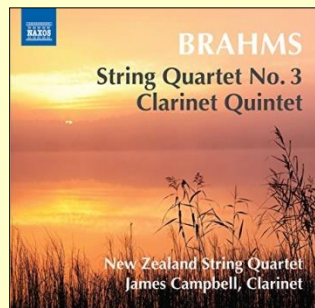


Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

June, 2017



Brahms: String Quartet No. 3, Op. 67 Clarinet Quintet, Op. 115 – New Zealand String Quartet; James Campbell, clarinet (Naxos)

It's another winner from the New Zealand String Quartet! This finely honed ensemble, consisting of Helene Pohl, Violin I, Douglas Beilman, Violin II, Gillian Ansell, Viola; and Rolf Gjelsten, Cello, show the cohesiveness allied with the instinctive freedom that made their Mendelssohn cycle and their earlier account of Brahms' Op. 51 Quartets such successes. Here they take Quartet No. 3 in B-flat, Op. 67 in such a way that Brahms' frequent changes in texture, rhythm, and color seem so positively intuitive as to be second nature.

That's important because Brahms does not sound a trumpet whenever he wants to introduce a new theme or to change the texture or the harmony ever so slightly. That goes double for his penchant for thematic transformation wherever it occurs. This is the last accomplishment of the composer's craft, and the New Zealanders are ever attuned to it.

To many listeners, myself included, No. 3 is the most attractive and easiest to love of the Brahms Quartets. A principle reason is the lyrical impulse that positively abounds in this work. The rollicking "hunting" character of the music in 6/8 meter which opens the Vivace sets the tone for the work, allowing plenty of opportunity for Brahms'



Brahms: Serenades 1 & 2 – Jaime Martin, Gävle Symphony Orchestra (Ondine)

Jaime Martin conducts the Gävle Symphony Orchestra of Sweden in thrilling performances of Johannes Brahms' two Serenades. Both were products of his mid to late twenties and tell us a lot about the heart and mind of the emerging composer. Martin, a Spaniard who first gained renown as a flutist before turning to the podium as a second career, uses his knowledge of woodwinds to good effect in bringing out the expressive writing for the winds that distinguishes both works.

Serenade No. 1 in D, Op. 11 is the more immediately infectious, as well as more problematical. Historically, the main critical knock against it has been its excessive length for what is ostensibly an entertainment genre (43:41 in the present unhurried account). No one has ever denied the sensual appeal of Brahms' material, particularly the opening Allegro molto where a heady theme in the horn takes the lead and the orchestra follows, and also in the Rondo finale. The first-named seems to conjure up some sort of rustic celebration, perhaps a merry wedding procession, while the latter captures the very spirit of the hunt. Bravura writing for the horn in both this movement and in the second Scherzo may have been Brahms' tribute to his late father, whose own instrument this was.



Schubert: Piano Variations Yevgeny Yontov, piano (Naxos)

Israeli pianist Yevgeny Yontov makes the best possible case on behalf of Franz Schubert's piano variations and fragments in the present CD. His firm, beautiful tone and feeling for the pronounced rhythmic values in the music pays handsome dividends. Intelligent scholarship in the case of the fragmentary works adds another dimension to an outstanding recital.

The finished pieces on the program include two really fine works from Schubert's teenaged years, his 13 Variations on a Theme by Anselm Hüttenbrenner, D576, and 10 Variations in F major, D156. Both show us he was already well versed in a form that gave him ample room to express his apparently boundless musical imagination. The daring modulation from F-sharp minor to A major in Var. 6 of the Hüttenbrenner set and the casting of the theme in octaves in the bass, accompanied high above by demi-semiquavers in Var. 10, show a confident mastery of form by a precocious composer who had not yet reached his majority.

The fragmentary works Yontov has selected call for special mention. Reasoning correctly that many of these fragments possess an unusual beauty that needs to be heard, he has made a careful selection of pieces whose only sin was in not having been completely notated by

<p>beloved cross rhythms (We will hear it again, masterfully recounted, in the finale). The extraordinarily beautiful Andante includes an extended melody for the first violin, alternating with strong unison passages and dramatic chords to create a lasting effect on the listener. In this movement, the New Zealanders capture the feeling of warmth that Brahms' friends and admirers such as Joseph Joachim described as "<i>innigkeit</i>," a German word for which the English "intimacy" is a poor approximation.</p> <p>Muted strings prevail in the scherzo movement, marked "<i>Agitato</i>" (though "restless" might be a better choice of adjective than "agitated") with only the viola, which has an unusually prominent and eloquent role, remaining unmuted. The Poco Allegretto finale is a set of variations on a lilting melody that never entirely vanishes from sight. Dark sonorities alternate with wistful sweetness. Variation 7 recalls the hunting horn motif from the opening movement, helping to end the work with a sense of completeness.</p> <p>The other work on the program is the great Clarinet Quintet in B minor, Op. 115, making the present CD a very satisfying pairing of what are probably Brahms' two best-loved chamber works. Here, the NZSQ are joined by the famed Canadian clarinetist James Campbell, who must have performed this work hundreds of times in the course of touring with no fewer than 35 string quartets in a distinguished career. Having said that, I must add that his performance here is as fresh and intuitive as any first love.</p> <p>Brahms wrote this quintet to a commission from clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld of the Saxe-Meiningen Orchestra, and appropriately filled the clarinet part with a lot of touches that show the instrument's range and capabilities. Whether interacting in fascinating ways with the strings or taking the center stage itself, the clarinet is very much a first among equals and not a prima donna. We hear it evervescently sparkling, chuckling, moving inobtrusively into the inner textures created by the</p>	<p>Unusually, Brahms has no fewer than two Scherzos plus another movement consisting of Minuets I & II and Coda. Any one of these could function as a quick inner movement in this work, a sign that, like many another young composer, he was loath to delete any of his material for the sake of the whole. Long though it may be, this first serenade is chock full of good melodies (It is, in fact, among my favorite Brahms works).</p> <p>Serenade No. 2 in A, Op. 16, is more concise and is developed along the lines of Mozart's wind serenades with double woodwinds and a pair of horns, though the mood of much of the material, as we shall see, is darker and more romantic. Brahms' exclusion of the violins from this work adds to the dark feeling of the inner movements, particularly the Adagio, where the melody is interrupted at one point by an agitated section in which the disturbing effect of staccato phrases in the strings seems to hint at an alarming disclosure. If this is "love" music, there is something else going on here, something very disquieting.</p> <p>That mood is never quite dispelled by the up-beat Scherzo, in which the triple rhythm is lent added character by the swelling tones known as hemiolas. (This movement, by the way, was encored on the first performance of Op. 16 in England, and has been a favorite Brahms "hit" ever since.) In general, the liveliness and charm of the outer movements seems to make by far the greater impression on most listeners, to the extent that few observers seem to comment on the dark undercurrent in this work. At any rate, Brahms sent the Adagio and the Menuett, whose Trio is likewise deeper in mood than one normally expects in a movement of this sort, to Clara Schumann as a birthday present in 1859. (Read into <i>that</i> what you will, Brahms biographers!)</p>	<p>Schubert, or are perhaps missing a final sheet, rather than being inferior in any way. Yontov uses a very fine discretion in presenting them to us, reasoning that to complete a piece without any indication of how the composer intended to finish it would make it no longer his work, while to stop where the manuscript broke off in mid-phrase would be undesirable for an audience. Unless Schubert leaves a clear indication of where he is going, Yontov prefers to draw to a cadence and finish off the phrase rather than speculate on how to complete the piece.</p> <p>He takes pains in his notes on performance issues to explain the rationale in his approach to each of the fragments, which include such tantalizing beauties as the two versions of the Adagio in G major, D178, and the Allegro moderato in C major, D347. The last-named has a nice contrast between the sombre beauty of its opening and the insouciant music of the following section, one indication that it was probably intended as the opening movement of an unfinished sonata. (Let's give Schubert a break: he was only 16 at the time, and possibly did not know how to continue a work that had begun with such promise.) The last three measures have only a melody line that had never been harmonized. Since this might have been done in a number of different ways, Yontov opts to omit these measures altogether and stop at the half-cadence of measure 70. In this particular instance, his procedure seems just slightly awkward to me. (See what <i>you</i> think!)</p> <p>The program concludes with the "Graz" Fantasy in C major (<i>Grazer Fantasie</i>), D605a, so-called after the city where the manuscript was discovered as recently as 1962. As with the theme-and-variations, the free-flowing form of the fantasia gave Schubert ample room for expression. Marked <i>Moderato con espressione</i>, it begins in solemn beauty and then diverges into an <i>alla polacca</i> (in the Polish style) that blithely explores a variety of keys and moods. As Yontov shows us, this attractive work measures up well in comparison with the more-</p>
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strings to enrich and deepen the harmonies, and then emerging in the Adagio to display a gorgeous dark cantilena in its chalumeau register. All of this is in Brahms' well-known "autumnal" mood that he had made very much his own by this time.

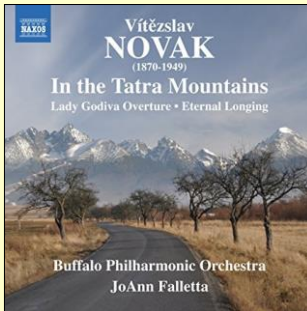


Beethoven: Piano Concertos 1, 2
Yevgeny Sudbin, Osmo Vänskä,
Tapiola Sinfonietta (Bis Records)

Yevgeny Sudbin, St. Petersburg, Russia native who has resided in the United Kingdom since 1997, once again shows his keyboard prowess in a pairing of Beethoven's Piano concertos 1 and 2. The smoothness with which he negotiates his way through the various changes in these scores, including modulations, arpeggiated passages, and sudden fortes, adds to our enjoyment of two works that are filled with the young Beethoven's vigor, lyricism, and pure sense of fun. His pedaling is so instinctive as to be second nature. And the sheer beauty of the pure limpid tone he draws forth from his piano must be heard in order to be believed.

These two concertos, which have pleased audiences ever since the composer himself introduced them, require the spontaneity they receive from Sudbin and the Tapiola Sinfonietta of Finland under the baton of Osmo Vänskä. The timing is absolutely perfect here, as it must be in order to bring out the surprise element in both these scores. Piano Concerto No. 1 in C, Op. 15 grabbed hold of Beethoven's first audiences by its bold rhythmic accents and a chromatic daring that seemed quite bizarre in its day.

A performance such as we have here can do much to recapture the



Novak: In the Tatra Mountains, Lady Godiva Overture, Eternal Longing
JoAnn Falletta, Buffalo PO (Naxos)

JoAnn Falletta and the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra continue their championing of significant lesser known works that need to be heard more often. In the case of Czech composer Vítězslav Novak the sales job was not particularly hard work.

Novak (1870-1949) was an almost exact contemporary of Richard Strauss, whom he rivals in the varied color palette and superficial attractiveness of his music. Early-on, he was encouraged by both Dvořák, with whom he studied composition at the Prague Conservatory, and Brahms, who recommended him to his own publisher. At the age of 26 he fell in love and his music took on a more personal and more erotic character, as we may judge from the three specimens heard here.

In the Tatra Mountains (1902) celebrates the rugged beauty of the mountain range stretching along the boundary of Poland and the future Czechoslovakia. The fog crawling between the mountain clefts is momentarily dispersed by the rising sun. Then, rain and lightning bathe and illuminate the granite cliffs. Peace finally arrives with the setting sun and the soft tones of evening bells (a procedure reminiscent of what Ferde Grofé was to do in the latter sections of his Grand Canyon Suite).

The Lady Godiva Overture (1907) was written for a play celebrating the legendary English heroine who staged history's first peaceful protest by riding bareback (so to speak) through the streets of Coventry to

famous "Wanderer" Fantasy, D760 in every respect except for the symphonic scope of the latter, and needs to be heard more often.



Tchaikovsky: Children's Album,
The Seasons – Polina Osetinskaya,
piano (Melodiya)

Russian pianist Polina Osetinskaya gives warmly glowing performances of piano pieces that really get to the heart of Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky. They reveal, among other traits of this composer, the comparatively rare ability for writing so-called "character pieces" that make a vivid, lasting impression in a brief duration of 2 or 3 minutes, often less. Not many composers have the knack for telling a story or painting a picture in this miniature form. Going back as far as Mendelssohn, one thinks of Schumann, Grieg, Debussy, the American Edward MacDowell... and how many others?

Osetinskaya gives as fine an impression as I've heard of the Children's Album, 24 pieces that Tchaikovsky put together to be played by children for their own musical education and enjoyment. He entitled this album in honor of the similarly named work by Robert Schumann. The pieces get right to the heart of the matter, whether it be a capricious doll, a marching troop of toy soldiers, or the song of a Lark, with its opulent silver chain of perfect notes.

These pieces are intended, as I've said, to be played by children, and Osetinskaya uses her considerable power of imagination to participate in the moods that Tchaikovsky creates. A beautifully centered tone and an awareness of a rhythmic impetus pay handsome dividends in terms of

sense of amazement those early audiences felt, as well as the sheer virtuosity of a pianist/composer who was already legendary for his skill as an improviser. The delayed entrance of the piano after an introduction by the strings and then two themes that are developed by the full orchestra, makes a fine impression, especially as it is soon evident that the piano is developing the music already heard, embellishing it with the sort of florid passagework for which Beethoven was (and Sudbin is) distinguished. The profoundly lyrical, almost prayer-like Largo ends on a hushed note, followed immediately by the high spirits, syncopations, irregular phrasings and bouncy rhythms of the finale, a quirky Rondo-Allegro scherzando that has delighted audiences since Beethoven's day.

As opposed to those he penned for all his other piano concertos, none of the three cadenzas Beethoven wrote for the opening movement of Concerto No. 1 are satisfying in terms of what a cadenza is supposed to do. Consequently, most pianists have historically chosen to provide their own. In what he modestly terms "a concoction of material (including some of my own)" Sudbin presents us with a gorgeous and imaginative cadenza – and plays it beautifully!

Concerto No. 2 in B-flat, Op. 19 is neither as martial in the mood of its opening movement (no trumpets or trympani) nor as broadly humorous as No. 1, but it has its moments, culminating with a saucy tantara at the end of the concluding Rondo, combining elements of both sonata and rondo form. On the whole, the work impresses with its charm, elegance, and endless profusion of lovely melodies. Sudbin handles all these elements in the opening movement, plus the composer's substantial cadenza, with seeming effortless, which is always the final accomplishment of a keyboard artist.

The slow movement, an Adagio, is characterized by its intimate theme and its exalted dialogue between soloist and orchestra, anticipating the Andante of the Fourth Concerto by more than a decade. The Rondo-

protest her husband's levying a tax on the townspeople. Novak deftly delineates the feminine charm of Godiva (a tender *Andante* on soft chromatic strings) and the masculine forcefulness of the Count (an entry appropriately marked *feroce*). In the end, opposites are reconciled in the music and the crisis end peacefully.

Eternal Longing (1905), based on a prose poem by Hans Christian Andersen, uses the enchanting tone color of oboe and harp and the glimmering sounds of the strings to create an undertone of mystery and longing, a reverie conjuring up dim forms lurking in the sea and the uplifting flight of swans.

In the last analysis, however, Novak's tone poems, in common with those of Richard Strauss, have the limitation of program music in general in that they do not resonate beyond the specific image or mood they conjure up. Once you have heard this music, you've heard it.



Beethoven Symphony No.3, "Eroica"
Fidelio Overture – Vladimir Jurowski,
London Philharmonic (LPO)

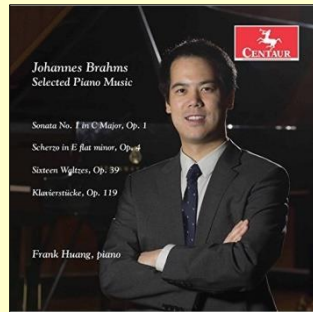
Vladimir Jurowski principal conductor of the London Philharmonic, leads the orchestra in truly dynamic performances of Beethoven's great Symphony No. 3 in E-flat, Op. 55, the "Eroica," and Fidelio Overture, Op. 72. Recorded in performance at the Southbank Centre Royal Festival Hall and the Royal Albert Hall, respectively, they have all the virtues of live recording. With the vitality and presence you can invest in a concert before a live audience, I don't understand why any orchestra would want to go into a recording studio anymore, especially since digital editing can remove stage

the feeling of satisfaction one derives from these little gems that are neither beyond the capacity of a child nor the imaginative re-creation of childhood that an adult needs to have in arriving at their essence.

One must get to this essence very quickly, as the entire cycle of 24 pieces has a total duration of less than half an hour and many are under a minute. They are not meant to be performed consecutively, and can be broken out into various "mini-cycles" of dances, for instance (Waltz, Mazurka, Polka) or songs of the various nations (Russian, Italian, French, German, and Neapolitan, the last-named of which was later to be used in the divertissement of the Nutcracker). Of particular interest are pieces dealing with intimate moments of childhood: Morning Prayer, Mama (a tender subject for the composer, who had lost his own mother when he was quite young), and the sad waltz that underscores the illness and funeral of a doll, a coming-to-grips for the child with the reality of life at a time when the death of siblings and playmates was more common than it is today.

As opposed to Children's Album, The Seasons was intended to be performed by accomplished adult pianists. It is a true cycle, vividly re-creating the moods, scenes, and activities associated with the months of the year and was in fact published in a magazine in twelve monthly installments. Each was preceded by a carefully chosen quote from some well-known Russian poet to help set the mood. The deep-water points in the cycle, for me at least, are April through June. "Snowdrop" recalls the delicately-hued flower, swaying in the breeze, which is an early herald of the coming spring. "White Nights" re-creates the enchantment, the beauty, and the vague mood of sadness associated with the time of year in St. Petersburg, northernmost of the world's great cities, when the sun never actually sets during a 24-hour cycle. Then we have all the romance associated with a Venetian boatman's song in "Barcarolle." A rousing "Reaper's Song" (July), a rather subdued if not downright sad "Autumn" (October),

Molto Allegro finale features ear-catching quirky accents and a good deal of deliberate turbulence, before the orchestra cuts the piano short brusquely with the afore-mentioned “tantara,” as if to say “Wooah, that’s enough!”



Brahms: Selected Piano Music: Sonata No. 1, Waltzes, Intermezzi, Op. 119 - Frank Huang (Centaur)

Frank Huang, a rising figure in the piano world, gives a balanced recital that lets us judge how well Johannes Brahms succeeded in making good the early assessment by Robert Schumann: “A young man ... who has moved us most deeply with his wonderful music. I feel convinced that he will throw the musical world into a state of great agitation.”

Brahms was no more than 20 years old at the time of his first meeting with Schumann. The pieces that he played for him then must have included two featured in the present recital: Piano Sonata No. 1 in C major, Op. 1, and Scherzo in E-flat minor, Op. 4 The Sonata, which Schumann described as a “veiled symphony” for its cohesiveness and breadth, is a remarkably effective work for one so young to have composed. It opens memorably with a theme that bears a resemblance to the one Beethoven used in the same spot in his B-flat Sonata, Op. 106.

A remarkable characteristic of this work that reveals Brahms’ early mastery is his use of the technique of thematic transformation whereby themes are altered in character and rhythm as a movement progresses. This was a striking departure from classical development procedures. Huang’s smooth execution and attention to rhythmic values in the

noise and “audience participation” in a way you could never hope to realize with tape editing.

At any rate, you have it all here in vibrant living detail in the present performance, beginning with the two massive E-flat chords at the very opening of the “Eroica” that grip the unwary listener by the neck and compel his attention. Jurowski gives full play to Beethoven’s love of complexities in this movement, marked *Allegro con brio*, including syncopations and sudden dynamic shifts that can lift you right out of your seat. In what Beethoven clearly conceived as a revolutionary work that embodied the upheavals of his era, he employs such highly flavored dissonances as the unexpected intrusion of C# into the main melody of the movement in order to increase the harmonic tension.

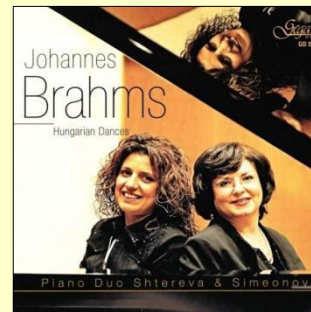
With the taut tempi that Jurowski employs so judiciously, the tension never slackens in a performance that has a total duration of 48:35. That includes the usual suspect whenever longeurs occur, the slow movement, a *Marcia funèbre* (Funeral March) that moves solemnly and purposefully, aided by Beethoven’s use of fugato to maintain the tension, to a point of exhaustion occasioned by grief.

Timing is all-important in Beethoven and never more so than in the unexpected sensational entry of the four horns, the last tuned a semitone off from the others in a manner that would have recalled the excitement of the chase for his audience.

The finale, marked *Allegro molto – Poco Andante – Presto*, is based on a simple but effective dance that trips in unexpectedly and at first blush seems incredibly lightweight by comparison with the preceding events. But it increases in gravity as Beethoven exposes it to variations and rhythmic contrasts that change its character completely and allow the symphony to end on the heroic note that the name “Eroica” implies.

The scale, structural rigor, and emotional depth of this work were unprecedented in Beethoven’s era and still impress audiences in our

and a spirited “Troika” ride on a snowbound lane (November) make for other choice highlights.



Brahms: 21 Hungarian Dances; 16 Waltzes, Op. 39 – Piano Duo Shtereva-Simeonova (Gega New)

On an exciting new label from Bulgaria, the piano duo of Desislava Shtereva and Evgenia Simeonova give rousing performances of Brahms’ 21 Hungarian Dances for piano, four hands. If they don’t shed any new insights on this ever-popular music, they are at least very enjoyable to listen to. High-energy performances, bright, bell-like tones, and a real feeling for Brahms’ quirky rhythms make these accounts of the Hungarian Dances memorable.

Brahms published the dances in two releases. Dances 1-10 appeared in 1869, and were clearly intended for the greatest popular appeal. They were initially written for piano, four hands, which is the form in which we hear them in the present recording. Brahms based the melodies on material provided him earlier by violinist Eduard Remenyi, with whom he had often performed in his earlier years, but he later supplied some of his own themes with a Hungarian Gypsy flavor. In 1872, he arranged Dances 1-10 for solo piano. The following year, he adapted 1, 3, and 10 for orchestra (good choices all: 1 for its lively Gypsy flavor, 3 for its playfulness and vibrant color, and 10 for its highly infectious rhythms).

Other composers, notably Dvořák, soon followed suite and prepared orchestral arrangements of 2, 5, 6, 10 and 20. Adding to their popularity, violinist Joseph Joachim, another Hungarian who had concertized with Brahms in the early days and

present recordings make this sophisticated characteristic of the music quite apparent. He also gives a handsome account in the Andante of a fine set of variations that has its nucleus in a germ-cell of four notes from what was alleged to be a old German song, “*Verstohlend geht der Mond auf*” (Stealthily, the Moon rises).

Amazingly, this four-note cell, varied and developed, serves as the connecting link that unifies all four movements. The spirited Scherzo, marked *Allegro molto con fuoco* (with fire) springs from the final notes of the Andante. The *Allegro* finale, filled with equal measures of yearning and rapture plus a touch of melancholy, would challenge any pianist. Huang manages these last two movements with the assurance needed to stress the cohesiveness of this particular sonata.

The Scherzo, Op. 4, whose rhythmic density is often positively demonic, is succeeded in this program by Brahms’ gracious set of 16 Waltzes, Op. 39. Among this composer’s most popular works in any genre, they begin with a vivacious waltz that has a gentle lift in the opening measure. As Huang explores them, there is a lot of variety in the composer’s harmonic manipulations of these little gems, giving plausibility and a sense of drama to the opus as a whole. No. 5 in E major is a good example of Brahms’ penchant for major-minor modes, in this instance a waltz in a major key that has a distinctly minor-key feeling to it. No. 6 in C-sharp minor has so many sharps and impudent up-beats that it seems to have morphed into a polka. No. 7 in C-sharp minor has the character of a poignant love song. The famous “Lullaby-Waltz,” No. 15 in A-flat major, is frequently performed just by itself as a popular encore. In all, Op. 39 comes across as a plausible set of pieces, continually filled with surprises.

Finally, we have the *Klavierstücke*, Op.119, comprised of 3 Intermezzi of varied moods – the first sweetly sad, the second with a heart-easing barcarolle as its center, and the third bouncy and athletic – plus a spirited

own day. To realize it all requires the utmost of any orchestra’s resources. In this stirring account by the LPO, it gets everything it needs.



“Duo Virtuoso II,” Honegger, Ravel, Schulhoff – The Elaris Duo (MSR)

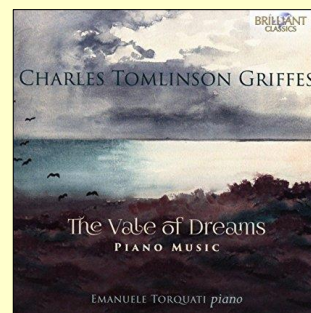
Larisa Elisha, violin, and Steven Elisha, cello, spouses who currently grace the music faculty of Georgia Southern University in Statesboro (GA), perform together as the Elaris Duo. In that capacity they serve the important function of helping to make audiences aware, through their sensational performances, of the repertoire, as rare and beautiful as it is totally unfamiliar to most listeners, for violin and cello duo.

So rare, in fact, that in my 35 years as a music reviewer I had not heard *any* of the works by three major 20th century composers on the present program. When you first listen to this music, you almost instinctively wait on pins and needles for the entry of a piano, which of course never arrives. Then you forget all about the piano when you realize that everything, but *everything*, the composers wanted to say is here, fully harmonized and in an amazing variety of textures, moods, and colors. There are not a few moments in all three works in which you could close your eyes and imagine you were listening to an entire string orchestra with all its range and expressive capability, and not just two instruments.

The credit for the richness of these three musical experiences lies as much with the totally committed performances of the Elishas as it does the original conception by the composers. For the record, we have here the Sonata for Violin and Cello (1920-22) by Maurice Ravel, the

remained a lifelong friend, arranged a number of the dances for violin and piano. Thus, these impudent little gems have enriched at least four instrumental repertoires. In our time, we have heard them in everything from pops concerts to background music for animated cartoons. (From my childhood I still remember vividly the use of the drawn-out, suspended cadences in Dance 5 in F-sharp minor as a backdrop for the Big Bad Wolf stalking the Three Little Pigs!)

It should be noted that Dances 1-10 have remained the more popular with audiences while Dances 11-21, which Brahms released in 1880, have been favored by musicologists and scholars, and even by Brahms himself. Generally speaking, the latter have more features that lend themselves to a scholarly apparatus, including a subtler means of expression, increased emphasis on counterpoint, and greater use of canon in part-leading. But even here, we have moments, such as in No. 15 in B-flat major, when Brahms returns to the rollicking style, color and brighter mood of Dances 1-10.



Griffes: “The Vale of Dreams,” Piano Music – Emanuele Torquati (Brilliant Classics)

I don’t know that Emanuele Torquati has published anything on the subject, but the Milan native has certainly devoted some serious study to the piano music of the short-lived American composer Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920). The results are clearly audible here in a program that follows the development of this fascinating musical figure.

Griffes, who was a late victim of the

<p>Rhapsody that ends matters on a very affirmative note. There's more to that tone of finality than you might think. Brahms, in a letter to his publisher, claimed that Op. 119 was to be his final word as a composer. Citing the similarity between the theme in "the last of my folk-songs" and the one that had begun his Sonata, Op. 1, he proclaimed "Thus, the snake bites its tail." Then along came Richard Mühlfeld with a commission for two final works for clarinet and piano, and so Op.120 was made necessary, but the comment about Brahms' career coming full cycle still stands.</p> <p>By the way, isn't it odd that Brahms should term his last piano pieces "folk-songs"? The connection, of course, is the strong lyrical element in all four pieces, a quality the present recital by Frank Huang brings out admirably.</p>	<p>Sonatina for Violin and Cello (1932) by Arthur Honneger, and the Duo for Violin and Cello (1925) by Erwin Schulhoff. Ravel and Honegger you already know. If Schulhoff is not a household name, he might well have been had he not perished in a Nazi concentration camp. All three works have a lot to say, by composers who witnessed the suffering and societal disintegration occasioned by the First World War and found the need for new modes of expression to replace the beguiling forms, styles, and harmony of an earlier era that now seemed suspect.</p> <p>I won't say more about the music heard on this program, but leave it to you to discover these treasures for yourselves. There is a surprising amount of warmth and humanity in all three works, all of which is more apparent on subsequent listenings after you have become accustomed to the strange textures, trenchant rhythms, and flavorful dissonances in the interest of more luminous color. I won't belabor my readers with detailed descriptions of all three works and the astonishing technical prowess required of the performers to put it across (My hat's off to the Elishas!) It's all sufficiently detailed in the booklet notes, and I could not do more than paraphrase them. Let your ears be your guide.</p>	<p>influenza epidemic that claimed more American lives than did the Great War, is often described as "America's Impressionist," and for sure Debussy and Ravel were influences in his development. But the story doesn't end here. As his last works, notably his Piano Sonata (1919) based on an artificial scale (D, E-flat, F, G-sharp, A, B-flat, C-sharp and D) that functions almost as a tone row, show us, along with his irregular rhythmic figurations and meters, augmented intervals, and occasional use of pentatonic and whole note scales, that he was moving into a whole new phase of his art when his life was cut short.</p> <p>Stepping back in time, Griffes' more impressionistic works, particularly the ten pieces that constitute Three Tone Pictures (1910-1912). Fantasy Pieces (1912-1915), and Roman Sketches (1915-1916) are easy for us to love and wonder at, especially given Torquati's deft grasp of their nuances in tone, texture, and harmonic relationships. The tonal and angular intervals in the deeply evocative "Vale of Dreams," the contrasts of bitonality and absolute tonal clarity in "Nightfall," and the undulating "Barcarolle" that comes across as more overtly passionate in its rise of emotion at the very end than a gondoloier's song has a right to be – all reveal Griffes at his most accessible <i>and</i> his most intriguing.</p> <p>Elsewhere, the languid chain of notes in the distinctive cry of "The White Peacock," the sparkling play of light and water in "Fountains of the Aqua Paola," and the vaguely disturbing Debussy-like figurations in "The Night winds" make indelible impressions.</p> <p>Among the most fascinating of all is the lesser-known "Clouds" It is in an unusual 7/4 meter in which the initial harmonies slowly break down (much as do actual clouds, whose destiny in nature is to become drops of rain), creating polytonal fragments. <i>That</i> description may seem excessively cerebral, but it certainly isn't the way this sad, moody piece feels!</p>
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