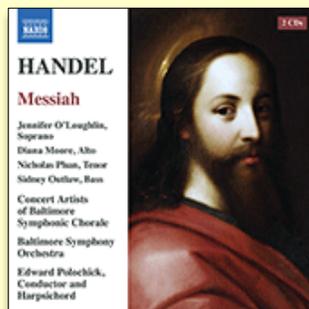


Bach: Cantata BWV 21, "Ich hätte viel Bekümmernis" – Greg Funfgeld, The Bach Choir of Bethlehem (Analekta)

This is the first occasion I've had to review the Bach Choir of Bethlehem (PA) under longtime artistic director Greg Funfgeld in quite some time. It's a pleasure to report they've lost none of the wonderful presence and sensitivity to Bach's texts that I remembered in their recordings on the Dorian label in the late 1980's and 90's. Did I say "longtime"? Funfgeld just celebrated the 35th anniversary of his tenure this year, and the Bach Choir its 120th year of existence.

Well, practice makes perfect, and I find no way to fault the execution of anyone involved in this CD release – choir, soloists, or instrumentalists. There are choice moments for all in this, one of Bach's finest cantatas. BWV 21 bears its subtitle from the opening chorus, *Ich hätte viel Bekümmernis* (I had much distress). The work begins with a Sinfonia in the form of a trio for violin, oboe, and continuo in which the hauntingly poignant aria sung by the oboe sets the mood for the transition into Lent, a season of fasting and patient expectation.

The words of this chorus, which may be rendered "I had much distress ... but your consolations revived my soul," contain a message heard in many ways and in various voices throughout the cantata. We hear it in the beautiful soprano aria with oboe



Handel: Messiah, complete oratorio Edward Polochick, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Concert Artists of Baltimore Symphonic Chorale (Naxos 2-CD)

This is a real treasure, a smooth, beautifully articulated and nuanced account of Handel's enduring masterwork in which all the elements – vocal, choral, and instrumental – are in perfect balance and the spatial relationships in the recording are ideal. Normally, that might make for a dull, proper *Messiah*, but in this case the results are as deeply moving as they are intriguing.

Edward Polochick, Conductor and harpsichordist in the recitatives, has the advantage of four excellent soloists in Jennifer O'Loughlin, soprano; Diana Moore, alto; Nicholas Phan, tenor; and Sidney Outlaw, bass. All are in fine voice, especially the women. O'Loughlin's bright, clear voice soars to stratospheric heights in an air such as "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace and bring tidings of good things," ending on an indescribably beautiful high note.

Moore, a mezzo-soprano, does a commendable job in the alto arias on passages from Isaiah dealing with the good news of the coming of the Messiah, "O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion," and also his sufferings, "He was despised and rejected of men" and "He gave his back to the smiters." Both ladies get high marks for their duets, "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd" and



Bach: The Motets, BWV 225-229 Howard Arman, Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks (BR Klassik)

London-born choral director and conductor Howard Arman is a musician of great versatility. He has distinguished himself in a variety of genres, from period-instrument baroque concertos and operas to Mendelssohn, jazz programs, and sing-along concerts. The present accounts of five of the great motets of J. S. Bach are distinguished for their grasp of the wide range of emotions in Bach's scores and their fidelity to the Lutheran religious ethos that inspired them.

To Bach, and to the congregation in Leipzig that he served, one had always to keep in mind the admonition (attributable, I believe, to St. Augustine) that there are only two days of real importance to the Christian: today and *that day*, toward which all our todays are leading. Yes, we're talking about death (an uncomfortable subject for many modern people). Some, if not all of Bach's motets were dedicated to actual congregants who had died, such as a beloved pastor or school-teacher. But in the larger sense, they are a memorial to Everyman (and Everywoman) for whom the struggles of the spirit toward union with God are universal and concern us all.

For all that, there is really nothing – *absolutely* nothing – in these motets that we could consider morbid or funereal in the usual sense of the

and cello in the third movement, *Seufzer, Tränen, Kummer, Not* (sighs, tears, anguish, trouble) in the emotional emphasis given the word *schmerz*, which means just what it sounds like: grief or pain. The energy of the succeeding tenor recitative and aria expresses one natural consequence of the problem of pain and suffering: "*Bäche von gesalznen Zähren*" (Brooks of salty tears).¹

The first part of the cantata ends with the chorus *Was betrübst du dich, mein Seele* (Why are you cast down, my soul?) Help is on the way, as we shall discover in the second part of the work, in the form of learning to trust in God's goodness and mercy. This message is conveyed most eloquently in a recitative in the form of a dialogue between soprano (the Soul) and bass (Jesus): *Ach Jesu, meine Ruh* (Ah, Jesus, my peace) and in the following duet *Komm, mein Jesu, und erquickte* (Come, my Jesus, and revive my faltering spirit) in which Jesus replies with calm, comforting words to the fearful entreaties of the soul.

The beauties don't end here. We are given a splendid chorale motet with tenor and soprano on the words *Sei nun wieder zufrieden, meine Seele* (Be fearful no more, my soul), a decidedly uplifting tenor aria *Erfreue dich, Herz, erfreue dich, Seele* (Rejoice heart, rejoice soul). Then a splendidly affirmative chorus (rather Handelian, in fact) with trumpets and kettledrums, *Das Lamm, das erwürget ist, ist würdig zu nehmen Kraft* (The Lamb that was slain is worthy of his strength).

A pair of lovely bookends surround the cantata: the soprano aria *Heil und Segen* (Praise and blessing) from BWV 120 and the alto aria, sung here by a countertenor, *Liebt, ihr Christen, in der Tat!* (Love, ye Christians, is expressed in deeds).

The full sound of the performances is captured in the source recordings and preserved in 24-bit mastering and editing. I could wish for texts and translations in the booklet, but

"Come unto Him, all ye that labour."

Nicholas Phan handles the tenor airs and recitatives that typically deal with prophecies of the Messiah's coming "Comfort ye, my people," and "Every valley shall be exalted," with dignity and circumspection. Along with Moore, he gives a fine account of himself in the soprano/tenor duet "O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" in which the deliberate thinness of the harmonies trenchantly underscores the meaning of the text. And Sidney Outlaw's recitative "Behold, I shall tell you a mystery" and the succeeding air "The trumpet shall sound," with stirring accompaniment by the self-named instrument, ring forth with authority.

If you get the feeling that this is very much a singer's *Messiah*, you are absolutely right. No mention is made in the booklet annotation as to which version of the score was used, but it would seem from the distribution of the vocal parts that this is basically the Dublin version that established the success of *Messiah* for all time. The strings have their accustomed great moments in the noble Overture with its contrapuntal grandeur and the all-too brief Pifa (Pastoral Symphony) with its lilting rhythm that briefly sets the stage for the Nativity sequence in Part I, but elsewhere their presence is felt, rather than distinctly marked, as befits their purpose in a sacred oratorio.

Handel's *Messiah* is unique among his oratorios in the unusually large number of choruses, commenting and expanding on the words of comfort and prophesy in the texts. The chorus has a fine moment in "All we like sheep have gone astray," in which all the various voices wander off from the harmonic center in a mischievous bit of whimsy equating sound and sense.

In this recording, the monumental numbers for chorus and orchestra come forth with all desired impact: "For unto us a Child is born," "Lift up your heads, O ye gates," and of course, the most famous seventh-

word. Instead, we find many expressions of joy and wonder at God's mercy, including a personal optimism in J. S. Bach that is often nothing short of ferocious. In BWV 227, "Jesu, meine Freude" (Jesus, my Joy) the longing for the Savior as our truest guide and protector is most vividly stated: "*Jesu, meine Freude, / Mein Herzens Weide, / Jesu, meine Zier, / Ach wie lang, ach lang / Ist dem Herzen bange / Und verlangt nach dir!*" (Jesus, my true pleasure, / Of my heart the pasture, / Jesus, my delight, / Ah how long, how long now, / Is my heart made anxious / As it longs for Thee!)

Though salvation is assured in Bach's 18th century Lutheran world view, even the most devout believer might have fears and misgivings along the way. These are usually the signal for the composer to indulge in his well-known penchant for vivid word-painting in sound: "*Laß den Satan wittern, / Laß den Feind erbittern... / Ob es itzt gleich kracht und blitzt, / Ob gleich Sünd und Hölle schrecken: / Jesu will mich decken*" (Let then Satan bluster, / Let the foe grow bitter... / Though it now crackle and flash, / Though even sin and hell strike terror, / Jesus me will shelter.)

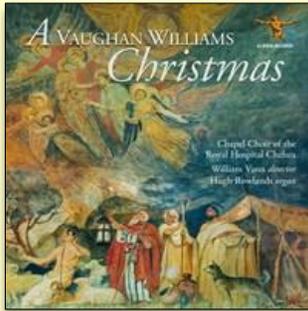
There's a lot we could focus on in these supreme examples of the art of the motet, BWV 225-229. All are performed *a capella* with occasional light accompaniment by violin and organ. The architecture of these five works is impressive: no cookie-cutters, *these!* With amazing versatility, Bach combines polyphony in up to eight voices in two choruses in a work such as BWV 225, "*Singet dem Herr ein neues Lied*" (Sing unto the Lord a new song, Psalm 149:1-3), where multiple voices are most clearly appropriate, along with simpler, more homophonic chorales. The full-blown fugue in this same motet calls for special attention.

Sometimes, Bach's writing has a nostalgically archaic flavor, and at other times, it is reminiscent of the new Italian concerto style of his day. BWV 226, "*Der Geist hilft unser*

¹ *Bäche*, which is the plural of *Bach* (brook), is an example of the composer's love of wordplay. An emotionally volatile man, frequently stirred to anger, Bach was keenly aware of his own need for grace.

these are not too difficult to look up on the internet.

Finally, let's recognize the vocalists: sopranos Cassandra Lemoine and Rosa Lamoreaux, countertenor Daniel Taylor, tenor Benjamin Butterfield and baritone William Sharp, all in good voice here.



"A Vaughan Williams Christmas"
Chapel Choir of the Royal Hospital Chelsea dir. William Vann (Albion)

Americans know Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) more for his symphonies and his string fantasias than anything else, but in the United Kingdom he may be just as popular for his many fine settings of traditional carols. These songs with a seasonal and religious inspiration are generally simple, light-hearted, and popular, considering their essentially serious subjects which are mostly in celebration of Christmas.

The present program appears on Albion, the recording label of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society and its Charitable Trust. Performances by the Chapel Choir of the Royal Hospital Chelsea under director William Vann are all beautifully conceived, affectionate and erudite without losing any of the essential joy and spontaneity that are hallmarks of the English carol style. The singers of the Chapel Choir are only twelve in number, a fact difficult to surmise from the variety of tones and vocal blends they produce. All are chosen for their high standard of ability as soloists in addition to skill in choral singing, factors that are vital to the success of this particular program.

We begin with Eight Traditional English Carols (1919), including "Down in Yon Forest," "On Christmas

inning stretch in all of music, "Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth!" In the final chorus, "Worthy is the Lamb," Polochick paces his massed forces so beautifully that there are no longeurs or any drop in intensity in spite of its length (here 7:49) as it builds to a stunning conclusion.



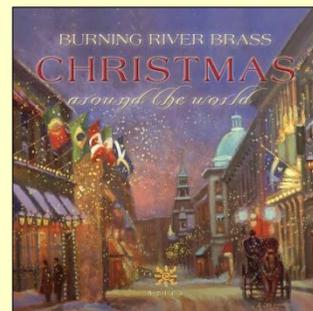
"A Renaissance Christmas"
Harry Christophers, The Sixteen (Coro)

As far as most people know today, our Christmas songs and traditions are of fairly recent 19th and 20th Century origins. We think of Franz Gruber's *Stille Nacht* (Silent Night), *O Tannenbaum*, Clement Clark Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas," of Scrooge and Tiny Tim, A Miracle on 34th Street, and Gene Autry singing "Here Comes Santa Claus." How far back Christmas music really goes would surprise most of us.

Part of the answer can be found in "A Renaissance Christmas," with Harry Christophers directing The Sixteen, the organization he founded in 1979 to bring to life the *a capella* choral music of former centuries, and in particular the richly layered, and frequently other-worldly sound of 16th century polyphony. We find solace and balm in the music of some of the greatest composers of that era, such as Thomas Tallis and William Byrd (England), Tomas Luis de Victoria (Spain), and the Franco-Flemish Orlando de Lassus, as well as many lesser names that still have things to say in music to lift up our spirits.

A good example of the latter is the Suffolk composer George Kirbye, whose *Vox in Rama* for six voices, a motet written as a communion antiphon for the Feast of the Holy

Schwachheit auf (The Spirit upholds us in our weakness) even uses dance music in the form of a passepied in 3/8 time to reinforce the idea of drooping hearts being lifted up by the holy spirit, a musical inspiration that must have raised eyebrows among the bluestockings of Bach's day!



"Christmas around the World"
Burning River Brass (Azica Records)

This album of Christmas carols, traditionals, and sacred music was released a year ago, but the promo arrived too late to be included in my Christmas/Baroque posting for 2017. So I've saved this album for an entire year to include it here. It's a package of delights to brighten Christmas for brass and percussion enthusiasts everywhere.

Burning River Brass, an ensemble that bill themselves as "Twelve musicians, Inextinguishable fire," made its debut in Tremont, Ohio in 1996 and have been touring widely almost from the get-go. Augmented for this album by a guest hornist and percussionist and having the benefit of splendid settings by different arrangers, BRB swing their way with seeming effortless through a program that ranges from solemnity to boisterousness, as befits a season of the year when holy mystery rubs shoulders with lowdown revelry.

The 21 tracks include a number of Christmas traditionals dressed up in fetching new arrangements: "Away in a Manger," "Ding Dong, Merrily on High," and "Silent Night, Holy Night," the last-named in an arrangement by Simon Wills that adds a surprise in the middle by way of a cheeky little

Night" (which is given a nice swing to its rhythm here), "May Day Carol," and the ever-popular rouser "Wassail Song," in which the poor children of the neighborhood, seeking charity at Christmas, wish a Happy New Year to one and all. Two Carols for unaccompanied four-part choir include "There is a Flower", based on *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen*, the well-known setting in four-part harmony by Michael Praetorius (1609) of an older German carol by an unknown composer.

Five carols are taken from the Oxford Book of Carols, whose publication was a significant event in the revival of this old tradition. Some, such as "O Little Town of Bethlehem," are familiar to modern-day listeners, while others are as rare as they are beautiful. These unexpected delights include "Wither's Rocking Hymn" (Sleep baby, sleep) by the Puritan poet George Wither, an enchanted and atmospheric "Snow in the Street" (From far away we come to you) from William Morris' *The Earthly Paradise*, and a Cradle Song by William Blake, "Sweet dreams form a shade o'er my lovely infant's head."

Last, we have Nine Carols for Male Voices (1941-1942). These *a capella* gems, some of which were arranged by VW for British troops who had been deployed for the defense of Iceland, include "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen," "Mummer's Carol," "The First Nowell," "Coventry Carol," with its timeless message of pity for those who suffer, and an awesome "Dives and Lazarus."

Innocents, captures all the pity and sorrow of Jeremiah's prophesy of Rachel "weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." Or take *Pastores loquebantur* (The shepherds said one to another, Let us go now even unto Bethlehem) by Francisco Guerrero, a setting which loses nothing, in its breathless wonder and ecstasy, in comparison with the richly polyphonic *Quem vidistis, pastores?* (Who have you seen, shepherds?) by his Spanish contemporary Tomas Luis de Victoria.

Several of the numbers heard here will be familiar to modern listeners. The Gregorian antiphon *Veni, Veni Emmanuel* (Come, O come, Emmanuel), dating as least as far back as Charlemagne's day, is still very much with us. And the 14th century hymn *Resonet in laudibus* (Let Sion resound with the joyful acclaim of the faithful), the lilting melody of which is known to us today as "Joseph dearest, Joseph mine," is found here in settings by Johannes Eccard, Jacob Handl, and Orlando de Lassus (a.k.a. Orlando di Lasso) that attest to its enduring vitality.

There's a lot more I could say about this enchanting program of no fewer than 19 selections, and also of the performances by Christophers and The Sixteen. They have been cited in the past for their tonal warmth, rhythmic precision, and flawless intonation and sequencing of voices, and the praise still goes. You will never find them in better form than here. The music speaks for itself.

carousel waltz!

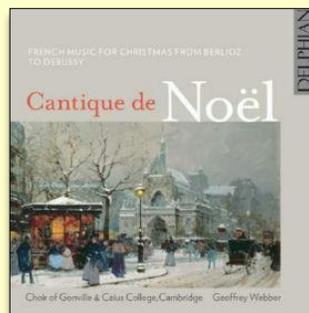
We also have such sacred classics as Bach's chorale *Wachet auf, Ruft Uns die Stimme* (Sleepers Awake) in an arrangement by Peter Reeve that plays up the contrapuntal beauty of the different brass voices. *In Dulci Jubilo* (arr. Feza Zweifel after Marcel Dupré) is heard in a setting that stresses the meaning of the title, "In Quiet Joy," rather than the upbeat version we are used to hearing. A Prelude and Fugue for Christmas, arranged by Wills from the carol "Jesus, good above all other," has eight counter-subjects based on other carols, posing an amusing guessing game for the listener.

Christmas songs of other countries include the 16th century Spanish *Riu, Riu, Chiu* (arr. Roger Harvey) with its lively rhythmical refrain (the original words tell how a lamb was saved from a ravenous wolf, with obvious implications for the Nativity story.) The 15th century English Coventry Carol is heard in another Harvey arrangement that preserves the angular polyphony of the original but curiously washes out the most striking feature of this carol, the eerie dissonance at the end of the verses that still raises goose bumps with modern listeners. (It's appropriate to the original play, where it occurs as the women of Bethlehem lament the Massacre of the Innocents.

Bela Bartók's arrangement for piano students of 10 *Colinda: Rumanian Christmas Carols* preserves their lively irregular rhythms and changing meters. It is heard here in yet another Harvey brass setting. His arrangement of the Polish traditional *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly* sets just the right mood for a Manger Scene.

The Toymaker, an outrageously original suite in three movements by Anthony DiLorenzo, tells three tales about an eccentric Greek inventor. The last of these marvels is a magic flying sled that will help his friend Nicholas (yes, *that* Nicholas) bring gifts to children around the world

Nor is Tin Pan Alley left out of the program: we have Mel Tormé's Christmas Song, and also the Katherine Davis, Henry Onorati and



"Cantique de Noël" - Geoffrey Webber, Choir of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge (Delphian)

Cantique de Noël is subtitled "French Music for Christmas from Berlioz to Debussy," though most of the traditionals go back farther than that. It is

performed affectionately and with feeling by the Choir of Gonville and Caius College, one of the oldest colleges (since 1348) of Cambridge, though its musical tradition stems from the late 19th Century. Under the direction of Geoffrey Webber and with subtly effective support from organists Michael How and Luke Fitzgerald and pianist Ursula Perks, the 26 member choir, from which the soloists arise, give a good account of themselves. The 24-bit digital editing and mastering proves a fine clarity of sound to the recordings made in Exeter College, Oxford, though the spacious venue was probably inimical to the full warmth and body of sound that was desired.

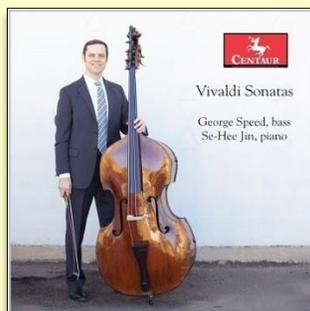
The first two selections are well known to most listeners: *Cantique de Noël* (O Holy Night) by Adolphe Adam and *L'adieu des bergers a la sainte famille* (Farewell of the Shepherds to the Holy Family) from Hector Berlioz' *L'enfance du Christ* (The Infant Christ). Less well-known but also delectable are Charles Gounod's *Noël: Chant des religieuses* (Song of the Nuns) for female voices with piano accompaniment, *Domine, ego credidi* (Lord, I believe) and *Alleluia* from Camille Saint-Saëns' Christmas Oratorio, *La Vierge à la crèche* (The Virgin's Cradle Song) by Cesar Franck, and *La neige* (The Snow) by Jules Massenet, in a moody setting for alto voice. Claude Debussy's deeply affecting *Noël des enfants qui n'ont plus de maisons* (Noël for the children who have no more homes) strikes a discordant note of righteous anger against the barbarity of the First World War.

Continued in the column at the right ==>

Harry Simeone hit Little Drummer Boy, in a setting that provides a holiday for tympani and percussion. We conclude with Dean Sorensen's Christmas Medley of "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer" "O Christmas Tree," "Let It Snow," and "Santa Claus is comin' to town."

Continued from the previous column:

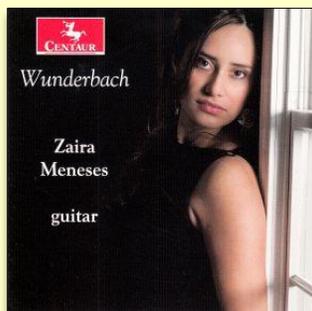
We also have some very welcome traditionals, such as *Il est ne le divin enfant* (He is born the Holy Child), arranged by Gabriel Fauré), *Quelle est cette odeur agréable?* (What is that lovely fragrance?), *Nous voici dans la ville* (Here we are in Bethlehem), and *Noël d'enfants* (Noël of the Children, a.k.a. Angels we have heard on high). The program concludes with a fine rendering of a Portuguese Hymn, known to all the world as "Adeste fideles."



Vivaldi: Sonatas for Double Bass
George Speed, bass; Se-Hee Jin, piano (Centaur)

American bassist George Speed gives distinguished performances of Vivaldi cello sonatas in intelligent transcriptions with a purpose for his own instrument. The Spartanburg, South Carolina native, who has been principal bassist of the Oklahoma City Philharmonic since 2005, aims, in his own words, "to showcase these sonatas as virtuosic works, but also as relatively accessible study pieces for advanced students and professionals."

Right on both counts! Vivaldi must have written these sonatas, RV 40-41, 43 & 45-47, for a similar purpose. They helped free the cello, which had but recently developed its modern form, from its usual role as



"Wunderbach," Guitar Transcriptions of Music by J. S. Bach – Zaira Meneses (Centaur)

Guitarist Zaira Meneses is a native of Xalapa in the Mexican state of Vera Cruz, where she completed her undergraduate work at the University of Xalapa. She later earned her MM degree at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. Already famed as an artist in residence and an enthusiastic participant in international music festivals, she lives in Newton, MA with her daughter Raquel Fisk and her husband Eliot Fisk (himself a world-famous musician), and is currently a faculty member of the New England Conservatory of Music & Walnut Hill School of the Arts.

On the evidence of this Centaur release of 2015-2017 recordings



"Rediscovering Couperin & Rameau" Lucas Wong, piano (Centaur)

Canadian pianist Lucas Wong is a young man of diverse interests, not the least the fact that, at the Yale School of Music, he studied both piano (with Boris Berman) and harpsichord (with the late Richard Rephann). Berman himself, realizing Wong's natural bent, encouraged him in his harpsichord studies. Among his other achievements, Wong founded Mostly Debussy, a multi-year lecture-recital series, and has commissioned a solo piano cycle to mark the 100th anniversary of Debussy's death.

It all fits in, right down to Wong's solemn confession that "I am still quite stubborn about my beloved harpsichord fingerings, which I try

an accompanying instrument and gave it music of real substance to sing. In a curious way, these sonatas may sound even better and more idiomatic on the double bass than in their original form, capturing the warmth, humor, and lyrical quality of the instrument to perfection. "In order to facilitate cleaner articulation," writes Speed, "I opted to use solo scordatura (A-E-B-D with use of a chromatic extension for my low string." He also sought an idiomatic key and flattering tessitura for each sonata, neither too high nor too low in each instance, with the optimal performance results we have here.

All the sonatas have exactly the same layout, Largo-Allegro-Largo-Allegro. That should not be taken to imply that there is any cookie-cutter process at work. On the contrary, as Speed and his partner Se-Hee Jin are at pains to express, there is a definite character and unique beauty in each one of these six delightful works.

In RV 47 in A major, for instance, the mood of the first Allegro is playful, almost dancing. The first Largo in RV 41 in D major is marked by noticeably sighing figurations, of which we will notice numerous other instances in the program. In RV 40 in B minor, the second Largo has a slow, sensual beauty that plays well against the brisker measures of the Allegro that follows it.

And so it goes. RV 43 in A minor allows the bass to display a rich, florid cantabile, particularly in the second Largo. In the first Largo of RV 45 in G major, the instrument takes on a lumbering character that is distinctly humorous. And in RV 46 in G major, the first Largo has a languid humorousness all its own, while the following Allegro is notably up-beat by contrast. The second Allegro in this same sonata, with its scintillating rhythms, brings a program that showcases all the remarkable things the old "bull fiddle" can do if you give it its head, to a rousing conclusion.

made at Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Meneses' artistry is characterized by her lucid technique and her great warmth of tone and spontaneity. She reveals these traits right from the beginning of the present program in the Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro in E-flat, BWV 998, in which her performance has an improvisatory feeling, ending in a very relaxed, happy mood. The spontaneity we spoke of is most apparent in the Fugue, which comes across as more like a dance than an academic exercise.

The highlight of the program is Bach's great Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004 for Solo Violin, heard in Meneses' own inspired and highly idiomatic transcription for guitar in which she occasionally adds bass notes or fills out harmonies. One of the world's truly great works of instrumental music comes alive almost as a new revelation in the intimacy of Zaira's unhurried and deeply insightful account. In her hands, the unusual formal design of this work unfolds with complete and utter naturalness.

A partita, you see, is basically a baroque dance suite. The dances usually consist of an Allemande, Corrente, Sarabande, and Gigue, with one or more optional dances called *galentéries* included (though not here) after the Sarabande, which was typically the deep-water mark of the suite. Partita No. 2 is different in that it throws the balance of its weight into a final, extra movement.

This movement, a Chaconne, or *Ciaccona* (to use the Italian version of the name as Bach does here) is not a dance, but a musical form that consists of a slow series of variations on a harmonic progression. This was a daring innovation of Bach's, taking the harmonic design of the first four movements and exploring it in great depth as the basis for the *Ciaccona*, thereby giving greater significance to what occurred previously.

Zaira emphasizes the connection beautifully by taking the *Ciaccona attacca* after the last bars of the Gigue, and the effect is truly heart-stopping. So, too, is the striking key change that occurs at a point of

hard to preserve at the piano!" The discovery of a Fazioli F308 piano at the company's selection room in Sicily helped it all come together. It confirmed Wong's desire to explore the French baroque repertoire through the use of the F308, an instrument that has a unique fourth pedal on the far left. That allows the performer to explore softer dynamics by setting the keys shallower and the hammers closer to the strings.

The Fazioli proved the ideal medium to demonstrate the connection between French baroque composers François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau and the music of Claude Debussy, who claimed a spiritual kinship with them. (At least, that's what I'd always heard. Wong's performances in this recital made the point come across with a greater clarity than I'd ever imagined.)

Couperin and Rameau composed their harpsichord music partly to theorize harmony in blocks of color and to demonstrate the technique required to master the harpsichord. The latter purpose is quite evident in Couperin's *L'art de Toucher le Clavecin* (1716), which he wrote in the form of eight Preludes designed to be "absolutely indispensable for playing my *Pièces* in the style most suitable to them." Besides basic keyboard technique, it contained numerous notes on fingering and ornamentation that are of keen interest to scholars and performers today.

The remarkable thing is that the music of *L'art de Toucher le Clavecin* should be so lovely in spite of its avowed pedagogical purpose, but so it is. In Wong's hands, the clarity and deeply expressive moods and colors of the eight preludes come across with the greatest beauty and assurance, leading us to marvel that, apparently, no other pianists have ever recorded this work.

Rameau is represented by *Pièces de Clavecin, Suites in D and A*. To the ten pieces in the former, he affixed descriptive names as guides to characterization and expressions of his lively wit. For example, *Les Tourbillons* (The Whirlwinds) has swirling figurations reminiscent of its

repose and reflection late in this same movement. As Zaira shows us throughout the program, her timing here is never less than superb.

title, while the drooping measures of *Les Tendres Plaintes* suggest a sighing lover. *La Joyeuse* pictures a cheerful girl, *La Follette* a silly one. *Les Cyclopes*, a robust rondeau, recalls the brawny giants of Greek antiquity. *L'Entretien des Muses* (Conversation of the Muses) is elegant and erudite, as befits the subject. In the Suite in A, *Les Trois Mains* demonstrates the illusion of a third hand being inserted between the performer's left and right hands.