from the back of a large empty room. The clutter does change for the better when the damper lever is applied, but most of the time listening is wearisome. Kim’s instrument is only slightly better.

English writes his own notes and discusses his choice of instruments.

KREISLER: Violin Pieces
Kees Hulsmann; Marian Bolt, p
Challenge 72749 [2CD] 130 minutes

The selling point of this set is that it claims to contain all of the original works for violin and piano, meaning that there are no arrangements here. I don’t see how that could have anything to do with the listener’s enjoyment.

Kees Hulsmann was concertmaster of the Halle Orchestra in Manchester and of the Rotterdam Philharmonic. He is a fine violinist with personality, and he plays this music very well. Most of the old favorites are here: Liebesleid, Liebesfreud, Schon Rosmarin, Tamborin Chinois, Caprice Viennoise, La Gitana, and the Praeludium and Allegro in the Style of Pugnani. [But not ‘The Old Refrain’—Ed] If a program of Kreisler with no arrangements appeals to you, then this is an obvious choice. I would prefer to hear this music played by Itzhak Perlman, though his recordings include arrangements.

KUHNAU: Sacred Pieces 2
Opella Musica; Camerata Lipsiensis/ Gregor Meyer
CPO 555020—67 minutes

Michael Maul states in his notes that the purpose of the projected complete recordings of Johann Kuhnau’s sacred music is to rectify our negative impression of his music—in essence “to disembarrass him of the ‘Musical Horribiliscribifax’ tag pinned to him by early historians”.

Although Kuhnau’s church cantatas sound less inspiring than the works of his successor JS Bach, the singers and instrumentalists do their best; the quality of their performance is high. His sacred vocal works hold an important historical place in the transition from the concertato works of Heinrich Schütz’s era to the sacred cantatas of Bach’s time.

Many of the sacred works Kuhnau composed as Thomaskantor (1660-1722) have been lost, yet the cantatas here testify to his understanding of form and style. Lobe den Herren, Meine Seele, for chorus, strings, cor-
nettos, trombones, and continuo, harkens to the concertos of Kuhnau’s predecessors. The archaic sound of Christ Lag in Todesbanden is due in part to the use of cornetts. The arias, though, already express the operatic style Bach embraced in his cantatas. Setting the chorale melody in cantus firmus style in the first aria, while the cornetts spin divisions around it, resonates with Bach’s later practice in similar chorale movements. Kuhnau uses a similar method later in the opening sonata for Lobe den Herrn, Meine Seele (tr. 17), where he states the chorale in longer note values in the oboe d’amore while the violins spin divisions around it. The plaintive sighing figures in the chorus ‘Gott, der Vater’ sometimes lapses into a kind of sameness. The program concludes with the Pentecost cantata Schmücket das Fest mit Maien. Texts and notes are in English.

LAKS: Sinfonie; Sinfonietta;
JARNACH: In Memory of the Lonely
NFM Leopoldinum Chamber Orchestra/ Hartmut Rohde
CPO 555027—51 minutes

Simon Laks (1901-83) was born in Poland; he went to Vienna and then to Paris in 1929. He was arrested by the Nazis in 1941 and taken to Auschwitz II-Birkenau, where he directed a prisoners’ orchestra. David Jacobsen reviewed his Violin Sonata and a few other pieces (EDA 31, May/June 2011) and described him as mostly “Ravel meets Chopin” and noted a use of jazz harmonies. Well, the Sinfonie and Sinfonietta, both for string orchestra, are nothing like that. The gestures and harmonies in the Sinfonie’s first movement remind me a lot of mid-1980s Christopher Rouse, just without the violence. It starts with a low bass line and builds through the rest of the strings; it ends with that same line, and it sounds like a sped-up Gorecki Third Symphony. It fairly dissonant but never grating, even though the material is nearly atonal and I rather like the effect. Like I, III moves along at a fair trot, and its harmonies are cut from the same cloth as the rest of the piece. Laks’s rather stern tone and logic also bring Hindemith to mind.

The Sinfonietta is, as its name would suggest, a bit lighter, a bit less serious—maybe Ravel introduced to Hindemith by Milhaud (and while I’m on the subject, I do find a lot of puns and humorous exaggerations in Hindemith’s instrumental sonatas; I always enjoy accompanying them). It has the subtlest hints of jazz now and then, and III is rather pleasant and summery. IV is spunky and sounds the most French of all. I do think the Sinfonie is a more interesting piece even if it’s almost dour; part of the problem is that the orchestra plays the Sinfonietta far too seriously and heavily.

Philipp Jarnach (1892-1982) was a German composer who studied with Busoni; he completed Doktor Faust after Busoni died. Musik zum Gedächtnis der Einsamen was originally a string quartet; the notes don’t say who did the arrangement. It is serious, philosophical, and effectively structured; and the climax is emotional but still restrained.

It would be difficult to imagine a better performance of Laks’s Sinfonie and the Jarnach, and the sound is excellent. String orchestras usually wear on my ears after about 15 minutes, but not this one.

LOEWEN

American Record Guide

LALO: Symphonie Espagnole;
see TCHAIKOVSKY

LASSUS: Motets
Studio de Musique Ancienne/ Andrew McAnerney—ATMA 2746—60:32

This is the first recording by the Studio de Musique Ancienne of Montreal with their new director, and it is a wonderful homage to both Christopher Jackson and his exploration of lesser-known repertoire. While Lassus is well known, these works for 6 to 12 voices have not been often recorded and require the same virtuosity as the 12-voice Et Ecce Terrae Motus Mass by Brumel or the multi-voice works that were typical of the Vatican choirs in the early 17th Century, both of which this same ensemble recorded with Jackson (S/O 2014 & J/F 2012: 238).

While Jackson had earlier recorded Lassus’s reflective Lagrime de San Pietro (M/A 2011), under McAnerney’s direction there is an impressive clarity of textures in his more extravagant motets, such as the 12-voice Laudate Dominum Omnes or the 10-voice Aurora Lucis Rutilat’ in the Te Deum for six voices, both because of the alternation between polyphony and chant and Lassus’s inventive variety of permutations and combinations between the voices, the 15 minutes of this setting are completely engaging. In contrast to some of the more recent small-scale recordings of Lassus (N/D 2014 & M/A 2015), this is sonic balm for my ears.

BREWER
LASSUS: Officium Pro
Omnibus Fidelibus Defunctis
Capella Foccara
Perfect Noise 1503—44 minutes

This is the first recording of the 1575 edition of Orlando de Lasso's four-voice Requiem. This source, preserved in the Benedictine Abbey of St Ulrich and Afra in Augsburg, is important, as the notes attest that it is the most authentic version of Lasso's Requiem. What makes this edition of the Requiem remarkable, moreover, is that it is notated fully a fifth lower than other editions, placing it in the range of the tenor and lower male voices that would have been accompanied by trombones and dulcians. The sound of this music is powerful if also unusually lugubrious, anchored by the "basso profundo" voice of Burkhard Kosche. Lassus was a musical alchemist, well known for his experimental spirit. The cycle of motets titled Prophetiae Sibyllarum (c. 1560) and 'Anna Mihi Dilecta' (1579) are outstanding examples of some of the chromatic extremes of his experimentation. Setting the Requiem for a male choir and low instruments, Lassus almost certainly intended to experiment with the mournful character of the text. It is beautifully performed here by tenor Gerhard Hölzle, baritone Felix Rumpf, and basses Hans Ganser and Burkhard Kosche. Notes are in English, but the well-known texts are translated into German only.

LEHRMAN: Songs; MANDELBAUM: In Sainte-Chapelle; Quartet 2: pieces
Helene Williams, s; Alexander Mikhailov, bar; Leonard Lehrman, p; Meridian Quartet; St Petersburg Symphony/ Vladimir Lande
Ravello 7951—76 minutes

Leonard Lehrman and Joel Mandelbaum are American composers of Jewish-Russian descent; they've been friends for decades, and each performs the other's pieces once or twice on this program. Mandelbaum wrote his Prelude for piano when he was "17 and just learning to substitute fourths for thirds". It is amusing and contrapuntal and often resembles something from Shostakovich's Preludes and Fugues. Eight of Lehrman's songs in Russian follow—'Benediction', 'Me & Russia,' 'My University', 'Winter Morning', and 'Untitled', as well as a set called Songs of Birds. One is for soprano alone, one for soprano and English horn, and the others for one of the soloists with chamber group or orchestra. So there's a good bit of variety. The Shostakovich influence is fairly strong; the settings are effective and natural but a little too safe.

Mandelbaum's Chaconne is a short, pleasant piece for a rather wobbly orchestra. In Sainte-Chapelle was inspired by that church's stained glass windows depicting the events of the book of Revelation. It was also a response to the 9/11 attacks, but one that seeks to guide toward resolution rather than stir indignation. Mandelbaum considers it his "most representative work on this recording". I would never have imagined it to be remotely related to either apocalypses or terrorists; it is placid, dull, and with barely a hint of any drama. I kept checking the track listing to make sure I was describing the correct piece.

Lehrman's Elizabeth Gurley Flynn Love Song Cycle is for soprano and piano, with an accompaniment more concerned with wandering around the vocal line rather than supporting it. That may not be a bad thing at all, but this recording makes the cycle unappealing. The acoustic is as dry as a practice room, which does nothing to mitigate the effects of a poorly tuned piano and Williams's voice—it's not unpleasant, but it lacks resonance and isn't physically grounded.

Of his quartet, Mandelbaum said, "Though I have found no satisfaction in composing serial music, I did once entertain the thought: 'What if the serialists are right?' This was my one attempt to put my own stamp on serial procedures." The piece is lyrical and easy on the ears; Mandelbaum conjures a sense of tonality and even continuity from his tone rows much of the time. The way the first movement takes flight and vanishes into the sky is really well done. If dances and flirts, and III is like the creature who flew away in I coming back to earth all discombobulated. It's the best piece on the program. Though not demanding, it is barely in the reach of the Meridian Quartet; they veer nearly into amateur playing a few times.

I'll gladly keep this for the quartet and the Russian songs. Notes are in English.

LEIGHTON: Organ Pieces, all
Stephen Farr—Resonus 10178 [3CD] 3:18

Kenneth Leighton (1929-88) was an important composer for the organ, and one whose works challenge both the player and the listener. As I said about an earlier recording of his organ works (Naxos 572601; S/O 2011), a great deal of
his music seems to embody a spiritual and emotional struggle towards a victory that is hard-won. The music is often ferociously dissonant, but not gratuitously ugly. The anguished harmony and counterpoint move toward a goal that cannot be reached any other way. Sometimes the victory is not attained and the music ends in darkness, but there is always a deep engagement with the listener. Leighton said, “I’m very much a romantic...there’s a very emotional attitude behind it all.”

In his notes to this recording, Adam Binks gives a fair amount of biographical detail and direct quotation of the composer, much of it from a published interview of 1979. The composer stressed the importance of his experience as a boy chorister at Wakefield Cathedral beginning in 1938 that “left some of the most vivid impressions in my mind” as part of a “marvelous musical training”. It is not surprising that sacred choral works account for a good deal of his output. Another powerful influence is hymnody, including metrical psalm tunes and plainsong. While some composers may be dismissive of hymn tunes, Leighton was almost in awe of them: “The power of a great hymn tune is immortal—it spans the centuries and crams into a few notes the spiritual experience of a whole civilization.” Most of his organ works from the 1970 on are based on hymn tunes or chant. He also contributed five new tunes to the third edition of the Church of Scotland’s Church Hymnary (1973).

Most of Leighton’s organ works were written on commission, and apart from accompaniments he did not write for the instrument until his 30s. His first solo organ work is also one of his most ambitious: the Prelude, Scherzo, and Passacaglia, Opus 41 (1963), commissioned by Bryan Hesford just before his appointment as organist of Brecon Cathedral in Wales. Leighton was teaching at the University of Edinburgh. He asked his colleague Herrick Bunney, then organist of St Giles Cathedral and university organist, for advice. They met at the console of the romantic instrument of McEwan Hall, and Bunney showed Leighton “roughly how an organ worked, what made it tick.” He also lent the composer scores of modern organ compositions, specifically Marcel Dupré. Not long after, Leighton completed the piece for Hesford. It is one of his most impressive works.

It is astounding that Leighton, not himself an organist, wrote so idiomatically for the organ. He composes with the colors of the organ, but he does so entirely in organ terms. He treats the organ as an instrument in its own right, not an imitation orchestra as so many in his position are apt to do. At the same time, he leaves many registration details to the performer.

In addition to the Prelude, Scherzo, and Passacaglia, Leighton’s larger scale solo organ works are Et Resurrexit, Opus 49 (1966), Missa de Gloria, Opus 82 (1980), written for the first Dublin International Organ Festival and based on Sarum plainchant melodies for Easter Day, and Veni Redemptor, Opus 93 (1985) for the North Wales International Music Festival, based on a plainsong hymn. To these may be added the Six Fantasies on Hymn Tunes, Opus 72 (1975), dedicated to Herrick Bunney. It is worth noting that he also wrote a Concerto for Organ, Strings, & Timpani (1970).

Several of Leighton’s shorter solo organ pieces were commissioned by Oxford University Press; these include Fanfare (1966), Paean (1966), Ode (1977), and Rockingham (1975). Elegy (1965) was commissioned by Bryan Hesford and published in a collection by Novello. Other shorter works are ‘Festival Fanfare’ (1968) for the first West Riding Cathedrals Festival, ‘Improvisation in Memoriam Maurice de Saussmarez’ (1969), and ‘Veni Creator Spiritus’ (1987) for the Dunfermline Abbey Festival.

Beyond the solo organ works, the present recording includes ‘Martyrs: Dialogues on a Scottish Psalm Tune’, Opus 73 (1976), a substantial organ duet commissioned by the Organ Club for its 50th anniversary. John Butt collaborates with Stephen Farr. ‘These Are Thy Wonders’ (A Song of Renewal), Opus 84 (1981) is a setting for tenor and organ of a poem by George Herbert. It is sung here by Nicky Spence, and this is its first recording. The Fantasy on ‘Es Ist Genug’, Opus 80 (1979) is for violin and organ, played here by violinist Chloe Hanslip. Stephen Farr concludes the recording with Improvisations ’De Profundis’, Opus 76 (1977) for harpsichord. Leighton, who was an accomplished pianist and harpsichordist, gave the first performance in Edinburgh. With his organ compositions, Leighton displays great understanding of the possibilities of the instrument—especially the lyrical possibilities. He intended the work not for a modern instrument with pedal stops, but for a harpsichord of 18th-Century design, specifically the 1769 French double by Pascal Taskin in the Russell Collection, reputedly the most copied harpsichord in the world. It is played here on a copy of that instrument.

Most of the organ works are performed on the 1992 Rieger organ (3 manuals, 57 stops) in

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St Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh. It is a classically conceived instrument, but large and varied enough to play a wide variety of repertory. It is well suited to the works of Leighton. The whole of the second disc here is recorded on the 2001 Klais organ (4 manuals, 82 stops) at Symphony Hall in Birmingham. The two instruments are quite similar. Farr plays the organ part of the Fantasy on ‘Es Ist Genug’ on the Henry Willis organ (4 manuals, 51 stops) at St Paul’s Church, Knightsbridge, London, where he is director of music. As heard here, that organ has a gentler tone than either the Rieger or Klais. The violin is remarkably prominent, and I wonder how much of the balance is natural and how much obtained from the mixing board.

Stephen Farr’s distinguished career has taken him around the world as soloist and continuo player. He has a special interest in contemporary music, and this recording of the collected organ works of Leighton must be regarded as a major achievement. He displays a profound understanding of this repertory and delivers consistently coherent performances of music that most emphatically was never intended for casual listening. It would be rash to say that these performances will never be surpassed, but readers with a serious interest in the works of Leighton will not go wrong with this set.

LEVINA: Piano Concertos
Maria Lettberg; Berlin Radio/ Ariane Matiakh
Capriccio 5269—57 minutes

Ukrainian composer Zara Alexandrovna Levina survived two world wars, the Russian Revolution, and Stalinism, including pressure from the infamous Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians. Through all this she forged a strong, personal, distinctively Russian style, both in instrumental and vocal music. By her death in 1976 she was a respected figure, though today her works are still little known to a larger public.

This recording of her two remarkable piano concertos seeks to remedy that neglect. The pieces are very different, the first extroverted and overtly romantic, the second introverted and quirky; yet both have the same musical personality and even share some of the same motifs.

Concerto 1, from 1942, is exuberant and affirmative, with a dollop of Russian melancholy. It plunges right in with an aggressive idea for piano, soon joined by a sumptuous orchestra. The central melody has a passionate lyricism similar to Rachmaninoff, as does the glittering piano virtuosity. The middle section offers more intimate, dreamlike music, some of it quite gorgeous. Il is gentle and pensive, with a huge climax in the middle and a somber cadenza. The finale is sunny, flashy, and festive; the soloist gets a real workout. The impish sections for brass and winds sound a bit like Prokofieff. Pianist Maria Lettberg handles all the challenges skillfully, with big technique, rich tone, and a generous sense of fantasy; the orchestra plays with lushness and abandon.

Concerto 2, Levina’s final work as well as her favorite, is more subtle and enigmatic, colored by bells and haunted by funeral marches. The opening, with its hesitant thumps and barks, could not be more different than in 1. Much of the writing in this single-movement work is searching and dreamlike, sometimes approaching silence in its rapturous stillness. Levina was suffering from acute heart problems when she wrote it, and much of it sounds like an elegy. Still, the piece rises to a boisterous, affirmative conclusion, a stirring affirmation of life. This is surely one of the last works in the Russian romantic tradition. For that reason alone it deserves to be heard.

SULLIVAN

LIGETI: Cello Sonata; see BLOCH

LISZT: 12 Grandes Etudes
Wenbin Jin, p
Naxos 573709—73 minutes

Liszt certainly wrote his share of etudes. This set of 12 dates from 1837 and, while similar, should not be confused with the 12 Transcendental Etudes of 1851. Liszt actually wrote three versions and this is the second. As studies for the Transcendental set they will sound near identical to most listeners. With the prevalence of the final set on record, these are rarely heard or played in concert. If you already have the Transcendental Etudes you may not need these.

When recording the complete piano works (this is Volume 45) it is necessary to cover all bases. Keith Anderson’s absorbing notes do cover many of the differences between the versions; and Jin, Associate Director of the Performing Arts center at Beijing’s Keystone Academy, has the technical equipment to handle all of the immense difficulties.

BECKER

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July/August 2017
Hector Berlioz introduced Franz Liszt to Goethe's *Faust* (in Gerard de Nerval's French translation) in 1830. Liszt responded with a few sketches for a work on the subject, but got no further. In 1842 he moved to Weimar, the city of Goethe, where he was thrown into constant contact with the Faust legend. Still he hesitated, writing once that "Anything to do with Goethe is dangerous for me to handle." In 1852 Berlioz conducted his own *Damnation in Faust* in Weimar. Two years later, George Lewes (companion of writer George Eliot) visited the city to research his biography of Goethe. Liszt accompanied him and in doing so broke his creative log jam. He finished *Faust Symphony* in two months and dedicated it to Berlioz. Later he made some revisions and conducted the premiere in 1857. Hans von Bulow conducted it in 1861 but turned harshly against the work after that. No one else took it up until Felix Weingartner performed it in the late 19th Century. The work did not really gain traction until the mid-20th Century, thanks mainly to Thomas Beecham and Leonard Bernstein.

*Faust Symphony* is one of Liszt's two greatest orchestral works (the other is *Dante Symphony*). It is also a work ahead of its time. Its unusual structure is based on three movements that serve as character portraits ('Faust', 'Gretchen', and 'Mephistopheles') with themes used in one movement appearing in others. 'Mephistopheles' has no themes of its own, so it devotes its time to destroying Faust's. In addition to that novel structure, the work opens with a tone row (before Schoenberg) and uses a whole-tone scale (before Debussy). In 'Gretchen,' Liszt treats the orchestra as separate chamber groups—an idea later taken up by Mahler and Strauss. Liszt was also one of several romantic era composers (with Wagner and Bruckner) whose scoring forced orchestras to develop more technical capacity and color. Alan Walker's excellent biography of the composer devotes 30 pages to the progressive qualities of Liszt's orchestration.

Under review is what I believe is the first "historically informed performance" (HIP) of *Faust Symphony*. It is latest in a series of Liszt's orchestral works by the Vienna Academy Orchestra led by Martin Haselbock. I have not heard the others, but Steven Haller reviewed some (J/A 2011; J/F 2014; M/J 2012). The orchestra is small to medium-sized and plays romantic era "period" instruments, eschews vibrato, and employs blunt, somewhat slashing attacks and other tricks of the HIP trade.

Given the forward-looking spirit of Liszt in general and *Faust Symphony* in particular, it is worth asking whether there is a point to such a performance. Well, HIP performances are pretty good at eerie and creepy, mainly because of the vibratoless strings, and they can be effective in exciting, aggressive passages. Both those qualities prove out to an extent in 'Faust,' a movement of mystery, brooding, aggression, turmoil, and pride. Haselbock seems comfortable with it, his tempos work, and he catches the varying emotions pretty well. The aggressive spots can be heavy-handed, but the music can more or less take it. Even a person who does not like HIP performances will find things to like here, though hearing it often may be another matter.

'Gretchen,' on the other hand, fails utterly. If any movement needs the warmth, expressivity, and color of a modern orchestra this is it, and the lack of vibrato and the shrill violin tone is fatal. Early in the movement, Gretchen's main theme is sung by the oboe over a winding viola—in this case, a whining (and annoying) viola. When the "garden" music is scored for string quartet, there is no magic, no warmth, and no image of a garden. Haselbock's unnecessarily fast tempo and the lack of effective phrasing or expression sounds like he was in a hurry to get through it all. The excitement written into 'Mephistopheles' augers for something better, but its grotesquerie comes off as mostly spiky, brittle, and eventually wearing and tiresome.

Two things that are not problems here are the orchestra's playing and the recording. Both are fine. The notes are adequate but nothing special.

This might explain why Von Bulow turned on the work with such hostility. It may even suggest why it did not catch on until the 20th Century, when orchestras were capable of producing all its color and complexity. If Liszt could hear the great recordings of Beecham, Bernstein, and Solti, and then the Haselbock, I can imagine that he would ask: "Why we would you settle for the strident, edgy sound of my time when your orchestras can produce a *Faust Symphony* more glorious than even I could have imagined?"
From HIP we move on to what we might expect to be an even more limiting performance: a piano transcription of Faust Symphony. Of course, Liszt produced many of those—and not just of his own music. They were the only way people of his time could hear orchestral music. For Faust he produced a two-piano score plus a solo piano version of ‘Gretchen’. I have heard neither, but the two-piano one was positively reviewed by Mark Koldys (July/Aug 1990). The single piano transcription heard here was produced by favored Liszt pupil, 16-year old Carl Tausig. It is one of 11 the teenager made of Liszt’s tone poems and symphonies. This performance by Istvan Lajko is its first recording (I think).

I am no fan of piano transcriptions of orchestral works, and I certainly did not expect much from one of a score as colorful and elaborate as Faust Symphony. Istvan Lajko would have it otherwise. He is a great pianist. His impeccable technique produces clarity and power. The tonal palette is balanced, perhaps not as dark as some listeners may prefer, but it works well, to the point of making the piece seem almost French sometimes. Lajko’s inward and intimate interpretation may not be to everyone’s liking, but he is one of those great musicians who can pull in an audience by playing a C-major scale, and the pull of his Faust Symphony is irresistible. It becomes a great work for piano, similar and perhaps even equal to Liszt’s Piano Sonata in B minor. The opening seems tentative, but once Lajko settles in, the performance takes hold. ‘Faust’ is well balanced. ‘Gretchen’ is like listening to a dream. ‘Mephistopheles’ is on a par with ‘Faust’ until the final moments where the piano cannot conjure up the otherworldly music of redemption that only an orchestra, tenor, and chorus can supply. Even so, Lajko does it as well as I imagine anyone can.

The sound is convincing. Zsuzsanna Domokos’s excellent and essential booklet notes go into important detail about Tausig’s adaptation. There are at least two more solo piano Faust transcriptions—one by Ervin Nyiregyhazi, the other from August Stradal.

LISZT: Operatic Fantasies
Chiyang Wong, p
Linn 561—70 minutes

Liszt’s fantasies based on operatic themes seem to be all the rage these days. They are highly creative, extremely virtuosic, and most enjoyable to listen to. They venture far beyond mere transcriptions.

Hong Kong born Wong, now living in England has been the recipient of numerous awards and has been active on the European musical scene for the past decade. He has chosen four of these monsters and has edited them in Horowitz-like fashion to reflect his own thoughts and ideas. These are for macho fingers, in macho style, but follow the orgiastic spirit of the originals to increase the virtuosic content.

The shortest fantasy (12 minutes) is Grande fantaisie sur des themes de l’opera Niobe de Pacini—Divertissement sur le caverne I tuoi frequent palpate, S. 419. Quite a mouthful, and quite an earful as well. I don’t think everyone will be humming Pacini’s themes after hearing this, but it is certainly enjoyable enough—and impressively over-the-top, as it should be. I loved every juicy second.

In the Halevy fantasy (themes from La Juive) Wong is again at his octopus-like best as fistfuls of notes go flying in every direction. It’s all very exciting, and this pianist knows just what to do to avoid anything sounding like empty rhetoric. It is all performed most seriously, but with enough bravura and flair to bring down the house.

The two Mozart based pieces are better known, especially the Don Giovanni Fantasy. Wong uses the Busoni edition as his point of departure. The Fantasy on themes from Figaro and Don Giovanni is a potpourri of joyful elation.

The pianist’s own notes give us increased understanding, though they do not reveal the many text changes. The piano is a Steinway D, beautifully recorded at the Wyastone Concert Hall in England. Do not miss this one.

BECKER

LISZT: Paganini Etudes
Wojciech Waleczek, p
Capriccio 5276—81 minutes

Besides the Grandes Etudes de Paganini (Revised version, 1851) and the Transcendental Etudes after Paganini (Original version, 1838) we also have the Variations on Paganini’s Carnaval of Venice.

Polish pianist Waleczek has taken many international competition prizes and has appeared with many symphony orchestras. Playing Liszt requires great digital control and rock-steady technique. Anyone without these qualifications had best avoid entering into this
The challenges for violinists performing the original pieces are great. Liszt’s piano transcriptions are uncannily pianistic and sound wonderful. Waleczek holds nothing back. ‘La Campanella,’ perhaps the best known of the etudes, is tossed off with seeming simplicity. Even the great Simon Barere makes us aware of the effort required. Here is playing that rarely pushes the tone or applies a little more stress to get through the difficulties.

The sound is natural and a testament as to what can be accomplished these days of superior technology. If only the notes were more extended to give details on each one of the etudes. Otherwise this makes for an impressive addition to the never-ending growth of Liszt recordings and a true bargain as well.

LISZT: Totentanz; Mazeppa; Battle of the Huns; Les Preludes
Duo Tsuyuki & Rosenboom
Odradek 329—64 minutes

This is clearly noted as performances by four hands at one piano. It is refreshing to see clear, honest labeling. It is important in this case because the composer made and published different versions of his symphonic poems both for one piano 4 hands (or piano duet) and 2 pianists at 2 pianos. As many as 20 years separated the arrangements. Totentanz was published in two versions for piano and orchestra, later arranged by the composer for 2 pianos (soloist and orchestra parts) and also an incredible version for solo piano. The version here for one piano, 4 hands is by Tsuyuki and Rosenboom and sounds like it began with Liszt’s solo piano version and added a significant amount of musical and percussive material.

Liszt is often credited as the inventor of the symphonic poem. Besides the piano duet and 2 piano versions, most were also arranged for solo piano by Liszt as well.

I once saw an old concert program that had Liszt and Saint-Saëns playing Les Preludes on two pianos—O to have seen that one!

Tsuyuki and Rosenboom present four works in very good performances, and the difficulty level at one piano is greater than at two. The two players are constantly competing for the same middle octaves of the piano. "Play your notes and get out of the way." Proper piano hand position goes out the window when musical lines played by different hands cross. I have had to play with the back of my hand flat against the fall board, wrist directly above the fingers pointing straight down and at the far back of the keys. This makes room for my partner’s fingers, just barely on the front of the keys with the wrist hanging below the level of the keys, to play a crossing line.

The symphonic poem arrangements are difficult to find on records. The Totentanz arrangement is performed exceptionally well, but presents a few aural items that need to be discussed. Tsuyuki and Rosenboom are very honest about using prepared piano techniques in their arrangement. They aim to imitate drums, the rattling of bones, and heavenly harps. The softest of these sounds (heavenly harps are just the slow strumming of high strings inside the piano) are out of the ordinary enough to catch your attention. The rapping on wood, scraping the bass strings, drumming with the palms of your hands on the bass strings add all to the sonic picture. Musical additions include secondary lines in many of the cadenza figurations, octave doublings, and the like. This is guaranteed to be a unique performance but might not please purists.

HARRINGTON

LISZT: Wagner Transcriptions+
Imogen Cooper, p
Chandos 10938—75 minutes

Cooper has been striking out in all directions as she seeks to discover new repertory. Here her attention turns to Franz Liszt and some corners of his world few have managed to explore. While she has turned her back on the composer’s notorious display elements, she deserves much praise in daring to do so.

Opening with the rarely performed Valse Oubliee 2 she immediately attracts our attention with her light-hearted charm in skittering over the notes and phrases. After this, her performance of the composer’s transcription of ‘Gretchen’ from the Faust Symphony (almost 20 minutes) is a real surprise. Not only is it rarely heard for solo piano, but it is totally void of any virtuosic elements or splashy display. If I prefer the orchestration I do not wish to denigrate her achievement.

Four pieces from Annees de Pelerinage II: Italy are drawn, not from the virtuosic portions of the travels, but from the more laid back and expressive ones. ‘Sposalizio’ is concentrated and moving, ‘Il Penseroso’ sombre and sor-
rowful. Things brighten up a little for ‘Canzonetta del Salvator Rosa’ but return to intense beauty with the famous Petzrach Sonnet 104. The latter also brings forth the first bit of what we can call display in the recital.

Nuages Gris comes next in all its composer’s late cryptic harmonic glory followed by Wagner’s Elegie—just as cryptic, and a deaf bit of pairing. By now we are ready for the meatiness of Wagner’s ‘Tristan Prelude,’ heard in a transcription by recently deceased Zoltan Kocsis. Low and behold, it is a rather gaunt transcription, with Cooper always holding things in check lest they spill over emotionally.

‘La Lugubre Gondola’ pushes the harmonic button further towards ambiguity, and his transcription of the ‘Liebestod’ can be emotionally draining but is ultra refined in execution. The program closes with the ‘Bagatelle Without’ Tonality,’ an amazing piece that helped point the way towards new harmonic horizons.

It’s hard to believe that a program such as this would have much broad appeal. Perhaps to a musician or a specialist willing to forego Lisztian rhetoric and Wagnerian splendor. The extensive notes are apropos, and the sound is superb. I just prefer more meat on my musical bones.


delcamp

LODÉR: Piano Pieces
Ian Hobson—Toccata 321—71 minutes

No doubt calling her Kate Lodér (1825-1904) would elicit a serious frown from her well-known surgeon husband, Henry Thompson. Back in the days of Victorian England it would have been the proper thing to refer to her as Lady Thompson, and we all know that proper ladies do not revert to their maiden names.

Besides, she agreed to give up her career as a performer after they got married. To be fair, Henry went along with her playing in private, and was not averse to musical parties at their London home.

Kate’s formative years included attending the Royal Academy of Music on scholarship and composition studies with Cipriano Potter and George Macfarren. Her time spent composing was not an impediment as long as it did not interfere with her married obligations.

The 24 studies were originally conceived as a way to induce students to develop their keyboard technique, and not for public performance. That they have just enough harmonic and melodic interest to engage the listener is a testament to the lady’s talent.

I’m not saying that these studies should be accepted in the same way as Schumann, Chopin, or Liszt—they are not in the same league, and were never intended for the concert platform. That they can be listened to without hating the experience is positive comment on its own. While most listeners will find them pleasant though a bit of a trial, they do show their limitations, and they best suit their pedagogical purpose. There are a few that stand out from the rest. No. 12 from the first book is really lovely, and the first study from book 2 is similar in sound to one of the Schubert Impromptus. The second set also brings more extended and interesting compositions.

Five additional short works from a later date round out the program and have greater interest for the listener. Veteran pianist Hobson plays all with much charm and conviction, making this music pleasant, if unremarkable. Sound and notes are very fine.

Becker

July/August 2017
LULLY: Persee
Mathias Vidal (Persee), Helene Guilmette (Andromede), Katherine Watson (Merope), Tassis Christoyannis (Phinee), Jean Teitgen (Cephee), Marie Kalinine (Meduse), Marie Lenormand (Cassiope), Cyrille Dubois (Ethiopiene, Mercure), Chantal Santon-Jeffrey (Ethiopiene, Nymphe Guerriere, Venus); Le Concert/ Herve Niquet
Alpha 967 [2CD] 108 minutes

Now here is a novel challenge to the librarian’s cataloging and the critic’s explaining.

Jean-Baptiste Lully set the libretto of Philippe Quinault, presenting the Greek mythological story of the hero Perseus, his killing of the gorgon Medusa and rescue of his beloved Andromeda, for presentation in Paris (and then at Versailles) in 1682. It was a great success, and part of that success was its revival over the following 65 years. These days we tend to give our attention to a Baroque opera’s original production or to a later version prepared by the composer. Revivals in general rarely interest us, but here is a remarkable example of a revival we should pay attention to.

In 1770, after great delays, the long-planned full-scale theater at the royal palace of Versailles was finally completed. Its opening on May 16, 1770, served also to celebrate the wedding of the Dauphin, the future Louis XVI and his Austrian bride Marie Antoinette. By that point, almost a century after Lully’s time, that composer’s reputation remained great but his style and theatrics were out of date. It had become common for his works to be revived in updated revisions, and this was quite strikingly so in the case of Perseus.

Quinault’s libretto was extensively revised, changing a lot of his poetry, and above all the structure: the original prologue, linking the heroism of Perseus with the triumphs of Louis XIV, was eliminated; and the action was cut down from five acts to four, making Perseus and Andromeda symbols of the prince and his bride. As for Lully’s music, only about half of it (mainly vocal writing) survived, but new material was interpolated. The instrumentation was augmented and dance episodes were added. To carry out the musical revisions, the score was partitioned out to three musicians of the day who were skilled in such “renovation”. Antoine Dauvergne (1713-97) was assigned Acts I and IV, Francois Rebel (1701-75) Act II, and Bernard de Bury (1720-85) Act III. The result was no longer an opera by Lully but a work effectively by four composers. How’s that for complexity?

This rare exploration of “renovation” practices is presented admirably. Niquet is a sensitive exponent of Baroque music, and he can understand well the transitional elements in this mixture of styles. He also has a generally very fine cast, which works hard to etch the personalities of the characters. Vidal is not particularly suave, but he certainly makes for a vigorous hero. Soprano Guilmette is outstanding as a feisty and multi-dimensional Andromede, and Lenormand is appropriately anguished as her mother, Cassiope. The role of Merope was drastically cut in the revision, but soprano Watson makes a good showing in what is left. Mezzo-soprano Kalinine nicely conveys both the regretful and horrific character of Meduse. Bass Christoyannis is not strong of voice and he sounds rather understated as the villain Phinee, but tenor Dubois is really quite dashing in the significant role of Mercure.

The excellent chorus has a ball with all the added dance sequences, and the period orchestra captures the colors of French orchestral writing between Rameau and Gluck.

The excellent recording was made in April of 2016, in the very Versailles theater where this 1770 version was first performed. The release is packaged in an elaborate bound-book format: excellent notes and synopses, with full libretto and translation, all among lavish and beautiful illustrations. (My one quibble is that the envelopes holding the discs are so tight that it is extremely difficult to get them out.)

There is already, of course, a superlative recording of Lully’s 1682 original conducted by Christophe Rousset, with an excellent cast led by the incomparable Paul Agnew (Astree 8874: S/O 2002). That serves not as competition for this new release, but in fact as a perfect comparative resource for this relatively rare opportunity to study the evolution of French operatic practices.

BARKER

LUTHER: Hymns
Calmus Ensemble
Carus 83.478—69 minutes

In time for the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, the Calmus Ensemble has organized a second program around seven of Luther’s most famous chorales. Another recording titled Mitten im Leben 1517 was reviewed earlier this year (May/June, p 195).

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This program more or less follows the liturgical year: for Reformation Sunday, ‘Ein Feste Burg ist Unser Gott’; for Advent, ‘Nun Komm, Der Heiden Heiland’; for Christmas, ‘Christus Wir Sollen Loben Schon’; for Candlemas, ‘Mit Fried und Freud ich Fahn Dahin’; for Easter ‘Christ Lag in Todesbanden’; for Pentecost, ‘Komm, Gott Schöpfer, Heiliger Geist’ and ‘Verleih uns Frieden Gnädiglich’. To add further to its solemnity, the recording was made at night in the Thomaskirche (Leipzig), where, according to Ludwig Böhne “Martin Luther’s theology reaches out and touches people almost every day through the music of many composers, but most of all through JS Bach’s music”. It is an homage to Luther’s chorales, beautifully sung by this five-voice ensemble.

At this point, one should note that “Collage” is interpreted by the Calmus Ensemble to represent the broad relevance of Luther’s chorales for audiences from Luther’s time to the present. Some works, like Carl Putti’s ‘Choralvorspiel’ to ‘Christum Wir Sollen Loben’ were originally composed for organ; Calmus adds wordless vocalizations. The only part of the recording that remains in Luther’s time is the first, alternating stanzas 1 and 3 of ‘Ein Feste Burg’ with a motet setting by Stephan Mahu (1485-1546). A setting of ‘Nun Komm’ by JS Bach is followed by settings by Schein, Praetorius, JCF Fischer (1656-1746), and Gunnar Eriksson (b. 1936). There are eight settings of ‘Christum wir Sollen Loben’, going as far back as Luther’s chant model ‘A Solis Ortus Cardine’ and continuing through settings by Guillaume Dufay (1397-1474), Bach, and Carl Putti (1846-1902), among others. Settings of ‘Mit Fried und Freud’ also cover a long time period, from Johann Walter (1496-1570) to the romantic works of Mendelssohn, Brahms, and Reger. With the settings of ‘Christ Lag in Todesbanden’ by Johann Eccard (1553-1611), Johann Walter, and Bach, we are back firmly in the Renaissance and Baroque. We hear ‘Komm, Gott Schöpfer’ in the form of the original Latin chant ‘Venit Sancte Spiritus’ and then in settings by Johann Calvisius (1556-1615), Balthasar Resinarius (1485-1544), and Johann Eccard. The program concludes with settings of ‘Verleih uns Frieden Gnädiglich’ by Schütz, Pärt, and Luther’s original chorale. Texts and notes are in English.

MACMILLAN: Stabat Mater
The Sixteen; Britten Sinfonietta/ Harry Christophers—Coro 16150—60 minutes
James MacMillan’s Stabat Mater (2016) sets the sorrowful text with the requisite despair and mournful sentiment. Tears abound, lines fall, lashings are felt. The people shout in anguish. There is a distant storm. Chaos and resignation result. Glimpses of Christ emerge occasionally and are followed by prayer and eventual salvation before everything fades into silence.

This is a substantial contribution, though it is demanding for listeners and performers alike and is unlikely to replace the classic works. It is not for the casual or uncommitted, so it might not be universal enough to pass the test of time despite the shameless hyperbole attached to it, particularly by conductor Christophers.

Notes by the composer. Texts and translations. Excellent performances. The work is preceded by the chant.

GIMBEL

MAHLER, A: Songs;
MONTANARO: Canto di Penelope
Catherine Kroeger, s; Monica Lonero, p
Brilliant 95469—64 minutes
Alma Maria Schindler (1879-1964), a central figure in Vienna’s cultural and social life, married composer Gustav Mahler, 19 years her senior, and after his death married architect Walter Gropius and later novelist Franz Werfel. Having studied with Zemlinsky, Alma had already established herself as a composer before she met Gustav, but she consented to his request to give up composing on the grounds that it would create unhealthy competition in their marriage. In the midst of a marital crisis, it took Sigmund Freud’s intervention to persuade Gustav to encourage Alma to continue composing. These songs reveal a talented composer with a strong lyrical gift.

It’s been a while since an album of Alma Mahler’s songs has been released. This one includes all 15 songs published in her lifetime and one long song, ‘Canto di Penelope’ by Patrizia Montanaro (b. 1956).

Kroeger and Lonero, as indicated in the notes, “have long championed female composers and performers, particularly ones previously disregarded or neglected”. Their commitment to women’s music is admirable, but Mahler’s songs deserve a better vocal exponent. The interpretations show sensitivity to the texts,
but Kroeger’s voice is monochromatic and harsh, lacking the warmth and expressiveness needed. Far more satisfying is soprano Isabel Lippitz’s 1987 performance with pianist Barbara Heller-Reichenbach (CPO 999018).

The best thing about this release is Montanaro’s piece, which calls for a vocal technique very different from the lyrical grace needed for lieder. Montanaro composed this 22-minute work for her friend Kroeger, setting a text by Rosario Lo Russo imagining the 20-year period while Odysseus was away. Much of the drama is in the accompaniment, which Lonero performs admirably.

The worst thing about this release is that no texts are included. They are available on the Brilliant website, but it took me a while to find them, and even then they are poorly laid out, all first in the original language then in Italian translation and next in English. Unless you print out the pages and cut and paste them side by side you cannot follow the text and translation at the same time.

MAHLER: Symphony 2
Olena Tokar, s; Hermine Haselböck, a; Czech Philharmonic Choir of Brno; Lille Orchestra/ Jean-Claude Casadesus
Evidence 27 [2CD] 84 minutes

Judging from the liner notes, this release is primarily a tribute to Casadesus and the Lille Orchestra, of which he was the founding conductor in 1976. This performance was recorded in concert in November 2015, just before the conductor’s 80th birthday.

In the notes Casadesus (who, by the way, is a nephew of pianists Robert and Gaby Casadesus) relates his close affinity for Mahler’s music, dating back to student days. He does a fine job with the *Resurrection Symphony*, maintaining tension through long, arid sections like the opening to V and gauging climaxes well. The orchestra plays well, though they sound a bit small and some of the instrumental solos lack the luster we hear with major orchestras. Both soloists have fine voices though I wished Haselböck had scaled back her instrument through much of ‘Urlicht’. The chorus sounds very good, though I could have sworn their initial entrance was humming, and shortly thereafter I wondered if only a few singers were actually applying consonants to the words! In addition the chorus, as mixed in the Nouveau Siecle Auditorium in Lille, sounds too distant. Put all this together, and I’d say my response is lukewarm.

But more about the notes. We have a lovely 24-page booklet, filled with pictures and information about the conductor and the orchestra. As for the soloists, nothing. As for the music itself, almost nothing. As for texts and translations, neither. As I said above, this seems to be a tribute to the conductor and the orchestra.

R MOORE

MAHLER: Symphony 3
Gerhild Romberger, Bavarian Radio/ Bernard Haitink—BR 900149 [2CD] 101 minutes

This 2016 performance is at least the seventh Haitink Mahler 3. The first was with the Concertgebouw and Maureen Forrester in 1966 and was the sweetest, freshest performance of the work until Eliahu Inbal recorded it in 1985. Since then we’ve had Haitink recordings from Amsterdam in 1983, Berlin in 1990 (twice), Amsterdam in 1995, and Chicago in 2006.

The performances are generally similar—none as fresh as that first one. The Chicago had some inert moments. The BRSO sound is leaner and brighter than the Concertgebouw or Berlin and more engaged than Chicago.

Romberger is an outstanding alto soloist: her voice is rich and steady and beautifully dark in tone. Her expression is superb as well. She’s in the same league as Haitink’s previous altos, which is to say first-rate.

In all, this is a wise and beautiful performance of this work, but if you have a Haitink Mahler 3, you don’t need to replace it with this. If you’re coming to his vision of this work for the first time, this is as good as any. That old Concertgebouw is magic, but the newer ones are richer and deeper.

Haitink’s is not the only way to play Mahler, but when it works (as here) it produces lovely results.

CHAKWIN

MAHLER: Symphony 3
Ewa Marciniec, a; Mainz Cathedral Choirs; Rheinisch Philharmonic/ Daniel Raiskin
Cavi 8553325 [2CD] 101 minutes

There is nothing much wrong with this, but it fails to “reach” me, to move me, the way a few great recordings do (Bernstein, Lopez-Cobos, Horenstein). I think the sound is too dry and clear—has no atmosphere or depth. The soloist is droopy. The choirs sound big, but that doesn’t make much difference.

ALTHOUSE
orchestra is also big, supplemented by musicians from the Mainz Philharmonic. But there is no spread or warmth to their sound. It is what current writers call “focused”—that is, a thin, tight line. This can be such gorgeous music if the strings, above all, are warm and rich—and they are not.

I say there is not much wrong with this because the conducting is very good, as is the playing. Maybe the conductor could have built a few passages more majestically and made a few climaxes more of an arrival. It is hard to pin down exactly why this fails to move me; I have just given you a few possibilities.

M A H L E R: Symphony 3
Gerhild Romberger, a; Canremus Children’s Choir; Bavarian Radio Choir; Budapest Festival Orchestra/ Ivan Fischer
Channel 38817 [2SACD] 97 minutes

“There is something divine in the wealth of this great masterpiece.” So says the conductor in his brief note here. And he conducts it as if he believes that. (I believe that; it’s probably my favorite Mahler symphony.) Compared to the other recording (above) this feels more profound, more mystical, more deeply rooted in the spiritual. It’s not “just music” here.

It also helps that Jared Sachs (the producer and engineer) has given us glorious sound in a real place—it makes the above recording sound unreal, sterile, disembodied. It is no surprise that the orchestra is excellent; listening to this you will be reminded that they are one of the world’s great orchestras.

All the tempos and timings seem normal, but the last movement is definitely faster than favorite performances from the past. It takes around 21 minutes, and the only others I know that were that fast are Solti and Tennstedt. Solti, in fact, is about 19 minutes (definitely too fast); and the DG Bernstein is 28—those are the outer limits. Who besides Bernstein could sustain such slow tempos? But some other conductors take 26 minutes or so. The 21 minutes here doesn’t seem too fast because the give-and-take, the ebb and swell, seem ideally judged. No expressivity is lost, as it often is with fast tempos. BUT: I really do miss the drawn-out ending of my favorite recordings—say the last three minutes. AND: I really want a warmer, richer string sound.

Apart from that I can’t find anything to question or criticize in this recording. It may not belong at the very top in every respect, but it is certainly among the top five or six recordings.

M A H L E R: Symphony 7
Dusseldorf Symphony/ Adam Fischer
Cavi 8553349—77 minutes

This is the first installment of a new Mahler cycle from these performers. Hungarian conductor Adam Fischer is the brother of Ivan Fischer, who has recorded several Mahler symphonies. If both Fischers complete their Mahler cycles, they would be the first brother tandem to do so, as far as I know.

One topic that Adam Fischer discusses in the booklet notes is Mahler’s famously precise performing instructions in his scores and how they annoyed many musicians, including Fischer. The conductor confessed to putting his own irritation aside when he concluded Mahler was “usually right.” Then comes this interesting statement. “Mahler’s music stems from the same world as Haydn and Mozart. He expresses the same emotions as Haydn—only he had another kind of orchestra at his disposal. When I conduct Haydn, I want to bring out the Mahler in Haydn, and when I conduct Mahler, the Haydn in Mahler.” Fischer has certainly conducted a lot of Haydn: remember his complete set of the symphonies with his Austro-Hungarian Haydn Orchestra for Nimbus (later on Brilliant). In the booklet to the Brilliant edition, in a passage that has some bearing on the new Mahler venture, he discussed the Austrian and Hungarian influences on Haydn.

Fischer’s stylish Haydn set (on modern instruments) was generally well received by ARG in several reviews. Many people prefer it to Antal Dorati’s Haydn set, though I like both. A few years later he conducted a complete Mozart symphony set on Dacapo with the Danish Chamber Orchestra, also playing modern instruments, but in a “period” style that included vibratoless strings, slashing, heavy attacks, and pounding timpani (justifiably eviscerated by Don Vroon, Nov/Dec 2009 & Jan/Feb 2014). It is hard to believe the same person conducted both sets, and I cannot help but wonder what the full story was with the Mozart.

So which Adam Fischer do we get this time? Fortunately for Mahler, it is the Haydn one. This Seventh is as classically oriented and youthful a reading as I have heard. It may be perfect for someone who has found the Seventh difficult. Fischer lays down a well-formed structure and a concept that is clear from the
opening measures—I thought "classical" even before reading his essay—and his statements about finding Haydn in Mahler come across. Mahler’s Seventh has been referred to as the Song of the Night, and I have seen it characterized as a progression from darkness to the light of the finale. None of that applies here, because there is nothing nocturnal about this performance. If anything, the mood all through the piece is fresh and light-hearted. One might even want to refer to II and IV as Nachtmittagsmusik (afternoon music).

The orchestral weight is light for Mahler. Textures and instrumental detail are clear, with strong woodwind presence. Clean and well-sprung rhythms produce a march that is spirited and jaunty. There is none of the heaving and hauling some conductors apply to the phrasing (often effectively). Tempos move along, and the orchestral sound is well balanced, tipping slightly to the top in the violins. Things fill out a little in "moonlight". The piece picks up power at the trio between bass and tenor trombones and euphonium (played more grandly here than I’ve heard anywhere), and from there it continues to the triumphant conclusion.

The nachtmusiks bear the classical stamp even more strongly. Both are cleanly produced with tight ensemble and clear detail, particularly in the winds. Nothing is exaggerated. The march rhythm in the first and the dotted rhythm in the second are crisp and marked. Their lyrical middle sections are warm and sing nicely with good flow. The first is particularly jaunty, with pungent timpani commentary. The exemplary horns are well placed front and back (or so they seem), though the cowbells are too distant. The second Nachtmusik is more wistful. The conversation between basses and flutes and the following dialog between trumpet and winds are conversational. One problem is the nearly inaudible mandolin (though some people might find that a plus).

The Scherzo follows suit, though it is more deliberate in the spirit of a good-natured Haydn minuet with a graceful interlude. This movement is often described as spooky, but that does not apply here. As usual, ensemble is tight, and the darting about and quick rhythms are major assets. Fisher makes excellent use of the comic and grotesque properties of the bassoons—perhaps more than most conductors—but the tuba is too light. A serious major contrast is supplied by the broad trombones toward the end. The mincing seems closer in this movement, and that adds sharpness to the execution.

One way to deal with the rambling finale is to maintain solid structure and avoid exaggeration—take a classical approach, as Fischer does. I’m not so sure of that any more, but it works here. This is one of the fastest finales out there, but it is also solid and well structured, with good energy and warmth. Not only is it classical in outlook, it is stately but not too serious. The opening is very good, even powerful. From there Fischer keeps the abundance of ideas coming, allowing the festivities to roll on without excess commentary; and the ending is as celebratory as one could ask for. This is not the only way to do this finale, but if done well, as it is here, it works.

Fischer was appointed Principal Conductor of the Dusseldorf Symphony in 2015, and the ensemble responds very well to him. If the strings seem a little lean, that may be by design. The sound is good and clear. Unless my description puts you entirely off, I recommend this performance both for its qualities and because it is unique and warrants investigating. The only recording I know that is in any way like it is from Markus Stenz, and that one is more strictly paced and less youthful than the Fischer. Otherwise, the recommendations of our Mahler Overview hold up well—even the first Bernstein recording, which I finally made my peace with. A special recording for me is the earthy and imperfect one by Jan Starek with the Czech Radio Orchestra (Jan/Feb 2015). It is not for everyone, and nothing at all like the Fischer.

HECHT

MAHLER: Symphony 9
Bavarian Radio/ Mariss Jansons
BR 900151 [2CD] 81 minutes
North German Radio/ Kurt Sanderling
Hanssler 17007—80 minutes

I can’t find much to like in the Jansons. It’s one of those surfiacy bland readings that he gives from time to time. He did a previous 9 with his old orchestra in Oslo that wasn’t fully realized, though it had an unforgettable color change early in the first movement when the music suddenly darkened. This one has some good playing, but not as good as earlier by this orchestra with Kubelik, Colin Davis, and Maazel. A Mahler 9 like this isn’t worth 80 minutes of your life.

This is my third Sanderling Mahler 9. First was a 1979 Berlin Symphony on the Berlin label (S/O 2002); second was 1982 with the BBC Northern Symphony (J/A 2008). The first
was lethargic and badly recorded. The second was considerably better, though a little rushed at the climax in IV. (There was also a slow and dreary 1992 Philharmonia performance.) This 1987 Hamburg concert is the best of them. It has the virtues of the BBC and paces the finale’s climax better.

That said, it’s still not one of the great performances. The best movement is I, as usual in this symphony. The good news is the sturdy, solid playing (I hear a kind of Schmidt-Islerstedt firmness and plain-spoken beauty in the sound) and a good playing-out of the drama of the three big assaults, the last a catastrophe that leaves devastation, but some hope of rebuilding, in its wake.

The limits of Sanderling’s vision are on display in II in a few measures in which the cellos get to do their version of the upward sweep that starts the movement. Almost everyone else has them dig in at the low notes that start it; sometimes the resin practically flies out the speakers. Why? Because it’s a gritty and earthy sound that gives the music the kind of muddy-booted flavor that Mahler seems to have written into it. Sanderling will have none of that: “Cellos, play your notes and no show-off stuff, if you please.” That stolidity is the obverse of the integrity and discipline of this performance—the defect of the virtue and vice-versa.

The building storm of mania in II is medicated so that it won’t hurt itself. The crawling chaos of III is understated so that the beauty of the interlude that is its trio has little to relieve us from, and the landscape where IV appears is a lot less scorched than in most performances.

IV itself is well done, but not spectacular. The outer-space bleakness and fiery passion of the Karajan concert performance on DG are unimaginably far from this decent, dedicated performance. But I was haunted by the vocal quality and the pathos of the voices calling and answering as they dissolved into silence at the end.

CHAKWIN

MAHLER: Piano Quartet; see BRAHMS

MAJERSKI: Concerto-Poem; Piano Quintet; Cello Sonata; Piano Pieces

Arkadiusz Dobrowolski, vc; Michal Drewnowski, p; New Art Chamber Soloists; Scottish National Orchestra/Emil Tabakov

Toccata 344—61 minutes

Tadeusz Majerski was born in Lvov (now Lviv, Ukraine) in 1888; he studied for a few years in Leipzig and was offered a position at the Lvov Conservatory on his return, a position he held until he died in 1963. In the mid-to-late 1930s he was a proponent of dodecaphony, though his variety of it stood well apart from Schoenberg’s. The Four Preludes and Three Pieces, both for piano, are the only pieces from that period on the program. He was accused of formalism in the late 1940s, and his writing afterwards followed a clearly tonal path.

The single-movement Concerto-Poem for piano and orchestra was written in 1946, performed in 1947, revised in 1956, performed again in 1957, then left on the shelf. In 2008 one of Majerski’s relatives gave Drewnowski some of his manuscripts, and our pianist reconstructed the Concerto-Poem from several scores and gave the Polish premiere in 2008. Emilian Madey corrected some harmonies and fixed some problems in the orchestration in 2009. It often sounds like Prokofiev’s Third Concerto, and some of the piano figures resemble Rachmaninoff, though they lack his elegance. It is effectively shaped, colorfully orchestrated, and attractive; but it wanders in the development process, and the themes don’t have Prokofiev’s irresistibility.

The Piano Quintet, “In the Form of Variations” and “in modo antique”, was written in 1953, and it is staunchly tonal. If I heard it on a drop-the-needle test, I’d guess it was written by a German composer in the 1860s. Majerski did use some Polish folk flavoring in it, though, and its beauty makes more of an impression than the Concerto-Poem. I think it should be more viscerally thrilling.

The Cello Sonata (1949) begins with a slow, austere, ascending processional that almost could have come from Paul Ben-Haim’s Mediterranean School; II is more virtuosic and has themes that are easily grasped. Aside from the dark mysteries of the harmonies, it isn’t very compelling, and the ending is not satisfying.

The Four Preludes take us into Majerski’s 12-tone world, but I doubt even the most astute listeners would spot that. Majerski used pedal points, repetition, and sequences to keep everything tonally grounded. The mood is quite serious, but the preludes are well written and enjoyable, especially the fourth one, a will-o’-the-wisp that barely breaks the 30-second mark.

La Musique Oubilee: Three Musical Pictures is an ephemeral, melancholy set. The Three Pieces, grouchy but not inhuman, consist of an ’Etude’ from 1963 and an ’Unsentimental Waltz’ and ’Prelude’ from 1935.

The musicians all play very well, and the
sound is fine and clear, though the thump of the piano’s sustain pedal is a little too prominent. Notes are in English. There are no undiscovered masterpieces here, but Majerski’s music should still be heard. I’ll certainly pull it off the shelf now and then.

**MALIPIERO:** Oriente Immagine; see Collections

**MANDELBAUM:** In Sainte-Chapelle; see LEHRMAN

**MARAIS; SAINTE-COLOMBE:**

Viola da Gamba Pieces
Paolo Biordi—Dynamic 7783 — 68 minutes

The viol compositions of Marin Marais and Sainte-Colombe are the most important and satisfying of the early pieces for that instrument. Marais wrote five volumes of music for viol and basso continuo; and Sainte-Colombe wrote three collections found in libraries in Geneva, Edinburgh, and Tournus (Burgundy). Most of the works by both composers were for two viols or one with a basso continuo line. This recording gives us some recent discoveries of music for unaccompanied viola da gamba, the Sainte-Colombe pieces from the Tournus manuscript, the Marais from a Panmure manuscript that seems to be earlier than the five official books. In other words, you probably have not heard this music before.

Paolo Biordi plays a seven-stringed gamba and is recorded clearly and naturally. His style is effective and satisfying. There have been more exciting players, but no one has covered this material before.

**MARTINU:** Cello Pieces
Rossini Variations; Ariette; 7 Arabesques; Suite Miniature; Nocturnes; Slovakian Variations
Meredith Blecha-Wells; Sun Min Kim, p Navona 6092—59 minutes

*Small Storms* is the title of this recording. It contains most of Bohuslav Martinu’s small-scaled music for cello & piano played with individuality and enthusiasm by an American female cellist and a South Korean pianist. Martinu wrote a good deal of cello music, including sonatas and concertos. What we have here is almost everything else.

The music is lively and entertaining and I would be glad to recommend these performances if it weren’t for the fact that there is another recording that covers the ground more persuasively. That is the 2001 recording by Michal Kanka and Jaromir Klepac (Praga 250143). That reading by two Czechs is more natural. It may be a little hard to find today, but it is well worth looking for. If it has disappeared, this new release is well played and recorded with clarity, though it doesn’t capture the folk idiom of the music as strongly or naturally.

**MATTHEWS,D.:** Trios 1-3;

*Journeying Songs*
Gemma Rosefield, vc; Leonore Trio Toccata 369—75 minutes

These are the complete piano trios of David Matthews (they date from 1983-2005). Matthews is an excellent composer and should be better known in this country. His music is tonal in the modern sense; his acknowledged influences include Shostakovich, Vaughan Williams, and Britten; I also hear Prokofieff and Tippett. Structures are clear and engaging; all is expressive and brilliantly wrought. The outlook is cleanly classical, with Beethoven as a seminal figure; but Matthews has a compelling and original voice.

1 (1983) is in four movements. All of it is based on its opening gesture. I approximates a sonata form, II a march-like scherzo, III an expressive adagio, and there’s a moderate and visionary finale, with classical trills appearing underneath. The influence of Beethoven is clear.

2 (1993) is also in the traditional four movements, with an energetic sonata form I, a memorial II (for the death of his friend: shades of the *Eroica* in its design), an intense scherzo reminiscent of Prokofieff, and a resigned finale ending with a presto coda disappearing into the distance (again a Beethoven reference).

3 (2005) is in two movements, perhaps like Beethoven’s Op. 111. I juxtaposes three contrasting ideas. They conclude with a firm triad. The searching finale concludes with serene triads.

In sum, these are truly significant additions to the genre and should become repertoire items for enterprising groups looking for impressive unfamiliar material.

The program concludes with *Journeying Songs* (2004-8), three pieces for solo cello dedicated to friends and colleagues. The outer

**American Record Guide**
The mention of Mayr’s name often brings forth the comment “He’s the guy born in Germany as Johann Simon Mayr who spent most of his career in Italy as Giovanni Simone Mayr.” His dates were 1763-1845. He taught Donizetti the tricks of opera composition, which the younger composer brought to near perfection. Both composers covered (littered?) the operatic landscape with comic operas, serious operas, and an in-between genre, the dramma giocoso. Both composers picked up some extra change by writing a lot of church music. Most of Donizetti’s operas have been recorded at least once. Soprano divas have taken up the cause too. As for Herr-Signor Mayr, many of his operas have been recorded but usually only once. And they have been staged, but again mostly only once and under festival conditions. Conductor Hauk now taken up the cause, traveling from festival to festival promoting Mayr’s music—and saving it for posterity via recordings.

Amore Non Soffre Opposizioni translates to “Love Will Not Suffer Opposition”. But it could also be “Love Finds A Way” or “Where There Is Soprano, There Will Be a Tenor Too.” For this comedy the ever-prolific Mayr set a text by the also prolific Giuseppe Maria Foppa, who must have worked fast and cheap.

The recording is quite fine except for the stratospheric shrieks of soprano Lichtenegger. She is also vibrato-laden and scoops into phrases. There is the requisite light tenor, a basso buffo, and other funny guys. Hauk enjoys his work and leads his singers in a merry romp. He also plays the harpsichord here. And he wrote the program notes. The is no libretto; but one in Italian, English, and German can be found at the Naxos website.

MAYR: Medea in Corinto
Davinia Rodriguez (Medea), Mihaela Marcu (Creusa), Michael Spyres (Giasone), Enea Scala (Egeo), Roberto Lorenzi (Creonte), Paolo Cauferuccio (Evandro), Nozomi Kato (Ismene), Marco Stefani (Tideo); Transylvanian Philharmonic Chorus, Orchestra Internazionale/ Fabio Luisi
Dynamic 7735 [2CD] 161 minutes

Medea in Corinth (1813; much revised over the next ten years) was Mayr’s best-known opera and remained a repertory staple even after he died. It has been revived frequently in our own day, especially in Italy.

It’s basically the same story that opera lovers know from Cherubini’s Medea; but the treatment of the Medea legend by Mayr and his librettist, the immensely gifted Felice Romani, is different enough from Cherubini’s that the work has its own identity and appeal.

ARG has reviewed three previous CD releases of this, the best of which, the reviewers agreed, was the studio recording from Opera Rara, with Jane Eaglen, Yvonne Kenny, Bruce Ford, and Raul Gimenez (Sept/Oct 1994; March/Apr 2000; Nov/Dec 2010). That recording also included additional numbers that were composed by Mayr for the work and were either omitted before opening night or were used in later stagings.

The two other CD recordings that have been reviewed here were made in Italian performances. Both are disfigured by one or more singers who wobble or sing off-pitch. The Myto set has the vibrant Leyla Gencer in the title role; the Oehms set has Elzbieta Szmytka (overstretched by the part). The pioneering Vanguard recording (1970) stars the magnetic Marisa Galvany. Its CD re-release seems to be deleted.

In this opera, the princess of Corinth (here called Creusa) was promised to King Aegeus (Egeo) of Athens, before she shifted her affections to the heroic Giasone. Egeo has a big and dramatically varied role. Medea is given a powerful scene with the spirits of hell (reminiscent of a scene in Cavalli’s Giasone from a century and a half earlier).

Romani and Mayr give the chorus several occasions to rejoice, reassure, worry, and be solemn or horrified. (They sound fine, mostly, except for some reason in the scene with Creusa at the beginning of Act 2.) The orchestra frequently offers colorful interjections, and we even get several arias with a solo instru-
ment (violin, English horn, even harp) in duet with the voice.

As in Rossini's serious operas, recitatives are accompanied by orchestra rather than keyboard. The Medea-Giasone duet in Act 1 is a large four-movement structure of a type that scholars normally call "Rossinian" and would become normative for Rossini's successors. Vocal lines are quite florid (not least for Egeo) but often also tuneful or even dance-like, sometimes reminding me of Donizetti (to come) or of phrases from Mozart's Cosi Fan Tutte and The Magic Flute (some twenty years earlier).

The recording derives from staged performances at the Valle d'Itria Festival in the summer of 2015. Inevitably, the performances on the Opera Rara studio recording are freer of imperfections. In this festival recording we encounter moments of orchestral unease and some slow wobbling from Medea and (worse) Creusa. The sound quality, generally fine, can get congested when Davinia Rodriguez (Medea) and Michael Spyres (Giasone), both intense-voiced, are singing simultaneously. Rodriguez's lower register is consistently hooded, sometimes sounding very Callas-like, which may displease some listeners; but it aptly indicates Medea’s grim determination to avenge herself on the lover who abandoned her. Indeed, Rodriguez seems to me a more convincing Medea than Eaglen on the Opera Rara recording, and the chorus of the spirits of hell register more vividly here in the splendid conjuration scene, too.

Spyres as Giasone is often utterly admirable, showing great stamina and presence. But he sometimes strains, at full voice, for high notes that, in Mayr’s day, would have been sung in falsetto or half-voice. And, quite unnecessarily, he adds several notes that are higher than anything written by the composer and has to lunge for them, making him sound less than heroic. His coloratura is sometimes firm, sometimes ungrainy. Still, he always sings in tune.

All the singers do. And they put the words across well. Fabio Luisi conducts expertly, blending dramatic impetus with delicacy and precision. David Parry's conducting on the Opera Rara recording sometimes feels sluggish and unvaried.

The booklet essay is has the compositional and performance history of the work but gives no indication what version is used here.

I had no trouble downloading the libretto, but then struggled through some unidiomatic or even outright erroneous translations. For example, talamo—literally: “chamber”—is the standard libretto-word for “marriage bed”. It is here translated as “thalamus”, as if the characters were discussing the function of somebody's brain. The booklet essay is similarly disfigured. I suggest that Dynamic hire better translators—perhaps ones who are native English-speakers.

A DVD of this same performance is also commercially available. One can also purchase a DVD of a 2010 staged performance from Munich, with a splendid cast (Medea: Nadja Michael; Giasone: Ramon Vargas; Egeo: Alek Shrader).

LOCKE

MAYR: Telemaco nell’Isola di Calipso
Siri Karoline Thornhill (Telemaco); Andrea Lauren Brown (Calipso), Jaewon Yun (Eucarí), Markus Schaefer (Mentore), Katharina Ruckgaber (priest of Venus), Niklas Mallmann (priest of Bacchus)
Concerto de Bassus and Simon Mayr and Bavarian Opera Choruses/ Franz Hauk
Naxos 660388 [2 CDs] 136 minutes

No sooner had I drafted my review of Simon Mayr's Medea in Corinto (see above) than the world-premiere recording of Mayr’s Telemaco nell’Isola di Calipso reached me, an opera from 16 years earlier, when Mayr was 34 years old. Franz Hauk, who is a conductor (and organist) in Munich, has made numerous recordings of Mayr operas, oratorios, and liturgical works for Naxos, and many of them have been praised in our pages (see index).

Telemaco (I abbreviate the title as the jewel case does) is a three-act work first performed in 1797 at the famous La Fenice theater in Venice. It is freely based on a didactic French novel (1699) by François Fénelon that intended as a sequel to Homer’s The Odyssey. Numerous other creative works, in the intervening century before Mayr came along, had been inspired by Fénelon’s novel (e.g., operas by Gluck and by Berlioz’s teacher Lesueur; also several famous oil paintings).

In Mayr’s opera, Telemaco (i.e., Telemachus, Ulysses’s son, now grown up), his tutor (unnamed: simply the "Mentore"—"mentor"), and his other male companions are shipwrecked on the island of the enchanting nymph Calipso (Calypso), whom his father Ulysses had once loved and abandoned. Calipso is still enraged at this betrayal by a mere mortal and has vowed to kill any outsider who arrives at her island. Instead, she finds herself
attracted to Telemaco. He, however, is drawn to the innocent Eucharis (Eucharis). Finally, Telemaco is persuaded by the Mentore to flee this island of entrapment, even though he is thereby abandoning Eucharis, whom the vindictive Calipso has already threatened to kill. When Telemaco and the Mentore reach a cliff overlooking the sea, the young man suddenly hesitates, the Mentore pushes him into the water, and the Mentore then jumps in as well. The ship carrying their companions collects the two men and heads back to Greece as the curtain falls.

The story relates to a long tradition of chivalric romances (e.g., by Tasso and Ariosto) in which a young hero must free himself—or be freed by upright male comrades—from the wiles of a foreign and powerful woman. It also bears some resemblance to another myth-based opera: Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice (1762; expanded and revised in French, 1774). But Telemaco has none of the stately grandeur that marks long stretches of that famous work. It feels instead very much like a series of conversations between people whom we all know. The closest parallel in Gluck’s Orfeo to what we often encounter in Telemaco is the quarrel between Orpheus and Euridice (halfway through Act 3) when he is leading her from Purgatory back up to earth and—for reasons that he has been forbidden to explain to her—he refuses to look at her.

The performance here keeps the conversations among the characters vivid and involving. Tempos are brisk, but they are also often adjusted for appropriate momentary effect. One number moves right into the next, with no long pauses to dissipate the tension.

The singers, all clear and light-voiced, color their voices in a variety of ways, allowing us to distinguish the characters from each other and to recognize the feelings that each is experiencing at the moment. Even slight shifts in vocal color are important because the basic layout of voice-types for the four major roles could have been problematic, at least for a modern listener: the two female roles of Calipso and Eucharis are sopranos; Telemaco, being a young male warrior, was written for a castrato (as were Mozart’s Idamante and Sesto) and is here likewise sung by a female soprano; and the Mentore is a tenor.

The most consistently firm and nuanced singing comes from Siri Karoline Thornhill. She is a rising star on the early-music scene, having sung Mozart’s Donna Anna under Sigiswald Kuijken and recorded a number of Bach cantatas. Markus Schäfer, a well-established recording artist (Don Ottavio and Ferrando, both under Kuijken; and Bach cantatas under Helmuth Rilling), brings great authority and variety to the role of the Mentore. Any moments where his voice sounds just a bit worn seem perfectly appropriate for a character who is old and wise. Andrea Lauren Brown is attentive to Calipso’s often-intense words, allowing us to ignore an occasional lack of solidity in her vocal production. Her embellishment of the melodic line at the end of Calipso’s final aria is beautifully realized and feels quite in character.

The acoustics are sometimes very resonant, giving undue emphasis to the three sopranos’ high notes. (The recording was made in a large meeting hall in a former Jesuit school in Neuburg, Bavaria.) The orchestra—a smallish but alert group—is recorded clearly and somehow free of that mildly annoying echo.

The basic style of the music is post-Mozartean (or post-Cimarosa, or post-Paisiello), with none of the anticipations of Donizetti and Verdi that will crop up in Mayr’s aforementioned Medea in Corinto. Still, numerous moments make a vivid impression. An early biographer of Mayr rightly praised two extended orchestral passages: a storm scene and a hunt, the latter with chorus. No less strong are the dances for Calipso’s nymphs, and the funeral march for the condemned Eucharis (which alternates, to great dramatic effect, with a military march announcing the imminent departure of Telemaco’s soldier buddies—will he join them?). The orchestra often interacts in productive ways with the vocal parts: adding brass fanfares or a pastoral drone bass to an aria to point up the imagery in the sung words, or turning a recitative into a mini-scena before the aria proper begins.

Some passages of recitative are accompanied by a small string ensemble, with one player, or just a few, per part. The otherwise informative booklet-essay does not indicate whether this orchestral “downshift” was specified by Mayr, but it works well, refreshing the ear and making the words easier to hear. The single most pleasant surprise for me in the whole recording was the end of a choral number for the Greek sailors in distress (‘Ah, che fai!’): before the chorus has completing its singing, Telemaco suddenly begins to sing “What horror! By me will you have vengeance!”, starting with a long high note to stress his determination.

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As for Calipso, Mayr’s skill at setting text makes the character a worthy member in opera’s long line of powerful, often vengeful women, from the Medeas of Cavalli (in Giasone), Charpentier, Cherubini, and Mayr himself to Bellini’s Norma, Verdi’s Azucena and Ulrica, Wagner’s Kundry, Dvorak’s Ježibaba (in Rusalka), and beyond. I found particularly satisfying the two trios, in which Calipso, Telamaco, and the Mentore express their different concerns in overlapping and contrasting lines. In short, a fertile musicodramatic imagination is at work here, and I now understand better why generations of opera scholars (including Hauk himself, in a German book, 1999) have drawn attention to Mayr as a crucial figure in the development of Italian opera.

The downloadable libretto is Italian-only and not free of typos (“piagnente” should presumably be “piangente”). Fortunately, the synopsis included in the booklet is very detailed and contains track numbers to help you know where you are. In that synopsis, and also in the booklet-essay, the English translation is unidirectional at times but never incomprehensible. The discs are slightly mislabeled: CD 1 contains not just Act 1 but also the beginning of Act 2.

LOCKE

Mehul: Uthal
Karine Deshayes (Malvina), Yann Beuron (Uthal), Jean-Sebastien Bou (Larmor), Sebastien Droy (Ullin), Philippe-Nicolas Martin, Reinoud Van Mechelen, Aravazd Sargsyan, Jacques-Greg Belobo (bards); Les Talens Lyrique, Namur Chamber Chorus/Christophe Rousset
Ediciones Singulares 1026—63 minutes

The opera world barely knows how to handle works that have significant amounts of spoken dialog. Conductors and stage directors will often trim it to a bare minimum (Magic Flute), have it rendered as sung recitative (Carmen), or have it spoken in the vernacular though the sung numbers may be in the original language (Die Fledermaus). Or, easiest of all, they avoid the problem by not performing the work at all.

The French operatic tradition, in particular, is full of important works with spoken dialog that we rarely get to see on stage, some comic (Auber, Adam), others serious (Cherubini or Mehul).

Recording a little-known work can give performers a chance to find out whether it retains enough vitality to speak to present-day listeners. I am also reviewing two other works with spoken dialog: Herold’s Pré aux Clercs, a long-loved French opera-comique whose tone alternates between giddy and grim; and—unusually—an Italian work: De Giosa’s comic opera Don Checco.

Here we have the first satisfactory modern recording of the one-act opera Uthal by Etienne-Nicolas Mehul (1806). This work has long been praised for its unusual treatment of the orchestra, but performances have been few. An LP of a BBC studio performance from 1972 was once available.

The opera’s story comes from the writings of “Ossian”, a bard purported to have lived in southern Scotland in the 3rd Century. The Ossian epics were beloved in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, even after it became known that they were inventions by a Scottish poet named James Macpherson, not (as Macpherson had at first claimed) translations from Gaelic originals. In this opera we meet Malvina, her aged father Larmor, and her husband Uthal, who has deposed Larmor. There is much mention of Fingal, the people’s leader. (Many of us recognize that brave warrior’s name through the other title for Mendelssohn’s Hebrides Overture.) The libretto was written by JB de Saint-Victor, largely in classical alexandrines (rhymed verses consisting of six-plus-six syllables, as in the great tragedies of Corneille and Racine).

There is an arioso for Malvina where orchestral fragments of the tramp-tramp of the warriors (who have just left the stage) can still be heard. In the first chorus of bards Malvina overlays an entirely different melody. Another top moment is the soliloquy aria for Uthal upon his long-awaited first appearance, halfway through the work. One senses here an opera composer who is never content to provide music in an automatic, conventional manner—and one from whom Berlioz learned a lot. (He, too, loved to layer disparate musical materials on top of one another.)

A solo cello, in high register, threads its quiet way through that aria of Uthal’s, playing long notes that form the melodic core of his vocal line, which has been somewhat more elaborated by the composer to allow for extra syllables in the text. (The vocal lines in this opera are on the plain and direct side, with nary a hint of coloratura.)

The singers here all have steady and attractive voices and sing their texts persuasively. They speak the dialogues well, though with a very wide dynamic range: I had to turn the volume up for some patches of whispering and then turn it down again when a character became agitated or insistent. But this com-
plait is also a compliment: the performers take the work seriously and make sure to convey the drama at every turn.

My favorite singer here is Karine Deshayes, whom I have previously praised in Rossini arias (M/A 2017) and as the pagan queen in Felicien David’s 1859 opera *Herculanum* (J/F 2016). Jean-Sebastien Bou sings beautifully as the father (though his lowest notes lack fullness, as was also true when he played another heroine’s father: in Lalo’s *Jacquerie*, M/A 2017). The much-recorded tenor Yann Beuron—his voice still firm at 48—conveys well the resoluteness of the title character.

Christophe Rousset’s early-instrument group plays with spirit, accuracy, and much tonal variety. The orchestration is somewhat dark, because Mehul excluded the violins: instead, he called for a larger-than-usual viola section and divided it into two parts to provide the top lines of the string choir. (Brahms would also do without violins in his Serenade No. 2 and in the first movement of the *German Requiem*.) The absence of violins is frequently relieved by many other interesting instrumental effects. We often hear two very woody flutes, colorful stopped notes from two unvalved horns, and glinting arpeggios from two light-toned period harps. Passages of tremolo for the string sections are full of energy and impulse. The chorus (men only) is small but spirited and nearly always clear in pitch. The solo singers playing Ullin and four other bards—cousins, in a sense, to Oroveso and the druids in Bellini’s *Norma*—have only a little to sing, but they do it superbly.

The small book that comes with this has excellent essays and background readings in French and English (including substantial passages by the composer, the librettist, and three 19th Century critics, one of them Berlioz); the libretto is in both languages. The alexandrine lines are broken up into shorter ones on the page. This inadvertently disguises the verse meter and the rhyme schemes. But a reader, once alerted, should be able to restore mentally the original layout. Translations are straightforward but sometimes too literal to be immediately clear.

The performance materials were prepared, and the recording funded, by the Center for French Romantic Music, located at the Palazzetto Bru Zane (Venice). The recording sessions took place in the Versailles-palace opera house, whose acoustics have long been admired. The published score can be downloaded at IMSLP.org.

I urge anyone who has a fondness for Cherubini’s *Medea* to get to know this work. You are in for an hour of pleasant surprises in the areas of melody, harmony, orchestral color, musico-dramatic cogency, and Napoleonic-era cultural mythology.

**LOCKE**

**MNHDELSSOHN: Midsummer Night’s Dream**


The London Symphony claims to be the most recorded orchestra in the world. This is their own label, but even here it’s a small orchestra: 63 musicians. The Boston Symphony recorded this with an additional 35 or 40 musicians, and that old recording (1960s, under Leinsdorf) still sounds richer and warmer. And Leinsdorf had a feel for the romantics. Gardiner hasn’t.

Listen to the first two or three minutes. How light and airy it is at first, but when the full orchestra comes blasting in, it is crude and heavy and downright clunky. I had to grit my teeth to keep listening. There is no charm whatsoever, and it’s far too aggressive. Other moments are slow and sluggish. Nothing flows naturally. One feels manipulated, as the music is. This is a terrible conductor—no matter that he is often recorded. He should certainly stay clear of romantic music—though if one cannot conduct romantic music, how can one conduct Bach or Mozart?

There is a boring narrator here—well, actually there are three, but the first one handed me that adjective. He is followed by a lickety-split scherzo that is so fast it’s inarticulate (the winds can’t play that fast). The next narrator is supposedly a fairy, but she sounds hard as nails and brittle to me—not like a fairy at all. She has smoked too many cigarettes. Puck doesn’t sound puckish. Oberon is almost inaudible most of the time. The soprano and mezzo soloists are almost as clumsy as the conductor.

Thanks to a good French horn soloist, the Nocturne is rather nice. But the conductor almost ruins it when the horn isn’t playing—it’s too emphatic. So is the Wedding March—bouncy and jumpy, never majestic.

What the music needs is magic and majesty—and a little subtext would help. Why go on? This is a terrible recording, and it is a sin to praise what is not worthy of praise.

**VROON**
MENDELSSOHN: Quartet 2 in A minor; 
BEETHOVEN: Quartet 15 in A minor 
DaPonte Quartet 
Centaur 3533—75 minutes

This will appeal to people who like a “thick” string sound. It’s actually a very attractive sound, almost orchestral. If you prefer a quartet to sound nimble and refined, this is not for you.

This group was founded in Philadelphia but has conquered the state of Maine, where they give dozens of concerts every year. This was recorded in Maine. I think their warm, rich sound helps in a cold climate!

The Beethoven has been recorded dozens of times, and some quartets are famous for their revelatory Beethoven. I doubt whether this group is in that select category, but I think some readers will like what they do here. It’s not neat and clean; it’s more strong and massive.

Mendelssohn’s quartets are less known than Beethoven’s these days. This is Opus 13, and I have a very sleek and beautiful recording of it by the St Petersburg Quartet (Marquis 81351; July/Aug 2007, under Dvorak). I prefer that kind of playing and sound, but I can hear that this group also has a sound that works for Mendelssohn. This is not “world-class” competition for such groups as the St Petersburg, but some readers will certainly like it.

VROON

MENDELSSOHN: Trios
Julia Fischer, Jonathan Gilad, Daniel Muller-Schott 
Pentatone 5186609 [SACD] 59 minutes

Trio 1, with SCHUMANN,C: Trio; SCHUMANN: Fantasy Pieces, op 88
Il Giocatori 
Phaedra 292034—71 minutes

Trio 2; with BEETHOVEN: Trio 4
Oberon Trio 
Cavi 8553367—62 minutes

The easy part first: the Pentatone release is simply wonderful in every way. Tempos are never rushed, and the music sounds warm and romantic. The sound is superb. The three players may not be a permanent trio, but they do not sound like three incompatible soloists, as so many such groups do. They blend well, they feel the music the same, and there is no feeling that one person dominates. Still, for me a strong cellist is essential to the first trio, and Mr Muller-Schott certainly is that. His rich, full sound gives every phrase a strong ground. I don’t think he tries to dominate, but the ear is drawn to him more than the others. So I advise you: if you like a lot of cello sound in your piano trio, here is one for you.

The group with the Italian name (“The Players”) is actually entirely Belgian. They make a much lighter sound, and quicker tempos add to that impression. Their Mendelssohn trio is not bad, but there are too many better ones out there—including the Pentatone, which makes this sound rather pale. It’s a sweet, unassuming performance that would

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appeal to people who do not want to be drawn to the players, but the music.

The Belgians give us the best recording I know of Clara Schumann’s trio. We have reviewed 6 or 8 over the years. The only reason it gets played is because she was Robert Schumann’s wife; without that name it would have been forgotten. It is not a bad piece, though, and these players present it with genial charm.

Clara’s piece reminds the listener of Robert’s Fantasy Pieces, Opus 88, which follow it on the Belgian disc. Robert wrote them as a trio in 1842, but retitled them to be published in 1850. (Meantime his wife had written her own trio—inspired by Robert’s?) Why did he retitle them? They are a Romance, a Humoreske, a Duet, and a Finale. As the notes point out, the name of the last movement is a clue that he once thought of the four pieces as a piano trio. Maybe he didn’t think they measured up to his three trios—perhaps in form. At any rate, he sounds a bit like Clara in these pieces, and it was a good idea to put them on the same program with her trio. They supplement each other; they do not detract from each other. But I have to admit that I could live without either piece.

The Phaedra album is titled “Songs without Words.” Our third album is titled “Oberon Celebrates Shakespeare.” Their recital ends with a piano trio version of the Scherzo from A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The Scherzo of Trio 2 is almost its twin (not identical). They include a short piece depicting Oberon by Charlotte Bray, an English composer (not a piece I like). And—a bit of a reach here—it is thought that Beethoven was working on an opera based on Shakespeare’s Macbeth around the time that he wrote his Ghost Trio.

The Oberon Trio is a German group that plays with a light touch. This is cheerful music-making, and I found that I liked their bright and witty Mendelssohn trio, even though I usually prefer it to be more soulful and romantic. They make a nice sound, dominated, I think, by the violinist, who is very good.

So there is something to be said for each of these releases, and their programs are certainly not alike, despite items in common. If you don’t have the two Mendelssohn trios, the Pentatone is certainly one of the best pairings of them. But it will not replace the KLR, Fontenay, or New Prague trios. It joins them on an equal basis. And it stands above the other two releases.

VROOM

MENDELSSOHN: Violin Concerto; Octet
Liza Ferschtman, Gelders Orchestra/ Kees Bakels
Challenge 72748 [SACD] 59 minutes

At last! A performance of Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto I can rave about! Here is a perfect partnership between soloist and orchestra. Liza Ferschtman is a Dutch violinist who turns 38 this year. “Het Gelders Orkest” is also called the Arnhem Philharmonic; Arnhem is the capital of the province of Gelderland in east-central Holland. And in March/April 2004 I sang loudly the praises of Dutchman Kees Bakels, 72, after spending a week with him and the Malaysian Philharmonic at an organ-and-orchestra festival in Kuala Lumpur.

Robert Shaw told me years ago that if a conductor can set a steady pulse, he can change the pulse of the listener to match the music’s. That is what happens here. Even through the give-and-take moments of rubato, the grasp here of I’s form is clear. Ferschtman’s lyricism and depth of expression is supremely musical, especially the way she easies into the second theme (marked tranquillo); she takes plenty of liberties but without ever breaking the flow. Bakels is by nature a stickler for clarity and details. The precision of the woodwinds’ quickly repeated ostinatos makes them truly effective, and the way that Bakels works the bass line makes it the foundation for the music’s harmonic flow. So exquisite are the balances that every element of Mendelssohn’s writing is functional—which, put simply, means that there’s all the more to hear and enjoy.

As the Andante opens, after an eighth-note pause, the violins plays five eighth notes per measure. I’ve always taken them for granted. Here Bakels makes them wax and wane like a violin’s sound is more than good enough and projects the orchestra’s details well.

My only quibble is with the engineering. I had to adjust to the brightness by turning down the treble a bit. I also had to accept the slightly hollow ambience. But, believe me, the sound is more than good enough and projects the orchestra’s details well.
What a contrast to the awful engineering of the Octet, recorded in concert (unlike the concerto). Bert van der Wolf is listed as the producer, balance and mastering engineer, and editor (one edit is clearly audible in at 4:06 in I of the Octet) for both recordings. The first thing heard is a bizarre-sounding audience ambience. The music itself is so congested that it often sounds like a processor was used that artificially expands and compresses the lines. It also produces truly ugly timbres for the eight instruments—especially the two cellos—and inner details are muddy. Ferschtman is the lead violinist—soloist, really, given the way the music is written. But sometimes even she is inaudible because of the awful sound. And I defy anyone to figure out the rhythm in the cellist’s opening to IV. In terms of performance, the pacing often feels more “maintained” than musical (what a contrast to the concerto!). For the record, the other players are violinists Itamar Zorman (Israel), Elina Vahala (Finland), and Corina Belcea (Romania); violists Krzysztof Chorzelski (Poland) and Marc Demons (France); and cellists Sebastian Klinger (Germany) and Antoine Lederlin (France). They sound like splendid players who normally don’t play together (thus that maintained versus musical pacing), though Belcea is a founding member of the Belcea Quartet, of which Chorzelski and Lederlin are also members.

Challenge should re-release the concerto with something else that is worthy of its company.

**FRENCH**

**Mertz:** *Guitar Pieces*

Jens Franke  
Stone 8068—63 minutes

Apart from his recording of guitar ensemble works of Antoine Lhoyer (N/D 2016), I had not encountered Mr Franke before. I wasn’t terribly impressed, but the music itself was too unimaginative for a decent impression. He comes of better in this release.

It has taken me a long time to warm to Mertz’s music—at first what most players were interested in were his large, virtuosic pieces, which I find terribly overwritten. But then I heard Graziano Salvon’s recording of his Bardeklange (Bardic Sounds, N/D 2014), and I was convinced. Those works are far better structured and more expressive than his barn burners, and Salvon’s way with the music was tasteful, imaginative, and expressive. Shortly after, I heard Salvon’s set of short works—etudes, dances, and similar works (J/F 2015)—still quite charming. Finally, Johannes Moeller and Laura Fratticelli released a disc of Mertz duets (M/A 2015), some of the most beautiful guitar music I’ve ever heard. Franke plays here some of those dances and etudes, a couple of pieces from the Bardeklange, and transcriptions of Strauss and Schubert (the latter, his song ‘Lob der Tranen’).

The one big piece is an operatic potpourri from *Rigoletto*. That was a disappointment, but whether the fault lies with Franke or Mertz is unclear. It starts with Rigoletto’s aria ‘Cortigiani, vil razza dannata’—the notes are there, but not the sense of pain, desperation, outrage, and helplessness as Rigoletto searches for his kidnapped daughter, nor the pathetic turn when he tries to appeal to the corrupted courtiers’ better natures—though they have none. Could anyone bring this out on guitar? Did Mertz come close? Can he bring out the irony of ‘La Donna e Mobile’, the innocence of ‘Caro Nome’, or the freewheeling libertinism of ‘Questa o Quella’? Maybe I’m asking too much—this was just designed so folks could hear the hits at home. Perhaps a more intense player can prove the worth of this piece, but I’m not convinced.

The rest of the pieces are played well—Franke has a lovely sound, though it could use more variety, and his phrasing is spot on. This music is easy to play badly.

**Keaton**

**Merula:** *Sacred Pieces*

Il Demetrio/ Maurizio Schiavo  
Brilliant 95270—55 minutes

The ten pieces here—taken from four collections by Tarquino Merula (1595-1665)—are written for one to four voices with accompaniment. The seven players of Il Demetrio use two violins, viola, and cello combined with dulzian, great bass viola, organ, and theorbo. The resulting sound is rich and varied, and the performances of most pieces are very good.

There’s a nice swagger and liveliness in the 1639 ‘Confitebor Tibi, Domine’ for alto and tenor with intricate violin parts—and fine expressive character in the 1640 setting of the same text, this time for two sopranos and bass. The ‘Nisi Dominus’ is full of life and color (for SATB soloists) and the concluding ‘Laudate Pueri’ (SSB) is full of fine declarative nobility. In a couple of the pieces for solo voice (such as ‘Favus Distillans’ and ‘Cantate, Jubilate’)
there’s somewhat less assurance in the pitch and a tendency to lose momentum.

Notes, bios, no texts with CD or on label website. As I’m having to write far too often, the lack of texts is a real flaw.

C. MOORE

MIELCZEWSKI: Motets; Canzonas; Sunday Vespers
Andrzej Kosendiak conducting
Accord 227—73 minutes

I have every reason to agree with Andrzej Kosendiak’s claim to have assembled some of the best early music specialists for this recording of Marcin Mielczewski’s motets, canzonas, and Sunday Vespers. The singers and instrumentalists sound fantastic. Marcin Mielczewski (d. 1651) was one of the most talented composers at the Polish court of Sigismund III Vasa, and that was no backwater of European culture. For when Sigismund imported several Italian musicians to his court in Warsaw around the turn of the 17th Century, he brought it into the mainstream of European musical taste. This would have a monumental effect on Polish composers, as one can hear in Mielczewski’s music.

Mielczewski’s genius abounds in every work—so much so that it would be impossible to single out one as superior to another. The motets on this program essentially imitate the concertato style of Giovanni Gabrieli’s polychoral motets, only in miniature, with the emphasis on vocal soloists and instruments. They actually come across as sounding rather similar to the vocal concertos in Heinrich Schütz’s Symphoniae Sacrae I. For the sake of comparison, one might listen to Manfred Cordes’s recording of Symphoniae Sacrae I with Weser-Renaissance Bremen (CPO 777929; Jan/Feb 2016). The instrumental passage work and fioritura on view in Mielczewski’s and Schütz’s solo vocal parts show an innate grasp of Italianate virtuosity, while their ensemble writing emphasizes rich sonority. In addition to the Vespers, the program includes the motets ‘Triumphalis Dies’, ‘Laudate Dominum’, ‘Audite et Admiramini’, ‘Currite Populi’, ‘Veni Domine’, ‘Deus in Nomine Tuo’, ‘Sub Tuum Praesidium’, and ‘Salve Virgo Puerpera’. The two three-part canzonas for violins and continuo fall essentially in the genre of the trio sonata.

Recent recordings of some of Mielczewski’s other motets by Weser-Renaissance (CPO 777772; May/June 2015) and Les Traversées Baroques (K617 226; Nov/Dec 2011) would make good companions to this collection of motets, but it would be difficult to beat Kosendiak’s ensemble on quality. Texts and notes are in English.

LOEWEN

MOLINO: Violin & Guitar Sonatas
Mauro & Luciano Tortorelli
Tactus 761302—72 minutes

I’ve written before (S/O 2014) about a famous Paris daguerreotype from the early 1800s, The Discussion Between the Carullistas and the Molinistas, which portrays a couple dozen young men, guitars raised above their heads, to be used as cudgels, El Kabong-like, against their rivals in this “discussion”. Indeed, there was considerable rivalry between the fans of Carulli and Molino. I must assume that Carulli (and Molino) were really magnificent players, to inspire such loyalty. It surely wasn’t the quality of their compositions.

This release made me rethink my assessment of Francesco Molino (though I still find Carulli a crushing bore). While these can’t compare with Beethoven (who can?), they are quite worthy of standing with the chamber works of his contemporary, Mauro Giuliani. These are early works—three sonatas Op. 2, and another three Op. 7 (the latest opus I could find of his was 68, and he lived to the age of 78). They are his only sonatas for guitar and violin, though he wrote other works for the combination. The original titles read “guitar with violin”—these are not just violin accompanied by guitar, but true collaborations. In each opus there are two sonatas in three movements, one in two, omitting the slow movement. That’s a shame, because he is particularly inventive and expressive in those slow movements—in the first of Op. 2, the guitar plays the primary material, while the violin strums accompanying chords.

The Tortorellis are excellent advocates for this music. I assume, from their photos, that they are brothers—and they play like brothers. Balance is perfect—Mauro has an exceptionally sweet sound that pairs beautifully with Luciano’s. Phrasing is always expressive, never eccentric, though I often smiled at unexpected beauties they created.

If you don’t know this composer, this is an excellent way to explore his rewarding music.

KEATON

July/August 2017
MONIUSZKO: Concert Polonaise; Funeral March; Civic Polonaise; Ballet Music
Warsaw Philharmonic/ Antoni Wit
Naxos 573610—78 minutes

Stanislaw Moniuszko (1819-72) was a Polish Johann Strauss Jr, but wrote polonaises and mazurkas instead of waltzes and quadrilles. Everything is charm and fizz, lots of drum and cymbal—the sort of light pops music that’s good in small doses to reset the ears and neurons after a surfeit of cerebral fugues or thorny modernism.

Various dances and ballet music are taken from his operas Hrabina, Halka, and Jawnuta plus Otto Nicolai’s Merry Wives of Windsor. The Warsaw Philharmonic plays with spirit and polish under the always reliable Wit. Sound is splendid, airy and spacious, with a firm and voluptuous low end. Na zdrowie!

MONTANARO: Penelope; see MAHLER,A

MOZART: Horn Concertos; Rondo; Bassoon Concerto
Louis-Philippe Marsolais, hn; Mathieu Lussier, bn; Les Violons du Roy
Atma 2743—77 minutes

Lovely accounts by first-rate horn and bassoon soloists with Quebec’s superb chamber orchestra, Violons du Roy. Louis-Philippe Marsolais, “Canada’s most active horn soloist,” has a uniformly soft and round tone in all registers and uses light articulations to create a buoyant playing style. The same can be said of bassoonist Mathieu Lussier, also guest conductor here.

Perhaps the most unusual readings are of the finale of Horn Concerto 2, decidedly restrained in tempo, and the slow movement of the Bassoon Concerto, where Lussier and the orchestra keep the volume way down and bring out mysterious qualities I have not heard before.

KILPATRICK

MOZART: Mass in C minor
with Exsultate Jubilate
Carolyn Sampson, Olivia Vermeulen, Makoto Sakurada, Christian Immler; Bach Collegium Japan/ Masaaki Suzuki
BIS 2171 [SACD] 71 minutes
Sarah Wegener, Sophie Harmsen, Colin Balzer, Felix Rathgeber; Stuttgart Chamber Choir & Hofkapelle/ Frieder Bernius
Carus 83284—56 minutes

Period-Aggressive and Period-Lite. Maestro Bernius is the one pulling his 18th Century punches with the Hofkapelle (6-5-4-3 strings) performing on modern instruments in support of his meticulously groomed choir of 32. I can’t quibble with the quality of the singing and playing, and there are some felicitous touches: the brawling ‘Laudamus te’, a pointed but un-rushed ‘Domine Deus,’ and an eloquent ‘Benedictus’. There are new musicological wrinkles as well, such as reconfigured trumpet calls and some expanded passages for the strings. In the end, though, we have a performance that winds up just too moderate to generate much excitement.

I hear more joy, more snap, and more
Mozart: Fantasy in C minor, K 475; Piano Sonata 14; Schumann: Fantasy; Ghost Variations

Piotr Anderszewski
Warner 88855—79 minutes

This is a strange release. It is titled Fantaisies (why in French?) even though only two of the four works are fantasies. According to the booklet, the Mozart works were recorded as long ago as 2006. The Schumann Fantasy was recorded in 2013, the Ghost Variations in 2015 and 2016 in two sessions almost 18 months apart (which seems strange, too). A bonus DVD of a film made by the pianist is included.

Anderszewski is a highly regarded artist often lauded for his sensitivity, with many recordings to his credit. He never seems to smile and comes across in photographs as self-absorbed and melancholy, an impression reinforced by the film. His Mozart is sensitive and finely differentiated, with a very wide dynamic range. The Fantasy and II of the sonata are rather slow and dreamy, with much pedaling. They seem a bit romanticized to me. I like the faster movements. In III Anderszewski inserts an improvisatory mini-cadenza. His ritardando near the end is extreme. The recorded sound is lush. I prefer a somewhat drier sound and a more limited dynamic range with Mozart.

Schumann’s great Fantasy, Op. 17, is next, and I compared it to Horacio Gutierrez’s performance, which had just been given a glowing review by Alan Becker (M/A 2017). Gutierrez’s full-bodied rendition has tremendous integrity and forward motion, lacking only a little in poetry owing to a limited dynamic range and restrained rubato. (It is also afflicted with pedaling noises.) As I had fully expected, Anderszewski is much subtler, having a wider expressive palette at his command. Unfortunately, he often employs it in exaggerated ways that do little service to the music. Wild tempo fluctuations, extreme rubato, unusual accentuations, and suddenffff outbursts break the music into episodes and draw attention to the performer instead. At the same time there is a curious lack of drive in II and also in III, and sometimes vocal noises can be heard. I prefer Gutierrez’s robust but natural and unaffected way with the music.

Schumann’s Ghost Variations was his last piano composition, written in 1854 shortly before he was admitted to a mental hospital. They are rarely performed and are not very satisfying. Schumann probably would have written additional variations if his mental condition had permitted it. The existing ones are mostly slow and deviate little from the theme. Anderszewski sometimes almost comes to a standstill, losing any rhythmic flow. His pedaling is heavy, and dynamic accents are exaggerated sometimes, as in the Fantasy.

In uttering such reservations about an unquestionably refined artist I am diverging from glowing tributes uttered by others, including our esteemed editor: “a beautiful person who plays music very beautifully” (Donald Vroon, N/D 2009); “glorious” and “miraculous” (Brent Auerbach on Schumann, J/A 2011). While I can hear all the beauty and subtlety, I just don’t respond to it strongly.

In the booklet the pianist writes that he sees a similarity between Mozart and Schumann “in their processes of giving physical form to their musical ideas”. The physical form he is referring to is the manuscript, and the similarity lies in both composers’ ability to write down quickly compositions they have already imagined completely in their head. I think some other composers, such as Schubert, must have had that ability, too, and doubt that it really constitutes an “important, pre-
cious connection” between Mozart and Schumann. Anderszewski believes it resulted in “an unobstructed directness to their music, where the purity of intention remains intact”. So Beethoven, for example, who wrote slowly and made many revisions, did not preserve the purity of intention in his music? To me this notion of “purity of intention” does not hold much water.

Anderszewski’s 36-minute film titled “Warsaw is my Name” starts with a silent text reminding the viewer of the city’s turbulent and tragic history and then continues with a series of slowly panned, mostly unattractive images: decrepit apartment buildings, desolate river shores, graffiti, a cemetery, bizarre wall paintings, smog, few people. Interspersed are war footage of buildings blowing up spectacularly and a conversation between two men in Polish, with English subtitles revealing that the word “f__in g” occurs in every single sentence, about a dozen times altogether. What is the point? I am not prudish, but this episode seems utterly tasteless and vulgar, and I like Anderszewski the less for it. The accompanying music by Chopin, Szymanowski, and Webern, naturally played by him, does little to relieve the dreariness of it all (sometimes enhances it). Perhaps this is how he feels about Warsaw, but why does he have to inflict his desolation and disgust on others? (For a more sympathetic review, see Anthony Tommasini in the New York Times, Feb 10, 2017.)

REPP

MOZART: Fantasy in D; Piano Sonata 17; Clementi: Sonatas in F; in G minor
Vanessa Wagner
La Dolce Volta 31—56 minutes

Wagner’s playing is crisp and clean. She performs some of these works on the piano (Mozart’s Sonata 17 and Clementi’s Sonata in G minor) and others on the fortepiano (Mozart’s Fantasy and Clementi’s Sonata in F). Her rendering of the Mozart sonata has impeccable timing and is highly sensitive. Her passage work is direct. While I often hear the Allegretto movement at a furiously fast tempo, she takes time to let it breathe.

Clementi’s final Sonata in G minor is absolutely gorgeous—one of the high points of this program. Named after Virgil’s heroine, one would expect such a sonata to need a lot of pathos and expressivity, and Wagner delivers. It is the most beautiful movement, with graceful rubato.

MOZART: String Quintets, all
Walter Trampler, va; Budapest Quartet
Praga 250 370 [2CD] 160 minutes

Just last issue I reviewed the Brahms quartets and string quintets with the Budapest Quartet and Trampler. Those recordings, made in 1958 and 1963, showed the Budapest near the end of its long career, stretching (with changes of personnel) from 1917 to 1967. As many have noted, the Budapest was not in top form near the end, owing primarily to intonation problems with first violinist Joseph Roisman. A bit of this showed up in the Brahms, and I found the 1958 quintets better overall than the 1963 quartets. These Mozart quintets are even later, recorded in 1965 and 1966, just before the group disbanded. Here I am not especially bothered by intonation problems (which were probably taken care of in retakes), but I do often feel a lack of finesse, a brashness in their playing; I prefer more warmth and lyricism. One wishes these recordings had been made a decade earlier.

I should point out things to admire in these recordings. The playing is never pushed for virtuosic effect; nor does the music threaten to sound gallant, as it can with more modern groups. Even if imperfect, these recordings are important as reminders of our chamber music heritage, which in mid-century was dominated by the Budapest Quartet. If you are less nostalgic or less tolerant than I (but still want some historical flavor), I would steer you to the Amadeus or Guarneri recordings of these pieces.

ALTHOUSE

MOZART: Violin Concertos, all; Rondos; Adagio
Isabelle Faust; Giardino Armonico/ Giovanni Antonini
Harmonia Mundi 902230 [2CD] 129 minutes

This is one time where first impressions do not count. In Concerto 1 Isabelle Faust’s instrument, played without vibrato, sounds strident and wry. As I turned the treble down a notch, I asked, “Why do you do this to your violin?”

At the same time I recognized how rhythm-
mically bright and upbeat her playing is, how she can switch between a detached and legato style so effectively, and how she “weights” arpeggios to project both the melody and rhythm. Meanwhile, Il Giardino Armonico sounds much fuller and riper than in its Teldec days playing Vivaldi. Also, the ensemble between conductor and soloist is really tight; the flow is alive, and their musicality keeps the pace from sounding relentless.

Yes, Faust plays full baroque style, I’ll bet with a baroque bow, even though she plays a Stradivarius. But I recognized that my ears had adapted to her sound by the time she and Antonini got to II, where they easily pranced along with Faust’s clever, lovely, light-as-a-feather ornamentation and wide degree of expression and tone color that enhance this lovely Adagio. III here is as virtuosic as it can get; it has clear articulation, hot rhythms, lovely lyricism, exquisite balances—and there’s plenty of bark, bite, and snap. Phrases are inflected, giving them full expression; and each movement has form and shape. (Aren’t you glad Don Vroon didn’t review this album!)

Concerto 2 twitters rhythmically right out of the box. No “behind the beat” romantic sluggishness here! And no rushing. In I Faust’s violin is especially full-bodied when playing in the middle C range on her Stradivarius. Every 32nd note and off-the-beat quarter or eighth note is rhythmically spot on, and Antonini makes the orchestra contrast piano and forte sections to high effect. In brief, Faust and Antonini perform with a style that romantic-style players could never approach. Concerto 3 also opens with a chirping style that reminds me of the birds outside as I write this (it’s springtime).

And Faust’s tone quality is especially welcome in the brilliant cadenzas created for her by fortepianist Andreas Staier. Why by a keyboardist? Because Mozart didn’t write any cadenzas for his violin concertos but wrote plenty of them for his piano concertos, with which Staier is intimately familiar, along with the principles behind “figured bass progressions as a basis for figurations and arpeggios”. Not only the cadenzas but Faust’s many ornamentations in all the works here use only Mozart’s ideas, are endlessly inventive, and should make even the most diehard romantic leap for joy! The cadenzas in almost every movement of every concerto are stunning, except for 5, where Staier, Faust, and Antonini seem to have run low on the bubbly (and not only in the cadenzas).

I must admit that there are moments when the music is rushed, as in II and III of 2 or in I and III of 3. Sometimes it’s Antonini who plays 16th couplets too fast and then lets the tempo surge before returning to regularity; sometimes it’s Faust who is impetuous—but not too often. Indeed, for me the sheer musicality on this album, such as in II of 3 with the orchestra’s lullaby-like triplets played with mutes, Faust’s ornamental improvisations (make that riffs), and the awesomely played cadenzas, far outweighs any liabilities. If I had to guess, I’d bet that Concertos 1, 2, and 3 (which rush sometimes) were recorded at one of the indicated sessions, and 4 and 5 (with steady tempo) at the other. Concerto 4 is so beautifully performed here that it puzzles me why it’s almost never programmed on concerts.

The two rondos (K 269 in B-flat and K 373 in C) and the Adagio in E, K 261, are all free of any rushing and supply sweet, happy interludes between the concertos. The ambient engineering is highly satisfactory except when the violins, playing in the range around middle C, are sometimes buried; there are also times when I wish inner orchestral details were articulated as clearly as the more obvious elements are; but I listened with a score—without one, I wouldn’t have noticed.

As a collection of all five concertos, this one goes to the top of my list, with Carmignola and Abbado on DG coming in second, and Frank and Zinman on Arte Nova now a distant third.

FRENCH

MOZART: Dixit Dominus; see HANDEL

NIELSEN: Flute Concerto; Clarinet Concerto; Aladdin Suite

Samuel Coles, fl; Mark Van de Wiel, cl; Philharmonia Orchestra/ Paavo Jarvi

Signum 477—69 minutes

Paavo Jarvi is a big fan of Carl Nielsen, recording the Danish composer’s entire cycle of symphonies with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony and conducting all six of them in London with the Philharmonia Orchestra and most of them in Cincinnati. Here he asks Philharmonia principal flute Samuel Coles and principal clarinet Mark Van de Wiel to take the stage with him in two of Nielsen’s last orchestral works—the noble and cheeky Flute Concerto (1926), completed for Holger Gilbert-Jespersen, a student of the French flute school, and the intense and brutal Clarinet Concerto (1928), written for
Anders Nilsson (born 1954). But I think they

Skoog (a woman born in 1963) studied with

The concerto goes well together, because Yiva

Nilsson: Violin Concerto;

SKOG: Concerto

Cecilia Zilliacus; Vasteras Sinfonietta/ Fredrik
Burstedt; Helsingborg Symphony/ Anna-Maria
Helsing—DB 179—64 minutes

These are both pretty new works. The Nilsson
is from 2011, the Skog from 2015. Both are
about half an hour long, and both are “accessible”—that is, not ugly or loud or outrageous. The concertos go well together, because Yiva Skog (a woman born in 1963) studied with
Anders Nilsson (born 1954). But I think they
also have a similar sound, and both are written
to communicate with classical music lovers.

The Skog comes first, and it reminds me of
Bartok. But the Nilsson drew me in more, made
me listen more carefully. The Nilsson is more
like a traditional concerto in the violin part, and
it is easy to like—and played just beautifully by
Swedish violinist Cecilia Zilliacus (born 1972),
who played the first performance with the
Stockholm Philharmonic. The Skog was record-
ed here before its official premiere.

Of course, I have just heard these concertos
for the first time (and second); that is, I had
never heard them before. And when music is so
new to us, it is hard to go beyond first im-
pressions. My first impression is that if you like
violin concertos these are worth hearing. I have
no idea whether they will wear well. I found
that I liked the Skog concerto better the second
time around, but I liked the Nilsson very well
both times. The first movement of the Skog is
very interesting—the sounds and the violin-
orchestra interactions. In fact, it is only in III
that the Skog concerto really lets the violin go
off on its own and act like a virtuoso. In the
other movements the integration with the
orchestra is very noticeable. But in the Nilsson
there is more lyricism and sheer beautiful
sound. The cadenza before the last movement
is accompanied by a timpani—most unusual!
And neither concerto makes much use of per-
cussion—unlike American composers.

NIKOLAEV: Sinewaveland; see STRAVINSKY

HANUDEL

OFFENBACH: Cello Duos, opp 19-20
Paul Christopher, Milovan Paz
HMP 107-2016—66 minutes

One tends to forget that Jacques Offenbach
was not only a composer of operatic works but
started out as a cellist. Along the way, he wrote
a large amount of music for that instrument,
notably nine collections of duos for two cellos,
the first four arranged in order of technical dif-
ficulty. Opuses 19-21 and 34 each contain
three duos, Opus 19 written only as high as
second position, Opus 20 climbing as high as
fifth position. Opus 21 uses more advanced
double-stops and 34 climbs into thumb posi-
tion as well—though that opus has not been
found yet.

The liner notes inform us that this is the
seventh disc of these works made by Human
Metronome. It is the first I have heard. The
players are from Northwestern University of
Louisiana, Simon having been Paz’s cello
teacher. These are warmedhearted but rather
careful performances. There is a certain didactic atmosphere to these early duos that is reflected in the playing. That is not a complaint about the interpretations, but Offenbach is writing here in a somewhat less outgoing style than the music I normally associate with him. The recorded quality balances the sounds of the two players in a somewhat rough fashion but it is clear and strong.

Several recordings have been made of the later duos from opuses 49-54 and 78. That is more exciting music, but I am glad to hear how it all got started. This release is titled *Lagniappe*, in case you are looking for it on a shelf.

D MOORE

**ORNSTEIN: Violin Sonatas; Hebraic**

Francesco Pannino, v; Stefano Pannino, fl; Maud Lagniappe

Leo Ornstein (1893-2002) is an interesting composer. He was born in what is today the Ukraine, took classes at the St Petersburg Conservatory, and immigrated to New York in 1906. He had his greatest success as a pianist. This is the first I have heard of him, much less heard any of his music.

After listening to this program, it is obvious to me why I had never heard of Ornstein before. His music is mediocre. It follows certain watered-down modernist trends of the early 20th Century (1914-1929 for the violin music, 1950s and 1970s for the flute music), and he has no interesting ideas. There is also a lack of stylistic unity. For example, I of Sonata 1 is chromatic in the extreme. The melodies are among the most aimless that I have ever had to endure. The remaining movements are not nearly as chromatic, and the melodies are not nearly as meandering.

The most effective piece here is the last for flute, 'A Poem' from 1979, and it is no masterpiece. Francesco Pannino is a good violinist, and his brother Stefano strikes me as an even better flutist. Maud Renier is a solid partner.

MAGIL

**Orr: Songs**

Nicky Spence, t; Iain Burnside, p

Delphian 34175—73 minutes

Scottish composer Buxton Daebitz Orr (1924-97) trained as a doctor before pursuing a career as a composer and composition professor, founding the Guildhall New Music Ensemble in 1975 to allow his students to play “difficult” contemporary scores. In addition to a large body of songs, his compositions include chamber music, works for brass, wind band, and orchestra, opera and music theatre works, and film scores. This is the first time we’ve reviewed an album of his music.

Scottish tenor Nicky Spence, in searching for a song to include in a program about journeys, discovered ‘The Boy on the Train’ from Orr’s *Songs of a Childhood*. He says in an interview, “I was struck by the infectious enthusiasm of the Scots language, which took me back to my childhood in Dumfries. It led me to want to know more about this Buxton Orr.” Through considerable searching and the assistance of Orr’s widow, he was able to find what he calls “a treasure trove of unrecorded works for voice”. He has brought together artists from Delphian’s roster of performers to perform a terrific program. He is the first singer to record a full program of Orr’s songs.

The variety of the program enhances its appeal. First comes ‘The Painter’s Mistress’ (1974), an evocative work for voice and piano. *Canzona* (1963), a four-movement work for voice, clarinet, and string trio, is Orr’s longest song cycle and reveals skillful counterpoint writing and a constantly shifting harmonic palette. Two very witty works follow. ‘The Ballad of Mr & Mrs Discobbolos’ (1970) is a setting of a whimsical poem by Edward Lear. Best of all is his 1986 cycle *Ten Types of Hospital Visitor* for voice and double bass. I laughed out loud at the texts by Charles Causley: one visitor enters wearing “the neon armour of virtue” and another appears as “a melancholy splurge of theological colours . . . distributing deep-frozen hope”. *Songs of a Childhood* (1962) concludes the program.

Spence has been a champion of music by 20th Century composers: Alan Hoddinott (J/F 2014, M/A 2015), Jonathan Dove (J/F 2014), Lili Boulanger (S/O 2016), Kenneth Leighton: Michael Csanyi-Wills, Mark-Anthony Turnage, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Benjamin Britten, and Pavel Haas. He now adds Buxton Orr to his repertoire.

I remain as impressed with Spence as when I first heard him. His clear and incandescent voice has ringing tone and laser-like intensity, but it’s not just a splendid sound that distinguishes him; his reading of the songs shows discriminating interpretive skill. His well-regulated dynamics and tonal quality range from rough-hewn brightness to soft tranquility. He displays impeccable diction.
and enunciation. (In opera videos he is also a fine singing actor.)

Perhaps Orr’s time has come. A recording of his trios was released in 2000 by Marco Polo and Toccata released a program of Chamber Music for Strings in 2012. A Celtic Suite and other works show up from time to time. I look forward to a hearing more of his music.

Notes and texts.

R MOORE

PADEREWSKI: Piano Concerto;
MARTUCCI: Concerto 2

Nelson Goerner; Polish Radio, Sinfonia Varsovia/
Jacek Kaspszyk

NIFC 44—73 minutes

An odd pairing of works. The composers were born just four years apart, and the concertos were written four years apart, in 1884 and 1888.

The Paderewski is programmed first but isn’t the reason you’ll want this. It is an able, fine performance that doesn’t surpass the lapidary and brilliant Piers Lane (Hyperion 66452), where the atmosphere cracks with electricity. Though tempos are slower than Goerner’s here, Mr Lane’s pianism is articulated and crisp, the brass prominent and piercing. Thick strings dominate under Kaspszyk, and a rushed smear of notes can sound slower than a clear, deliberate approach. Maybe it’s mere imprinting, but I like the Hyperion more, and its 1991 digital sound is fully competitive with this newcomer.

Martucci’s Concerto 2 is a 40-minute levianthan, a punishing workout for the soloist in the 20-minute first movement—after two beats of orchestral introduction, he’s granted sanctuary for just a handful of bars halfway through. The pianism is relentlessly brilliant, part Brahmsian muscle, part Lisztian pyrotechnics, the harmonies a mix of Brahms and Rachmaninoff—except Rachmaninoff was still years from publishing his first opus. The form of I is rhapsodic, desperate, and heroic, with just a handful of major-key passages. II and III simply don’t sustain the inspiration. II is a larghetto modeled after Chopin’s second concerto, a morose cantabile-agitato-cantabile arch giving the soloist a breather before the knuckle-busting finale. III is a loose rondo structure, the main theme shaped like the petulant first theme of Brahms’s Concerto I finale, the passagework lean and sinuous in contrast to the beefy textures of I and II. At one point Martucci teases us with a promise of an exultant allargando peroration in the manner of Grieg or Rachmaninoff, but finally yields to minor-mode pessimism with a final surly elaboration of the petulant rondo theme. It leaves a bitter taste in the mouth and perhaps explains why this otherwise compelling piece is rarely heard.

The sound of these concert recordings is good, the audience mostly silent, and Goerne’s indefatigable stamina and brilliance awe-inspiring.

WRIGHT

PAISIELLO: Fedra

Raffaella Milanesi (Fedra), Anna Maria Dell’Oste (Aricia), Esther Andaloro (Diana), Sonia Fortaneto (Tisofone), Artavazd Sargsyan (Teseo), Salvator D’Agata (Mercurio), Giuseppe Lo Turco (Plutone); Teatro Bellini, Catania/ Jerome Correas

Dynamic 7750 [2CD] 109 minutes

Many years ago I designed and staged the world premiere of the opera Sea Thorn by local composer Henry Humphreys (Cincinnati). Like Paisiello’s Fedra it is based on the ancient Greek story of Phaedra, wife of Theseus, who fell in love with her stepson, Hippolytus. The gods are offended by this and send down their judgement by having Hippolytus killed by a runaway chariot. Phaedra kills herself and send Theseus on his merry way for more adventures. I speak about this occasion because it taught me a valuable lesson in life. The opera was a modest affair, not very difficult for the singers or orchestra. Musically it was a return to the high romantic melodies. The audiences liked the work. The performance and production were praised by the local newspapers. But one critic (Cincinnati Enquirer, James Wierzbiicky) was offended by the composer’s music: it was old-fashioned, boring. He concluded his review with this savage line: “Even the Met would have trouble making something out of this operatic sow’s ear.” It broke the composer’s heart. I can still see the tears in his eyes. So the critic didn’t like the opera. Bad reviews are part of the opera game. But he could have phrased it more kindly. For some 40 years I have remembered it and made it part of my musical philosophy. I seek to write in a kind, but honest way.

Paisiello composed his Barber of Seville in 1782. It was very popular—until Rossini’s Barberie overpowered it in 1816. It is not as clever as Rossini’s opera, but Paisiello composed a minor treasury of tunes to tickle the ear and bring a smile to the face. It is remembered in the history books, but very rarely on stage or in
recordings. There was an excellent LP recording on Mercury.

Fedra is new to the recording world. This was first performed in Naples on New Year’s Day, 1788. There was only one performance in the 20th Century—not staged but a radio broadcast (RAI, 1958). One might be able to find a recording of that, but don’t bother. It is incomplete and its musical practices are shabby. To mark the bicentenary of Paiiello’s death the Catania Opera staged the work based on the original manuscript and some early transcriptions. The result was the unveiling of a minor masterpiece. The music is complex much of the time, but the drama is weakened by delaying Theseus finding out about his son’s assault on his stepmother until halfway into the second act. The arias are tuneful enough, but their effect is countered by a lot of secco recitatives. Very disappointing are Phaedra’s accusation of Ippolito and later suicide—both set in recitative!

The singers are a mixed bag. Best of the lot is Dell’Oeste treading the light fantastic of Ariadne’s coloratura. Milanesti is suitably impassioned, her voice acceptable. I have some trouble with Sargyán’s tenor. It’s an odd sound—loud but not to be lightly dismissed. The other singers, all minor roles, need to be dismissed, and not lightly. The Catanian orchestra plays well.

Unlike the usual good Dynamic presentation, this one does not have a libretto and plot synopsis.

PARSONS

PAPANDOPULO: Piano Concerto 3;
Violin Concerto
Oliver Triendl, p; Dan Zhu, v; Rijeka Opera Symphony/ Ville Matvejeff
CPO 555100—75 minutes

Croatian-Greek composer Boris Papandopulo (1906-91) is stylistically eclectic, hard to pin down. His 1961 Piano Concerto 3 starts with a sinuous, serpentine figure somewhere south of middle-C, much like Prokofieff’s own 3rd concerto. It’s happy to writhe around in the dirt instead of soaring aloft like Prokofieff’s. The mood is one of coiled menace, but it’s soon relieved by a gleeful, almost bufoonish explosion of brass and string merriment, reminiscent of Enesco’s Romanian Rhapsodies. The serpent enjoys one last slither before dozing off to a darkly wilting morendo chord progression lifted from Rachmaninoff. The slow movement is spectral and forlorn, piano skeletal. The silly and repetitive finale owes much to swing dance, propelled by a large battery of percussion and voluptuous jazz drum.

The 46-minute violin concerto of 1943 makes for good contrast, alternately declamatory and pastoral, haunted by current events of the time but not succumbing to them, often gently wistful in tone. This isn’t the grim war music Prokofieff and Shostakovich were writing in 1943. I is almost 25 minutes of rather slow music (andante sostenuto, mesto), sometimes tough and defiant, though the contemplative mood prevails. Orchestration is plush and quite conventional versus the later piano concerto. II, also andante sostenuto, is a soulful and aerobatic meditation that brought to mind Vaughan Williams’s Lark Ascending or Chausson’s Poem. After near 40 minutes of relative repose and lyricism, the Allegro con brio finale gives us some muscle and fireworks. It’s like a carefree and energetic peasant folk dance, sometimes reminding me of Nielsen, and even more so Estonian composer Eduard Tubin’s violin music, his first concerto in particular. If you like the violin concertos of Tubin, Nielsen, or Kurt Atterberg, you’ll like this effusively rhapsodic and expansive piece.

There’s a rumble all through the violin concerto, but the sound is otherwise outstanding, with great depth for the big bass drums and timpani Papandopulo favors. Mr Zhu is most eloquent and musical, his tone succulent. Mr Triendl sparkles in the composer’s rather lean and wiry piano stylings.

WRIGHT

PERI: Euridice
Olivier Lalouette (Orfeo), Rufus Muller (Aminta), Joseph Cornwell (Arceto), Isabelle Poulencard (Ninfa), Françoise Masset (Tragedia, Dafne), Katalin Karolyi (Euridice), Bruno Karl Boes (Tirsi), Paul Germon (Plutone), Jean Vendassi (Carone), Isabelle Lopez (Venere), Sonia de Beaufort (Proserpina); Les Arts Baroques/ Mireille Podeur
Maguelone 358415 [2CD] 88 minutes

Jacopo Peri (1561-1618) could justly be considered the “father of opera.” He was active (as composer and singer) in the Florentine La Pellegrina dramatization of 1589. His first full experiment with musical drama, Dafne, was performed in 1598, but almost all of the music for that is lost. For a Medici festivity in 1600, with compulsory insertions of sections by his colleague and rival, Giulio Caccini (1551-1618), the more mature Euridice was performed. That is the first surviving example of
what we reckon as "opera" (which, by the way, is the Italian word for "works" or "deeds" or perhaps "performances"). Caccini attempted his own full *Euridice* treatment, which he published in 1600 and had performed in 1602. But the achievements of these two Florentine pioneers was quickly eclipsed by Monteverdi’s brilliant *Orfeo*, which was produced in Mantua in 1607 and rapidly spread the new idiom to other centers in Italy. Monteverdi’s work survives as the earliest specimen of opera that we still hear and enjoy regularly, while the achievements of Peri and Caccini are generally overlooked except in the textbooks.

To approach Peri’s work, we need some perspective on what he and his colleagues were trying to do. They were working in the lines of the Florentine aesthetic group first called the Camerata, who sought nothing less than the recreation of ancient Greek and Roman drama. In that sense, it might be said that the last, and unintended, contribution of Renaissance Humanism to Western culture was opera. The goal also was a patriotic one, to challenge the complexities of Franco-Flemish “northern” music with the Italian love for the solo voice and expressive melody. The result was the soloistic idiom (voice with underpinning bass) of monody—not yet the stiff recitative of several generations later, but something ranging between free declamation and flowing arioso.

Despite the inclusion of choral episodes in a madrigalian style, and some instrumental uses, the bulk of the full Florentine music drama was solo monody. That texture could be a recipe for monotony, though the intended Italian audience would at least be able to follow the text.

I know of at least two earlier recorded attempts at presenting this work. For one of them, consult Mr Loomis’s review (J/F 1997). He found that performance “moves at a pace that makes the piece seem interminable”. I understand his point. He also speculated: “Whether a more dramatically telling performance would transform this opera from a historical curiosity into a real music drama remains to be seen.” He saw that as a “great, perhaps insurmountable” challenge.

I am happy to report that, in this release, we have a recording that can overcome my colleague’s doubts. This recording was made at a public performance in Rouen in 1993; to my knowledge it has not been released before. Except for Poulenard, the 11 singers are not familiar. But they are wonderfully caught up in their roles as genuine singing actors, and they tell the story vividly, with the well-balanced support of Podeur.

It might be noted that Rinuccini’s libretto for the piece carries that story only to Orfeo’s recovery of Euridice, without including the hero’s unintentional blunder that deprives her of her in her second death, included in Monteverdi’s work. After all, this 1600 work was intended as part of the wedding ceremonies of a Medici princess with King Henry IV of France, so a rousingly happy ending was in order.

I would like more information about the instrumentation used, which seems to me a bit generous. But, if this recording hardly unseats Monteverdi’s great work of original genius, it does show that Peri’s “first” deserves to be taken seriously.

In packaging this recording, Maguelone has met the usual constraints of the Law of False Economy with a sensible compromise over the booklet. All its 30 pages are given over to the full Italian libretto, with French and English translations.

Connoisseurs of early operatic history and literature should not be without this set.

BARKER

PERICOLI: *Cello Sonatas*  
Federico Bracalente; Nicola Proccaccini, hpsi  
Brilliant 95358—58 minutes

Pascal Pericoli is something of a mystery. He appears to have been from Naples, and a couple of his sonatas have sometimes been attributed to Boccherini. The cover gives the dates of the composer as 1752-1757.

These six sonatas are all in three movements and are lovely works, first published in 1769. They have a way of blending effectively with the harpsichord bass line so that I felt sometimes that there were two cellos playing. Well done, Mr Pericoli and Mr Bracalente! This is a very pleasant collection, played sensitively. It is well worth investigating, particularly if the Boccherini style attracts your ears.

D MOORE

PESCETTI: *Keyboard Pieces*  
Paolo Bottini, org, hpsi  
Brilliant 95438 [2CD] 142 minutes

There are 20 extant sonatas by Giovanni Battista Pescetti (1704–66), who was mostly a vocal composer and opera director. 16 of those are harpsichord sonatas. Pescetti published the first nine in London in 1739. He did not
publish the others, but completed them before 1756. The four very short sonatas for organ were published as recently as 1962, and their authorship is not entirely secure.

In these 20 sonatas, Paolo Bottini plays 19 of them on organ, and only one (Number 10) on harpsichord. He plays two organs in Venice. On the evidence of this recording, Bottini is a fantastic organist. His harpsichord playing sounds untrained and not as expressive as it could be.

The music is fairly predictable and ordinary, with consequent phrases and harmonic progressions playing themselves out like music-theory exercises. It's pleasant enough. It sounds like Antonio Soler’s music, but is less memorable.

The attractive performance makes this set worth hearing. The registrations are colorful, sometimes even humorous. Just when the music threatens to be dull, Bottini throws in some sparkling improvised embellishments or brings in a new timbre. The pieces I most wanted to hear again are the last four in the set, the ones originally for organ.

The only competition appears to be from Filippo Emanuele Ravizza, who recorded only the first nine sonatas (the 1739 book) on harpsichord. He’s fine, but has a distracting style of playing notes very short. Bottini makes the music more amusing.

B LEHMAN

PORTERA: Red Music; see SCHOENBERG

POULENC: Sextet; see THUILLE

Violin Sonata; see Collections

PRAETORIUS: Lutheran Choral Concertos
Weser-Renaissance/ Manfred Cordes
CPO 555064—74 minutes

In time for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Manfred Cordes brings us this recording of Lutheran chorale concertos by Michael Praetorius (1571-1621). As Cordes explains in his notes, what the Welfian rulers lacked in real power they made up for in their incomparable patronage of the arts. And when Duke Heinrich Julius of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel converted to Protestantism, he would align with the Saxon court in such a way that would add to the esteem of the Wolfenbüttel court as a center for Lutheran Church music. Appointing Michael Praetorius as court composer in 1593 would allow Duke Heinrich Julius to capitalize on Praetorius’s gifts for the Italian concerto style, which was all the rage. This style is on view in chorale-based concertos such as ‘Veni Sancte Spiritus: Halleluia, Komm Heiliger Geist’, ‘Vater Unser im Himmelsreich,’ and others. Some of the passages seem to get a little high for the sopranos—e.g. the closing passage of the massive ‘Ach Gott vom Himmel sib Darein’—but the performance is on the whole excellent. Texts and notes are in English.

LOEWEN

PROKOFIEFF: Piano Concerto 2;
TCHAIKOVSKY: Concerto 1
Irena Portenko; Ukrainian Symphony/ Vолодимир Сіренко—Blue Griffin 417—73 minutes

Ukrainian pianist Irena Portenko, now in her 40s according to a website (why do women, especially Europeans, hide their age?) and
apparently living in New York state, simply
doesn’t cut the mustard in Prokofieff’s tour de
force. Most of the time I get the feeling that the
only way she can hack it, especially in solo sec-
tions with three staves of music, is by drastically
reducing the tempo. I heard no clams, but
every movement sounds laborious. She also
has a very bad habit, especially in sections
without orchestra, of constantly using rubato,
which kills the form or flow. She takes II,
marked Vivace, at about 130 beats per minute
instead of 150 to 170. In III she mistakes
Pesante (peasant-like) for a tempo; it’s not—it
indicates style. The tempo is marked allegro
moderato, but hers is unbelievably slow
(apparently peasant-like). Also, the orchestra
is rather faceless. Its ensemble is not really
tight, and as a result its rhythms lack character.
Neither Artistic Director-Chief Conductor
Sirenko nor the engineers give it any heft—a
significant drawback in this bang-up concerto.
In the Tchaikovsky Portenko does much
better, exhibiting fine musicality, despite a few
missed notes. The killer here is the orchestra,
which lumbers along without strong disci-
pline. It has that “somewhat behind the beat”
feeling. In III the Russian dance (without
piano) is very two-dimensional, without kick
or muscle. Also, the violins sound grainy from
start to finish in both concertos.
This was recorded in Kiev in 2013.

PROKOFIEFF: Sonatas 2, 6, 8
Alexander Melnikov
Harmonia Mundi 902202—70 minutes

Prokofieff’s piano sonatas have never appealed
to me the way the ballets, symphonies, piano
concertos, violin concertos and sonatas, string
quartets, and film scores have (in other words,
pretty much everything else he wrote). I like
the Third and Seventh the best, but even they
don’t have the all charm, whimsy, or dramatic
depth his other pieces have; there is some, of
course, just not as much. They tend to be
among Prokofieff’s most percussive pieces, and
that’s not where he excelled.
Melnikov recorded Shostakovich’s Pre-
ludes and Fugues a few years back. I thought
that set was terrific; he did a fine job at bring-
ing out characters and colors from the pieces.
If I remember right, our reviewer (Nov/Dec
2010) wasn’t quite as taken with them as I was.
Here, Melnikov is technically clean and ener-
gic but cerebral and a little dry; he doesn’t
play 2 and 8 with Sviatoslav Richter’s fire and
urgency. He’s not entirely emotionless, but his
approach is rather analytical. The sonics
accent this—they are clear, bright, and without
much warmth. The recording makes the
pieces even less interesting to me.

PROKOFIEFF: Romeo and Juliet
Oslo Philharmonic/ Vasily Petrenko
LAWO 1105 [2CD] 2:25

Some readers might remember the series of
very exciting recordings this orchestra made
with MariSS Jansons in the late 1980s and early
90s for Chandos and EMI. Those records were
notable for superb sound, excellent playing,
and thrilli, if not always particularly deep,
interpretations. The good news is that all those
virtues are on display here under Petrenko, the
Oslo Philharmonic’s current chief conductor.
And he digs a bit more deeply into the under-
lying emotional core of Romeo and Juliet than
Jansons did in his exciting, superbly recorded
EMI disc of excerpts. I’m not sure I’m ready to
agree entirely with the observation in the
album notes that Petrenko is “one of the most
significant and galvanizing musicians alive”,
but he does seem to know his way around
Prokofieff’s large, ambitious ballet score.
The only problem with this new Romeo is
that it’s not quite exceptional enough. I will say
that when I compared it to the old Cleveland
Orchestra/Maazel (Decca) complete recording,
Petrenko and his band hold their own.
Maazel’s players—essentially the orchestra
selected, drilled, and honed to perfection by
George Szell—play with exceptional alertness
and sensitivity to detail. But I can’t say the Oslo
Phil of 2015 is really inferior to the Cleveland
Orchestra of 1972. Maybe it’s an indication of
how much the standard of orchestra playing
has risen worldwide in the last 50 or so years.
What would have been a second- or third-rank
ensemble in those days now rivals the best of
that era in technical precision and polish.
It’s harder to compare the recorded sound
because my copy of the Maazel is on LP. I’ll say
that both recordings represent the pinnacle of
what their reproduction technologies have to
offer. LAWO’s sound pretty much squeezes
everything you can from the format—and
reminds me that many of the complaints we
had about the hard, tiring, rather constricted
nature of CD sound back in the early days was
more a matter of the people making the
recordings and mastering them—they did not
have the experience to extract its full potential.

American Record Guide 141
The London LPs hold up well in comparison, though of course, they don’t have the dynamic range or the same punch in the bass as the present set.

Petrenko brings more energy and drive to the score than Muti in his recent Chicago Symphony recording (Mar/Apr 2015) of excerpts. When I want to hear the high points of the score, minus the less interesting connective music, the other Chicago Symphony set, Solti’s (Decca), is my first choice. Petrenko does not convey the same kinetic energy and visceral punch in the dramatic music that Solti does. Anti-Soltians will probably say that’s a good thing, but by the time he made his Romeo and Juliet Solti was settling down and could relax enough to indulge in the sensuous, lyrical side of the score. Petrenko is mellower but doesn’t draw as much lyrical fervor from movements like the Balcony Scene or the scene in the tomb at the end of the ballet.

Solti’s late-analog sound transferred to CD is almost on par with what LAWO gives Petrenko. The very best sound may well be BIS’s for the Bergen Philharmonic under Litton (J/A 2007—about half the score), but Litton’s tempos are stodgy in some places, and the order of the numbers makes the performance slow to heat up.

Petrenko ticks all the boxes in the big dramatic moments, so there’s plenty of bite to the death of Tybalt and a lot of unrepressed youthful energy to the scene leading up to it. But on the whole there are no revelations here. The lighter, more playful numbers aren’t particularly light-hearted; and the harrowing moments of tragedy seem a bit emotionally detached.

This is a competent interpretation of the complete score, but I think I’ll stick with Maazel and Solti.

HANSEN

PROKOFIEFF: Violin Sonatas; 5 Melodies

Elise Batnes; Havard Gimse, p
LAWO 1118—65 minutes

Sonata 1; 5 Melodies; Cinderella & Romeo and Juliet Pieces

Lisa Oshima; Stefan Stroissnig
Quartz 2119—70 minutes

Prokofieff’s two violin sonatas, and especially Sonata 1, are among the masterpieces of the literature. They have been recorded many times, and they are popular with audiences because of their lovely tunes.

Swedish violinist Elise Batnes is a soloist and concertmaster of the Oslo Philharmonic. She is a very fine violinist, and she plays these works with authority and sympathy for their idiom, though she has nothing new to say about them. She plays the “Arditti” Stradivarius of 1689.

Lisa Oshima is not as commanding a presence as Batnes, and her partner is not as assertive as the Swede’s. Her disc is mainly valuable for the arrangements of pieces from Prokofieff’s two most popular ballets, Cinderella and Romeo and Juliet.

By far the best disc I know of both sonatas and the Five Melodies is by Franziska Pietsch and Detlev Eisinger (Nov/Dec 2016).

MAGIL

PUCCINI: Manon Lescaut

Anna Netrebko (Manon), Yusif Eyvazov (Des Grieux), Armando Pina (Lescaut), Benjamin Bernheim (Edmondo), Carlos Chausson (Geronte), Patrick Vogel (Dancing Master, Lamp-lighter), Vienna Opera Chorus, Munich Radio/ Marco Armiliato
DG 4796828 [2CD] 127 minutes

There are divas and then there DIVAS! Such is Anna Netrebko—she is one of the most popular singers today. She lives up to her reputation; but does she live up to Puccini’s heroine? I may be speaking heresy, but no, she does not. There is a certain round sound evoking warm beauty, yet some wobble in the sustained notes of the upper range. She sings some beautiful pianissimos. Her characterization is of a most put-upon diva.

There’s more bad news. Eyvazov is nasal in the extreme. On high notes the voice is tense and tight, with little color, sometimes blossoming into a screech. At least Pina holds up the honor of Puccini and the Italian baritone with beautiful color and a solid characterization. By now it’s too late, despite good work from Chausson and Vogel. The Edmondo of Benjamin Bernheim is best forgotten. Armiliato is a master of this repertoire.

A libretto is included.

For a grand interpretation of the opera try Renata Tebaldi and Mario Del Monaco on Decca or Montserrat Caballe and Placido Domingo on RCA. For great singing it’s Jussi Björling all the way, though some may not like the husky voice of Licia Albanese. But what a way she has with the text! Her pain and despair in the opera’s conclusion would melt a stone.

PARSONS
Puccini: Songs
Krassimira Stoyanova, s; Maria Prinz, p
Naxos 573501—47 minutes

Giacomo Puccini’s song output is very slight compared to many other composers; but like Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and Verdi he left a handful of settings that in their simplicity and restraint could hardly be more different from his operas. A number of them were composed for friends and they cover themes typical of lyric poetry of that period: life, death, love, nature and spring, etc. Some of these songs contain musical themes that Puccini would recycle in his operas. ‘Sole e amore’ uses music that the composer would later use in Act Three of La Bohème. The opening song here, ‘Canto d’anime’, uses a melody that sounds a great deal like Rinuccio’s aria in Gianni Schicchi. Other songs are the first draft of music that would later be used in La Ron- dine, Manon Lescaut, Tosca, even Madama Butterfly. It’s fun to listen for melodies that are familiar from the operas.

Placido Domingo recorded a collection of Puccini songs over two decades ago for CBS. Krassimira Stoyanova is an exceptionally gifted soprano who in the last five years or so has turned increasingly to Puccini and other composers of the verismo school. She has chosen mostly out-of-the-way repertoire for her solo discs. Her colorful spinto soprano is thrilling in the opera house, and she has a commanding stage presence. Those attributes work less well for her in this repertoire because one wants an intimacy that isn’t quite hers to command. These songs should sound like they’re being shared with friends at a family gathering. Stoyanova doesn’t sing badly—far from it. She just sounds better in more operatic material.

Her accompanist, Maria Prinz, finds the appropriate chiaroscuro in the piano parts. The sound is clear, but I hear a trace of distortion in loud high phrases.

Naxos offers detailed background on the songs; texts and translations are available online (I checked).

REYNOLDS

What is remarkable about western music is that by its chosen scales, modified through equal temperament, and by developing complex forms and instruments, it has raised the expressive power of music to heights and depths unattained in other cultures.

JACQUES BARZUN

From Dawn to Decadence

PURCELL: Sacred Pieces
O Sing unto the Lord; Remember not, Lord; Jehovah, quam Multi Sunt Hostes Mei; Evening Hymn; O God, Thou Art my God; Morning Hymn; I Was Glad; Hear My Prayer, O Lord; Voluntary in G; Te Deum in D

St Thomas Choir; Concert Royal/ John Scott
Resonus 10184—54 minutes

This recording of sacred music by Henry Purcell (1659–95) contains a good cross section of his output: one symphony anthem, several full anthems, a Latin psalm setting, two non-liturgical devotional songs, and the festive Te Deum with strings and trumpets written for the St Cecilia’s Day celebrations of 1694. An organ voluntary in G is thrown in for good measure, played with exquisite sensitivity by John Scott (1956–2015), who also directs the choir of St Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue, and the New York-based period instrument ensemble Concert Royal. The recording dates from 2010, but does not appear to have been released until this year.

The technical standard here leaves nothing to be desired, and Scott conveys the essential character of each piece. In the opening symphony anthem ‘O Sing unto the Lord’, I was immediately taken with the warm string sound and the perfect combination of exuberance with refinement in this jubilant but stately work. He is every bit as convincing in the more penitential works.

I can certainly recommend this recording to readers looking for an introduction to the sacred music of Purcell. It shares a good deal of repertory with an excellent recording I reviewed a few years ago by the choir of St John’s College, Cambridge, under the direction of Andrew Nethsingha (Chandos 790; M/A 2013). That recording is about 16 minutes longer and has more symphony anthems, but not the St Cecilia Te Deum. It also contains an anthem and a set of evening canticles by Purcell’s elder contemporary, Pelham Humfrey (1647–74). Also worthy of consideration is a recording of Purcell verse anthems by the choir of New College, Oxford under Edward Higginbottom (CRD 3504; J/F 2001). Of course, committed admirers of Purcell will be satisfied with nothing less than the 11CD set of the complete anthems, service music, and devotional songs directed by Robert King with the King’s Consort (Hyperion 44141; M/A 2003).

GATENS
RACHMANINOFF: Early Piano Pieces
Elisa Tomellini
Piano Classics 123—78 minutes

As a lifetime Rachmaninoff aficionado, I really appreciate this record. Besides the first-rate performances, not many of the pieces here are heard or recorded very often. Everything was composed 1886-94 by a young composer just beginning to find his voice. Notably absent from this collection are the five pieces from Op.3, which includes the famous Prelude in C-sharp minor. That opus gets performed and recorded often. I have only come across the ‘Humoresque’ (heard here in its 1940 revised version) and the ‘Barcarolle’ from the Morceau de Salon apart from recordings of the complete opus (Horowitz on RCA). The four-movement Suite in D minor (1890-91) is a piano transcription of an early orchestral work. It was only discovered in 2002 in a collection of Siloti’s papers. This 20-minute work is well worth getting to know and has been recorded many times since their first US publication in the early 1970s, but have never entered the mainstream of piano repertoire. Tomellini’s interpretation might help remedy that situation. The same holds true for the Four Pieces Rachmaninoff originally considered for his Opus 1.

This disc is also part of Piano Classics 111, Rachmaninoff’s Complete Piano Music [6CD]. Either way, it sheds new light on the composer’s early piano music. When taken in this context, the Op. 10 pieces assume a significance not generally associated with them, and I can’t recall enjoying these pieces more.

HARRINGTON

RACHMANINOFF: Piano Sonata 1; Corelli Variations; 3 Etudes-Tableaux; 4 Song Transcriptions
Sandro Russo
Steinway 30077—78 minutes

Russo has come my way before with Russian repertoire (Musical Concepts 150, N/D 2014). He is an exciting, very talented pianist, born in Sicily but a resident of the US since 2000. Now the Steinway artist has his first disc on that top label. As expected, it is generously filled, with excellent piano sound and good program notes. I have discs with just the sonata and Corelli Variations, but here we get an additional seven pieces—25 minutes more music. Sonata 1 is probably my favorite of Rachmaninoff’s large piano compositions. It opened the composer’s first solo piano recital at Carnegie Hall in 1909. Rarely heard 40 years ago, it is played and recorded much more often these days, but nowhere as often as Sonata 2. Without the benefit of a champion like Horowitz, and with a difficulty level comparable to Piano Concerto 3, this work requires a pianist with vast reserves of technique, power, and interpretive skill. Russo succeeds on all counts. He doesn’t knock Ogdon (RCA) from my top spot, primarily because of the flow and drive, which can start and stop here but is relentless with Ogdon. Of course, the 1968 RCA piano sound can’t compare with Steinway’s 2017 sound, and Russo has many beautiful and important things to say about this work.

The Corelli Variations are just as well played and recorded, but I do object to the 18 minute work as only one track.

In between the two big works, we are treated to three nicely contrasting Etudes-Tableaux: Op.33:3 in C minor and 33:6 and 39:5 in E-flat minor. The inclusion of four of Earl Wild’s brilliant song transcriptions makes this release even more irresistible. I have the greatest admiration for pianists who can play these murderously difficult arrangements. I know how hard the original accompaniments are; I have performed all four of the songs with a singer: ‘Dreams’, ‘Floods of Spring’, ‘The Little Island’ and ‘Here It Is Beautiful’. Wild adds extra verses, harmonic modulations, and tons of notes to the original; but everything he does is fully in keeping with Rachmaninoff’s style. I believe that the composer would have approved.

HARRINGTON

RACHMANINOFF: Symphony 1; BALAKIREV: Tamara
London Symphony/ Valery Gergiev
LSO 784 [SACD] 61 minutes

“You can’t phone it in”, goes the old saying. Well, Gergiev sort of does here. There’s a certain soullessness to this performance that reminds me of the emptiness of the “Phone Dead” generation.

Gergiev doesn’t turn in a bad performance of the symphony; it’s just not entirely convincing or interesting. Of course, the work’s premiere in St Petersburg in 1897 was one of the famous failures of musical history. The orchestra was under-rehearsed; the conductor, Alexander Glazounov, was unsympathetic to
the piece and possibly inebriated; and the composer had a crisis of confidence afterward. The music is not Rachmaninoff’s greatest, but it certainly has far more merit than its dispiriting first performance indicated. The mood of the piece is dour—rather relentlessly dour, as if the composer’s early tone poem The Rock were expanded to three times its original length. Did I mention that it’s quite a dour, emotionally monochromatic piece?

The LSO sounds quite well rehearsed, but Gergiev seems to be mostly directing traffic. I found my mind wandering while I was listening, thinking about what I want to do this weekend. This is entirely unlike the experience of listening to Gianandrea Noseda’s recording (Chandos, N/D 2008), which grabs one’s attention and won’t let go for the whole 45 minutes, filling one’s head with thoughts like “underrated early masterpiece by one of the great composers” or “should be performed in concert more often” or “holy smoke, now I know where the Second Symphony came from!”

The first movement starts with a bit of a bark and drives ahead relentlessly for a solid 13-1/2 minutes here. Gergiev pushes hard and makes the music sound hard-nosed. He keeps it moving along, but doesn’t seem much involved, and actually seems to lose interest in the more prosaic connective passages where the young Rachmaninoff hadn’t yet mastered the art of transition. Gergiev makes the work feel like a collection of effects without causes—very much NOT how it sounds in Noseda’s interpretation.

The scherzo (II) comes off pretty grim, too, though some of the responsibility for that has to fall on the composer’s shoulders. There’s none of the lyrical Rachmaninoff of the Second and Third Piano Concertos or the Second Symphony in this movement. Gergiev doesn’t let III drag, but he also doesn’t do much to make a contrast with the other three, dour movements—at least not the way that Ashkenazy does in his still resplendently conducted and recorded Decca set; but he also has the advantage of the ultra-lush Concertgebouw Orchestra’s string section. The London Symphony’s strings just don’t have the same full-bodied warmth, though some of that might be the effect of the hall they’re playing in. The LSO does achieve a Concertgebouw-like tone in the old Previn recording, part of a fairly complete set of Rachmaninoff orchestral music, on EMI.

Gergiev whips through the long, punchy finale very punchily, leading right up to the loud peroration at the end, which comes off harsh and overbearing. If the goal is to get the listener to warm up to the music, it didn’t happen here.

Some of the problem may also lie with the sound. All the LSO recordings made in the Barbican tend to have hard, gray sound, even in the SACD format. The tone here is a little less dry than the usual Barbican productions but does not come close to the vibrancy of the Ashkenazy and Previn recordings.

At least the filler is interesting: Balakirev’s rarely performed 20-minute tone-poem Tama-ra. Gergiev seems to have put the phone down here, for this is a lively, vital performance of music that’s not really from the top drawer. Aside from his two symphonies, rarely performed outside of Russia, Balakirev’s greatest achievement may have been mentoring, encouraging, and sometimes browbeating Tchaikovsky into writing Romeo and Juliet and the Manfred Symphony. In Tamara he has the symphonic form down well enough, if not the full measure of melodic invention to give it the kind of life Tchaikovsky gave it.

HANSEN

RACHMANINOFF: Vespers
Mariya Berezovska, a; Dmitry Ivanchenko, t; Gloriae Dei Cantores; members of St Romanos Cap-pella, Patriarch Tikhon Choir, Washington Master Chorale/ Peter Jermihov
Gloriae Dei 63 [SACD] 67 minutes

Rachmaninoff’s All-Night Vigil is the composer’s most impressive choral work and, indeed, one of most impressive a cappella works in the entire literature. It is in 15 movements, 10 of which are based on ancient chant; but the individual pieces do not form any narrative. It is a conservative work. Rachmaninoff was somewhat daring in some of his chord progressions, but in general the piece sounds deliberately archaic. The music is heavily weighed with pure triads, usually relating to each other more modally than tonally; and seventh chords are rare. The effect, though, is mesmerizing; you can listen to this music just for the gorgeous sound, knowing little or nothing of the Russian text.

The main choral group here is the Gloriae Dei Cantores, resident at the Church of the Transfiguration (Benedictine) in Orleans, MA. They and members of the three other groups are conducted by Peter Jermihov, who was born in Chicago to Russian-immigrant par-ents. Jermihov elicits gorgeous, rich, and pure
choral sound from his singers, maintains tension through long sections of slow-moving music, and delivers wonderful climaxes in several of the movements. I guess it’s a compliment to say I didn’t feel I was listening to American singers!

Traditionally this music has belonged to Russian choirs, which, in Lindsay Koob’s words had a “big, brawny sound with lots of massive, vibrato-heavy voices and seismically deep basses” (S/O 2014). In recent years smaller groups, even English choirs, have taken on Rachmaninoff, often with good results because of greater precision and better intonation. Jeremiakov’s recording draws the best from both worlds. His slow tempos add to the depth and sheer beauty of the score, and at the same time his singers maintain splendid intonation and attention to detail. The soloists, particularly tenor Ivanenchko, are first-rate. Texts, translations, and notes are included in a sumptuous booklet. This is a terrific recording in every way.

ALTHOUSE

RACHMANINOFF: Violin Pieces
Annette K Gregory; Alexander Sinchuk, p
Bridge 9481—71 minutes

I didn’t know Rachmaninoff wrote anything for the violin. In fact, there was a very early work, a Romance in A minor from the 1880s (he was born in 1873). The only other Rachmaninoff pieces for violin are the 2 Pieces, Opus 6, from 1893. So if he stopped writing for the instrument when he was 20 years old and still lived and composed for 50 more years, where do these 71 minutes come from?

Everything else is transcriptions and arrangements of piano pieces and songs. Many of them are by Fritz Kreisler or Jascha Heifetz, who made them for their own recitals. Kreisler even arranged the second movement of Piano Concerto 2 for violin and piano, and that is here, as is his arrangement of the most famous variation from the Paganini Rhapsody.

It’s only fair to say that the transcriptions are excellent and very violinistic (what do you expect from Kreisler and Heifetz?). They work well, but in some cases you will say to yourself that you liked a piece better on the piano than on the violin—or you might want to hear the singer and know the words, if it’s a song.

It’s certainly not a mistake to record these pieces, and the violinist is very good—affectionate rather than splashy, but the pieces were splashy enough on the piano and needed to take on a somewhat different persona with the violin. (There’s not so much difference between voice and violin.) I liked this, but it remains to be seen how it will wear over time. I think many of these transcriptions were for “encores” rather than for repeated hearing.

VROON

RAFF: Songs
Noemi Nadelmann, s; Barbara Kozejl, mz; Thomas Oliepman, bar; Jan Schultz, p
Divox 20806 [2SACD] 115 minutes

Swiss composer Joseph Joachim Raff (1822-82) was Liszt’s assistant in Weimar from 1850 to 1856. His music was championed by Mendelssohn, and he was the most performed composer for a few years in the 1870s all over Europe and in the United States. In addition to songs Raff composed 12 symphonies, six operas, oratorios, cantatas, and choral works, chamber music, concertos, and orchestral works.

This release contains all 30 of his Spring Songs, Op. 98 and all 12 songs of Maria Stuart, Op. 172. These performances are commendable and the sound is very good, but most of his songs are not of enduring significance and will probably remain on the musical margins. Still, they are worth a hearing, and if anything can earn them respect, it will be performances as good as these.

Notes but no texts.

R MOORE

RAVEL: Miroirs; see SCRIBABIN

REGER: Fantasia and Fugue
op 29, 46, 57, 135b
David Goode, org
Signum 476 [2CD] 85 minutes

Another entry in the 2016 celebration of Reger’s 100th birthday (S/O 2016; M/A 2017). This program contains his four fantasies and fugues ranging from the early Op. 29 to the late Op. 135b. The most familiar will be the BACH (Op. 46), which, taking its inspiration from the one by Liszt, moves to another level both in length and technical difficulty. Op. 57, with its stacks of 32nd and 64th notes in the fantasia combined with an intricate, 12-minute double fugue, is appropriately nicknamed Inferno. Reger is an acquired taste whose style exists somewhere between late Brahms and early Schoenberg, with a whiff of Debussy thrown in, all wrapped-up in dense, Bachian counterpoint.

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Goode is an excellent player whose sensible tempos, combined with clear, musical, and technically fluid playing, allow the listener to follow the harmonic development and contrapuntal intricacies in a logical way. If this music is played too fast it makes no sense—a lot of noise and a “smear” of notes. He plays on the wonderful 1997 Klaas organ in Bath Abbey. I quibble with 85 minutes spread over two discs—why not include more pieces? Notes on the music and specification.

DELAMP

REINECKE: Die Wilden Schwäne
Kirsten Lobonte (Elfriede), Gerhild Romberger (Fairy Queen), Markus Kohler (King’s Son), Christian Kleinert (narr); Ensemble/ Peter Kreutz
CPO 777940—57 minutes

Carl Reinecke (1824-1910) was of those German composers who wanted to preserve and promote German heritage, folklore, romanticism, and “hausmusik.” The concept of “hausmusik” was to compose music that was appealing, yet easy enough for talented amateurs to perform at home in their evening salons.

Although of German descent he was born in Altona, a town near Hamburg that at that time belonged to Denmark. The stories by Hans Christian Anderson were familiar to him. This trifle is based on Andersen’s story “The Wild Swans” with a text by Karl Kuhn. It is called a poem for two sopranos, mezzo, alto, baritone, speaker, women’s chorus, with a modest accompaniment by harp, cello, two horns, and piano.

It is a charming little piece with music redolent of Schubert. It is more than competent; it is a minor masterpiece. Peter Kreutz conducts from the piano. The performance is excellent, well sung and played, a true delight. German and English texts are included.

Gaunderino’s performance does not do much to change my opinion of this music; it is somewhat plodding and not very engaging. He plays on a large two-manual organ by Alessio Lucato in the church of San Michele Arcangelo in Padua. The notes indicate that it was inspired by German symphonic organ music, but it certainly does not sound like a symphonic organ. Other choices include Rubsam (Naxos), Stevens (Raven), and Pohl (Motette). Minimal notes on the composer and music.

DELAMP

RIMSKY-KORSAKOFF: Trio; see TANEYEV

ROGER-DUCASSE: Piano Pieces
Joel Hastings
Grand Piano 724—79 minutes

Until recently, the name Roger-Ducasse (1873-1954) was one I had only seen here or there; and I had never heard any of his music. Then last year I reviewed an excellent 3-disc set of his complete piano music by Martin Jones (Nimbus 5927, Sept/Oct 2016). Younger than Debussy by 11 years, Roger-Ducasse lived into his 80s. He was most definitely an impressionist composer, with strong influences from Chopin and Liszt. He was a favorite student of Gabriel Fauré, whom he succeeded as professor of composition at the Paris Conservatoire. It is too bad we don’t get much of a chance to hear his music, but with this new release I sense the possibility of more wide-spread recognition of how good his music is. He was active in the French music scene for more than
The demons hear Mary's lovely lament and they continue to taunt her and declare that Heaven is now closed and deaf to her pleas. Mary does not give up and vividly describes the cruel nails in her Son's flesh. But this only provokes more mocking from the demons, so she makes a direct plea to Jesus. The oratorio ends not by declaring a clear victor in the contest between Mary and the demons but with 'Piangete Occhi, Piangete' a madrigal about the precious value of Christ's pain in showing all disciples the way to eternal life.

The performers capture the spirit of the music well, and I am glad to hear this piece. Check that your playback volume is high enough. At first I found the performance to be rather dragging and distant, so I experimented with the volume and raised it quite a lot. A good test to get the volume right is track 11, where demons cast scorn and Mary sings her lament to Jesus. Then go back to hear the whole program.

Notes, texts, translations.

C. MOORE
departed”, is a more generalized memory piece. Changing Light, for soprano and violin, illustrates Saariaho’s skill in writing for voice and small ensembles. The passionate vocal discourse is set against an eerie violin sonority depicting “the intimate nature of the duo”; its fragile sound reflects “the fragility of our uncertain existence”. Die Aussicht, another vocal work and the most lyrical piece here, begins with a Mahlerian song, moves into Saariaho’s more familiar brittle territory, then returns for a poetic close. Pia Freund is the rapturous soprano. The Meta4 Quartet, for whom several of the works were written or rewritten, plays with intensity and commitment.

SULLIVAN

SAINT-CAJETAN: Gamba Pieces;
see MARAIS

SAINTE-COLOMBE: Gamba Pieces;
see MARAIS

SAINT-SAENS: Cello Concerto 1;
Sonatas 2+3
Emmanuelle Bertrand; Pascal Amoyel, p; Lucerne Symphony/ James Gaffigan
Harmonia Mundi 902210 — 67 minutes

Camille Saint-Saëns was a composer of often memorable music. We have here his well-known Cello Concerto in A minor, coupled with two much less common cello sonatas, the last one only two movements long.

I find it difficult to keep my attention on the sonatas, even when following the musical score. That is mainly because of the performance style. Bertrand and Amoyel are fine technical players, but they do not phrase in a way that pulls the musical meaning out of the scores. That goes for the concerto as well. My favorite recording of this music is the one by Isserlis (RCA 61678; J/F 1994). For more choices, see the Cello Overview (M/A 2009).

It should be mentioned that Sonata 3 is a first recording. It is in two movements and is well worth hearing.

D MOORE

SAINT-SAENS: Piano Concertos 1+2;
Allegro Appassionato
Romain Descharmes, Malmö Symphony/ Marc Soustrot—Naxos 573476—58 minutes

This release is the latest in this orchestra’s project to record all the Saint-Saëns orchestral music under the leadership of Marc Soustrot, their principal conductor since 2011. Here they are joined by Romain Descharmes, a fine French pianist in his mid-30s.

American Record Guide
CARLATTI, A: St John Passion; Responsoria
Giuseppina Bridelli (Evangelist), Salvo Vitale (Christ), Namur Chamber Choir, Millenium Orchestra/ Leonardo Garcia Alarcon
Ricercar 378—59 minutes

The main work here is the only surviving example of several Latin oratorios that the youthful Alessandro Scarlatti produced in the early 1680s. Most of them were composed for Rome, but latest researches have identified this one (from 1685) as intended for Naples.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the second recording of the work. The first goes back to the early 1950s and the earliest LP years: it was made in New Haven CT under the direction of Howard Boatwright and issued as the very first release by the Overtone label. This new recording was made at a public performance on March 27, 2016 and is apparently also available in a video edition.

It is interesting to note that Scarlatti’s setting of the Latin Gospel text dates from less than 20 years after the aged Heinrich Schutz composed his setting of the German translation of that text. Schutz cast his treatment for voices only—an Evangelist (tenor), individual solo characters, and a chorus as the crowd, also singing opening and closing framing pieces. Scarlatti does essentially the same thing, with a Testo as the Evangelist (taken here somewhat incongruously by a mezzo-soprano), and with modest support by strings and continuo. But there are no framing cho- 

uses, and the work ends with the conclusion of the Gospel text.

It is surprising how, despite some differences, Scarlatti’s setting sounds close to Schutz’s—which the Italian composer presumably did not know. Schutz had his singers use a kind of post-plainchant declamation, whereas Scarlatti employs a rather simplified arioso style that avoids operatic associations, with the crowd sections (turbae) in simple chordal textures.

This Scarlatti Passion setting has its own integrity, but conductor Alarcon apparently felt it was too bald and simplistic by itself. Accordingly, he has inserted, at regular intervals, seven selections from a collection of Latin Responsori della Settimana Santa (Responses for Holy Week) produced by the composer about 20 years later and surviving only in manuscript. The Passion setting itself takes a bit over 41 minutes, the Responsoria about 17. These interpolations do create a variety of musical textures, in the process providing a kind of liturgical commentary on the Passion story. Still, they seems to me to dilute the character of the primary work.

Alarcon’s soloists are not of prime rank, but fill their assignments quite well. Bridelli is able to maintain a certain non-operatic objectivity as the Evangelist. And the Namur choir is outstanding for its suavity. The instrumental ensemble (15 string players plus six continuo) is smoothly discreet.

Good notes, full texts and translations.

SCARLATTI: Amor d’un’ombra & Gelosia d’un Aura
Beatrice Mercuri (Eco-Aurora), Angelo Bonazzoli (Narciso), Romabarocca Ensemble/ Lorenzo Tozzi—Bongiovanni 2485—51:17

There’s a certain amount of fakery here.

In Rome in 1714, for his patroness the former queen of Poland, the 29-year-old Domenico Scarlatti set a libretto by Sigismondo
Capece. The Greek mythological story of Echo and Narcissus was mangled into a tangle about two couples, Cefalo and Aristeo and Eco and Narciso, who go through near-fatal crises, with interference from the jealous Prorci, before they are finally united in a double wedding. The title of the piece translates as “Love of a Shadow and Jealousy of a Breeze.”

In 1720 Scarlatti prepared for London a heavily overhauled version. He used a new libretto, by Paolo Antonio Rolli, under the title of Narciso. The composer made musical changes, while the production’s director Thomas Roseingrave, contributed some additions of his own. The cast included some of the outstanding singers in London at the time.

What we have here is neither of those full operas. It is a “reconstruction, revision, and adaptation”, based on the 1720 London score, but reverting to the 1714 Capece libretto. The Cefalo-Aristeo component is expunged entirely, resulting in a kind of duet cantata, and it is quietly given the subtitle of Eco e Narciso. Two instrumental tidbits from one of the composer’s cantatas are tossed in.

This farrago of shreds and tatters is not championed very well here, either. The two singers are lackluster and undistinguished. (The role of Narciso was sung in London by Handel’s distinguished Margherita Durastanti, but is here taken by a countertenor.) The small instrumental group is adequate, if little more. Well, at least the full libretto is given with English translation.

This release adds nothing to the composer’s discography. I can’t imagine why it was issued.

BARKER

SCHIEDEMANN: Organ Pieces
Preludes & Fugues; Chorale Settings
Friedhelm Flamme
CPO 777562 [SACD] 63 minutes

This is the 15th volume in Friedhelm Flamme’s comprehensive recorded survey of North German baroque organ music played on historic instruments. Music by Heinrich Scheidemann (c1595-1663) is played on the 1728 organ by Christoph Treutmann at the Castle Church of St Levin in Harbke. The instrument has 2 manuals and 22 stops. The pedal has only 2 stops—a 16-foot Subbass and 16-foot Posaune—so the pedal coupler to the Hauptwerk is indispensable. The instrument incorporates the pipework of the Gottfried Fritzscbe organ of 1622, but Treutmann so altered the character of the old pipework that the instrument reflects his tonal design rather than Fritzscbe’s. Treutmann also added the Rückpositiv as the organ’s second manual. As heard here, the organ’s tone is rich and clear. It is a relatively small instrument, not capable of massive effects, but quite brilliant in its way, and very pleasing to the ear.

Heinrich Scheidemann was the son of David Scheidemann (d 1629), who in 1604 was appointed organist of St Catherine’s Church in Hamburg. From 1611 to 1614 Heinrich studied with Sweelinck in Amsterdam, as did so many North German organists of his time. Sometime in the 1620s he became his father’s assistant at St Catherine’s and succeeded to the position when his father died. A substantial body of Heinrich’s keyboard music survives, but only two pieces in autograph manuscripts. The rest are copies, and in some cases the attribution to Scheidemann is doubtful. Johann Mattheson characterized Scheidemann’s playing and compositions as genial in contrast with the more serious musical personality of his friend and contemporary Jakob Praetorius (1586-1651), the organist of St Peter’s Church in Hamburg. One can hear that geniality in this recording.

B LEHMAN

SCARLATTI: 15 Sonatas
Johannes Maria Bogner, clavichord
Fra Bernardo 29208—73 minutes

The novelty here is the use of a clavichord instead of a harpsichord or fortepiano. Bogner’s roster of Scarlatti sonatas includes Kirkpatrick numbers 30, 32, 119, 132, 133, 141, 175, 184, 185, 193, 208, 209, 238, 239, and 513. These are some of the most familiar. Most of them sound terrific in this timbre. The clavichord brings out their relationship with guitar music. In Sonata 175 I miss the spicy jangling of the clusters, as the clavichord’s overtones are less prominent than a harpsichord’s.

Bogner’s instrument is a new one by Thomas Vincent Gluck, based on Cristofori designs. Because clavichords are so quiet, there would be a danger of making the music sound precious or sentimental. Bogner keeps it vigorous, with a cheery good humor and strong dynamic accents. The bass is strong. The F-minor Sonata 239 is like a rowdy stomping dance.

Igor Kipnis recorded three other Scarlatti sonatas on clavichord (EMI, deleted). I hope Bogner will take this exploratory project farther.

BARKER

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The program begins with 12 short preludes that sound as if they originated as improvisations. Friedhelm Flamme varies the registrations of these pieces to bring out their character. They are followed by seven pieces based on chorales. Most of these are chorale preludes in the ordinary sense, but the ‘Kyrie Dominicalis’ in three verses was probably intended to be performed in alternation with the choir. Within the boundaries of the North German style, Scheidemann brings an extraordinarily fertile musical imagination to these chorale-based compositions.

The program concludes with six more free compositions: a Canzona in F with three fugal sections, a Fantasia in G, two short fugues in D minor, a Toccata in C, and Scheidemann’s most extended free work, the Toccata in G. It is notable for florid passagework that may owe something to the English virginalist school as mediated by Sweelinck.

In recent years I have reviewed several volumes in this series, including works by Vincent Lübeck (CPO 777 198; Nov/Dec 2006), Hieronymus Praetorius (CPO 777 345; Jan/Feb 2013), Michael Praetorius (CPO 777 716; July/Aug 2015), and Jakob Praetorius (CPO 777 959; Mar/Apr 2017). Flamme’s playing leaves a poseur who has written a great deal of music, including 600 film scores as well as 8 operas, religious works, and a lot of instrumental and chamber pieces.

Here we have mostly music for cello and orchestra written from 2010 to 2016. Sulamith and Fatal Harmonies are suites for cello and string orchestra, Dugud and Abaddon use a full orchestra, and Lilith is for orchestra alone. All of these works have stories attached to them (see the composer’s liner notes). The descriptions demonstrate the many sources of the subjects in a way that leaves the music open to varied interpretations. That is also the effect of the music.

Schneider’s style is based on tonality but is replete with sonic events of many kinds and lyricism. I enjoyed it. Cellist Fenyo is highly competent and plays with feeling, and Zucker- mann and his fine orchestra work very well with him. This composer describes the present state of mankind well. In other words, he’s crazy but enjoyable. This is also a fine recording.

D MOORE

SCHNITTKE: Cello Sonata 1; Suite in the Old Style; Madrigal In Memoriam Oleg Kagan; Musica Nostalgica; ELSCHENBROICH: Shards of Alfred Schnittke

Leonard Elschenbroich, vc; Petr Limonov, p
Onyx 4180 — 60 minutes

“Musica Nostalgica” is the release title. Alfred Schnittke (1934-98) was a composer of mixed heritage, born to German parents in Russia. That may account for the tragic intensity that is often evident in his compositions, particularly in his first cello sonata, a very moving three-movement work dedicated to cellist Natalia Gutman, wife of the great violinist Oleg Kagan. The first movement is a short, almost inaudible Largo suddenly broken into by a highly tragic, wild and woolly Presto, after which comes a dramatically varied return to Largo that goes on for more than twice as long as the first two movements. The musical language varies as much as the emotions, including everything from lyrical Baroque to total dissonance. His strong personality serves to hold it together, making him one of the most listenable composers of the last century.

The Suite in the Old Style is based on music Schnittke wrote for films. It is mostly in the Baroque-sounding side of his idiom, five movements that almost recall Bach in places. Then we have another work of great lyric feeling in memory of Oleg Kagan, originally written for violin but soon transcribed for cello. This begins with almost inaudible thoughtful cello notes that gradually build into harmonics, double-stops, and varied effects. It is 11 minutes for solo cello. Then we have the short but pithy ‘Musica Nostalgica’ for cello and piano, written for Rostropovich, based on one of the movements from the Suite. This prepares us for Elschenbroich’s Shards of Schnit tke on the 10th Anniversary of his Death.

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another moving piece where the cellist is joined by piano (both outside and inside), and that evokes much of Schnittke's musical language to good effect, thus ending this program suitably.

Elschenbroich is a musician of good taste but unafraid to crunch and scratch where necessary. Both he and Limonov take this music to heart and express it with feeling. There have been other recordings of it. Sonata 1 is in our Cello Overview (M/A 2009). If this program interests you, it is an effective presentation of some worthy music well played and recorded with clarity.

D MOORE

SCHNITTKE: Suite in the Old Style; Violin Sonata; Piano Concerto; Fragments on Paintings by Hieronymus Bosch
Dmitri Kortchak, t; Vladimir Spivakov, v; Alexander Ghindin, p; Moscow Virtuosi/Spivakov
Capriccio 8011—79 minutes

This collection makes an excellent introduction to Schnittke, with samples from 1972 to 1994, spanning almost his whole career.

Earliest is the Suite in the Old-Style (1972), the style of Bach, Handel, and lesser baroque lights, a touch of classicism, and a bow to Tchaikovsky, with humor, exaggeration, and weird endings.

The Violin Sonata (1963) is given here in the version with chamber orchestra (1968). This is a mature work reflecting Russian oppression and, in Schnittke's case, suppression. The first movement is filled with sorrow, anguish, and violence. The scherzo is jocular, sarcastic, and virtuosic, with a nasty raspberry interrupting anguish, slams, and gloom. The slow movement wakes up triads, and proceeds with romanticism and baroque touches with wrong notes; there is some modern angularity and visionary weirdness. The finale is a jolly dance with boogie rhythms, a funny march, and finally a serene close. It's a postmodern extravaganza, disturbing and riveting.

The Piano Concerto (1979) opens with a sullen introduction with touches of the Moonlight Sonata. Wagnerian nobility is followed by squeaks. The scherzo could have been written by Prokofiev. Triads enter and are distorted, as are the quiet dreams that follow. There is a sick waltz. Pounding is followed by evaporation, quiet, and serenely rising clusters.

We enter the world of post-stroke Schnittke with the bizarre and tragic Fragments on Paintings by Hieronymus Bosch (1994), two grimly upsetting slow movements followed by a setting of a poem by "Aeschylus and Nicolaus Reusiner" (in German) dealing with death in nature. I is a miserable bass trombone solo followed by desperate pleading; II has a sad violin solo with ghostly doings including a sad triad, a distant harpsichord, clusters, slams, and desperation. After the text setting, IV continues the misery until the final bit of text contrasts a live frog with dead winter until man finally arises. This is unquestionably the statement of a hopelessly disabled victim, not for the squeamish.

For all his "bad boy" repute, Schnittke is becoming a more and more vital voice the better one gets to know it, and this is a fine place to start.

GIMBEL

SCHNITTKE: Choir Concerto; see BORTNIANSKY

SCHOENBERG: Pierrot Lunaire; PORTERA: Red Music
Anna Clementi, Ensemble Bios/Andrea Vitello
Coninuo 114—50 minutes

It's nice to be back in the world of Schoenberg again, though "nice" comes and goes in Pierrot with its bizarre and grotesque images, the Commedia dell'arte transmuted in some decidedly non-alchemical process into German expressionism.

I'm old enough to remember a time when Schoenberg's music was played grimly, often inaccurately, and as a collection of ugly sounds that were somehow good for us. Pierrot performances these days are very different. The instrumentalists, as here, are usually able to play anything Schoenberg puts before them with style and ease. Singers know both the art-music and the cabaret roots of Schoenberg's idiom and are often flexible stylists in all kinds of music. Anna Clementi is a prime example of this kind of breadth. She is the daughter of composer Aldo Clemente and studied flute at the Perugia Conservatory, experimental drama in Rome, and then experimental vocal music and music theater in Berlin. She also studied jazz. She now performs contemporary art music, jazz, improvisation, performance art, cabaret, etc.

This means that Clementi has a lot to bring to this performance. Some of the especially striking ones are the airy voice and the elegantly pulled phrases in 'Mondestrunken'; the drunken old lady in 'Valse de Chopin', the
smoothly elegant, almost chanted ‘Madonna’, the almost spoken ‘Raub, the lightness, precision, almost instrumental ‘Serenade’, the dreamy ‘O alter Duft’. Each of these 21 miniatures is given its own little world by Clementi and her superb collaborators. There are many ways to perform this music and many fine recordings, but this charismatic, beautiful reading can hold its own against any of them.

Red Music is three light pieces, each dedicated to a great musician. The first honors Prokofieff with huge sweeps of not quite diatonic sound. My first impression when I heard it was of Liszt on drugs. Next up is Shostakovich, folk-like Jewish music alternating with eerie ghost music. Finally we get Rostropovich, with some very clever imitation of different aspects of cello writing but not quite as much actual cello sound as the dedication might suggest.

The works are about four minutes each and have catchy tune fragments and popular-sounding harmonies. There’s also a loud ascending swirl in the flute part that sounds like a shriek—I’m not looking forward to hearing that again.

The sound is very immediate, a blessing in the Schoenberg, less of one when Portera is shrieking, but there’s also enough space around the musicians to avoid a feeling of constriction. The cover art is ugly and campy, almost as awful as the old London LP cover for the Nilsson/Solti Salome. I also cannot understand why a performance of Pierrot would not include texts and translations.

If you like this music, or think you might, find this. Continuo seems to be a small Italian label imported by Naxos, and releases of small record companies often disappear quickly. If you’re new to the work, you will need at least a translation. You may be able to find one online. There is a low-priced Dover edition of the scores of Pierrot and Verklarte Nacht that has the poems underlying both works as well as English translations.

SCHOENBERG: Chamber Symphonies; 5 Pieces
Matteo Fossi & Marco Gaggini, p
Brilliant 94957—59 minutes

The validity and musical interest in these piano transcriptions lies in the hands of the arrangers—Alban Berg (Chamber Symphony 1—one piano, four hands), Anton Webern (5 Pieces—two pianos), and the composer himself (Chamber Symphony 2—two pianos). The arrangements work well, no doubt owing to the skill of Fossi and Gaggini. In general, I am not drawn to Schoenberg’s music, but the first Chamber Symphony is an enjoyable late-romantic work. It also sounds appropriate in this four-hands transcription.

I could go the rest of my life and not hear the Five Pieces for Orchestra or Chamber Symphony 2 again and I would not ever miss them. The pianists have near-perfect ensemble, and the recording is good. Gaggini’s extended booklet essay is also quite good.

HARRINGTON

SCHOLLHORN: Spur; see KOFFLER

SCHUBERT: Impromptus, D 899
with Piano Sonata in A, D 959
Barry Douglas
Chandos 10933—70 minutes
with Piano Sonata in G, D 894
Sheila Arnold
Cavi 853336—69 minutes

Northern Irish pianist Barry Douglas (b. 1960) is much in demand and makes numerous recordings, many of which have been reviewed in ARG. I have not heard any of them but have encountered him repeatedly in concerts broadcast on BBC Radio 3. I never found his playing exciting and eventually gave up listening to him. When this new disc, Volume 2 of a Schubert series, arrived in the mail I thought here was an opportunity to make up for any injustice I may have done this artist in the past. Alan Becker reviewed Volume 1 (S/O 2014) and had some good things to say about it, though he was far from enthusiastic. Alas, my listening to this new issue fully confirmed my previous impressions. The performances are competent but dull. Textures are coarse, and the recorded sound is clangorous. The fine essay by Schubert expert Brian Newbould is not a sufficient reason to get this.

The other release is on quite a different level. Sheila Arnold, looking 40-ish, is South Indian but grew up in Germany and is now teaching there. She was new to me, though she has made several previous recordings. Her interpretations are sensitive, dynamically differentiated, and tasteful, with judicious rubato. I compared her G-major Sonata with Walter Klien’s (Vox 5173), a high benchmark, and thought it just as fine, despite some differences. Her first movement is slower, but not too slow, and unlike Klien she takes the repeat.
(Taking exposition repeats is common practice nowadays, but I am not convinced that it is necessary or important.) It is a little fast, but not too fast. All her artistic choices are in acceptable limits and finally convincing. This is outstanding Schubert playing, and I will be happy to add this recording to my collection.

The Cavi disc comes in a slim cardboard case adorned with striking color photographs of the artist. Beautiful as they are, there are too many pictures; and it would have been better to put instead the track listings on the back of the case and booklet. The notes on the music (in German and English) are by the pianist herself and reflect her deep engagement with Schubert. I found them pleasant to read but somewhat redundant after listening to the music, which speaks for itself.

Schubert: 8 Impromptus; Allegretto;
Hungarian Melody; Andante; Kupelwies Waltz
Michael Endres, p
Oehms 458—80 minutes

Endres’s Schubert is refined, though less of a stirring performance than Krystian Zimerman’s (for instance). His approach is uncomplicated, appropriate for the ‘Kupelwies Waltz’ and the Allegretto—clean works. The Impromptus are polished and sensitive, but more straightforward. He is extremely attentive to the harmonic changes, but I wish he could linger more on the lyrical passages of the Impromptu in C minor. His precise and clear approach is most effective in the second impromptu: the outer sections flow like water. The voicing is impeccable, though again I want more contrast between sections.

Schubert: Piano Sonatas, D 664+960
Javier Perianes—HM 902282—63 minutes

These are the two most beautiful Schubert piano sonatas, and they have been recorded a great deal. (D 664 is in A; 960 is in B-flat.) We have reviewed at least 50 recordings of each, and with so many there is no one that stands out. They are different, of course.

This pianist has a sweet, gentle, almost delicate touch. He is less percussive than most pianists. His sound is almost pure tone. This is beautiful, perfumed playing.

But much as I admire his playing, I cannot get over what I am used to in these sonatas—that is, I need something more definite, more coherent, more natural in flow—less “sensitive” and delicate. I think many readers will find Perianes just perfect for Schubert, but some will think the way I do about it. I certainly admire anyone who can play so sweetly and tenderly, but I need more moods than that. (It’s not that he is stuck in one mood; it’s more that the one mood dominates and is what he does best.)

As I see it, our job is not to tell you to go buy something, but to describe it in such a way that you will know whether it suits you. I have tried to do that. The music is wonderful, and I can’t imagine living without these two sonatas; the pianist is amazingly sensitive—much more romantic than one expects these days.

Schumann: Davidsbundlertanze;
Humoreske; Blumenstuck
Luca Buratto, p—Hyperion 68186—65 minutes

A new name to the Hyperion stable of pianists, Buratto hails from Italy where he earned his piano diploma from Milan Conservatory and his masters from Bolzano Conservatory. In 2015 he became a Honens (Canada) Prize Laureate, and he was awarded third prize at Zwickau’s Robert Schumann Competition.

This Schumann program attests to his skills as a Schumann interpreter, and we must
be thankful that he has chosen some of the less performed of the composer’s works. While the competition is still pretty keen, it is perhaps time to let Carnaval and the Fantasy in C rest for a while.

Humoreske is one of the composer’s most enjoyable works. Its five movements are immediately appealing, laden with humor, and distinguished by their melodic beauty and rhythmic elan. A pianist friend once commented that he stayed away from them because they are less well known and would draw only tepid applause.

Buratto fully grasps Schumann’s often tricky rubato requirements and makes Humoreske work brilliantly. His speed might even be slowed a bit sometimes to make for more pliant expression, but that is a small matter and I have come to accept his ideas the more I listen to them. Just one warning for listeners looking for endless jovial humor: it’s all relative, and this is not shallow fun and sport. It’s all pretty serious, with the joy coming in the beauty of execution and the warmth of human expression.

The Davidsbundlertanze is dedicated to Clara and a work borne of love. Dances of the League of David refers to the imaginary and spiritual brotherhood of artists who combat the shallow nature of the day’s culture. The 18 pieces give us an intimate portrait of Schumann and his Florestan and Eusebius personalities. There can be no question but that it stands at the peak of the composer’s creation. There is a yearning spirit, marvelously realized by Buratto. There is also the widest variety of character from movement to movement of any of his piano works. The varied personalities are realized fully in Buratto’s skilled hands. This newcomer can join the exalted ranks of the best performances.

The short and lighter Blumenstuck is played as a bridge between the two major works and can be enjoyed for what it is. Sound is fully up to Hyperion’s standards, and the notes by Misha Donat are exemplary. My feet shuffle with enthusiastic approval.

Schumann: Fantasy; Kreisleriana

Yet another performance of these endlessly recorded pieces. The major difference here is the return of a pianist formerly known to me through his youthful and highly effective recordings decades ago. Jean-Philippe is now 69, but time has not stood still for me either.

What emerges from the pianist’s now mature fingers is a surety of technique and interpretive freedom in works that simply will not do as just another face in the crowd. The Fantasy is performed emotionally, but with an abandon leavened with refreshing control. The notes, in the form of an interview, reveal an artist loving the music, but never to death. For intensity in revealing a masterpiece and an almost overwhelming searching for the music’s depth and meaning, this belongs in the top rank of performances. Just one warning: the emotional intensity is almost overwhelming.

Kreisleriana is a no-nonsense, driven performance. Collard strikes gold. The intensity of the opening is palpable. It’s as if the pianist continues his emotional involvement with the music and has fully discovered all aspects of Schumann’s many-sided personality. A little less pedal might have helped the clarity of the opening, but give me this any day to the carefully executed, emotionally barren playing often encountered.

The fourth section is an homage to Chopin, the dedicatee of the piece; it has a tender ecstasy before lurching into wild abandon in the following section. There is an almost manic quality to the playing from here on—well suited to the composer’s aches and pains as his mind enters troubled territory.

Organization ensues as fugal discipline takes place amid the chaos. Things end quietly, but refuse to go gently into the night as Collard brings us to terrifying places we did not wish to enter. This is one of the most revealing journeys through this work we have ever had and deserves a place on every collector’s shelves.

SCHUMANN: Fantasy; see MOZART Piano Quartet; see BRAHMS SCHUMANN, C: Trio; see MENDELSSOHN

Schütz: Symphoniae Sacrae I

Yet another performance of these endlessly recorded pieces. The major difference here is the return of a pianist formerly known to me through his youthful and highly effective

July/August 2017
Rhythmic pulse forms the basis for the sharp, he is capable of. Repeated notes and strong offbeat accents that are the hallmark of this widely-known example of the kind of pianism he composed later in life, these 20 Latin concertos (Venice, 1629) are miniature in scale, which allows Schütz to experiment with virtuosity in the intimate relationships between solo voice or voices and instruments.

Schütz’s preference for low-consort accompaniments underscores the mournful qualities in several of these concertos: 3 dulcians in ‘In Lectulo Per Noctes’ and ‘Invenerunt Me Costudes Civitatis’; 3 trombones in ‘Veni, Dilecte Mi’; and 4 trombones in ‘Attendite, Popule Meus’ and ‘Fili mi, Absalon’. Combinations of voices, cornettos, and violins in other concertos offer dazzling displays of coloratura that bear the impress of Schütz’s early training in Venice.

Previous recordings of Symphoniae Sacrae I include Manfred Cordes’s with Weser-Renaissance Bremen (CPO 777929; J/F 2016) and Matteo Messorì’s with Cappella Augustana (Brilliant 9395; M/J 2010). Cordes’s recording is more compelling than Messorì’s. Rademann’s recording is every bit as good. The singing here is polished and spirited, and the playing is sometimes more robust and forceful, especially by the dulcians and trombones. Texts and notes are in English.

SCRIABIN: Piano Sonatas, all: Vers La Flamme
Andrew Tyson
Alpha 272—59 minutes

This is a good, better, best program in reverse order. Scriabin’s Sonata 3 gets as good a performance as I have heard, and the competition is stellar. Ravel’s Mirrors get a commendable performance in line with many of the fine performances available. Finishing with Scriabin’s Sonata 10, we hear a good, clear reading, but without the forward momentum and white-hot intensity of Horowitz, whom I consider the best. Recorded sound is excellent, the booklet essay is good but has no information about the pianist, and the overall production values are attractive.

Tyson, now 30, is a graduate of Curtis and Juilliard. He was awarded the Avery Fischer Career Grant in 2013 and judging by his busy schedule is active in concert worldwide. Ravel’s Alborada del Gracioso might serve as a widely-known example of the kind of pianism he is capable of. Repeated notes and a strong rhythmic pulse form the basis for the sharp, offbeat accents that are the hallmark of this work. He nicely softens his touch for the lyrical recitative moments in the middle section and keeps the music going better than most. His tempos are quick, and he has no problems with those nasty double-note glissandos. My only wish would be for a more electrifying drive to the finish, which Ravel specifically marks “sans ralentir”. The rest is great, so go for it.

I will return to this, especially for the Scriabin Sonata 3. It is a big four-movement work, dramatic and well structured. Tyson has a strong sense of the architecture of the work, which does have some recurring themes and motives. His sure technique is not fazed by the considerable difficulties. And, in the final bars, he makes a very fitting conclusion—not always the case with others pianists. I plan to watch the New York concert schedule will go out of my way to see this young man in recital.

LOEWEN

American Record Guide
There are no weaknesses in this set. The early, multi-movement sonatas have the requisite power and more traditional Russian romantic style; yet the glimpses into Scriabin’s future innovative harmonic and rhythmic writing are always there. I especially like the poignant Funeral March in Sonata 1, the very dramatic opening of Sonata 3, and the huge climax at the end of Sonata 4. Sonatas 5 to 10 are in one big, complex movement. The range of dynamics Donohoe uses is nothing short of remarkable. Scriabin also calls on the pianist to shift gears constantly, across the entire range of the keyboard. Often the greatest challenge is to tie all the musical material together. But Donohoe has studied these works in minute detail and has the technical skill to realize what his musicianship has uncovered in all those pages black with notes.

The extensive, nine-page booklet essay by Jonathan Summers is the kind of well-written article that I wish were the norm rather than the exception. Somm’s recorded sound does justice to all of Donohoe’s efforts.

HARRINGTON

SHOSTAKOVICH: Piano Concertos; Quartet 8 (arr)
Boris Giltburg; Liverpool Philharmonic/ Vasily Petrenko—Naxos 573666—70 minutes

The concertos are excellent, playful, and brimming with verve and wit. Giltburg has thought through each phrase and given it its own personality and direction; he and the orchestra are fully engaged. The slow movement of the Second is beautifully calm. Giltburg, with the permission of Shostakovich’s estate, arranged the Eighth Quartet and the ‘Waltz’ from the Second for solo piano. The ‘Waltz’ and movements I, III, IV, and V from the Eighth work well—they sound very natural and effective, especially since there are few places in the quartet that rely on long sustained notes. If I were playing this, I’d hew closer to the original articulations in III, but that’s a small thing to complain about.

The main problem is II—it is much less forceful in transcription. When the Jewish-sounding theme appears after the “DSCH” introduction, Giltburg pulls the tempo back a little to get all the rolling left-hand arpeggios, I think. He does that again when the theme returns at the end of the movement, and his dynamic level drops there as well. That robs this important movement of its rage and vigor. The left hand strikes a C minor triad built on the low C on each quarter note, and then the arpeggios travel all the way up to the E-flat above middle C and all the way back down in time for the next quarter note. At 100 beats per minute, that’s a lot of ground to cover! If I were playing this, I would simplify those arpeggios in order to keep the music moving and let it have the bite it needs.

The sonics don’t help, either; the engineering is by no means poor, but there’s a little too much space around the piano, and it rounds the edges and softens the blows. The bottom end is boomy, too. The quartet transcriptions and concertos were recorded by different engineers in different places, but my complaint applies to the concertos: the softened sonics blur the picture just enough to make a difference. Notes are in English.

ESTEP

SHOSTAKOVICH: Quartets 4,6,9
Borodin Quartet
Praga 250 331—79 minutes

Everything I’ve seen from Praga in the last few years has been SACD reissues of recordings that have gone out of copyright in Europe. When our Editor called and talked to me about this, I assumed Praga was remastering the Borodins’ first, incomplete Shostakovich cycle, recorded from 1967 to 1971. But according to the booklet these are performances originally taped for Soviet radio in January and November, 1966; Czech radio broadcast them in 1972, and that is Praga’s source. Praga also released Quartets 1, 2, and 5 last year, broadcasts from 1964 to 1966; I haven’t heard them, and I don’t think we reviewed them.

Of the incomplete cycle, Quartets 1-11 were licensed from Melodiya by Angel and issued in America in two Seraphim LP boxes; I can’t remember if 12 and 13 came out on Seraphim or Angel later, but Chandos remastered and all 13 in 2003, and I’d always wondered, “Why Chandos? Angel and Seraphim reissues are normally on EMI!” In the process of writing this, I found an interview with the Borodins’ current violist, Igor Naidin, who tells us that the widow of Rostislav Dubinsky, the first violinist in the Borodins’ original line-up, sold the recordings to Chandos.

Naidin also said, “in the first generation of the quartet, there were very strict rules and procedures in sound production. Quartets used a lot less vibrato, so they were sharper and more pointed in expression.” Indeed, the sparing use of vibrato was one of the first

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things that stood out to me in the early Borodin recordings. Quartets 4, 6, and 9 are among the most peaceful of Shostakovich’s cycle, and their approach gives them a smooth, almost glassy feel. The result is very intimate and personal and seems to be a record of some of Shostakovich’s innermost thoughts.

If you already have the Chandos set, there’s no pressing need to get these; I haven’t done a note-by-note comparison, but in going back and forth between Chandos and Praga, the performances are very similar. If anything, the playing on the Praga is more careful and not quite as polished; intonation is more secure on the Chandos. The sound on Praga’s source is slightly but noticeably inferior, too. The Editor let me borrow the Jerusalem Quartet’s Harmonia Mundi recordings for a comparison, and they are strikingly good—they use more vibrato and play more gregariously, and the sound is both clearer and more reverberant. I may have to invest in that set. Praga’s notes are in English and French.

SHOSTAKOVICH: Symphonies 4+9; Execution of Stepan Razin
Vitali Gromadski, b; USSR Chorus; Moscow Philharmonic/ Kirill Kondrashin
Urania 121333 [2CD] 112 minutes

The Fourth Symphony was recorded in 1962, not long at all after its December 30, 1961 premiere; I have the original Melodiya two-LP box with its blue edging and yellow cover. BMG re-released it on CD in 1994, but that is deleted. Kondrashin’s cycle released by Melodiya in 2006 has a 1966 recording, also with the Moscow Philharmonic. The sound here is more diffuse, and some details are lost; the source—presumably tape—is of lesser quality than the 1966, though that shows its age as well. (In 2006 Profi released a monophonic 1963 radio broadcast of the Fourth with Kondrashin and the Dresden Staatskapelle.)

Here, the brass are even brassier than in 1966; terrifying growls emanate from the depth of the orchestra; threats loom and then recede. Some parts are particularly vicious, but other passages are more peaceful than what I usually hear. The opening of III is strikingly world-weary, and the first climax is just as noble. The orchestra is in fine fettle; only around the middle of III does the ensemble get shaggy. The limits of the tape mar the climax in III, though—it can’t handle the volume, especially the cymbal crashes. Patronizing terms like “archival sound” and “of historical interest” come to mind.

Since this is my favorite symphony by my favorite composer, I’m thrilled that it’s back in print. In all honesty, though, if I had to part with all but one of my 23 other recordings, I could live happily ever after with Neeme Jarvi’s (Chandos 8640, M/A 1990). Fine as the Kondrashin is, there’s no overwhelming sense of import.

The Ninth is from 1965; it is the same as in the Melodiya box set, which was remastered better. The Urania has some digital artifacts, a noisy background, and a strange white-noise whoosh between I and II. Their Stepan Razin was clearly transferred off an LP—you can hear the needle noise right before the music starts, and there are tell-tale ticks in a few places.

In the symphony, the strings sound unsure in the opening phrase, as if they’re late for the party and trying to sneak into the room. Once past that, the playing is vivid and bright, though there are a few shaky tempos still to come. Kondrashin adds a lot of rubato to II, giving it an unexpected human warmth. V has some urgency to it and more effective rubato. The powerful Execution of Stepan Razin is from 1966; it first came out with the Ninth on a Melodiya-Angel LP that had an insert with Russian transliteration and English translation. Urania offers nothing but track listings and dates (the Melodiya box doesn’t have texts or translations, either). The Melodiya wins hands-down. I’ll keep this for the Fourth, but it will probably be a long time before I feel the need to listen to it again.

SHOSTAKOVICH: Quartet 10;
see BEETHOVEN
SIBELIUS: Quartet; see KAIPAINEN

SIERRA: Fandangos; Sinfonia 3; Alegría; Fanfarrí; Diferencias; Phoenix from Carnaval
Eastman Wind Ensemble/ Mark Davis Scatterday
Summit 695—54 minutes

A collection of wind ensemble arrangements of works by Roberto Sierra, recorded at Eastman in concerts 2005-6.

Fandangos (2000) are just that, a Bolero-like series of continuous variations with ample virtuosity. Sinfonia 3 (La Salsa) (2005) is a suite of four dances in Desi Arnaz style (especially the first one), the rest outtakes from Ravel Spanish rhapsodies and anonymous modern

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Spanish imitators. **Alegria** (1996) is more of the same. **Fanfarria** (2000) is a grim but eventually heroic introduction to something. **Diferencias** (1997) is five little pieces apparently abstract in content. Apparently sketches, they leave no impression. Finally, ‘The Phoenix from Carnaval’ (2007) is the most recent piece on the program. It’s more of the same, but only 3 minutes of it.

The local audience applauds relatively tepidly, except for some rock concert-like hooting and “whoo”-ing. That stuff all seems forced, but I guess you’d have to have been there. This will be of interest primarily to Eastman Wind Ensemble fans and alums. Since most of this music is available elsewhere in its original form, and none of the music is discussed in the notes, I would pass on this.

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**SKOG:** Violin Concerto; see NILSSON

**SOMMER:** Piano Quartet; Trio; Gavotte; Romance; Vanished Joy

Trio Image; Hartmut Bohde, va

Cavi 8553329—69 minutes

It’s a rare composer blessed with a reliable gift for compelling, memorable melodies, the gift of the tunesmith. Most get by on passable themes treated to interesting transformation, variation, counterpoint, texture, color, and/or virtuosity. German composer Hans Sommer (1838-1922) was, typically, not so blessed but wrote a piano quartet between 1870 and 1884 that pretends he was. The melodies are bland, counterpoint pedestrian, technical difficulties modest and amateurish, originality nonexistent. It’s 30 minutes of my life I will never get back. Pure dross.

By his trio of 1884, Sommer imbued his work with structural ingenuity, virtuosity, and long-breathed, sinuous counterpoint, owing an obvious debt to Schumann’s late chamber music. The first two movements are mercurial, exploring several tempo shifts and unstable moods of melancholic languor and agitated frisson, plus a cheeky and frolicsome coquetry in II. The Adagio (III) begins so promising with a dialog between violin and cello accompanied by skeletal piano commentary that settles into a bland string cantilena wending above unimaginatively throbbing piano chords. Schubert, Schumann, and Rachmaninoff get away with this because their melodies are unforgettable. The finale is satisfying, though, building to a soaring Brahmsian climax.

The three works for violin and piano—a gavotte, romance, and character piece—gradually cool the trio’s fever, fading away into resigned melancholy on reaching the valedictory 1921 **Vanished Joy**.

Good sound, reasonably good performances. Recommended to listeners with a bottomless appetite for 19th Century composers indebted to Schumann, Brahms, Mendelssohn, and Schubert.

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**SOR:** Guitar Sonatas

Andrea Dieci—Brilliant 95395—74 minutes

Mr Dieci is one of a number of very fine Italian guitarists who are emerging in recent years, including Giulio Tampalini, Cristiano Poli Cappelli, Andrea Pace, and Giorgio Mirti, among others. Their level of musicianship is incredibly high, and Dieci proved this in his recent release of the complete solo guitar works of Hans Werner Henze, including his two works based on Shakespeare characters, the **Royal Winter Music** (Nov/Dec 2016). I kept thinking “how beautiful”—not an expected response in those thorny, dissonant works.

I have a similar response to this program—time after time I was struck by not only beautiful sound, but beautiful phrasing, architecture, rhythmic pacing. These are really marvelous performances of some of the finest works of the Golden Age. Even the idea of programming all of Sor’s sonatas is inspired. Although these works are certainly no rival to Beethoven—what is?—they are certainly of a consistently high quality. Guitar composers, especially ones who were themselves players, tended to avoid the form because of the need for modulation in the development section—it’s easier to write variations. But Sor had no fears. All the works are early, and he includes the **Gran Solo**, a textbook example of sonata form—and, yes, I’ve used it in my university classes.

He also plays the one-movement Sonata in C, Op. 15 and the two Grand Sonatas, Opp. 22 and 25. Yes, they’re in C major, too—perhaps he found it easier to pass through distant modulations in that key. Yet, listen to the Adagio of the first Grand Sonata. It’s in C minor—an awkward key for guitar—and it has a depth and gravity that I find the closest any composer ever came to a Beethovian work for guitar.

**Mille grazie**, Signor Dieci, and best wishes for more of your beautiful playing.

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**KEATON**
Soro: Sinfonia Romantica; Danza Fantastica; Aires Chilenos; Andante Appassionato
Chile Symphony; José Luis Dominguez
Naxos 573505—56:17

Even the most broadly informed of music lovers is not likely to have even heard the name of Enrique Soro (1884-1954). Soro, the son of José Soro Sforza, an Italian composer who migrated to Chile, studied first with him and then perfected his skills at the Milan Conservatory (1898-1904). He then returned to Chile and held various important positions, finally becoming director of the Conservatory in Santiago in 1919. His level of success is testified to by the numerous compositions for piano published by G. Schirmer in New York in the teens and 20s (the stream continues until 1929, and presumably the crash affected Schirmer’s bottom line, along with so much else, so there is no more Soro from Schirmer thereafter).

There has been almost no musicological writing on Soro, in English or Spanish; a 1976 article on the composer by Raquel Bustos Valderrama includes a works list of more than 20 pages, with compositions dating from 1889 to 1952—most for solo piano.

Individual compositions by Soro have appeared sporadically on records; this seems to be the first recording entirely devoted to the composer and includes the premiere of his Romantic Symphony. Generally, Soro’s voice sings with an Italian inflection, unabashedly romantic (there’s not much hint of the sufferings of the 20th Century here). There are Latin American traits, as one might expect, in the Three Chilean Airs (1942), a relatively late work. Given his success with Schirmer, I would be willing to bet that Soro’s piano music would be worth at least a few CDs for some enterprising pianist with an ear for the unusual. This orchestral music will certainly appeal to many.

MOORE, T

Spohr: Sonata Concertante;
Fantasy; Sonatas
Apparla
Stradivarius 37072—81 minutes

Apparla is a duo of Irish harpist Maria Christina Cleary and Italian baroque violinist Davide Monti. The album says, “World premiere recording on period instruments”. Monti’s sour tuning, frequent intonation problems, and non-vibrato style produces a nasal whine that drives me crazy! This is playing from the bad old days of period-instrument ensembles when they were proving points with revenge. Monti’s sound is especially grating in Spohr’s sonata-allegro-type movements, the straight serious kind where invariably the lines are naively written with lots of quarter, half, and whole notes held for long periods of time; his tone is more tolerable in movements that have a folk or dance style and more variety.

Cleary plays a harp organisėe, the kind available to Spohr and his harpist-wife that was murder to play and became obsolete (full details in the liner notes); it produces a very acceptable sound. Cleary always gives phrases and long sections aim and knows precisely where she’s headed. She taps and phrases the music exquisitely. But her essential style is highly modest, almost whispering sometimes, and this results in her arpeggios being so buried by the violin that too often it’s impossible to know whether they’re ascending or descending arpeggios. Whether that’s the fault of Monti, Cleary, the instrument, or the engineer I can’t tell.

All these things count with composer Spohr, who certainly was proficient, but what a windbag he can be, as in the opening of his 30-minute Sonata Concertante, Op. 115, one of the two tolerable works here. It goes on for 14 tiring minutes, including a four-minute repeat of the exposition. But then comes a truly lovely Larghetto that proceeds seamlessly from E minor to E major. The concluding Rondo is in 2/4 time with a 1/32 hitch plus grace notes thrown in for extra kick. If someone asked me, “On the whole, is the work interesting?” I’d reply, “Yes, but it’s like an uncle who’s led a fascinating life, but you wonder if he’ll ever shut up.”

The other tolerable work here is the Grand Sonata, Op. 16. Like Opus 115, I is musically tolerable. II is a lovely Adagio as in Beethoven’s last three piano concertos. And III is a Rondo (A-B-A-C-A) with fine music, but be prepared: the A sections are all the same, done with repeat signs.

The Fantasy, Op. 118, is a vapid exercise in harp arpeggios that I never want to hear again. The Sonata in C minor is really in two movements, not three (as the liner notes portray): the opening Adagio is really an introduction to the Allegro Vivace; II is fast-slow-fast-slow. That opening movement is even more trivial than the Fantasy, though the rondo-like II has more variety.

All four of these works are really for violin solo with harp accompaniment. True, the violin lines are melodically mind-numbingly
naive, and the harp has the far more interesting writing (if only more of it were audible here). The sound in general is resonant and seems balanced. This album is probably of interest only to harp enthusiasts, especially for its liner notes.

**FRENCH**

**STANCHINSKY:** 12 Skizzen; 10 Preludes; Piano Sonata 1; 3 Songs Without Words
Ekaterina Derzhavina
Profil 17003—60 minutes

Alexey Stanchinsky (1888-1914) was a promising young Russian composer who succumbed to severe mental illness at the age of 26. A student of Taneyev, he was most influenced by Scriabin, with an unusual dose of Bach's contrapuntal styles. Derzhavina's extensive and detailed booklet essay makes a powerful case for this forgotten composer. She handles the difficulties with ease, and I cannot imagine better performances of this material. But no amount of excellent pianism can make Stanchinsky's music come across on the same level as other Russian composers from the same period. Intellectually, his music holds up to scrutiny and shows a huge potential. As music of choice from Russia's Silver Age (an undefined Derzhavina term, probably referring to the end of the 1800s), this offers strong evidence of why Stanchinsky is almost unknown. The most important composers of the time would be Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky, Prokofieff, and Shostakovich. As an interesting diversion, Stanchinsky is worth a listen or two, but not much more.

**HARRINGTON**

**STEVENS:** Piano Pieces 2
Christopher Guild
Toccata 388—67 minutes

Piano pieces by Scottish composer Ronald Stevenson (1928-2015), dating from 1935 to 1995. His main goal was to bring Scottish music into the Western European classical fold, and Toccata and Mr Guild are producing a series devoted to his works. This is Volume 2.

Stevenson loves transcriptions. Frank Merrick is an extended romantic fantasy on a beautiful Scottish song with both Liszt and Debussy as inspiration.

*Three Scots Fairy Tales* (1967) are children's pieces that could have been written by Debussy if he were Scottish. A *Carlyle Suite* (1995—Thomas, that is) adds Schumann to the mix, and even Schoenberg pops in toward the end to show that Stevenson can also be Modern (but the effort is ludicrously out of place). Some of the work is dark and dreamy, but much of it is blindly meandering. It is the longest work in the collection.

*Rory Dall Morison's Harp Book* (1978) is a set of Scottish folk songs written for a blind harpist friend. It's all lovely. *3 Scottish Ballads* (1973) are just that, with modern, somewhat drunken harmonisations, apparently as an attempt to be "up-to-date" (this was the 70s). Finally, 'Lament for a Blind Harper' (1986) is a touching little piece for the blind harpist friend immortalized earlier in the program.

These are for the most part attractive and competent pieces that would be appealing to pianists with Scottish sympathies. Mr Guild is a fine player and wrote the exhaustive notes.

**GIMBEL**

**STRAUSS:** Ariadne auf Naxos Suite; Bourgeois Gentilhomme Suite
Buffalo Philharmonic/ JoAnn Falletta
Naxos 573460—76 minutes

Of the rarely encountered orchestral suites I've recently heard taken from Richard Strauss's operas, including his own arrangement of *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* with Falletta and the BPO and Manfred Honeck's own of *Elektra* with the Pittsburgh Symphony, this world premiere recording of D Wilson Ochoa's suite from *Ariadne auf Naxos* is the best yet. Ochoa, the Boston Symphony's librarian, uses Strauss's own orchestrations (without the vocal lines), and weaves its seven sections into an extremely melodic continuity without any breaks.

What makes the *Ariadne Suite* so rewarding is the stunning performance Falletta gets from the Buffalo Philharmonic. The quality of playing confirms that, in her 18 years as music director, she now has the orchestra performing at its peak. And on the day this was recorded, March 20, 2016, Falletta herself was in top form.

The opening lively Prologue is lyrically expressive, with keen rhythmic flow. The woodwind and string dialog in the Duet 'Ein Augenblick Ist Wenig' waxes and wanes with beautiful expression. The splendidly engineered swirling Waltz, 'Eine Störrische Zu Trösten,' is elegant. The Opera Overture is sheer seamless lyricism—Falletta is never far from Strauss's restrained ecstasy. And the Aria 'Es Gibt ein Reich,' Interlude, and Finale ('Gibt Es Kein Hinüber') conclude the 39-minute suite, yielding total satisfaction.
From the point of view of the ordinary person who simply puts a CD on and hits "play", it was a wise decision to place not the world premiere but the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme Suite* first on the album because *Gentilhomme’s* more familiar orchestration is the ideal preparation for the new suite that uses the same tonalities and orchestration. (Both works were written in 1912.) But, in fact, Falletta said, “We put the pieces on the CD in order that they were played in the production. We used exactly the same number of strings for both, because of course both pieces were played by the same orchestra at the Stuttgart premiere. So that is six violins, four violas, four cellos, and two basses.”

The *Bourgeois Gentilhomme Suite* (recorded November 3, 2014) is just as splendidly played and conducted. The crisp articulation of the Overture makes me sit up straight with delight, and the exquisite balances in the Minuet let me hear all of the details. The piano work is outstanding, and its balance in the ensemble is ideal. But most memorable are the many solos by William Preucil, who was acting concertmaster for this recording (Michael Ludwig left the BPO at the end of the 2014 season and Dennis Kim began in spring 2015). He makes the tailors dance with exquisite light, upturned buoyancy. The same in the Courante, though here I wish that the four violas were more audible; they supply important harmonic flow and counterpoint to the solo violin but remain mostly buried. One must wait for ‘The Entrance of Cleonte’ to hear their exquisite tone and style (the violas have always been the BPO’s most notable string section) as they dialog with the woodwinds. In the Prelude to Act II that follows, the violins and woodwinds link all their triplet grace notes into a seamless, exquisitely balanced flow. In ‘The Dinner’ the cello duet is very lovely, and how brilliantly Falletta has tuned the utterly buoyant woodwinds in the dance with cuckoo and myriad bird calls.

When Strauss writes chamber music like this, every player has, as they say, no place to hide, and here they acquit themselves beautifully, though I have one other quibble with the engineering: the overall sound is warm and resonant, but I suspect it was recorded rather close-up. Loud sections sometimes sound “in your face”, particularly the entire ‘Fencing Master’—it’s much louder than the sections before and after it.

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**STRAUSS:** *Cello Sonata; Romance*

*STRAUSS: Cello Sonata*

Andrea Favaleesa; Maria Semeraro, p
Brilliant 95236—65 minutes

Here is a pair of composers who were contemporaries and friends. Both wrote a single cello sonata, Richard Strauss’s in 1883 when he was 19, Ludwig Thuille’s in 1902 when he was 41. Both are fine works full of life, vigor, and romantic beauty. Both are in three movements and take about 28 minutes to play. The Strauss ends with a movement that resembles a Scherzo, making the Romanze in the same key that follows it feel like a finale to the sonata. In other words, this is a very pleasant program.

There is one other CD I have heard that combines these two sonatas. In that one the cellist is also a woman, Sophie Rolland, with pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin (ASV 913; M/A 1995). It is a somewhat more intense and varied reading than the present one with greater breadth in the slow movements and a little clearer balance between instruments. It doesn’t include the Romanze, though there are other recordings of the Strauss that do. The Thuille Sonata is not often recorded, but the Strauss has many recordings, and you may wish to read the Cello Overview for more details.

So what about this one? It is a nice warm-hearted performance of all three works, though unless the program itself turns you on, the two sonatas are more clearly recorded and a bit more polished on the ASV disc, if you can still find it. But then you don’t get the Romanze.

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**D MOORE**

**STRAUSS: Also Sprach Zarathustra; see HOLST**

**STRAVINSKY:** *Firebird*

*STRAVINSKY: Firebird*

with Apollo
SWR Symphony/ Zoltan Pesko, Gerard Korsten
SWR 19020—76 minutes

with **NIKOLAEV: Sinevaveland**
Elisa Barston, v; Seattle Symphony/ Ludovic Morlot—Seattle Symphony 1014—59 minutes

with **BARTOK: Piano Concerto 3; Miraculous Mandarin Suite**
Yefim Bronfman; London Symphony/ Valery Gergiev—LSO 5078 [2CD] 97 minutes

The SWR’s *Firebird*, with Zoltan Pesko conducting, is a sparkling, vivacious performance, but its effect is diminished by a cavernous acoustic; the orchestra sounds distant, almost as if it’s heard from the lobby. The strings in *Apollon* American Record Guide
Musagete, with Gerard Korsten, are not as rich as in Firebird. I still think the piece is a dreadful bore, and the acoustic certainly doesn’t help.

Morlot coaxes some earthy instrumental tones from the Seattle Symphony in the opening. Where Pesko created a gossamer, impressionist world, Morlot’s is more immediate—without distorting anything, he colors the music with primitivism and even pointillism. Pesko took The Firebird closer to Debussy; Morlot makes it look forward to The Rite of Spring. His performance doesn’t have the same sweep, though, and the energy sags in several places. The ‘Infernal Dance’ and ‘General Rejoicing’ are particularly lackluster. Though it’s less reverberant than the SWR’s, the Seattle Symphony’s soundstage is somewhat indistinct.

Vladimir Nikolaev’s Sinewaveland: Homage to Jimi Hendrix is 12 minutes of raucous texture-painting. It begins with some harmonics that attempt to emulate distortion, then there’s some rock-and-roll drumming (admittedly better than what Christopher Rouse did in his ill-considered Gerette Alberich), loud flailings and squirmings, and then a meditative section that grows into a rocky, riffy coda. It all ends with two quiet marimba notes and a whispered “yeah!” from the orchestra.

Gergiev’s Firebird is darker and has a sense of urgency and foreboding to it. The flow is good, and the whole ballet is alive with sorerly. The London Symphony doesn’t have quite the polish the German orchestra does, but they play fine for Gergiev’s approach. Of the three releases at hand, this one grabs me the most. Pesko’s interpretation is valid and attractive, but it would have to have better sonics to get a permanent place on my shelf. Gergiev includes a brassy ‘Montagues and Capulets’ from Prokofiev’s Romeo and Juliet as an encore after the Stravinsky. Bartók’s Miraculous Mandarin is majestic and intense, and the Third Piano Concerto is filled with visceral thrills—and the slow movement is exquisite. Bronfman’s tone is warm, and the sonics are rich. There are a few quiet audience noises.

Erich Leinsdorf recorded the other two; his Boston recording takes 27 minutes, and his LA recording takes 30. In Boston he has some wonderful soloists—listen to the bassoon, played by Sherman Walt—but the sound of the strings is rather harsh (it’s the engineering). In LA the orchestra sounds much better (again, the engineering), but they are not the Boston Symphony, and that’s especially noticeable in the solos.

I have a wonderful Cincinnati recording (Telarc) led by Paavo Jarvi with gorgeous sound and the best bassoonist of them all, William Winstead.

What does this 1976 recording have to offer? Above all, it is for Kempe fans, because it is the last recording he ever made. He was known as a Richard Strauss conductor, and he recorded a lot of Strauss in Dresden and was scheduled to do all the operas as well, but he died at only 65. He was a Dresden native, and he grew up listening to this orchestra.

As you listen to it you will notice that the strings are as powerful as the brass—something I always hear from this orchestra in the concert hall. It’s Dresden’s equivalent of “the Philadelphia Sound”, and it may trace back to Strauss, who conducted there a lot and was known to say, “Never encourage the brass.” In Dresden the brass doesn’t dominate, and the strings make a big, glorious sound.

There’s also the Britten piece as fill—it is rarely heard and a very rare partner for Firebird (and I don’t particularly like it).

SULLIVAN: Songs
Mary Bevan, s; Ben Johnson, t; Ashley Riches, bar; David Owen Norris, p
Chandos 10935 [2CD] 147 minutes

Sir Arthur Sullivan, best known for his operatic collaborations with WS Gilbert, also produced 13 major orchestral works, eight choral works and oratorios, two ballets, one song cycle, incidental music to several plays, numerous hymns and other church pieces; a large body of songs, parlor ballads, part songs, and carols; and piano and chamber pieces.

This program presents his 11-song cycle The Window (1870) and 35 other songs. Most of the texts are by British poets, particularly Shakespeare and Tennyson, with two each in Italian and German. Much of this is entirely new to me and does not seem to be readily available elsewhere.

George Grove, founding Director of the

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July/August 2017
Royal College of Music and of the Dictionary of Music that still bears his name, sought to introduce the British public to the idea of the song cycle. His efforts resulted in uniting Sullivan and Tennyson to create The Window, which tells a story of courtship leading to marriage. Ben Johnson gives a glowing reading of the cycle and is enchanting elsewhere, as in the ballad ‘Once Again’.

One delight after another is found here, with a considerable variety of compositional style. Bevan gives a lithe reading of Sullivan’s lovely setting of ‘Orpheus and His Song’ and is simply exquisite in the lullaby ‘Birds in the Night’. Riches gives an engaging reading of the multi-movement ode ‘I Wish to tune my Quivering Lyre’ and sings with serene beauty in the ballad ‘Golden Days’ and in ‘Edward Gray’. The program is performed beautifully. Mary Bevan’s vocal radiance alone would make this release irresistible. Add to that the wonderful singing of Johnson and Riches and this is a program not to be missed. Give it a try.

Comprehensive notes and complete texts with English translations as needed.

**SWERTS: Piano Pieces**

Russell Hirshfield

Phaedra 92095—57 minutes

In his piano music Belgian composer, pianist, and conductor Piet Swerts is the 21st Century equivalent of a neo-classical Ravel. These pieces are elegant and urbane and always sound a bit French. Swerts has his own voice; this is not pastiche, despite homages to Bach, Debussy, and Chopin (not to mention artists in other mediums such as Monet). There is dissonance to be sure, but it is subtle. Much of the music, written from 1986 to 2011, has an impressionist quality.

The prelude ‘Le jardin a Giverny’ evokes the gardens that inspired Monet; the gently rocking ‘Sicilienne pour Nadine’ has charm to spare; ‘Histoire Perdue—hommage a Claude Debussy’ is in the manner of late Debussy, austere yet sensual, with lots of seventh and whole-tone harmonies and a magical atmosphere. The tiny preludes in honor of Chopin go by in a shivery flash. The earliest piece, Partita in Memoriam JS Bach, is in the same spare yet sexy style as the others. The album ends with a set of misty waltzes in different keys, the Valses Enigmatiques.

Russell Hirshfield, a longtime Swerts champion, commissioned two of these works, ‘Histoire Perdue’ and Valses Enigmatiques. He plays with gentle understatement and pastel colors, like an alter-ego. The recording is soft-hued and intimate, ideal for the music. There is nearly an hour of music on this supremely civilized album. One only wishes there were more.

**SZYMANOWSKI: Concert Overture; Slopiewnie; Sinfonia Concertante; Nocturne & Tarantella**

Marisol Montalvo, s; Ewa Kupiec, p; Rheinland-Pfalz Philharmonic/ Karl-Heinz Steffens

Capriccio 5280—62 minutes

Szymanowski wrote his Concert Overture, Op. 12, when he was 23 and revised it several years later. It sounds more like Richard Strauss than anything, though it doesn’t strive for heroics. It achieves grandeur and drama, and the quieter sections have a shimmering clarity to them.

Slopiewnie, a neologism roughly translating as “word-songful”, according to the booklet, is a set of five songs written in 1921; Szymanowski integrated his studies of Goral folk music into it. The harmonies are unique and striking, so modal and wild that they sometimes sound Central Asian. Capriccio did us a great disservice by not including an English translation—only Polish and German.

Montalvo has a pleasant voice, but it’s too light and not resonant enough; she can’t work up enough strength in the most dramatic moments.

The Sinfonia Concertante is Szymanowski’s Fourth Symphony; it has a prominent piano part and is dedicated to Arthur Rubinstein, who made a recording for RCA. The composer played its premiere, though, and Carl Bauman (Dux 320, Jan/Feb 2002) notes that he wrote it as a money-making work he himself could play, even though he wasn’t a virtuoso. It is spiky, folk-influenced, and often colorful but certainly not gripping or even inspiring.

The Nocturne and Tarantella is, again, colorful but far from a masterpiece. The orchestra plays well, and Steffens is a fine conductor, but this album is probably only for Szymanowski’s most devoted fans. The sonics are spacious but a little soft. Notes are in English and German, and they contain a sympathetic portrait of the composer.

**ESTEP**
**Szymanowski: Violin Pieces**

Duo Bruggen-Plank—Genuin 17459—68 minutes

Duo Bruggen-Plank is violinist Marie Radauer-Plank and pianist Henrike Bruggen. The duo has been together since 2007. The fine violinist studied with Benjamin Schmid, Lukas Hagen, Ulf Schneider, and Augustin Dumay.

This is a good selection of music by the great Polish composer. Much of it was inspired by or arranged by his violinistic muse, Paul Kochanski. The earliest work is the longest, the Violin Sonata of 1904. It is not as stylistically advanced as what was to come, but it is still a fine, well-crafted work. Perhaps the most famous composition is the Myths of 1915, one of the composer’s most productive years for violin music. These share the hothouse, impressionist atmosphere of the contemporaneous Violin Concerto I.

The most famous and memorable piece here is Kochanski’s arrangement of the lovely ‘Song of Roxane’ from the opera King Roger of 1926. Also here are the Peasant Dance from the ballet Harnasie, the Berceuse d’Aitacho Enia, and the Nocturne and Tarantella.

This is a good acquisition if you want an all-Szymanowski program, but far superior performances of the sonata and Myths are available from David Oistrakh.

Radauer-Plank plays a violin made in 1746 by Don Nicolò Amati (no relation to the more famous Nicolo Amati of Cremona).

**Taneyev: Oresteia**

V. Chernobayev (Agamemnon), L. Galushkina (Clytemnestra), A. Bokov (Aegisthus), T. Shimko (Electra), I. Dubrovkin (Orestes), N. Takhenko (Cassandra), A. Scavchenko (Apollo), L. Ganestova (Athena); Byelorussian Theatre/ T Kolomiytseva Melodiya 2277 [2CD] 150 minutes

Melodiya has dug deep into their vaults to reissue this 1965 recording of Sergei Taneyev’s only opera (1895). In a mere 150 minutes he presents his Russian version of Aeschylus’s ancient Greek trilogy of plays on the curse of the House of Atreus. Other composers have set individual plays of the trilogy (Richard Strauss’s Elektra is the best known).

It’s a quite decent opera in a much more than decent performance. The music is all tonal and romantic. None of the singers are well known, but they sure do sing in grand style, savoring the text and the dramatic situation. Aegisthus just goes on and on. What he is going on and on about I don’t know. There is no libretto, but there is a fairly detailed track listing. Bokov has a massive voice and when he is joined by Galushkina and her massive contralto, the dramatic sparks fly in a, well, massive duet.

Cassandra is a miserable soul, and the music takes on a melancholy air for her ten-minute aria. Takhenko’s Electra is sharply cutting in the upper range, but otherwise a beautiful sound. Agamemnon is hastily dispatched in a mere 33 seconds of music, allowing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus almost seven minutes to justify their murder, with a bit of choral indignation about the murder.

Part 2 continues with Clytemnestra’s emotional misery (guilt) and Galushkina’s magnificent singing. Dubrovkin (Orestes) shows us just how fine a tenor he is—no squeaks and squalls typical of the Russians in the 1950s and 60s. But then Shimko’s Electra shows up, letting down the vocal grandeur. She sounds more like Orestes’s baby sister having a bad day, tiny and tinny of voice. Orestes and Clytemnestra indulge in a dramatic confrontation before she is murdered. Plot-wise Clytemnestra loses, but in the vocal competition between Galushkina and Dubrovkin, Galushkina wins with sheer vocal beauty and dramatic flair. Dubrovkin isn’t far behind her, though.

Part 3 is dominated by Orestes’s dramatic outbursts, which Dubrovkin masters with ease. The off-stage chorus is musically not very threatening—a low-keyed group. Scavchenko (Apollo) shows up almost at the opera’s conclusion (only 15 minutes to go). But what a performance! For beautiful singing Scavchenko gets all the bouquets. Just 8 minutes before the end Athena (Ganestova) shows up to render her verdict, declaring Orestes absolved of his murders. With such delicate music Ganestova cannot be absolved of her vocal murders. She is hard-edge, steely, and wobbly.

The orchestra is in fine form, as is the chorus.

**Taneyev: Quartet &; String Quintet**

James Buswell, va; Carpe Diem Quartet

Naxos 573671—77 minutes

This is part of Naxos’s project to record all of Taneyev’s quartets. Quartet 8 (1883) begins with a folk-like tune, at first raspingly voiced. The second subject is far more ingratiating. Most of the movement is congenial, and even the rasping of the opening bars later becomes jovial. II, the slow movement, has a melan-
choy but heartfelt melody with true harmonic depth. Taneyev's emotional use of suspensions is worthy of Elgar. The final bars are fascinating: the violins and viola sustain a very high chord as the cellist gradually ascends into their region. III, the minuet, is serious but not somber. Rather than the conventional trio, it has an expanded coda. The finale contrasts a lightly skipping theme with a charming, more legato second subject. The development has a fugue whose subject derives from the opening of the movement. The lyrical theme intervenes before the fugue resumes, leading the music to a whimsical close. The work has the genial touch of a modernized Haydn.

The opening theme of Quintet 5 (1905) has a distinctive syncopated rhythm. It's in a slow 3/2 meter, which enhances the breadth of the music. With its digressions into brief interludes, the work sounds more romantic than classical, expanding some dramatic episodes to symphonic scope. The extra voice makes for an even deeper wealth of textures and range. The close of the movement returns the rhythm of its beginning. II, the slow movement, has an ABA plan. The outer sections use a noble melody, which Taneyev thoroughly works out. He arranges some of the accompanying piano trills so that they sound both structural and decorative. The central part of the movement has a lyrical melody in a contrasting key.

III is more like a complex study in dance rhythms than a conventional minuet. It includes scherzando sections and a mazurka. The varying tempos added to this verge on self-indulgence by a composer normally known for the tightness of his forms. The ending sensitively combines trills with pizzicato accents. IV has a contentious nature. It relies heavily on the first theme of I and includes some violent outbursts. Its central section has a weighty fugue, also based on the theme from I. Taneyev wrote a book on counterpoint. This also furnishes material for a forceful coda.

For both works, the playing and interpretations are excellent, as is Naxos's sound.

O’CONNOR

TANEYEV & RIMSKY-KORSAKOV: Trios
Leonore Trio—Hyperion 68139—78 minutes

I find all of this terribly dull—second-rate pieces with a very occasional nice moment (the very beginning of the Rimsky), played without any warmth or flair.

VROOT

TCHAIKOVSKY: 12 Pieces; Souvenir de Hapsal; 2 Valse-Scherzos; Valse-Caprice; Capriccio
Mami Shikimori, p
Naxos 573543—77 minutes

The main work in this program is Tchaikovsky's Op. 40: 12 Pieces of Medium Difficulty. To put these 12 pieces in perspective, they were written the year after Symphony 4 and the same year as the Violin Concerto (1878). These followed a set of 24 short piano pieces called Album for the Young, Op. 39. We are listening to mature Tchaikovsky, a master of composition with an ability to write beautiful melodies matched by few others. With 36 short piano works coming so close together, he was clearly in the mode for this kind of work. Even though this set is called "pieces of lesser difficulty", one should ask, "lesser than what?" They are more difficult than the Album for the Young and less than the Grand Sonata.

Beginning with a difficult Etude, there follows a wide range of pieces: a Funeral March, a couple of Mazurkas, Songs Without Words, a couple of Waltzes, a difficult Scherzo, and a Danse Russe that theme detectives will recognize from Swan Lake.

Japanese pianist Shikimori is new to me, and she is very much worth watching for. Her abilities to shape phrases and vary her touch are quite good. She brings to these small pieces the same level of musicianship and attention to detail that you might expect in a Beethoven sonata. Each one was engaging; and the entire, very generous, program seemed to be over too soon. I could easily go on for another full disc of relatively minor Tchaikovsky pieces when they are played this well. I can only hope that this could be the beginning of a project.

HARRINGTON

TCHAIKOVSKY: Rococo Variations; Nocturne; Andante Cantabile; Pezzo Capriccioso
Johannes Moser; Suisse Romande Orchestra/Andrew Manze
Pentatone 5186 570 [SACD] 65 minutes

Moser is a fine cellist who is concerned as much with playing an interesting program as with sounding like a virtuoso. He is rather special in both directions. These works by Tchaikovsky are made up of several interesting oddities, primarily the original version of the Rococo Variations, Op. 33 that contains a bit more music than the Wilhelm Fitzenhagen

American Record Guide
TCHAIKOVSKY: Violin Concerto;
LALO: Symphonie Espagnole
Augustin Hadelich; London Philharmonic/ Vasily Petrenko, Omer Meir Wellber
LPO 94—68 minutes

The engineering alone disqualifies this album. The orchestra’s strings sound decent enough, but the woodwinds are in a different, echoey acoustic that makes them sound unbended with one another and with the orchestra. Worst of all, when Hadelich’s violin enters for his introductory solo, its timbre is shockingly ugly—wiry, whiny, as if all lower overtones have been deleted. The tone is better in the Lalo, but the engineering still exposes his foibles (occasional intonation problems, unsteady tone, slight lifts in phrasing that kill the melodic line) and enhances nothing, leaving the instrument really raw (think “freshly killed carcass”).

Not that this makes any difference. In the Tchaikovsky Hadelich’s pacing is irregular, even when no tempo changes are marked. On February 24, 2016, when it was recorded at a concert in Royal Festival Hall, he didn’t have a firm grasp of the form of any of the movements. In I he pushes, then pulls back slightly. In II the long lyricism of the melody line eludes him. And in III he’s impulsive, excited, rushing. Only Petrenko projects steadiness.

In the Lalo, recorded at an April 17, 2015, concert, it’s just the opposite. Israeli conductor Omer Meir Wellber, 35, conducts like a military puppet. Every movement has a martial, metronomic strictness and not an ounce of musicality. Hadelich is the one who lets the lines flow more musically. But in the introduction, after making his sixth note, the highest E on the violin, sound terribly insecure, he proceeds to play every movement without an ounce of tone color. Not even the gorgeous Andante has any atmosphere.

Perhaps one could argue with my assessment of these interpretations, but why release recordings like this where the sound is so unquestionably awful?

D MOORE

TCHAIKOVSKY: Piano Concerto 1;
Thomson: 4 Saints in 3 Acts;
see PROKOFIEFF

TCHAIKOVSKY: Piano Concerto 1;
 Four Saints in Three Acts

Charles Blandy (St Chavez, First Capital), Simon Dyer (Fourth Capital), Aaron Engebrath (St Ignatius), Andrew Garland (Third Capital), Tom McNichols (Compere), Gigi Mitchell-Velasco (St Teresa II), Sarah Pelletier (St Teresa I), Deborah Selig (St Settlement), Sumner Thompson (Second Capital), Lynn Torgove (Commore), Stanley Wilson (St Stephen); Boston Modern Orchestra Project/ Gil Rose
BMOP 1049 [2CD] 107 minutes

Four Saints in Three Acts has always been considered an important work in American opera, if only for its composer and librettist. Virgil Thomson was an important American composer during his long life, and Gertrude Stein became the center and source of encouragement for writers of many nationalities from her Paris apartment. A work by the two of them was bound to be special.

It is a fascinating work. Both Thomson and Stein warned against trying to find conventional meaning in its text. In the material accompanying this recording, Thomson draws a parallel between the lives of saints and the lives of the artists and writers that he and Stein knew. The text seems to be a long conversation having no particular meaning but employing clever rhymes and word play, somewhat like the extremes of an absurdist play. Yet the music is very easy to listen to. Written in an era that was producing the atonality of Berg and Schoenberg, this music, by Thomson’s admission, has the simplicity and tunefulness of Sunday school songs sung in the American Midwest, where he grew up. Thomson said that he hopes the listener feels “the inner gaiety and the strength of lives consecrated to a non-material end”. He refers to lives of both saints and artists, a thought similar to Thornton Wilder’s statement in Our Town that only some saints and poets really appreciate life.
So, if we follow the advice of the authors, we should listen to these works (also Capital Capitals) without over-analyzing or trying to find deep meaning. One can enjoy the music and perhaps even the word play of the text, by listening several times. I hate to hear anyone’s condemnation of a piece on one hearing or reading. The music is unfailingly tuneful and pleasant. Given a fine recording (like the present one), one can enjoy the fresh voices of these young singers as they resurrect this important piece of American operatic history.

I have nothing but praise for the singers. Their enunciation of Stein’s text is marvelous, and they have fine voices and excellent musicianship. There are too many singers to point out all their strong points. The chorus and orchestra are also good. The package contains the full text and small, but very good articles, as well as cast bios.

SININGER

THUILLE: Sextet; POULENC: Sextet; FRANCAIX: L’heure du Berger
Margaria Hohenrieder, p; Dresden Staatskapelle players
Solo Musica 251—54 minutes

This program of sextets for piano and winds shows off some marvelous ensemble playing. German pianist Margaria Hohenrieder is a distinguished soloist and collaborative artist, and her performance with the principal wind players of the Staatskapelle Dresden is a real delight.

Ludwig Thuille was a lifelong friend of Richard Strauss, but his richly melodic Sextet has more in common with Brahms than Strauss, especially the piano writing. This is a lovely performance, demonstrating flawless intonation and a real enjoyment of the piece. The fleeting nightscape of the scherzo is particularly striking.

The Poulenc Sextet is a standard part of the woodwind chamber repertory and has been recorded many times. The performers do an excellent job with this delightful piece, capturing its distinct combination of acerbic wit and heart-felt, almost maudlin, tunefulness. Hohenrieder is a standout in her ease with the technical virtuosity of the piano score.

The Francaix suite is light, mocking, and dancing. It’s a perfect ending to the program. The three short movements are clever sketches of the Paris café scene. The music is appropriately picturesque, and the titles reflect that: The Old Dandies, Pin-up Girls, Anxious Children. Again, the Dresden players capture this wry, sarcastic, sometimes grotesque writing with style and verve. The entire program is marked by freshness, impressive technical prowess, and perfect balance between keyboard and winds. Don’t miss out on this one.

PFEIL

THUILLE: Cello Sonata; see STRAUSS

TUUR: Peregrinus Estaticus; Le Poids des Vies Non Vecues; Noesis
Christoffer Sundqvist, cl; Pekka Kuusisto, v; Finnish Radio/ Hannu Lintu
Ondine 1287—58 minutes

Estonian composer Erkki-Sven Tuur writes in the New Modernist style so popular among Scandinavians such as Magnus Lindberg and Esa-Pekka Salonen with its modified atonality and free forms. Peregrinus Estaticus (Ecstatic Falcon) (2012) is a clarinet concerto in the standard three movements but played without pause. There is an exposition with two contrasting areas (fast and slow) and a complex development of the first part. The slow section reprise leads into a dreamy slow movement which itself leads into the rapid, fairly jazzy finale. After the climax, there is a calm though tense coda before it finally evaporates. The work is a considerable test for the soloist, and Mr Sundqvist passes with aplomb.

Le Poids des Vies non Vecues (2014—The Weight of Lives Lived) turns out to be a gruesome elegy “for those who have been disrupted,” according to the annotator. Opening with a crash, the work is filled with weeping descents, waterfalls of tears, and inconsolable despondency. Traditionally such pieces have associations, though of course you can make your own, but you should be inconsolably in mourning before submitting yourself to it.

Noesis (2005) is a double concerto for violin, clarinet, and orchestra. Its title refers to “understanding.” Like the clarinet piece, the work is in three continuous sections, corresponding to the standard classical form. All is controlled by a falling figure ubiquitous all through. The first section is dramatic, the second dreamy, the exciting finale fast and a little jazzy.

Tüür is an excellent composer, and these pieces are deserving of the attention of new music fans. Performances are impressive.

GIMBEL

American Record Guide
VAINBERG: Violin Sonatas; Sonatina
Grigory Kalinovsky; Tatiana Goncharova, p
Naxos 572320 [2CD] 129 minutes

Mieczyslaw Vainberg (also spelled Weinberg) is a composer I only became aware of three years ago. A Polish protégé of Shostakovich, he moved to the Soviet Union at the outbreak of WW II and remained there until he died in 1996.

These sonatas span nearly 40 years. Sonatas 1 through 4 and the Sonatina are from the 1940s, Sonata 5 is from 1953, and Sonata 6 is from 1982. The earliest already show the influence of Shostakovich, whom Vainberg met when they were both evacuated to the east as German troops advanced. The sonatas become more technically assured and sophisticated with time, culminating in the best of the bunch, No. 5. Sonata 6 has a different, craggier language and is less appealing than the earlier sonatas with their folk elements.

Grigory Kalinovsky and Tatiana Goncharova are very accomplished musicians with a good feel for this music, but Yuri Kalnits and Michael Csanyi-Wills have are even better, with better tempos and sense of timing (J/A 2014).

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: Job; Symphony 9
Bergen Philharmonic/ Andrew Davis
Chandos 5180 [SACD] 78 minutes

Vaughan Williams’s ballet Job makes a clear distinction between the ethical worlds of good and evil. The music for Satan and his posse is full of snarling brass. Job and his virtues are handled in a more bucolic vein, often with melismatic solos for the higher woodwinds or violin. This can make for a lot of what composer Elizabeth Lutyens called “cowpat music”. Thus it’s not always an easy piece to interpret. Satan’s scorn is largely self-rising, but keeping the more spiritual passages moving needs a firm hand on the wheel, with a vision of the work as a unified whole.

Sir Andrew has just that, with the ropes firmly in his grasp for a coherent account. He handles balances and dynamics with sensitivity. The Bergen orchestra plays expressively, with good tone quality, and soloists are excellent. I especially like the sax soloist’s unctuous portrayal of Job’s comforters.

Chandos’s sound is, per usual, excellent. When the organ cuts in near the end, it does so with overwhelming effect. The organ is a 1997 Rieger from the Bergen Cathedral. The notes include a stoplist.

Symphony 9 increasingly strikes me as an underrated work. It was written in 1957, the year before Vaughan Williams died; and some of the ill favor it initially suffered may have been the result of the rising tide of serialism. Now we can hear it as both a summary of the composer’s work and a reaffirmation of what a symphony can be. And the music is actually comprehensible. Written a generation after Job, the symphony not only shares some of its language, but even quotes a theme from his 1903 orchestral sketch, The Solent. At the same time, it’s no mere exercise in nostalgia. The scherzo points to what such a movement was and still could be. The orchestra includes a saxophone trio and a flugelhorn to enhance the arresting scoring. The symphony ends in E major, but still has a mysterious air as though something were yet to be unveiled behind its conclusion. All the virtues of his reading of Job also inform Davis’s direction of this work, with results just as convincing. For people who’d like to look under the hood, the scores of both works are in the Petrucci online library.

O’CONNOR
VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: Symphonies 3+4
Liverpool Philharmonic/ Andrew Manze
Onyx 4161—69 minutes

This is the second issue in Andrew Manze’s Vaughan Williams symphony cycle. In my review of the first (2 and 8, S/O 2016) I called the performances an interesting revisionist view of Vaughan Williams that to an extent clears the cobwebs that some people think characterize this music. Manze takes that approach a step further this time, to the point where it could be called modernist.

Normally, Vaughan Williams’s Symphony No. 3 (Pastoral) is a piece where one sits back and absorbs the sheer beauty of it. It is almost like taking a sound bath. In recent years, some people have taken a different view of the Pastoral, drawing on the composer’s description of it as a symphony that reflects the feelings he brought back from the Great War, where he served as an ambulance driver. A few performances reflect that conception—Andrew Davis’s dark and slightly brooding one, with a rich, broad texture. Manze goes in a different direction. The usual flow is replaced by more delineated lines, different and often unexpected colors, and shorter phrases, resulting in a performance that is serious, nervous, and uneasy. There is none of the “rolling over and over in a ploughed field on a wet day” that bothered critic Hugh Allen in 1932. Perhaps Allen would have responded more positively to this performance.

In the Molto Moderato, there is none of the breadth and dark warmth of Davis. Instead we get even more clarity of inner lines than Manze supplied in his previous recordings. Tempos tend to be slow and the pacing deliberate. The conductor’s control is apparent, and the mood is pensive. The Lento Moderato starts off slowly and gained in. The pacing remains deliberate and the mood becomes brooding. Vaughan Williams said that the long trumpet solo was inspired by the bugle call he heard during the war. As played here, the solo is phrased in the manner of a bugler and comes closer to realizing that image than other performances I know. The horn solo sounds almost muffled in a good way, creating an effect that is distant and mournful. Very striking in the Lento finale is the replacement of the usual soprano with a tenor (allowed by the composer along with a clarinet, if all else fails). The image created is one of a young soldier bemoaning the destruction of war. I have never had that response to this music with a soprano singing. This is a totally different and convincing sound, one that other conductors should consider.

Is this an interpretation Vaughan Williams would favor? Then why would he chose the nickname Pastoral—perhaps to indicate a dream image that got him through the war? Whatever the case, Manze’s performance is an interesting supplement to the great recordings of Boult, Previn, Davis, etc., but I would not want to hear it every time I play this work.

Manze’s Fourth Symphony is a harder sell. His approach is similar to the others: light in weight, detailed, revealing, and inward looking, with the usual anger replaced by sadness. The famous crunching climaxes are now quite proper in tone. The Allegro is slow, dark, restrained, literal, and rather passive. Lento Moderato is light in weight, creating an effect that is almost impressionist. The music is eerie in the quieter spots, sometimes like a dirge. Even the powerful ending is restrained and controlled. In the Scherzo, notes are shorter and instrumental lines dart around sharply. The pacing is not fast so much as quick. The finale is almost polite, as well as slow and rather dull. That wonderful passage with the offbeats is too light and bouncy. Gone is that rustic seaside effect this section usually conveys. The slower mid-section is more drawn out than ominous. Even the four-note signature theme is indifferent, and the ending fails to bring down the hammer. In rehearsals for the premiere of the Fourth, Vaughan Williams reportedly said, “I don’t know if I like it, but it’s what I meant.” If the composer’s recording is any evidence, Manze’s take on the work is not what he meant.

Andrew Davis’s Fourth is also slow and restrained, but those are the only qualities that it shares with the Manze. The Davis has the weight and mass that the Manze is missing; it is neither as furious as the composer’s nor as powerful and angry as Bernstein, Boult, and several others; but it has a dark and powerful gloominess that I have appreciated more as the years go by. On the other hand, Manze’s Fourth seems destined to be one of the weaknesses in his Vaughan Williams set.

As was the case with the earlier issue, the playing is first rate. The sound is similar but much more distant than the sound of the Elgar Second recorded in this same hall with the same orchestra (reviewed this issue). Lewis Foreman’s notes are brief but interesting and helpful.

HECHT

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: The Solent; see Collections
VIVALDI: 4 Seasons; 12 short works
Daniel Hope, v; Zurich Chamber Orchestra
DG 4796922—80 minutes

This is a trendy concept album created by Daniel Hope. It has not only Vivaldi’s Four Seasons but 12 short works assigned to the 12 months of the year (for reasons beyond me) with 10 performing friends of Hope on piano, double bass, bass synthesizer, harp, electric guitar, organ, and percussion plus a soprano and string quartet, spread out among the 12. There are also four hideously ugly B&W photographs of pouty faces representing the four seasons themselves plus 12 photos of art works (de gustibus) for each of the months (again, the connections are beyond me), all with commentary by Hope. But then, what counts is the quality of performances. Onward!

Hope plays the (complete) Vivaldi with little or no vibrato, and the very alert orchestra is infused with harpsichord, baroque guitar, and a wonderfully fat theorbo. While the orchestration and tone colors are clearly baroque, I wouldn’t call the performance style authentic; the approach is quite romantic in terms of constant, expressive waxing and waning, retards, tempo changes, and other liberties. The movements of all four concertos most often flow into one another without a break, turning them into unified wholes, despite the liberties. Hope has a few slightly sour runs in ‘Spring’ but he is in “real fiddlin’ form” here—fast, delicate, furious one moment, ethereal the next, and quite often virtuosic. In ‘Spring’ and ‘Summer’ I sometimes feel that the effects or contrasts are more “designed” than truly atmospheric; in fact, Hope’s liberties sound too indulgent in ‘Summer’. But ‘Autumn’ and ‘Winter’ are especially atmospheric with their tranquil and icy middle movements and snappy finales (or was I just getting used to Hope’s overall approach?).

The engineering in the Vivaldi is so wiry and bright that I finally had to turn down the treble a couple notches, which made it more livable. Even still, at one point in III of ‘Spring’ where several solo violins play together, the sound is so wiry they sound like a harmonica.

The treble knob went back to normal position for the 12 short “monthly” selections, generally about two to four minutes each, ranging from Bach, Molter, Schumann, and Rameau to items in styles from new-age and Appalachia to synthesizer-distorted and lounge lizard. The loveliest are a Bach aria from Cantata 115 for voice, violin, cello, and portative organ (though I bet even someone fluent in German couldn’t understand a sung syllable) and Aria II from a Concerto Pastorale by Johann Molter, both served rather straight with the Zurich Chamber Orchestra. In Tchaikovsky’s ‘June’ the pianist uses a sappy night club style, while Hope plays “oh! so meaningfully” in ‘A Shining Summer Morning’ from Schumann’s Dichterliebe a harp paralleling the piano right hand gives a new-way edge to the sappy violin solo. Weill’s ‘September Song’ is pure lounge lizard stuff, and a bass synthesizer gives ‘Amazing Grace’ a distorted “rock” edge. Other shorties by Nils Frahm, Aphex Twin, Max Richter, and Chilly Gonzalez are more “new age” with lyrical noodling and harmonies that are generally soothing and mind-numbing. In many items among these 12, the engineers can’t keep their hands off the volume control; moments suddenly range from oppressively loud to, “Did the sound just die?”

There’s actually a 13th selection, what Hope calls a “postscriptum”, his arrangement without accompaniment of Brahms’s ‘Guten Abend, Gut’ Nacht’ (Lullaby) played in his own unique style.

It would be both mean and unfair to call this a “vanity” album because, while this is a long dreamed-of project by Hope, he does not hog the limelight. To be fair, my problem is that I’m not a trendy person, and everything about this album, from the cover and photos to musical styles, says “trendy” to me. Some might say I suffer from “old fart’s syndrome”; I think of it rather as hopeless addiction to classical music, which I prefer straight up without five other liquors mixed in.

FRENCH

VIVALDI: Arias; Dixit Dominus; see HANDEL

WAGNER: Lohengrin
Camilla Nylund (Elsa), Katarina Dalayman (Ortrud), Klaus Florian Vogt (Lohengrin), Evgeny Nikitin (Telramund), Falk Struckmann (King Heinrich), Samuel Youn (herald); Concertgebouw Orchestra, Dutch Opera and Radio chorus/
Mark Elder
RCO 17002 [3SACD] 210 minutes

There have been dozens of capable and more than capable recordings of Lohengrin. Among the most often praised are the Sawallisch (1962), Kempe (1963), Solti (1985), and Abbado (1991). Recording a major Wagner opera involves heavy costs that a record company may be unable to recoup. Hence the appeal of recording a performance. This was edited from
two performances in Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw on December 18 and 20, 2015. It was done without costumes and sets, but some evocative lighting was employed. Characters made entrances and exits through various doors, and characters and (I gather) brass players appeared on various balconies.

An injured shoulder forced the scheduled conductor, Andris Nelsons, to cancel. Fortunately, the conductor who stepped in on a week’s notice, Mark Elder, is an experienced hand with opera. He was music director of the English National Opera 1979-93, led the Rochester Philharmonic in 1989-94, and, since 1999, has been at the helm of the renowned Hallé Orchestra (in Manchester, England). Here he moves things along at a generally brisk clip, yet he also gives the more “spiritual” elements of the score their due, as in the beautifully sustained yet forward-moving prelude to Act 1. The entire performance takes just about as long as the recently released 1963 recording—from a staged performance in Munich—by renowned Wagner specialist Hans Knappertsbusch (May/June).

The singers all bring clarity and dramatic point to the sung words. Most of them are native German-speakers or Scandinavians, but the Russian Nikitin and the South Korean Koun articulate the words well, too. Unfortunately, most of the cast members are afflicted by a certain roughness of sound, often combined with a slow and somewhat wide vibrato—presumably the result of singing heavy roles in large theaters over some years. Nylund manages to find a clean line at the beginning of the bridal-chamber scene, only to regain her slight wobble the moment Elsa gets agitated.

The best of the singers, for my taste, is Vogt (Lohengrin), whose singing is somewhat unusual in timbre—a bit like the Evangelist in a Bach Passion, but consistently clear and controlled, as if this character floats in some higher realm than the rest. (One of his other major roles has been Mozart’s Tamino. He has recently added Tannhäuser.) Vogt’s remarkable use of a light, lyrical, utterly unfurled tone conveys many nuances of feeling, including resignation, confident determination, and purity of intent. He phrases beautifully. (He was a professional trumpet player before becoming an opera singer.)

The combined choral groups sound absolutely marvelous. Like Vogt, they are a balm to the ear. Dalayman, in the complex role of Ortrud, manages to combine (or alternate, really) viciousness and insinuating sweetness. She is, almost inevitably, not always a balm to the ear, but she gives quite a portrayal!

The Concertgebouw plays superbly, as one might expect. There is no scrambling when things get excited and no unsteadiness in slower, reflective passages.

A work as complex as this must be the devil to record in a performance (whether staged or not). Sometimes a singer here is not captured fully by the microphones, and the orchestra’s sonority often lacks the subtle glamor that listeners have come to expect from symphonic recordings made by this same orchestra in this same hall. I also wonder whether some of the singers would have been less tempted into vocal vehemence and high intensity if the orchestra had been tamed by being tucked away in a pit, rather than playing right behind them on the stage. But “opera in concert” seems to be a compromise that we are fated to live with nowadays, even on recordings.

Complete libretto, an excellent translation, and a brief essay emphasizing the work’s historical references are supplied. Also some photos, which reveal that a barefoot male dancer made an entrance—down the aisles—in the silent role of the long-awaited savior-swan. He wore a white dinner jacket and trousers, with white ruffles (suggestive of feathers) on the back of the jacket, and he was carrying the head and neck of a swan (made of cloth).

Despite the many strengths of this recording, especially its tenor, the choral singing, and the orchestral playing, I would continue to recommend as a first choice the Kempe. It is one of the few that restore a five-minute chunk of Act 3: a stirring and operatically effective (almost Italianate) ensemble after Elsa faints. The singing of all the roles in that famous recording is firm and youthful. Most of all, Elisabeth Grummer sings the role of Elsa cleanly. And Christa Ludwig portrays Ortrud with a seductive sweetness that the listener—like, alas, Elsa—may find impossible to resist.

LOCKE

WEISS: The Rome MS; GEBEL: Tomba
Diego Leveric, lute
Lilac 161021—40 minutes

Silvius Leopold Weiss was the most important, and certainly the most prolific, lutenist and lute composer of the High Baroque. This recording includes excerpts from the Rome manuscript, works early in his career (the Dresden ms contains his more mature works). I gather from the notes that these are not pub-
Richard Wernick (b. 1934) is an American composer who likes to write in an atonal idiom. Don’t let that turn you off. His music is colorfully scored and full of variety.

This program begins with a relatively recent piece, a three-movement sextet written in 2003 for a string quartet plus double bass and piano. Watch out! It begins so softly with string harmonics and playing inside the piano that the second movement comes as a shock to the ears. Still, it is full of memorable sounds and is quite enjoyable.

The 1980 Cello Concerto is for ten instruments, mostly winds, brass, and percussion. Cellist Barbara Haffner has a fine time playing games with them and a huge passacaglia Finale.

A sensitively scored Piano Trio from 1994 is played by Fulkerson, Haffner, and Orkis. Sitting here on Easter Sunday in the sun, there were lovely quiet moments in the music when the birds outside joined in. Altogether, I enjoyed this program.

The players are quite well known and play with involvement and lovely sounds. Haffner is the performer for whom the concerto was written, and she plays in all the pieces. She is a fine cellist, and everyone else does a sensitive job with this demanding music.

**Williams:** film music

Filmharmonic Brass—Roven 10017—55 minutes

Arrangements for brass septet of thrilling movie music by John Williams. To look at the list of pieces is to be amazed again by how many film blockbusters Williams scored and how much of the music is memorable. There are themes here from *Jurassic Park,* *E.T.,* *Schindler’s List,* *Harry Potter,* *Indiana Jones,* and *Jaws,* plus a set of five from *Star Wars.*

The ensemble is very good, but a septet is a little small for such epic works.

**Willscher:** Organ Symphony 5

Carson Cooman—Divine Art 25150—74 minutes

Having reviewed Cooman as a composer of numerous well-written organ pieces (S/O 2015; N/D 2016; M/J 2017), now I am interested to hear him as a performer. Andreas Willscher is a German composer who has won numerous awards and had commissions ranging from symphonic works and oratorios to cabaret, jazz, and rock scores. He has written several organ works that blend traditional elements with contemporary and jazz influences. In 1971 he was appointed organist of St Francis Church in Hamburg where, in 1975, a large fresco and 11 windows on the life of St Francis were commissioned. What resulted was this 12-movement symphony, subtitled “of Francis’s preaching about holy poverty”, inspired by the windows. It is not program music per se, but it is meant to be a large-scale meditation on this theme. He employs a motive (FDA-Francis d’Assisi) and several Gregorian chant melodies in alternating toccata, fughetta, and meditative movements.
Silence is used as an element of equal importance to sound, particularly in VII, which, at 13 minutes, is the longest. Long chords alternate with even longer silences—so long you will think the movement is over!

Cooman’s success as a composer for the organ is due in large part to his innate understanding of the instrument as a performer. He plays a large and wonderful 1973 Marcussen organ found in the Laurenkerk in Rotterdam. Notes on the composer, music, and specification of the organ.

**Ysaye: Six Solo Violin Sonatas; Kaunzner: Sojuchameleon**

Viktoria Elizabeth Kaunzner
Hannsler 16086—78 minutes

Eugene Ysaye’s masterpieces, the Six Solo Violin Sonatas, have finally taken their rightful place in the mainstream repertoire. Recordings of these works, once rare, are proliferating. For years now, I have been recommending recordings by Thomas Zehetmair (J/F 2005) and Rachel Kolly d’Alba (M/A 2011) and dismissing the rest. Finally I can add a third set to stand alongside theirs.

Viktoria Elizabeth Kaunzner is a composer as well as a violinist, and like many composers who are also performers, she has looked deeper into the music she is playing than others do. The first thing I noticed was that she wrote the booklet notes herself, and they are extensive. They include a short biography of Ysaye and an analysis of each sonata and how they form a whole together. She even notices several musical allusions that had escaped my notice. She notes that Ysaye’s sonatas follow the example of Bach’s Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin, beginning with a work in G minor and ending with a work in E Major, forming the interval of a major sixth. She points out that, like the set by Bach, the first four works are in the minor mode and the last two are in the major mode. Remarkably, as with Bach, Ysaye’s wife died in the course of writing these works, and then he remarried.

The performances are very spirited, and Kaunzner’s attacks, vibrato, and tone colors are exceptionally varied. She brings more variety of mood to these works than nearly all other performers. You can sense that she has thought long and hard about them and come to her own conclusions about interpretation. I even sense some of Ysaye’s own contrasting dreaminess and impulsiveness and explosiveness in her playing. One thing that particularly impressed me is how well she controls the notoriously difficult opening of Sonata 5, dedicated to Ysaye’s own pupil and quartet partner, Mathieu Crickboom. Anyone who loves these sonatas as much as I do will not regret acquiring this.

Appended at the end is one of Kaunzner’s own compositions, titled Sojuchameleon, for solo violin and field recordings. It is essentially a protest piece against urban noise and alcohol abuse. It has an avant-garde quality, but it is more playful than preachy, so it works. It doesn’t take itself too seriously, which shows that the composer has better judgement than many of her contemporaries.

She plays the “David-Midori” Guarnerius del Gesu violin made in 1735.

**Zaderatsky: 24 Preludes & Fugues**

Ksenia Basmet, Yury Favorin, Lukas Geniusas, Andrei Guzin, Nikita Mndoyants, Andrei Yaroshinsky, p
Melodiya 2450—135 minutes

Very few composers have written 24 preludes & fugues since Bach’s last set completed in 1739. Carl Czerny, more than a century later, wrote an excellent set (Op. 856) that sounds like early Beethoven, playful and assertive—it’s the best thing I’ve heard from Czerny. Josef Rheinberger wrote 24 preludes but finished just 19 fugues. Later, Hans Huber and Algernon Ashton wrote a full 24, but I can’t find recordings or sheet music anywhere; perhaps they’re still unpublished.

Which brings us to Russian composer Vsevolod Zaderatsky, who, 200 years after Bach, finished his 24—and without access to a piano—in 1939 while confined to a Soviet gulag because his art offended Stalin. Fugue, at least by reputation, is the most academic, cerebral, and forbidding of forms, so it’s clear this is protest music. Imprisoned for transgressing Stalin’s delicate hothouse aesthetics, Zaderatsky wrote a spittle-flecked raspberry to throw in that tyrant’s face.

This is fighting music, defiant and belligerent in the extreme, and yet cast in a staunchly tonal context. The harmonies and pianism remind me of Nikolai Medtner’s early works, particularly the surly and volcanic Op. 7 Arabesques and Op. 8 Skazki; technically saturated two-fisted virtuosic overload, sledgehammer left-hand octaves, an orgy of ecstatic violence. There’s also a touch of Moussorgsky and Scriabin’s early Op. 8 Etudes.

The fugues all begin “by the book,” with a
bare subject and lightly-accompanied answer, but then lose themselves in virtuosic counter-subjects. Zaderatsky has a penchant for thunderous pedal points underpinning progressive fragmentation of the subject, the fragments repeated in close stretto, then piling on the tension with manic diminution, drawing most of his fugues to a monumental, exultant close. It’s not all ferocity, though—Zaderatsky makes room for beauty and wistful solace, or at least pensive disquiet.

Connoisseurs of fuge will love pondering the veiled, submerged complexities here, as Zaderatsky tears his subjects to bits, rearranges them, smashes them back together using unpredictable octave displacements, inversions, and every other stock-in-trade of the consummate contrapuntist. But even listeners with no particular interest in fugues will be moved and awestruck, even overwhelmed by their expressive power. A handful of composers since Zaderatsky have completed 24 preludes & fugues, but only Shostakovich’s are better—and just barely.

Six pianists play four preludes & fugues each. Why six pianists? Who knows? The notes are silent. But they all play the same piano, in the same hall, in the same style, so it sounds like one pianist anyway; and their unified approach strikes an ideal balance between fugal clarity and monumentalism. Excellent sound, recorded in 2016.

WRIGHT

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<th>British Tone Poems</th>
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<td><strong>ALWYN:</strong> Blackdown; <strong>AUSTIN:</strong> Spring; <strong>BANTOCK:</strong> The Witch of Atlas; <strong>GURNEY:</strong> Gloucestershire Rhapsody; <strong>GARDINER:</strong> Berkshire Idyll; <strong>VAUGHAN WILLIAMS:</strong> The Solent</td>
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<td>Chandos 10939—77 minutes</td>
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An unbroken pastoral strain runs through English cultural life. This collection of tone poems proves its strength and value—all but two are in that vein.

William Alwyn (1905-85) gained fame as the writer of well-knit symphonies, versatile movie scores, and fine chamber music. His orchestral sketch Blackdown (1926) is subtitled “A Tone Poem of the Surrey Hills.” Specifically, he meant a hill near Hazlemere. In his own words “it depicts the quiet beauty of a wide expanse of country. The oboe ushers in a chromatic tune, which disturbs the calm.” The music paints a blustering gale swaying the trees till a climax. The piece then tapers off to a reminiscence of its opening.

Spring by Frederic Austin (1872-1952) has an oboe theme over a quietly rocking rhythm, followed by some interplay of bucolic woodwind phrases. A second theme on the horns he works into a rich paragraph resembling Delius with a more diatonic bass line. The music assumes a dance-like character with syncopated figures. There’s a postlude, where an oboe and harp in a new key head the music toward a resonant peak. A noteworthy detail is the

Collections are in the usual order: orchestral, chamber ensembles, brass ensembles, bassoon, cello & double bass, clarinet & saxophone, flute, guitar, harp, harpsichord, miscellaneous, oboe, organ, piano, trumpet & brass solos, viola, violin, wind ensembles, early, choral, vocal.
left sketches for three orchestral works, which were for years considered too incoherent to be playable. The Glouces tershire Rhapsody (1921) was restored by Philip Lancaster and Ian Venables in 2010. It starts with an ascending do-sol-do horn call, developed by the strings and woodwinds into a dance theme for the cellos. An Elgarian melody follows, then a segment based on a rustic oboe theme. The latter portion of the piece is a vigorous march with an insistent timpani beat. The Elgarian theme returns, broken off for some saucy woodwind writing before an exuberant finale.

Balfour Gardiner (1877-1950) was a member of the “Frankfurt Gang” of English musicians who went there to study. Gardiner also helped promote the careers of Bax, Grainger, and Holst. His Berkshire Rhapsody memorializes his elaborate cottage in Ashampstead, where he’d invite his musical friends. Bax remembered it as “a refuge in adverse times and a beautiful stressing of all the fleeting happiness of this uncertain life” Gardiner’s work has an improvisatory air, but remains coherent. There are Debussian parallel seventh chords, with rhapsodic woodwind writing adding to the impressionist mood. The orchestration becomes more fully fleshed out and detailed, sometimes sounding like a more acerbic Delius. It leaves a pleasingly fragrant after-effect.

Vaughan Williams’s Solent is an orchestral sketch from 1903. The title is the name of the strip of the English Channel between England itself and the Isle of Wight. Its main theme—an already characteristic melody—he recycled to good effect in his Symphonies 1 and 9.

All the pieces are well played, with Gamba’s interpretations sympathetic. This is labeled Volume 1; I look forward to Volume 2.

Adelaide Town Hall
Bryars, Skempton, Part
Adelaide Symphony/ Gavin Bryars
GB 25—53 minutes

I don’t think I’ve ever heard Bryars as a conductor before: he fares quite well, though I’d be curious to see the effect with a truly first-class orchestra. (The Adelaide is a very good but not really brilliant orchestra.)

The program, too, is not without its missteps, but here only one piece diminishes the effect of the rest: Pärt’s If Bach had been a Beekeeper: an early, incoherent, and thoroughly silly work that combines a nascent flowering of Pärt’s tintinnabulation technique with plodding repeated notes, minor scales, and occasional dissonance. Ho hum.

Howard Skempton’s Lento offers 12 minutes of a series of mostly minor triads in various configurations and with little variation in timbre. It is haunting, and serious, and masterly. Bryar’s own contributions take the form of excerpts from his opera G and an odd work taken from an unpublished Wagner sketch called The Porazzi Fragment. In these works the musical voice of the Gavin I know and love—an arresting combination of sophistication and innocence, wistfulness and joy—emerges clearly and forcefully. A worthwhile and important release.

HASKINS

**Italian Chamber Orchestra**

CASELLA: Divertimento for Fulvia; DONATONI: Musica; GHEDINI: Concerto Grosso; MALIPIERO: Oriente Immaginario

Italian-Swiss Orchestra/ Damian Iorio
Naxos 573748—64 minutes

All the works are for chamber orchestra, and most of them are highly enjoyable. Casella’s 1920 Divertimento was written for his daughter. Born in 1928, she’s apparently still alive and promoting his work. The music has charm and delicacy. If you enjoy Stravinsky’s Pulcinella you’ll love this. You hear bows to Rossini and Debussy, the latter in Casella’s arrangement of ‘Keel Row’. That tune is familiar to anyone who likes Debussy’s Gigues and to anyone who ever lived in England. The finale pays homage to Ravel via a condensed form of the finale of his ballet Mother Goose. It’s done with such skill you wish it were longer.

Franco Donatoni (1927-2000) became a 12-tone convert in the 1950s. Musica uses that language, though with some humor. Still, the discontinuity—a constant danger in serialism—soon grates. The notes describe it as “one of the most appealing 12-tone pieces ever composed”. To borrow a Seth Meyers joke, that’s like being named Best Dressed at WalMart.

Ghedini’s Concerto Grosso (1927), a five-movement work, would also appeal to Pulcinella fans. He writes in a fluent neo-baroque language, superbly orchestrated. The harmony is traditional generally and expressive constantly. It is a grave, moving segment. Ill has a fugue with a “dropped” note in its subject. The gap adds a curious sense of dislocation to the music’s flow. The movement ends unresolved, but the first note of IV resolves it. IV has a long-limbed oboe theme played over syncopated string chords. The strings then continue

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the narrative thread of that theme to an apt close. V, a gigue has the bracing athleticism you hear in the gigue from Schoenberg’s later Suite for Strings and concludes with a flourish.

Malipiero put down his Oriente Immaginario (The Imaginary Orient) as “horrible”. He wrote it in 1920 for a theatrical production by Achille Ricciardi, a theatrical innovator, especially with color. The composer later felt the music had too many facile orientalisms, but composers aren’t always the best judges of their own work. The music is suave and elegant, with color that’s subdued but none the poorer for that. The three movements center around a theme used in varied form in each movement. Like so much of Malipiero’s work, the piece exudes a subtle beauty.

These are all world premiere recordings, except the Casella. They’re played with both vigor and refinement. Maestro Iorio’s interpretations are just right for this music, with good balances and nuanced shadings of colors.

O’CONNOR

Springtime in Vienna
Ziehrer, Suppe, Beethoven, Schonherr, Strauss
Vienna Symphony/ Manfred Honeck
Vienna Symphony 11—60 minutes

The selections are similar to what you might hear at a light-music concert in Vienna. There are short pieces; waltzes, polkas, galops, and ballet music by Ziehrer and Strauss, the Poet and Peasant overture by Suppe, and some theater music by the rarely heard Max Schonherr. Also included is the ‘Allegro’ (III) from Beethoven’s Symphony 6.

The program and playing are very enjoyable and conductor Honeck offers the lift, lightness, and sensitivity required by the music. There needs to be some sweetness (but not too much) and a connection with the rhythms of the music, which Honeck and the Vienna Symphony have in their DNA. I enjoyed this for the variety of selections and the excellent playing and sound.

FISCH

I Musici
Corelli, Bonporti, Paisiello, Telemann, Vivaldi
Ermitage 1029—71 minutes

Piero Rattalino wrote the notes to this collection, and they are very informative. I Musici was the “next generation” after I Virtuosi di Roma, which I heard in concert many years ago. Both of these groups (like the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra in Germany) represented a compromise between “period style” and what people in the 1960s were willing to listen to. They used modern instruments, vibrato, etc, but they also used a harpsichord in the continuo (a modern harpsichord—not a copy of an ancient one). In that period I remember a performance of Rossini’s Barber of Seville with harpsichord accompaniment for the recitatives. That was already going too far: Rossini would have used a piano. The fad of sounding “ye olde” was catching on.

But it’s not a problem here, unless you are annoyed by a harpsichord in the Paisiello concerto, which was written in the piano era (1780—Mozart was writing piano concertos from 1773 on). I think it simply sounds silly—the work obviously calls for a piano. But it’s only one piece of the five on this album, and they don’t spoil the lovely slow movement.

The Corelli piece is the Concerto Grosso, Op. 6:7, and it sounds fine here, though to be historically “correct” it should have a lot more strings. The Bonporti is essentially a violin concerto, and it’s pleasant enough. The Telemann is a viola concerto in G, the Vivaldi a three-violin concerto in F. Both sound much more attractive than they usually do nowadays in “period” style.

So this is a throwback to the 1960s (1964, to be exact) and not to the actual periods of the music. But it is very nice this way, and I don’t feel guilty preferring it to the way it’s done nowadays—which I am sure is not the way it was done in the Italian Baroque. There is too much blind dogmatism in the current way of playing these; this may not be more “authentic”, but it has the advantage of appealing to our ears. It’s utterly musical and never rigid or frigid. But I have to add a warning: there is applause after some of these pieces.

VROON

Kazakhstan
Kurmangazy Sagyrbayuly, Zhubanova Gaziza, Mobekov Tolegen, Zhaiym Arman, Tattimbett Qazangapuly, Zheldibayev Abdimomyn
Kazakh Quartet—Divox 21501—67 minutes

This is the kind of recording that could either disappear into oblivion or become a cult item. Who on this side of the world knew about this vital, still-flourishing Kazakh folk tradition that has migrated to classical music and taken on new configurations? The Kazakh State Quartet, founded in 1988, presents a generous 67 minutes of rare Kazakh music, both contemporary and folkloric, some originally for string quartet, some transcribed for the medium. It was recorded to note the 25th anniversary of the
independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan in December 2016.

There is a lot to sort out and enjoy here. The opening piece, Kurmangazy Sagyrbayul's 'Adai', sets the album up, presenting basic modes and rhythms from the culture. It is bracing and sizzling and goes by in a flash. Gaziza Zhubanova's quartet from 1974 plays with many of the same materials, both the dances and singing melodies, but in a more sophisticated manner. Zhubanova worked in numerous genres, including symphony, ballet, and vocal music, and was a revered figure. One can see why in this haunting, tuneful quartet. She manipulates native harmonies and open sounds in forward-looking ways—listen to the subtle dissonance in the gorgeous Andante or the piquant finale—but the basic profile is closer to Dvorak than anything contemporary. Her Quartet 2, written in 1991, two years before she died, is far more adventurous, opening with a harmonically ambiguous Adagio Misterioso played with vibrato-free, ghostly stillness by the Kazakh players. It sounds a bit like late Shostakovich in its spare attenuations. The angular finale, the most modernist piece on the album, reaches for atonality but is brought back to a melancholy tonality by a series of chorales. While more cosmopolitan composers were fiddling with tone rows, Zhubanova was going her own way, partaking of modern materials as she pleased or ignoring them.

A talented new composer on the scene, Zhaiym Arman, has chosen to embrace the modern world, though without abandoning Kasakh tradition. That tradition matters to these composers, and they want to keep it in the foreground even with the most sophisticated "modern" materials. There is an otherworldly melody in Quartet 1 that drones and sings in a manner at once ancient and modern—timeless, as music aspires to be. Other sections, especially the fast ones, are freely dissonant, though the melodic line is always up front. The finale is an unbroken song of rapturous intimacy. The Kazakh State Quartet is a confident, polished ensemble, executing the sizzling Kasakh rhythms with finesse. But what impresses me most is their sense of poetry. Listen to the Doloroso finale of Arman's quartet, where the players sustain a silvery purity.

The most revealing and refreshing pieces here are the traditional ones. They don't partake of contemporary trends, but exist in their own realm. This is not music I normally get to hear, so I want to hear more. Mobekov Tolegen's delightful 'Saltanat' is for plucked strings; the Kazach players dispatch it with consummate delicacy. Tattimibett's 'Kos Basar'—one of 62 pieces he wrote in this form—struts along with bright, idiosyncratic colors. Zheldibayev Abdimomyn's 'Yerke Sylkym' ends the album on a note of zestful dignity. Now could we have more of this arresting music please, this time scored for other instruments, especially Kazach ones?

SULLIVAN

Out of this World
Miller, Gabrieli, Brahms, Dupré, Pearsall, Gigout, Bach, Dinda, Strauss, Handel, Campra, Heusen
Boston Brass; J Melvin Butler, organ
Loft 1022—61 minutes

Boston Brass recorded this album almost two decades ago at St Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Seattle, where J Melvin Butler is organist and choirmaster. The organ is the Mighty Flentrop, built in 1965. The cathedral's website sums up the organ's specifications: "3,944 pipes...tin and lead alloy, cured copper, African and/or Brazilian mahogany...58 speaking stops...four manuals and pedal...one of the largest 20th Century organs employing mechanical key action".

Long sound decay indicates the cathedral is cavernous. Balancing five brass players with mighty organ in a vast space was a challenge for the engineers.

Recorded sound quality is quite variable. In the program opener, Bruce Edward Miller's 'Pluto: The Last Planet', brass easily overwhelms organ at fortissimo. Balance is better at moderate and quiet levels. The work, commissioned in 1992 by Boston Brass, seems rather rambunctious as a sonic representation of the farthest-away planet in our solar system.

Balance affects Gabrieli's familiar 'Canzon Septimi Tonus 2', too. We can hear the organ when it plays alone, but really only the brass when both are playing. This means we are sometimes not hearing the melody. Doubling trombone with tuba an octave below adds muddiness.

So goes the entire program: balanced when quiet, organ faint when brass is loud. Brahms's 'Geistliches Lied' and Robin Dinda's 'Nocturne' sound good because no one plays loudly. Even with balance problems, it's great to hear the stirring brass-organ works: Marcel Dupré's Poème Heroïque, Eugene Gigout's Grand Choeur Dialogue, Strauss's Solemn Entry.

The disc I was sent is a mess. Track 3 is not the Dupré but 'Pluto' again, and the Gabrieli begins again at the end of the same track. Track
Doppler effect, and a final ‘City of Broad Shoulders’. Glissandi sound like the train’s horn with the horns. By the end, order is restored. Jeremy Howard on the intervals 5th and 7th and on rhythmic ‘Prayers of Steel’ where frequent trombone groups of five and seven. Corigliano’s ‘Anti-Beck’s ‘Roar’ is a study in double-tonguing and facts, various sound effects (sudden decays, echo effects) seem to hint at something once definite but now only enigmatic. ‘History’ has quiet, muted brasses as background to slow, open melodies; pyramid effects; dissonances and pointed articulations; and accelerations and loud blares that lead to the ending. ‘Ceremonies’ begins with a murky chord progression in low brass and then adds all sorts of abstract liveliness in trumpets and trombone. A series of brief, staccato pronouncements builds to a grand close.

The finale is Corigliano’s ‘Fanfares to Music’, composed for the 25th Anniversary season of Chamber Music at Lincoln Center. An on-stage brass quintet plays quietly while a brass sextet in back of the audience plays fanfares. After a raucous climax, when the melody from Schubert’s ‘An die Musik’ is heard and passed around, it becomes clear that the intervals used in the fanfares came from that melody. It is actually rather disappointing—I want to be moved, but Schubert’s beautiful melody is subjected to unsettling harmonies. At the very end, the strangeness melts into consonance, but it is not very satisfying.

Gaudete is a fine brass quintet (M/A 2013: 193). Recorded sound favors the upper voices; the tuba often seems distant and indistinct.

Salaputia Brass—Audite 97725—51 minutes

My introduction to this fine German brass ensemble came only recently, in a recording of lively big band-style arrangements (M/J 2017: 155). This program is nothing like that one, though there are big-band moments. Actually, I am smitten.

As always, the answer is yes. Salaputia Brass maintains gravity and taste at all times. They could go a little slower and express more depth of feeling, give the impression they don’t want this wondrous work to end. But it is a lovely reading, and so are their accounts of four other Gabrieli canzonas. In the little ‘La Spiritalita’ quartet, they do interesting things with articulation and add tasteful yet virtuosic ornaments. In the famous ‘Canzon per Sonar Septimi Toni 2’ they seem ready to end with a very loud chord, but instead they make it gold-

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The lively triple-meter portions are given dance pulses and articulations. This brass ensemble really understands Gabrieli’s music.

How about the rest of the program? It is wonderful. I am moved and impressed by Boris Netsvetaev’s arrangements of Gershwin’s ‘Summertime’, Duke Ellington’s ‘Come Sunday’, and the spirituals ‘Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child’ and ‘Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen’.

Toru Takemitsu’s little 2-movement, 5-minute Signals from Heaven also manages to recall Gabrieli while indulging in rich harmonies.

Belgian trumpeter Jeroen Berwaerts is the center of attention in this recording. I have heard him in excellent albums by Stockholm Chamber Brass (J/A 2013: 171) and of the Hindemith brass sonatas (M/J 2015). Here he is not only solo trumpeter but also vocalist in ‘Summertime’ and three spirituals. He has a terrific voice and singing style.

The album ends with Peter Dorpinghaus’s setting of ‘Swing Low’, which begins with a long and beautiful study on Gabrieli’s ‘Sonata Pian’ Forte. Berwaerts then sings the song, there is a moment of call-and-response singing (with brass players who sing very well), and then the arranger has a field day, moving skillfully from one style to another. At the very end of this amazing album, and especially in the very last chord, the players finally let loose with some brilliance.

Pitch Black

Verhelst, Berio, Albeniz, MacMillan, Veldhuis, Bartok
Brass United; Siebe Henstra, hps; Jan Jansen, org; Koen Plaatnick, Jasper Mertens, perc
Channel 38717—61 minutes

This fine collection of arrangements bears the title of a new work by Jacob ter Veldhuis, but the big piece is the 20-minute program opener: Steven Verhelst’s Pulcinella Suite 2.0. Actually, it is Verhelst’s transcription for brass quintet and harpsichord of 10 of the old pieces Stravinsky adapted for Pulcinella. The collection begins with Carlo Ignazio Monza’s Harpsichord Suite 1, heard as an Allegro late in Stravinsky’s ballet. Next come a Pergolesi aria and another Gallo Trio Sonata. Also heard are works by Unico Wilhelm van Wassenaer and Alessandro Parisotti. It’s very interesting to hear the arranged originals, having first becoming so familiar with Stravinsky’s slightly twisted versions.

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Jacob ter Veldhuis (aka Jacob TV) wrote Pitch Black for saxophone quartet with a recording of jazz trumpeter Chet Baker talking about his prison experience. It is not a spoken narrative; rather, it is a snippet, a few words that composer Veldhuis repeats, loops, and dissects. Steve Reich did the same in works like Different Trains. One particularly clever device has a throat-clearing sound used repeatedly as punctuation, much as a drummer uses a hi-hat.

James MacMillan’s haunting ‘New Song’ (1987) was originally scored for SATB choir with organ. Here the brass play the vocal parts, Jan Jansen plays organ. The one original brass quintet work is Luciano Berio’s brief, intricate, and mostly quiet ‘Call’ (1985).

The Elegant Bassoon

Concerto Delaborde
Globe 5266—79 minutes

Concerto Delaborde is an ensemble dedicated to the performance of early music on period instruments, and on this release they play beautifully, with excellent intonation and balance and cohesive musical style. Wouter Verschuren is co-founder of the group and serves as the principal bassoonist of the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra. He has a warm, rich sound in all registers.

This program offers up a nice mix of familiar and little-known composers. Verschuren’s research into forgotten works for dulcian and baroque bassoon has unearthed sonatas by Johann Georg Tiehl and Theodor Schwartzkopff. Tiehl is completely absent from reference books, and his dates are unknown. These three sonatas, part of a set of 13, have never been published or recorded before and are likely some of the earliest bassoon sonatas. Verschuren handles the considerable technical difficulties with ease, most impressively in Sonata 6.

The Schwartzkopff Sonata closely resembles a suite, with its overture-like opening movement followed by a chaconne, bourree, and gigue, and is unusual in its combination of gamba with bassoon.

Concerto Delaborde does a fine job with all three of the Telemann sonatas, but their reading of the D-minor Sonata from Tafelmusik is especially inspired.

The music of Johann Friedrich Fasch is considered an important bridge between the
Baroque and classical styles. Delaborde brings out the sparkling brightness of this sonata, his only known piece for flute, violin, bassoon, and continuo. The three short sonatas by CPE Bach are one-movement works taken from a collection of six, originally written for keyboard, clarinet, and bassoon. Here they have been programmed in a fast-slow-fast order to suggest a larger composition, and the clarinet part is played by the flute instead. This mirrors the scoring of the Devienne trio, which ends the program with satisfying elan. Veschuren’s Baroque bassoon playing is delightful. If you value woodwind music performed on period instruments, you won’t want to miss this.

PFEIL

### Cello Style

**SOLLIMA:** Alone; **SCIARRINO:** Ai Limiti Della Notte; **BOSELLI:** Boga; **HENZE:** Serenade; **BRITTEN:** Tema Sacher; **REIMANN:** Solo; **STOCKHAUSEN:** In Freundschaft

Paola Furetta

Bongiovanni 5195—55 minutes

This program contains a good deal of interesting music by contemporary composers. Unfortunately, it is played by a cellist who has too much trouble playing in tune to supply much personality. Even the Serenade by Hans Werner Henze, a lighthearted suite in the most harmonically comprehensible idiom here, sounds questionable in both intonation and phrasing. I’m sorry to be so negative.

D MOORE

### Azul

**GOLIJOV:** Azul; **AGHAEI & JAKOBSEN:** Ascending Bird; **DVORAK:** Song to the Moon; **STOCKHAUSEN:** Leo; **STEVENS:** Run Rabbit Run Suite

Yo-Yo Ma, vc; The Knights

Warner 58752—59 minutes

This odd collection, designed for Yo-Yo Ma and the “cool classical music” group The Knights (note the rock band-type nomenclature), whose intention is to “turn on” young audiences to the genre, using a wide variety of styles with some trendy “diversity” thrown in. The enterprise is essentially a Yo-Yo Ma vehicle showing off his considerable virtuosity and well-meaning concerns. These performers are first rate: there can be no real criticism of their skill, but I don’t like this kind of wishful salesmanship, so I have to fight my distaste and go about my critical business.

The program leads off with some “relevant” ethnic flavor with Colin Jacobsen’s Ascending Bird (2004), a wild Iranian dance sure to please the head-bobbing crowd. The main event is Osvaldo Golijov’s Azul (2000), a through-composed cello concerto that includes juicy romanticism, bird song, a touch of mysticism, and some Bach fumes, culminating in a wild Jewish (or is it Indian?) dance. It ends romantically. Slow music is colored by a “hyper-accordion” and occasional touches of modernist chaos suggesting a neo-60s update. Golijov refers to himself as a “musical omnivore”, instead of just calling himself a “postmodernist”, which I suppose is a critic’s job. The sprawling work is at least in principle crowdpleasing and could convince an unwashed listener that this stuff is not as bad as they think it is, though to be sure it does require substantial concentration (which might eliminate the entire project for some)

We then move to a cello arrangement of Dvorak’s ‘Song of the Moon’ from Rusalka, an arrangement of a strange bit from Stockhausen’s Tierkreis, with triads for grudging digestion, and finally a Suite from Sufjan Stevens’s Run, Rabbit, Run (2009). These four pieces are ingratiating and short and in a neotonal postmodernist style that would fit in well on a Bang on a Can concert. They are generally sunny and make a happy conclusion to the program, but it’s unclear how they relate to the other pieces.

GIMBEL

### Vladimir Orloff

**TCHAIKOVSKY:** Rococo Variations; **BOCCHERINI:** Cello Sonata 6; **VALENTINI:** Sonata in E; **HAYDN:** Concerto I:III-II; **Concerto 2** with Marietta Demian, p; Lausanne Chamber Orchestra/ Sergiu Comissiona, Victor Desarzens; Munich Chamber Orchestra/ Hans Stadlmair

Doremi 7896 — 80 minutes

Vladimir Orloff was one of our most virtuosic cellists of the past century. Doremi has released a three-CD album of his recordings. That I haven’t heard, but this single-disc Volume 2 is an impressive introduction to his work. It contains mostly concert performances made in 1969 and 1970. The Haydn D-major Concerto was a commercial recording made in 1972. All are decently recorded and well worth our while.

Orloff had a fine sense of phrasing and a blend of intensity and virtuosity that hold one’s attention. Some moments seem too fast for comfort, but he carries it off remarkably well and worked well with his colleagues. I find myself a bit taken aback by the tempos he

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puts everyone through sometimes, but it is worth hearing, since he is a fine phraser and has a technique that seldom falters. You might give it a try and if the production turns you on, go for Volume 1.

D MOORE

Confluence
Niels Bijl, sax; Ronald Moelker, rec
Aliud 91—64 minutes

Folk wisdom from Portugal and Brazil: “There will always be an old slipper for a tired foot”. We don’t seem to have this proverb or anything like it in English, but here is a fine example. Bijl and Moelker must have the only CD ever for recorder and saxophone—an unlikely combination, but it works well enough: solos and duos, mostly stolen from the baroque wind repertoire, including the well-known Telemann flute fantasias (one each for recorder and saxophone) and the Bach sonata for flute and continuo, S 1035, as well as some more unusual morsels (a John Baldwin duo, for example).

MOORE, T

French Holidays
Debussy, Francaix, Grovélez, Pierne, Poulenc, Saint-Saëns, Widor
John Finucane, cl; Elisaveta Blumina, p
Genuin 17451—68 minutes

Irish clarinetist John Finucane and Russian pianist Elisaveta Blumina offer a program of French recital favorites for clarinet and piano: the Debussy *Première Rhapsodie* (1909), the Francaix Variations (1974), the Grovélez *Sarabande et Allegro* (1929), the Pierne *Canzonetta* (1888), the Poulenc Sonata (1962), the Saint-Saëns Sonata (1921), and the Widor *Introduction et Rondo* (1895).

The recital has some nice moments. Finucane offers sensitive phrasing, a fine pianissimo, good fingers, and a decent legato; and Blumina plays with excellent touch, technique, color, and presence. Yet Finucane struggles all through with a fragile and stuffy tone that spreads at loud volumes and causes frequent intonation problems, and his attention to detail can be weak: chipped notes, chopped phrases, patchy rhythm, and so forth. His overall vision, too, is rather conservative, ranging from weird caution to ordinary interpretations that say little. Blumina exhibits more creativity and personality, though she is careful to respect the soloist.

HANUDEL

New Era
Danzi, Mozart, Stamitz
Andreas Ottensamer, cl; Emmanuel Pahud, fl; Albrecht Mayer, ob; Potsdam Chamber Academy
Decca 4814711—72 minutes

In 1741 the Czech-born violinist and composer Johann Stamitz arrived in Mannheim and quickly turned the court into one of the most progressive centers of European instrumental music. His expansion of the symphony through form, scoring, and Italian theatrical devices placed absolute orchestral music on par with opera and paved the way for the Enlightenment-driven ideas of the classical period. In addition, his warm embrace of the recently invented clarinet in both the symphony and the concerto inspired composers who worked in the city as well as ones who visited from afar.

For his third solo album, Berlin Philharmonic Principal Clarinet Andreas Ottensamer recruits his fellow Philharmonic principals Emmanuel Pahud and Albrecht Mayer for a Mannheim-inspired concert with the Chamber Academy Potsdam, an ensemble that performs regularly in the German capital. The program begins with Johann Stamitz and his single Clarinet Concerto and ends with his son Carl Stamitz’s Clarinet Concerto No. 7. In between, third-generation Mannheim composer Franz Danzi appears with his Fantasy on ‘La ci darem la mano’ from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* and his Concertino for clarinet, bassoon, and orchestra, performed here with Mayer on the English horn.

Noting the profound influence of the Mannheim School on Mozart, Ottensamer takes his basset clarinet and teams up with Pahud for two arranged operatic selections—the passive-aggressive aria ‘Batti, batti, o bel Masetto’ from *Don Giovanni* and the duet ‘Se vivi non deggio’ from *Mitridate*, written when Mozart was only 14 years old.

Minor masters such as Danzi and Stamitz rarely get this kind of star treatment, and if readers have high expectations these performances may well surpass them. Ottensamer, Pahud, and Mayer play with exceptional beauty, power, and virtuosity, and the Chamber Academy Potsdam delivers the chugging rhythms of the Mannheim Rocket and the graceful phrases of the Enlightenment era with the utmost conviction and professionalism.

Ottensamer takes marvelously elegant risks in his proto-classical constructs, stretching his resonant soft dynamic to its subtone
precipice, unleashing his full forte dynamic only at peak moments; and pressing the tempo in the intense technical passages to jaw-dropping speeds. Pahud offers his usual brilliance, effortlessly flying alongside Ottensamer in the Mozart selections; and Mayer is stunning on the English horn, matching his clarinet colleague with his own vivid phrasing and technical fireworks.

Some readers may debate whether or not these bold renditions cast these old scores in a “new” light. Others will simply enjoy an amazing concert by some of Germany’s best musicians.

HANUDEL

Portraits of England
Arnold, Finzi, Horovitz, Ireland, Raybould, Vaughan Williams
Jonathan Parkin, cl; Sebastian Stanley, p
EMEC 119—65 minutes

London freelance clarinetist Jonathan Parkin and prize-winning pianist Sebastian Stanley are among the newest generation of classical musicians in England. Here they give a recital of British favorites for clarinet and piano that include the nationalism that flourished in the early 20th Century and the modernist developments that soon followed.

The program includes the Arnold Sonatina (1951), the Finzi Five Bagatelles (1943), the Horovitz Sonatina (1981), the Ireland Fantasy-Sonata (1943), and the Vaughan Williams Six Studies in English Folk Song (1926), originally written for noted cellist and feminist May Mukle and later arranged by the composer for violin, for viola, and for clarinet.

Clarence Raybould’s (1886–1972) rarely heard miniature ‘The Wistful Shepherd’ (1942) was first recorded by Reginald Kell and the BBC Salon Orchestra; it travels in the pastoral footsteps of Finzi and Vaughan Williams. Though often overlooked in a century of celebrity conductors, Raybould was widely respected for his breadth of repertoire, from Gilbert and Sullivan to the standard classical literature and contemporary British works. When Nikita Khrushchev invited Sir Arthur Bliss and six of his compatriots to the USSR in April 1956 on a post-Stalinist cultural diplomacy tour, Bliss asked Raybould to join his team.

The performances have energy and technical flair but seem stuck in the same extroverted gear. Parkin sports a thick British timbre through a free-blowing set-up, and while he usually shapes it nicely, loud volumes can turn his high register shrill and his low register tubby. Stanley boasts great power and clarity, and though he creates some wonderfully sonorous backdrops, his touch is sometimes too dry and blunt. Together, they tear through the scores at a near-constant forte and state of excitement, overlooking the warmth, sweetness, and humor that make English music so special.

HANUDEL

Recordare Venezia
Barokkanerne; Ingeborg Christophersen, rec
LAWO 1114—64:39

This collection is about evenly divided between ensemble works for strings (Marini, Castello, Legrenzi, the Galuppi Concerto a quattro 1) and works with recorder solos by Christophersen (Vivaldi, Op. 10:1, the Recorder and Bassoon Sonata, R 86, and the Flautino Concerto, R 444). The curmudgeon in me would rather hear more of the former, especially the Galuppi—I know no other recording as fine as this—and less of the latter. Christophersen (b. 1985) has the chops, but the interpretations are square. Every phrase sounds like it was stamped out of the same mold. NO. Why not inflect it differently each time? That way, the repetition has some meaning, instead of being a purely mechanical process.

MOORE, T

Guitar Quartets
Haydn, Rode, Giuliani, Carulli
Agustin Maruri, g; Alban Beikirkircher, v; Martina Horejsi, va; Michael Kevin Jones, vc
Emec 131—69 minutes

The playing is all quite good, engineering not so good, and the notes a bit confused. The music is mostly interesting, often quite charming.

Here we have four works for guitar and strings—a quartet and three trios. The Haydn is an early work, identified as Op. 2:8 (originally in E). It was originally for string quartet, but has also long been identified as a lute quartet, with the lute replacing first violin an octave down. The notes claim the lute version was the original. I can’t find who arranged it or when, though there is an authentic painting of Haydn holding an archlute and playing with Mozart at the keyboard, so maybe Haydn did the lute adaptation. This is young Haydn, brimming with invention if not the sophistication he would eventually achieve. The work is in five movements, with an extra minute after the adagio—here arranged for guitar solo, with the rest of the strings only playing in the trio. The
engineering is too reverberant for my taste—only in this piece.

Jacques Pierre Rode (1744-1830) is best known for his violin music, though he did write chamber music for guitar, with and without strings. In the unsigned notes there are two full pages on him, versus one and a half on the others total. The music is later than Haydn by a half century but not terribly interesting, other than an occasionally attractive melody. The Giuliani should be more interesting, but it was recorded with the guitar so much in the background it can barely be heard—another engineering problem. The Carulli, though listed as ‘Deux Solos’ is in fact one trio for guitar, violin, and viola, with several sections. The notes don’t tell us whether there is another from the set that was omitted. I find Carulli the most dull and plodding composer of the guitarist’s Gold-Age, though he can sometimes sparkle in chamber works. Alas, not in this one.

The players are all quite good, though Maruri is rather twangy in his tone. I thought he might have been playing a period instrument, but not according to the picture of the group here. He also tends to rush his slurs—an amateurish trait in such an experienced player. This will be of interest mainly to guitarists looking for chamber works beyond duos.

KEATON

Viva Segovia!

HAUG: Etude; Passacaglia; SCOTT: Sonatina; BERKELEY: 4 Pieces; DESDERI: Sonata in E; FORNEROD: Prelude; PEYROT: Variations

Roberto Moronn Perez, g
Reference 723—59 minutes

Roberto Moronn Perez continues his exploration of the Segovia Archive—pieces written for the Maestro but which he never performed. He did keep the scores in an archive, which was opened in 2000 and published by Berben. The whole set was recorded by Ermanno Brignolo and released as a 7-disc set (Brilliant; M/A 2014) at a real bargain price. The Perez discs are going for about $15 each, and he’s done less than half of the set so far. His first set (S/O 2013) was devoted to Spanish works. It predated the Brignolo release, and it included about half of the repertory on Brignolo’s two discs devoted to Spain. His French release (N/D 2014) duplicates all of Brignolo’s repertory save a short and forgettable piece by Ida Presti.

Until this release, the playing of the two was more or less equal—both perform at a very high level, and you won’t be sorry with either. Now I have to give the nod to Perez, especially in the three strongest works, the Scott Sonatina, Berkeley’s Four Pieces, and Desderi’s cheerful neoclassical sonata.

Scott’s work is often aptly described as impressionist, but I hear some mysticism in the music that reminds me a bit of Scriabin. Berkeley’s work has much of the joy and invention of his Sonatina. And Desderi’s work is simply a joy to hear, and Perez sounds like it’s also a joy to perform.

All this program is a pleasure. Brignolo’s set is a better bargain, but if you don’t want to manage an 8-hour program, you can spend a bit more and get the Perez volumes in smaller bites. And you wouldn’t regret purchasing both.

KEATON

Der Wanderer

BRAHMS: Variations; SCHUBERT: Death and the Maiden; Quartet, D173; FRANCK: Prelude, Theme & Variation; MERTZ: Am Grabe der Geliebten; Unruhe; Ich Denke Dein; Tarantelle

Wanderer Guitar Duo
Stradavarius 37069—67 minutes

A remarkable program—all deeply romantic music, transcribed from unlikely sources or written by the guitar’s arch-romantic, Johann Kaspar Mertz. The Wanderer Guitar Duo is another pair of talented guitarists emerging from Italy: Giacomo Copiello and Michele Tedesco. Both are students of Stefano Grondona—we reviewed four of his students performing the four Bach lute suites (M/A 2017).

The Brahms was transcribed by John Williams. It is from the early String Sextet in B-flat. Bream and Williams’s performance is darker and richer, the Wanderer more delicate. It sounds like it’s on period instruments—they perform on both 19th Century and modern instruments. The Schubert song transcription is by Copiello, and the quartet by Bream. I had never heard either, but both are quite effective. The quartet is early. I don’t think you could do any of the last three in transcription, but this is really attractive.

The most interesting work here is the Franck transcription, done by Matanya Ophee. Franck’s sensuous chromaticism comes through perfectly. The Mertz is also beautifully played and the group of four programmed intelligently. If they can’t match the sheer beauty of Johannes Moeller and Laura Fratticelli (M/A 2015), they do give us moving performances.

The playing of the Wanderer reminds me of descriptions of Chopin as a pianist—deli-
cate, without thunder but with 100 different shades of piano and pianissimo. The sonority is always beautiful, delicate, sensitive. Phrasing is free; and, perhaps because of this, ensemble is not always perfectly precise. But that minor quibble aside, this is a beautiful program I’ll return to often.

KEATON

Nicanor Zabaleta, harp

MOZART: Flute & Harp Concerto
BOIELDIEU: Harp Concerto
RAVEL: Intro & Allegro
pieces by Bach, Fauré, Albeniz, Krumpholtz
Ermitage 1034—74 minutes

From the notes by Piero Rattalino:

“Nicanor Zabaleta (born 1907) did with the harp what Segovia had done with the guitar: he tried to retrieve the retrievable from the harp repertory of the past, transcribe the transcribable from the harpsichord and violin repertory, and asked contemporary composers to write for the harp.... He was no innovator and didn’t start any trend; the harp recital was born and died with him.... The harp is marvelous in an orchestral score but pathetic on its own.”

This is the harpist’s album; we aren’t even told who plays the flute in the Mozart or Ravel. The Mozart has been recorded by others. We have reviewed 25 different recordings over the years; I am especially pleased with the Menuhin-conducted recording on EMI (M/A 1991). Here it’s “diddly”—too sparkly, bouncy, and insubstantial.

The Boieldieu will easily stand up to other recordings. It has been recorded 8 or 10 times by others; see our index. Zabaleta is the father of them all, as Segovia is the father of guitarists. The Boieldieu is in very good sound that makes the Mozart sound tinny. Both recordings are from 1968-70, as far as I can figure out. The Ravel also sounds very good (same period?).

VROON

A Madame:

Divertissement pour Adelaide
Julien Chauvin, v; Olivier Baumont, hpsi
Aperte 138—53 minutes

The program celebrates princess Adelaide, daughter of Louis XV. Everything recorded here is a premiere. The only familiar composers are Rameau and Balbastre. The others are Simon Simon, Antoine Dauvergne, Jean-Pierre Guignon, and Jean-Baptiste Cardonne. Guignon’s piece is a set of variations on Rameau’s harpsichord piece ‘Les Sauvages’, but there’s no harpsichord in it. It’s a violin duet with Chauvin overdubbing himself. Baumont’s harpsichord solos are several excerpts from Rameau’s Castor et Pollux arranged by Josse-François-Joseph Benaut. The performers play together the rest of the time, responding well to one another.

This is Adelaide’s violin. Mozart allegedly played it on a visit to Versailles when he was 7. Some of the pieces were composed for this violin specifically. The recording was made in Adelaide’s room at Versailles. We also get to hear the chiming of a vintage musical clock in that room. It plays some short tunes by Marc-Antoine Le Népveu. The booklet explains everything thoroughly in French and English.

This violin has an uncommonly sweet and full tone after its restoration in 2010. The harpsichord is a Blanchet from 1746, restored in 2007. Chauvin and Baumont play them beautifully, doing nothing challenging or odd. It sounds as if they are simply enjoying the music and re-creating these diversions from about 1770.

I didn’t expect much from this obscure rococo French music, but have found this very enjoyable.

B LEHMAN

Il Cembalo di Partenope
Catalina Vicens, hpsi
Carpe Diem 16312—67 minutes

This is spellbinding. Catalina Vicens has the uncommon ability to take the listener to a different world in seconds. She has a way of making her performances sound both casual and intentional at the same time. This is difficult to describe. It sounds free, yet definitely going somewhere important.

The instrument is from Naples, c1525, and is the world’s oldest playable harpsichord. It is in the National Music Museum of Vermillion, SD. It is small and simple, with a single register, but it makes an extraordinarily intense sound. The music is roughly contemporary with that. There are dances, fantasias, and arrangements of songs. Most of it is not easy to find in other recordings. Some of the pieces were originally for lute.

The album includes a free downloadable audiobook written and read by Vicens, advertised as “a Renaissance musical tale”. She starts with her impressions from spending time in the museum. Having visited there, I recognize which instruments she’s referring to in the room with that harpsichord. She moves on to historical fiction about the people and places...
surrounding this harpsichord’s origin. She is a
good actress with a sultry sotto voce delivery.
Her script is available in the booklet.

That’s all an added level of fun. The main
reasons to buy this are the important instru-
ment and the superlative performance. I am
likewise enthusiastic about Vicens’s 2013
recording of Parthenia by Byrd, Bull, and Gib-
bons (M/A 2017).

B LEHMAN

Music That Should Have Been Written
for the Oboe

DEBUSSY: Hills of Anacapri; Girl with the Flaxen
Hair; Syrinx; MENDELSSOHN: Concerto;
CHOPIN: Waltz; BACH: Sonata in E minor;
GERSHWIN: 3 Preludes; RAVEL: Piece en
Forme de Habanera

Jenett Ingle, ob; Paul Hamilton, p
Ingle 0—61 minutes (773-458-4581)

This was apparently self-published as part of a
professional development grant from the
Southwest Michigan Symphony, and the title
suggests why. None of these pieces were com-
posed for the oboe, and all the Ravel were
arranged by the oboist. The idea of an oboist
performing the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto
seems like a long shot, but Ms Ingle does a
very creditable, convincing job. Of the
Debussy pieces, ‘Girl with the Flaxen Hair’ has
been arranged for all kinds of instruments.
‘Hills of Anacapri’ was a surprise, but works
very nicely. Syrinx is a standout. Ms Ingle uses
her clear, pure tone to make this solo flute
piece her own, and she achieves a remarkably
flute-like sound in the low register.

Probably the least convincing piece is
Chopin’s ‘Minute Waltz’. Solo Bach can be a
challenge for wind players, especially double
reeds, but the soloist does well with the E-
minor Violin Sonata. The entire program is
very enjoyable, but the Mendelssohn and
Syrinx are the reasons to hear this. The liner
notes are very brief and only describe the
motivation for this project. It would be nice to
read more about the music itself, and how the
artists chose and arranged these pieces.

PFEIL

We have no heroes anymore. We have
celebrities, who are vastly inferior. Celebri-
ties are known for being well-known,
heroes for what they accomplish. Celebrity
is made by familiarity, heroes by deeds.
Celebrity fades fast; heroes become
immortal. Do not confuse the two!

American Record Guide
depth to this virtuosic showpiece. Schulhoff’s Hot Sonata, first composed for saxophone and piano, is as jazzy as its name would suggest.

Michael Sieg has a rich, even sound and lovely phrasing, and is utterly convincing in each of these arrangements. Pianist Merkle is a fine collaborator. These excellent transcriptions were done by Sieg. The liner notes are detailed and informative, in German and English.

**Organs of St Thomas, Leipzig**

Buxtehude, Bach, Krebs, Piutti, Mendelssohn, Boëllmann

Ullrich Böhme
Rondeau 6117—71 minutes

This recording is a showcase for the two large organs in the church where JS Bach worked from 1723 to 1750. The performances are by Ullrich Böhme, the church’s current organist. The recordings were made at various times from 1992 to 2016. The organ that Bach would have known is long gone. The newer of the two organs is known as the “Bach Organ,” built in 2000 by Gerald Woehl for the 250th anniversary of the composer’s death. It is a large baroque instrument of four manuals and 61 stops. The older organ is a German romantic instrument by Wilhelm Sauer dating from 1889 and enlarged in 1908. It has three manuals and 88 stops.

The program opens with Buxtehude’s Prelude, Fugue, & Chaconne in C. Two works from Bach’s Leipzig period follow: the Trio Sonata 6 in G and the Prelude & Fugue in E-flat from Clavierübung III. After that is a ‘Fantasia in the Italian Style’ by Johann Ludwig Krebs (1713-80), something of a rococo trifle. These are played on the Bach Organ. The second half of the program consists of romantic works on the Sauer organ, beginning with ‘Festival Hymn’ in C by Carl Piutti (1846-1902), who was organist of the church at the time the Sauer organ was installed. The piece gives us six minutes of bombastic splendour. Mendelssohn had strong professional associations with the city of Leipzig, so it is appropriate to include his Sonata 2 in C minor on the program, except that the composer intended his sonatas for a classic-style organ. The Sauer organ imposes a late romantic flavor on the music that Mendelssohn himself would most likely have considered inappropriate. The program concludes with the familiar Suite Gothique of Leon Boëllmann.

I cannot say I find Böhme’s playing engaging. It sounds too matter-of-fact, and sometimes even stodgy. The slow movement of the Bach trio sonata cries out for more phrase inflection. Here it simply does not sing. The little Fantasia by Krebs could be quite charming, but here it is too straight-faced. I find many of the pieces over-registered, even on the Bach Organ, producing a heaviness that is wearying to the ear. Böhme takes the final section of the St Anne fugue at a very brisk tempo, but it does not sound exciting, just busy. He plays the entire fugue on full chorus with manual 16s and pedal 32s, and no changes of color from one section to another. This may be the “historically correct” way to play it, but it becomes tiresome long before the fugue has ended. The heavy-handed registrations on the Sauer organ yield a tone that is weighty and turgid, and this instrument’s tone tends to be thick to begin with. Add to this the formidable reverberation of the room, and intricate textures become badly obscured.

**Organ Fireworks—World Tour**


Christopher Herrick
Hyperion 68214—77 mins

This release celebrates Christopher Herrick’s 75th birthday and his popular Organ Fireworks series, which began in 1984. The 14 tracks are drawn, one each, from the 14 volumes in the original series; and each is recorded on a different organ from around the world—England (2), New Zealand, Australia, Finland, Iceland, USA (2), Denmark, Sweden, Hong Kong, Switzerland, Canada, and France.

The programming is inventive, entertaining, and often unfamiliar—Rule Britannia spun by Lemaire, splendid trumpet tunes, the first version of Liszt’s BACH, and toe-tapping delights by Lefebure-Wely, Takle, and Verdi. This is spirited, extrverted playing. If more organists would embrace his approach, the seats at organ concerts would be full. It’s hugely enjoyable in every way. Notes and specifications.

DELCAMPO
This is a compilation from many Grand Piano releases, and many have been reviewed here. I'd use the term "gems" advisedly: most of these works range from bland to execrable (examples of the latter are the thoroughly dull-witted number from Georges Baz's *Esquisses* and the horrible 'Sassoun Dance' by Arutunian—it would be hard to find a piece more unpleasant). Most appear intended as attractive, uncomplicated salon pieces that belong to a previous era and are now largely unnecessary, even as historical artifacts.

But there's another problem here, not often remarked on by the reviews I read. The sound quality varies widely among the various offerings—though overall the recordings sound warm and unobjectionable. A variety of recording techniques appear to have been used. In more than a few, the microphones appear to be jammed into the piano a very small distance away from the hammers, and the piano timbre isn't allowed to bloom as it should. One particularly noticeable example is the movement from Rääts's fourth sonata—by the way, subtitled 'Quasi Beatles', so the music isn't very good, either. And finally the quality of the pianists varies, too. In short, I would pass on this release.

**HASKINS**

**Dino Ciani 2**

**CHOPIN:** Piano Concerto 1; Sonata 3; **BEETHOVEN:** Sonatas 4, 17, 31; **BARTOK:** Out of Doors; **LISZT:** Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen; short pieces by Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, Tchaikovsky

*The Key Collection* 3 Centuries of Rare Keyboard Gems

Grand Piano 753 [3CD] 221 minutes

The Italian pianist Dino Ciani (1941-1974) died at a young age in a car accident. He was highly regarded, and a festival and a piano competition have been named after him. He left quite a few studio recordings, to which many recorded concert performances have been added. Nevertheless, his name (unlike William Kapell's, for example) is rarely mentioned today, and he seems rather to be a cult figure, especially in Italy.

All the major works listed in the header were recorded in concert. 11 short pieces by 6 composers, probably favorite encores of the pianist, are from an LP recorded in 1965 and issued here on CD for the first time. They include Chopin's Nocturne, Op. 27:1, Tchaikovsky's Nocturne, Op. 19:4, Mendelssohn's Song Without Words, Op. 67:4, Schumann's 'Vogel als Prophet', Op. 82:7, and 'Warum?', Op. 12:3, Schubert's Impromptus No. 2 and 3 from Op. 90, and Liszt's Liebestraum No. 3, 'Chasse-neige', and La Campanella. They are all played very well, though I would not call the performances exceptional. The sound is monophonic and constricted, and there is occasional LP rumble.

The concert performances are of more variable quality. They, too, are monophonic and may have undergone some form of restoration that affected their sound, though it is quite acceptable. The audiences are very quiet. All but the Chopin Concerto have been issued previously on LPs, some also on Italian CDs. The E-minor Concerto, from a 1971 concert in Paris, starts with the booming voice of a French radio announcer, who returns at the end. Ciani takes rather deliberate tempos. His rubato is fine, but his touch is heavy. There is neither delicacy nor brilliance, and dynamic differentiation is limited. Some passages are muddy, and the left hand is often unduly prominent. Coordination with the unimpressive orchestra is imperfect, especially at the end. The piano is recorded rather close-up and sounds like an old instrument, perhaps an Erard or Pleyel. The B-minor Sonata, from a 1973 performance in an undisclosed location, is worse. It is quite messy, and the rubato is often strange and unconvincing. Dynamics are handled poorly. The sound is thin and dry. Even Ciani addicts could hardly derive pleasure from such a flawed performance. A probably superior performance from 1971 has been issued on CD (DG 474418) but may be difficult to find.

The Beethoven Bagatelles and Bartok's *Out of Doors* are from a 1970 recital in Florence. These performances are very good. The Liszt Variations, a rarely played work, are from the 1961 Liszt-Bartok Competition in Budapest, which Ciani won. They are dispatched with considerable virtuosity.

The third disc is devoted entirely to a Beethoven sonata recital given in Verona in 1973: 4, 17, and 31. 10: III is an encore. (The recital also included No. 25, which the disc evidently could not accommodate.) The playing is quite excellent and lacks any kind of flashiness. Tempos are sometimes on the slow side but never dragging. Ciani recorded all the Beethoven sonatas and seems to be at home with the composer. Dynamic contrasts are very large, and soft passages sometimes verge on inaudibility. I wonder whether some nonlin-
Carnival of the Animals is literary. Both originate in a work of Goethe. Egmont is pretty straightforward and effective. Mendelssohn’s ‘Suleika’ is Liszt on his best behavior. Both are played with relish and well worth hearing.

One further example includes a Rachmaninoff Prelude juxtaposed with a Prelude by his friend Abram Chasins and concluding with Katsaris’s own ‘Goodbye Mr Rachmaninoff’.

Each of the seven Programs is fascinating, and the execution is all we have come to expect from this pianist. Most of the pieces are either new to us or arrangements making their debut here.

Chalk up some really superb sound on the Bechstein D-282 Concert Grand, and a concept both fascinating, puzzling, and creative for some very positive reactions from this reviewer. You will probably love it as well.

Russian Ballet Transcriptions

STRAVINSKY: Firebird Suite; BORODIN: Polovtsian Dances; TCHAIKOVSKY: Sleeping Beauty Pas d’Action; Nutcracker Suite; 3 Dances from Swan Lake; KHACHATURIAN: Lezginka & Sabre Dance from Gayaneh

Cyprien Katsaris & Etsuko Hirose, p Piano 21 56—76 minutes

Russian ballets are an easy sell: great tunes, lots of energy, and tremendous familiarity. Katsaris, known to me for decades, has teamed up with Hirose (great recording of Balakirev on Mirare 181, N/D 2012) for a release on his new label, Piano 21. They have no problems with the orchestral complexities of the Firebird or Polovtsian Dances. The perfection of ensemble here rates up there at about 95% to 97%. Teams of brothers and sisters, often with a lifetime of duo performances, are the only ones that achieve greater perfection.

All of the Tchaikovsky selections here were on the Kodama sisters SACD (Pentatone 5186 579, M/A 2017). Sleeping Beauty and Swan Lake selections are by Rachmaninoff and Debussy for one piano, four hands. The Nutcracker selections are by Eduard Langer, also for four hands, but the Kodama sisters offered a two-piano arrangement by Anton Arensky, with some different sections included. If all you want is Tchaikovsky (and more of it), then get the Pentatone because both the sound and performances are a little better.

The Firebird arrangement here is the best of many I have come across. It is the only one of Stravinsky’s ballets where he did not make a piano version. I think he realized that much of
the big sustained parts of *Firebird* don’t translate to piano as well as *Petrouchka* or *The Rite of Spring*. That has not stopped many from trying their hands at *Firebird*, at least a suite of the most famous sections. The two-piano arrangement by Achilles Wastor (b.1973) performed by Katarsis and Hirose is listed as a world premiere recording. It is worth the price of the disc and captures the energy and grandeur of this music.

HARRINGTON

20th Century Piano  
Berg, Schoenberg, Zimmermann, Liszt  
Cathy Krier—Cavi 8553339—71 minutes

I’m embarrassed to admit this, but I still do not really get Alban Berg’s music, aside from *Wozzeck* (which I heard early on in Boulez’s powerful recording and have loved ever since). The piano sonata is a typical case: I hear mostly undifferentiated, sickly-sweet harmonies with tortured, hyper-emotional melodies, meandering along without purpose; it always makes me feel queasy.

Not so Schoenberg’s Op. 11, which is still compelling even at its most confounding (the final piece in the set). Krier plays it very well, bringing out details that often elude others and giving her listeners the opportunity to savor the fabulous sense of sonority and the compelling grasp of musical logic and form. I presume, then, that she brings the same nuance and care to her performance of the Berg sonata.

Compelling readings of some miniatures by Zimmermann (‘Enchiridion’) and Liszt (the predictable and uninteresting ‘Nuages Gris’ among them), along with Schoenberg’s Op. 33a and 33b, complete the program.

HASKINS

**Bright Circle**  
*SCHUBERT*: Piano Sonata, D 959; *BRAHMS*: Handel Variations; *DEL TREDICI*: Ode to Music  
Beth Levin—Navona 6074

Horrible sound: clunky, heavy, hard, dead, bass-heavy. The pianist is banging the hell out of the instrument. After 5 minutes of the Schubert my ears felt insulted. This bright circle went straight into the garbage can.

This pianist has made quite a few recordings. I glanced at ARG reviews of them and found that they got more negative over time. Most recently, Stephen Wright’s verdict was “eccentric, unsatisfying performances in unpleasant sound” (N/D 2016). Exactly.

REPP

**Transhuman**  
New Muse Piano Duo  
Blue Griffin 407—62 minutes

I remember talking with a famous pianist, whom I knew slightly and whose career I had followed, in the 1970s. Somehow we got on the subject of conductors, and it turned out that we both knew and liked Erich Leinsdorf. He told me Leinsdorf had a double piano in his New York apartment, and he had spent many happy hours “playing around” with Leinsdorf on that instrument (the musical equivalent of “doodling”). I think I said that I wished I had been there.

Well, in those days that kind of thing was private entertainment and not considered “public music”. Who knows what they produced? Very likely very little of it had any lasting value, but it helped the pianist to be a better pianist and helped Leinsdorf to be a better musician too.

Today, everyone who plays around thinks it’s an act of genius and should be preserved for posterity. Hence this album. (It’s the age of “self-esteem”.) There is nothing at all original in it, and there is almost nothing you would ever want to hear again—just experimental piano. The two pianists are playing (or bowing, in one case) what someone else wrote, but it could have been invented on the spot, just for kicks. One 13-minute piece is by Gabriel Prokofieff, grandson of the other Prokofieff. But none of it has any lasting value. In that respect it sounds like hundreds of similar albums issued every year.

VROON

**Latin American Piano**  
Pablo Rojas—Gramola 99115—66:47

Calvo, Nazareth, Lecuona, Cervantes, Guastavino, Vieco, Revelo, Perez, Hinesorta, Piazzolla, Salgan, Bardi, Aguirre, Weil, Ginastera—if most, or even some, of these names resound with a place in your soul, this will be something to add to your collection. The production of small character pieces in the form of typical salon dances (polka, schottisch, mazurka, waltz, and so forth) in the Latin America of the late romantic era was immense—and is still mostly forgotten. Ernesto Nazareth from Brazil, for example, produced hundreds of works for solo piano, many of which continue to be famous as central pieces in the repertoire of choro. Ignacio Cervantes, of Cuba, is a slightly earlier contemporary, but his pieces, suffused with melancholy, are very much in the same
vein. Rojas ventures into somewhat more modern territory with three of the creole dances from Ginastera (Op. 15).

The piano is close and attractively recorded. Rojas entirely captures the singing soul of Latin America here, and usually his touch is sure (a burble crept into Nazareth's 'Odeon'). I will play this often.

MOORE, T

**Legendary Treasures 4**
Pnina Salzman, p; Tel Aviv Quartet
Doremi 7852—70 minutes

This is a series that so far includes Salzman as a chamber musician and as soloist with orchestra. All have been caught in concert, with none presenting her as a solo performer. The notes refer to her as "First Lady of the Piano in Israel," say nothing about the music, and serve primarily as a puff piece.

Born in Tel Aviv in 1924 she became head of the piano department at the university, and was noted for her appearance on the juries at many international competitions. She died in 2006.

This volume contains two chamber works where she serves as pianist, Brahms's F-minor Quintet and Schumann's E-flat Quintet. The Brahms was recorded in Jerusalem on November 20, 1974 and is in decent, if raw sound. The Schumann on December 22, 1983 sounds a trifle better, but would never be mistaken for a professionally made recording. Since these are among the most often recorded chamber works, we have an abundance of fine recordings.

As a memorial to a fine artist this serves reasonably well. While the lady is an asset to the ensemble it is doubtful if anyone's selection of a performance will be governed by just one member of the group. The Tel Aviv Quartet plays in tune and the piano sounds natural and blends in effectively. They are vigorous performances—some may say too vigorous, maybe a result of the close, raw sound. Unless you have a nostalgia for these artists, look elsewhere.

BECKER

**Encores After Beethoven**
SCHUBERT: Allegro assai; Allegretto; Hungarian Melody; MOZART: Eine Kleine Gigue; HAYDN: Sonata 44; BEETHOVEN: Andante Favori; BACH: Partita I; Prelude & Fugue in B-flat minor
Andras Schiff, p—ECM 25872—75 minutes

ECM has been devoted to releases of Schiff’s performances, and this fascinating recording is a collection of encores performed after his Beethoven piano sonata recitals. These works reveal Schiff as a programmer and as a performer. Why did he choose particular pieces to follow specific recitals? The liner notes tell us that he chose all 11 tracks specifically as a continuation of the music before, gesturing towards musical connections mostly across composers’ works, or in the case of Beethoven’s 'Andante Favori,' bringing back the original slow movement of the Waldstein.

These works are superbly performed. They are not the showpieces that listeners may expect from a typical encore. The Haydn is a meaty and measured work. The selections of Bach are light and airy, especially the Gigue from Partita 1. The sound quality is excellent. This encourages pianists to put this level of thought into not just the program, but what comes after.

KANG

**French Piano Concertos 2**
Florian Uhlig; SW German Radio/ Pablo Gonzalez—SWR 19027—72 minutes

This German pianist has already shown his sympathy with French repertory by giving us the solo piano music of Ravel and a previous volume containing mostly lesser known French concertos. Volume 1 gave us Ravel’s Concerto in G, and this one his Concerto for the Left Hand. I had some trepidation about the orchestra at first, but they outdo themselves in the Ravel and, along with the soloist present a performance of almost unsettling clarity. No primordial ooze begins the piece, but the subterranean growling chews at the ear with a remarkable crispness that continues to develop towards the devastating climax. The left hand is so difficult that one colleague said he “had to cut off that hand after a performance and send it on vacation for a few weeks to recover.” Here we recover rapidly as the program continues with Germaine Tailleferre’s Ballade.

I can count the performances I have heard of Germaine Tailleferre’s works on my pinky, though she was quite productive. Her major handicap was her gender. The Ballade is a lush, rather impressionist work with a certain amount of pithiness to keep our fluids going. More performances like this and we could experience a Tailleferre renaissance.

At just under 20 minutes, Nadia Boulanger’s Fantaisie (variee) is the longest work here. While she abandoned her composing career for teaching around 1920 we can still get an idea of her talent from this work. The music is strong boned, romantic, and arrestig. It is
well worth performing, perhaps as a substitute for Franck’s Symphonic Variations though performances of that are no longer plentiful.

Jean Francaix’s concerto is in four short movements and shows liveliness and plenty of humor. If you have the Decca recording with Jean-Yves Thibaudet you may not need this one. But then again you may want it particularly for the works by the two ladies (they are that good). Thibaudet also plays both Ravel concertos very well. How to describe the Francaix? Sort of like eating cotton candy to which has been added a touch of rock salt. It’s a saucy French confection and a bit of fluff with oodles of craftsmanship. What’s not to like?

Treat yourself to this one. Pianist, conductor, orchestra, and recording all conspire to bring a little joy to the world. We could certainly use a bit of that.

BECKER

Great American Sonatas
Copland, Bernstein, Harrison, Ives
Nathan Williamson, p
Somm 163—78 minutes

Copland’s expansive, pensive, meditative sonata always sounds to me like Billy the Kid or Appalachian Spring after dark: late-night ruminations between the first and second sleeps, circadian rhythms once governed by the setting sun rather than our epoch’s ever-burning artificial lights. It hails from the same Americana years as Copland’s three popular ballets, when he distanced himself from his youthful experimental modernism. His language here is spacious, spare, anti-virtuosic, chromatic, and gently dissonant.

Bernstein’s sonata from a couple years earlier (1938) is brash and ultra-modernist, calculated to scandalize conservatives. Williamson’s performance here is more jazzy than the steely and aggressive Alexandre Dossin on Naxos I reviewed two years ago (J/A 2015). Both performances capture its pugnacious and provocative spirit, though I think Williamson has won me over to his warmer style, at least for now.

Lou Harrison’s Sonata 3 (also 1938) is new to me and doesn’t sit well—it gives me aural indigestion. The structure is superficially like Copland’s, slow-fast-slow. I is stentorian and overbearing, a dismal sermon. II is marked fast and rugged and is implicitly quite jazzy, but Williamson is oddly stiff, not indulging its jazzy swing as he does in the Bernstein and the tripping II of the Copland. III recapitulates the oppressive solemnity of I. After this I’m in no rush to hear Harrison’s other sonatas, but his 1937 ‘Largo Ostinato’, though fully minor-mode, is a rather comforting and hypnotic five minutes on the heels of the stern sonata.

Three-Page Sonata is vintage Ives, a riot of gratuitous dissonance and hymns, marches, and patriotic tunes at ludicrous extremes of virtuosity. The name itself is a bad joke—only microscopic staves could hold on three pages these 9 overstuffed minutes. The also 9-minute Celestial Railroad (1925) maintains an almost Scriabinesque—and I mean late Scriabin—level of mystery and profundity until succumbing in the last minute, literally the last 60 seconds, to Ivesian tongue-in-cheek ragtime high jinks. What a disappointment. It’s an impressively virtuosic journey anyway.

Great sound, good value, and even if I don’t like every piece, a stimulating and thought-provoking recital. The harrowing technical challenges of the Ives hold no terrors for Williamson’s transcendent virtuosity. Clear, resonant sound, just right for the Copland, Harrison, and Ives.

WRIGHT

Impromptu
Shai Wosner, p
Onyx 4172—75 minutes

“What would happen if we get together Schubert, Chopin, Beethoven, Liszt, Dvorak, Gershwin, and Ives for a posthumous jam session?”. Such a concept forms the root of this program of (mostly) impromptus. That it all works is testament to both the quality of the music and the excellence of the playing. The Ives are barely wisps of ideas, but the others stretch the imagination to form an eclectic grouping we can all appreciate.

Finding Gershwin among the group with his strange Impromptu in Two Keys prompts Wosner to supply a sly spoiler alert that E-flat wins. Shucks, I wanted to figure that one out for myself. In any case, Schubert’s Impromptu D 935:1, the longest piece on this program, opens with a lovely melody, much concentration, and tonal beauty. Schubert does return later with Impromptus 3 and 4 from that late set, but not before other composers have been added to the mixture.

Improvisations 1 and 3 by Ives are expectedly cryptic but fit in well with their more tonal surroundings. Gershwin’s jazzy dabbling is a delight, and Chopin’s three Impromptus are well known (the Fantasy-Impromptu is not played). Wosner’s ability to embrace all idioms is most impressive. It is impossible not to
enjoy the program’s freshness and the attractiveness of the playing.

Beethoven’s rarely heard Fantasy, Op. 77, is added inducement to join the jam session.

BECKER

Maria Yudina

BEETHOVEN: Eroica Variations; BERG: Piano Sonata; STRAVINSKY: Serenade; Piano & Winds Concerto; BARTOK: Mikrokosmos excerpts

Yudina’s recordings reveal a Russian pianist with a full and ringing sound. These recordings add to her already sparse output (Soviet censorship of her favorite composers was the problem). What few recordings exist from that time are often of poor quality, especially her collaborations. This recording is a real treat. The Mikrokosmos excerpts are vibrant and playful (listen to No. 142, ‘From the Diary of a Fly’). Her playing is not particularly soft; her Eroica Variations are powerful and full. She manages to keep Beethoven sound explosive and hard but not brittle.

Yudina with an orchestra (September 1962) is percussive and fierce, the centerpiece of this program. Her playing shows an iron control. Rozhdestvensky blends well with her sonorities.

KANG

Haochen Zhang

SCHUMANN: Scenes from Childhood; LISZT: Ballade 2; JANACEK: Sonata; BRAHMS: 3 Intermezzos

If you would like to hear a fine Chinese pianist but are tired of flashy crowd pleasers, here is your man. He first came to my attention when he won the Van Cliburn Competition in 2009, sharing the gold medal with Nobuyuki Tsujii. What I remember from that competition is his fine performance of Beethoven’s Sonata 31, not of some virtuoso piece. He seems to have kept a relatively low profile since then, and this appears to be his debut recording apart from a release of some of his competition performances (not including the Beethoven) that was reviewed unenthusiastically by Brent Auerbach (M/A 2010).

Haochen Zhang is a thoughtful and introverted young man. He himself says as much in the booklet. This is a fine, distinctly unfla$h program. How many young pianists would open a recital with Schumann’s Scenes from Childhood and close with Brahms’s quiet Three Intermezzos, Op. 117? In between are two works that have a much wider expressive range.

Zhang plays everything with taste and superb technique, and the piano has been captured in lush sound. It is possible to be too thoughtful and introspective. Zhang prefers slow tempos, lacks temperament, and is not particularly good at conveying the special atmosphere of different pieces and composers. Everything is just too beautiful. Comparisons with older recordings from my collection confirm that impression. Carlo Zecchi (Ermitage 190) is more than 3 minutes faster overall in the Schumann and makes some interesting (perhaps controversial) interpretive decisions, such as playing No. 11 (‘Frightening’) at a tremendous clip; Zhang deviates nowhere from the norm. Louis Kentner (APR 5514) is not faster in the Liszt Ballade but more daring in the virtuosic passages and more engaging overall. Wilhelm Kempff (DG 437249) is 4 minutes faster than Zhang in the Brahms Intermezzos, without sounding superficial. The most striking contrast is between Zhang’s tame Janacek sonata and Josef Palenicek’s highly inflected and devastatingly dramatic rendition (Supraphon 3812), which is 3 minutes faster.

So, in the end I must agree with Mr Auerbach’s overall impression of 7 years ago that Zhang “lacks expressive power”. There is fine pianism here, but the interpretations are too conventional, drawn out, and finally a little boring.

REPP

Furatus

Grieg, Yamada, Shostakovich, Tveitt, Nielsen

Grieg’s lovely baroque-style Holberg Suite is quite famous in his setting for string orchestra, but the original is actually for solo piano. This arrangement borrows from both versions. For instance, in the Praeludium, the piano version has rapid arpeggios, the orchestra a sort of galloping rhythm that sounds smooth and energetic as played by strings. Here the piano has the original arpeggios, trumpet the galloping rhythm—but the trumpet makes that rhythm sounds quite distinct and staccato.

There are three gentle songs by Kasaku Yamada (1886–1965). The composer’s daughter invited these artists to perform them in Japan, and they are now part of their repertoire. ’Akatonbo’ (Red Dragonfly) can be found on a

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variety of albums in arrangements for clarinet and piano, violin and piano, boys’ choir, flute and harp, and so forth. It is lovely here.

In Shostakovich’s Fantastic Dances, originally for solo piano, trumpeter Antonsen’s nimbleness is impressive. High passages that sparkle on piano are rather piercing on trumpet, but everything else compares favorably.

Perhaps the most interesting pieces here are the five by Norwegian composer Geirr Tveitt (1908-81). The selections from Hardingtonar have unusual harmonies and piquant folk melodies.

The album ends with six settings from Carl Nielsen’s Humoresque-Bagatelles. Antonsen plays all six on piccolo trumpet, and it is a pleasure to hear that instrument sound so good.

KILPATRICK

The Lightning Fields
Peaslee, Schnyder, Daugherty, McKee, Plog
Jason Bergman, tpt; Steven Harlos, p
MSR 1630—61 minutes

I greatly enjoyed Jason Bergman’s first album (M/J 2014: 214), and here again I appreciate his full and warm tone quality, expressive way with a melody, open sound in the low register, security up high.

The album opens with three first recordings. Richard Peaslee’s very attractive Catalonia (2003) is a challenge for the trumpeter, evocative for the listener. Each of the three movements lasts five minutes. ‘With fire’ mixes traditional Spanish elements with whole-tone intervals. ‘Slow, with warmth’ evokes a sultry evening, especially as expressed on the warm-toned flugelhorn. ‘Wired, excited’ has much terse double-tonguing (including in the very high register), muted passages, and an exciting ending.

Daniel Schnyder composed his Trumpet Sonata in 1994, revising it in 2013. For something called a sonata, it is a miniature: a single 6-minute movement. Pauses delineate distinct sections, and as always for Schnyder, there are various styles and moods. Jazz-flavored touches are heard now and then. There is introspection, and nothing is madcap or frenetic—unusual for a piece by Daniel Schnyder.

The big work is Michael Daugherty’s 4-movement, 22-minute Lightning Fields (2015), “inspired by four unique nocturnal fields of natural or artificial light phenomena found in North America”. I has the soloist playing melancholy lines on flugelhorn, depicting someone in a thoughtful mood while looking at “the breathtaking view of endless city lights” from Griffith Observatory overlooking Los Angeles. A busy II (‘The Lightning Field’) is named for an art installation in New Mexico, where 400 steel poles are often struck by lightning. Flugelhorn and mariachi melodies are heard in ‘Marfa Lights’, a phenomenon allegedly seen near the Mexican border in Texas. The finale, ‘Times Square’, is predictably busy with whole-tone melodies and lots of double-tonguing.

Anthony Plog was an outstanding trumpeter before he became a composer. It took a while for him to write a Trumpet Sonata (2009), and even then he put it away for seven years before revising and publishing it. The 4-movement, 15-minute work has bell tones, muted staccatos, and virtuosic chromatic lines in I. In a quiet II, cup-muted trumpet is heard alone, then piano is heard alone, and then both play together. The unusual element of III is that celeste is substituted for piano (though not in a recent recording by trumpeter Paul Futre, J/F 2017: 206). The driving finale IV is by turns jagged, light, demonic, and dreamy.


Kudos to Bergman, whose students at the University of Southern Mississippi have an excellent example to follow, and to his fine piano collaborator Steven Harlos.

KILPATRICK

Stories for our Time
Gotkovsky, Fine, Guzzo, McDowall, Tann, Silverman
Thomas Pfotenhauer, tpt; Vincent Fuh, p
MSR 1589—55 minutes

Trumpeter Thomas Pfotenhauer, of the University of Minnesota-Duluth and the Duluth Superior Symphony, offers a program of works by living women composers.

Ida Gotkovsky and Elaine Fine are well-known names; Gotkovsky’s 8-minute Trumpet Concertino (1969) is pleasant, Fine’s 11-minute Sonata (2002) tuneful.

Anne Guzzo composed her 3-movement, 7-minute Jazz Professor Glasses (2008) for Pfotenhauer’s performance in Beijing at the International Congress of Women in Music. It is an unaccompanied piece. A cup-muted and technically challenging I (‘Allegro alla Fluevog’)
purports to depict bustling Beijing—I suppose its not e groupings could be heard as hints at pentatonic scales. II (‘Snow’) is open and seems quite close-miked, amplifying every detail of Pfotenhauer’s tone production. Midway there is a distinct sound change; we are not so close. A harmon-muted III (‘Jazz Professor Glasses’) has jazz flavors and foot stomping.

The big piece is Cecilia McDowall’s 7-movement, 19-minute Framed (2009), a set of miniatures that depict famous paintings. Renoir’s ‘Ball at the Moulin de la Galette’ is a lilting waltz, Whistler’s ‘Nocturne in Blue and Gold’ is melancholy, Giacometti’s ‘Walking Man’ is jaunty, and so on.

Faye-Ellen Silverman’s 3-movement, 14-minute Stories for our Time (2007) has athletic I (‘First Tale’), soothing II (‘Calming Tale’), and bright III (‘Tale of Joy’).

Although the printed program says Hilary Tann’s 6-minute ‘Look Little Low Heavens’ (1992) is for trumpet and piano, only trumpet is heard. Quiet opening and closing sections flank an acrobatic middle portion.

The recording was made in a studio, so there is little ambience. Piano sound is natural, but we are too close to the trumpet. Every minute detail of tone, articulation, vibrato (quite prominent), and pitch is much too audible.

Romantic Horn
Brahms, Schumann, Schubert, Pils
Rob van de Laar, hn; Thomas Beijer, p; Mathieu van Bellen, v; Karin Strobos, s
Challenge 72745 [SACD] 73 minutes

Some instruments have immense repertoires, so vast that a whole lifetime would not be enough to even read through everything; and some have repertoires small enough that one can grasp them in a few years. And then there are instruments with immense repertoires that have been forgotten. If you happen to develop your skills on an instrument that is not the piano, the violin, the flute, the guitar, but the recorder, or the cello, or the gamba, you must develop concomitant skills on the size of the repertory you can share with your listeners (case in point: Jordi Savall). The somewhat porous world of Celtic traditional music is often appealing in this respect. It was and is often played by the violin (fiddle), and also the transverse flute, both now and in the 18th and 19th centuries; and probably very rarely by the recorder or the cello.

Bruno Cocset offers a well-filled selection of baroque-period arrangements of Celtic material, principally by Francesco Geminiani and James Oswald, for solo “viola” (not da braccio), and continuo. (Savall released his own Celtic disc back in 2009, with little overlap with this program.)

Poèmes
Poulez: Violin Sonata; Szymanowski: Fountain of Arethusa; Chausson: Poem; Faure: Sonata 1; Ernst: Erlkönig Grand Caprice
Irene Duval, v; Pierre-Yves Hodiche, p
Mirare 312—74 minutes

Irene Duval is a good violinist, but she doesn’t have enough verve. I would prefer a more assertive approach to the music here. Part of the problem is her pianist, Pierre-Yves Hodique. This is most obvious in the Poulenc, a work born in wartime and dedicated to the
martyred Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca. The intensity I praised in Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg’s recording is barely approached here (M/A 2006), and Hodique must bear most of the blame.

One thing about this release that sets it apart is the piano reduction used in the Chausson. It was prepared by Hodique, and its texture is much lighter than the other reduction traditionally used. It loses some of the hothouse atmosphere of the usual arrangement but makes the piano part much clearer. If anyone preparing to perform this work with piano would like to know what a thinner texture would sound like, listen to this. MAGIL.

**Russian Giants**

**PROKOFIEFF:** Romeo & Juliet Suite; SHOSTAKOVICH: Viola Sonata; VAINBERG: Clarinet Sonata; STRAVINSKY: Elegy

Yuri Gandelsman, va; Janna Gandelsman, p
Blue Griffin 413—79 minutes

Yuri Gandelsman has assembled an attractive program, and I looked forward to listening to this. Once I started listening I realized that this was not going to be very enjoyable. The problem is with Gandelsman. I found it hard to believe that he is actually professor of viola at Michigan State University. His intonation is accurate, but he has practically no vibrato. His fingers are fairly agile too, but the lack of vibrato coupled with the strangely hollow tone he draws from his 1748 Paolo Testore viola make listening unpleasant. Look elsewhere if you wish to hear these works. Helen Callus made a find recording of the Prokofieff (M/A 2008), and Yuri Bashmet and Sviatoslav Richter made a monumental recording of the Shostakovitch (J/A 1998).

**British Light Music**

**CARWITHEN:** Violin Sonata; **ORR:** Serenade; **BERKELEY:** Elegy; Toccata; **SCOTT:** 2 Sonnets; **DELIUS:** Legend; **PITFIELD:** Sonata 1; **YOUNG:** Passacaglia; **IRELAND:** Berceuse; Bagatelle

Fenella Humphreys, v; Nathan Williamson, p
Lyrita 359—76 minutes

This release could be called Light Music for Thinking People. All the entries have their fair share of headwork and all are captivating. Doreen Carwithen (1922-2003) was a student of William Alwyn and later became his wife. Her Violin Sonata (1960) opens with an impassioned accumulative theme, followed by one more evenly paced. The interval of a descending major second plays an important part. The movement’s melodic lines have breadth and personality, voiced for maximum clarity. In II, the scherzo, the piano at first dominates, the violin chipping in some phrases that eventually cohere into a distinguished theme. III has a slower, more emotional subject that also accumulates by phrases into an impressive whole. It builds to eloquence over splendidly spacious piano writing, then dies off into silence. In the finale, the major second again has a significant role in organizing the piece. This is a commanding composition.

Wilfred Orr (1893-1976) was apparently always known as CW Orr. He’s not related to Robin Orr. The Serenade, with its quietly rocking rhythm, resembles a sober barcarolle. Under any name, it’s ingratiating. In the minuet, the unusual harmonic and tonal shifts of the theme add interest. The trio has a faintly Brahmsian tinge. Lennox Berkeley’s Elegy and Toccata are also pleasing works. The latter would make a great recital encore. Cyril Scott’s Sonnets (1915) are dreamy in the best sense of the word. The Second has a fascinating passage where the violin has a whole tone melody accompanied by mysterious hollow trills on the piano.

Delius’s Legend (1916) also exists in an edition with orchestra. It’s laid out as a rondo, with good construction and its recurring theme one of markedly strong character. None of the stereotypical wishy-washy Delius here.

Thomas Pitfield (1903-99) was a self-taught composer, and his sonata is a solid piece of goods. I has an excellent compact, diatonic tune kept steadily moving. The composer gets some truly ingenious sounds out of only two instruments. II has a lengthy arch of a theme over a subtle piano ostinato. III, the scherzo, even though brief has the weight of a piano arrangement of a symphonic movement. IV neatly sews up the bundle with variations on themes from the previous movements.

Percy Young (1922-2004) is probably best known for his excellent 1955 biography of Edward Elgar. Written when that composer’s standing was at its nadir, Young’s book gave a major boost to the revival of his reputation. His Passacaglia (1931) starts with the ground bass in the piano, but soon the violin shares part of it too. Though a compact piece, the music has a majestic pace worthy of Purcell, developing to a climax of noble clarity.

Ireland wrote his Berceuse and Bagatelle as learning pieces. Learners will find them of
musical as well as didactic value. The former uses an elegantly limpid tune, the latter a jaunty one.

The performances of these varied works are excellent. The players grasp their aesthetic aims completely. Especially praiseworthy is their superb dynamic control—an asset that consistently enhances both the atmosphere and the structure of all this music.

Viola Concertos
Telemann, Weber, Baksa; Bruch
Herbert Kefer; Vorarlberg Symphony/ Martin Kerschbaum
Nimbus 5961—59 minutes

Herbert Kefer is an Austrian violist born and bred. He was one of the founding members of the Artis Quartet in 1980. In 1991 he was appointed professor of viola at the University of Graz.

The Telemann, by far the easiest and simplest work here, is played with no passion. It is a bloodless performance. Kefer’s playing is not impressive either.

With the Weber, Kefer and his band perk up considerably. Kefer’s tone even has an allure and body that were lacking in the Telemann. The next work on the program continues the Hungarian theme begun by the Weber. The meat-and-potatoes work here is the Viola Pannonica. It was written by the late Andreas Baksa (1950-2016), a student of Bartok’s, for the Weinklang (Wine Sound) Festival, and Kefer played its premiere in 2010. The title is derived from the name of the Roman province of Pannonia, which included territory from western Hungary, eastern Austria, northern Croatia, northwestern Serbia, northern Slovenia, western Slovakia, and northern Bosnia and Herzegovina. The piece is in the standard three-movement concerto form. It takes folk elements from those regions and wed them to a modernist idiom that is a bit more conservative than Bartok’s. It is a pleasant work but not particularly memorable. It is still a welcome addition to the viola’s very limited repertoire.

Max Bruch’s Romance is merely pleasant and hardly a masterpiece. Kefer plays a viola made by JB Guadagnini in 1784.

Of all the minor dissipation in which temperate men indulge, there is none more alluring than the after-breakfast pipe.

Baltic & Beyond
DVARIONAS: Pieces; KANCHELI: Time & Again; VASKS: For a Summer Evening; PART: Fratres
Piet Koorenchof, v; Thomas Hecht, p
Delos 3529—62 minutes

This collection puts together composers from countries invaded by the Soviet Union and dealing with the later suppression. The 6 Dvarionas pieces are Lithuanian Dvorak (but his dates are 1904-72). They could have been written in the 19th Century and are romantic and innocuous.

Georgian Kancheli is represented by Time and Again. The arrangement for violin and piano is touching, but not nearly as powerful as the orchestral version, and Mr Koorenchof is an insecure proponent. Mr Hecht gets Latvian Vasks’s Music for Summer Evening, a quiet romantic solo piano piece. Finally, Mr Koorenchof takes a stab at Estonian Pärť’s familiar Fratres with shaky results. Friends of the performers might be interested, but all of this is available elsewhere, so I would skip it.

Libero, Fragile
BERIO: Sequenza 8, 6; CARTER: Mnemosyne; Figment 4; KURTAG: Signs, Games & Messages; MULLER-WIELAND: Libero, Fragile; Himmelfahrt
Elisabeth Kufferath, v, va
Genuin 17456—71 minutes

These modernist works for violin and viola are all played by German violinist Kufferath, who has no problem in her mastery of both instruments.

Berio is represented by two Sequenzas (6 [viola] and 8 [violin]). 8, with its warped pitch center and dizzying flourries and contrasting expressive lines is still astonishing. 6 is gruffer and is a particularly brutal exercise for the violist: manufacturers of bow hairs make a mint from it. Carter’s two little late pieces, one for violin (the blankly expressive ‘Mnemosyne’) and one for viola (the likewise blank ‘Figment 4’), may be of interest to some, but I find him chronically overrated. The Kurtag pieces from the collection Signs, Games and Messages are interesting sketches but no more.

Jan Müller-Wieland’s two pieces, one for violin (‘Libero, Fragile’) and one for viola (‘Himmelfahrt’), are stuck in the old German modernist academic mode (the composer was born in 1966) and will cause snoring. These are first (and I presume last) recordings.

Except for the Berio pieces, which retain

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their audacious freshness, the rest are eminently forgettable. Ms Kufferath is a strong virtuoso, but most of this material is below her. The booklet includes a brief interview.

GIMBEL

Miller Porfiris Duo
FUCHS: 12 Duets; TOCH: Divertimento; MARTINU: Duo 2
MP2 42908—63 minutes (800-529-1696)

Robert Fuchs’s 12 Duets (1898) are typical of this composer—well constructed, melodious, and perfectly crafted. They each last two to three minutes and sound as if they’d be fun for two good players. Despite their brevity, they cover a broad range of moods, from the sober waltz of 4 through the seriousness of 8 to the pleasing whimsy of 9. Mahler (and about a dozen other heavyweights) was a Fuchs student, and the rustic dance of 5 has a distinct touch of his style. Fuchs is remarkable in his ability to include emotion in these works, while keeping this emotion coherent.

In Toch’s Divertimento (1926), I opens with furious triplets, leading to wild melodic lines that threaten to break away. The triplets keep returning to impose discipline and (barely) keep the wild melismatic lines inside the corral. II has a descending theme over a broken dactyl rhythm (think I of the Beethoven 7th). This develops to an extended melodic line incorporating the dactylic figures till they become part of the main theme itself. As in I, the line strays, but the rhythm harnesses it. III has the character of a rustic dance, more optimistic in mood. The lines going their own way in counterpoint do occasionally clash. Toch’s adroit mixture of bowed and pizzicato sounds moves the work to a sprightly finish.

Martinu’s Duo (1950) is not the same as his Duo 2 for Violin and Cello. In this work, I has good themes with a constantly churning accompaniment. In the slow movement, the initial theme moves with ease from one tonality to another. There is some dissonance, as if each theme had to work out its own path. This leads to a descending melody for the violin, with an arpeggiated accompaniment on the viola. Martinu’s skill at multi-stop writing fills out the harmony so that it sounds like more than two instruments are playing. III is an upbeat, almost sunny movement. As with a lot of Martinu’s music, the melodies are lyric, with irregular meters adding seasoning. The work has a moto perpetuo finale, and clean fun is had by all. The playing is first-rate, with a good recording.

O’CONNOR

Steinberg Duo
Reizenstein, Bush, Ireland
Lyrira 360—69 minutes

Franz Reizenstein (1911-68) was a Hindemith pupil who migrated to England in the 1930s. Though his work is audibly modern, he apparently never fell for the serial snake oil. He also attained fame as a movie composer, his credits including Circus of Horrors. His 1945 Violin Sonata, despite its ranging harmonic travels, is quite tonal. The first movement goes back and forth between the tonalities of G sharp major and minor. (Major wins.) The opening theme is somewhat rhapsodic. The piano writing is fleshted out to the point of being overwhelming. The second subject uses a lot of open fourths and fifths, then moves subtly into fuller harmonies. Overall, the movement has a fetching sweetness and purity. II, the brief scherzo, is agitated, but the trio has a pleasing touch of whimsy. III starts with impressive scale passages on the piano; the violin then adds arching figures using harmonics. The piano rhetoric returns, these elements intertwining till the movement achieves a grandiose, yet compact end. Incidentally, Reizenstein’s G-sharp major needs a key signature using six sharps and one double-sharp! String players do favor sharp keys, but eight of them could be too much of a good thing.

The sonata of Geoffrey Bush (1920-98) is in one movement. It opens with a gentle rocking rhythm accompanying its first theme. The ornamental garnishes of its basic melodic lines, along with their often varying tempos yield a rhapsodic effect. The central portion of the movement has a yearning, convulsive effect. The work is very chromatic but the listener is never at sea. Often, one theme seems to grow out of its predecessor, like a tonal version of Schoenberg’s developing variation. Toward the end, there’s a register change for the violin so cleverly handled that it sounds as if a second violinist had chimed in. A postlude again makes play of the rocking rhythm that began the music. For all its freedom, in a nearly 19-minute movement, the narrative line neither sags nor meanders.

The opening of Ireland’s Sonata 2 (1917) has a dotted note piano theme, with the violin entering over piano trills. The music is dark and tense, some of this caused by a roiling piano part. There’s a contrasting segment with a more continuous violin line over “pizzicato” piano, the notes played extra staccato. The opening returns in varied form leading to a dramatic close. II has a hesitant violin figure
over an ascending piano theme. After a pause comes a stately theme, worked up to a logical peak. During a decrescendo, the music slides into another key, then again becomes more forceful. This is succeeded by quiet pages over a regular piano pulse. The ending has the serene spaciousness of a Bruckner slow movement. III begins with rhetorical gestures in open fourths and fifths, then a self-contained folk-like tune. Ireland includes reminiscences of the beginning of the sonata before progressing to a vigorous conclusion.

This was one of Ireland’s most popular works. The morning after its premiere, Ireland found his publisher on his front doorstep and the first edition almost immediately sold out. It’s easy to hear why; the music has integrity of form and fertility of invention. Performances are first-rate, with interpretations that capture the spirit as well as the letter of these varied and satisfying works.

**O’Connor**

**The Sound of Hamburg**

Schop, Weckmann, Baltzar, Telemann

Gabriele Steinfeld, v; Anke Dennert, hpsi

Genuin 17462—70 minutes

This is co-produced by a museum of Hamburg history, promoting tourism to this port city. The violin and harpsichord were built there, and both belong to that museum. The violin’s builder is unknown. It is from 1680. The harpsichord is by Carl Conrad Fleischer, 1716. Anke Dennert recorded Telemann’s solo music on another important Hamburg harpsichord recently, the one by Christian Zell (J/A 2016).

The composers worked in Hamburg for parts of their careers. Most of the program is by Johann Schop (1590-1667) and Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767), celebrating the 350th and 250th anniversaries of their deaths. There are short pieces by Thomas Baltzar (1631–63) and Matthias Weckmann (1616–74). Another prominent Hamburg composer is CPE Bach, but he is not represented here.

Gabriele Steinfeld and Dennert have a violin–harpsichord ensemble named La Porta Musicale. They play with lively articulation and good taste. I notice Steinfeld using separate bow-strokes in the 17th Century music (even in the ornamental figures) and more slurs in Telemann’s. The compositions are scarcely recorded elsewhere. One of Schop’s pieces is an arrangement of John Dowland’s ‘Lachrimae’.

We get to hear the interesting tone colors of muted violin and buff-stopped harpsichord together in a Telemann slow movement. The two short pieces by Baltzar are for violin alone. Weckmann’s piece is a set of variations for harpsichord. The music of Schop is the main attraction here. All the rest is a pleasant bonus.

**B Lehman**

**Bel Canto**

**VIEUXTEMPS:** Viola Sonata; Elegy; Caprice;

**DONIZETTI:** Il Faut Partir; O Mon Fernand;

**MAZAS:** Le Songe; **BELLINI:** Casta Diva; **NEY:** Prelude 15

Antoine Tamesit, va; Cedric Tiberghien, p

HM 902777—65 minutes

This is an interesting program. It is drawn entirely from the 19th Century, the era of bel canto singing, but also a time when the viola was not taken very seriously as a solo instrument by most composers. Two composers who did take the viola seriously are represented here: Henri Vieuxtemps and Casimir-Ney. Vieuxtemps was renowned as one of the greatest romantic violin virtuosos who played the viola on the side; and Casimir Ney, almost entirely forgotten today, was the leading viola virtuoso of his age, who tried to do for his instrument what Paganini had done for the violin.

I have heard these works by Vieuxtemps before, but these are the finest performances that I have heard. This is the first time I have heard anything by Ney, and his Prelude 15 is drawn from his 24 Preludes for solo violin, modeled after Paganini’s 24 Caprices for violin. They explore the technical and expressive possibilities of the instrument as thoroughly as Paganini’s set does. True to the title, the Prelude Tamesit selected draws, as Paganini so often did, on the operatic bel canto tradition. Actual bel canto arias from La Fille du Régiment, La Favorita, and Norma appear here in arrangements that are uncredited, except for Fernand’s Cavatine from La Favorita, arranged by Jacques-Fereol Mazas and titled ‘The Dream.’

This is a very pleasing, well-conceived program. Tamesit and Tiberghien are beyond criticism. Lovers of the viola would do well to hear this.

Tamesit plays the “Mahler” Stradivarius viola of 1672.

**Magil**

**Philharmonia Octet Prague**

Mozart, Beethoven, Klein

Supraphon 4214—60 minutes

Founded in 2007, the Philharmonia Octet is a small wind ensemble of noted Czech soloists, competition winners, and orchestral players that appears often at European music festivals.

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This album is a nod to the entertainment music performed by outdoor wind groups in central Europe in the late 18th Century. Known as “harmonies”, these groups played leisurely compositions scored in instrument pairs, sometimes with interchangeable parts, and usually divided into several different movements and structures. While transcribed selections from the latest hit opera were always popular, any type of “divertimento” or “serenade” or “partita” added life to the party.

The program here takes the latter route, and while its span is more than a century, all three works are youthful products that transcend their titles. Working in his native Bonn, the 22-year-old Beethoven finished his Octet in 1792 for his employer Maximilian Franz, the Elector and Archbishop of Cologne. Although the original title “Partita” suggests banquet music, it is a serious concert piece that challenges the limits of classical form, style, and technique.

Likewise, when the 26-year-old Mozart completed his Serenade in C minor in 1782, the dark, dramatic, and complex nature of the music hinted that the composer was ready to make the kind of profound statements that mark his late works and later the romantic period.

In between, the Philharmonia Octet introduces Gideon Klein (1919-45), a talented Czech pianist-composer of Jewish heritage murdered in the Holocaust. In November 1939, Klein was a musicology student at Prague University when the Nazis closed all Czech institutions of higher learning and banned compositions and performances by Jewish musicians. Undaunted, Klein gave recitals under pseudonyms, continued to compose, and applied to the Royal Academy of Music in London. By the time the Academy offered him a scholarship, anti-Jewish laws had been enacted to prevent him from leaving. In December 1941, Klein was deported to the Terezin concentration camp, where he joined actor Kurt Gerron, conductor Karl Ancerl, jazz pianist Martin Roman, and composers Pavel Haas, Hans Krasa, and Viktor Ullman in the organization of cultural and music activities. In 1944, the Nazi authorities sent most of the prisoners to Auschwitz. Of those mentioned here, only Ancerl and Roman survived.

Klein produced a respectable catalog of compositions in his tragically short life, some of which he completed in Terezin (they were smuggled out of the camp). His Divertimento for Wind Octet, written in his last days as a college student, has been dated between June 1939 and April 1940, and it pays homage to his two favorite influences, Leos Janacek and Arnold Schoenberg. While it weaves elements of Moravian song and neo-classicism, it is really a daring avant-garde work, shocking the listener with sharp dissonance and spiky rhythms.

This is a splendid concert, rendering each score with wonderfully clear and resonant timbres, excellent balance and blend, expressive character, technical mastery, and great sonic power. The readings take a different path than many others, emphasizing the majestic and orchestral aspects of the music through restrained tempos, commanding solo lines, and robust harmonic support. The upshot is a gorgeous symphony of wind color in every single measure, though sometimes at the expense of what makes a performance truly special: the subtle turn of phrase, that ghostly or eerie ambience, or a spontaneous burst of energy that grabs the listener and never lets go. Even so, this is some of the finest wind playing available, and collectors interested in the Klein or fresh approaches to the Mozart and Beethoven will find this release worthwhile.

HANUDEL

Hidden Gems
Badings, David, Mahler, Roseman, Szervanszky
Powers Woodwind Quintet
Centaur 3528—70 minutes

This group from Central Michigan University (Joanna Cowan White, fl; Lindabeth Binkley, ob; Kennen White, cl; MaryBeth Minnis, bn; Bruce Bonnell, hn) searches some of the more dust-covered corners of the wind quintet repertoire. The beginning of the program has an air of familiarity: the Renaissance Suite by the well-known New York oboist Ronald Roseman (1933-2000) and three selections from Mahler’s Des Knaben Wunderhorn, transcribed by Florida-based bassoonist and publisher Trevor Cramer.

After that, the group offers some remarkable finds. Hungarian composer Endre Szervanszky (1911-77) invokes the nationalist folk spirit of Bartok and Kodaly in his Wind Quintet (1953); Austrian composer Thomas Christian David (1925-2006) fuses Teutonic modernism with Eastern ambiance in his Wind Quintet No. 2 (1979), written shortly after the completion of his orchestral and music education activities in pre-revolution Tehran; and Dutch composer Henk Badings (1907-87), who dabbed in everything from neo-romanticism to microtonal scales and electronic music, dedicated his Quintet No. 4 (1948) to the Concertgebouw Quintet.
The Powers Quintet sells each piece with superb energy, rhythm, technique, and teamwork; and woodwind enthusiasts looking for recital ideas off the beaten path will find this album valuable.

For serious collectors, though, the level of sonic command varies too broadly to produce a clean and cohesive ensemble sound. Some timbres are beautiful and resonant; others are raw, breathy, reedy, and spread. The group has the fluency and camaraderie to sculpt rich and well-balanced chords and cadence points; but the finer points of tone, blend, and intonation in between are too uneven, and the collective volume resides mostly between mezzo-forte and forte. These scores have much more possibility.

HANUDEL

Canadian Panorama
Meyer, Royer, Eddington, Gray, McGrath, Rapoport, Cable
Scarborough Philharmonic Winds/ Ronald Royer
Cambria 1227—67 minutes

This is an album of firsts: first recordings of these Canadian works, first recording by these orchestral wind players from a suburb of Toronto. It is a contribution to Canada’s 150th birthday, and it is delightful.

Chris Meyer’s 7-minute Fundy is a lovely and quite musically descriptive ‘Poem of Wind and Waves’. Ronald Royer’s two-movement, 11-minute Rhapsody for oboe, horn, and wind ensemble begins thoughtfully, then becomes dancelike. It bubbles along merrily. The work was composed for these soloists, and it is a treat to hear them; Sarah Jeffrey has beguiling oboe tone, and Gabriel Radford is a very strong horn player.

Also by Royer (conductor of this ensemble) is the wonderful Travels with Mozart: Variations on a Theme from the Magic Flute. The quiet introduction is dissonant, but soon the lovely ‘Bei Männern, Welche Liebe Fühlen’ is heard. And then Royer takes the melody to cities Mozart visited—London, Munich, Mannheim, Rome, Prague, Vienna, Paris, Naples—and subjects it to imaginative variations. It is a marvel.

In Saturday Night at Fort Chambly, Alex Eddington imagines what off-duty soldiers might have done and sung, way back in the day. 20 folk songs are incorporated, sometimes separately, sometimes simultaneously. As you might imagine, it has Ivesian moments.

John Gray’s cheery, 5-minute ‘Allemande’ is for double wind quintet plus double bass.

Jim McGrath's 5-minute ‘Serenade for Clarinet and Wind Ensemble’ shines the spotlight on Kara Royer (the conductor’s wife). It is whimsical, to say the least, but gives her plenty of opportunity to show technical skill, grace, and beauty of tone. Also whimsical (hardly a surprise, given its title) is Alexander Rapoport’s 6-minute ‘Whirligig for Ten Instruments’. Howard Cable, famed for his musical depictions of eastern Canada, wrote ‘McIntyre Ranch Country’ in response to a request for something about the west. Familiar western songs are heard.

Fine playing, excellent sound.

KILPATRICK

The Return
Maslanka, Daugherty, Ticheli, Davoren, Bellor, LaBounty
Ted Atkatz, timp; UNLV Wind Ensemble/ Thomas Leslie—Klavier 11217—68 minutes

It has been several years since a UNLV Wind Ensemble album last came my way. As always, this one is of high quality.

David Maslanka’s Traveler (2003), composed for a longtime professor’s retirement, is based on the chorale ‘Nicht so traurig, nicht so sehr.’ The first half of the 15-minute work is full of energy and excitement, but then Maslanka slows things way down. In expressing the quieting-down of a once very active life, he is in no hurry whatsoever. For seven minutes, things move ever more slowly and become ever quieter, until it finally ends. Frank Ticheli’s Sanctuary is in the same vein: a long and gentle tribute to H Robert Reynolds, renowned wind ensemble director at the universities of Southern California, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

The rest of the program is the opposite of contemplative. Ted Atkatz is the timpani soloist in Michael Daugherty’s very exciting Raise the Roof. Tom Davoren’s ‘Return to the White City’ celebrates a famous stadium and the 2012 London Olympics. Anthony LaBounty’s ‘Triumph’ is about as noisy as a celebration can be.

The big piece is Jennifer Bellor’s 18-minute Bordello Nights, which recalls early 20th century music from Buenos Aires (tango) and New Orleans (jazz). The work is scored for soprano and alto saxophones, piano, bass, and drums. It seems out of place in a college wind ensemble recording (the players are professionals), but Ms Bellor teaches composition and theory at UNLV.

Notes online only.

KILPATRICK

July/August 2017
**Meditation**  
Saint-Benoit-du-Lac Abbey  
Analekta 8790—61:28

This recording includes various chants and Latin songs without any thematic connection aside from the generic title. Many of the liturgical chants—the introits for Pentecost (‘Da pacem’) and the feast of Saints Gervaise and Protasius (‘Logutur Dominus pacem’) and the antiphon ‘In viam pacis’—were already released on a previous recording titled “Pax” (Analekta 9776). Most of the remaining pieces were previously released on “Cantus Mariales” (Analekta 9769), such as Dom Joseph Pothier’s setting of the “ancient Carmelite hymn” ‘Salve Mater Misericordiae’.

While this choir follows the Solesmes style of performance, many of the selections have organ accompaniments (melody with simple drones or thin harmonies). The minimal booklet includes a short discussion about how “there is a peacefulness to Gregorian chant that naturally brings about an inner calm that we all desire”, but there are no texts or translations to elucidate the monk’s “meditative interpretation of sacred texts”. In sum, this is basically sonic wall paper.

**Beneath the Northern Star**  
English Polyphony 1270-1430  
Orlando Consort—Hyperion 68132—72 minutes

There has been a steady flow of recordings of late medieval English polyphony, mainly from the early Tudor period. Less consistently explored is the work of earlier English musicians. Few of their works survive, and in many cases we know little about their lives.

This release therefore is most useful in its unusual scope. The 17 selections are given in roughly chronological order. They date from the late 13th Century to the final flowering of Plantagenet style in the 15th, as drawn from the invaluable Old Hall Manuscript. The first five and last two selections are by unidentifiable composers, but otherwise we have Johannes Alanus (13??-14??), Thomas Damett (c.1390-c.1437), Byttering (13??-c.1420), Robert Chirbury (c.1380-1454), Gervays (13??-14??), J. Excetre (13??-14??), Leonel Power (d.1445), and John Dunstable (c.1390-1453).

Except for the final four-voice piece, all the selections are for three voices, though in some there are striking shifts between three and two parts. Four are polytextual, and indeed the earliest of them, by Alanus, is an amusing juxtaposition of history and biography between the two texted voices. Nine selections (only one anonymous) are Mass movements. They exhibit certain consistent stylistic elements that became identified as typically English: a love for longish melodic lines, for variable rhythms, and for particularly clever weaving of voice parts. In two items, both Credo settings—one by Excetre, the other anonymous—the vitality of the shifting of rhythms comes from changing note lengths.

Few of these pieces have been recorded before: I do know of several of the troped Kyrie Cuthberti prece. So this repertoire is generally new to records and the more welcome for that.

The merits of the Orlando Consort are too familiar to need explanation at this point. But they strike a particularly fine balance here between ensemble blending and the individuality of each singer. The sound is exemplary. The booklet has excellent notes and full texts with translations.

In sum, this is a truly perfect release!

**Cyprus:**  
Between Greek East and Latin West  
Cappella Romana/ Alexander Lingas  
Cappella Romana 416—64:43  
HANELLE: Cypriot Vespers  
Graindelavoix/ Bjorn Schmelzer  
Glossa 32112—76 minutes

The French dynasty of Lusignan ruled Cyprus from 1192 to 1474, as a crusader outpost. The dynasty staunchly maintained its French identity and French cultural contacts. Its official liturgy was of the Roman Church, and its musical and liturgical expression was in line with the European Ars Nova style and its ars subtilior subcategory. But some degree of cultural multiplicity was accepted in the largely Orthodox native population, with the Greek church of the island allowed close contacts with the Byzantine liturgical developments of the time. There are even signs of some Greco-Latin cross-influences.

The primary source for the European-linked Latin liturgical life of Lusignan Cyprus was a manuscript, known as J.II.9, surviving in Turin’s National University Library. This was discovered about a century ago, and the conclusion has since been reached that it was the creation of a French musician, one Jean Hanelle (c.1380-c.1436), who served the Lusignan court chapel from 1411 to 1434. He apparently prepared this manuscript after that, as

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editor and one of the scribes, in the last two years of his life in Italy. Containing 334 pieces of both liturgical and secular music, it names no composers, but the assumption now is that all or most of it is by Hanelle himself, with perhaps a few of his colleagues.

That manuscript has been the basis for a couple of earlier recordings of this Franco-Cypriote music (not reviewed in these pages). The excellent notes for the Cappella Romana program discuss Hanelle’s involvement, but the Glossa release is the first to present its music as emphatically by that composer.

These two releases do have some things in common. In each, women’s voices are included with men’s. Oh yes, boys might have been used originally, but the women here do not sound like boys. Both directors contrive performance procedures for the Latin works that diverge from what have been used in dealing with *ars subtilior* literature. Above all, each program goes beyond just the Latin material and suggests a broader context by including Eastern Christian singing.

Alexander Lingas is one of today’s leading experts on Byzantine music, but he has also developed a vocal group, the Cappella Romana, that has been building an impressive catalog of recordings ranging through the span of Greek Orthodox music, including contemporaneous practice both abroad and in the USA.

The present program is an exploration of inter-cultural liturgical life of which Byzantine music was a part. There are 14 tracks here, where the traditions are intermingled. 8 of the selections are from the Turin manuscript. 3 of them are part of a Mass in honor of St Hilarion, the Greek patron saint of Cyprus whom the Latin Christians also celebrated, and he is honored in a Latin responsory as well. There is another Mass movement, and some of the four pieces are pseudo-plainchant rather than polyphonic. There are also three polytextual Latin motets. Against that Latin material is set four examples of Greek chant clearly influenced by late Byzantine developments of the 13th and early 15th centuries. One of these ends with the monastic ritual called *teretisma-ta*, fanfare-like repetitions of “tererere”.

Lingas and his 11 singers (three of them women) are perfectly in their element. When they turn to the other material they seem to suggest a Greek softening of the Latin style. The somewhat pointillistic qualities of the motets are smoothed into a flowing Orthodox sound. That approach might set off Western medieval specialists, but it does make a point about the apparent interactions between the island’s two cultures.

If the Lingas release suggests a different approach to what we have understood as performance practice for late medieval music, the Schmelzer program is nothing less than a kick in the pants. He has been influenced a lot by the performing style of Marcel Peres, but has carried those ideas to the most bizarre extremes. Schmelzer completely rejects any “historical” approach to medieval music and seeks some kind of wacky “relevance”, assimilating singing drawn from a range of current musical categories. Pitched are slid into and wiggled about, ornamental notes are slipped in, rhythms are mangled, and everything is reduced to anarchic blur. This kind of crazy approach has already been displayed in the group’s recent recording of Machaut’s Mass (Glossa 32110, S/O 2016), which drove our reviewer, Mr Gatens into utter bafflement.

All that nonsense is a pity, because Schmelzer’s programming is actually quite interesting. There are 18 tracks. Of them 5 give examples from the non-Latin communities of Cyprus. But 3 of these are Byzantine Greek: the other 2 are Maronite Christian and Melkite Christian (in Arabic), pointedly illustrating a wider inter-cultural life of Cyprus. The rest is music from Ms J.II.9, all bluntly credited to Hanelle. These are all double-texted four-voice motets, each preceded by an appropriate bit of plainchant. One sets a Christmas text. But the other nine of these constitute the so-called “O” antiphons of the December Vespers services.

Schmelzer’s group consists of nine singers (one of them a woman). They sing the plain-chants with a Greek *ison* or drone-note. Schmelzer’s performing ideas make masses (and not Masses!) out of the chants, but the motets are pure chaos. Reasonable diction is irrelevant and it is generally difficult to figure out from the singing alone just what language is being heard. Schmelzer has offered a valuable exploration of unusual literature and then obliterated it with his bizarre performing aberrations.

The booklets for both releases supply the texts (in their original typography) and translations.

BARKER

*100 Years’ War*
Binchois Consort/ Andrew Kirkman
Hyperion 68170—77 minutes

As usual, the Binchois Consort has brought together a beautiful program of early-Renaissance masterpieces. After singing the introduc-
tion 'Anglia Tibi Turbidas,’ they perform works by Johannes Ananus, John Dunstable, Leonel Power, Forest, and others to tell a story of how English composers responded to the struggles of war in the early 15th Century and took comfort in their national pride, the support of protector saints, and by reveling in their victories. The program is divided into four narrative sections titled ‘Kingship and the Rise of Nation,’ ‘St Thomas Becket—Protector of England,’ ‘St Edmund, King and Martyr—Protector of England,’ and ‘The Coronation of Henry VI.’

Except for ‘Ecce Mitto Angelum’ and ‘Pastor Cesus in Gregis Medio,’ which are chants, the program consists of polyphonic music—Dunstable’s Da Gaudiorum Premia Mass, the famous English ‘Agincourt Carol,’ and several Latin motets. The motets are especially compelling in this context, as they are narrative pieces by nature. Like the frames of a stained glass window, each line of a motet offers a self-contained story. But as with windows, whose larger message becomes clear as the panels are simultaneously illuminated by the sun’s light, so the lines of a motet reveal a deeper narrative meaning when they are heard simultaneously through the art of music; the challenge, of course, is to hear as clearly as one can see. Alanus’s ‘Sub Arturo Plebs/Fons Citharizantium/In Omnem Terram’ (so titled because each vocal part bears a different text) is an outstanding example of the narrative properties of motets. The tenor line, a setting of Psalm 19, announces the power of “their voices” that sing to the ends of the earth, while the upper (triplum) voice identifies those “voices” with several famous English composers and music theorists. The middle (duplum) voice, at the same time, establishes the legacy of great composers—from Tubal to Pythagoras, Gregory the Great, Guido of Arezzo, and Franco of Cologne—as though it were instantiating the authority on which English greatness rests. And to show his listener that Alanus saw himself as part of that legacy, he demurely adds his name (“J Alanus minus”) as an inheritor of this authority.

Interlocking patterns of repeated melodies and rhythms help to organize textual and musical phrases in these motets. In fact, Dunstable’s motets are often pan-isorhythmic—a real contrapuntal tour de force when one considers the difficulty of coordinating different repeating rhythmic and melodic patterns in each vocal part. In ‘Veni Sancte Spiritus/Veni Creator Spiritus’ Dunstable uses repeating melodies and rhythms to coordinate two well-known chants; but he also adds complication when he submits the lower two voices to a three-fold program of diminution, so that by the time they reach the final section of the motet, the duration of their pitches is one third the length of the ones that sang at the outset. The music itself, then, has its own rhetorical register, which brings out incrementally the excitement inherent in the text.

The Binchois Consort has a knack for this repertory. Their intonation and balance are spot on, and the ease of their singing seems to belie the technical difficulty of the music. Texts and notes are in English.

LOEWEN

Peterhouse Partbooks 5
Blue Heron/ Scott Metcalfe
Blue Heron 1007—55:33

This is the latest release in Blue Heron’s continuing exploration of the so-called Peterhouse Partbooks. These are the sources, dating from Henry VIII’s reign, that preserve for us a vast array of early Tudor polyphony. The group’s exploration is based, too, on the expert scholarly work of Nick Sandon, who knows this resource inside out and is its authoritative editor. (Since the tenor book is lost, he reconstructed the missing parts for these five-voice works.)

These partbooks contain music by many composers about whom we know little or nothing otherwise. There is, of course, the ubiquitous Mr Anonymous. The other three composers represented here are the variously obscure Hugh Sturmy, Robert Hunt, and John Mason.

The motets, one each, by Sturmy and Hunt are skillful weavings of beautiful sound textures. Mason’s Ve Nobis Miseris stands apart because its five voices are only for men, and at almost 13 minutes it is the longest motet here. It is a most interesting display of low-voice part writing.

The longest item, at about 32 minutes, is the Sine Nomine Mass, which lacks the identifications of both composer and title (that is, chant source). Though Sandon does not accept it, he suggests a theory that the cantus was taken from an antiphon in honor of the founder of the English church, St Augustine of Canterbury, and that his symbolism was set in criticism of the demolisher of that historic church by Henry VIII, making this Mass a risky piece of work.

At any rate, this Anonymous Mass is quite a fascinating piece. (Since Mass settings of this period lacked a Kyrie opening, one is supplied
by a troped example of Sarum Chant.) The well-developed part writing is a sinuous interweaving of contrasting voices that leads the ear on and on in careful attention.

The singing by this 13-member mixed-voice ensemble is as smooth, balanced, and graceful as always, and in fine (if somewhat distantly miked) sonics. I deplore the unhelpful pasting of the booklet into the cardboard album, but full texts and translations are included.

**BARKER**

_Cifras Imaginarias_

Ariel Abramovich, Jacob Heringman, vihuela Arcana 428—54 minutes

The title of this release loosely translates to “Imaginary Tablatures”. A tablature is a form of notation used only by fretted instruments, showing where to put the fingers on the neck, with an indication of duration. There is little music for the Spanish renaissance lute known as the _vihuela da mano_, and only one source of works for two vihuelas, a manuscript by Enriquez de Valdarrabano. That set contains not only original works, but many arrangements of vocal music from the greats of the day, including Josquin and Morales.

So, for this recording, Abramovich and Heringman have taken some music of the early 16th Century and arranged it, in the style of Valdarrabano’s works. The composers include Josquin, Francesco da Milano, Antonio de Cabezon, Phillippe Verdelot, Adrian Willaert, Thomas Croquillon, and Claudin de Sermisy.

The music is all beautiful and subtle—perhaps too subtle for some tastes. The vihuela, even more than the lute, has a limited dynamic and timbral range. The players do shape their phrases as if singing. Their playing is clean and their rhythm fluid. They create a delicate sound world, one that might only be enjoyed by a few people at a time. But if you are in the right frame of mind, those beauties are not quite like anything else.

**KEATON**

_Guerre e Rimpianti: Carlo V_

Musica della Corte/ Eduardo Notriuca III Millennium 208—48:22

This is a better-than-average program of Renaissance music.

There is a never-ending flow of releases that present “Music from the Time of...”. And most of them are just that—programs of music more or less falling into the time-period suggested, but rarely with direct connections to the headline totem.

Here things are somewhat different. To be sure, there are instrumental pieces by composers who were close to the Hapsburg Emperor Charles V—Antonio de Cabezon and Diego Ortiz. But this anthology for the most part—in six of the ten items assembled—directs attention to either one or the other of two very important compositions, which represent the two elements of the album title: _Guerre e Rimpianti_, War and Regrets.

One of the compositions, the one standing for war that was so common in the Emperor’s reign, is, of course, the remarkable programmatic chanson by Jannequin, ‘La Guerre’ (or La Bataille de Marignan) for four voices. We thus have the original, then its use as the basis by an _ensalada_ by Mateo Flecha and for a Mass setting by Francisco Guerrero (its Kyrie and Gloria). The other original is the four-voice chanson ‘Mille Regretz’ by Josquin Desprez, well known in the 16th Century as the _cancion del emperador_ or the emperor’s favorite song. In addition to that original, we are given an instrumental treatment by Luys de Narvaez and the Sanctus and Agnus Dei from the six-voice _Mille Regretz Mass_ by Cristobal de Morales.

It is fascinating to have these two groupings of originals with adaptations. The 16th Century was full of elaboration on elaboration as a compositional technique, in both vocal and instrumental music; and the ones here are choice examples. Indeed, with so short a running time on this disc, we might well have expected another set on another original. With just these contents, too, the groupings should have been consolidated, instead of scattered indiscriminately in the program.

This ensemble consists of six singers and three instrumentalists (organ, gamba, and baroque guitar). The singers are generally an enthusiastic bunch—rather coarsely so in some fast tempos—but they do the Flecha and Jannequin pieces vividly, and the Josquin chanson is really beautiful here. The instrumentalists are able, if rather understated.

The release errs in presenting NO TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS for the vocal works, and the notes are somewhat skimpy. Nevertheless, I found myself quite caught up in the ways the originals were drawn on, and I commend this release ahead of so many “Time of” counterparts.

**BARKER**

206

_July/August 2017_
Routes of Slavery, 1444-1888
Tembembe Ensamble Continuo, Capella Reial de Catalunya, Hesperion XXI/ Jordi Savall

This is the latest of Savall's "CD-books" devoted to historical themes, with idealistic preaching implied or explicit on moral issues.

Slavery is as old as human civilization. As a function of military might and conquest, it has had many implications as a source of economically indispensable forced labor, at various social levels, over the centuries. It has provoked reactions ranging from hesitant criticism to moral outrage, but has had its defenders, from Aristotle to self-serving exploiters.

Beginning in the 15th Century, the practices of enslavement were given new identity in the European trans-Atlantic traffic in African slaves for servitude in the colonies of the Western hemisphere. That new identity introduced the element of racism, pairing servitude with racial vulnerability and supposed inferiority. Despite a spate of 19th Century Western prohibitions against such slavery, it still flourishes in certain cultures to the present. And, of course, its toxic heritage in our own culture continues to plague us.

In a bound volume extensively illustrated (with 21 pages promoting the AliaVox catalog), are nine essays by various authors, reproduced in six languages (French, English, Castilian Spanish, Catalan, German, Italian). The tone is set by the first, written by Savall himself. He introduces the venture's scope as extending from the Portuguese establishment of of the African slave trade in 1444 down to the Brazilian abolition of slavery in 1888. But Savall also ranges over a much wider span, regularly foaming with moral fury.

The remaining essays cover disparate topics ranging through historical periods, offering textual testimonies, and culminating in surveys of slavery in the world today.

Then we turn from all that to the recordings. It is from a public concert in France on July 17, 2015, and has been presented or scheduled for other performances. The performers combine 4 singers and 13 instrumentalists from Savall's regular ensemble with singers and instrumentalists from Mali, Madagascar, Morocco, Mexico, Columbia, Venezuela, and Argentina.

The DVD documents that first concert visually as well as sonically.

Running through the 33 tracks (on the CDs), we find a mix of things. A loose structure is supplied by 11 tracks that present, at intervals and in chronological order, contemporaneous texts that reflect on the Atlantic slave traffic. Those are read in French by Bakary Sangare. The remaining 22 tracks are musical selections, most of them representing songs and dances of the blacks themselves. Many of them use words either partly or fully in Spanish (or Portuguese). Six of them, in fact, are negritos or parallel pieces by European musicians (Mateo Flecha, Juan Gutierrez de Padilla, Fray Filipe da Madre Deus, Roque Jacinto de Chavarria, Juan de Araujo, and Juan Garcia de Zespedes) who tried to evoke negro musical idioms in written compositions of their own. A number of those are by now well known from recordings.

Many of the remaining selections are traditional survivals drawn from serious musico-logical explorations into folk sources in Mali, in Africa, and in Mexico, Columbia, and Brazil. To these are added a subcategory of improvisations by the players based on folk traditions and played on folk instruments. Like so much in these Savall explorations, the bulk of the material has been shaped by the master's arrangements. Savall himself presides patriarchally over the performance, regularly joining in on his viol.

The book itself includes sectionally (language by language) the original texts with translations, usable as one watches or listens. The video gives subtitles only for the spoken texts, and not for the sung pieces. The purely audio version is perhaps more usable with the printed texts. On the other hand, in the video one it is possible to enjoy the vitality of singing and the spontaneous dancing.

BARKER

Queen Mary's Big Belly
Van Wilder, Mundy, Tye, Lassus, Tallis, Newman, Sheppard, Elizabeth Kenny, lute; Gallicantus/ Gabriel Crouch—Signum 464—78 minutes

In November of 1554, Mary Tudor, Catholic Queen of England, was thought to be pregnant and due to deliver around May 1, 1555. She entered the confinement and birthing chamber at Hampton Court Palace, and on April 30, the rumor reached London that she had given birth to a male heir to the throne, continuing the Tudor dynasty and consolidating the restoration of the Catholic Church in the realm. The rumor was false. As the summer wore on, it became evident that Mary was not pregnant at all, and in August she left Hampton Court for Oatlands Palace.

This program brings together pieces of
sacred and secular music of that time and place. Even if some of it was composed before the start of Mary’s reign, it could well have been performed in her presence. As the booklet notes put it, the music “explores the musical traces of an extraordinary year of hopes raised and dashed”. The musical genres range from motets, office responsories, and polyphonic hymns to solo songs with lute and an instrumental “Fansye”. There were many processions and litanies to supplicate for the queen’s safe delivery, and the present program includes a Sarum litany of the period fitted to the music Tallis wrote for the English litany of the Book of Common Prayer.

The ensemble Gallicantus under the direction of Gabriel Crouch seeks to create “performance projects which explore narratives and draw out unifying themes in apparently diverse repertoire”. That is certainly an apt description of this program. The booklet notes give a riveting account of the historical events and how the musical selections relate to them. The performances themselves are of the highest order. The vocal polyphony is sung by one voice to a part to give the intimate feel of vocal chamber music. I would guess that this recording will appeal as much to students of the history and culture of the period as to admirers of the music for its own sake.

GATENS

Masque of Moments
Theatre of the Ayre/ Elizabeth Kenny
Linn 542—68:16

The English masque of the early 17th Century was a rarified dramatic entertainment that Ben Johnson hoped would “lay hold on more remov’d mysteries”. While this may have been an unattainable ideal, the English nobility greatly enjoyed the mixture of poetry, drama, comedy, song, dance, and audience participation in the masque. During the Commonwealth there were few public opportunities for such lavish entertainments and Cupid and Death with music by Matthew Locke and Christopher Gibbons only could be performed in private to entertain the Portuguese ambassador in 1653.

Theatre of the Ayre attempts to recreate the sound of these court masques from the early 17th Century on this collection of songs by composers such as Thomas Campion, Giovanni Coperario, Alfonso Ferrabosco II, Robert Johnson, and Charles Colman, and dances selected from many different masques. Two excerpts, ‘From the heav’ns now I fly’ and ‘Sweet Echo’, are from Henry Lawes’s songs for John Milton’s Comus, first performed at Ludlow Castle in 1634. ‘Sweet Echo’ was first performed by 15-year-old Lady Alice Egerton, and is performed on this recording by an equally old Rosanna Wicks with appropriate innocence and elegance.

The 15 vocalists and instrumentalists of the Theatre of the Ayre are joined by 8 trebles and 3 lay clerks from the Salisbury Cathedral Choir, who stand in for the boys and men of the royal chapel. While not as large in number as the original performers or the ones used for the recording of Ben Johnson’s Masque of Oberon by the Musicians of the Globe (Philips 446 217), the Theater of the Ayre is similar in size to I Claratani (N/D 1998: 289), who reconstructed a masque written for the marriage of Count Palatine Friedrich V to Elizabeth Stuart in 1613. The group improvisation of the instruments on this new release, especially the four players of lutes (including Elizabeth Kenny) and harp, is especially impressive. In only one song, Ferrabosco II’s ‘Why stays the bridegroom’, the elaborate ornamentation found in a contemporary manuscript does not quite fit Nicholas Mulroy’s best tenor range. Otherwise, this is a very enjoyable sound picture of that lost world of the English masque.

BREWER

Golden Age in Brandenburg
Ensemble Art d’Echo/ Juliane Laake
Querstand 1616—66 minutes

The Brandenburg Court in the 17th Century was home to Quantz and CPE Bach and ruled by Frederick the Great, not only a great military strategist but a music lover and a reasonably good composer himself. But music had flourished there for well over a century, and this recording documents it from the early to mid 1600s.

The composers are, for the most part, obscure—many were gambists or lutenists at court. I was only familiar with Matthew Locke, Walter Rowe, and Ambrosius Scherle—and there is a Praetorius, but it’s Bartholomaeus, not Michael. The music is, stylistically, late renaissance more than early Baroque—there’s no continuo, and more blended homogenous sound than contrast. It brings to mind Michael Praetorius’s Terpsichore, ensemble music of Samuel Scheidt, and the broken consort of Elizabethan England, though without that distinctive English accent. I love that music, and I was quite charmed by this set of performances.

Ensemble Art d’Echo is mostly violas da gambas, with players switching off on sizes, and
an added harp and recorder player. They play beautifully together—the sound is lovely, the shaping of dynamics and phrasing dependably expressive. Director Juliane Laake plays both discant and bass gamba, and has three works on the latter to herself—solo gamba suites by Dietrich Stoeffken and Scherle and a courant by Rowe. The suites are no match for Bach—what is?—but they do show some precedent he had to work with. And Laake plays them with elegance and energy, as needed. Delightful.

KEATON

Veas Yo Los Ojos Bellos
Luz & Norte—Brilliant 95457—59:18

Subtitled “Music from the Time of Cervantes”, this is a collection of Spanish baroque song, including selections by Sebastian Duron (1653-1731), José Marin, and other less known composers. Interspersed among the songs are instrumental selections by Antonio Martin y Coll, Diego Ortiz, and Bartolomé de Selma y Salaverde.

Victor Sordo Vicente has a clear tenor voice and an ability to vary his vocal color and enunciation to communicate the meaning of these texts. He is ably accompanied by Sara Aguenda (harp) and Calia Alvarez (viola da gamba) with the occasional addition of percussion by Daniel Garay.

While this is an excellent recording, the lack of translations for both the sung lyrics and the excerpts from Cervantes's Galatea given in the booklet severely limit the primary audience to people who understand Spanish. While the Cervantes novel exists in many English translations, you have to want to search out the excerpts; and for most of the songs there are no readily available translations.

KEATON

Ars Magica
La Rossignol/ Domenico Baronio
III Millennium 222—60 minutes

Organized into 10 Chapters (Capitoli), this fine program—exploring various themes connected to magic—is very well researched, conceived, and performed. The packaging and accompanying materials are clear, attractive, and well designed, but there is no English. If you know a little Italian, French, and Latin, it’s possible to figure out some of what is going on. For instance, Chapter 2 is called “Tarantole E Antidoti” and its three pieces are about tarantula bites and their antidotes, including a cathartic Dionysian tarantella dance; Chapter 8 is “Le Danze Macabre”; and Chapter 9 is “Renovatio Mundi” with three pieces about the arrival of Spring, one of which sets a Latin text about blossoming flowers to the familiar ‘Good King Wenceslas’ tune.

All the musicians in La Rossignol are highly expert, and musical contrasts abound: as an illustration, the three pieces in Chapter 7, “Carmina Magica”, are Gregorian chant; then the combination of lute, voice, and viel in a

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slow and sweet rendering of ‘Nostre Donne Du Bout Du Pont’; then bagpipes and drum in an English traditional Morris dance.

Notes in Italian; texts in original languages translated into Italian; some information (such as bios) in English on the ensemble’s website.

C.MOORE

Venite a Laudare
Minstrel Kaleta—Lilac 160715—51 minutes

There is nice spirited playing here, and the mix of timbres across varied instruments and voices serves the music quite well. But if you already have recordings you like of pieces from these same sources, including the Llibre Vermell and the Cantigas de Santa Maria, you don’t need this.

One reason I can’t recommend this is that the only documentation is a track list and two brief paragraphs about the setting for this repertory: streets where minstrels played to all who passed by, from nobility to beggars. There’s a note directing us to the label website for information about the works and the artists, but there’s nothing there about this disc, either in the “current” or “forthcoming” sections of the website. Once again, a message to labels: don’t do this. It’s a great disservice to your artists and to your audience.

C.MOORE

Lucrezia Borgia’s Daughter
Motets from a 16th-Century Convent
Musica Secreta, Celestial Sirens/ Laurie Stras, Deborah Roberts—Obsidian 717—73 minutes

Though withdrawn from the world, cloistered nuns in Italy not only composed and performed some of the finest and most progressive music of their time, but they also spread it far beyond the convent walls. Simply put, “in the 16th Century the sound of [polyphonic] convent music was the sound of the Renaissance city”. The nuns’ fame was widespread and they drew audiences from far and wide, but nuns were not allowed to take credit as individual composers. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence to link this music to the Corpus Domini convent in Ferrara and to its abbess, Sister Leonora D’Este (1515-75).

The daughter of Lucrezia Borgia, Leonora was born a princess (her mother died in childbirth when Leonora was 4) and grew up to be a nun and a musician, the latter vocation being one she shared with other family members such as her aunt Isabella D’Este.

The Musica Secreta ensemble, led by Deborah Roberts (well known for her Tallis Schola work), has championed music by and for women composers for many years. Deborah Roberts also formed Celestial Sirens in 2003 as “a select non-professional choir of female singers based in Southern England”.

Together these two vocal ensembles bring together women aged from their teens to their 60s, and they are the ideal interpreters of these 16 motets from a 1543 collection. In the booklet essay we learn that this volume is “the earliest published polyphony we can be certain was intended for nuns”. The music is composed in voci pari style, which means that the five voice-parts are for similar ranges such as would be found in a single-sex religious house (either for men or women). In these interpretations, organ and bass viol complement the voices from time to time and extend the range as needed.

Texts are set with color and imagination, and the composer was not averse to using dissonance to underline references to fears of plague (as in the motet ‘O Beate Christi Con-fessor’, honoring St Roch) and church bells pealing across the city celebrating Easter Day (‘Angelus Domini Descendit’, one of the motets that also has references to the important role devout women play).

These excellent performances fuse virtuoso skill and devotional ardor to capture all the prayerfulness, reflection, and ecstasy that abound in this fine music.

Notes, bios, texts, translations.

C.MOORE

Virgin & Child: Baldwin Partbooks II

TALLIS: Gaude Gloriosa; Magnificat; Videte Miraculum; TAVERNER: Mater Christi; WHITE: Tota Pulchra Es; Regina Caeli; FAYRFAX: Ave Dei Patris Filia; SHEPPARD: Verbum Caro

Contrapunctus/ Owen Rees
Signum 474—75 minutes

This is the second recording from the vocal ensemble Contrapunctus of music from the Baldwin Partbooks, a source now in the library of Christ Church, Oxford. John Baldwin (d 1615) was a lay clerk at St George’s Chapel, Windsor and later a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal. He compiled his partbooks from 1575 to 1581. His purpose appears to have been the preservation of outstanding examples of Latin church music that had become liturgically obsolete after the English Reformation. The books contain nearly 170 works from a broad chronological swath of English composition from the generation of Robert Fayrfax (1464-1521) to living composers like William Byrd. Some of the pieces are
unique to this source. The tenor book is missing, so that part must be reconstructed for pieces that survive in other sources. That is the case with the Tallis **Magnificat** here.

The plan for the series is for each disc to contain music on a specific devotional theme, the compositions representing the chronological range of Baldwin’s collection. The first volume, “In the Midst of Life” (Signum 408; J/A 2015) was on the subject of death. The present recording is on Marian devotion. There was an exceptionally rich tradition of such devotion in England before the Reformation. Composers produced lengthy and elaborate settings of votive antiphons like Tallis’s ‘Gaude Gloriosa’ and ‘Ave Dei Patris Filia’ by Fayrfax. Large-scale office responsories like Tallis’s ‘Videte Miraculum’ and ‘Verbum Caro’ by John Sheppard were another important genre. Several shorter but no less glorious pieces are included here.

I was highly impressed with the first recording in the series, and this new one maintains the high standard. The sound is sumptuous but clear. The vocal blend and coherence are outstanding, and director Owen Rees delivers performances that convey a keen sense of forward movement and coherence.

Owen Rees is director of music at The Queen’s College, Oxford. The ensemble Contrapunctus was founded in 2010 particularly for the study and performance of polyphony. 12 singers are listed, but they do not all sing in every selection.

**The Italian Job**

_La Serenissima/_ Adrian Chandler, v
Avie 2371—76:23

This is a refreshing and eclectic collection of Italian baroque concertos and sinfonias. It includes some rarely recorded works, such as Arcangelo Corelli’s Sinfonia to Giovanni Lulli-er’s oratorio, _Santa Beatrice d’Este_ in D minor, a model concerto grosso, and Giuseppe Tartini’s Violin Concerto in E (D51), where the middle movement is subtitled ‘Tortorella bacie’ (dove’s kisses). Woodwinds are also well represented by Albinoni’s Concerto in F for two oboes, Op.9:3, Vivaldi’s Bassoon Concerto in C (R 467), and Vivaldi’s _Alla Rustica_ Concerto with the optional oboe and bassoon parts in the final movement. The bookends are Antonio Caldara’s Sinfonia in C for two oboes, two bassoons, two trumpets, timpani, violin solo, and strings, modeled on Vivaldi’s concertos for several soloists, which dates from after 1717 when Caldara began his employment as Vice Maestro di Cappella for Charles VI at Vienna, and Giuseppe Torelli’s Sinfonia in C (G 33) for four trumpets, trombone, timpani, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 violins, 2 cellos, and strings; both works are filled with extensive solo passages and trumpet fanfares.

The Corelli Sinfonia has only appeared in complete box sets (M/A 1991 and N/D 2005). While there have been other complete collections of the Albinoni oboe concertos (N/D 2009 & S/O 2013), the baroque oboes on this new release can be by turns virtuosic, rustic, and lyrical. I know of only one earlier recording of the Torelli (M/J 1994), which is very good, but _La Serenissima_ makes this piece of baroque bombast much more subtle.

The soloists and ensemble are superb and Adrian Chandler is very effective both as leader and as soloist in the Tartini concerto. As has been noted in the earlier reviews for this group (such as their Vivaldi recordings, S/O 2005, M/J 2008, N/D 2011, and N/D 2013; or their concerto collections, M/J 2007: 216; M/J 2009: 196, and N/D 2012: 257), they play with precision and passion, both readily evident on this new release.

**BREWER**

**Heroes of Love & Loss**

Ruby Hughes, s; Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann, vc; Jonas Nordberg, theorbo—BIS 2248—71:28

This is an eclectic collection of English and Italian songs from the 17th Century performed by Ruby Hughes. Her range of repertoire and style is impressive from Barbara Strozzi’s dramatic cantata, _L’Eraclito amoroso_ to the simple beauty of the lament, ‘O death, rock me asleep’, attributed to Anne Boleyn. Particularly enjoyable is the imaginative and supportive accompaniment supplied by Nordberg and Brinkmann, who also supply instrumental interludes; Nordberg includes Giovanni Kapsberger’s ‘Toccata arpeggiata’ and Alessandro Piccinini’s ‘Ciaccona’; Brinkmann performs Vivaldi’s Cello Sonata in G minor (R 42), though the movements are interspersed between the songs.

The Italian vocal selections also include works by Claudia Sessa and Lucrezia Vizzana (both nuns), along with Francesca Caccini’s ‘Lasciatemi qui solo.’ The English selections range from the anonymous ‘Willow Song’ and John Bennet’s lute song, ‘Venus’ Birds’ from the early years of the 17th Century to two selections by Purcell. The first, ‘Oh, lead me to some peaceful gloom,’ is from the play **Bondu-**
ca, and Hughes offers a very intelligent and reflective interpretation of the vivid images of its text. The other was rather a surprise, ‘Dido’s Lament’ from Dido and Aeneas, though this trio creatively and very effectively reconfigures this famous aria into a solo song.

After the Sabbath

Weelkes, Taverner, Nicholson, Davies, Huxley, Le Fleming, Schütz, Kelly, Tallis, Mendelssohn, Bruckner, Bairstow, Dvorak, Stanford, Palestrina, Harris

David Hardie, org: Birmingham Cathedral Choir/ Marcus Huxley—Regent 490—74 minutes

According to a note on the back panel, the recording was inspired by a collaboration between the Birmingham Cathedral Choir and Tony Iommi, the lead guitarist of the rock band Black Sabbath. Iommi wrote the music for the song ‘How Good it Is’ to a text compiled by the Dean of Birmingham. That work is not here, and I fail to see any connection between that and the present recording, which is a miscellaneous collection of well known sacred choral works plus a few rarities. It is typical of innumerable recordings by English choral foundations.

There are three pieces written especially for the choir: Antony Le Fleming’s Nunc Dimittis (1997), Bryan Kelly’s ‘O Clap your Hands’ (2008), and director Marcus Huxley’s arrangement of ‘When I Survey the Wondrous Cross’ (tune Rockingham). All three are claimed as first recordings.

The Birmingham Cathedral Choir consists of three divisions: adult men, boys, and girls. They perform separately and in various combinations, most often as a traditional choir of men and boys. The girls’ choir was founded in 1992. The choral sound heard here is highly respectable, but I would not class it with the very best of the English choral foundations for technical polish, intonation, or vocal poise. The trebles sound as if they are trying too hard to hit the highest notes. In Bruckner’s ‘Christus Factus Est’, the choir sounds stretched to its technical limit, if not slightly beyond.

One of the more impressive performances here is ‘Faire is the Heaven’ by Sir William Harris, who clearly knew how to write effectively for choirs of this sort. As an interlude roughly halfway through the program, organist David Hardie plays ‘Meditation’ by Maurice Duruflé, a work written in 1964 but published posthumously.

Marcus Huxley (b 1949) retired in the summer of this year after 31 years as music director of Birmingham Cathedral.

Black Mountain Songs

Bryce Dessner, Richard Reed Parry, Caroline Shaw, John King, Alessandra Vrebalov, Jherek Bischoff, Nico Muhly, Tim Hecker

Brooklyn Youth Chorus/ Dianne Berkun Menaker

New Amsterdam 87—77 minutes

I had heard of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, but had never actually heard them until I was sent this for review. Led by artistic director Dianne Berkun Menaker, they are an excellent ensemble that blends very well and has far better intonation than I would have expected, given their youth. They don’t sound like robots though, even allowing some vibrato to color the vocal ensemble (anathema to other choral groups).

According to the notes enclosed in the booklet, “Black Mountain Songs is an exhilarating 90-minute staged choral work with readings, videos, dancers and, at its core, the singing of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus...” I enjoyed all of the music, but even before I read the notes I wondered if something was missing. This is the choral music, minus the readings, so it’s difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the entire presentation. All the same, the choral writing here is eclectic and not easy to sing. There are times when the ensemble is asked to overlap each other with great precision or maintain one vocal line while others are singing something completely different.

The texts are derived from old hymns and contemporary poets. Read by themselves the lyrics don’t seem connected to each other, and yet with the musical settings it all makes sense. The sound is excellent and the texts are supplied. I urge all lovers of contemporary choral works to hear this. I just wish there was a DVD that included the narration and visual elements.

1517? Mitten im Leben

Calmus; Lautten Compagney

Carus 83.477—76:31

1517? Why? I am not remotely Lutheran, and never have been, but in 2017 Lutherans and others are marking the 500th anniversary of the date considered to be the beginning of the Reformation, Oct. 31, 2017, when Martin Luther is thought to have nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg. (Of course, the Bohemian Reformation of Jan Hus, responding to the same corruption as Luther, was more than a century earlier, and...
Jan Hus was burned at the stake at the Council of Constance in 1415.)

The vocal quintet, the Calmus Ensemble, together with the Lautten Compagney (two lutenists joined by recorder, cornetto, violins, gamba, and sackbut), has chosen an interesting program of mostly secular music relating to the issues of 1517 and thereafter. There is a Johann Walter motet (‘Beati immaculati in via’), with topical texts in bassus and altus (Hail, Luther! Hail, Melanchthon!), and a rather nasty anti-Popish song by Stephan Zirler (‘Ich will fürthin gut päpstlich sein’), though Te Luther- um Damnannus (a anti-Lutheran parody of the Te Deum, once performed and recorded by Richard Taruskin) is inexplicably missing.

About a third of the program is devoted to modern arrangements of popular songs of the time (‘Ach Elslein’, et alia), interspersed among the echt-Renaissance numbers. These do not say much to me—maybe they are more gemütlich for German listeners. American singers will enjoy the rendition of the familiar ‘Matera mia cara’ by Lassus.

MOORE, T

Anthem

HANDEL: Zadok the Priest; BAINTON: And I Saw a New Heaven; ELGAR: Ave, Verum Corpus; Give unto the Lord; VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: O How Amiable; BRITTEN: Jubilate Deo in C; PARRY: My Soul, There is a Country; I Was Glad; HOLST: Psalm 146; STAINER: God So Loved the World; MACMILLAN: A New Song; FINZI: God is Gone Up; DOVE: Seek Him that Maketh the 7 Stars

Thomas Trotter, org; Huddersfield Choral Society/ Aidan Oliver—Signum 465—69 minutes

Another recording by an English choir of oft-recorded pieces. Why do these ensembles keep recording the same repertoire over and over? The Huddersfield Choral Society, founded in 1836, is one of many choral societies still active in Britain, keeping the tradition of choral singing very much alive. Their primary function is to perform major choral works with orchestra, so it is a bit unusual to hear them in liturgical repertoire. They sing with a full-bodied tone and achieve some wonderful fortissimo climaxes and lovely pianissimo effects, but I found myself much of time wishing that the soprano section would make another quarter-turn of the “intonation screw”. Some of the most distinguished music-making comes from the organist, Thomas Trotter. There are much better choices for all of these pieces. Notes on the music and texts.

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A New Heaven

MACMILLAN: Alpha and Omega: Bring Us, O Lord; HARRIS: Bring Us, O Lord; Faire is the Heaven; DUBRA: Stetit Angelus; BAINTON: And I Saw a New Heaven; JACKSON: I Know that my Redeemer liveth; YOUNG: 7 Trumpets; GAL-VANI: Et Vidi Angelus; LEIGHTON: Alleluia, Amen; RUTTER: Hymn to the Creator of Light; COOKE: The World on Fire; BEDNALL: The 7th Angel

David Bednall, Rebecca Baker, org; Queen’s College Choir/ Owen Rees—Signum 475—78 mins

I haven’t heard a recording of English choral music in a long time that moved me as much as this one did. The theme of the program is “revelation, both divine (particularly the apocalyptic visions of the Book of Revelation) and revelatory visions of earth and heaven”. Most of these pieces were unfamiliar to me, save Bainton, Harris, and Rutter, but I found myself fully engaged with every one of them. Their relation to the overall theme of revelation, combined with the superb performances by the Queen’s College Choir, makes for a truly spiritual experience. With Oxford and Cambridge college choirs one assumes perfect blend, intonation, ensemble, and diction, which can result in “bloodless” performances. That is not the case here; these performances are distinguished by their sincere musical and emotional commitment. This is inspired music-making and a must-have for your English choral collection.

EXCELLENT notes on the music by the conductor.

DELCAMP

Sing Me to Heaven

RUNESTAD: Alleluia; ESENVALLS: O Salutaris Hostia; Stars; FORREST: Entreat Me Not to Leave You; LAURIDSEN: Sure on this Shining Night; CHILCOTT: Chautauqua Requiem; GAWTHROP: Sing Me to Heaven; LEVINE: I Thank You God; CALDWELL & IVORY: Gabriel; arr ELDERS: Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star; SMITH: We Rise Again; arr WILBERG: My Song in the Night; Bound for the Promised Land

Susquehanna Chorale/ Linda Tedford—Signum 52259—51 minutes

Between Esenvals, Chilcott, Lauridsen, and a couple of these soft-rock arrangements, the cumulative sweetness of the music can turn a bit gelatinous over time. But I do want to commend the choir and conductor for their lovely singing and for their emotional sincerity. The engineering flatters the voices at every turn. So if the repertoire piques your interest more than it does mine, don’t hesitate.

GREENFIELD
Finland

SIBELIUS: Rakastava; Finlandia; SAARIAHO: Nuus Adieux; TALVITE: Kuun Kirje; RAUTAVAARA: Canticum Mariae Virginis; Cancion de Nuestro Tiempo; Orpheus Singt; LINKOLA: Mieliteko

SWR Vocal Ensemble/ Marcus Creed
SWR 19031—72 minutes

Maestro Creed’s SWR singers prove quickly that they aren’t accidental tourists in Finland any more than they were in Russia, Poland, Italy, and the USA in their previous choral stops. They sing Sibelius’s ‘Rakastava’ (The Lover) with commendable ethnic flair, and if there’s ever been a lovelier ‘Finlandia’ I haven’t heard it. Rautavaara’s settings of Lorca’s poetry are nightmarish to a fault, and there’s an attractive meeting of Scandinavian pop culture and American jazz in ‘Mieliteko’ by Jukka Linkola (b 1955). Alas, SWR still refuses to supply English translations.

GREENFIELD

Azahar

STRAVINSKY: Mass; MACHAUT: Notre-Dame Mass (sel); OHANA: Cantigas; ALFONSO EL SABIO: Cantigas

Claire Lefilliatre, Anna Reinhold, Francisco Manalich, Lisandro Abadie; La Tempete/ Simon-Pierre Bestion—Alpha 261—82 minutes

Before I forget, azahar means orange blossom in Spanish. It becomes a fragrant metaphor for the Virgin Mary in a 13th Century poem that became one of the texts set by Maurice Ohana (1913-92) in his Cantigas. That evocative title turns out to be one of the nicer things about this release, which, frankly, is a little on the strange side.

Stravinsky’s 1948 Mass was inspired by the medieval idiom of Guillaume de Machaut’s Notre-Dame Mass, and Monsieur Ohana’s Cantigas are 20th Century echoes of the medieval songs crafted by Alfonso El Sabio in his Cantigas de Santa Maria. So far, so good. The idea of the program, though, is to disorient the listener (Maitre Bestion’s own description) by jumbling everything up so that Stravinsky’s take on the liturgy is interrupted by Machaut three times, and we jump back and forth between the medieval Cantigas and the contemporary ones. Strangest of all is the version of the Notre Dame Mass in use, which sounds like the Otto Klemperer Silk Road Edition. It’s slow, craggy, and sports antiphons and other bits more redolent of an Eastern marketplace than a French cathedral.

The Stravinsky is actually quite good, especially in the Gloria and deeply-felt Agnus Dei. I just wish they had left it alone, because the 700-year-old interpolations are disruptive and add nothing to either work. But there’s hearty singing on display in the medieval Cantigas, and the exotic touches added there wind up flattering Alfonso’s handiwork. I also find that the alternating idioms dilute the force of Ohana’s modernism, making his Cantigas sound more appealing. The recording is vivid and strong. Texts and translations are included in the booklet. A short Q&A session with the conductor takes the place of scholarly notes.

GREENFIELD

Ein Feste Burg ist Unser Gott

Luther and the Reformation
Bart Jacobs, org; Vox Luminis/ Lionel Meunier
Ricercar 376 [2CD] 155 minutes

Most CDs come with a booklet, sized about 4 7/8 x 5 1/2. Here, though, you get what looks like a real book: 5 1/4 x 8 1/4, hard-bound and 104 pages long; the discs are tucked in the front and back covers. The “book” contains a short history of Martin Luther and music of the Reformation. The history part runs only 8 pages, notes on the pieces take another 10, and there are pictures. The remainder of the book includes texts and translations, as well as translations of the essay material into French and German (with lots more pictures).

The CDs include the vocal works of 13 composers and organ works of 7. The oldest composer here, next to Luther himself, is Balthasar Resinarius (c. 1485-1544), and the youngest is Christopf Bernhard (1628-92). Most popular is Scheidt, with 6 pieces, followed by Schütz and Michael Praetorius with 3 and several with 2. (There is nothing of JS Bach, who was born too late for inclusion.)

The first disc contains selections running through the church year, beginning with Advent (Michael Altenburg’s ‘Nun komm der Heiden Heiland!’ The second disc has music for the foundations of the Lutheran liturgy. Here we have a German Magnificat (Schütz) and Mass (Bernhard), as well as music for the sacraments, the Passion, and so forth. The notes by Jerome Lejeune are uncommonly detailed and informative.

Musically everything is top notch. The choir consists of 6 sopranos, 2 countertenors, 4 tenors, and 3 basses, but not everyone sings every piece, so balances are fine. The organ pieces were recorded at Saint Vincent’s church in Ciboure (in the Pyrenees section of southern France), and the ones for organ with voices were recorded in Notre-Dame church in Gedinne, Belgium. Both are modern instru-
to make her Metropolitan Opera debut in 2019. opera houses in Russian roles. She is scheduled (2013) and has already sung at major European soprano that has often been associated with the notes w ith ease. Her Fr ench pronunciation is role, though she can certainly sing normal high known in English as 'Midnight in Moscow', and two folk songs: a Cossack lullaby and (in her native Tatar) 'Allüki' . plays her strengths. She sings Russian arias and songs by Rachmaninoff, the Russian popular song (Tatar equivalent). She starts off with two French arias: 'Juliet's Waltz Song' from Gounod's Romeo et Juliette and the ‘Bell Song’ from Delibes's Lakmé. She transposes the latter down a bit to suit her voice, which is not the stratospheric type of soprano that has often been associated with the role, though she can certainly sing normal high notes with ease. Her French pronunciation is approximate: the mute E is too open, and I did not notice a single nasal vowel. She also does little in those two arias to color individual words—she is far more interested in producing a beautifully even string of pearl-like notes.

Garifullina says in the booklet that she took the recordings of Anna Moffo as one of her main models, and she has chosen well. I hope she continues to grow as a singer, mastering the art of performing in other languages and responding more to the meanings of individual words and phrases—but without losing the astounding perfection of vocal production that is on display here.

The orchestra is sometimes a bit in the background. Various orchestrators are credited for the songs she chose to sing, and their work is mostly capable and inoffensive. But I disliked Paul Bateman’s reorchestration of the ‘Song of India’ (from Rimsky-Korsakov’s Sadko): why not just let us hear what Rimsky-Korsakov wrote, since this is already an opera aria? Bateman had the not-brilliant idea of making the orchestration more elaborate in the second strophe. It’s all somewhat distracting and unnecessary.

Far more distracting, I find, is Paul Campbell’s lush arrangement of the Tatar folk song. Campbell seems to have taken as a model what Joseph Canteloube did with the famous Chants d’Auvergne: a cushion of string sound, swooshing harps, soft arpeggios in the woodwinds, and so on. If you like the Canteloube songs (I have never had the patience for them), then here’s a Tatar equivalent.

Complete texts in the original languages, plus good translations. The table of contents is a little confusing: the layout could give the inadvertent impression that Rachmaninoff wrote the Tatar song and the Cossack lullaby.

I suggest that you listen to Garifullina: this this is some of the most beautiful singing I have heard in years.

Aida Garifullina
Austrian Radio/ Cornelius Meister
Decca 4788305—60 minutes

Aida Garifullina is utterly remarkable: a lyric soprano who also can handle coloratura with ease. Her tone has a constant shimmer, with a touch of quick, narrow vibrato even on short notes. She was clearly well trained in her native Tatarstan and then in Nuremberg and Vienna. She won first prize in the Operaalia competition (2013) and has already sung at major European opera houses in Russian roles. She is scheduled to make her Metropolitan Opera debut in 2019.

The repertoire she has chosen here displays her strengths. She sings Russian arias and songs by Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Rachmaninoff, the Russian popular song known in English as ‘Midnight in Moscow’, and two folk songs: a Cossack lullaby and (in her native Tatar) ‘Allüki’.

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Tides of Life
Wolf, Schubert, Brahms, Barber
Thomas Hampson, bar; Amsterdam Sinfonietta/
Candida Thompson—Channel 38917—55 mins

“Tides of Life” begins with four songs each of Schubert and Wolf as arranged in 2013 by David Matthews for string chamber orchestra. Next comes Wolf’s Italian Serenade for strings followed by Brahms’s Four Serious Songs, again arranged by Matthews for string ensemble. The program concludes with Barber’s ‘Dover Beach’.

Hampson has a sweet and honey-toned voice, and I often love his recordings. In this case I find his approach too sweet and too polite, especially in the Brahms, which needs to be more serious. The songs are meant to convey somber and sober reflection in the face of death. The hammer striking the piano strings gives an entirely different feeling than the softness of bowed cello strings. The entire program is entirely too somnolent.

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Barber composed ‘Dover Beach’ for baritone and string quartet. Here the accompaniment is string orchestra. Again his singing remains too restful to convey the anxiety of living in time of war, and the lushness of a string orchestra removes the bite that a string quartet can produce.

The notes have an interview with Hampson and texts in original languages only.

**Of Love of You**

Liebermann, Tredici, Bolcom

Sharon Harms, s; Robert Osborne, bar; Todd Crow, Lowell Liebermann, Yehudi Wyner, p

MSR 1611—41 minutes

This short program consists of 11 pieces commissioned by Luigi Terruso in memory of Emery W. Harper, the love of his life. Harper was an attorney who specialized in admiralty law, and there is a tribute to him from Terruso in the booklet. Terruso himself is an abstract expressionist artist with several bold, kaleidoscopic paintings to his credit. The composers are people Emery and Luigi had become friends with, and the pieces were first performed on February 25, 2014, on what would have been Emery’s 78th birthday. There are three songs for soprano, four for bass-baritone, and four pieces for piano.

Lowell Liebermann’s lyrical setting of ‘Music, When Soft Voices Die’ has gentle dissonances and a fairly opaque accompaniment. Bernard Rands’s Impromptu No. 2 is scampering and barbed. Joan Morris and William Bolcom’s ‘Of Love of You’ has lyrics by Arnold Weinstein, and it is an easy-going song in their cabaret style. Steven Stucky’s ‘Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking’ is chromatic and stern; David del Tredici’s ‘Bank Street Prelude’ is winsome and restrained; it reminds me a lot of one of Schumann’s medium-tempo character sketches. John Eaton’s ‘Lycidas’ is the most abstract and dissonant, with atonal piano gestures and swooping vocal lines.

Bolcom’s ‘Sentimental Waltz’ is for piano four-hands, and it is more pragmatic and experienced than its title implies. Paul Moravec set Emily Dickinson’s five-line poem, ‘You Left Me,’ and it deals the most directly with the pain of loss. Yehudi Wyner’s ‘Amoroso,’ for piano, is bluesy, aphoristic, and—indeed—amorous all at once. It and the Del Tredici are my favorite pieces here. Tania Leon’s ‘Mi Amor Es’ is a breeze from Latin America that carries some profound harmonies. Jorge Martín’s ‘We Two Boys,’ with a Walt Whitman text, is jazzy and effective.

The pianists are all fine; no real virtuosic demands are placed on them, but they play with intelligence and sympathy. The singers are less enjoyable. Harms is best in ‘Music, When Soft Voices Die’; in the Morris-Bolcom her style is unconvincing, and she resorts to some disturbing affectations and bizarre pronunciations—’for laahve uv yeew’. In her other pieces she is listenable but not much more than that. Osborne’s diction is very clear, but he strains sometimes and sounds emotionless in ‘You Left Me’ and ‘Mi Amor Es’. English texts and a translation of the Spanish song are included.

**Temps Nouveau**

Gounod, Massenet, Frank, Bizet, Saint-Saëns

Michele Losier, mz; Olivier Godin, p

ATMA 2720—73 minutes

Michele Losier is a fine Canadian mezzo-soprano who was one of the Metropolitan Opera National Council winners in 2005. She made a Met debut in Gluck’s “Iphigenie en Tauride” in 2007 and then sang Siebel in the new ‘Faust’ production in 2011. Since then she has not returned to the Met (the Met’s loss), but has had an active career both in opera and recital. Her rich, warm, seductive voice is heard here in a generous recital of songs by well-known French composers. All of this repertoire will be familiar to collectors of this material and Losier sings it to the manner born. It certainly helps that she is a native French speaker. More so than with some other languages, French benefits from singers who know exactly what they are singing about at every moment. I remember hearing Phyllis Curtin in a masterclass reply to a young soprano who said she knew the general meaning of a song, ‘Generalities do not make great art.’

Losier’s gift is that she reveals the subtleties of these texts without sounding like she is trying to teach us something. Her delivery is natural, unforced, and spontaneous. She is obviously enjoying singing these songs, and so the listener does too. Her fine accompanist, Olivier Godin, contributes his share to the proceedings, adding color and precision to these beautiful songs. The sound is excellent, capturing the glow of Losier’s tone and the warm tone of the piano.

The only criticism I have of this elegantly produced disc is that while the original texts are included there are no translations.

REYNOLDS

*July/August 2017*
**Toutes les Nuits**

Mattea Musso, mz; Miguel de Olaso, lute, g; Hernan Cuadrado, gamba
Acqua 493—48 minutes

This is the first release for Mattea Musso, a Sicilian mezzo who has already developed an international career, having lived and performed in New Orleans from 2012 to 2014 and since then dividing her time between Italy and Buenos Aires. The structure of the program is unusual and interesting, tracing a spiritual journey from sunset through the dark hours of the night (think Dowland’s ‘In darkness let me dwell’), through to the hope of the following day.

Musso has an attractive contralto, and her accompanists are skilled. But three factors mitigate against a fuller enjoyment of this: Musso’s rich sound is not aimed principally on a projection of the texts, and this is exacerbated by the resonant acoustic of the recording. (I would defy the most skilled transcriber to actually understand the poetry here.) And, finally, no texts are supplied.

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**Jessye Norman: Salzburg Festival 1991**

Strauss, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, Schoenberg
James Levine, p—Orfeo 926161—80 minutes

Jessye Norman was a true favorite in Europe (she still is) and her annual Salzburg Festival recitals were eagerly anticipated. This recital from August 6, 1991 finds her in typical form for that period. Her choice of repertoire is good—music of composers long associated with her.

The five opening Strauss songs are well done though some intonation problems show that perhaps she wasn’t quite warmed up yet. The Tchaikovsky songs (French texts—always a language that Norman did well) find her at something close to her best form and are quite beautiful. The main courses of the recital are the Wagner Wesendonck Lieder and the Schoenberg Brettl Lieder, both of which she sings sumptuously as only she can. She finds the humor in the Schoenberg songs, though it is never spontaneous. Every interpretive nuance has been planned. Her two encores are also planned for maximum effect. Strauss’s ‘Zueignung’ is rapturously received by the audience only to be topped by the slowest, most mannered version of the Carmen ‘Habanera’ I’ve ever heard. No matter: the audience eats it up.

James Levine is a fantastic accompanist, following Norman when she needs him to, spurring her on when the music requires it. Everyone had a good time at this performance. The sound is very good, though ideally one wants a little more air around Norman’s voice. As with all of these Orfeo recital discs, no texts or translations are supplied.

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**Catharsis**

Xavier Sabata, ct; Armonia Atenea/ George Petrou—Aparté 143—66 minutes

Wait—Vin Diesel sings opera? Oh no, it’s just Xavier Sabata, the bad-boy of the countertenor world. Here he is, head shaved, sporting a rough beard, hairy chest exposed, and dripping wet, as though we’ve caught him in the midst of an undercover mission with the Navy SEALs. What is it with the odd cover art of these solo countertenor albums? On the 2014 recording of Hasse Arias titled ROKOKO (Decca 4786418; J/A 2014), Max Emanuel Cencic is decked out with a 1950s pompadour, bright yellow shirt unbuttoned to the navel, and neck slung with beads. I commented in my review that it imitated the bold cover art of vintage Decca albums—Bing Crosby, c. 1964. Ah, but puzzle solved: there is a connection between these competing countertenor recordings, and it is the conductor George Petrou and the ensemble Armonia Atenea, who add their share of drama in the orchestral accompaniment on both releases.

Catharsis is as brilliant a recording as was ROKOKO. And one wonders whether it will do as much for the revival of these little-known opera composers as Cencic’s recording did for Hasse. Arias on this release by Orlandini, Conti, Torri, Caldara, Ariosti, and Sarro are as virtuosic as Hasse’s. Some of the arias here derive from the three-act opera Adelaide (1729) by Giuseppe Maria Orlandini (1676-1760). He was the maestro di cappella at the courts of Florence and Bologna, and, according to Charles Burney, was renowned for his dramatic music. The arias ‘Alza Al Ciel Pianta Orgoglioso’ and ‘Gia Mi Sembra Al Carro Avvinto’ are full of complicated passages, which Sabata tosses off without difficulty.

To counteract Orlandini’s ravishing arias, Petrou programs the gentle arias of Conti, Handel, and Hasse. ‘Cara Sposa’ from Francesco Bartolomeo Conti’s opera Griselda (1725) offers soaring melodies over simple harmonic accompaniment. Handel’s arioso ‘Chiedetevi Miei Lumi’ from Act I of Admeto is sublime, as is ‘Or Mi Pento’ from Hasse’s oratorio La Conversione Di Sant’Agostino. Texts and notes are in English.

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217
Verlaine Songbook
Bordes, Chausson, Debussy, Fauré, Hahn, Ravel, Saint-Saëns, Severac, Szulc, Poldowski
Carolyn Sampson, s; Joseph Middleton, p
BIS 2233 [SACD] 80 minutes

Back in the LP days, if a singer wanted to show some sophistication, she sometimes put out an album of songs by famous composers based on one poet: for example, Phyllis Curtin’s much-admired 1964 record of Debussy and Fauré songs (Verlaine), with pianist Ryan Edwards (available now as a CD from VAI).

Today, singers and their pianists are more willing to explore repertory by less-known composers. Also, a CD can carry much more music than the typical LP. Carolyn Sampson—an established light soprano—here offers an entire program of Verlaine settings by no fewer than ten composers: the inevitable Debussy and Fauré, but also Saint-Saëns, Chausson, Ravel, Reynaldo Hahn, Severac, Joseph Szulc, and Regine Weniawski Poldowski (daughter of the famous violinist).

This does not produce a scattershot effect because several cycles or sets are recorded entire (Debussy’s Fêtes Galantes, series 1, and Ariettes Oubliées; and Fauré’s Bonne Chanson). Also, the songs of Poldowski are grouped together, as are Hahn’s. The single songs by Ravel, Szulc, et al., thus come as refreshment after a group of tracks by one composer.

Another element of coherence: a number of the songs use the same text. There is much fascination in observing how Saint-Saëns, for example, fills ‘C’est l’extase langoureuse’ with a lively accompaniment emphasizing ecstasy whereas Debussy’s setting emphasizes languor. And, for extra fun, certain images recur from poem to poem, in different contexts: moonlight, nightingale, musical note-names (“do-mi-sol”), and so on.

Roger Nichols’s booklet-essay discusses the different composers’ approaches to each poem. The translations, by William Jewson, of the often-laconic song texts are as clear as can be without adding words of explanation.

People who already know the Debussy and Fauré songs may well be delighted, as I was, to discover how responsive the other composers were to this poet’s evocative verses. Hahn, Poldowski, Severac, and Szulc produce what are, in many ways, quite conservative settings. (Szulc would go on to write musical comedies.) But conservative need not mean routine. Szulc’s setting of ‘Claire de Lune’ captures the dreamy mood of the text beautifully, as does Poldowski’s somewhat Schumanesque ‘En Sourdine’ (“Calmes dans le demi-jour”). Poldowski’s ‘Mandoline’ (“Les donneurs de sérénades”) evokes the atmosphere of commedia dell’arte no less effectively than the famous settings by Fauré and Debussy. And there are poetically apt echoes of church style in a song by Bordes and the closing number of the program, by Severac. As for the master composers, I will confine myself here to mentioning the sole Ravel item: ‘Sur l’Herbe’, which I had never encountered before, is a wonderful “slice of life” song in his magical pseudo-Spanish style.

This was my first time hearing Sampson. She is a light, flexible soprano, a bit like Sylvia McNair or Kathleen Battle. She commands a wide range of techniques, from straight tone to rich vibrato, and from super-legato singing and controlled portamento to a semi-spoken lightness. She can file her voice down to a slender but well-supported thread. Some of the singing is among the most beautiful that my ears have ever heard—for example, in Chausson’s ‘Apaisement’ (“La lune blanche”) and Hahn’s ‘L’Heure Exquise’ (“Votre ame est un paysage choisi”).

Sampson is given superb support from Joseph Middleton, who is director of the Leeds Lieder Festival. I was often enchanted by the way the pianist responds to the changing imagery in the texts and to shifts in harmony and figuration.

The same performers’ previous CD for BIS, Fleurs, was rapturously received by critics (including Erin Heisel, S/O 2015). I foresee a positive response to this marvelously well thought-out program, which nicely reminds us that many lesser-known composers from the past have written at least a few pieces that can gratify performers and listeners alike today.

Warning: I at first listened to this in my car. Her loud high notes often came across as harsh and the echo annoying. At home, on good equipment, it is as exquisite as (Verlaine might say) the glow of moonlight on russet grass.

LOCKE

Fêtes Galantes
DEBUSSY: Chansons de Bilitis; Fêtes Galantes I; Mallarmé Poems; FAURE: 5 Melodies de Venise; Chanson d’Eve
Bettina Smith, mz; Einar Rottingen, p
LAWO 1116—55 minutes

Here are five complete song sets by two of the greatest masters of French song. The performers are highly competent. I should have known, given the rave review that Erin Heisel wrote of
their recording of modern Norwegian songs (S/O 2015).

Bettina Smith (who is, like her pianist, a Norwegian) handles the French texts very well. Still, I noticed some approximate pronunciations. Her vibrato is mostly under good control, but the brief passages of coloratura in Fauré’s ‘Clair de Lune’ are not tossed off with ease. Her mezzo-soprano voice broadens wonderfully at the top, especially at high volumes. At the bottom it is often a bit light. Is she singing these songs in keys that are a little low for her (which thus helps the top notes be well in her grasp)?

On an interpretive level, the singer is often emotionally neutral. There are few shadings to indicate regret, humor, passion. The singer responds to the text mainly by becoming louder or softer, or by speeding up or slowing down a little. The touching conclusion of ‘C’est l’Ex- tase’—”Tout has” (soft and low)—here becomes merely two more words for Smith to sing in her nice, solid fashion. Her pianist shows high skill but, at least in this repertoire, little independent imagination.

This shortcoming is most apparent in the least known set: a true cycle by Fauré that amounts to a kind of mini-opera for Eve, the world’s first woman. I cannot help but wonder if Smith (or, indeed, Rottingen) has thought about the many fascinating aspects of the ten poems that Fauré selected out of a much longer collection by Charles van Lerbergh. For one thing, Eve, in Fauré’s cycle, has a fascinating relationship with what seems to be the primary more-or-less-male figure in her life: God, about whom the world’s first woman sings in an intimate, even sensual manner.

There are numerous recordings of these works; some supply more variety in the emission of the voice and greater attention to the subtleties of the poetry. Recordings of the Eve cycle by Elly Ameling, Jan De Gaetani, Barbara Hendricks, and Nathalie Stutzmann (who is a native French-speaker) are listed in our index, mostly under the composer and then the simple word “Songs”. Not in the index are recordings by Irma Kolassi and Dawn Upshaw. The latter is pure and gripping, with superb support from pianist Gilbert Kalish. The pioneering and highly responsive recording by Phyllis Curtin and Ryan Edwards (1964)—likewise not in the index—is still available on VAI 1186.

The booklet essay alternates trenchant observations and hyperbolic generalizations. Full texts and translations.

American Record Guide

Verismo

Krassimira Stoyanova, s; Munich Radio/ Pavel Baleff—Orfeo 899171—70 minutes

This is, I believe, the third aria album to be released by the Bulgarian-born soprano, who, for close to two decades, has sung major roles on the world’s stages, including the Met. The two previous ones were praised in these pages: one entirely devoted to Verdi (S/inunger, S/O 2014) and one offering arias by a variety of composers, including some from less-familiar operas (Lucano, J/F 2009). ARG has also reviewed her Puccini songs, three complete operas (Donizetti’s Maria di Rohan and Verdi’s II Trovatore and Otello), and DVDs of Rosenkavalier, La Juive, and Eugene Onegin (two of the latter). Clearly this is a singer who has mastered the ability to incarnate operatic characters, and in a variety of languages.

This is all-Italian. It brings together arias that can be described as more or less “verismo” from the years 1889-1926. A number of the excerpts are familiar, e.g., Liu’s two arias from Puccini’s Turandot and Cio-Cio-San’s ‘Un Bel Di’ and ‘Che Tua Madre’ from Madama Butterfly, and the exquisitely resigned ‘Ebben? Ne Andro Lontana’ from La Wally of Catalani. We also get to hear lesser-known excerpts from such works as Puccini’s early Edgar and Mascagni’s Lodoletta and Amico Fritz.

The entire album is performed with blazing conviction and close attention to the text and dramatic situation. These are arias of determination, desperation, and desolation; and Stoyanova helps me believe in each heroine’s specific crisis. Her beautiful pianissimo high notes, which reviewers of her earlier recordings greatly appreciated, find apt application in many of these excerpts as well. The one problem, to my ear, is that her vibrato is slower and wider than in the past. Perhaps this is in part because she is here singing so inten- sely; or perhaps the voice has (as so often with singers) become a bit worn over the years.

The aria texts are summarized in English and German but, alas, not given in full. I consider this an unfortunate economy on the part of Orfeo, which has for years been and remains a major label for opera. Stoyanova is a world-class performer and deserves better.

Advertising and “PR” replaces truth with believability. Politics is going the same way. Truth is lost.

LOCKE
Camilla Tilling: arias

GLUCK: Orfeo, Armide, Iphigenie en Tauride;
MOZART: Idomeneo, Marriage of Figaro, Cosi Fan Tutte
Musica Saeculorum/ Philipp von Steinaecker
BIS 2234—66 minutes

The excellent soprano Camilla Tilling brings us a fascinating program contrasting Gluck and Mozart arias. Tilling’s vocal competence is never in question: she has a lovely, floating tone that she uses exquisitely in this music. Of more interest is how she responds to these two classical composers.

I must confess that for many years I didn’t enjoy much of Gluck’s vocal writing, finding it dull and sanctimonious. It also rarely had that element of vocal virtuosity that is so much a part of Mozart’s writing. Tilling embraces Gluck’s textual settings, really making them come alive by knowing exactly what she is singing about. This is not as common as one might believe. I could name any number of singers who have important careers and get by on generalities (especially in the German repertoire). Cecilia Bartoli did an album of Gluck Italian rarities about 16 years ago that really opened my eyes to the potential of Gluck’s writing. Tilling does the same here (with much more familiar material), I’d love to hear her in a complete Armide or Iphigenie en Tauride.

Her Mozart arias are also treasurable. Recently I lamented that producers of Anette Fritsch’s Mozart recital (on Orfeo) used disc space to record another version of the Figaro overture rather than another aria. Here the Idomeneo overture leads seamlessly into Ilia’s opening recitative and aria and underlines Mozart’s genius. I can pick at a few things. Tilling’s trill is adequate, but not as clear as one ideally wants in this repertoire. And I would like more ornaments.

The Musica Saeculorum is an excellent period orchestra that adds color to the proceedings, and Maestro von Steinaecker leads with authority and flexibility. Excellent sound with enough space around the voice to make it glow. Texts and translations.

Siv Wennberg

Volume 5: Arias; Songs with orchestra
Mascagni, Verdi, Puccini, Sibelius, Beethoven, Schubert, Grieg, Strauss, Mahler, Rossini
Sterling 1804 [2CD] 147 minutes

Volume 7: Recitals
Grieg, Peterson-Berger, Strauss, Ponchielli, Verdi, Puccini, Stolz, Lehar, Kihinen
Lars Røn, Dag Achatz, p
Sterling 1809 [2CD] 134 minutes

Volume 8: New Year’s Concert; Songs
Peterson-Berger, Grieg, Sibelius, Puccini, Wolf, Strauss, Rangstrom, Wagner, Adam, Gounod
Bengt Wennberg, Anders Wadenberg, p
Sterling 1811 [2CD] 129 minutes

Most collectors will remember Siv Wennberg (b.1944) from her exciting performance of Irene in Heinrich Hollreiser’s recording of Wagner’s Rienzi (EMI). It was the first studio performance of that opera and, although not ideal in all respects, has worn its years very well. Wennberg has had a long and flourishing career in her native Sweden; and I always regretted that, for whatever reasons, she never had a big North American career as well. In its prime the voice was a shining, sturdy soprano with excellent high notes married to a keen interpretive talent.

Sterling has issued eight volumes of Wennberg’s work, all taken from concert performances and broadcasts. The other volumes are listed below.

Some of these recitals are from when she was a little past her vocal prime. A hootiness and under-the-note attack afflict her in the recordings made after 1990 or so. Her sincerity and commitment to the music are never in doubt.

What makes these sets worth acquiring (in addition to Wennberg’s singing) is that Sterling has supplied texts and translations for everything. Most collectors probably already have texts and translations for the Strauss, Schubert, Mahler, and even Grieg songs; but the other composers presented here are not so well known. It has become common for record companies to leave out essential translations. Sterling presents Wennberg’s art with all the class it deserves. The sound is at least decent in all these selections, sometimes more than that. Get these discs before they disappear!

Volume 1:
Songs by Schubert, Stenhammer, Grieg, Mendelssohn, Mozart; others
Sterling 1689

Volume 2:
WAGNER: Tristan & Isolde
with Wenkoff, Wilkens/ Franz Welser-Most
Sterling 1690 [3CD]

Liberalism...means a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance for authoritarianism, and a love of freedom.

The New York Times
FROM THE ARCHIVES

BACH: Brandenburg Concertos
Vienna Chamber Orchestra/ Joseph Mertin
Supraphon 4213 [2CD] 100 minutes

This is a happy reissue documenting a ripe moment in the evolution of historical performance movement. Josef Mertin (1904-98) was a Viennese musicologist who in 1950 gathered some of his students and musicians from the Vienna Chamber Orchestra to record the Bach Brandenburg Concertos played on old instruments—recorders and harpsichord—with an orchestra of 18th Century proportions. These students included Nikolaus Harnoncourt (1929-2016), Eduard Melkus (b. 1928), and Gustav Leonhardt (1928-2012). The performances were somewhat belatedly issued by Supraphon on 12 shellac discs in 1953.

The results might be considered more evolutionary than revolutionary: if the strings play with vibrato, the shift in scale is notable; while the tempos are slow by modern standards—and more variable—the style is a notable departure from the syrupy, maudlin interpretations of Bach not uncommon at the time. Perhaps the historicizing matters less than the performances simply considered simply as music. They are graceful, sensual, and attractive in the best Viennese way, and very well recorded too.

RADCLIFFE

BEETHOVEN: Piano Concertos 1, 3, 4, 5; short pieces
Wilhelm Kempff; Berlin Opera Orchestra, Dresden Philharmonic, German Opera Orchestra, Berlin Philharmonic/ Paul van Kempen, Peter Raabe
APR 6019 [2CD] 2:34

This collection includes Kempff’s first recording, the Beethoven Bagatelle in C from 1920 and extends through his first recordings of the concertos (1925, 1942, 1940, 1936). Early or late, Kempff inclines to the wit-and-sensibility, as opposed to the volcanic-passion end of the spectrum, always playing with incisive clarity. His cool manner lent itself to phonographic reproduction, not requiring the emotional stimulus of a concert audience.

But there are significant and telling stylistic changes between the acoustically-recorded first concerto and what followed in the 1930s and 40s. Kempff, like other performers,
indulged in strongly marked contrasts of tempo and tone in and between movements—
contrasts that created a different kind of drama than the smoother and more seamless style characteristic of romantic music in the era of high modernism. Likewise, there tended to be less integration between the solo and orchestral parts, creating a kind of unpredictability and drama. In the 1925 concerto even the transitions stand apart as their own thing, while the more continuous rhythmic flow in the performances of the 1930s and 40s creates an excitement that has more to do with memory and anticipation than with contrast and juxtaposition. In these performances one notices the greater sophistication in orchestral playing in Berlin that came in with Furtwangler, Klemperer, and their peers. Then too, recorded sound got noticeably better after the introduction of the microphone, though in Appian’s reconstructions, while surface noise is audible, so are the nuances of Kempff’s playing.

Whether considered individually or collectively, this is a valuable assemblage of out of the way early recordings by one of the great Beethoven interpreters of the 20th Century.

RADCLIFFE

BRAHMS: Piano Concerto 1; MOZART: Concerto 24
Glen Gould; CBC Symphony, New York Philharmonic/ Victor Feldbrill, Leonard Bernstein
IDIS 6720—77 minutes

The remarkable item here is the Brahms concerto. The Canadian conductor Victor Feldbrill (b. 1924), a former classmate of Gould’s, imparts a Toscanini-on-steroids energy to the work, which the soloist matches stride for stride, modulating deftly through a striking variety of tones and tempos. If this furious performance threatens to go over the top, it is compelling and shows Gould in a very unaccustomed light.

The Mozart concerto is a saner affair, Bernstein and Gould oozing sensibility as opposed to snatchin at sublimity. These 1959 broadcast recordings are not all one might desire sonically, but the performances come across.

RADCLIFFE

It is easier to work for the improvement of the world than to work for the improvement of oneself, though the world would profit immensely if the inverse order were followed.

RUTH ANSHEN

CHAUSON: Symphony; Poème de L’Amour et de la Mer; DEBUSSY: Printemps
Kathleen Ferrier, Boston Symphony, Halle Orchestra/ Charles Munch, John Barbirolli
Praga 250 345—75 minutes

This is aptly titled “Belle Epoque”—if the dark clouds of WW I were looming just over the horizon, these late-romantic compositions are as vibrantly sun-drenched as a landscape painted by Monet. It is not difficult to make such things pretty, but to make them memorable requires more than simply attending what is in the score: success requires rhythmic elan. Kathleen Ferrier elevates the Poème, which can be sleep-inducing, to Wagnerian sublimity with the assistance of pulsing accompaniment supplied by Sir John Barbirolli. This 1951 broadcast was captured on acetate discs by an amateur. While the shards are carefully pieced together for this reissue, the sound is not what one is accustomed to these days. No matter.

The Boston Symphony recordings date from 1962 and if not sonic wonders do quite well. Charles Munch brings huge gusto to both works: shaping the phrases, swelling and diminishing the tempos, and imparting a winning energy. This is the farthest thing from limp-wristed aestheticism. These radiant compositions are individually compelling and gain by a juxtaposition that does indeed suggest La Belle Epoque.

RADCLIFFE

MOZART: Don Giovanni
Maria Curtis Verna (Donna Anna), Carla Gavazzi (Donna Elvira), Elda Ribetti (Zerlina), Giuseppe Teddei (Giovanni), Italo Tajo (Leporello), Cesare Valletti (Ottavio), Vito Susca (Masetto), Antonio Zerbini (Commedatore); RAI Turin/ Max Rudolf
Urania 121.294 [3CD] 164+44 minutes

This was recorded in 1955 and released on Cetra. The sound is quite good, and the performances give us an idea of the level of Mozart singing in that era. This is not the supreme European cast of the post-war years with the likes of Schwarzkopf and Seefried, but a cast mostly of Italians conducted by Max Rudolf—an excellent conductor who would leave his mark on American music making, especially with the Metropolitan Opera and the Cincinnati Symphony. Here he seems to favor brisk tempos, and this performance really sails along.

The singers whose names are most recognizable are the best. Italo Tajo must have been a wonderful Leporello. He brings out both the
humor and the humanity in the man; and his voice is still fully able to cope with Mozart’s vocal line while now and then inserting the quavering tone he often used for comic effect, or, here, to show his fear of the statue. I saw Giuseppe Taddei when he was much older, doing Dulcamara and similar roles, so it is hard for me to imagine him as a dashing Don Giovanni, but he sings the role very well. His soft singing shows an elegant style, especially in his duet with Zerlina and his Act II serenade to Elvira’s maid. Don Ottavio was one of Cesare Valletti’s most frequent roles in his Met years. While he sounds a little tight in ‘Dalla sua Pace,’ he is definitely at home in this role. The evenness of his line and his superior breath control in ‘Il mio Tesoro’ are testaments of his excellent technique. Both Masetto and the Commendatore sing well also.

Maria Curtis Verna, or Mary Curtis-Verna, stands out for the singing of her two difficult arias. She has the necessary power in her high notes for ‘Or sai chi l’onore,’ and in ‘Non mi dir’ she copes well with the fiendish coloratura passage. She is a fine Donna Anna, though in the Epilogue she sounds a bit strained. She would in the following decade sing many roles at the Met as well as Cincinatti Opera. I also like the Zerlina of Elda Ribetti; but the Elvira of Carla Gavazzi, while not totally ineffective, has some rather unpleasant shrill high notes. In ‘Mi tradi’ she seems to lunge after some of the notes instead of hitting them squarely.

Thus this performance is an interesting memory of Mozart in mid-50s Italy. I cannot imagine anyone preferring it to many fine later recordings. The third CD is completed by seven arias from Mozart and Rossini sung by Giuseppe Taddei. All are done well, but not well enough to warrant buying the recording.

SININGER

MOZART: Piano Concertos 13, 19, 20
Clara Haskil, Berlin Philharmonic, RIAS Symphony/ Ferenc Fricsay
Praga 250 347—83 minutes

Clara Haskil (1895-1960) and Ferenc Fricsay (1914-63) made their reputations in the early 1950s—Haskil very belatedly—and have attracted record collectors ever since. These performances are decidedly of that modernizing era, scrubbing off the brown varnish the previous generation had applied to Mozart. Instead of sentimental wash we have pointillist perfection, Haskil playing gracefully with a rather staccato touch and Fricsay teasing apart each line and tone in the score. The result is more classical than baroque, more Berlin than Vienna, but pleasing, not least when the general briskness yields to an unexpected ritard. The concerto recorded with the Berlin Philharmonic is in better sound and particularly attractive.

RADCLIFFE

VERDI: Requiem; 4 Sacred Pieces;
4 opera overtures
Maria Stader, s; Oralia Dominguez, mz; Gabor Carelli, t; Ivan Sardi, b; RIAS/ Ferenc Fricsay
Urania 121.284 [2CD] 153 minutes

The four soloists are extremely well captured by the microphone, the chorus and orchestra somewhat less so. Perhaps this was a radio broadcast. The sound sometimes gets a little constricted when several soloists are singing at once or when the chorus and orchestra are blazing away.

Fricsay (1914-63), born and trained in Hungary, was much appreciated by record collectors in the late 1950s and 60s for his opera recordings (four by Mozart, plus Fidelio and Flying Dutchman). His extensive experience in opera houses (Budapest, Munich, Berlin) helps him here to bring out the Requiem’s contrasting moods. I do not recall ever having felt more deeply involved in the work’s drama and its spiritual message.

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The soloists are at least as good, on the whole, as the ones on Fricsay’s studio recording. Dominguez is definitely an improvement over Deutsche Grammophon’s capable but somewhat faceless Maria Radev. (Dominguez was Amneris in the astonishing 1951 Mexico

American Record Guide
BEETHOVEN: Symphonies, all with BERLIOZ: Symphony Fantastique; STRAUSS: Alpine Symphony; RODRIGO: Concierto de Aranjuez Pepe Romero, g; Danish Symphony/ Rafael Fruhbeck de Burgos Dacapo 2110423 [3 Blu-Ray] 8 hours

It’s great to hear some unapologetic big-band Beethoven: about 60 strings in Symphonies 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9, 50 in 2, 4, and 8, with quadruple winds in 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9 and double winds otherwise. Strings use plenty of vibrato and tempos are ideal for the most part. Only Symphony 1 lets us down with its meager 35 strings, but no one buys a big box like this for Beethoven’s 1st.

Symphonies 5 and 8 are standouts, the former with an urgent, impatient I, portentous and deliberate III, and IV just expansive enough for genuine triumph and glory without dragging—it’s the best performance I know. The first movement of Symphony 8 starts off polite and genteel but builds to a violent, oppressive climax in the development and maintains that tension until the end of the movement. III, Beethoven’s only true symphonic minuet, is broad and pompous, with big fat downbeats—Fruhbeck really understands how a minuet should go. He treats the scherzo III of Symphony 2 also as a courtly minuet.

The rustic yodeling near the end of Symphony 6:1’s exposition and recapitulation starts on the weak fourth beat in the score, but is phrased here as a down beat—I’ve never heard that before, and it works well. Symphony 9’s first movement clocks in at almost 16 minutes, bursting with tension and towering climaxes, a gripping and compelling struggle. Its finale is all-around strong and grandly paced, though the horror fanfare chugs too deliberately.

I have few complaints. The finale of 7 is hasty, more presto precipitato than allegro con brio. The slow movement of 9 floats by in under 14 minutes and lacks heart: it’s smooth and pretty, but not moving. And all repeats are taken, so the scherzo of 9 natters on for 13 minutes. But this is still the best complete set I’ve heard.

Strauss’s Alpine Symphony luxuriates over an expansive 54 minutes, 4 minutes longer than Kempe’s 1973 recording (EMI 64342, M/A

VIDEOS

We usually note whether we reviewed DVD or Blu-Ray, but most videos are available in both formats, though the number may be different.

BEETHOVEN: Symphonies, all with BERLIOZ: Symphony Fantastique; STRAUSS: Alpine Symphony; RODRIGO: Concierto de Aranjuez

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Strauss’s Alpine Symphony luxuriates over an expansive 54 minutes, 4 minutes longer than Kempe’s 1973 recording (EMI 64342, M/A
1993) and 2 minutes longer than Jansons and the Concertgebouw (J/F 2009). Our mountaineer savors his triumph at the summit for over 15 minutes, 2 minutes more than Kempe allows. Fruhbeck takes longer in the slow sections, but his fast sections are about the same as Kempe’s. Fruhbeck’s storm is apocalyptic, shaking the floorboards and walls of my home (without hurting my ears one bit). The Danish Radio Concert Hall has no organ, so they use an electric organ, and its pedal is anemic compared to the Concertgebouw’s. Still, this replaces Jansons’s excellent account as my new favorite. I’m glad to have Kempe’s old 9-disc integrale and I learned most of my Strauss from him, but the dated sonics cannot compete with modern SACDs and Blu-Rays.

Fruhbeck was of mixed European heritage, and he pays homage to his Spanish half with Rodrigo’s most famous concerto. The orchestra is pared down to an intimate 20 strings and double winds. Pepe Romero has recorded this many times since the 1970s and plays it as if he composed it himself, with utter conviction and effortless facility, spontaneous and subtle—his seamless alternation of nails and fingertips is exquisite. The many orchestral solos are a bit stiff set beside Romero’s improvisatory freedom. It’s a really gorgeous performance, with one tiny flaw: before the last chord of I fades away completely, Romero starts retuning a string that had stretched flat, and it comes across like a tasteless joke. Also, the cameraman too often shows just Romero’s left hand when there’s clearly something more interesting happening with the right.

The Berlioz is competent, but never really catches fire. The expansive and rapt III goes best, similar to the lingering mountaineer in the Strauss. But it is fascinating to watch the barely-controlled chaos of Berlioz’s overstuffed score brought to life and also how often his orchestrations don’t “sound”—there’s a lot of frantic activity from the strings that goes for naught, buried under brass and percussion. Four harps are used, massed stage-left, their presence crisp and assertive in II.

The high-resolution video is both sumptuous and enlightening. The concert hall is a soothing and gorgeous melange of mahogany and crimson backdrop to the maple, rosewood, ebony, silver, and golden hues of the instruments, instilling a deep calm and heightened sensitivity that holds the viewer in the moment. The producer often puts the spotlight on woodwinds, whether their solos or short splashes of color. Until watching these Blu-Rays, I never noticed all the subtle woodwind colors Beethoven dabs onto his dominant string textures; that has forever changed the way I hear his symphonies. Fruhbeck allows his wind players a lot of expressive freedom. It’s also fascinating to see how Strauss achieves all his unique textural and coloristic effects—and every square foot of the stage is crammed with instruments.

The high-resolution surround-sound recordings are miraculous: warm, powerful, and detailed, with a wide dynamic range and realistic stereo separation as you’d hear about 20 rows back. The audience is heard only before, after, and between movements.

The packaging is just as lavish as the videography and sound: 19 dense pages of notes in double columns (like ARG’s layout) and 12 full-page color photos of the musicians, all in a box the size of two DVD boxes stacked atop each other. It’s a magnificent capstone to Fruhbeck’s long career and brief tenure at the helm of this orchestra, cut short by cancer in June of 2014, just five months after the Strauss performance, where his sparse wisps of hair bear silent witness to the ravages of chemotherapy. This box can be had for a mere $65 from HBDirect, a terrific bargain. And for listeners with an audio-only Blu-Ray setup, the menus are simple enough to navigate without video: they’re top to bottom as listed on the box.

WRIGHT

Bizet: The Pearl Fishers
Diana Damrau (Leila), Matthew Polenzani (Nadir), Mariusz Kwiecien (Zurga), Nicolas Teste (Nouhrabad); Metropolitan Opera/ Gianandrea Noseda
Erato 58936—120 minutes

Penny Woolcock’s production of Bizet’s Pearl Fishers was the first time this opera has been seen at the Met in nearly a century. It’s difficult to understand why. It’s a charming work with great melodies and a simple story line, and Met-goers have been asking for it for years.

Woolcock moves the action forward from “ancient times” in Ceylon to a modern fishing village somewhere in today’s “Far East”. Using vivid projections by 59 Productions, Woolcock captures the heart of the story without doing anything that will upset the traditionalists. Her emphasis on the ocean as a fifth character is most apt and offers stage pictures that will thrill a modern audience. The opening underwater ballet, played during the prelude, is stunning. She also is able to obtain committed performances from her cast.
Diana Damrau is deservedly a big star at the Met now. Sometimes she overacts, and her voice has taken on a coarser quality than it used to have. There is an uneasiness about her vibrato that will bother some, and the top can turn shrill; but overall she approximates the French style and language well. She sings what coloratura she is given by Bizet with alacrity and has an excellent trill. One can understand why her two leading men are all hot-and-bothered about her.

Matthew Polenzani and Mariusz Kwiecien are both handsome and act their roles convincingly. This production does not emphasize the homoeroticism between the two men that other recent productions have. Polenzani sings a dreamy ‘Je crois entendre encore’ with spun-out high notes that make one glad to have him around. It also makes him easy to take for granted—he makes it sound so effortless. Kwiecien sounds in rough vocal shape for the first half of the opera. As far back as his Lucias with Natalie Dessay I heard a forcing of the tone that was unbecoming and worrisome. In the second half he seems to find himself and is very believable in his big aria ‘O Nadir, tendre ami de mon âge.’ Teste offers a handsome presence as the implacable Nourabad and sings beautifully. I hope the Met will bring him back in bigger roles in the near future.

Gianandrea Noseda offers propulsive leadership that tends to eschew the more delicate moments of the score. The orchestra and chorus do well for him. Some horn bobbles heard in the radio broadcasts have been ironed out here.

The picture and sound are excellent, the camera work less intrusive than in some other recent DVDs. This is a beautiful evening at the Met with a cast able to meet Bizet’s requirements and tell an entertaining story.

REYNOLDS

**Boito: Mefistofele**

René Pape (Mefistofele), Joseph Calleja (Faust), Kristine Opolais (Margherita), Karine Babajanyan (Elena); Bavarian Opera/ Omer Meir Wellber C Major 739208—140 minutes

In this production as the Prologue begins we see a stage full of generally undesirable people (or maybe physically desirable but morally corrupt). They are joined by Mefistopheles in a purple suit with black gloves. He plays an old vinyl disc on a record player, thus starting the music. As the heavenly choirs sing, Mefistofele and his friends arrange chairs to watch a film of an airplane flying over New York. Before any disaster occurs on screen, Faust’s name is mentioned, and the philosopher appears in dirty shirt and pants, looking very unhappy. As the music ends, Faust is dressed in a shirt on which some devilish friends write some letters and send him off upstage.

In Act I, Faust and his friend Wagner sing about seeing a friar, but no friar’s costume appears on the stage. No matter. The “friar”, who is Mefistopheles, strikes his bargain with Faust, aided here by drugs and alcohol. He takes Faust to the innocent Margherita, while he flirts with her neighbor Martha, here dressed as one of the sleazy women from the Prologue. When Margherita is sufficiently corrupted, the Devil takes Faust on a tour of a witches’ sabbath, a dance which loses its shock value because it resembles everything else we’ve seen in this production.

After an intermission of 35 minutes (proclaimed by a sign on the stage which had previously read “Open”) Margherita’s life in prison consists of singing her aria while wandering barefoot around a small obstacle course of little props: a teddy bear, some flowers, a chair or two, the aforementioned sign, which now reads “Sold Out”. Here the Devil is aided by the same person who played Martha in the garden scene, looking sleazier than ever. Margherita’s salvation is actually easy to miss, as she descends through a trap door while a rather weak offstage chorus proclaims her saved.

For the scene with Helen of Troy, I assume the director is influenced by the final act of Stravinsky’s *Rake’s Progress*, where the insane Tom is confined to an asylum, where he sees himself and Anne as Adonis and Venus. Here Faust is the patient and Helen is his nurse, while Mefistopheles looks on the whole scene as if totally bored until near the end, when he dances a little solo jig while Faust, Helen, and everyone else pay little attention to him. This scene leads immediately into the Epilogue, where Faust somehow regains enough sense to wish for the eternal endurance of good, and Mefistopheles is defeated.

When I first saw this recording, I was delighted, because I feel that *Mefistofele* is a truly neglected opera. Boito attempted to create a real operatic version of Goethe’s masterpiece, not just part of it, as in Gounod’s more famous one. But here the director, Roland Schwab, has failed to trust the dramatic validity of one of the classics of Western literature. I don’t really mind the modern costumes or the tawdreness of the setting; but I object to ignoring the text, as in the friar scene or the Prologue, and gimmicks like...
the record player and neon sign—or, especially, interpreting it all as a problem with mental illness. I remember two great productions of this opera, one with Samuel Ramey and an earlier one with the great Norman Treigle. Neither needed to resort to these gimmicks.

But, as is so often the case nowadays, the music is extremely well served. René Pape is certainly one of the greatest basses in the operatic world, and here his singing is glorious. I do not object to his acting, except that he has to follow the dictates of the director. Kristine Opolais sings very well as the ill-fated Margherita. The chorus and minor characters are all fine. But the real glory of this recording is the singing of Joseph Calleja as Faust. I have been a huge Calleja fan since I first encountered him as the Duke in Rigoletto at the Met several years ago. His voice has grown in power and assurance while losing none of its lyric beauty and elegance. He simply sings as well as any tenor singing today. His declaration of goodness in the Epilogue is moving enough to almost make me forget my objections to the staging. The conductor leads his chorus and orchestra in an exciting performance.

I would almost recommend this on its musical merits alone. Just to hear Pape, Opolais, and especially Calleja is a joy. Perhaps one could play it with one’s eyes shut.

SININGER

DONIZETTI: Poliuto
Michael Fabiano (Poliuto), Ana Maria Martinez (Paolina), Igor Golovatenko (Severo), Matthew Rose (Callistene), Emanuele d’Aguanno (Nearco); Glyndebourne/Enrique Mazzola
Opus Arte 7201—117 + 18 minutes

Donizetti composed Poliuto in 1838 for San Carlo in Naples. One of the leading Italian librettists, Salvatore Cammarano, worked up a pithy text for the composer, basing it on one of the great French dramas, Pierre Corneille’s Polyeucte (1642). It was not then produced; the king had forbidden its production. Had the story of Christian virtue versus Roman authority offended the king? The opera remained dormant until early 1840, when Donizetti adapted it with a new libretto by the prolific Eugene Scribe. The new setting divided the first act of Poliuto in two in order to make four acts, as was then required in Paris. He added a ballet, new arias, and other changes. The revamped opera was called Les Martyrs and produced at the Paris Opera in April of 1840. Donizetti had done the remodeling in less than three months. Opera Rara has recently issued a new recording of the French version.

Poliuto is a recently converted Christian; his wife, Paolina, is the ex-fiancée of Severo. It’s a classic love triangle with religious oppression added by Severo’s determination to destroy the Christians. The music is high-quality Donizetti with enough arias, ensembles, and choruses to satisfy all.

Glyndebourne is not known for producing bel canto opera. Was it taking a risk in producing the first professional staging in the UK of this rarity? If the opera itself does not lure an audience, perhaps big-time singers will. There are no super stars here—Glyndebourne has fielded a trio of world class young singers. Reviews were raves! First among the singers is tenor Fabiano (a Beverly Sills and Richard Tucker award winner). He sings an exciting, even thrilling performance. He fears not the high strung coloratura or the dramatic outbursts. Ana Maria Martinez is awash in emotional sentiment, firm yet liquid, gently flowing. The music of noble-evil Roman Severo rests comfortably in the splendid Verdian voice of Golovatenko. There is more evil and vocal gold in the dignified Callistene of Rose. The much put-upon Nearco of D’Aguanno is brilliantly acted and sung. Mazzola knows just when to let the singers either be bel or just canto.

There are no historic Roman details in Marianne Clement’s stripped down, modernist production, filmed July 2015. I really do not like it. It’s mostly dark walls and a blue backdrop. At least the sets do not intrude on the music. The Neo-Fascist costumes do.

PARSONS

ELGAR: The Dream of Gerontius
Janet Baker, mz, Peter Pears, t, John Shirley-Quirk, bar; London Philharmonic & Chorus/Adrian Boult—ICA 5140 [2DVD] 100 + 60 minutes

The number of musical treasures tucked away in the vaults of the BBC boggles the mind. This historic treasure will especially boggle your mind. The first disc is the April 14, 1968 (Eastert) broadcast of Elgar’s oratorio recorded 28-29 March 1968 in Canterbury Cathedral. The second is a 1989 film in celebration of the musical life of one of England’s greatest conductors, Sir Adrian Boult.

The concert is the epitome of all things beautiful in England’s spirituality. Nooks and crannies of the cathedral are explored as a visual accompaniment. The stained glass windows are a combination of the modern and the
medieval. The visuals end beneath the soaring arches at the high altar, accompanied by Baker and the choir’s rapturous vocal outpourings.

But it is for the music that the BBC has come to Canterbury. All through his long and distinguished career Boult championed Elgar’s music. The three soloists are a contrast in vocal technique and dramatic passion. Each sings from memory—no distracting page-turning. Pears was at the pinnacle of his career, his voice solid, with its own unique timbre—and his acting (so well captured by video director Brian Large) is revealing. Elegantly clothed in tails with only a giant pillar as background, Pears fully expresses the excruciating agony of fear of the dying Gerontius. It is as operatic as can be. In the second part Pears’s Gerontius is at rest, calm, happy, in awe of his new world—an expression of deep spirituality.

Part 1 ends with the great chorus ‘Go forth on thy journey, Christian soul: A very young John Shirley-Quirk, the bass-baritone soloist, has already mastered the art of vocal display and dramatic interpretation. Yet he is a total contrast to Pears. Shirley-Quirk is motionless, fully centered on his message, commanding and precise, the very messenger of God.

Dame Janet Baker (the Angel) has arrived at complete artistic maturity. Hers is another unique voice. Is it any wonder that Benjamin Britten chose to work with these artists and compose music specifically for them? Baker’s voice is redolent of incense, color, and passion.

The London Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra had often performed under Boult’s direction. The music itself is deeply ingrained in all English musicians.

The booklet contains the complete text—there are no subtitles. It also contains description of the recording process.

The 60 minute “bonus” disc is narrated by Vernon Hanley, and there are comments by André Previn, Malcolm Williamson, Colin Davis, and other musicians.

FALL: The Dollar Princess
Tatiana Ivanov (Olga), Horst Niendorf (Coul-der), Gabriele Jacoby (Alice), Gerhart Lippert (Freddy), Regina Lemnitz (Daisy), Stefan Behrens (Hans von Schlick); Kurt Graunke Symphony/ Bert Grund—Arthaus 108311—87 minutes

Die Dollarprinzessin is one of Leo Fall’s operettas with a (then) up-to-date storyline. The show premiered in Vienna in 1907 and was adapted into English for 1909 London and New York performances. The plot of this rarely performed operetta takes place in New York, where coal magnate John Coulter runs his business empire with his daughter Alice. Living with Coulter is his scatterbrained niece, Daisy. Coulter will only have his daughter and niece marry wealthy men who are not royalty. He staffs his home (butlers and maids) and business (male secretaries and advisors) with penniless European royalty to show the royals what it means to work for a living.

The over-complicated plot has Alice falling in love with her assistant, Freddy (who is actually a wealthy German businessman and Count), Daisy falling in love with her riding instructor Hans (a deposed Count who knows that Freddy is a wealthy businessman), and Coulter falling in love with Olga (an imposter Countess who is actually an ex-trapeze performer). There are the several misunderstandings, and Alice and Freddy break off their engagement at the end of Act 1.

The second act takes place at a Colorado oil mining field with various embarrassing Indian and cowboy stereotypes. What happens to bring the couples together is even more ridiculous, but everyone ends up with the right parties.

Fall’s music is not memorable, though there are the requisite waltzes. I lost interest about 15 minutes into the show and had to take breaks from watching to understand (and tolerate) what was going on. It seemed endless.

This is another of the Unitel operetta movies (1971) that, although lavish, is stage-bound and betrays its age with 1970s hairdos and makeup and mechanical dance sequences. The performers bravely attempt to make their characters interesting, but the plot works against them. The picture quality is good, but the advertised stereo soundtrack is monaural. Subtitles are in German, French, and English. If you’re very tolerant, you might enjoy this.

FISCH

GOUNOD: Romeo and Juliet
Roberto Alagna (Romeo), Angela Gheorghiu (Juliet), Vratislav Kriz (Mercutio), Ales Hendrych (Capulet), Frantisek Zhradnicek (Laurent), Zdenek Harvaneck (Paris); Czech Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra/ Anton Guadagno
Arthaus 109262 [Blu-Ray] 73 minutes

As the short running time indicates, this is not the complete opera. It does cover the principal arias and duets. This is not a stage production but a film interpretation made on location at
the Royal Castle of Zvíkov in the Czech Republic (2002). Verona has been reduced to a medium sized castle so confined that the Montagues and Capulets could hardly not be rivals engaged in frequent brawls. Stage director Barbara Willis Sweete has used every nook and cranny, every public hall, every terrace of the castle, no one setting used for a full scene. The surrounding outdoor area has its own charm in many brief scenes. Characters wander through the castle, chase each other, process, dance—it’s continual movement. Costumes by Christian Gasc are in a simplified High Renaissance style. Blue cloth must be inexpensive in the Czech Republic judging from its frequent use.

The musical side of the film is unusual. Alagna and Gheorghiu are vocally splendid, lovely in colorful tone, textually astute. Don’t expect Shakespeare’s teenage lovers; the two singers are far more mature, yet quite handsome and beautiful. Veteran conductor Anton Guadagno conducts with passion.

The whole production is lovely to watch, lovely to hear. Yet I cannot recommend it. Mercutio, Capulet, Laurent, and Paris are acted by actors—not the singers. All the music is pre-recorded. Although the lip-sync is excellent, the sound ambiance is all wrong. It is obvious that the singers are where they appear to be.

PARSONS

Handel: Alcina
Patricia Petibon (Alcina), Philippe Jaroussky (Ruggiero), Anna Pohaska (Morgana), Katarina Bradic (Bradamante), Anthony Gregory (Oronte), Krzysztof Baczky (Melisso), Elias Madler (Ober- to), MusicAeterna Choir, Freiburg Baroque Orchestra/ Andrea Marcon
Erato 59743 [2DVD] 187 minutes

Theodora
Katherine Watson (Theodora), Philippe Jaroussky (Didymus), Stephanie d’Oustrac (Irene), Kresimir Spicer (Septimius), Callum Thorpe (Valens); Les Arts Florissants/ William Christie
Erato 58899 [2DVD] 182 minutes

Here—coincidentally linked by the presence of Jaroussky in each—we have two great Handel masterpieces assailed by modernized staging for the sake of “relevance”. Sorceresses and Crusaders romping about on a magic island. Roman persecution of early Christians. Now there are “relevancies” for our time!

This Alcina was filmed at the Aix-en-Provence Festival in July of 2015. The staging was devised by Katie Mitchell. Everyone wears more-or-less present-day clothing, of course. The set is a fixed one, with a single top level and the main level divided into three segments, of which the central one (a lavish room) is the most important. This is itself dominated by a large bed where a lot of the “action” is “played” out. That means, quite bluntly, a lot of sex scenes, with one to three climaxes each. (Morgana seems particularly to like bondage and flagellation.) A squad of four robotic servants regularly appears, to make and remake the bed, to undress and re-dress characters, and to supply appropriate food or erotic support.

There are no “verdi prati” here—only a pretentious house. Alcina’s enchanted former lovers have been machine-converted into stuffed animals in glass cases, almost none of whom return to life at the end. Alcina and Morgana, finally personified by aged actresses, end up in cases of their own. The enchanted island is never destroyed as per instructions.

All this piles up, more and more at odds with Handel (much less Ludovico Ariosto, whose Orlando Furioso was the libretto’s poetic source). The desperate striving for “relevance” only makes the work more tedious and slow—when will they ever stop all that moving about? As so often in these “modernized” productions, the strenuously “relevant” staging, instead of filling up all those “dead” arias, only detracts increasingly from the wonders of the music and the work of a really splendid cast.

Petibon is just a touch shrill at full steam, but she brings wonderful pathos and power to such major arias as ‘Cor mio’ and ‘Ombre pallide’. I like even better the bright and engaging singing of Pohaska as Morgana—lyrical while still virtuosic. Bradic is more solid than exciting as Bradamante, but Gregory’s bright tenor voice serves him well as the jilted Oronte. The rest are excellent, though a real surprise is Madler, an actual boy soprano rather than the usual female, who holds his own with real confidence and character.

Marcon is a seasoned Baroque specialist, and he has the benefit of the fruity but sturdy Freiburg ensemble.

The well-illustrated booklet contains a brief synopsis.

The bad taste of Mitchell’s Alcina is in contrast with the sometimes odd but generally very workable modernization of Theodora by Stephen Langridge—son of the famous tenor Philip Langridge. It is also noteworthy as the third recorded performance of the work under Christie’s baton. One of these, an audio version
for Erato, studio-made in 2000, was a solid if not definitive venture (J/F 2004). It followed in date, however, the audio documentation of the 1996 production staged at Glyndebourne in 1996, which was not released on discs until 2013 (not reviewed). That stands as one of the leading presentations of this great score, superbly sung and happily detached from the grossly eccentric “modernized” staging of the 1996 director, Robert Carsen. (Christie has a history of working with wacky Eurotrash directors.) With this new Erato release, we have the video documentation of the newest Christie production, mounted at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees in 2015, with Langridge’s direction.

In the meantime, the first video presentation of this Handel score had appeared (N/D 2011), based on a 2009 production at the Salzburg Festival, in a staging by Christof Loy, with the Freiburg players under Ivor Bolton. Its musical results were good, though not superior, but Loy’s “modernized” staging was for the most part vulgar and disgusting (the Roman governor Valens was turned into a sex-crazed monster).

Langridge’s staging here is certainly “modernized”: the inevitable present-day dress and an updated “relevance” attempted with the story. Langridge has decided this is a story about fighting oppressive authoritarianism, with Theodora as an early example of a revolutionary. The devotion that Christians show to their faith is just a symbol of resistance to tyranny.

The trouble is, while Christian doctrines are passed over, the theme of defiant martyrdom is moderated by Handel’s concern with his characters’ struggles to find themselves in their new faith. That is certainly the challenge for the romantic pair, Theodora and Didymus. Further, the latter’s friend, the honest and caring Septimius, is a study in personal ambivalence, left unresolved. As the story proceeds, directorial hopes notwithstanding, the work is about individual and group devotion, about self-sacrifice, about loyalty unto death. Irene identifies the key point in the work’s last minutes: “love is stronger far than death.”

Irene becomes the only success in Langridge’s concept. Usually portrayed as a devoted and comforting friend to Theodora, here she becomes an aggressive exemplar of protest. It is clear in Langridge’s staging that Irene is the Christian community’s real leader—no male priests in sight. And D’Oustrac, celebrated for her dramatic singing, creates a forceful character who is by no means secondary.

All that said, it must be admitted that Langridge gives direction that is steady and thoughtful, rather than sensational or trick-ridden. Theodora is a long score, with very little real “action”. All those da capo arias one after another. Handel never intended it to be staged as an opera, and such efforts are risky. Langridge does manage to add a considerable amount of movement and visual texture to the proceedings, and they are not distracting but appropriate. He is aided by scenographer Allison Chitty’s set-without-a-set, so to speak. A brace of large and variously blank fly-like screens are continuously moved about to form uncluttered backdrops, sometimes for tableaux that are simply breathtaking (aided by Fabrice Kebour’s lighting).

Oh, there are gimmicks. Langridge is fascinated, especially in Act I, with books as holy artifacts: apparently every Christian carried (and could be identified by) a pocket Bible or the like. Still, there are some memorable moments, some of which actually parallel Loy. That final chorus is always very moving. The sublime chorus (Handel thought it his best ever!) ‘He saw the lovely youth, telling the story of Christ’s raising of the Widow of Nain’s son—used to measure the full conversion of Didymus to the faith—is beautifully brought off.

We are not forgetting the musical side. Christie can be counted on to give steady, delicately colored and nuanced instrumental support. Of the singers, Jaroussky will naturally attract attention, and justly so for strong, natural singing and engaged acting. Watson is vocally beautiful and emotionally touching in her portrayal of virtue and vulnerability. Spicer is a true discovery in his representation of the tormented Roman officer. Thorpe is a really nasty Valens without being a caricature, either vocally or theatrically. In all of these roles, earlier audio recordings have offered outstanding casts and individual portrayals, but these certainly stand up admirably.

The booklet has a brief synopsis and long essays, in French only. Bon chance, mes amis!

HUBERGER: The Opera Ball
Helen Mane (Angele), Harald Serafin (Paul), Maria Tiboldi (Marguerite), Maurice Besancon (Georges), Tatjana Iwanow (Palmina), Heinz Erhardt (Cesare), Christiane Schroder (Hortense); Kurt Graunke Symphony/ Willy Mattes
Arthaus 109307—100 minutes

Der Opernballe is Richard Huberger’s 1898 German-language operetta set in Paris. It is famous for the song ‘Im Chambre Separee’.
which has been recorded by many famous performers. It is a seductive and lovely song about couples who have affairs in special “rooms” at fancy restaurants. The operetta is very entertaining and Heuberger’s music is excellent. The intricate plot, by Victor Leon and Heinrich von Waldberg, involves three couples where the wives suspect their husbands of infidelity and put them to the test at the Paris opera ball. The wives send each husband the same letter to meet at the opera ball where the wives will attend masked and in similar costumes. The catch is that each wife will meet with another’s husband to test their fidelity. That leads to some very funny outcomes, while Heuberger’s waltzes and songs are performed by the couples.

Heuberger’s inventive use of melodies is unique. For example, when the letters are written to each husband the same melody is used. When the letters are read by the husbands, who are unaware that each is getting a letter, the same melody is used again. ‘Im Chambre Separee’ is sung by each of the husbands (who are not aware the other husbands are also there) to their masked wives at the ball. I haven’t heard this witty use of music to propel the story in other operettas.

This is another of the operetta movies produced in 1970, and it is the best of the group. The production values are excellent and the performances by the large cast are very, very good. The movie uses a framing device (not in the original show) of having Toulouse-Lautrec relate the couple’s story to his scantily dressed model. All of the sets and decor are loosely based on his art work, which makes the production very colorful and stylized. The Art Nouveau furnishings are beautiful, as are the costumes. The opera ball setting is impressive and includes performances by Can-Can, Spanish, and Gypsy dancers.

The performances are by experienced singers and farceurs who do justice to the score and script. Director Eugen York times the songs, comedy, and dances with clockwork precision. Unlike some of the others in this series, the original orchestrations are used. The 4:3 picture and stereo sound are good. Titles are in English, German, and French.

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**LEHAR: The Count of Luxemburg**

Eberhard Wächter (Count), Lilian Sukis (Angele), Erich Kunz (Basil), Peter Frolich (Armand), Helga Papouschek (Juliette); Graunke Symphony/ Warner Goldschmidt

ArtHaus 109312—95 minutes

Another operetta movie from the early 1970s produced by Unitel. In general, the production values are very good, but that depends on the specific production or director.

‘The Count of Luxembourg’ is Lehár’s second most famous operetta, after ‘The Merry Widow’, but Lehár’s score for ‘The Count’ is far superior. The plot deals with an arranged marriage of the hapless Count to Angele, a star of the Folies. Angele’s older suitor, Prince Basil, arranges the marriage and later divorce so that he can marry Angele, who will then be a Countess. Of course, the arranged marriage turns out to be the right one for the Count and Angele. Although the script is witty and uses clock-work precision to convey the story, the music makes the show. It’s no wonder that the famous waltzes have been popular as concert pieces for many years.

This is the most star studded of the Unitel productions. It has Eberhard Wächter (famous in opera and operetta) as the Count, and his strong baritone and savoir-faire are perfect for the part. As Basilo, there is Erich Kunz, who has performed on many recordings and knows how to play the wounded lover perfectly. Liliane Sukis sings Angele very nicely, but she seems less involved in her part than others I’ve heard. Peter Frolich’s Armand and Helga Papouscheck’s Juliette are adequate though there parts have been shortened. In fact, the scenario has been changed and shortened to meet the 95-minute playing time, and there is no overture and no repeats. The production is deluxe, with beautiful sets and costumes; and the stereo sound is very good. The booklet is in English. There are no other extras. The 4:3 picture quality is detailed.

This is not the only video available, and I prefer the 2010 Morbische Festival on Videoland 13 (M/I 2015). The outdoor performance is spectacular without overwhelming the story, the performances and dancing are energetic, the comedy is amusing, and the singing by the leads is wonderful. Most important, you care about the characters, their predicament, and the joyous outcome. The production includes 20 extra minutes of Lehár’s glorious music and it is time very well spent.
MINKUS: Don Quixote
Anna Tsygankova (Kitri), Matthew Golding (Basilio), Peter DeJong (Don Quichote), Karel Roodij (Sancho Panza); Netherlands Ballet/ Kevin Rhodes
ArtHaus 109267 [Blu-Ray] 122 minutes +30

Minkus’s ballet Don Quixote has been recorded many times, always with a basis in Marius Petipa’s and Alexander Gorsky’s choreography, amended by the performing ballet company’s preferred choreographer. This Dutch National Ballet performance from 2010 uses additional choreography and scenario changes by Alexander Ratmansky. Having seen many video and stage performances of the ballet, I have to admit that this production is the best of them all. This is performed with such ease and precision (without being showy) that everyone seems to have a good time regardless of the challenging choreography.

The scenario is changed somewhat to have Don Quixote and Sancho Panza be more integral to the storyline. Their scenes are related to the basic plot of Basilio trying to win the hand of Kitri against her father’s wishes. Some productions have Don Quixote as a character who bumbles through the ballet but seems there only to give the ballet its title. The Dutch production makes him more of a protagonist and dreamer who shapes the actions of the other performers. The dancing is uniformly excellent. Matthew Golding and Anna Tsygankova make Basilio and Kitri believable characters, and everyone acts and reacts with a naturalism that makes the ballet more than just a showpiece for the dancers.

The set design follows the Bolshoi’s classic staging by Golovin and Korovin, which is a Spanish village on built on several levels. Quixote’s dream sequence in Act 2 is beautifully staged. Again the dancing is quite beautiful and precise.

The 16:9 Blu-ray picture is very clear and colorful, but could use more contrast: the stage lighting is rather flat. The multilevel staging is a benefit in identifying individual characters. Rhodes conducts the excellent orchestra with brio and the 5.1 Dolby sound is excellent.

As an added bonus, 30 minutes of additional footage is supplied of one of the performers (a matador) using a GoPro camera attached to his chest during a rehearsal to show what the ballet dancers actually see while performing their parts. This fascinating material gives the viewer an idea of the hard work, choreography, and props required by the large cast. There are also interviews with Golding and Tsygankova.

In comparison I reviewed a recent stage performance with Matthew Acosta from the Royal Opera. Although some of the same choreography is used, much of the dancing was created by Acosta (following Petipa’s guidelines) to show off his prowess. He is a great dancer, but the entire production seems very stagy, performed more for the benefit of the dancers than the audience. It’s one of those shows where the main characters cry out “look at me”. That is also Blu-ray, and the 16:9 picture and sound are excellent.

I also compared an earlier Bolshoi performance on Kultur (1217). Although the performance and recording are much older, the dancing is more committed than Acosta’s version, but not as good as the Dutch performance in picture quality and sound, and the primary dancers have a tendency to get lost in the hordes of villagers.

FISCH

PONCHIELLI: La Gioconda
Eva Marton, Placido Domingo, Matteo Manuguerra; Vienna Opera/ Adam Fischer (1986)

MEYERBEER: L’Africaine
Art Haus 109327 [3DVD] 6:03

These performances starring Placido Domingo have been around for quite a while and were available separately, both on VHS and DVD.

It’s so easy to take Domingo for granted. One may or may not like how he sings or interprets something, but the voice is consistently in excellent condition: the high notes, the fervor, the passion—everything that makes Domingo popular is here. His interpretations tend to be rather generalized, yet he makes it all work for him. His role in L’Africaine is more prominent, but Ponchielli gives him some of the best music ever written for a tenor.

The other singers are just as strong. It’s a shame Eva Marton didn’t stick with roles like Gioconda; it wasn’t too long after this that her voice began to show an unattractive wobble. Her decision to take on the Brunnhildes and Elektra was probably not vocally good for her. But she is very passionate, and the Viennese public loves her. Matteo Manuguerra was a hard-working, underrated baritone who began his career relatively late, but sang well until his
retirement. He is an excellent Barnaba, though his howl at the end is stagy in the wrong way. The performance is faithful to Ponchielli but not especially interesting on its own.

Meyerbeer has been making a comeback in the last decade or so, and this performance finds everyone in good shape. Verrett is vocally fresher in an earlier San Francisco performance also with Domingo (available on several labels), but her singing and acting here won’t disappoint anyone. She looks smashing, and her regal beauty enhances the role of Selika. A young Ruth Ann Swenson is heard in the Other Woman role and sings it beautifully. Justino Diaz is also at the top of his game. The production is very faithful to Meyerbeer’s libretto without drawing attention to itself. Sound and picture for both operas is first-rate.

REYNOLDS

SCHOENBERG: Gurre-Lieder
Burkhard Fritz (Waldemar), Emily Magee (Tove), Anna Larsson (Waldaube), Markus Marquardt (Bauer), Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacke (Klaus Narr), Sunný Melles (narr); Netherlands Opera Chorus, Essen Choir Forum Chamber Choir; Netherlands Philharmonic/ Marc Albrecht
Opus Arte 1227—158 minutes

Gurre-Lieder wasn’t composed for the opera house, but that didn’t stop these folks from having a go at it. This isn’t a “semi-staged” version, either; costumes, sets, make-up, props, lighting, and the rest are all called to service under Maestro Albrecht’s baton. Musically, I have no serious problems with any of it. The singing is powerful but never wobbly, the spoken portions (Klaus the Fool and an angrier than usual female Narrator) are strongly characterized, and the orchestra sounds fine.

As theater, though, the results are mixed. The piece has always struck me more as a series of musical monologs than a vehicle for interactive theater. Obviously, there’s some back and forth between Waldemar and his beloved Tove at the beginning; and the appearance of the hero’s troops straight out of his own imagination pushes some theatrical buttons as well. Where things are interactive, interesting things can happen, dramatically and visually. When Tove comes and goes in Part I, she is distanced by mirrors, a swirling bed, and some inventive camera work. The ending is striking with the masses donning sunglasses, bathed in white light, and proving with authority that illumination may not be all it’s cracked up to be.

Elsewhere, though, the visual elements are less engaging. The Wood Dove segment is stand and deliver stuff, as is a lot of the music assigned to the not-so-happy couple. And as the women have at it, Waldemar has little to do but adopt an endless series of pained looks and punch drunk expressions. And how many times must we see the same blush-white soldier marching slowly on and off the set carrying his silly white balloon? Schoenberg gave us all this plush and glamorous music, and I just don’t see endlessly repetitive actions like these adding all that much to it. I must also say that the pajamas and housecoat worn in by the leads in Part I reminded me more of Ralph and Alice than of Tristan and Isolde—or any other romantic couple. (And whose idea was that wildly unflattering tank-top? Oh my!) It could be I’m just oblivious to the pre-Raphaelite, fin-de-siecle, and horological nuances the accompanying essay is on about. But from my humble vantage point, Gurre-Lieder’s dramatic magic lies more in its score than in this attempt to transfer it to the musical stage.

GREENFIELD

SCHUBERT: Winterreise
Matthias Goerne, bar; Markus Hinterhäuser, p
C Major 738008—85 minutes +53

For grit and intensity, it is hard to imagine anyone surpassing Matthias Goerne in Winterreise. This is his fourth release of the work, each with a different pianist. No reading I’ve heard conveys a more palpable sense of bleakness, including Florian Boesch’s gripping reading with Martineau (M/J 2012).

At 81 minutes (adjusting for titles and applause), it is the longest reading on record; it is also an exceedingly deliberate account that sometimes stretches tempos almost unbearably. Most recordings are 73-76 minutes. Goerne’s 2004 recording with Brendel for Decca was 74 minutes (J/A 2004), as was his 2010 recording with Johnson for Hyperion; his 2014 recording with Eschenbach for Harmonia Mundi was 75 minutes (M/A 2015).

It is the length of two songs in particular that so strongly conveys the mood of this performance. Their heart-breaking reading of ‘Der Lindenbaum’ takes 5:56 (vs. 4:54 with Brendel, 4:47 with Johnson, and 5:21 with Eschenbach). It conveys the disconsolate realization that what had once been a place of loving memories had become only a reminder of love lost. Their deliberate approach strips the song of any pretense of sweetness.

‘Das Wirtshous’ becomes the heart-break-
ing nadir of the journey with its message that there is no room for the traveler even in the cemetery. At 5:47 (cf. 4:59, 4:46, 5:38) the desolation seems profound.

Goerne and Hinterhäuser take considerable rhythmic liberty to good effect. It is an astonishing performance. If you close your eyes and just listen it is a riveting account of the cycle.

But this is a film of a performance at Aix-en-Provence in 2014 that is meant to be seen, and that is where the problems begin. If you’ve ever seen Goerne in recital, you know how visually distracting his body language can be. In the interview with him on the second disc, he talks about why using his whole body is important in conveying his feelings and emotional connection with what he sings. He gives a clear explanation that using body language is a path he has to follow in being himself. Seeing his emotional intensity as a teacher reflected in body language in a portion of the second disc shows how authentic this is for him.

In this performance his histrionics are almost ridiculous sometimes. What comes across visually is a pretty angry reading, full of indignation and fury. It’s like watching Alberich on a particularly bad day. He presents an image of someone becoming unhinged before our eyes.

The worst problem with the production is the use of black-and-white experimental movies by South African director William Kentridge projected on the set behind the performers. Not only does it fail to illuminate Winterreise; it is visually distracting, silly, even fatuous.

Anthony Tommasini, in his November 12, 2014 New York Times review of their performance of the work in Alice Tully Hall, called the images “strange, busy, and sometimes grimly resonant”; he found that they “seemed disconnected and became a distraction from one of the most compelling and perceptive performances of Winterreise I have ever heard”. Another review of that New York performance called it “perverse, pretentious, mannered, silly, mock-profound, distracting, and boring”.

It’s hard to imagine how Goerne and Hinterhäuser were able to perform at all with these images being projected onto them and onto the wall behind them. Goerne has lights flashing before his eyes. He sometimes turns his back on the audience even while singing and looks at the images as though he is interacting with them. Hinterhäuser, hunched over the piano, has to read the score with images flashing on the pages.

Goerne remarks that it is not necessary to include the visual elements but tries to give a defense for doing so, pausing and struggling to come up with words as though he is not fully convinced that Kentridge’s films enhance the work.

I would welcome an audio-only version of this performance. Turn off the picture and just listen. Goernes may look ridiculous, but vocally he is magnificent.

Notes about the production. Texts in subtitles.

R MOORE

S HAOYU: You and Me
Jingju Theater of Beijing/ Zhu Shaoyu
Accentus 20310 [2DVD] 140 + 32 minutes

Zhu Shaoyu’s You and Me is described as “A Peking Opera”. As such it is not an opera as is known in the West, but an example of that particular Chinese genre. It is colorful in music and staging. A 32-minute documentary adds information about the genre and production.

PARSONS

V ERDI: Aida
Kristin Lewis (Aida), Anita Rachvelishvili (Amneris), Kate Francherman (Priestess), Marco Bertini (Radames), Mark Doss (Amonasro), Giacomo Prestia (Ramfis), In-Sung Sim (King); Teatro Regio, Turin/ Gianandrea Noseda
C Major 737004 [Blu-Ray] 148 minutes

During his tenure as music director of the Teatro Regio Gianandrea Noseda brought the theater to renewed heights. He hired the best singers the budget would allow, led the orchestra into the major leagues, and oversaw innovative productions.

With this October 2015 production of the Verdi favorite to accompany the opening of Turin’s fabulous Egyptian Museum, the seemingly impossible was achieved: new ideas without sacrificing the opulence of ancient Egypt the audience expected. Sets and costumes designed by Carlo Diapin emphasize cool white with gold splendor for the Egyptians and dull reddish brown for the Ethiopians. There was plenty of gold loot to be piled at the feet of the king, and authentic looking Egyptian statuary was wheeled across the stage. There are not a lot of uncomfortable-looking soldiers parading—just enough to accompany the king and keep the Ethiopian prisoners in line. Interiors and the Nile Scene were lit in a bright blue, exteriors in stifling bright red and orange.

July/August 2017
Turn down the color regulator a bit for a less color-saturated picture.

The stage director is famed film director William Friedken. Remember The Exorcist? He is content to let the grand public ensembles park and bark. It's the massive sound we want anyway. Friedkin gets off to a good start. During the Act 1 prelude Aida and Radames meet on the empty stage, she gives him a red-dish scarf the color of her costume, a token of her love. In the finale the entombed Radames still has the scarf. As the lovers walk off into the darkness he leaves the scarf spotlighted center stage. Only death could make him part with it. During the recitatives of Radames 'Celeste Aida' the heroic sentiments are expressed to several of the hero's friends who encourage him in his militaristic sentiments. He moves away from them for the more personal sentiments of love. Everyone, even the king, walks on stage. There are no horses, elephants, or chariots. Almost everything takes place at stage level; the only heights are a small raised altar for the temple, a higher one for the king and Amneris to watch the triumphant activities, one to conceal the River Nile so Amneris's barge can float on in Act 3, and a huge one for the "Judgement Scene". Radames's trial is seen on stage. Even the defendant is on stage. Talk about upstaging the mezzo! I saw this ploy used as long ago as 1959 at Cincinnati Opera. It didn't work then, and it doesn't work now.

The performance is almost first-rate. Nose-en-dia leads a symphonic reading of the score. Details sound with simple clarity, with elegance. Yet the singers are well attended to. American soprano Lewis shows why she one of the most preferred Aidas around today. To a personal beauty she adds beauty of voice. Her exquisite pianissimos shimmer, and she can pull out stops to soar over any ensemble. Rachvelishvili is a vocal bulldog! With power to spare she could beat any vocal competitor. Berti is not quite the bull in a chinashop, but the crockery is in imminent danger. Doss is simply inadequate for Amonasro. The voice lacks strength and depth; it fails to carry or impress. He is not a Verdi baritone. Prestia's Ramfis has got it all. He is tall, dignified, and plunges to the vocal depths. It is good to see his facial expressions up close. This Ramfis really cares about Radames. His look of bewilderment and disappointment in Radames's betrayal are most touching. Sim's king is rock solid, if a bit bland. PARSONS

American Record Guide

VERDI: Otello

Alessandr Anteneno (Otello), Sonya Yoncheva (Desdemona), Zeljko Lucic (Iago), Jennifer Johnson Cano (Emilia), Dimitri Pittas (Cassio); Metropolitan Opera/ Yannick Nezet-Seguin

Sony 30890 [2DVD] 165 minutes

While I enjoyed this, I must admit to some disappointment in the inert and puzzling production. People have complained about some of Peter Gelb's "unconventional" commissions, but there isn't anything here that should disturb the traditionalists.

For unknown reasons the action has been moved forward to the late 19th Century. While that doesn't harm the story, it does make one ask "Why?" And except for the detailed, impassioned conducting of Yannick Nazet-Seguin and Sonya Yoncheva's beautiful, first-ever Desdemona it is difficult to see how this production is an improvement over Elijah Moshinsky's 1994 production.

The opening storm is very exciting, but the constantly shifting set (by bunraku-like stage-hands) is confusing and frustrating. One asks "Just where are we supposed to be and why?" In Act II we seem to be in a Cypriot street, but then for the ensuing Otello-Desdemona scene we are transported to their bedroom.

Neither Aleksandrs Anteneno nor Zeljko Lucic are great actors. They don't invest their movements with any meaning. I've heard An-toneno as Pollione in Bellini's Norma and as the Prince in Dvorak's Rusalka and was much more impressed with his singing in those roles. Dramatic tenors don't grow on trees, so we should be grateful that he can get through the role at all. The problem isn't so much his singing. His face remains blank and unexpressive, even in Otello's more fiery moments. The overexposed Lucic sings well—his Credo in Act II has some momentary vocal excitement—but he too is disappointingly vague in a role that cries out for stage presence. His Iago is as lacking in cunning as Anteneno is lacking in specificity. Yoncheva sings splendidly and looks stunning. Her Act IV scene is heart-breaking. My only quibble is that she doesn't scream where Verdi and Boito ask her to when Otello attacks her in the last act.

The other singers are all competent, though they too look like they needed more specific direction. The stakes are very high for these characters, and none of them should just casually wander around—that happens several times in this production.

Nazet-Seguin leads a nuanced, exciting
performance, at least from the orchestra. The Met chorus also does some full-blooded singing under his direction. The sound (though compressed) and picture are very good; I wish the camera wouldn’t move around so much. I should draw attention to an older Met production on DVD, the one with Jon Vickers, Renata Scotto, and Cornell MacNeil under James Levine. The audio and video quality aren’t as sharp as they are here, but the performance is much more exciting.

As a “bonus”, Eric Owens subjects us to some of those infamous backstage interviews that have become a part of the Gelb era’s broadcasts. Owens’s speaking voice is as superb as his singing voice, but he isn’t given much time, and the singers, understandable, simply tell us how wonderful everything is.

REYNOLDS

VERDI: La Traviata
Olga Peretyatko (Violetta), Attalia Ayan (Alfredo), Simone Pizzolzola (Germont), Emiliano González Toro (Gastone), Tom Fox (Douphol), Christine Daletksa (Flora), Deniz Uzun (Annina); Baden-Baden/ Pablo Heras-Casado
C Major 733804—139 minutes

Yet another Traviata! Is there anything left to do on stage? Hope lies in a man who can truly say “Been there. Done that”—famed tenor turned stage director Rolando Villazon. The opera begins with Violetta’s dying moments. She toys with the locket portrait that Alfredo had given her as her mind sinks ever deeper into madness and she recalls the last months of her life. Violetta’s home is here a gaudy freak show of a circus (colorful watch-face platforms designed by Johannes Leiacker) with guests in bizarre costumes (by Thibault Vancaenbroeck). Gastone cavorts in a black and white clown costume. Douphol wears a long priestly robe and sports a tattooed bald head. The whip-wielding, black-clad Flora is a dominatrix. Violetta is dressed in a modest ballerina-length white gown cut enough to reveal her tattoos accompanied by a non-singing double (Susanne Preisler) above on a trapeze or down on stage to distract the audience. Alfredo retains his traditional basic black. It’s a circus of delirium.

For Violetta’s country estate the discs are now chartreuse and red. Papa Germont arrives clad in a 19th Century suit and cape—all white, including his face and hands, looking like the Ghost of the Commendatore (Don Giovanni). During the cabaletta to ‘Di Provenza’ he is surrounded by a host of black-capped figures with snouts (the witches from Macbeth on holiday in Paris?) for a quick transition to Flora’s blue house. For the final act Violetta stays down stage separated from the others, her double acting with the others in her stead. The production is thought-provoking, but do its distractions add up to audience satisfaction? No.

The musical performance is outstanding. Peretyatko’s sensitive acting is coupled with a finely nanced colorful voice. Ayan crashes through Alfredo’s music with little subtlety. The ghost-like Germont is sung by Piazzola with scarcely a facial expression, but with a powerful Verdian voice. The other characters and singers are pretty much overlooked and undersung.

As the Festspielhaus in Baden-Baden does not have a house orchestra or chorus it employs the Balthasar Neumann Chorus and Ensemble. They play with little subtly for conductor Heras-Casado.

PARSONS

VERDI: La Traviata
Renée Fleming (Violetta), Joseph Calleja (Alfredo), Thomas Hampson (Germont); Royal Opera/ Antonio Pappano—133 minutes

Il Trovatore
Jose Cura (Manrico), Veronica Villarroel (Leonora), Dmitri Hvorostovsky (Di Luna), Yvonne Naef (Azucena)/ Carlo Rizzi—136 minutes

Macbeth
Simon Keenlyside (Macbeth), Liudmyla Monastyrska (Lady Macbeth), Raymond Aceto (Banquo), Dimitri Pittas (Macduff)/ Antonio Pappano—170 minutes

Opus Arte 1190 [3DVD]

Opus Arte has gathered three of their most effective Royal Opera House Verdi productions in one set. ARG readers may well already have these productions from their separate releases (the Trovatore was reviewed in J/A 2008).

Traviata stars Renée Fleming, considered by many the Violetta of our time. She got a rough start with this opera, canceling her appearance in a new Franco Zeffirelli production at the Met because it came at a time where she was overwhelmed with work. She later sang the role in Houston and then in New York, Los Angeles (of which there’s another DVD), and elsewhere. In the Richard Eyre production seen here, she looks terrific and sings her heart out. She easily encompasses the coloratura in Act I (no, she doesn’t sing the E-flat at the end of ‘Sempre libera’) and she finds the vocal pathos in the last act to make the tears
flow. Perhaps her acting is a little generalized and she doesn’t break your heart the way Teresa Stratas does in the Zeffirelli film, but her sincerity and identification with the role are never in question.

Joseph Calleja sounds fantastic and is a handsome man though he looks a little beefy for Alfredo. Thomas Hampson sings and acts Germont convincingly, far better than he did last spring at the Met. Eyre’s production is the same one seen in the DVD with Angela Gheorghiu. It seems rather generalized and unaccountably vague, but it will do and at least doesn’t reset the opera in a coven of vampires.

Elijah Moshinsky’s production of Trovatore is a gripping piece of theater. He actually takes the opera seriously and offers specific motivations for his singers. Jose Cura looks fittingly macho and hot as Manrico, though his actual singing, while serviceable, won’t make anyone forget Franco Corelli. Dmitri Hvorostovsky sings a beautiful Di Luna and matches Cura in handsomeness. Veronica Villarroel was an excellent soprano that producers were pushing into this repertoire whether she was ideally suited to it or not. She sang Leonora opposite Andrea Bocelli on his studio recording of this opera and sang the high notes there that she leaves out here. She does well both in her singing and acting. She is overshadowed by Yvonne Naef as Azucena, a mezzo-soprano perhaps better known for her Wagner roles (at least in this country). Moshinsky rightly makes Azucena, the storytelling gypsy, the center of the action. Naef has been well-coached and performs expertly. She doesn’t have the Italian guts that Fiorenza Cossotto or Giulietta Simionato could supply, but she always stays in the picture.

Phyllida Lloyd’s production of Macbeth might start some arguments, but I didn’t see anything very shocking. The gaggle of children that invade the second half are, I guess, supposed to be a stand-in for children the Macbeths couldn’t have. Some of the production is a little overthought with extraneous details, but nothing gets in the way of the music. Sir Simon Keenlyside acts well as Macbeth (he wouldn’t have any trouble standing next to Patrick Stewart in this role). His singing sounds under stress, though, as if he’s forcing his voice into a role that Nature did not intend him to sing. The big Italian roles don’t seem to suit him vocally. Liudmila Monastyrska became a major player on the opera stage after these performances. She offers exciting singing, and her acting fits well into Lloyd’s concept. Raymond Aceto and Dimitri Pittas are very good in their rather thankless roles.

Antonio Pappano offers stirring leadership, and Carlo Rizzi’s conducting in the Trovatore is accommodating of the singers without allowing them to take over. Sound and picture are first-rate for all three productions. I think the camera is too busy in Traviata and Macbeth and would enjoy it more if it would stay in the same place for more than ten seconds, but this MTV-style camera work is all the rage now.

**BOOKS**

**Behind the Baton**
by Gerald Schwarz
Amadeus Press, 375 pages, $27.99

Many a conductor has published his memoirs; I think of Mr Schwarz as too young to do it, but he is not that young! He looks young; he always has. But he has had lots of experience. He was first trumpet with the New York Philharmonic, and in 1979 he began a long conducting career that include the Y Chamber Orchestra, New York Chamber Orchestra, Mostly Mozart, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, the Waterloo Festival in New Jersey, Eastern Music Festival in North Carolina, and finally, more than 25 years as music director at the Seattle Symphony. He has made hundreds of recordings, and just about all of them got pretty good reviews in ARG.

These memoirs—like all the others—make it sound like one triumph after another. And it sounds like he was “friends” with absolutely everybody—which is, of course, impossible. The sheer number of “dear friends” is itself huge. One gets tired of all the wonderful things he did and that happened to him. Yet, I believe in gratitude; and I think Gerald Schwarz is a very grateful person for the friends and opportunities he has had. And one can hardly object to good stories about famous instrumentalists and conductors. He likes many of the same people I like! But they are great people, so why not? And who can resist finding out more about the world of classical music?

Finally, at the end of the book, he expresses his views on many vital subjects. If I was cheering for him all along, at the end I was roaring with joy! He hates strings played with no vibrato, as anyone does who cares about beauty. He quotes Geminiani (as I have) to the
effect that string players should use vibrato “as often as possible.” Without it, string sound is harsh, dry, lacking in warmth. He objects to the rigidity of union rules, which often wrecked a recording that was going great guns because they were about to go beyond the allotted time. He likes the big sound of a full symphony orchestra for most music. When people objected that some performances were too free, too emotional, too personal, he responded that that is what music-making is all about.

He goes around the whole orchestra to comment on each instrument—I found that fascinating. For example, the trumpet, the instrument he certainly knows best. He says most players are too loud and don’t maintain a beautiful tone as a result. He thinks trumpeters should study vibrato. The piccolo trumpet is used too often, and it has an inferior sound. There is no reason why it should be used in Messiah.

Gerald Schwarz grew up in New Jersey, as I did, and around the same time (1950s). His small public school had an orchestra, a band, a jazz band, and a choir. Every student was exposed to music. Our love of music is formed between the ages of 7 and 14, and it should be a part of any general education. I had a similar experience—and how many young people today have had that? And why not?

Actual musical talent is usually wasted. Ability to tune and play your instrument is often missing—nearly irrelevant. Three chords are plenty. Could you get any farther away from black-tie classical concerts? These two genres offer nearly totally different experiences. The fact that music is played at each is almost inconsequential. Rock music comes close to being not about the music. In classical, it’s everything (OK, operas excluded).

They seem to be having such a great time I’d hate to say they are wrong to be doing these things as long as some legality is observed (pot is OK with me). They are playing at decadence. They’ll go back to their job at a stock exchange or some such on Monday and be indistinguishable from people who went to hear Argerich.

Allow me (DV) to quote Daniel Moynihan (from Defining Deviancy Down): “A society that loses its sense of outrage is doomed to extinction.” To accept the outrageous as normal is destructive of civilization. And, as Moynihan put it many years ago, “The amount of deviant behavior in American society has increased beyond the levels the community can afford to recognize.” If anything goes, then everything goes.

A day spent without the sight or sound of beauty, the contemplation of mystery, or the search for truth and perfection, is a poverty-stricken day; and a succession of such days is fatal to human life.

LEWIS MUMFORD
“Implement” is bureaucratese. Bureaucrats implement initiatives. Speaking of bureaucratese, here’s what Blue Cross says on their phone system: “Please remain on the line while our customer satisfaction advocate researches your inquiry.”

“Prior to” is also bureaucratic. I recently read “prior to its closure”; I am bright enough to realize that they meant “before it closed”, but why don’t people say what they mean—say it directly and simply?

Recently Lang Lang was signed by Deutsche Grammophone. The press release said that he is “the world’s most impactful pianist” and called him a “superstar”. We are well aware that the big labels are only interested in “superstars”, but what does “the world’s most impactful pianist” mean—that he bangs the poor instrument harder than anybody else? What else could it mean? It’s not acceptable English!

One of our major orchestras advertised in their season booklet that “First-time subscribers receive a free parking pass.” Yes! What most of us learned in second grade has not been learned by adults who work in important jobs for our orchestras: “I before E, except after C...”

The San Francisco Symphony press release of next season brags about “immersive concert experiences”. Do they realize what a turn-off language like that is? How stupid it sounds to well-educated people? In trying to be trendy, classical music publicity people are alienating their actual, loyal audience.

Apollo’s Fire advertised that they will perform “undiscovered works of Vivaldi”. One of our readers sent the comment, “If they are undiscovered, how can they play them?”

“Repurpose” has become a popular verb. The words we used to use were “adapt” or “convert”—perfectly adequate. “Repurpose” was not in the dictionary until recently.

A local storage company advertises “free truck usage”.

The weather service is now saying “partial cloudiness” instead of the correct “partly cloudy”. They also issue “hazardous weather bulletins” (and alarms) that say (after listing two dozen counties) “no hazardous weather is expected at this time”. The weather service has also been invaded by the “issues” nonsense, as in “heavy rainfall will cause flooding issues”. They even talk about places that will “experience flooding issues”.

“We are experiencing intermittent technical issues” says the Cincinnati Public Library. You would think librarians, of all people, would know the language. But perhaps such notices are not written by them but by “techies”.

Still very common on the Internet is the superfluous “successfully”, as in “you have been successfully removed from our list”. Either I have been removed or I have not; the “successfully” is stupid. (J/A 2013, p 191)

We are told that a certain artist “is set to release an upcoming classical music album”. People use that horrible word because it is trendy, even when it is utterly unnecessary.

A news magazine referred to “countries that have upcoming elections”. Ugh. Why not “countries about to have elections”? Or even “soon to have elections”? “Soon” is one of the great words replaced everywhere these days by the horrible “upcoming”.

We recently got publicity announcing “our innovative new programming series”. Another one bragged about “our exciting, innovative initiative”.

When we wrote about “pre disease” (M/A 2013) we didn’t mention what has become the latest stupidity in that line: “pre-recorded”. Almost anything with “pre” in front of it gains by leaving that out. For example, you cannot “pre-board” an airplane, even if every airline announces early boarding that way.

We are seeing “plus” used instead of “and” in much writing submitted to us. They are not interchangeable. For one thing, “plus” does not have the conjunctive force of “and”, so it does not make the verb plural.

Language changes, they say. What mostly happens is that people are stupid and lazy and don’t bother to learn English, and their mistakes catch on with millions of other people who also lazy and ignorant. Should that be how language changes? The people who should be policing and protecting the language have given up (teachers, for example). It’s hard to blame them; things are such a mess! But it means the language is degenerating daily and before our eyes. Someone in his 70s today has trouble understanding someone in his 20s—yet has almost no trouble understanding Shakespeare and the King James Bible. The pace of change is out of control, and the language is becoming a mess.
USA: We charge media mail postage ($2.63 for one, .49 more for each additional). We pay postage for 10 or more.

OUTSIDE USA: Postage: $8 for one, $14 for 2, $20 for 3, etc

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