

Phil's Classical Reviews

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Brahms: the Two String Quintets
WDR Symphony Orchestra Cologne
Chamber Players (Pentatone) SACD

The Chamber Players of the WDR Symphony Orchestra Cologne, here consisting of Ye Wu, Violin I, Andreea Florescu, Violin II, Mischa Pfeiffer and Tomasz Neugebauer, violas, and Susanne Eychmüller, cello, give lighthearted performances, full of spirit and feeling, of two of Brahms' most attractive chamber works. On the menu are String Quintets Nos. 1 in F major, Op. 88 and 2 in G major, Op. 111. The joy and conviction which the Chamber Players invest in their performances make us wonder why we haven't heard these works more often.

As it frequently happens whenever Brahms writes two works in the same genre, the first is often more straightforward and (relatively) more innocent in its appeal, and the second more complex in ways that make it interesting to scholars. The two sets of Hungarian dances are one example, and the two sonatas for clarinet and piano are another.

The same phenomenon is present in String Quintet No. 1, in which the opening melody is so lovely and transparent it is hard to resist. Very early on, the first viola introduces a major-third relationship (main theme in F, secondary theme in A) that will dominate all three movements.

The violas really shine in the Adagio section of the middle movement, which combines the functions of



"Quattro Mani: Lounge Lizards"
Steven Beck and Susan Grace, duo-
pianists (Bridge Records)

Pianists Susan Grace and Steven Beck, known professionally as "Quattro Mani," give a sonorous and intriguing 2-piano recital of works by five American composers, all but one of whom are still alive and in their creative prime. The chosen works reveal a bewildering variety of texture, rhythm, and color.

Fred Lerdahl (b.1943) is represented by Quiet Music, originally scored for orchestra and arranged for two pianos in 2001. Employing a soft dynamic with running 16th notes throughout the textural fabric, Lerdahl creates intense tension by overlapping variations, each of which grows from a single melodic or harmonic cell. Not an easy work to grasp. I personally found it more comprehensible on repeated auditions.

I've reviewed John Musto (b.1954) on several occasions and found him a remarkably easy composer to like. His Passacaglia, originally written for large orchestra, uses the old baroque form in the following layout: Theme/ 6 variations/ Theme/ 14 variations/ Theme/ Fugue. Musto enlivens his writing with jazzy syncopations and material revealing an ongoing love affair with the blues.

Charles Ives (1874-1954) showed his revolutionary penchant in Three Quarter-Tone Pieces (1925) which he described as three studies in the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic



Mozart: Piano Concertos 21 & 23
Simone Dinnerstein, piano; Havana
Lyceum Orchestra (Sony)

A long-overdue outreach to our Latin neighbor to the south pays off handsomely when Brooklyn-born pianist Simone Dinnerstein journeys to Havana to perform two of Mozart's richest concertos. Playing with her usual poise and feeling for movement and rhythm and an exquisitely beautiful tone, she finds sympathetic cohorts in the Havana Lyceum Orchestra under Jose Antonio Mendez Padron. This ensemble makes up in verve, quick execution, and the sheer joy of music making for any deficiencies it may have in correct execution. In essence, we have living, vibrant Mozart that curiously, for its palette of tone colors and the subtle flavor of its mood changes, seems very much at home in a tropical setting.

Of particular importance is the quality of the Lyceum's woodwind players, as a striking feature of both concertos is the lush writing for the winds. They interact with the soloist in a myriad of ways, beginning right after the exposition by the piano in the aptly-titled Allegro maestoso of Concerto No. 21 in C major, K467, where, among the other delectable features, a bassoon seems to swoop in from somewhere in left field at about 2:14. The woodwind writing is even richer and more subtle in No. 23 in A major, K488, coinciding with Mozart's personal discovery of the clarinet about this time.

slow movement and scherzo so deftly that we are scarcely aware when one section melds into another. The characteristic sound Brahms employs lends a special emphasis to the tenor and alto registers of the instruments, so much so that Neugebauer and Pfeiffer must have arm-wrestled to see who would play the second viola part in a brief but memorable duet with first violin. All the Players are continually alert for sudden changes of tempo and character in this movement.

A fugue theme taken from the introduction shapes the entire finale, marked *Allegro energico - Presto*, helping to give added character to a very zestful movement.

Quintet No. 2, in four movements, is even more harmonically rich than its predecessor, and more symphonic in scope. There's lots of room here for the spontaneous music-making that typifies the Chamber Players, and the melodies are every bit as charming as in Quintet No. 1. From the stirring opening of the first movement, a masculine-sounding call to adventure based on a rippling cascade of 16th notes and a multi-octave theme, first given to the cello, right through to the finale, with its lively pastiche of Hungarian gypsy music, the Chamber Players show us why this infectious music has sometimes been nicknamed the "Prater," after Vienna's famous amusement park with its big wheel.

If there were any doubts that Jorge Federico Osorio is one of the finest pianists of our time, this ambitious program of the last piano works of Franz Schubert and Johannes Brahms would certainly dispell them. These "Final Thoughts" are the last words of two great composers on the piano and on life itself, making this slimline package a must for any serious music lover.

Schubert is represented by his last two Sonatas, in A major, D959, and B-flat major, D960. Together with the C-minor, D958, they were sketched in the summer of 1828 and completed in September, just weeks before his death in November. Though he worked with white-hot intensity in anticipation of his own demise, it is evident from Schubert's manuscripts and the care with which he developed his material that he had been mulling over this project for some time. There are striking relationships among all three works, including similarities of themes and patterns of development and a penchant for modulating into what were then considered remote keys that indicate Schubert was breaking new ground, far beyond the borders of the known musical world.

possibilities of quarter-tones. I admit microtonal compositions sound alien to me, and Ives does not cast this music in his usual populist vein to make it more palatable (I couldn't tell "My Country 'tis of Thee" from "Mary had a Little Lamb" in quarter-tones.)

Of Risk and Memory by Arlene Sierra (b.1970) is probably the most technically difficult work in the present recital. In Sierra's words, "Musical objects are presented sequentially, interrupted, and then brought back in an overlapping reverse order, only to be shattered with mechanical persistence in the second main section of the work." Our admiration for Quattro Mani increases as they deal at high speed with the complexities of a work in which the pianists must finish each other's phrases and match exactly.

Finally, Lounge Lizards is the affectionate account by Michael Daugherty (b.1954) of his student days when he supported himself by playing jazz piano in cocktail bars here and abroad, where "I paid my dues as a lounge lizard." He deftly depicts four of them: the Sip 'n' Stir, Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Dennis Swing Club in the notorious Reeperbaum district of Hamburg, the Ramada Inn on Exit 1, New Jersey Turnpike; and the Bamboo Bar, Amsterdam. There's lots of fun as Quattro Mani, assisted by a pair of percussionists, savor Daugherty's touches of local color— including the delightfully out-of-tune piano in Cedar Rapids!

This is unforgettably beautiful music, and Simone and her friends make the most of it. Concerto 21 opens with several march themes and a songlike melody for the piano, and it concludes in a Rondo finale with a jumping theme and a lively call-and-response between pianist and orchestra. In between, the heart of the music is the Andante, where a dreamlike melody is heard in the second violins and violas over arpeggios in the bass. Soon, the piano enters and begins playing a melody that veers off into different keys and a glorious new world of harmonic imagination.

Concerto No. 23 makes for a striking contrast in its range of moods that make it a very satisfying companion to its predecessor in the present program. In fact it exhibits the variety of Mozart's opera buffa *The Marriage of Figaro*, which he was writing at about this time. There's a lot of fun in the interaction of piano and tutti in both the opening and closing movements. In between, we are treated to another supremely beautiful Mozart slow movement in which the piano seems to roam through a verdant meadow of woodwinds lush enough to furnish any wind serenade. There's also a strain of real melancholy in this Adagio, Mozart's only movement in F-sharp minor, a disquieting note that keeps things in an operatic perspective.



"Final Thoughts," Brahms 20 Piano Pieces, Opp. 116-119 + Schubert Sonatas, D959, and D960 – Jorge Federico Osorio (Cedille) 2-CDs

D959, first up in the program, allows ample room for the sort of purposeful rumination that Robert Schumann had in mind when he spoke of Schubert's "heavenly lengths." That also allows Osorio the opportunity to savor the choice chords followed by arpeggios in the opening movement while still maintaining a calm moderate tempo as its basis. That feeling of harmonious musical time is totally shattered by the furious outburst that erupts in the midst of a slow, sad barcarolle in the Andantino, like a cry of anguished despair if not actual madness. This is Schubert, soon to leave this earth, speaking. The scherzo begins innocently and playfully, with a momentary outburst into a descending minor scale before it resumes its graceful, waltz-like character. The finale, marked Rondo: Allegretto, requires the pianist to be continually alert for subtle changes in mood, texture, and rhythm. Following a swirl of arpeggios which Osorio handles very skilfully, the coda ends in a transformation of the theme we heard at the very beginning of the sonata.

Next, we have all 20 of Brahms' piano pieces (*klavierstücke*), Opp. 116 thru 119. Intensely lyrical and personal, though not in a way that would impede their accessibility for any sensitive listener, they benefit from the deft characterization and attention to pianistic values that Osorio applies here. That includes Brahms' accompaniments, which can be calm, introspective, or gently rocking, or else pulsating, brusque, or impassioned. Brahms puts a lot of music and emotion into the space of only 3-5 minutes, which is what most of these pieces run, and Osorio is closely attuned to all of it.

The seven pieces in Op. 116 are variously entitled intermezzi or capriccios. The former are typically quiet and introspective and the latter more extroverted, although the distinction doesn't always hold. Pulsating rhythms and stepwise movement mark the Capriccio in D minor that opens the set with one large arching phrase after another. Another Capriccio in the same key with a plunging and soaring theme closes the set on a dramatic note, though not before a quieter interlude that has more in common with the intermezzi. At the other extreme, the quiet, echoing cadences of the Intermezzo in A minor exert a soothing effect on the listener, and the rollicking measures of the Intermezzo in E minor are imbued with a carefree, playful mood.

Op. 117 begins with a gently rocking Intermezzo in E-flat that has a folk quality and an intimacy that have earned it the nickname "Scotch Lullaby." This tenderness is also found in Op. 118 in the Intermezzo in A, together with a love theme and a discursive episode. On the other hand, the Intermezzo in F minor in the same set, an Allegretto marked *un poco agitato*, is characterized by an unquiet mood that is only dispersed at the end. In a slightly different mood, the Intermezzo in E-flat minor comes across like a desolate nocturnal procession swept over by wispy arpeggios.

Finally, three Intermezzi of varied moods, the first tenderly poignant, the second with a softly swaying barcarolle as its center, and the third optimistic and bounding, comprise Op. 119, together with a final Rhapsody charged with turbulent emotions. It ends the set on a really decisive note, letting us know that the 20 piano pieces have come full cycle. In what has been an eventful journey, Osorio's performances remind us of Clara Schumann's observation that in these pieces, Brahms "combines passion and tenderness in the smallest of spaces."

The last work on the program, Schubert's Sonata in B-flat, D960, begins *Molto Moderato* with a steady theme that is interrupted by upheavals in the bass line that rise unexpectedly instead of falling (*That* was something so strikingly new that I do not recall even Beethoven employing it). In both the initial exposition and the recapitulation, disquieting tremolos in the left hand interrupt the train of thought in the theme completely, but on the second occurrence the melody resumes before the tremolo has subsided. (Osorio brings these moments off magically, by the way.) The music continues after a remarkable key-change, indicating the determination to push on despite all obstacles that is a striking characteristic of this work.

The Andante is sheer magic: sad, mysterious, hauntingly beautiful. Harmonically it is the most audacious movement of all. It begins in C-sharp minor, but the central section is written in A major and touches upon B-flat, the home key. After a half cadence, the music shifts to the remote key of C major, eventually turning to E major, the relative of the home key. All of these modulations, which still can seem striking to us today, must have utterly dumbfounded Schubert's audiences. The way the melody keeps circling, obscured by chiaroscuro-like gauze, gives the music a dream-like quality. Osorio captures this element very well, as he also does with the exhortation in the Scherzo, marked *Allegro vivace con delicatezza*, to perform the music with the greatest vitality and delicacy, which would logically seem to be incompatible requirements. The finale is a heady concoction of charm and pugnacity with a seemingly endless flow of melody over an uninterrupted and highly rhythmic flow of sixteenth notes. It requires, and receives, all the musical insight and technical prowess an Osorio can invest in it.



Mahler: Das Lied von der Erde
Jonas Kaufmann, tenor; Jonathan Nott, Vienna Philharmonic (Sony)

Munich native Jonas Kaufmann, celebrated as an operatic tenor with a penchant for bel canto, turns his attention to one of the greatest works of the entire Austro-German repertoire, Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (Song of the Earth). The remarkable thing here is that he sings all of the songs, not just those specifically written for tenor. As he explains it, "I've always wondered why one needs two singers for these six songs. Of course, there are powerful differences between the songs and also clear differences in their vocal *tessitura*. In spite of this, I was attracted by the idea of framing these six songs within a single overarching structure from the first song to the last."

An ambitious project, to be sure. Consider the sheer vocal demands. From the painful intensity of *Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde* (Drinking Song of the Earth's Sorrow) and the vaulting spirits of a gallant youth galloping on a lusty steed in *Von der Schönheit* (Of Beauty) all the way to the word *ewig* (forever), repeated like a mantra to the very limit of audibility as the light fades into the blue distance in *Der Abschied* (The Farewell), Mahler's dynamic requirements for the voice are extreme. One could hardly expect to be able to repeat this six-songs-in-one-voice feat night after night, much less be able to take it on tour. In that respect, I note that Kaufmann and the VPO under Joanathan Nott took their time with the recording sessions over the week of June 16-22, 2016, getting every nuance and detail just right.



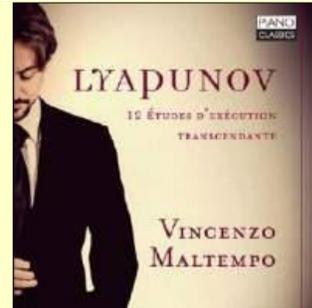
"Danzas," music for Spanish guitar, incl. Falla: Dance of Fire - Montréal Guitare Trio (Analekta)

From Analekta, our friends north of the border, comes a very attractive package of Spanish music by the Montréal Guitare Trio. They consist of guitarists Glenn Lévesque, Sébastien Dufour, and Marc Morin, the last-named doubling on acoustic bass in the pieces where greater luminosity or a more substantial sound is required. In this album, MG3 return to the Spanish idiom that was their first love in their student days, when it made up 80-90% of the music they played. They are exceptional in capturing the spirit of Spanish dances like the *farruca* and *buleria* which constitute the very soul of flamenco.

We start off with "Mediterranean Sundance/Rio Ancho" by jazz artists Al di Meola and Paco de Lucia. Together with John McLaughlin, they constituted the famous trio whose album *Saturday Night in San Francisco* (1981) has had a lasting influence on MG3. It is followed by *La Catedral* by the Paraguayan Augustin Barrios Mangoré, a wide-ranging work inspired by the spiritual beauty of the Montevideo Cathedral.

The simple tenderness and passion of Paco de Lucia's *Canción de amor* (Song of Love) is paralleled at the end of the program by the vibrant textures of Our Spanish Love Song by yet another jazz great, Charlie Haden.

The heart of the program is devoted to two searingly memorable dances by Manuel de Falla, *Danza del Molinero* (Miller's Dance) from *The Three-Cornered Hat* and the eerie and often positively terrifying *Danza*



Lyapunov: Transcendental Etudes
Vincenzo Maltempo (Piano Classics)

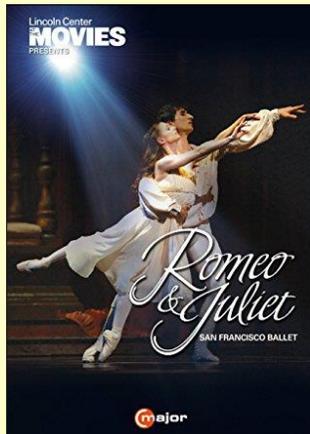
In a beautifully accomplished and very stylish recital, pianist Vincenzo Maltempo gives vibrant presence to the 12 Transcendental Etudes of Sergei Lyapunov (1859-1924). This composer, who studied under Mily Balaikirev, one of the "Mighty Five," represents the second generation of the Russian National School. In his student years, Lyapunov came to venerate Franz Liszt as a virtual god, so much so that it threatened to crimp his own development. After Liszt's death, he conceived the idea of composing a memorial to his idol but was stymied by a figure who, in his own words, completely enslaved him. He was reassured by Balaikirev that he might employ Lisztian-style piano technique as long as he followed his own natural tendencies.

The impasse broken at last, Lyapunov worked faithfully on his set of 12 Transcendental Etudes between 1897 and 1905, polishing them to exquisite brilliance. The fact that he gave them the same title as the famous work by Liszt shows that he was confident in his own "transcendent" piano technique, or else he would have really been exposing himself to ridicule! The Etudes begin, in fact, in F-sharp minor, continuing the progressive key sequence begun by Liszt.

Etude No. 1, "Berceuse," seems to meander effortlessly, its fleeting progression being interrupted by cadenzas like soft effusions of sunlight. Etudes No. 2, "*Rondes des fantomes*" (Dance of the ghosts) and 11, "*Rondes des sylphes*" (Dance of the sylphs) both employ Liszt-style quicksilver passagework based on rapidly-executed double notes, the

Das Lied is a miraculous work. Mahler took his texts from the unrhymed adaptations in German verse by Hans Bethge of Chinese poems of the Tang Dynasty, particularly those of Li Tai-Po, dealing with the impermanence of life, love, and beauty. Set against these sad reflections which reach their greatest poignancy in *Der Einsame in Herbst* (The Lonely One in Autumn) is the perpetual renewal of the earth itself with the change of the seasons. We move from images of bitter irony – the howling of the ape over a forgotten grave in the initial poem and the contemptuous dismissal of the bird proclaiming in song the change of season in *Der Trunkene im Frühling* (The Drunkard in Spring), “What do I care? Let me be drunk!” – all the way to the healing force of the earth’s renewal in the final poem, even as the speaker prepares for life’s final journey, death: “My heart is still, and awaits its hour.”

A work such as this requires, and here receives, the most sensitive interpretation from its performers, and also outstanding support from the recording team. I recommend it highly.



Prokofiev: *Romeo and Juliet* Ballet in 3 Acts - San Francisco Ballet; Helgi Thomasson, Artistic Director and Principal Choreographer. Martin West, Principal Conductor. (C Major Entertainment) DVD Video

ritual del fuego (Ritual Fire Dance) from *El Amor Brujo* (Love the Sorcerer), and then the well-known Spanish Dance No. 1 from Falla’s two-act opera *Le Vida Breve*, whose style breathes the air of the popular Spanish entertainment known as *zarzuela*, in which audiences were accustomed to sing along in the choruses.

The Falla section concludes with three numbers from the often-arranged *Siete canciones populares españolas* (Seven Popular Spanish Songs). They include *Nana*, a tender lullaby; *Polo*, the complaint of a jilted lover in which we hear the wronged woman’s spite in the sharply-struck accents that accompany the original lyrics: “Love be damned, damned, / and damned him who made me understand it. *Ay!*” Finally, we have the serene loveliness of *Asturiana*, traditionally the grateful song of miners happy to see the starlit sky after a weary shift underground.

This attractive soft-pack release is part of Analekta’s popularly priced series of “*Classique à emporter*” (Classics to Go).

latter being even more disjunctive with its acrobatic leaps and repositions. Liszt’s “*Feux follets*” (will o’ the wisp) comes to mind, though Lyapunov’s conception in both instances is far from servile.

The Russian vein in this work is best represented by No. 8, “Epic Song” and No. 10, “Lesghinka.” The former has the solemn dignity of the old Russian folk epics, its final bars recalling Balakirev’s Fantasy on Themes from Glinka’s *Life for the Tsar*. The latter is a courtship dance of the Muslim tribes in the Caucasus in which the man dances with wild, extravagant gestures while his partner circles slowly around him. Its inspiration was Balakirev’s piano fantasy “Islamey,” the spirit of which Lyapunov recalls for us in swirling whirlwind figurations with a calm central episode.

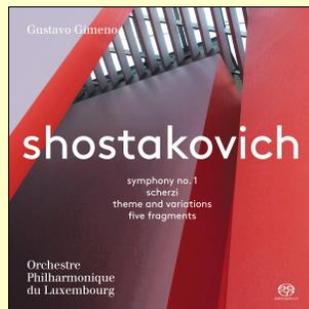
This is impressive work by an artist whose earlier recordings for Piano Classics of works by Schumann, Liszt, and Alkan show that he is not deterred by awesome challenges. Beautiful recorded sound, produced in the Netherlands by Pieter van Winkel, himself a prize-winning pianist in his earlier years, supports Maltempo’s efforts handsomely.

The San Francisco Ballet puts on a handsome staging of Sergei Prokofiev’s enduring classic *Romeo and Juliet*. Recorded live on May 7, 2015 at the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House, it stars Maria Kochetkova (Juliet) and Davit Karapetyan (Romeo) as Shakespeare’s lovers, with Pascal Molat (Mercutio), Joseph Walsh (Benvolio), and Luke Ingham (Tybalt). These dancers are wonderful. Karapetyan is manly in his bearing and athleticism, with a range of emotional sensitivity required by the character. Kochetkova’s Juliet is beguiling. Her movements are deceptively easy, her leaps inspiring. In the Garden Scene in her pas de deux with Karapetyan, their movements together have the effortless feeling of slowly drifting clouds (which, of course, is the result of countless hours of painstaking rehearsal). Molat’s Mercutio is endowed with a seemingly endless bag of really funny comic business, whether flirting with the street harlots or baiting Ingham’s very menacing Tybalt. Walsh, as Benvolio, has some fine moments in a trio with his companions as they prepare to set out on a lark to crash the fete at the Capulets, an escapade that helps seal Romeo’s fate.

This is a quick-moving account of a ballet in 3 acts, thanks mostly to Helgi Thomasson’s sensational choreography that flows seamlessly from one solo, pas de deux, trio, or ensemble to another or into the enveloping scenes in the street and at the Ball of the Capulets. That seamless flow incorporates the sword fights in the Street Brawl in Act I and the Deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt in Act II, Scene III. This swordplay (always a dangerous element in any staging of this ballet, and for more reasons than one) is beautifully choreographed to move with the pounding rhythms of the music and melt into the surrounding street scenes without a misstep.

Jens-Jacob Worsaae's luminous costume design includes attractive splashes of color that accord very well with the mood and tone colors of Prokofiev's score. His set design has a vertical dimension that reinforces the mood of the drama with its themes of the oppressive weight of family dignity and the looming imminence of impending fate. It is also easily moved between scenes under the entr'acte music provided in the score.

In all, this production runs 1h52m, with another 4 minutes for the well-deserved curtain calls. Prokofiev's complete musical score runs in the neighborhood of 140-145 minutes, which leads us to suspect some (very) discrete deletions. They occur mostly in Act III, in the final street scene with its celebration (a bit premature, as it turns out) of Juliet's marriage with Count Paris. The intermission between Acts II and III is handled cinematically with a fleet montage of images from the story up to this point. Strangely, the only scene I actually miss is the first one in Friar Laurence's cell, as he returns from gathering medicinal herbs (including the fateful Mandragora, later Juliet's sleeping potion). It constitutes a peaceful interlude in the score before the drama, which has played like a comedy up to this point, begins to build through one fatal incident after another toward ultimate tragedy. Presumably, this scene was deleted because it did not accord with Thomasson's overall design for the choreography. You could make a case, either way.



Shostakovich: Symphony No. 1, Theme & Variations – Luxembourg Philharmonic (Pentatone) SACD

A superb Luxembourg Philharmonic under its Spanish music director, Gustavo Gimeno, delivers probing and insightful performances of Symphony No. 1 in F minor, Op. 10 and three other works by a Dmitri Shostakovich who had not yet reached his majority. They perform with style, nuance, and a feeling for the deeper issues in the music.

The astonishing thing about the Symphony, in particular, is that it still strikes us today as a skillfully crafted masterpiece and not just a signpost in the development of its 19-year old composer. It was recognized as such upon its May, 1926 Moscow premiere under Nikolai Malko, and within the next three years it would be championed outside Russia by Walter, Klemperer, Toscanini, Rodzinski, and Stokowski. Its mixture of pure lyricism, impudence, pathos, and grotesquerie, with a real conflict among these elements, characterizes it immediately and leaves an indelible impression. The opening movement begins with a desolate-sounding trumpet motto, which is answered in turn by queries from bassoon, horn, clarinet and other instruments. A rather theatrical march emerges and develops into a noisy and vulgar affair against which Shostakovich sets a dreamy waltz as his second theme. The burlesque element here reminds us that Shostakovich did not think it beneath his dignity to occasionally write music for that quintessential popular entertainment, the Moscow Circus!



Shostakovich: Symphony No. 8 - Andrey Boreyko, Stuttgart RSO (SWR Music)

Under Russian conductor Andrey Boreyko, the Southwest Radio Symphony Orchestra Stuttgart gives a memorable performance of one of the greatest symphonies of Dmitri Shostakovich (maybe *the* greatest). This is a real audiophile-class recording made in the famed SWR Studios, and the quality sound is a definite plus in a work in which there are no throw-away gestures and every nuance has a meaning of its own. It reinforces Boreyko's razor-edge interpretive insight and demon execution by the orchestra, making this a must-have recording.

Shostakovich composed Symphony No. 8 in C minor, Op. 65 under the dark cloud of war, working on it from 2 July to 9 September, 1943. Unlike other famous Russian composers, he was not evacuated by the government to a resort far from the front, but remained, perhaps by his own choice, in his home city of St. Petersburg during the worst days of its two-year siege by the Nazis. He was assigned the duty of fire warden, in which capacity he often had the chilling experience when making his rounds of coming across the frozen corpses of people who had died of hunger or exposure. All of this colored his perception of the grim reality of war, so much so that he was unable to write the sort of morale-raiser the Soviet musical establishment demanded and many of his audiences expected.

The Eighth Symphony captures war, the greatest of human atrocities, in all of its impersonal brutality and

The scherzo, in perpetual motion enlivened by comic flourishes from the piano, and an absorbing slow movement whose expansive theme is disrupted by increasingly urgent trumpet fanfares, reveal the ardent young composer's handling of the resources of the orchestra with confidence and economy. In the finale, the disturbing elements we have heard in the three earlier movements, in particular the fanfare from the slow movement, are ratcheted up to greater intensity. Supported by the tympani, it takes on the character of a doom-laden pronouncement. It is answered by the eloquent, almost human, voice of the cello, filled with compassion for the trying times that many Russians had experienced in a country that had been in the throes of civil war. The ending, in this performance, is clearly cathartic.

Lesser-known works from the early years of the composer give Gimeno and the Luxembourg PO yet more opportunities to feast on the choice instrumental passages that are scattered throughout these works, as well as their amazing variety of tempo and mood. That is particularly true of Theme and Variations for Orchestra, Op. 3 (1922) which generates a real Tchaikovsky-like excitement as it moves kaleidoscopically from one variation to the next. Its masterful assurance recalls Benjamin Britten's Variations on a theme of Frank Bridge, with the difference that the Russian composer was but 16 at the time (to 24 for Britten) and was already in complete command of the full resources of the orchestra.

The other works in the program, the Scherzos in F-sharp minor, Op. 1 (1921) and E-flat major, Op. 7 (1924), and the Five Fragments for Orchestra Op. 42 (1935), are more undiscovered treasures that reflect in various ways the myriad textures and moods, the passion and poise, of the young Shostakovich.

mechanized terror. It begins with a far-ranging opening movement that has no fewer than eight expressive markings and in which the tempo indications, like virtually everything else in this work, are subject to extreme contrasts and modifications. In this setting the melancholy song of the English horn seems like a lament for a desolate world. This movement is quite involved, almost self-sufficient and longer in duration than most whole symphonies (28:29 in the present recording). The next movement, marked Allegretto, has the unenviable task of persuading us that what we have heard is not the final word on the subject. It does so by means of its hysterically high rhythmic tensions, enhanced by solos in the woodwinds, particularly the piccolo and piccolo clarinet, in which the instruments are cast in their highest and lowest registers. Their shrieking calls sound an unmistakable note of terror and alarm.

The last three movements are taken *attacca*, which helps build the tension in this work. Another Allegretto functions as a second scherzo, with its unvaried tempo accentuated by a grotesque trumpet solo. The slow movement is a deeply moving Largo cast in the form of a passacaglia in which the theme is repeated eleven times by the cellos and basses. It is so darkly subdued in its basic mood that I would advise particularly vulnerable persons to listen to it in a well-lit room, lest they find themselves anxiously peering sidelong into dark corners in dread of the malevolent shapes that may be lurking there.

The finale proceeds *attacca* as the Largo resolves to C major, a key normally associated with wholeness and sunlight, but not in this case. Too much has happened in the Eighth Symphony to warrant a happy ending. There are a number of solos, most significantly a brief birdsong in the flute. A cautiously hopeful melody in the bass clarinet seems to imply that things are greening up again. It appears that the world of nature is starting to recover from the devastation of war, but where is man in this picture? The future of the human race seems far from certain. Shostakovich ends the symphony on a slow, quiet cinematic fadeout accented by the composer's use of his own signature in the beats of the tympani: "DSCH" for Dmitri Shostakovich, where the notes are the standard German notation for D-E-B. It is the voice of the composer speaking, drawing on his inward resources in an effort to find pity and consolation for suffering.

That, at least, is my opinion. Be aware that the music conveys different messages on different levels to different people. This work is very demanding on the conductor and players, and also on the listener, in order to bring out its various meanings. I am content that Andrey Boreyko and the members of the orchestra have done their utmost to present a deeply moving and meaningful experience in a manner that, to me, is utterly convincing.