

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

October, 2012



"Sweet Remembrance"
Rudens Turku, violin; Yumiko Urabe, piano
Avie Records

"Encores," says Albanian-born violinist Rudens Turku, "are a kind of good-bye and thank you from artist to audience, a farewell until next time." Considering that thought, it is no mistake that Turku's program of choice miniatures and encores is entitled *Sweet Remembrance*, which is also the title of a song-without-words by Felix Mendelssohn that we hear in this program in the treasurable arrangement for violin and piano by Jascha Heifetz that reminds us constantly of the emotional quality of the human voice. With the more-than-capable assistance of pianist Yumiko Urabe, Turku re-creates a tradition from Heifetz' heyday and earlier, the "encore recital." That is of important because the world of music is more than just the sum total of its great masterworks, impressive as they are. Wonderful things can be said in small measures, too, and Tracks 1-14 are living proof.

The key to a great encore, for performing artist as well as composer, is to get to the heart of the matter with as little fuss or distraction as possible, and Turku's vibrant performances certainly fill the prescription. Many of these pieces – such as Paganini's gently caloric "Cantabile," Elgar's warmly ardent "Salut d'amour," Fritz Kreisler adorable "Schön Rosmarin," and Massenet's sublime Meditation from *Thaïs* – allow Turku to bring forth the emotion effectively without ever descending to schmaltz. They are interspersed with such stunning virtuoso showstoppers as Paganini's vivacious "Moto Perpetuo," Mussorgsky's high-energy Ukrainian dance, "Hopak," Sarasate's smoldering "Malagueña," and Paganini's "La Campanella," in the Kreisler arrangement that takes it considerably beyond Franz Liszt's original piece conjuring up the still, breathless mood of a lone church bell sounding the call to morning prayer..

There's more. Wieniawski's high-octane Mazurka with the extraordinary sound qualities conjured up by scordatura tuning and stopping makes the most striking of possible contrasts coming just after Maria Theresia von Paradis' softly swaying "Sicilienne." Welcome



Chopin: 26 Preludes + Scriabin" Sonata No. 2
Beatrice Rana, piano
ATMA Classique

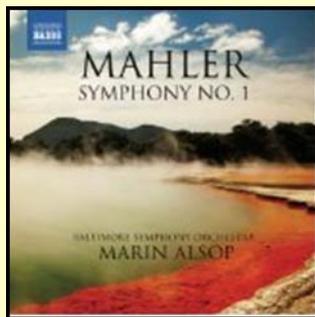
Beatrice Rana, the young Italian artist who won the First Piano Prize at the 2011 Montreal International Music Concourse, shows why she must have wowed the judges with her deft technique generally, her mastery of rhythms and textures in particular, and her steady focus on the emotions underlying Frédéric Chopin's 24 Préludes, Op. 28. She applies the same qualities to a memorable account of the companion-piece, Scriabin's moody Sonata No. 2 in G-sharp minor, and Chopin's two uncollected Préludes in A-flat major and C-sharp minor.

Chopin's Préludes puzzled his contemporaries, of whom Robert Schumann's comment was typical: "They are sketches, beginnings of etudes, or, so to speak, ruins, individual eagle pinions, all disorder and wild confusion." No doubt Schumann expected them to be well-formed character pieces, a genre of which he himself was a master. Some of them do, in fact, approximate that type of composition. Most of the even-numbered Préludes from 12 through 24, with the sole exception of No. 20, a slow, funereal procession, are passionate pieces with enough bravura to have satisfied even Schumann. They definitely throw the emotional weight towards the second half of the set. Rana seems to enjoy No. 18 in F minor, with its *fortissimo* five-octave arpeggio plunging downward into the depths of the bass, where a struggle immediately takes place, culminating with a double-*fortissimo* chord at the end. Ditto No. 24 in D minor, which concludes the set resolutely with three booming unaccompanied notes, the lowest D on the piano.

The curious thing, in spite of the afore-mentioned sound and fury, is that none of these bravura pieces has come down to us with a characteristic nickname. Indeed, the sole Prélude to do so is No. 15 in D-flat major, the well-known "Raindrop." That, besides the fact that the Préludes are organized in an ascending circle of fifths, tips us off to Chopin's purpose, which was to replicate Bach's achievement in the Well-Tempered Clavier of writing preludes in all the major and minor keys. Early-on,

surprises in this program include pieces as diverse as Alexander Glazounov's gently glowing "Meditation" and Dmitri Shostakovich's wickedly astringent "Preludium." Brahms' F-A-E Scherzo sounds like a lyrically charged call to arms and stirring action, requiring the utmost of technique and commitment from both Turku and Urabe.

The program concludes with a major work, the Solo Violin sonata in A minor by composer and virtuoso violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. I've never been fond of Ysaÿe's unaccompanied violin music, though that may be because the recorded examples I've heard lacked the character Turku imparts to each of the present sonata's four movements. They are entitled "Obsession," "Melancholia," "Dance of Shadows," and "The Furies," clear indications to an intrepid interpreter such as Turku.



Mahler: Symphony No. 1
Marin Alsop, Baltimore Symphony
Naxos

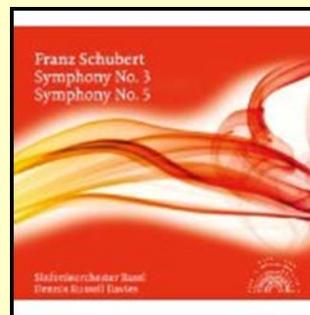
Why, this late in the day, do we need yet another recording of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 1 in D major? Marin Alsop shows us just why, in an illuminating account with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra that makes us wonder why we wasted our time listening to so many of the 165 competitive versions on the market.

For one thing, Alsop shows that she clearly relates to Mahler as a fellow symphonic conductor. It remains a mystery why Mahler criticism usually glosses over the obviously remarkable fact that, of all of history's greatest composers, he was the only one who was an equally eminent conductor. I find it very significant. In his orchestration for the First Symphony, for example, Mahler uses greatly expanded woodwinds, brass, and percussion. He includes four oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet, and another E-flat), and three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon). The brass section has no fewer than seven horns and four trumpets, with various doublings, and the percussion includes timpani, cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, and bass drum. The composition varies from one movement to another, and the total forces are never employed in any one movement.

Most importantly, Mahler typically does not use his expanded instrumentation for massive effects, as another composer less sensitive to the range of sounds an orchestra is capable of producing might have done.

no fewer than seven preludes, including five of the first ten, are in quickly flowing perpetual motion and deal with a single technical problem each. The highly agitated No. 8 in F-sharp minor, with its ceaseless polyrhythms based on continuous thirty-second note figurations in the right hand, set against triplets alternating with quarter-notes in the left, would bedevil a less accomplished keyboard artist than Beatrice Rana, who takes it all in stride.

Other notable preludes are 17 and 21, lyrical "songs without words," 13 in F-sharp minor, a dreamy Nocturne if ever there was, the darkly dramatic 15 in D-flat major, beginning with insistent tones evoking raindrops and incorporating an unmistakable funeral march, and the brief No. 7 in A major. The last-named is the only one of the preludes to have been included in the ballet *Les Sylphides*, owing to its being in dance tempo, a Mazurka. Rana treats them all with care and tasteful emphasis.



Schubert: Symphonies Nos. 3 & 5
Dennis Russell Davies, Basel Symphony
Sinfonieorchester Basel label

The Basel Symphony Orchestra under their American music director (as of 2009) Dennis Russell Davies give live performances of Franz Schubert's Symphonies Nos. 3 and 5 that emphasize their economy, inherent high spirits, and buoyant lyricism. Of course, you still need to perform these early symphonies in a way to optimally bring out their best qualities, and the BSO do just that under Davies' spirited leadership. It all makes for an auspicious debut recording on the orchestra's spanking new in-house label.

Schubert wrote his Third Symphony in D major, D.200 between 24 May and 19 July 1815, just two months after his 18th birthday, and he finished his Fifth in B-flat major, D.485 on 3 October 1816. In between lay no fewer than 284 "D" Numbers in Otto Deutsch's historical catalogue. Though most represent single songs, they also include choral and keyboard works, a singspiel, and the Fourth Symphony. It would be surprising if this remarkable outburst of creative lyricism had no influence on Symphonies 3 and 5, and in fact it did.

Critics have noted the influence of the opera, and Rossini in particular, on the Third Symphony. The opening movement sounds like an overture, beginning slowly and dramatically and then giving way to a flowing lyrical section marked here by sprightly interplay between

She uses them sparingly, in just the right combinations for what he wants to achieve at any given moment, so that one gets the impression of economy rather than massiveness. That is certainly the feeling you get from Alsop's reading, which is consistently characterized by its beautiful clarity and sense of purpose. There is no fat in this account, no wasted motion, no fuzziness as it moves from one enchanting moment to the next.

The notable exception to what we just observed about Mahler's eschewing massive effects is the sensational opening of the Fourth movement, in which he gives us an abrupt cymbal crash, a loud chord in the woodwinds, string and brass, and a bass drum stroke, all in quick succession. It's enough to lift the unwary listener out of his seat (as it did in fact to an unfortunate lady at the work's first performance in Budapest!) But, as it happens, Mahler has set us up for this stunning moment by the very quiet, slow diminuendo at the end of the slow movement, a grotesque funeral march that is both shadowy and lugubrious.

The other thing you notice about Alsop's account of this work is her spontaneous embrace of its lyricism. Seldom had any composer used vocal-like lyricism as the wellspring of a symphony the way Mahler does here, and that goes beyond the obvious fact that he pulled the melodies of several songs from his cycles *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Magic Horn of Youth), and *Songs of a Wayfarer*, including the pristine beauty of "*Ging heut' Morgen übers Feld*" (I went this morning over the fields) to give the first two movements an immediate appeal for the listener. The most notable use of dance music occurs, appropriately, in the scherzo movement, in the form of an Austrian dance, the *Ländler*, the gracefully gliding contrasted middle section of which Alsop keeps moving steadily and purposefully along, just a little ahead of the beat so that it seems effortless.

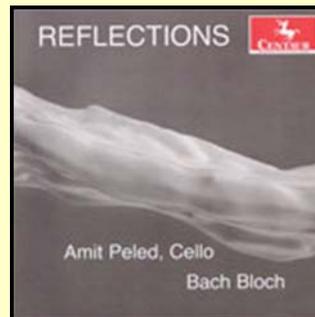


Franz Liszt Recital
Daria Scarano, piano
Centaur Records

Daria Scarano, Moscow-born American pianist who completed her doctoral studies at the University of Maryland, shows a definite affinity for the music of Franz Liszt in this, her debut recording on Centaur Records. That affinity is a rarer achievement than you might imagine, since it is so easy for keyboard artists to become so involved with the formidable technical

clarinet and syncopated strings. The following Allegretto, filled with humorous touches, is probably the fastest slow movement Schubert ever wrote. The hi-jinks continue with the rather impulsive Minuet, in dance time but not strictly danceable, with a gracious trio for oboe and bassoon in the form of an Austrian folk dance, the *Ländler* (This is a good place to talk about the various solos by the Basel SO woodwinds, which are all first-rate throughout the CD). The finale, *Presto vivace*, is a real rouser in the manner of a *Tarantella* with striking dynamic contrasts.

The Fifth Symphony is the more Mozartean of the two, though not without elements revealing an earnest young romantic at work. This symphony is very economically scored without clarinets, trumpets, or timpani, and that places greater emphasis on the strings, which have a lithesome, upbeat sound in the quickly spirited opening movement. The yearning melody for the oboe, spun out over a gently rocking accompaniment in the strings in the *Andante*, is sheer poetic enchantment, up to Schubert's highest standard. Again, the scherzo movement is a vivacious Minuet with a *Ländler* for the trio, this time for bassoon and strings and with a rustic burden lending a definite outdoorsy quality to the proceedings. The finale, *Allegro vivace*, is short and passionate. Davies builds it to a fine frenzy right up to the very end.



Bach: Cello Suite No. 1 + Bloch: Schelomo
Amit Peled, cello
Hajime Teri Murai, Peabody Symphony Orchestra
Centaur Records

Amit Peled, Israeli cellist who balances his active performing career with teaching at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, shows why he is much in demand in both capacities in a really sensational first release in what promises to be a series pairing each of J. S. Bach's six solo cello suites with a masterwork from the concerto repertoire.

First, we hear Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 in G major, in which Peled establishes a formidable presence right from the beginning in the Prelude, where he steps up and boldly challenges all the arpeggiated chords that give this music its distinctive character. There follow in succession an Allemande that is more passionate than that stately old dance has a right to be, a swiftly moving Courante, a deeply felt and deeply moving Sarabande, a pair of rhythmically alert Minuets that preserve the graceful

demands of the music (and hey, *why not?*) that they neglect the interpretive issues that were so important to the composer. As the mother of one of Liszt's students once observed with shrewd insight: "He is the enemy of affected, stilted, contorted expressions. Most of all, he wants truth in musical sentiment, and so he makes a psychological study of his emotions to convey them as they are. Thus, a strong expression is often followed by a sense of fatigue and dejection, a kind of coldness, because this is the way nature works."

We find these issues paramount in the five characteristic pieces with which Scarano begins her recital. In "les cloches de Genève" (The Bells of Geneva), for example, there is a notable human presence responding to the sound of distant church bells in a way that justifies Liszt's choice of a caption below the title, a quote from Byron's poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: "I live not in myself, but I become / Portion of that around me." The pulse and vital breath of the music, as it were, seem to increase imperceptibly to a deftly realized climax as the listener falls under the spell of the bells, then subsides softly at the end. This is no mere landscape painting, but a living human presence interacting with nature.

For Scarano to recognize subtleties such as this is "*Les Cloches*" – and also in other pieces as varied as "*En rêve*" (in a Reverie), "*Liebestraum* No. 3," and "Sonetto 104 del Petrarca" bodes well for her further development as a true Lisztian. She reveals something else, an unfailing sense of timing, in the way she handles the measured movement, the lapping of water against muffled oar and the *slow* progress toward ultimate resignation in "*La lugubre Gondola*" (The Funereal Gondola), a work Liszt composed in premonition of the death in Venice of Richard Wagner. Her deft touch is evident also in the all-too seldom heard *Vier kleine Klavierstücke* (Four Little Piano Pieces), 1-2 minute studies that Liszt deliberately avoided assigning characteristic names, trusting the performer and the listener to supply their own associations.

The high point of the program is the great Sonata in B minor, S.178. Scarano shows herself not only cognizant of Liszt's epochal concept in which all the movements of a sonata are played without breaks as one continuously evolving whole, unified by cyclic form but displaying evidence of a double function in which the elements of sonata-allegro form (exposition, development, lead back, and recapitulation) are replicated within each movement. She also reveals a superb sense of timing, so essential for this work in which the emotion builds through stages to an overwhelming climax, then subsides slowly to a soft dying-out in which her mastery of barely audible but deeply perceived dynamics is nothing short of magnificent. The work ends in resignation, all emotion spent. But that, as a certain Parisian lady observed long ago, "is the way nature works."

feeling of that popular dance form, and a Gigue in perpetual motion. Throughout the suite, Peled bears down in all the right places, and makes the most of the darkly rich, resonant tone of his instrument, a 1689 Andreas Guarneri, as he ruminates his way like a philosopher prince through music that has as much to say to the inner man as it appeals to the ear.

As splendid as his Bach suite is, it pales by comparison with the absolutely stunning account Peled gives, with the able support of Hajime Teri Murai and an excellent Peabody Symphony Orchestra in which the cello section is amply stocked with many of his own students, of Ernest Bloch's Hebrew Rhapsody, "Schelomo," a work that obviously has the greatest personal meaning for him. Peled sees its three sections as representing three aspects of the Biblical King Solomon: poet, womanizing ruler, and world-weary monarch of a vast empire that burdens his soul. The cellist visualizes the solo cello as filling a purpose similar to the *Talit*-draped Rabbi of an orthodox Jewish synagogue, conversing intimately with God as he reads the holy book.

From the very opening, "Schelomo" is one of the most searingly intense works in the entire literature. It is *not* for everyday listening, unless you enjoy being continually wrung out like a dishcloth emotionally on a daily basis. It opens with a rhapsodic lament by the cello in its lowest range. Thereafter, the intensity never lets up, even in the moments when the pace slackens, during the work's entire 23-minute length, all the way until the cello, all passion spent, concludes in a hushed, tense moment, and a mood of resignation, on the lowest D in its register. Along the way, there is not a note in this remarkable work that does not serve an expressive purpose as we encounter extravagant tonal colors, unresolved dissonances, exotic progressions, and increasingly frenzied playing by soloist and orchestra.

This seems a good place to reflect on the reason I spend so much effort and column space on the products of smaller, independent U. S. labels like Centaur, Bridge, and MSR and such foreign labels as Linn and Avie (both U.K.) and ATMA Classique (Canada), rather than the big multi-national labels that I've reviewed so often in the past. It may seem odd, after all, that an artist of such obvious charisma as Amit Peled, should be releasing on a small label like Centaur when the big boys (*I won't mention names*) ought to be camping on his doorstep waiting to ink a multi-album contract with him. The sad fact is, the big labels, in our time, seem to have succumbed to hardening of the arteries and are spending most of their time basking in past glories – SACD-ifying their back catalog items or remastering them on gold layered discs at 70 dollars a pop. For exciting new artists and repertoire and refreshing new takes on traditional classics, I look to the smaller and upcoming labels for inspiration. It's no mystery!

Honens laureates honored

In 1991, millionaire philanthropist and music enthusiast Esther Honens endowed a competition to be staged in her hometown of Calgary, Alberta. Held every three years with the purpose of recognizing some of the world's most promising young pianists, the Honens International Piano Competition provides valuable career development services in addition to cash prizes for its laureates. On the eve of the semifinals and finals of the seventh competition, to be held October 17 to 26, 2012, the foundation has released selected recording of some of the past Honens Laureates, three of whom are discussed below.



Katherine Chi plays Beethoven, Rachmaninoff
Honens.com

Katherine Chi was the first woman and first Canadian-born Honens Laureate (2000). She shows us why she was so honored in distinguished accounts of works by Beethoven and Rachmaninoff. In Sonata No. 29 in B-flat Major by the former, the "Hammerklavier," she reveals a keen intellect as she explores the broadest canvas of suffering, introspection, and triumph in all the piano literature. She displays an impressive variety of skills in her sure phrasing, her mastery of the broadest range of dynamics, and especially her superb sense of timing in the far-ranging opening movement, particularly in the dramatic moment when we move from the major into the dark abyss of B minor, and in the finale when the music effects a suddenly quiet, but resolute, transition to the fugue that concludes the work.

In the pensive third movement, *Adagio sostenuto*, she gives us a startling insight into Beethoven the man, taking us, slowly, quietly and thoughtfully, through one of music's greatest extended meditations on sorrow for which there is no remedy, utilizing all the resources of song and sonata form that Beethoven had at his disposal.

In Rachmaninoff's Variations on a Theme of Corelli, also known as the



Hong Xu plays Mozart
Honens.com

Hong Xu, 2006 Honens Laureate, went to conservatory in Wuhan in his native China and completed his studies in the U.S. at Eastman and Juilliard. From what I hear in the present recital, his clear, purposeful phrasing and articulation of themes, and the beautiful sense of balance and proportion he realizes in his performances, would seem to make him an ideal Mozart pianist. He is not one to take his Mozart for granted.

A point at issue is Mozart's Sonata in A minor, K310. As it is one of only two Mozart sonatas in a minor key and because it was written in Paris during the period of his mother's untimely death, the tendency among scholars has been to view it as the outpouring of a bereaved heart. In reality, it is usually unwise to equate what we hear in Mozart's music with the events in his life, and K310 is no exception. What I really hear in the *Maestoso* and *Presto* movements in Xu's finely honed performance is a composer whose native language was opera, while the *Andante cantabile* conveys yearning and pathos reminiscent of an operatic heroine, rather than deepest tragedy.

If you want more melancholy sentiments, look no farther than the Adagio in B minor, a profound meditation with no fewer than 20 rests in its 10-minute course,



Georgy Tchaidze plays Schubert
Honens.com

Georgy Tchaidze, Saint Petersburg native and 2009 Honens Laureate, really has an affinity for the music of Franz Schubert, for which the present CD bears eloquent witness. The connection is not hard to find. With the common themes of wandering, suffering, loneliness, and elusive pursuit of happiness that infuse his music, Schubert is the quintessential young man's composer – and as we know, he never lived into middle age. Elated one moment, downcast the next: that's youth. And that's the feeling you get with the sudden, disquieting shifts and contrasts in his music.

Schubert requires, and receives from Tchaidze, an interpreter who isn't afraid for an instant to let go. Tchaidze talks of the "exceptional crescendo" and "abnormal accents and extreme dynamics" that make Schubert's intimately personal melodies seem so terribly fragile. It is more than just a matter of technique, as accomplished as Tchaidze is in that department: you need to be one with the music and experience it from beginning to end as he does, in order for your Schubert to ring true.

We encounter these contrasts early in the present program, in the shape of the stirring forte passages that interrupt the innocently flowing lyricism that infuses the opening

"*La follia*" variations, Chi applies the same pianistic qualities to her exploration of the psychological and sensory vicissitudes of a work that may not have the great depths of the Beethoven but rivals it in terms of its emotional range, from robust vitality to limpid pools of introspection and finally a mood of farewell and regret. Chi has opted to exclude Variation 12, with its galloping rhythms and thumping Mussorgsky-like bass, probably because it is so similar in character to Variation 13 and she might have felt more of a respite was needed before the music moves into quieter, gentler and sunnier pastures in the transition to Variations 14-15 and the concluding coda. I can accept it either way. Chi's nuanced account makes a good case for her balanced view of Rachmaninoff.

requiring the utmost from the artist in terms of maintaining continuity. Xu does an equally remarkable job with the Sonatas in D major, K576 and F major, K332. These works, with their surface appearances of childlike simplicity, conceal complexities of voicing and all sorts of structural and harmonic surprises. The sparkling cantilena that constitutes the Adagio of K332 and the cascading measures in the finale of K576 are but the most remarkable examples.

The Sonata in E-flat major, K282 would seem to be the lightweight of the collection, but even here Xu shows us his artistry in the way he characterizes the differences between Menuetto I and its the more engaging Menuetto II. A true Mozartean!

movement of the Sonata in A major, D664, like a sudden thunderstorm in the midst of a pleasant nature walk. Such disjunctive moments are common in Schubert – witness the meditative middle section that unexpectedly emerges in the midst of the urgent-sounding Klavierstück, D946 No. 1 for example, or the way the gently poignant Allegretto in c minor, D915 ends with quiet, but heartbreaking, suddenness.

The "Wanderer" Fantasy in C major, D760 is the high point of the program. The whole work derives from a theme, sounded in galloping, thunderous measures in the opening movement and heard again in cascading figures in the finale. It is meant to be played without a break in its four movements, though it is vital to keep its solid sonata-allegro structure clearly in mind, as Tchaidze does, and not just play it as a free-form fantasia. The Adagio is the heart of the matter, based on a deeply touching, ruminative set of variations that Tchaidze delights in exploring. And his take on the highly charged fugue and the stunning conclusion of the Allegro finale is absolutely sensational.