

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

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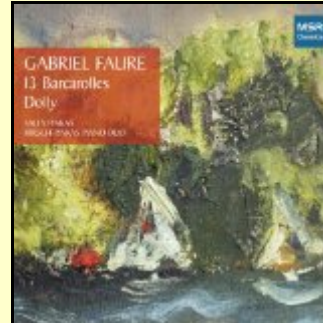
Ysaÿe: 6 Sonatas for Solo Violin, Op. 27  
Wanchi Huang, violin  
Centaur Records

Taiwan native Wanchi Huang seems to have been around musical institutions of higher learning for most of her young life. Upon arriving in this country, she studied violin at the Pebody conservatory Preparatory Division. She has since earned a Bachelors from the Curtis Institute, a Masters from the Juilliard School, and a Doctorate from the Indiana University School of Music. She has been violin professor at the James Madison University School of Music since 1998.

With such impressive academic credentials, I'd expected her complete recording of all six of the Sonatas for Solo Violin by Belgian virtuoso Eugene Ysaÿe (1858-1931) to be equally academic in the sense of a learned discourse on the technique that informs each of these six highly technical works that were inspired by the solo sonatas and partitas of Johann Sebastian Bach. All my previous encounters with Ysaÿe performances by other violinists had impressed me as such. Why, I reasoned, should Huang be any different?

Brother, was I wrong! Hers were the first recordings of Ysaÿe that had ever really struck me by their warmth and musicality. The superlative technique required in the first place in order to realize these six premier challenges for the violinist were there, of course. But the lovely wealth of sound Huang draws from her instrument and her constant engagement with the purely musical qualities inherent in the sonatas make these performances a positive delight. *That*, I hadn't bargained for.

We find this happy union of irresistible qualities early in the set in Huang's account of Sonata No. 1 in G minor, said to have been inspired by a performance Ysaÿe had heard of Bach's sonata in the same key by its dedicatee, Joseph Szigeti. In Huang's interpretation, the sonata's resemblance to its Baroque forebear is striking, particularly in the stately opening movement, marked *Grave*, and the marvelously energetic *Fugato*.



Fauré: 13 Barcarolles, Dolly Suite  
Sally Pinkas, piano  
MSR Classics

From the paucity of my reviews, you may gather, correctly, that I haven't been terribly fond of the piano music of French composer Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924). As it turns out, I just hadn't heard enough of it played by the Israeli-born American pianist and scholar Sally Pinkas. As she shows us in the present program of Barcarolles, Fauré was a master of the subtlest lyrical and rhythmical effects, which he used to conjure up a range of moods that can be nostalgic or gently melancholy without descending into the *fin-de-siècle* torpor that characterized so many of his contemporaries.

The Barcarolle originated as a Venetian gondolier's song, as its lilting sway and moderate 6/8 time would indicate. In Fauré's treatment of the genre, consisting of 13 barcarolles over a long span of years (1880-1921), he avoids the monotony its gently rippling and rocking effect might impart by occasionally switching to a 9/8 meter in the episodes. But he does a lot of other things besides, and Sally Pinkas is keen to recognize the subtleties of Fauré's style, such as his increasing use of syncopation, layered textures and rhythmic uncertainty, combined with glowing tone color and expressive freedom as the years progressed. Some of these Barcarolles, such as Nos. 2, 3, 8, and 12, embody a definite *joie de vivre*; others, such as No. 5 are bolder and more overtly dramatic, pensive (No. 9) or nostalgic (No. 13).

There is a tendency among critics to view Fauré's development as a progress from romantic to impressionist, and finally one who was susceptible to modernistic influences. That needs to be taken with a grain of salt. As I listen to Sally Pinkas' highly engaging performances, I get the impression of a composer who could vary his approach to a given genre but was remarkably true to himself throughout his career.

Together with her duo partner Evan Hirsch, Pinkas does a splendid job of re-creating the world of childhood

Ysaÿe went on to dedicate each of his sonatas to a different major violinist of his day, even to the point of paying a nod to each artist's recognizable personality. In Sonata No. 2, subtitled "Obsession" and dedicated to Jacques Thibaud, he added a further challenge by incorporating the famous *Dies Irae* theme from the Latin mass for the dead into each of the four movements, to be taken in each instance at a different point within the line. Huang does a superlative job of bringing out the unique characters of Movements 2-4, subtitled "*Malinconia*" (Melancholy), "*Danse des Ombres*" (Dance of the Shadows), and "*Les Furies*" (The Furies, classical symbols of the quilt-racked mind) in a way that adds real distinction to the music.

And so it continues throughout the rest of the set. We have fiendishly difficult Sonatas 3 and 6, both highly-condensed works that express their power in a single movement, and No. 4 that pays tribute both to Fritz Kreisler and the Baroque in its quest for harmonic richness and perfect form. No. 5 unfolds its beauties in the form of two charming movements, the luminously colorful "*L'aurore*" (The Dawn) and a very attractive "*Danse rustique*" (Country Dance) that allows Huang to revel in its infectious variations on an asymmetrical dance tune. Anyone who undertakes Ysaÿe's essays in the sublime might do well to have a listen!



Beethoven: Triple Concerto, Op 56; Trio No. 1  
The Claremont Trio  
Martin West, San Francisco Ballet Orchestra  
Bridge Records

"Liesurely repetitions... graciousness... pomp." Those terms from the Wikipedia description of Beethoven's Triple Concerto in C Major for Violin, Cello and Piano, Op. 56 make me wonder if the folks at dear old Wiki weren't playing the music backwards. It doesn't sound like the type of "killer" concerto we'd expect of Ludwig! For sure, he starts a lot of hares in this 36-minute romp, but he allows most of the dear little creatures to live. The reason, aside from the fact that Beethoven was writing with the taste of an aristocratic audience in mind, lies in the nature of the triple concerto form itself (which explains why so few composers have attempted it). In a true triple concerto, all three soloists would have a crack at developing the main theme of the opening Allegro, but Beethoven avoided the longeurs that would detail by

imagination contained in Fauré's Dolly Suite for piano duet, Op. 56. This was a labor of love by the composer for the singer Emma Bardac, with whom he had a liaison of several years beginning in 1892. The "Dolly" of the title was Emma's daughter Héléne, who was suspected of being Fauré's child, though the evidence may be considered inconclusive. Like the Children's Corner Suite, which fellow composer Claude Debussy wrote for Claude-Emma, his own daughter by Mme. Bardac, the "Dolly" suite reflects an unsentimental view of the world as experienced by a real child. The "Berceuse," or cradle song, is rather energetic for that genre, a mood replicated by the vibrant activity of the "Kitty-Valse."

"Mi-a-o," despite the feline connotation, was Dolly's infant attempt to pronounce the name of her brother Raoul. "Le Jardin de Dolly" is a walk through an enchanted garden, and "Tendresse" (Tenderness) is slow and dignified, though not unduly sentimental. The concluding piece "Le pas Espagnole" is an ebullient and extroverted Spanish dance that Pinkas and Hirsch invest with all the brilliance and color it deserves, including the smartly struck accents that kick off each of its major sections.



Handel: Guitar Arrangements  
Robert Gruca, guitar  
MSR Classics

It's a funny thing, but George Frideric Handel's significant body of suites for the harpsichord has never made much of a splash in piano transcription. That's in marked contrast to J. S. Bach's harpsichord works, which are just as much a part of the pianist's repertoire, particularly the Partitas, Italian concerto, and French Suites. The reason may reside in the character and texture of Handel's suites themselves, which may be more amenable to sounding on a plucked string as opposed to a hammered one. That leads us to an interesting phenomenon of fairly recent origin, namely the practice of transcribing these Handelian masterworks for guitar, which promises to give them the broader exposure they deserve.

One of the leaders in this regard is the well-known guitarist David Russell, who arranged the Sonata in A minor, Op. 1, no. 4, originally for recorder with keyboard accompaniment, and the Suite in D minor, HWV 432. Both are heard in the present program in expressive and stylish performances by the upcoming American artist Robert Gruca. In between, we have the Suite in D Major, HWV, 441, realized by Gruca in an arrangement by

considerably shortening the development section. He also avoids having the cello drowned out by the full body of orchestral strings by writing for the instrument in its highest register, resulting in a distinctly brilliant sound.

In the present performance by the New York City-based Claremont Trio, consisting of twin sisters Emily and Julia Bruskin, on violin and cello respectively, and Andrea Lam on piano, the unique qualities of the Triple Concerto shine forth with the greatest clarity and interpretive insight. Their attack is strong and sure, their articulation superb. In the opening movement, their timing is “right on, sister” in the individual developments when the full orchestra, that of the wonderful San Francisco Ballet conducted by Martin West, treads very quickly and forcefully on their skirt tails, adding great excitement to the proceedings. Individually and as members of an ensemble in what often sounds, as in the nobly beautiful Largo, to be a concerto for piano trio and orchestra, they are tops. And the fun really begins at the moment when the all-too short slow movement moves *attaca* into an exuberant Rondo finale in the form of a Polacca. That Polish dance, rarely used by Beethoven, cannot fail to please the listener, in the concert hall or in the armchair.

Also on the program is the Piano Trio in E-flat Major, Op. 1, No. 1, which the Claremonts give an auspicious performance, as befits the very first of his works the ever-critical Beethoven permitted to be published. These artists, long familiar with all the composer’s trios, play this one with the utmost assurance and audaciousness. They take the zestful Presto finale as fast as possible, so hold on to your seat!



**VIOLA** music of Benjamin, Mackey, Ruders, Carter, and Chen  
Hsin-Yun Huang, viola  
Bridge Records

This program by Taiwan native Hsin-Yun Huang reflects her interest in furthering the repertoire and expressive range of her chosen instrument, the viola. This energetic lady who combines an active concert career with teaching at both the Curtis Institute and the Juilliard School of Music feels a calling to establish the identity of the viola in listeners’ minds as an instrument that has its own distinct voice. In this, she succeeds admirably, with a little help from such friends as pianist Sarah Rothenberg, the Evergreen Symphony Orchestra under

William Kanengiser to which he himself provided an arrangement of the Minuet.

Cheers for Robert Gruca! These are idiomatic performances in the best Handelian vein, filled with fire and nuance, plus the unmistakable energy and drive that Handel used as his signature to make an indelible mark on the music of his day (*and beyond*). The Sonata, long recognized as the most dramatic of the Opus 1 set, is distinguished by its “walking” bass line and the serene beauty of the Adagio.

In the D major Suite (originally G major), HWV 432, Gruca masterfully negotiates the work’s grand design, from its imposing Allemande in the style of a French Overture with its amply dotted opening contrasted by the lighter, more ebullient section based on scampering broken chords that follows it, all the way to the energetic Gigue, which Gruca ends with a flourish. In between, we have a smartly articulated Courante and a beautifully nuanced Gavotte with Variations. Both enclose an Aria that is busier than we might expect (there is no real slow movement) and a highly rhythmic Minuet in 3/8 time, as instantly engaging as it is strictly un-danceable.

The D minor Suite, HWV 432 has as its most outstanding features a very operatic Overture, whose austere, poignant beauty even seems haunted at times, a stately Sarabande, and a lively Gigue that Gruca ends with an appropriate flourish. The last movement is a *Passacaille*, a set of variations on a ground bass that is marked by complex rhythms, scale passages and arpeggios. Gruca brings out the drama of this movement so completely that it shines forth as a worthy rival of the more famous Chaconne in G major, HWV 435, which it resembles in its outward design. It provides a perfect finish to a program that makes us long to hear more of this guitarist.



“French Fantasy,” Debussy, Franck, Saint-Saëns  
Maria Bachmann, violin; Adam Neiman, piano  
Bridge Records

“French Fantasy” is a program of French masterworks for violin and piano, vividly re-created for us by violinist Maria Bachmann, an artist who had earlier intrigued me with her album “Café Music” (Bridge 9296). Her bold approach to the music and her full tone are as much in evidence here as they were in the earlier release, even more so. She has the perfect partner in Adam Neiman,

Gernot Schmalfuss, and her husband, Mischa Amory, who has long been the violist of the Borromeo String Quartet.

This is a program of music by contemporary composers who are still, with one exception, very much alive and active in their craft. We begin with Steven Mackey, who conducts the American Modern Ensemble in his own provocative *Ground Swell*, with Huang as soloist. With titles like "Approach by Sea," "The Fertile Hillside," "Peak Experience," "Thin Air," "Over the Top," "Running Downhill," and "Sailing Way," Mackey invites performers and listeners to envision an experience with a clearly defined contour. A mood of rising expectation governs the first three movements. "Thin Air," listed as Tr. 3 in the booklet but correctly described by Huang as Tr. 4, is the centerpiece, a moment for reflection characterized by austerity and a certain mood of sadness common to those who have just achieved a goal, a peak experience: *Is that all there is?* The excitement resumes in the last three movements, including the tumbling, sliding energy in "Running Downhill."

Pianist Rothenberg joins Huang in *Romances*, by Danish composer Poul Ruders. The six pithy epigrammatic pieces are given titles as an aid for the listener, though there is no literary subtext. "Even Song," appropriately, is slow and meditative in mood, with a more lyrical part for viola over widely spaced chords in the piano. "Ballad" has a larger range of incidents, as befits a piece whose title suggests a vocal romance.

Huang had the distinction, together with her husband, of premiering the title piece **VIOLA** by British composer George Benjamin. In many ways, this is the most audacious work on the program, as it calls for a demonstration of all the techniques the viola can summon up and all the sonic effects it can produce. It is characterized by incredible rhythmic drive that scarcely relents during its 10-minute length, a dynamic range from ppp to fff, and a challenging array of scraping, queeping, swelling, and pizzicato sounds, with sudden, unexpected outbursts of radiance.

Elliott Carter (1908-2012), the longest-lived of all composers, continued to be amazingly active from his 90<sup>th</sup> year onwards. Huang presents Carter's 3-minute *Figment IV* (2007) in a way that illustrates the composer had lost none of his reputation for impudent wit and audacity. It begins with a startling statement of just two notes, E-flat and D natural, forming a major seventh. That leads to the assumption that it will be resolved to an octave. If you think that's an easy task, you haven't figured on Carter's resourcefulness, continually leading us back to a tantalizing unanswered question.

Finally, in *Remembrance for viola and orchestra* (2005), Huang presents a very attractive work by Taiwanese composer Shih-Hui Chen that reflects the penchant of today's Chinese composers for honoring their rich lyrical heritage (much as the early 20th century English composers drew on their own native folksong tradition) while at the same time re-animating it with the technique

whose solid musicianship gives us a fair earnest of what we can expect when he assays a Beethoven sonata cycle, which is currently in the works for Sono Luminus.

We begin with a choice 3-minute miniature, Jascha Heifetz' transcription of Claude Debussy's song "Bon Soir." I'd make my usual comment that "Life is short, so play your encores first," were it not for the fact that this delicately sad melody, supported by seductive rhythms, makes a perfect introduction to the following program.

Cesar Franck's *Sonata in A major* is next, and Bachmann and Neiman make clear why it is the crown jewel of the repertoire. It has long been praised as the most perfect example of cyclic form, a procedure by means of which a theme, heard early in the opening movement, provides the germ for new themes throughout the work, each a subtle variant of the one heard previously. In this case, it is the gently melancholy rocking figure heard in the violin after quiet chords in the piano have set the stage for it. This is a true duo-sonata, with piano and violin in full and complete partnership as they alternate the roles of melody and accompaniment throughout the work.

The second movement, *Allegro*, has the character of a fiery scherzo as the music contrasts highly rhythmic passages with lyrical episodes, ending with a bracing *accelerando* passage just as the movement seems to have ended. As Bachmann and Neiman take it, the third movement has a very free, semi-improvisatory character as it alternates dreamy reverie and impassioned declamation. The finale, *Allegretto poco mosso*, has a tinge of sadness, as the marking indicates, but it also moves with supreme confidence toward a joyous, affirmative ending that seems to have been pre-ordained from the opening phrase.

Debussy's *Sonata in G minor* is as impressionistic and quirky as we might have expected. It is also concise, a rare distillation of sadness, nostalgia, defiance, and unexpected rhythmic vitality and lyricism to which Bachmann and Neiman are very well attuned. It is in three movements, appropriately marked *Allegro vivo* (with life and vigor), *Fantasque at léger* (fantastic and light), and *Trés animé* (very animated). The present artists obviously enjoy exploring its range of moods, from coquettish to passionately driven ("Like a snake biting its own tail," as Debussy piquantly described the theme of the last movement).

Finally, we have Camille Saint-Saëns' *Sonata No. 1 in D minor*, Op. 75 in the most convincing performance I have ever heard. Bachmann and Neiman stress the work's purely musical qualities as well as its more obviously virtuosic ones, opening for us the possibility that it may constitute great music for violin and piano as opposed to just great violin music (for those who appreciate the distinction). Our artists keenly and cleanly articulate the *attacca* transitions between Movements 1 & 2 and 3 & 4 (similar to what the composer was to do later in his famous "Organ" Symphony), and they revel in the sonorous qualities and the sheer irresistible drive of the



of the modern composer. Lyrical beauty and nostalgia reinforce each other in Huang's performance with Schmalfluss and the Evergreen Symphony.



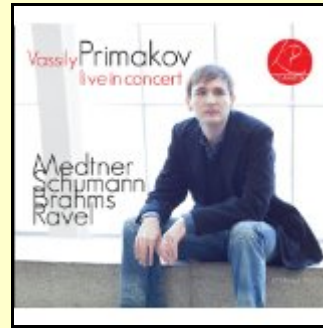
Schubert: Duo Sonata, Rondo, Fantasy in C major  
Tomas Cotik, violin; Tao Lin, piano  
Centaur Records

These three major works for violin and piano of Franz Schubert are something of a conundrum. They are generally classified as chamber music, but present real virtuosic challenges for both instruments, sometimes when least expected. They are among the most tuneful and ingratiating of all Schubert's works, but they just don't sit down and play themselves. The beauty is in the details, and to that extent Tomas Cotik and Lin Tao, both of whom have very active careers as chamber musicians, have been at pains to give the music the right amount of period style in order to optimally bring out its beauties.

That involves research into matters such as "slurs" (*not* a disrespectful word when you're talking about violin technique), harmonic movements and enharmonic modulations that require equal temperament of the piano, use of the pedals for special effects, *very* subtle gradations in dynamics, a varied treatment of appoggiaturas depending on the context in which they occur – and many other things besides. All these technical issues may seem confusing to the average listener, but attention to them brings out the unique character of a given passage. You can "feel", without understanding why, the strangely beautiful, even haunted, moods we experience in the slow introductions to the Duo Sonata in A major, D574 and the Fantasy in C major, D934. Or take the bold alteration in the second half of the fully stated theme of the Rondo *brilliant* in B minor, D895, which gives the music a feeling of irresistible onward movement.

The texture of the music also frequently changes, especially in the Rondo and the Fantasy, where the two instruments often switch the roles of melody and accompaniment. The piano writing, particularly in the way Lin takes it in the Fantasy, is characterized by its unusual depth and broad compass, while the violin writing is usually more spare but absolutely brilliant when the violinist rises to the occasion, as Cotik does in the Rondo. The Sonata, earliest work in the program, is a well-behaved duo sonata in the full sense of the word,

*Allegro molto* finale, which bursts on the scene in an impetuous surge of quarter-notes that seldom pause in their onslaught until the very end.



"Vassily Primakov: Live in Concert,"  
Music of Medtner, Schumann, Brahms, Ravel  
LP Classics

It has gotten to be customary in the media to talk about "the Primakov Touch" when critiquing recordings by the Russian-American pianist Vassily Primakov. As the artist demonstrates in the latest release on his LP (for "Lavrova-Primakov") label, the "Touch" is more than mere hyperbole. You can sense it in the far-ranging program, which probably constitutes the best live recital performances he has given us to date. From the softest whisper of a theme from Medtner's *Forgotten Melodies* to the most muscular fugal passages in Brahms' *Handel Variations*, his range of sensitivity to touch on the keyboard is extraordinary. And he takes it all in the interest of solid music-making, not showmanship.

The Medtner selection from *Forgotten Melodies*, Cycle I is entitled "*Sonata Reminiscenza*" (sonata remembered). This is a difficult work to analyze, much less sustain in performance. Primakov's is easily the best account I have heard of a work that has often sounded too nebulous in other hands. Here, he makes Medtner's shifting points of view coalesce into a tangible form, all the while bringing out the work's delicate lyrical beauty.

The title of Robert Schumann's *Bunte Blätter* Op. 99 means "bright-colored leaves," which can refer equally to both autumn leaves and pages from an album of piano pieces. Primakov performs ten of these delectable pieces with a consummate artistry that makes us wonder why they aren't performed more often, at least as encores, echoing as they do earlier masterworks such as *Carnaval* and *Waldszenen* (*Forest Scenes*). The piece marked *Ziemlich Langsam*, "rather slowly," seems a kindred spirit to some gloomy scene in a forest glen in the last-named collection.

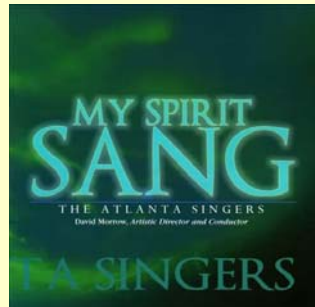
Brahms' *Variations on a Theme by Handel*, Op 24 challenges the keyboard artist every which way with its powerfully stated rhythms, its sense of the unexpected, and its gradations from one variation to the next that overcome the static quality one might expect from a work of such perfect symmetry and harmonic firmness. And

but even it has its peculiarities, such as the fact that the Scherzo omits the expected minuet in its trio section (only to have Schubert surprise us with a very gracious one in the melody of the slow movement).

The music is enchanting. The performances have unmistakable vitality, and they are optimally recorded in the Gusman Concert Hall at the Frost School of Music of the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida. So what are you waiting for?

that's to say nothing of the way Brahms evokes actual orchestral colors and textures such as trumpet fanfare, flute, clarinet, horns, and even the distinct rhythms of a Hungarian Czardas and a lilting Siciliano. It all builds to a climax in an exultant, muscular fugue that Primakov handles with surpassing skill.

Regarding Maurice Ravel's La Valse, an interpreter always has to contend with its well-known analysis by composer George Benjamin as "a metaphor for the predicament of European civilization in the aftermath of the Great War [in terms of] the birth, decay and destruction of a musical genre: the waltz." Be that as it may, there is a gradual process in this compelling work, which belongs to the pianist's repertoire as much as it does the orchestra, as we move from dimly-perceived swirling forms seen in mist to a lighted ballroom filled with dancers, and finally to a smashing conclusion that has all the chaos and percussive force of a train wreck. Primakov is aware of all these elements as he builds La Valse swiftly (and with surprisingly little fuss considering its awesome challenges for the keyboard) to a conclusion that seems as right as it is inescapable



#### "My Spirit Sang,"

Choral works by Finzi, Ticheli, Hailstork, Furman, Courtney, Johnson, Schafer, and Moore, plus arrangements of folk music and spirituals  
David Morrow directs The Atlanta Singers  
Aca Digital Recording

These are virtuosic accounts of choral works by composers who were mostly unknown to me previously. Normally, I would pass on a program such as this, as I generally find choral settings of poetic texts in the English language to be rather tiresome. (Sometimes, I even get the impression that George Frideric Handel was the only composer who ever managed to do English "right" in the choral genre, and he had the advantage of scarcely understanding the language.) Is it an inherent sententious or prosaic quality in our native tongue, coupled with its shortage of natural rhythms? For whatever reason, I usually find myself listening to a lot of standard choralese, and regret the time spent doing so.

While I didn't find the first, more serious, half of the program to be entirely free of these reservations, the professional skill, dedication and virtuosity of the Atlanta Singers were a major redeeming factor. Under the leadership of David Morrow, only the third director and conductor in their 36-year existence, the Singers revealed such an engaging performance style that I found it hard to totally resist these works in spite of myself. The texts included Gerald Finzi's setting of Robert Bridge's evocation of the joy of love "My Spirit Sang All Day," Frank Ticheli's settings of his own hopefully uplifting "Earth Song," and Sara Teasdale's still, quietly expectant "There Will Be Rest." We also have Adolphus Hailstork's rather pedestrian setting of William Butler Yeats' "The Cloths of Heaven" and his more vigorous setting of the gospel-influenced "O Praise the Lord," and Lane Johnson's eloquent setting of a martyred woman's speech, "Inward Stillness." There seems to be nothing of which the Atlanta Singers are incapable in the way of expressive chromatic changes and sudden improvisation-like utterances that cast light on a vital line in a text.

Still, I was glad when the more sober half of the program gave way to the folksongs and spirituals, with their irrepressible rhythmic vitality. They include Three Bahamian Songs ("A Wen Down da Road," "O! Lady," and "One a' Twenty"), the Nigerian homecoming song "Dide ta Deo," the soaring "Jacob's Ladder," and Undine Smith Moore's "I Will Trust in the Lord," with its flavorful mixture of response, blue notes, and syncopations illuminating the venerable old spiritual. We also have a curiosity in R. Murray Schafer's "Gamelan," a vocalse for four voices sensationally imitating the distinctive quickly-struck sounds and rhythms of the Javanese percussion orchestra of the title. As a downloadable bonus track, we are offered the Atlanta Singers in "You are a Part of Me" by Uzee Brown, Jr., a choral work that impresses by its contrast between cool ethereal sonics and urgent feeling.



Stravinsky: The Firebird, complete  
Gerard Schwarz, Seattle Symphony  
Naxos Records

It is midnight, in an enchanted garden. Prince Ivan captures a fabulous creature, the Firebird. He releases her only upon her promise to come to his aid when he is most in need. As a token of her faith, she gives him a magic feather for his protection. Ivan encounters others in the garden – twelve knights who have been turned to stone and twelve princesses who are captives, all under the spell of a demon, Kastchei the Immortal. There is a thirteenth princess, fairer than all the others, with whom Prince Ivan falls in evil. In Scene 2, he boldly journeys to Kastchei's castle with the aim of freeing the captives and being united with his new-found love.

This brief synopsis contains a hint as to the major problem in performing and recording Igor Stravinsky's Firebird ballet, as recorded in its entirety in 1986 under the baton of Gerard Schwarz and reissued here as part of Naxos' Seattle Symphony Collection. And that is the great dynamic range of the score, from the most delicate scrapings and queep-queeping nocturnal sounds in the enchanted garden to the percussive outbursts and raucous off-beat accents in the Infernal Dance of Kastchei and his ghastly retinue. There are also moments of pure lyricism, as in the Round Dance of the Princesses in Scene 1 and the Firebird's Lullaby in Scene 2, which occurs just prior to a sequence of sensational fanfares, each topping its predecessor, as all rejoice at the demise of Kastchei and the triumph



Stravinsky: Petrushka, Song of the  
Nightingale  
Gerard Schwarz, Seattle Symphony  
Naxos Records

This Petrushka has a lot of things going for it. Using the original 1911 score, more opulent than the composer's 1947 revision, provides Gerard Schwarz a rich, deeply-hued canvas to work with. It also gives ample scope to every family of the orchestra, and in particular the woodwinds. There are many incidents in Stravinsky's ballet in four scenes, but the score is surprisingly economical for all that, and Schwarz keeps a firm rein on the continual changes of tempo and texture that make *Petrushka* what it is.

Essentially, it is the story of three puppets, brought to life by the sorcery of a crowd-pleasing charlatan against the colorful and exciting backdrop of a Shrovetide Fair in St. Petersburg, Russia in the early 1800's. Unnoticed by the crowd of pleasure-seekers, the puppet Petrushka, prompted by his love for the totally unresponsive Ballerina, the innamorata of the handsome but brutal Moor, develops real human emotion. It brings him no happiness, however only the pain of unrequited love and sudden death at the cruel scimitar of the Moor. The Charlatan endeavors to lull the crowd with the soothing reminder that the victim they have witnessed is only a puppet stuffed with straw. Then the ghost of Petrushka appears with a ringing denunciation of his master as a liar.

For this 1988 performance, recorded in stunning detail by producer Adam Stern and engineer John Eargle, Delos Records first used the Colossus digital encoding system,



Stravinsky: Rite of Spring,  
Dumbarton Oaks  
Gerard Schwarz, Seattle Symphony  
Naxos Records

As we prepare to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of Igor Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, we need to consider the legend that has come down to us. It goes something like this: "It was the beginning of all modern music. Its premiere in Paris in 1913 created a riot, thereby ensuring its success. Stravinsky's fellow composers, all of whom had previously been Romantics, saw the light at once. Trimming off their beards, they became clean-shaven, gilt-edged Modernists overnight. Nobody wrote melodies anymore. *Rhythm*, an element hitherto unknown in music, now became the main thing, and composers out-did one another trying to cram it into listeners' ears. Modernism had triumphed."

I exaggerate (slightly) in order to point up the absurdity of gross generalizations. Rite of Spring, in fact, gained acceptance slowly among critics, the public and fellow composers. Its idiom was largely responsible. Features of the score continue to present potential problems in performance and recording up to the present day: inaudibility of the lighter woodwinds that stand in danger of being drowned out by heavier scoring and the problem of balance between instruments in the brass section in the *fortissimo* passages, to name just two concerns that occupied Stravinsky. The metrical irregularity of the music, with its combinations of duple and triple time and its irregular beats emphasized by powerful

<p>over his evil power. (As we might have guessed Kastchei's sobriquet "the Immortal" fails to live up to its hype, thanks to the Firebird's sagacity!)</p> <p>As often happens in music, it takes a large orchestra with all the resources and the individual virtuosity of the Seattle Symphony to realize both the barely audible, almost <i>perceived</i> rather than audible moments in the nocturnal garden and the stunning music connected with Kastchei's Dance, his death, and the General Rejoicing that follows it. Gerard Schwarz reveals himself as both a master of nuance and a conductor who is capable of realizing the broader canvas at the same time. And producer Joanna Nickrenz and engineer John Eargle lend excellent support in the sound booth.</p> <p>As an encore, we have the short symphonic sketch Fireworks. The four-minute dazzler lives up to its name in terms of impressionistic color and excitement. For Stravinsky, this early work marked a real advance in terms of mastering symphonic technique, with a little help from both Claude Debussy and Paul Dukas, to whose eerie opening music in the <i>Sorcerer's Apprentice</i> he pays eloquent tribute in the slowly downward falling festoons of sound that follow the first outburst of pyrotechnics.</p>	<p>ensuring greater clarity of detail, discrete quadrophonic capability, and superior imaging of orchestral timbres and textures. In a score featuring quadruple woodwind, cornets, two trumpets and a pair of harps in addition to a substantial string section, there is no blurring of details. Aiding the sonic registration, maestro Schwarz took pains with such matters as the placement of the snare drum that stirs the puppets to action, placing it onstage in the scenes at the bustling fair and <i>offstage</i>, in the perspective it would be heard by the puppets, in the more intimate scenes in the rooms of Petrushka and the Moor.</p> <p>The program also includes the 1986 recording by Schwarz and the Seattle of the symphonic version of Song of the Nightingale. This was Stravinsky's adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's well-loved story, which the composer started as an opera in 1908 and finished as a ballet five years later, being at pains to reconcile his earlier style with his later modernism. It worked well, as Stravinsky was able to contrast the more consonant sound of the Nightingale's eloquent song, realized by a solo violin delicately supported by harp, piano, and celesta, with the more chromatically dissonant sounds emanating from its mechanical rival. As in <i>Petrushka</i>, there is wealth of orchestral timbres and colors here, especially for the woodwinds and brass that give the score so much of its character. It is just the sort of thing that Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle SO were used to eating for breakfast.</p>	<p>percussion, affords many other examples. In terms of dance, the differences were even more revolutionary. The dancers <i>stomp</i> out the music's rhythms, they do not dance on their toes. This was the very antithesis of the classical ballet.</p> <p>As we often notice in big, intricately scored music with an extremely wide dynamic range, it takes a large orchestra with many resources in order to realize Rite of Spring. This score requires double, triple, and even quadruple woodwinds and an enlarged percussion section. Despite the size of the orchestra, much of the music actually has a chamber-music quality and occurs in the context of solos and small groupings. In this 1990 recording, the accomplished musicianship of the various chairs in the Seattle Symphony comes into play time and time again, bringing out surprisingly lyrical passages in the midst of so massive a score. Gerard Schwarz' fine sense of balance and timing, which we have often had occasion to observe, serves him well here.</p> <p>The inclusion of Stravinsky's "Dumbarton Oaks" Concerto (1938) gives the Seattle musicians the chance to shine in a setting in which they typically do surpassingly well. Scored for an ensemble consisting of flute, clarinet, bassoon, 2 horns, 3 violins, 3 violas, 2 cellos and 2 basses, it affords a choice example of Stravinsky's Neo-Classical period. I never much like this work in other performances (including Stravinsky's own) but this 2008 account with Schwarz at the helm has more red corpuscles than most.</p>
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