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Mozart: The Four Quartets for Flute and Strings – Lisa Friend, flute; members of the Brodsky Quartet (Chandos)

Flutist Lisa Friend, capably seconded by three members of the well-seasoned Brodsky String Quartet – Daniel Rowland, violin; Paul Cassidy, viola; and Jacqueline Thomas, cello – have a grand time with Mozart's four Quartets for Flute and Strings. All these works reveal Mozart's supreme inventiveness in a genre that ostensibly qualifies as "light" music, but which gave their composer lots of opportunity to experiment with the kind of part-leading that was to prove valuable to his future string quartets.

These four attractive works go by Köchel Numbers 285, 285a, 285b, and 298, for historical reasons that are well-documented in the booklet but are too tedious to describe here. The important thing to note is that 285a and 285b are not versions of K285, but different and highly original works in their own right. We are also given as a bonus the Andante in C major, K315, originally written for flute and orchestra but presented here in a 2000 arrangement for flute quartet by Mordechai Rechtman, so the listener is not given short measure. Quite the contrary.

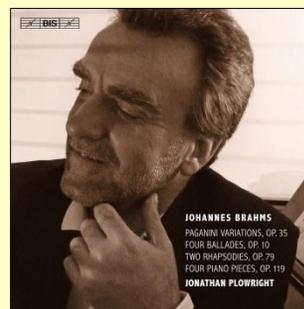
K285 in D major is heard first, and it makes a splendid lead-off with its sparkling Allegro, followed by a long-breathed aria for the flute over a plucked string accompaniment



Mendelssohn: Piano Trios 1 & 2
Julia Fischer, violin; Daniel Müller-Schott, cello; Jonathan Gilad, piano (PentaTone) SACD, DSD

This offering of the Mendelssohn Piano Trios was so successful on its initial release in 2006 that PentaTone decided to reissue it again ten years later. A warmly affectionate account of these ever-popular chamber works is always welcome. We feel its finer qualities instinctively from the very opening of Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 49 as our trio of young musicians swing very nicely and graciously into the main melody in a way that belies the title of this opening movement, *Molto allegro agitato*.

"Agitated"? The word is misleading if we are to expect a prevalent mood of unease or severe tension. "Restlessness" would be a more appropriate word to characterize such gracious lyricism. The piano leads the way here, as it does in the Andante, which features an intimate dialog between the violin and cello. There follow a fleet-footed, dance-like Scherzo and then a finale titled *Allegro assai appassionato*, the "passionate" part of which must be taken with a grain of salt as this movement does not wear its heart on its sleeve in the manner of Tchaikovsky or Dvořák. This is Mendelssohn the "classical romantic" calling, and he wears his mantle comfortably and naturally. Even the sensational ostinati do not detract from our feeling that "All shall be well."



Brahms: Paganini Variations; Four Ballades, Two Rhapsodies, Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119 – Jonathan Plowright (Bis) SACD, Surround

English pianist Jonathan Plowright has come out with his penultimate release in a Brahms project for Bis Records of Sweden, and brother, is it loaded! We learn a lot about the heart and the mind of Johannes Brahms in the works presented here, including some things you probably didn't want to know.

Leading off (and concluding) the program is Brahms' Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 35. This work demands so much of the listener that Plowright has chosen to play Books I and II as book-ends of the program, a wise decision that allows us to better take in a work of this magnitude. The familiar theme is Paganini's 24th Caprice for violin, the rich lode of which many other composers have attempted to mine. In Jonathan Plowright's penetrating interpretation, we get the distinct impression that Brahms has come pretty damn close to exhausting its possibilities in the course of 28 incredible variations, some of which are exceedingly dark and ominous. In Book I the ferocious demands on the artist include rapid double notes, trills taken with the weakest fingers, skips, portentous octaves, and imitations of the sort of bouncy *spiccato* that remind us of the violin source of the theme itself.

Book II is no less difficult, but it does offer us solace in the form of a

that will inevitably remind listeners of the "Dance of the Blessed Spirits" from Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. The finale is a scampering Rondeau that gives all four players the chance to show themselves to best effect.

K285a in G major follows next. It is in two movements, a quick Andante that is meant to be played, as it is here, *con moto*, and a lively Minuet (*Tempo di Menuetto*) in which the impression of its having been speeded-up is the product of its sudden rests, sharp dynamic contrasts and fleet runs, rather than any undue haste by the performers.

K298 in A major comes next in the program. It begins with a stately Andantino in four variations, of which the flute takes the theme and embroiders it in the first, the violin the second, and the viola the third, while the flute takes up the theme again in the fourth over a backdrop of running chords in the cello. A sprightly Minuet and Trio and a playful Rondeau, marked *Allegretto grazioso*, follow in that order.

K285b in C major is in many ways the most substantial work on the program. The opening Allegro uses an Alberti-bass theme, with a second theme characterized by appoggiaturas and pizzicato bass notes. This work is memorable for its second movement, a Theme and Variations affair that proves to have been a re-arrangement (or perhaps a precursor?) of the great variations movement from Mozart's Serenade, K361 scored for 12 Winds and Double Bass. A poignant minor-key variation, No. IV, is followed by a gently lyrical, almost Schubertian Variation V, and then a lively waltz for Variation VI.

And let's not forget the aforementioned Andante, K315, which has long been a favorite in its original form for its aria-like melody. The present arrangement stands to make even more friends for it.

When we get to Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor, Op. 66, which premiered several years after its predecessor, a good deal had happened in Mendelssohn's life that is reflected in subtle ways in its somewhat more serious mood. The death of his mother in 1843 and the deterioration in his own health probably account for the relatively more urgent conflict between heavenly aspirations and worldly cares in the opening movement, *Allegro energico a con fuoco* (spirited, energetic and with fire) – although, once again (Mendelssohn being what he was) we should be cautious in drawing a relationship between life occurrences and the workings of a very creative mind.

At any rate, the opening theme in the Allegro is darker and the music more chromatic than we are used to expect from Mendelssohn. When the music regains its balance at the end of the movement, it is as if someone poured oil on a troubled sea. The slow movement, *Andante espressivo*, has a real feeling of consolation, enhanced by a search for compatible timbres. If this is a farewell song, it is nonetheless hopeful and not at all prone to despair. Significantly, the voices of the instruments are very carefully blended and balanced – a real joy to hear in the present recording.

The Scherzo, on the other hand is very fast and furious – not at all akin to the fortuitous alacrity of the similarly-named movements in the Midsummer Night's Dream Music, or in Piano Trio No. 1, for that matter. The finale, titled *Allegro appassionato*, uses the venerable old Bach chorale "*Herr Gott, Das fürchten wir alle*" (Lord God, we all fear you) to add to the steady, affirmative character of the music.

very charming waltz in Variation 4 and splendid cascading figurations in Variation 12. The ominous mien of Variation 9 is, however, more in character with the work as a whole. Even the glittering figurations in Variations 33/34 are not exactly glass chandelier pianistics for the salon: approach them with caution, as you would an actual chandelier that had fallen from a great height, for fear of cutting yourself on the shards!

The Four Ballades, Op. 10, open with a grim piece inspired by the Scottish folk ballad "Edward, My Son" with its stark tale of patricide and guilt, a rare example of a literary influence in a work of Brahms. The second Ballade is a light-fingered caprice with a lullaby for contrast, the third a fantastic scherzo that, for some listeners, conjures up Mendelssohnian elves. The fourth is the most introspective and intimate of all, seeming as it does to conceal a love-secret.

The 2 Rhapsodies, Op. 79, call for considerable ardor and a confident rhetorical sense in the interpreter. Dark hues contrast with chiming counterpoint in the expressive central section of the first. The second is boldly assertive, with a powerful melody arching over somber triplet figurations. Both pieces demand, and receive in the person of Plowright, the assurance needed to put them across.

The 4 Piano Pieces, Op. 119, close out Brahms' oeuvre for piano in grand style as a collection of pieces varied in affect. The first was described by Clara Schumann as "sadly sweet," and was perhaps intended as a memorial to her husband Robert. The second pits unrest in the outer sections against a heart-easing barcarolle in its center. The third has a jocular, bouncy mood, making it a favorite encore-piece. The last is a spirited Rhapsody, ending Op. 119 on an assertive, masculine note.



Mahler: Symphony No. 9 – Mariss Jansons, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (BR Klassik)

In 1908, Gustav Mahler first experienced heart problems. He even expressed his concern to his assistant Bruno Walter that the prospect of his increasing debility would put an end to the walks on mountain paths that contributed so much to his creative energy. He was quite emphatic that it was not any morbid fear of death that bothered him: on the contrary, he'd known for some time he was going to die. But how could he continue to write the kind of music he did without the life-enhancing creative strength he derived from his walks?

In the event, Mahler recovered his strength in 1909 to the extent that he was able to resume his normal life. The Ninth Symphony reflects the experience of those times in its slow progress toward complete and total acceptance of a human life and its destiny. It is definitely not morbid or pessimistic. Contrary to the assertions of some listeners that they can detect a coronary thrombosis in the insistent, halting rhythms of the opening movement, Mahler was not prone to writing what the movies used to call "Mickey Mouse music." There is a slowly moving flow to the opening Andante, which begins and ends with a descending second, over which the composer inscribed "*Leb' wohl!*" (Farewell) in the manuscript.

Ostensibly in the key of D major, the Ninth shows Gustav Mahler's preoccupation with progressive tonality as evidence that he was breaking new ground, even in a "song of farewell." Its form consists of bold expansions, compressions,

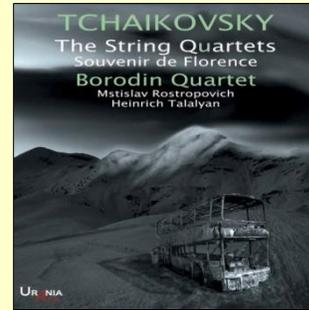


Mendelssohn: Midsummer Night's Dream – Sir John Eliot Gardiner, London SO, Monteverdi Choir (LSO Live) Hybrid SACD, DSD, Blu Ray

An intriguing concept we have here, presenting all of Mendelssohn's incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* together with the relevant dialogue in the play. By hearing the music interspersed with the spoken text or serving as a soft backdrop to it, we are able to get an impression of what Mendelssohn had in mind. And remember, this German composer really knew his Shakespeare and had loved this particular comedy since childhood.

With this approach, the essential elements in the play appear in high relief. Elements such as Theseus' famous dissertation on the relation between the creative imagination and sheer madness: "Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, such shaping fantasies that apprehend more than cool reason ever comprehends." Or consider Oberon's benediction on the imminent marriage of the play's pairs of moonstruck lovers, under the soft strains of a refrain from the Overture: "Now, until the break of day, through this house each fairy stray. To the best bride-bed will we, which shall by us blessed be. And the issue there create ever shall be fortunate." The blessing on the house puts to rest all the strife in the play, even as the music draws slowly to its end.

In a production such as this, Sir John Eliot Gardiner is fortunate to have as his speaking voices three fine young products of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama who have received a thorough training in voice as well as theatre. They are



Tchaikovsky String Quartets 1-3, Souvenir de Florence – Borodin Quartet, Mstislav Rostropovich, Genrikh Talalyan (2-Urania)

Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky was the very first Russian composer to make a name for himself with his symphonies and concertos. It is not as well-known that he was also the first significant Russian in the sphere of chamber music. His major works were few in number – basically the four on the present reissue from the Italian label Urania plus the Piano Trio in A minor, Op. 50 (see my Classical Reviews, October 2016) – but high in quality. The performances by the Borodin String Quartet heard on the present release deserve to live forever.

There is a paucity of information on the date and location where these recordings were made. Presumably it was in Moscow sometime in the 1950's for the three quartets and in 1965 for the sextet. Originally released by the Russian state label Melodiya, they have held up very well over the years. This was the classic Borodin Quartet as it existed between 1953 and 1974, with roots as far back as 1945: Rostislav Dubinsky and Yaroslav Alexandrov, violin; Dmitry Shebalin, viola; and Valentin Berlinsky, cello. Intense performers with the highest level of personal musicianship, they are said to have hardly glanced at one another while playing, each intent on infusing his part with as much emotion, depth, and sheer beauty as possible.

For Tchaikovsky, that approach certainly paid off handsomely. Of the three String quartets, No. 1 in D major, Op. 11 remains the best-known down to the present day,

intensifications, and moments of crisis as we come to grips with the breadth and diversity of life itself. There are moments of exultation as well as suffering, expressed as variations and transformations in a moving stream. A slow, syncopated motif like a heartbeat and a sighing figure in the strings help set the mood. We are lifted up wondrously by the sounds of the horns, while occasional distractions are heard from snarling brass (music critics?)

In the second movement, a rustic Ländler turns into a wicked whole-tone waltz in frantic rhythms. The third movement, Rondo-Burleske, is a parody of the popular Viennese music of the day, manic in mood and sarcastic in intent. No real consolation can be gotten from either of these movements. That awaits us in the finale, an Adagio marked "*Sehr Langsam und noch zurückhaltend*" (very slow and held back). It plays much like a slow relinquishing of the world, with all its beauty, joy, pain, and sorrow. The last passage is marked "*ersterbend*" (dying away).

The symphony is scored for an orchestra consisting of piccolo, 4 flutes, 4 oboes (one doubling cor anglais), E-flat clarinet, 3 clarinets in B-flat and A, 4 bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, tympani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, 3 deep bells in F-sharp, A, and B, 2 harps, and the usual strings. Mahler, who was one of music history's great conductors as well as a composer, knew well the capabilities of all these instruments, individually and in combination, and the way to use each for best effect. Despite the mammoth orchestration, there is no sense of overloading or confusion, only the most amazing economy and a chamber music-like clarity.

All of which requires a performance rich in nuance, well-paced, and with a constant awareness of the textures and range of emotions that are involved in an exceptionally detailed score. The cueing by the conductor and the execution by every chair of the orchestra have to

by name: Ceri-lyn Cissone (Hermia, Fairy, Titania), Frankie Wakefield (Oberon, Theseus), and Alexander Knox (Lysander, Puck). Remember their names: you will be seeing them in theatre programs and film credits over the coming years. Gardiner also enjoys the resources of London's Monteverdi Choir in the choruses and such occasional solos as the soprano aria "You spotted snakes with double tongue, thorny hedge-hogs be not seen."

And finally, the members of the London Symphony Orchestra are in good form, playing with vigor or delicacy as the music requires. Musicians who have come of age in the United Kingdom cannot be expected to approach such familiar music as this as if experiencing it for the first time, but neither do we get the impression that they've heard it hundreds and hundreds of times, which is more likely the case. They invest their playing with the require freshness to put over this thrice-familiar score convincingly.

Notably absent from the Incidental Music are Nick Bottom and his chums, those "rude mechanicals who ne'er labored in their minds 'til now" who gather in the woods to rehearse the god-awful tale of Pyramus and Thisbe (which was Shakespeare's send-up of poetic tragedy in the sublime style). Fear not: they are abundantly present in the famous Overture, with its "hee-haws" celebrating the moment in the play when Bottom is crowned with the head of an ass! We hear it twice, in the hybrid SACD and on a separate Blu-Ray disc in the same package.

mainly because of the slow movement, *Andante cantabile*, the one that reduced Leo Tolstoy (and many listeners since) to tears when he first heard it, and which was the basis for a popular song in the 1940's, "It was June on the Isle of May." But Quartet No. 2 in F major, Op. 22, and No. 3 in E-flat minor, Op. 30, also have plenty to say for themselves.

The conflict between form and emotion that so often makes for great art is abundantly present in these works. The texture and blend of voices is uniquely Russian, and the Borodin Quartet are careful to observe these issues. The emotion in all these quartets is distinctly Tchaikovsky, and is most evident in his slow movements. Not for Peter Illyitch the romantic notion of pink sunsets or intimations of the godhead as perceived in moments of tranquility. This is passionate music, involved with the two most important issues in life, whether we know it or not: love, which makes life bearable, and death, which is our constant reminder to live our lives as fully as we can while we still have the chance.

The above-mentioned *Andante cantabile* from No. 1 still inspires us as a charming evocation of young love, while the *Andante ma non tanto* in No. 2, with its mid-air cry at the outset and its aching melody in insistent dotted-rhythm phrases, conveys darker moods. In No. 3, in the elegiac slow movement, *Andante funèbre e doloroso*, a funeral march and an evocation of liturgical chant darken the atmosphere with a keen sense of personal loss – in this instance, for the recently deceased Ferdinand Laub, who had been first violin in the premieres of both previous quartets. (In the slow introduction to the opening movement of this same work, Tchaikovsky commemorated him in a beautiful cantabile melody for the violin.)

That leaves the Sextet in D minor, Op. 70, subtitled "Souvenir of Florence," in which the Borodin are supplemented by the talents of violist Genrikh Talalyan and cellist

be right on the money. Further, you need recorded sonics with both substantial body and the highest transparency. To my mind, this live recording by Mariss Jansons and the BRSO is as close to perfection as I could possibly imagine.

Usually, the so-called “perfect” recording is perfectly bland, the product of a safe approach with no risk-taking by all hands involved (We critics often term them “correct” recordings, by way of damning them with faint praise). That is decidedly *not* the case in the present instance, as Jansons takes all the requisite risks and brings in a big, beautiful symphony that handsomely repays the effort.



“Garden of Joys and Sorrows,” Aguila, Debussy, Takemitsu, Dubois, Gubaidulina – Hat Trick (Bridge Records)

In ice hockey, a “hat trick” is when a player makes three goals in the same match. That’s a rare enough occurrence in a sport that is sometimes scoreless at the end of regulation. No problem here: the three players who constitute the trio known as “Hat Trick” put the puck in the net every time in a program that explores the myriad ranges of expression of all three instruments. They are, by name: April Clayton, flute; David Wallace, viola; and Kristi Shade, piano, and their home base is the New York City area.

Trios for flute, viola, and harp have rarely been encountered in modern times, although such works would be fairly common during the baroque era in France. Claude Debussy’s Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp (1915), heard here, seems to recapture the spirit of that

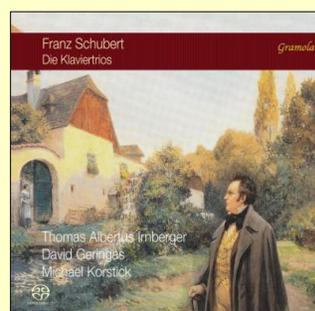


Rachmaninoff: Complete Works and Transcriptions for Violin & Piano - Annelle K. Gregory, violin; Alexander Sinchuk, piano (Bridge Records)

L.A. and Moscow meet agreeably in the persons of U.S.violinist Annelle K. Gregory and Russian pianist Alexander Sinchuk. The occasion is the complete original works and transcriptions for violin and piano, including some of Rachmaninoff’s most ravishingly beautiful and appealing music. A nice recorded presence makes the offerings even more attractive.

Sergei Rachmaninoff actually wrote no more than three pieces for the combination of instruments: a Romance in A minor, composed in the mid-1880’s when he was a young student and then another Romance and a Hungarian Dance, published as Op. 6 in 1893, after he’d finished composition studies at the Moscow Conservatory and been awarded its highest honors.

Mstislav Rostropovich. This suite, heard as often nowadays in the version for string orchestra as it is the original sextet, has sometimes generated controversy as to how “Italian” it really is. (It seems to me, Tchaikovsky’s Russian in Florence carries about as much baggage from home as Gershwin’s American in Paris.) The highlight is, again, the slow movement, a glorious Andante cantabile that plays like a love duet between Violin I and Cello I and in which, after a stunning interlude in which all six instruments seem to buzz like a swarm of insects, the duet resumes with the roles of violin and cello reversed – a heart-stopping masterstroke of genius!



Schubert: Piano Trios –Thomas Albertus Imberger, David Geringas, Michael Korstick (SACD, Surround, and DSD. Released by Gramola)

From the Austrian label Gramola comes an exciting release of really exceptional recordings of Franz Schubert’s complete music for piano trio. The artists are Thomas Albertus Imberger, violin; David Geringas, cello; and Michael Korstick, piano. Natives of Austria, Lithuania and Germany, they all enjoy much acclaimed international careers. That’s a real plus when interpreting works like these with their great musical values and philosophical issues that go beyond the sphere of music, as vast as it is.

Both Piano Trios were composed at roughly the same time, towards the end of 1827 when Schubert had less than a year to live. The fact that he *knew* he had but a short time is important, because his response to it was an enormous burst of creative energy in his final

bygone era in which the tasteful interaction of instruments blown, bowed, and struck with keys would have been much admired. It is in three movements: a very charming Pastorale, Interlude marked Tempo di Minuetto, and a finale marked Allegro moderato ma risoluto, which is to be executed with dispatch. By turns languorous and invigorating, exuding the open air and sunlight of Mediterranean lands, it has long been a favorite work of Debussy.

In fact, for ensembles such as Hat Trick, it was the *only* jewel in its repertoire – until quite recently. In the present program, we are given Toru Takemitsu's "And then I knew 'twas wind" (1992), which takes its inspiration from a provocative poem by Emily Dickinson. It even quotes material fairly directly from Debussy's Sonata, though in ways that are varied in sympathy with the Japanese composer's own unique style. We also have a wonderful fantasy entitled Submerged by Miguel de Aguila (2016), based on a poem by Alfonsina Storni, "Yo en el fondo del mar" (Myself at the bottom of the sea) that is suffused with the beauty and charm – and also the menace for terrestrial beings such as you and I – of the watery world. Sounds in the flute that are evocative of birds singing far above, insistent rappings on the soundboard that are reminiscent of Paraguayan harp techniques, and multiple-stop pizzicati in the viola, all create an indelible effect in this work, expressly commissioned by Hat Trick.

Elsewhere, we have a Terzettino (1905) by Theodore Dubois, a lovely and exquisitely turned little work by a professor at the Paris Conservatory that has been quite obscure until recently, but may have been known to Debussy. Also, "Garden of Joys and Sorrows" (1980) by Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina. An astringent work inspired by a poem of existential angst by Francisco Tanzer, it reminds us that into each life a little Gubaidulina must fall, or else we'd be so delirious with joy we wouldn't know how happy we were.

The vocal melodies in the two Romances, especially the latter with its effective use of double-stops in the violin, and the everescent gypsy style of the Dance, make for highly delectable listening.

That's just the beginning, as numerous great violinists over the years have succumbed to the urge to transcribe Rachmaninoff's songs and especially his preludes and etudes-tableaux, pieces that seem to cry out for greater breadth and harmonic amplication, even when you consider the originals were richly endowed to begin with. We have here no fewer than five transcriptions by Fritz Kreisler and six by Jascha Heifetz, among others, to whet our musical palate.

Highlights in this program include Kreisler's arrangement of the exalted 2nd movement, *Preghiera* (Prayer) from the Second Piano Concerto and his arrangement of the Prelude in G minor, Op. 23, No. 5, a stirring Cossack march with a reflective middle section and a quick ascending passage at the end that seems to scatter into nothingness. Heifetz' transcriptions of the restlessly fluttering Prelude in E-flat minor, Op. 23, No. 9, with its technically demanding double-notes in the piano part now shared more equitably between our artists, and two of the highly descriptive Etudes-Tableaux of Op. 33, No. 7 with its madcap atmosphere reminiscent of a Russian fair, and No. 2 with its suggestion of tolling bells, call for special notice even in a rich lineup.

Other gems include songs, notably *Oriental Romance*, a transcription by an unknown hand of a song after a text by Pushkin "Sing not to me, Beautiful Maiden" that is notable for its exotic melismas and other evocations of the Caucasus, and Kreisler's transcription of Polka Italienne, utterly charming in its vivacity and remarkable as a rare example of a completely "happy" piece by its dour composer.

"Vocalise," a wordless song that seems to have the stuff to take on an endless variety of transcriptions,

year of life, encompassing his Mass in E-flat major, his last three Piano Sonatas, his String Quintet, and the "Great C Major" Symphony, among other important works. Significantly, it also included his lied "*Das Hirt auf dem Felsen*" (The Shepherd on the Hill), D965, in which the persona in the song concludes he must move on to other pastures, with other songs to sing, rather than linger awhile in this beautiful spot.

A poignant thought, yes, but with a note of optimism and an incredibly beautiful lyricism that suffuses all of these last works. We find it too in the song "Des Sängers Habe" (The Singer's Possession), the melody of which also occurs in the fourth movement of Piano Trio No. 1 in B-flat, D898. Here, the singer's zither is his consolation, and he requests that it be placed upon his grave, "so that when the spirits ascend from death's dark realm to silently dance at midnight I can pluck its strings." As with love, so music constitutes the ultimate affirmation of life in the face of time and death.

The B-flat Trio has historically been the more popular of the two piano trios, as well as the easier for a first-time listener to fall in love with at first hearing. At a playing time of 42:14 in the present recording, it is a long work as trios go (though of shorter duration than Trio No. 2), but in this case its length works in its favor, particularly when you observe all the repeats. They are not just perfunctory conventions but add immensely to the feeling of breadth and ease in the melodies, which are among Schubert's finest. The slow movement, an Andante marked *un poco mosso* (a little sad) has a gentle lift and a twilight mood that will linger long in the memory.

The Scherzo has the two strings and the piano trading off roles of melody and accompaniment in the most natural, unforced manner. Its trio section has the feeling of a relaxed waltz, in contrast to the general urgency of the scherzo. The work concludes playfully and stylishly with a Rondo marked *Allegro vivace*. Despite its tremolos and trills, a congenial mood

A final observation: the Debussy Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp is performed here in a very recently published edition by Carl Fischer that goes back to Debussy's original autograph manuscript. Carl Swanson, who researched and prepared the new edition, claims to have uncovered 124 measures (from a total of 319) that differ in some way from the edition published by Durand et Cie in 1915. Many of the differences are said to be slight, others more significant in terms of missing or misplaced indications. To my ears, we have essentially the same sonata we have enjoyed for the past hundred years, but with phrasings that are sometimes lighter and more insouciant, and deliberate discords that seem somewhat more acerbic. The differences are mostly in slight degrees of flavor (so don't be in a hurry to discard your older recordings!)

sounds particularly good in a latter-day arrangement by Mikhail Press in which the violin brings out the wonderful cantilena in the original.

But even a Fritz Kreisler cannot quite compensate for the loss of a lush sound in transferring the melody from the string section to a solo violin in the 18th Variation from Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. Gregory's playing over piano chords by Sinchuk does, however, capture a certain poignancy in this arrangement.

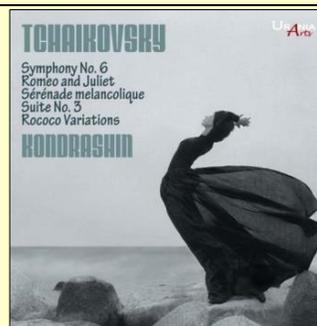
predominates in this finale.

On Track 5 of Disc 1 we have the Notturmo in E-flat, D897, which was intended as the slow movement of Trio No. 1. As did Beethoven when he removed the *Andante favori* from his great "Waldstein" Sonata, Schubert discarded this hauntingly beautiful movement with its stirring unisons, rippling accompaniments and bold pizzicati in favor of the present Andante, as it made too strong an impression in its own right (see what you think).

There is nothing in this work, or indeed in the literature itself, quite like the fatalistic mood we hear in in the fortissimo chords that open the Allegro of Trio No. 2 in E-flat, D929, and even more the melancholy melody heard in the Andante over a tremolando in the accompaniment. It builds to a climax of almost unbearable intensity before it finally subsides. This melody was taken from a Swedish song "Se solen sjunker" (The sun is setting), which plays here like a metaphor for the closing of a life. A Scherzando seems to recall the spirit of Schubert's evenings with his friends in which he often displayed his ability to extemporize waltzes and ländler in endless profusion. Then, the poignant melody of the Andante is heard again in the Allegro moderato finale, first at around 9:30, and then at 13:20, and 19:38 in the present performance, leaving a lasting impression on the listener.

Kirill Kondrashin (1914-1981) was much celebrated in his lifetime, in Russia and abroad, as a conductor of broad sympathies and the firmness needed to bring out the best in the orchestras he led, notably the Moscow Philharmonic, which he brought up to international standards and which is heard in most of the works on the present program. Just *how* great he was becomes clearer with each new release of recorded performances from his career.

We hear him in recordings made between 1949 and 1965, in a Tchaikovsky program consisting of Symphony No. 6 in B minor, the "Pathétique," the Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture, Variations on a Rococo Theme for Cello and Orchestra, and Orchestral Suite No. 3 in G major, all with the Moscow Philharmonic, and in an eloquent and moving account of Sérénade mélancolique in B minor for Violin and Orchestra, in which he leads the Philharmonia of London with the formidable Leonid Kogan as soloist.



Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6, Romeo and Juliet, Serenade mélancolique, Rococo Variations, Suite No. 3 for Orchestra – Kirill Kondrashin (Urania) 2-CD slimline

These Russian recordings sound remarkably good for their age, even the very oldest, a live 1949 account of the Rococo Variations featuring an incredibly passionate performance by cellist Daniil Shafran, a figure noted as somewhat idiosyncratic in his day. Here he shatters the notions of lightness and elegance we usually associate with the word "Rococo." The full-bodied sound is more than we might have had a right to expect of a recording made when magnetic tape was still in its early years.

That all these recordings were undoubtedly made in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, which was then generally deemed the best available venue for its superb acoustics, was undoubtedly a plus. So was the current Russian practice of placing microphones all over the place in order to capture the full flavor of the orchestra. The idea was that if any instrument had something important to say, you slapped a mike on it. That was anathema to the concept of a modern symphonic soundstage with minimalist miking that was being developed in the West, but it worked all right for a composer like Tchaikovsky who had a real passion for instrumental timbres and imaginative orchestrations.

We hear this passion in the recording of the "Pathétique" Symphony, with its low, poignant bassoon solo that leads inexorably into the opening movement, the plangent horns, and the low, ominous basses that seem to emerge out of the mist. The mid-movement forte is as stunning as a bolt of lightning, leaving aftershocks throughout the whole movement. Its effect is even felt in the succeeding movement, Allegro con grazia, where a little broken-backed waltz struggles between extremes of despondency and radiance. The third movement, Allegro molto vivace, lives up to its name, unfolding as a stunning march with a smashing climax. Then the finale plunges us back into the mood of the opening movement.

In the Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture, as in the "Pathétique," the conviction Kondrashin brings to an overly-familiar work almost gives us the impression of hearing it for the first time. But the real surprise is the Orchestral Suite No. 3 in G major, Op. 55. I'd heard this work on several previous occasions over the years, but it had never made much of an impression on me before, probably because the performances lacked the power, imagination, and sheer persuasion that Kondrashin invests in it. (There are Russian conductors, and then there was Kirill Kondrashin!)

"I meant to write a symphony," Tchaikovsky confessed in a letter to Sergei Taneyev, "but the title is of no importance." The work is richly scored, calling for 3 flutes (one doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, an English horn, 2 clarinets in A, 2 bassoons, 4 horns in F, 2 trumpets in F and D, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, side drum, tambourine, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, harp and strings. Though Tchaikovsky collectively termed his three serenades "Mozartiana," the work is hardly a Mozart serenade in either scope or orchestration.

With a darkly hued Elégie, marked Andantino molto cantabile, as its opening movement and an more somber, even sinister, Valse mélancolique following it, this is not music to attend to if you are not in a strong frame of mind - unless you want to spend the rest of the evening staring dumfounded at the floor! The Scherzo, which is meant to be played with emphasis throughout, alternates between 6/4 and 2/4, creating difficulties for an orchestra and conductor less capable than we have here. The finale, as long as all the previous movements combined, balances the formal freedoms achieved in movements 1-3 by being cast in the form of a very imaginative theme and variations. It begins and concludes with a Polonaise, marked *Moderato maestoso e brillante*, providing a strong sense of unity. In Kondrashin's hands, it is a work of utter conviction in which the fourth variation, marked *Pochissimo meno animato*, fairly leaps out at us with the startling realization that it is none other than a quotation of the *Dies Irae* theme associated with the chant for the dead!

Great performances? *You bet!* This 2-CD slimline package has to qualify as an early candidate for best reissue recording of the year. And the sound, as I've hinted, is surprisingly strong and vital for the age of the recordings.