

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

Baroque + Christmas Special

2019



"Vivaldi con Amore," Concertos for diverse instruments; Sinfonia Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra (Tafelmusik Media)

"*Vivaldi con Amore*" amounts to an impressive calling card for Elisa Citterio, the Brescia, Italy native who joined the Toronto-based Tafelmusik Chamber Orchestra and Chamber Choir as its music director in 2017. Her studies in baroque violin at the Luca Marenzio Conservatory in her hometown and with famous teachers in postgraduate studies has certainly paid off in the scintillating sense of style we witness here in an all-Vivaldi program. Vivaldi's breadth of understanding of the capabilities of the instruments for which he wrote these concertos is as impressive as they themselves are sensuously beautiful.

Of course, Citterio does not neglect her own instrument, in two very attractive and "nicknamed" Violin Concertos, in C Minor, RV 761, "*Amato bene*" (Dearest Friend) and E Major, RV 271 "*L'amoroso*" (The Lover). The former has a noticeable depth of feeling, particularly in the Largo movement, and the latter is characterized by the infectious swing of its opening movement (without a descriptive title). Citterio also takes the lead in the well-known Concerto for 4 Violins in B-flat Major, RV 553, where she and three other soloists (Cristina Zacharias, Patricia Ahern, and Genevieve Gilardeau) interact with skill and rapport.

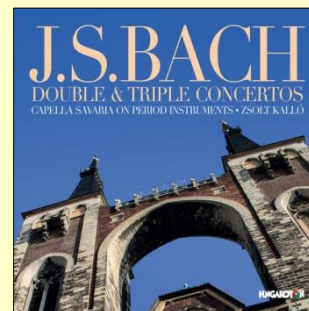
Two reasons why later generations



Bach: Cantatas & Arias for Bass Dominik Wörner, bass; Zefiro ensemble directed by Alfredo Bernardini (Arcana)

In a co-production of Outthere Music France and Südwestrundfunk (SW German Broadcasting), we are given all three of J.S. Bach's cantatas for solo bass voice plus three significant arias selected from other cantatas. That the texts typically deal with a painful awareness of sin, followed by repentance, the boundless mercy of the Saviour, and lastly, redemption, made them ideal vehicles for a dry, authoritative voice such as Dominik Wörner possesses. There are also an unusually large number of credited supporting instruments in the program, including violin, viola, cello, bassoon, organ, harpsichord, and a variety of oboes, underscoring the innermost reality of the texts themselves.

The cantatas we are given here contain an embarrassment of riches in that respect. Most notable is the oboe da caccia, played by Emiliano Rodolfi, that makes such a stunning impact enhancing the florid bass aria *Schlummert ein, ihr matten Augen* (Close peacefully, your weary eyes). It helps create and reinforce the mood of peace and calm acceptance in BWV 82, "Ich habe genug" (It is enough, or I am satisfied). This cantata takes its inspiration from the Gospel story of Simeon, the old man who been given a prophesy that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah with his own eyes.



Bach: Double & Triple Concertos Capella Savaria, Zsolt Kalló, director (Hungaroton)

Violinist Zsolt Kalló directs the Capella Savaria of Szombathely, Hungary in accounts of concertos for two and three instruments by J.S. Bach that reflect both the stylistic versatility and a feeling of movement that the composer intended.

First up, the Concerto for 3 Violins in D, BWV 1064R, is a reconstruction based on the existing concerto for 3 harpsichords in C, BWV 1064, for which it was the original model. I prefer the version heard here because the individual lines of the three string instruments stand out with greater clarity than I can remember in the 3-harpsichord version (or is it that we are simply accustomed to the sound of the violin, while the unfamiliar interplay of multiple harpsichords can seem like a dissonant clangor to our ears?)

The Concerto for 2 Violins in D Minor, BWV 1043, has always been a favorite of mine for the heart-stopping interweaving of voices in the slow movement, marked *Largo*, *ma non tanto*, the multiplicity of dramatic incidents and the irresistible verve of a finale that shows the influence of Vivaldi-style ritornello.

Concerto for Violin and Oboe in D Minor, BWV 1060R, another "desert island" favorite of yours truly, likewise has a drop-dead beauty of a slow movement, in this case an Adagio in which the instruments

of reed players have had cause to reflect on their debt to Vivaldi are well apparent in the Concerto for Bassoon in D Minor and the Concerto for 2 Oboes in C Major, RV 534. The difference between these concertos, both composed for instruments that had only recently achieved their modern form, is as pronounced as the traditional moods ascribed to their key signatures. The bassoon concerto is mysterious, dark, and sensual, particularly in its slow movement, *Larghetto*, and the one for 2 oboes is characterized by its everescence and its surface brilliance. Listening to these two works, I imagined an operatic love scene for the former, and the sort of light entertainment a bygone era would have described as a “masque” for the latter. Credit some fine performances by bassoonist Dominic Teresi and oboists John Abberger and Marco Cera in these works.

Concerto for Lute in D Major, RV 93 is one of Vivaldi’s best-loved works. Particularly for the feeling that he invested in the slow movement, a pensive *Largo*. Here the solo part is performed by lutenist Lucas Harris, though it is not clear which of the instruments in his own repertoire, whether archlute, theorbo, or just plain lute, is to receive the honors.

The other works on this album are Cantatas BWV 56, “Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen” (I will gladly bear the Cross) and BWV 158, “Der Friede sei mit dir” (Peace be with You), plus arias from three other cantatas, *Gott ist gerecht in seinen Werken* (God is just in all his works) from BWV 20, *An irdische Schätze das Herze zu hängen* (To hang one’s heart on earthly treasures) from BWV 26, and *Warum willst du so zornig sein?* (Why do you want to be so angry?) from BWV 101. All benefit from Wörner’s scrupulous interpretations of texts that are filled with doctrinal significance.

Unfortunately, I am not as happy with the spatial relationships in the recorded sound that can result in the vocalist, solo instruments and ensemble having to compete for attention rather than enhance one another. A good example is in the aria with chorale: *Welt, ade, ich bin dein müde* (World, farewell, I am weary of you) from BWV 158, in which the addition of a soprano voice ought to have an ethereal sound, as if it were the penitent’s own soul speaking to him, rather than be a competing voice.

weave dance-like patterns around each other in imaginative imitation that sounds rather like a courtship (This must be heard to be believed!)

Finally, the Triple Concerto in A Minor, BWV 1044, has a transverse flute, violin and harpsichord as its solo instruments, inviting inevitable comparisons with Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, although, as with other instances in the canon of Bach’s works, the question of which came first must remain a musical whodunit. Not subject for debate, however, is the driving momentum of the outer movements, with use of “cut time” (*alla breve*) deliciously complicating the flowing motion of a finale in which the harpsichord, the “star” of the occasion, has an all-too-brief but memorable cadenza. .

The soloists, violinists László Paulik (BWV1064R, BWV1043) and Daniel Papp (BWV 1064R), oboist Bettina Simon, flutist Andrea Bertalan, harpsichordist Rita Papp, and Kalló himself as a solo violinist in all four concertos, give performances that are right on the money in terms of expression, flexibility and scintillating motion. And the ensemble provides the foundation and backdrop that are so vital in setting off and reinforcing the virtuosity of the solo lines.



“Festival of Carols” - Sylvia McNair, soprano; Eric Stark, Indianapolis Symphonic Choir (Naxos)

“Festival of Carols” has everything – and almost too much of it! The title refers to the practice in many churches of having a ceremony of carols and traditionals during the Christmas season, a holiday for the choir when they can really open up and let ‘er rip, and, quite often, a sing-along for the congregation as well. It is, after all, the most joyous time of the Christian year.



“Christmas in New York” New York City Children’s Chorus (MSR Classics)

**Christmas in New York** is a delightful mixture of fondly recalled carols and not-so-familiar fare, served up in an attractive style and a variety of settings that keep even the oldest holiday chestnuts fresh and appetizing. The singers are the boys and girls of the New York City Children’s Choir under artistic director Mary Wannamaker Huff, assisted by Andrew Henderson, director of music and organist of the Madison Avenue

We get all of that in a well-packed program by the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir and Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra under conductor Eric Stark. The substantial choir are supported by an orchestra that plays with a lot of gusto, especially the folks in the percussion section (this genre of music encourages a lot of gongs and bells). Listen for some distinguished playing by pianist David Duncan in Rob Swenson's *Christmas Hosanna* with its jaunty rhythms recalling that old chestnut, *Good Christian men, rejoice*.

Most welcome of all is soprano Sylvia McNair, whose warm vocal presence has been absent from this reviewer's CD shelf for some time (no doubt because she has been so busy performing all over the country, including here in Atlanta). She adds a special quality to such songs by contemporary composers as *Mary, Did You Know?* (Buddy Greene) in which the choir asks Jesus' mother a series of poignant questions ("Did you know when you kissed your baby boy, then you touched the face of God?") and *Grown-Up Christmas List* (David Foster/Linda Thompson Jenner) with its plea for greater understanding and peace among people).

McNair does some of her best work in the two spirituals, *This Little Light of Mine* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the last-named with an accompaniment by David Duncan that partakes deliciously of the spirit of the blues and R&B. Sylvia's intimate vocal warmth and sensitive interpretation capture the special quality of both these grand old songs. She is less successful in Adolphe Adam's *O Holy Night* where she has to contend with an overloaded acoustic created by the orchestra and a substantial chorus singing with extended tessituras and the top of their lungs.

There's something for everyone here, including J.S. Bach's Sinfonia from the Christmas Oratorio, its lilting melodies and swaying pastoral rhythm recalling those time-honored instruments of simple shepherds, the wooden flute and the hurdy-gurdy. We also have John Rutter's *All Bells in Paradise* and his *Magnificat*, the last-named animated by use of Latin-American rhythms, Mendelssohn's *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, a recounting by composer William Goldstein of 'Twas the *Night before Christmas* with delightful spoken narration by Sherry Stark, and a rousing *Jingle Bells*.

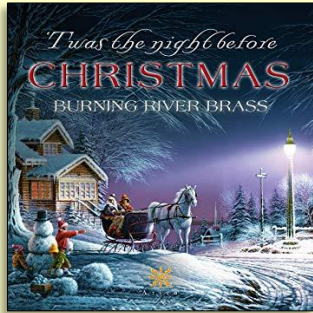
Presbyterian Church. Treble voices predominate, as you might expect, in these settings of songs that strike a responsive chord in the listener by their simplicity and joyful character. They are supplemented on a number of tracks by the voices of older boys whose timbres have changed, or are in the process of changing, to tenor or bass. All these voices sound great together, with a wonderful transparency appropriate for the season.

Christmas morning comes early for the chorister, and Mary Huff delights in recounting the glee the youngsters experience when they first open their folders to discover the likes of *Carol of the Bells* and *Deck the Halls* in settings as irresistible for the singers as they are for the listener. The Austrian carol *Still, Still, Still* and the Spanish *La Nanita Nana*, both in Norman Luboff settings, offer even more delectable fare, as do such comparative rarities as *Huron Carol* and *The Bright Daystar*, both in settings by Paul Halley, and Pietro Yon's *Gesú Bambino*, which has the swaying rhythm of a processional. *Carol of the Animals* (Patrick Wedd) even has some barnyard cacophony thrown in for humorous effect.

At the end of the program we have a spirited selection of traditionals: *Deck the Halls*, *Jingle Bells*, *O Christmas Tree*, and *Here We Come a-Wassailing / We Wish You a Merry Christmas*. At the very end, we are reminded of the seriousness of the Nativity in *The Place of the Blest* by NYC native Randall Thompson, consisting of his settings of *The Carol of the Rose* and *The Place of the Blest* by 17<sup>th</sup> Century metaphysical poet Robert Herrick, with *The Pelican* (traditionally a symbol of Christ's self-sacrifice) by 20<sup>th</sup> Century poet Richard Wilbur as the centerpiece and a florid *Alleluia* making for a splendid finish.

First-rate sonics by Richard Price and Wayne Hilleman of Candlewood Digital enhance our enjoyment of all the music on this album.



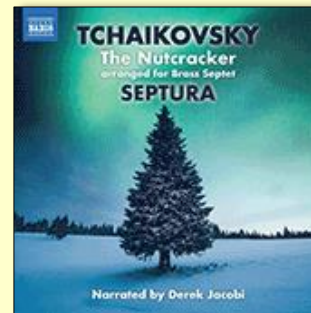


'Twas the Night before Christmas  
Burning River Brass (Azica)

Christmas is that truly amazing time of year when holy mystery rubs shoulders with down-to-earth revelry. There is something in this album for those with a taste for both strains of merry-making, and particularly the low-down revelry we just spoke of. The arrangements of Christmas carols, traditionals, and even a very jazzy Tchaikovsky send-up that goes by the name of "Burning River Nutcracker" are all in the spirit of a season where, musically speaking, anything goes.

Burning River Brass, an ensemble composed of twelve of the best American brass players, made their debut in 1996, and have continued to win an increasing following through recordings and live performances nationwide. Composed of trumpets, horns, trombones, bass trombone, euphonium, and tuba, plus percussion, they have a recognizable sound with plenty of opportunities for "bloom" as well as more trenchant sounds and lots of rhythm. The gifted Roger Harvey is responsible for half the arrangements on this album, from the jauntily cheerful *I Saw Three Ships* to the hauntingly beautiful setting of John Jacob Niles' *I Wonder as I Wander*. Others include *In the Bleak Midwinter*, *Sussex Carol*, the Catalan traditional *Fum, fum, fum* (which provides a fine opportunity for the percussionist), and the delightful French traditionals *Il est né le divin Enfant*, *Noël Nouvelet*, *Patapan*, and *Joseph est bien Marié*.

The afore-mentioned Burning River Nutcracker consists of imaginative, and often impudent, spins on the Overture and five numbers from the Nutcracker ballet by six different arrangers. They include a rather erratic *Waltz of the Flowers*, a wall-banger of a *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*, a *Spanish Dance* with wildly disjunctive rhythms, and a *Pas de Deux* that threatens to go the limit as a 50's-style rock crooner ballad. The last number, *Mother Gigone*, recalls the madcap moment in the Christmas Party scene when the skirts of the grand guignol puppet open to allow the egress of what seem to be an endless host of happy, mischievous children. Other pure pleasures include *'Twas the Night before Christmas* with narrator, a Bing Crosby/Andrews Sisters-style take on *Jingle Bells*, and a medley of *Christmas Toons* by William Kirkpatrick (arr. Roger Harvey) that pay tribute to our TV heritage of Frosty the Snowman and Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer.



Tchaikovsky: The Nutcracker  
Septura, with narrator Derek Jacobi (Naxos)

Septura, consisting of Huw Morgan, trumpet in E-flat; Alan Thomas and Simon Cox, trumpets in B-flat; Matthew Gee and Matthew Knight, trombones; Daniel West, bass trombone; and Peter Smith, tuba, with Scott Lumsdaine standing in on percussion, are up to the unconventional, as usual. A familiar Tchaikovsky ballet gets a new sound, as well as a new look, in a version for brass septet and narrator arranged by Knight and Cox, and based on the Alexandre Dumas adaptation of E.T.A. Hoffman's story *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*.

We expect the unusual with the London-based Septura, and we get it here. The arrangements for brass generally bring out the brightness and the feeling of uninhibited *joie de vivre* in Tchaikovsky's score, with the possible exception of the Overture Miniature and the March of the Hussars in red jackets in the opening scene, which has always struck me as rather cute, conventional music conforming to the bourgeois holiday setting at the beginning of the story.

That's before the magic of an enchanted Christmas transforms the scene in the moonlit living room after the departure of the guests. The menacing appearance of the Mouse King and his fearsome retinue and the heroic defense of Clara, the daughter of the house, by the grotesque wooden Nutcracker (who is, as we might have guessed, a handsome prince imprisoned by a witch's spell) changes all that. From this point on, the music assumes the special quality that we associate with Tchaikovsky's well-loved ballet.

The music heard here corresponds to the original Hoffman story, rather than Tchaikovsky's ballet scenario, so that some numbers familiar to balletgoers, such as the *Waltz of the Snowflakes* and the *Neapolitan Dance*, are missing. On the other hand, all the other national dances from Nutcracker Suite No. 1, the *Spanish*, *Arabian*, and *Russian dances*, the *Waltz of the Flowers*, *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*, and so forth, are present. The music for the *Forest of Fir Trees* in Winter scene has its wonted majesty in the brass setting, and the final *Pas de Deux* its customary verve. British actor Derek Jacobi's expert narration gets much of the credit for holding a rather loose-limbed story together.

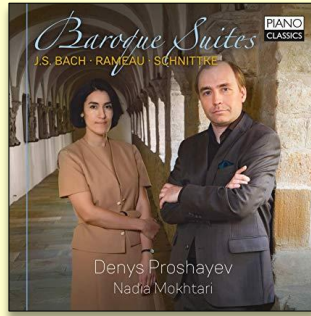


"Telemann's Garden," quartet, trio sonata, fantasia, and suite  
Elephant House Quartet  
(Pentatone)

The Elephant House Quartet is comprised of musical artists from Denmark, Japan, and Poland who got together to further their love of the chamber music of the Baroque. They are, reading from L to R on the album cover: Bolette Roed, recorder; Aureliusz Golinski, violin; Reiko Ichise, viola da gamba; and Allan Rasmussen, harpsichord. All are supremely accomplished performers who function as well in solo roles as they do as an ensemble. That is vital in the case of Hamburg-based composer Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767) whose chamber music so smoothly integrated the best features of the various national schools of his day that it serves to epitomize his era.

After the tastefully ornamented *Lentement* for solo harpsichord from *Fantasia No. 2*, TWV 33:19, which sounds just as gracious as the description would suggest, the program continues with *Suite No. 5* in A Minor for Flute, Violin & Basso Continuo, TWV 42:a3, which also draws upon discretely charming French influences. The *Siciliana* for solo violin from *Fantasia No. 9* in B Minor, TWV 40:22 has a song-like feeling in arcs of swaying melody.

*Paris Quartet No. 3* in G Major for Flute, Violin, Viola Da Gamba & Basso Continuo, TWV 43:G4, is subtly distinguished by the way its dances in the different national styles are transformed into lively character pieces as the composer creates an ever-changing palette of colors and instrumentations, all



"Baroque Suites," Bach, Rameau, & Schnittke  
Denys Proshayev, Nadia Mokhtari,  
duo-pianists (Piano Classics)

Russian pianist Denys Proshayev and his French-Algerian duo-piano recital partner Nadia Mokhtari give highly illuminating performances of keyboard suites by two composers who were most instrumental in defining the style of the Baroque era, Johann Sebastian Bach and Jean-Philippe Rameau, plus a modern composer, the late Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998) who paid eloquent tribute to them in his late style. For those of us who believe the Baroque spirit is timeless and undying, these performances, recorded on various occasions in 2005, 2015 and 2016, are a healthy confirmation.

The last of the Partitas of J.S. Bach, No. 6 in E Minor, BWV 830, is the most challenging of all to perform and the most artistically demanding. In his day it could only be performed on a two-manual harpsichord, as an instrument with a single keyboard could not accommodate its frequent changes in registration and still capture the bold definition of its musical lines. Even then, something stood to be lost in the process of moving rapidly between manuals and re-positioning one's hands. Somehow, it seems more natural in the present duo arrangement, which allows the partners greater freedom to explore its abundant beauties.

It begins with a Toccata of great expressive power plus a three-voice fugue that reaches a point of great intensity before it gets resolved. It is followed by an Allemande with a rising bass and arpeggiated figures, a Corrente with jazzy syncopations



*Ein' feste Burg*, Music of the Reformation - Chicago Gargoyle Brass & Organ Ensemble  
(MSR Classics)

The Chicago Gargoyle Brass and Organ Ensemble under the direction of Stephen Squires, with Jared Stellmacher and Mark Sudeith sharing the duties as organist, give thrilling performances of the Reformation hymns that have inspired composers to create imaginative settings of them ever since Martin Luther's day. *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*, usually translated *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, is the best-known, but the Gargoyles also show themselves adept in bringing the lesser-known hymns to life in the sort of glorious arrangements that have been their trademark.

The program opens with the *Rejouissance—Fantasia on Ein' feste Burg* by our U.S. contemporary James Curnow (b.1943), a spirited setting with lively syncopations, a very lyrical middle section, and later a rhythmic figure for an ostinato. It is followed by 3 settings by Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) of paraphrases by the theologian Cornelius Becker of Psalms of David. They are heard in splendid arrangements for brass quartet by Gary Olson that recall the polyphony of Venetian composer Giovanni Gabrielli, who was one of the the mentors of Schütz.

Next we have Johann Sebastian Bach, heard first in the serenely majestic organ chorale *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* (Come now, Saviour of the Nations), BWV 659, and then in a transcription for organ and brass quintet by Rodney Holmes of the Opening Chorus and Chorale

served up with a contrapuntal skill that does not call undue attention to itself.

These traits of Telemann's music are likewise found in the other works on the program: Fantasia No. 1 in A Minor for solo flute, TWV 40:2 (which affords Bolette Roed the opportunity to display some fantastic tonguing and breath control), Trio Sonata No. 10 in A Minor for Recorder, Violin & Basso Continuo, TWV 42:a4 (the *Affetuoso* movement is a real gem), and Recitative & Arioso from Solo Sonata No. 9 in E Minor for Viola da Gamba & Basso Continuo, TWV 41:e5, which gives the humble gamba a splendid chance to sing.

What is the significance of the title "Telemann's Garden"? It refers to the composer's passionate love of gardening, which he pursued with a similar inspiration as that which yielded the "flowers" of rare beauty, in a great variety of forms, tone colors, and expressions, that we find in the music on this album.

over a walking bass, a carefree Air with wide leaps, a richly textured Sarabande that harkens back to the mood of the Toccata, and a *Tempo di Gavotta* in a galante style. The concluding Gigue, at first disquieting in its slow, almost dispirited opening, soon reasserts its true nature as a fast-tempo dance in a galloping meter. Lots of contrapuntal texture keeps both partners busy.

Rameau's Suite in E Minor, best-known for its exuberant fifth movement, *Le Rappel des Oiseaux* (Cries of the Birds) which conjures up what seems like a whole forest of songbirds, is a great favorite of Proshayev and Mokhtari because it gives ample play to the many ornaments they encounter in its eleven deeply poetic, dance-inspired movements. Proshayev, in an interview in the booklet, describes Rameau's ornaments as requiring, "a refined culture of *touché*." More than the simple graces we usually conceive them to be, they are a means of overcoming one of the harpsichord's basic limitations, namely its short tone duration, by extending the phrase length and permitting the performer greater expressive freedom, lightness and sharpness of articulation. These ornaments are essential here in realizing a suite of gracious dances: Courante, Gigue, Rigaudon, Musette and Tambourin, the two last-named recalling sounds of rustic bagpipes and hand-held drums. *Villageoise*, a dreamy evocation of a village in the quiet hours, makes for a fine ending.

from the Cantata, BWV 80, "*Ein' feste Burg*." Then we return to solo organ in Three Lutheran Chorales, BWV 680, 687, and 651. The last-named is a brilliant Fantasia inspired by the cantata, *Komm, Heiliger Geist* (Come, Holy Spirit) with contrapuntal interweaving and rapid figurations that recall the "rushing of the mighty wind" and the moment when "All began to speak with other tongues" in the Pentacostal story.

The program continues with the Ecclesiastical Festival Overture on *Ein' feste Burg* by operatic composer Otto Nicolai (1810-1849, best known for *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) in a joyous, exuberant arrangement by Craig Garner.

The last items on the program are by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847): first, his Organ Sonata No. 6 in D Minor, reflecting his noted skill as an improviser. We then conclude with the finale to his great "Reformation" Symphony, Op. 107, in an inspired setting by Craig Garner for brass quintet, timpani and orchestra that plays up the festiveness, majesty and drama of the original, including a timely outbreak of the chorale (you guessed it!) *Ein' feste Burg*.