

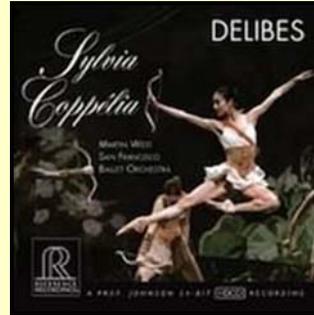


Liszt: Piano Concertos 1 & 2,
Totentanz, Hungarian Fantasy
Nareh Arghamanyan, piano
Alain Altinoglu, Berlin RSO
PentaTone (Hybrid SACD)

Armenian-born pianist Nareh Arghamanyan builds on the big boost she received from her earlier all-Rachmaninoff recital for PentaTone. I was high enough on that earlier release when I reviewed it this past March. But this new SACD containing all four of Franz Liszt's major works for piano and orchestra is absolutely stunning.

Really, I can't recommend these performances highly enough. The 23-year old shows her impressive keyboard prowess and sensitivity to nuance and mood right from the beginning in the two Liszt concertos in E-flat and A Major. Occurring closely in time, with premieres in 1855 and 1857, they are closely related in mood and treatment, if not thematically. Both are tightly structured works in an era in which the piano concerto was supposed to be loose-limbed and effusive, giving the virtuoso-composer ample room to be discursive. In both concertos, particularly in the First, cyclic sonata form, with variations on the main theme and movements taken without a break, give the feeling of highly condensed, non-slackening excitement.

In the opening Allegro Maestoso of Concerto 1, Arghamanyan gets to show off her keyboard dynamism as the music alternates between the portentous opening, building through dazzling keyboard passagework to a powerful climax and then – surprise! – a relaxed duet for piano and clarinet that serves as the perfect point of repose before proceeding on the weightier matters. A lovely Quasi Adagio, more blistering passagework in the Allegretto, and a powerfully sonorous Allegro finale for soloist and orchestra featuring sensational polyrhythms for the soloist, bring matters to a stunning conclusion. Concerto 2, though less well-known and less often performed than its predecessor, is, if anything, even more demanding on the pianist's virtuosity. Though occupying four tracks on the present CD, its unusual stricture can actually be divided into six sections, connected by the continuous transformation of its



Delibes: "Sylvia," "Coppelia" Suites
Martin West, San Francisco Ballet Orchestra
Reference Recordings

French composer Leo Delibes (1836-1891) is notable for having composed the first memorable ballet music of the romantic era. No less an authority than Peter Illyich Tchaikovsky remarked of Delibes' score for *Sylvia* (1876), "If I had known this music earlier, I never would have dared to write *Swan Lake*."

Actually, to modern-day ears, Delibes' music often "isn't *all that*." The music of the fourteen highlights comprising the *Sylvia* Suite on the present disc varies in quality, the most striking being "*les Chasseresses*" (The Huntresses) with its stirring horn calls, "*Valse Lente*" (Slow Waltz), and "*Marche et Cortège de Bacchus*" (March and Procession of Bacchus) – and perhaps also the heroine's solo dance "*Pizzicato*," although it has often been parodied. Maybe the story is at fault, as ballets based on Greek mythology have usually received more reverential than robust treatment from latter-day composers.

That is clearly not an issue with the Suite from *Coppélia*, based on a story by E.T.A. Hoffman and benefitting from a lively, colorful contemporary setting. The 19th century preoccupation with science trumping human needs is reflected in the magician-toymaker Coppélius' obsession for endowing his lifelike doll creations with the vital force stolen from human victims, though a happy ending is not long in doubt in this *ballet comique*. A vital, red-blooded account by the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra under its music director and principal conductor Martin West brings instant life to such favorites among the suite of 12 items as the "Mazurka," "Swanhilde's Waltz," and the rousing "Czárdás" (Hungarian Dance) with which the heroine Swanhilde dismisses her fiancé Frantz when he succumbs to the artificial charms of Coppélia, the magician's namesake automaton. "*La Nuit*" (Night) from the suite of allegorical dances that precedes the happy ending, calls for special notice for the delicacy of its scoring and its performance on this disc.

It's great to hear Delibes' music performed by a real ballet orchestra with all the vibrancy that only long

themes. Changes in mood, dynamics and keyboard touch keep Arghamanyan continually on her toes in an alert, engaging performance as the work begins unusually with an entire slow movement, *Adagio sostenuto*, and ends in a stirring march.

Totentanz (Dance of Death), featuring continuous variations on the *Dies irae* (Day of Wrath) from the Latin mass for the dead, starts off with one of the most awe-inspiring passages ever written for soloist and orchestra. It captures Liszt's fascination with death and places enormous demands on the pianist for an overwhelming volume of sheer percussive sound, to say nothing of its eerie repeated notes. Quieter moments following this allow for rare delicious examples of Liszt's musical humor, which Arghamanyan obviously enjoys.

Finally, we have the Fantasy on Hungarian Folk Themes, which is Liszt's scintillating arrangement for piano and orchestra of his popular Hungarian Rhapsody No. 14 for solo piano. With its variety of long and short rhythms and its alternation of relaxed and up-tempo moments, this Fantasy is both a smashing showpiece and a good way for pianist and orchestra to *really* let it all out at the end of the program!



Berlioz: *Symphonie Fantastique*
Leonard Slatkin, Orchestre National de Lyon
Naxos

A young artist of lively but morbid imagination, finding himself disappointed in a hopeless love, attempts suicide by an overdose of opium. The dose does not prove lethal, but plunges him instead into a wave of passions in which he experiences dreams of his beloved and places and events associated with her. Some are beautiful, others are more disturbed, even nightmares. Throughout, a common musical theme, an *idée fixe*, recurs in various guises, some ethereal and others impassioned, distorted, or even mocking, unifying the dreamer's experience.

This, more or less, is the literary subtext for *Symphonie Fantastique*, which Hector Berlioz premiered at the Paris Conservatory in 1830 and revised over the next 15 years. One obvious problem for the interpreter is its nebulosity; like the reverie the program describes, as its hero experiences extremes of melancholy and upsurges of aimless joy, delirium, outbursts of fury and jealousy, tenderness, tears, and fleeting religious consolation. All that, mind you, is in the opening movement, subtitled

familiarity with this kind of music can ensure. The sound quality of the 24-bit HDCD, produced by Victor and Marina Ledin and engineered by Keith O. ("Prof") Johnson at the studios of Skywalker Sound in Marin County, California isn't exactly shabby, either!



Beethoven: "Eroica" + Mendelssohn: "Italian"
Bruno Weil, Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra
Tafelmusik Media

Who says you can't do Beethoven with a small orchestra? With no more than 39 musicians – because that's the total listed for an augmented Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra in the accompanying booklet – Bruno Weil and company bring forth a grand and glorious sound that would be a credit to any orchestra twice as large. In a program composed of two of the most familiar warhorses in the repertoire, Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony and Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony, the music comes up as fresh and exciting as if we were hearing it for the first time. Rhythmically and intellectually invigorating performances of both favorites make them stand out even in the fastest competition. Recorded in live concerts at Toronto's Koerner Hall between 24 and 27 May, 2012 and processed in 24-bit high definition sound, these recordings are as vibrant as we are likely to hear anywhere.

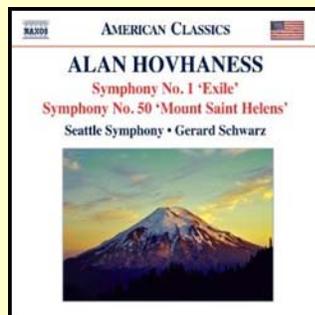
The "Italian" Symphony is up first. Despite posterity's praise of it for its purity of form, conciseness, and abundant melody, Mendelssohn is said to have been dissatisfied with it, claiming it had cost him some of the bitterest moments in his career. The exact reasons must have been personal and outside the music, which has a vibrancy that stays with you for a long time. The very opening is unusual, in that it begins *Allegro vivace* without an introduction, just as if a curtain were raised on an Italian scene drenched in the clear air and brilliant white sunshine of the country itself. Bruno Weil really has his finger on the strong rhythmic pulse, the sense of immediacy, in this movement. The key is that he keeps the basses that underscore the melody continually in our awareness. The slow movement is said to have been inspired by a religious procession Mendelssohn witnessed in Naples. It may be slow, but certainly not funereal, as too many other interpretations have been. Weil gets it just right. The third movement, *con molto moderato*, is technically in the tempo of a minuet, but its character is more expansive and sweeping. Again, Weil

“Reveries – Passions.” Leonard Slatkin, at the helm of the Orchestre National of Lyons, France, takes the larger view of the work, keeping its grand sweep and progress continually in mind and the listener’s interest primed as we move from one tableau to the next.

A crucial moment here is the third movement, the “Scene in the Fields” (*Scène aux champs*) where, with the gentle rustlings of the landscape as a backdrop, two shepherds, heard as oboe and English horn, engage in a call-and-response dialogue. In the course of the movement, the higher of the two voices is suddenly and inexplicably silenced. Mingled hope, fear, forebodings and dark premonitions seize the remaining voice: is this a final betrayal? Considering the great length of this movement (17 minutes), this is the usual place where mediocre, unfocused interpretations make the listener feel like going to bed. Not so with Slatkin, who has firmly in hand all the nuances and turns, bold and subtle, in this scene, as well as its overall design. At the end, when the low sounds of distant thunder played by the four timpani leave the dreamer with an uneasy feeling, we are actually surprised that the movement is over so soon.

Throughout the symphony, the musicianship of the Orchestre National is exceptionally good, especially the crucial woodwind solos and obbligati in the “Scene in the Fields,” the glorious, sensual sweep of the two harps and the strings in the second movement, “A Ball,” the *fortissimo* rolls of the snare drums and the pounding timpani in the fourth, “March to the Scaffold,” and the mocking sounds of C and E-flat clarinets in the final “Witches’ Sabbath,” as the tenderly beautiful melody of the *idée fixe* is hellishly transformed.

As record producers are apt to experience guilt these days if they don’t provide at least 70 minutes of music on a CD, we are given bookends for the program in the form of Berlioz’ *Corsair* Overture (where Slatkin detects signs of life in the old pancake, after all) and the alternative version of “A Ball” featuring a cornet solo that only confirms the old dictum that an unnecessary element is best left out. But after all, that’s small potatoes. *Enjoy!*



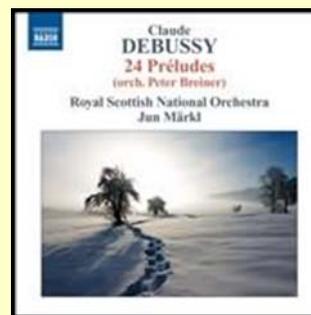
Hovhaness: Symphonies 1, “Exile” & 50, “Mount St. Helens”; Fantasy on Japanese Woodprints
Gerard Schwarz, Seattle Symphony Orchestra
Naxos

Alan Hovhaness (1911-2000) is one of the most

has it right. The *Presto* finale combines dance figurations from two distinctively fast Italian dances, the Roman saltarello and the Neapolitan tarantella, whipped up together into a fine frenzy.

In his account of Beethoven’s “Eroica,” Weil pays close attention to three of Beethoven’s favorite preoccupations: his love of rhythmic complexities, including syncopations; the use of sudden dynamic changes that can lift the unwary listener off his seat, and his employment of dissonance in the form of unexpected chromatic notes, such as the intrusion of C# into the main melody of the opening movement, to increase the harmonic tension. He keeps the tempi taut, but realistically so, throughout this work, so that its playing time (48:31) is rather on the short side by present-day standards. I like that because the intensity never slackens, even in the second movement, *Marcia funébre* (funeral march) which is the usual culprit in many unsatisfying performances. Here, the funeral march ends very effectively with a feeling of utter exhaustion occasioned by grief.

That movement also contains several fugatos, reflecting Beethoven’s predilection for fugue as a way of increasing the intensity of a movement. The Scherzo features a Trio in which four the French horns, tuned in the manner of the chase with the fourth horn a semitone off, bound forth unexpectedly and sensationally. The last movement is a set of variations on the bass line of a theme Beethoven had used previously in his ballet Prometheus. As he does throughout this account, Weil judiciously manages the progress of this movement through its various stages, fugal treatments, and climaxes, building it to a splendid, stunning conclusion that feels absolutely right.



Debussy: Préludes, Books 1 and 2
(orch. Peter Breiner)
Jun Märkl, Royal Scottish National Orchestra
Naxos

Volume 8 in Jun Märkl’s cycle of Debussy’s orchestral music is memorable for more than one reason. Besides living up to the standard of interpretation Märkl has achieved in this project and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra’s high reputation for musicianship, it is also the first time, to my knowledge, that anyone has successfully orchestrated all 24 pieces that comprise the two books of the Préludes for Piano. That distinction belongs to Peter

attractive and easily recognizable of American composers because his approach to composition was like no other. The modern obsession for re-inventing the wheel was not for Hovhanness! At a formative stage in his career, buoyed by his studies in Asian music, particularly that of Japan, Korea, and India, and by his own Armenian-American heritage, he decided to base his music on Eastern scales and modal harmonies and the hymn tunes and chorales he knew so well as a church musician. To these, he added a powerful Western influence in the use of counterpoint and fugue (which he often applied even more vigorously than had Bach or Handel) to develop his themes. The result was a flexible style that allowed him to be highly prolific: the catalog of his works lists 67 symphonies among his 434 opus numbers, and these do include scores that were unpublished or never collected.

The earliest work on the present program of Hovhanness recordings made for Delos Records in 1990-92 by Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle Symphony and now re-released by Naxos as part of its American Classics Series is Symphony No. 1 (1936). This work, subtitled "Exile," meant a lot to one of Hovhanness' ethnic heritage because it commemorated a tragic event: the mass expulsion of Armenians from the Ottoman Empire, in which at least 1.5 million persons died between 1915 and 1922. Hovhanness uses many authentic Armenian melodies, particularly in the slow movement, with its modal melodies in the woodwinds over pizzicato accompaniment. In the outer movements, rhapsodic themes in the woodwinds, punctuated by powerful fanfares in the brass, are concluded triumphantly by a mighty chorale in fugal counterpoint.

Fantasy of Japanese Woodprints, Op. 211 (1965) reflects Hovhanness' ongoing fascination for the culture of Japan. And incidentally, it offers the Seattle Symphony's Ron Johnson a great opportunity to contribute to the flavor and texture of this work through his distinguished performance on the marimba, an instrument the composer uses to evoke the tonal world of traditional Japanese music. Though Hovhanness made no attempt to identify the various woodblock prints referenced in the title other than to say that the conclusion represented "a wild festival scene," much of this music seems to evoke the nightmare world of crime and the supernatural that was captured so vividly in the Japanese graphic genre known as *Ukiyo-e*.

Hovhanness' Symphony No. 50, "Mount St. Helens" (1982), is a stunning example of the composer's symphonic prowess brought to bear concerning an event that made world headlines. It begins with an opening movement in the form of a relaxed prelude and fugue, with long melodic lines based on modal harmonies that manage to convey the atmosphere of the American west. Hovhanness' symmetry of form conveys the perfect beauty of the mountain before the cataclysmic event of May 18, 1980. The middle movement, "Spirit Lake," uses an English horn, a flute duet, and the soft tinkling of liquid bells to describe the lovely lake, since vanished, which

Breiner, Slovak composer, pianist, and conductor who now resides in the U.S. Whether Breiner's imaginative orchestrations will earn a place besides the ones that Ravel made for Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition remains to the judgment of history, but it is undeniable that they are remarkably effective in bringing to life in the symphony hall pieces that were clearly conceived for the resources of the piano.

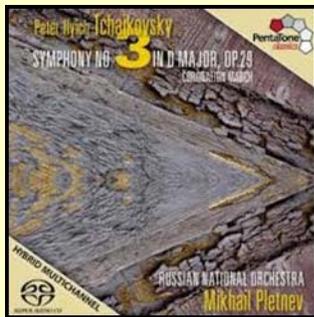
The task is more difficult than you might imagine. Some years ago, Dmitri Mitropoulos recorded Book 2 with the New York Philharmonic, an effort that to my mind was one of the few unsuccessful recordings by that esteemed maestro. A key element in its lack of success was the unsatisfactory orchestrations (by whose hand, I have forgotten.). This music is impressionistic, rather than romantic, in character, and often rewards a more-is-less approach by the arranger, as opposed to more massive orchestration.

That is particularly true in the preludes that evoke images of wind and water, the two of the ancient Four Elements that excited Debussy's imagination the most. They occur in various forms in *Voiles* (Sails), *Le vent dans la plaine* (The Wind on the Plain), *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* (Sounds and Perfumes Turn in the Evening Air), *Des pas sur la neige* (Footsteps in the Snow), *Ce qu'a vu le Vent d'Ouest* (What the West Wind Saw), *La Cathedrale engloutie* (The Sunken Cathedral), and *Brouillards* (Mists), and are implicit in *Ondine*, the depiction of a water nymph. Most of the orchestrations in these pieces are deftly applied, in keeping with the impressionistic quality of the music and Breiner's stated aim that, "My goal [was] to make it sound as close to the original composer as I can manage." Even the big, blustery effects in "What the West Wind Saw," foreboding stormy weather, are more economically realized than they seem at first hearing. How it is that "sounds and perfumes turn in the evening air" is something more easily perceived by the mind than it is realized physically: Breiner, to his credit, succeeds in this daunting task as well as is humanly possible.

Surprisingly, his orchestral depiction of The sunken cathedral that, according to an old Breton legend, rises from the depths with the sounds of bells tolling and monks chanting on rare mornings when the mist clears and the sea is translucent is less immediately gripping in its immensity than it is in piano recordings that I can recall. On the other hand, *Le Danse de Puck* is charmingly rendered by a duet of flutes with transparent strings for accompaniment, and *General Lavine – eccentric* is a provocative portrayal for orchestra of a certain comedian whose act consisted of a sensational cakewalk on high stilts. *S. Pickwick, Esq.* falls short in its evocation of Charles Dickens' character, and *Les tierces alternées* (Alternating Thirds) is impossible to realize in terms that appeal to the senses. Although Breiner gives it his best, even Debussy was not entirely satisfied with some of the preludes in Book 2, and presumably would not have been elated by the idea of orchestrating them.

formerly reflected a mirror image of St. Helens.

Despite the fact that we know well what is to befall in the third movement, the volcanic eruption, coming after a peaceful Adagio that harkens back to the mood of the first movement, takes us completely by surprise with its sudden *forte* outburst, followed by the briefest of pauses and then a rising chaos of pounding drums and percussion and a miasma of blaring brass and strings, a blazing triple canon in 20 voices that persists for almost seven minutes before it eventually subsides. All of the artistry of Gerard Schwarz and the members of the Seattle SO come into play here, in sonics that are captured in startling realism by the recording team of Adam Stern and John Eargle. The work concludes with a rising chorale, a hymn of praise to "the youthful power of the Cascades, the volcanic energy renewing the vitality of our beautiful planet, the living earth" (Hovhaness).



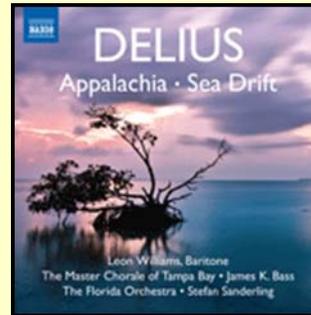
Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 3, Coronation March
Mikhail Pletnev, Russian National Orchestra
PentaTone (Hybrid SACD)

Mikhail Pletnev and the Russian National Orchestra celebrate the end of their cycle of Tchaikovsky symphonies in festive style with Symphony No. 3 in D Major, Op. 29. For a chaser, we have the colorful and pompous Festival Coronation March, with the quotation of the Russian national anthem, that Tchaikovsky composed in 1883 to celebrate the coronation of Tsar Alexander III.

From its premiere in 1875, the Third Symphony has attracted criticism for its alleged structural weaknesses. This is Tchaikovsky's "happy" symphony, the only one written in a major key and significantly filled with an abundance of good melodies, even by the composer's usual standard. Conspicuously absent are the obsessive, melancholy moods, reminding us how good it is to suffer, that we find in his last trio of symphonies. In fact, there is so much good feeling that critics suspected the Third of being a mere symphonic suite giving itself airs in the guise of a symphony, so much so that Tchaikovsky was at pains to bolster its formal structure with contrapuntal techniques in the opening and closing movements. Nevertheless, it is the melodic impulse that wins out in the end, captivating the listener in this performance by Pletnev and the RNO.

The opening movement, its slow introduction followed by

Au contraire, there is real magic in Breiner's realization for orchestra of such a prelude as the enchanting *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair) with its sparing but effective use of clarinet, harp and strings to create an indelible impression of a girl whose natural beauty is beyond artifice. And *Bruyères* (Heather) is such an atmospheric evocation of its subject it makes me wonder if Messrs. Lerner and Lowe were under its spell when they wrote "The Heather on the Hill" in *Brigadoon*? I'd like to think they were!



Delius: Appalachia, Sea Drift
Leon Williams, baritone
Master Chorale of Tampa Bay, dir. James K. Bass
The Florida Orchestra, cond. Stefan Sanderling
Naxos

It is not clear whether the 22-year old Frederick Delius went to Florida in 1884 to accede to his father's desire that he make something of himself in business. He might just as easily have wanted to escape the parental influence when he agreed to manage an orange plantation in Solano Grove on the St. John's River, south of Jacksonville. In any event, it was a seminal experience for the wayward young man. In a part of America that was far more virgin than it is today, surrounded by the azure beauty of water and sky that merged at the horizon (the St. John's, it should be noted, is very broad at this point), living in a four-room cottage cooled by a canopy of oaks, Delius fell in love with the country easily enough.

It seems almost too fictional for belief, but the young Delius came under the powerful influence of Negro song at this time. He heard it everywhere: from plantation workers, deck hands on ships who sang as they worked, and even waiters in cafes who doubled as singers. In the quiet evenings, he could hear the sounds of voices drifting across the water. It was no coincidence, as his pupil Eric Fenby attested, that many of Delius' early works are "redolent of Negro hymnology and folk-song ... not heard before in the orchestra, and seldom since." Together with the influence of Thomas Ward, an American who taught him counterpoint and composition, it helped determine his future career.

The direct fruits of the young Englishman's American sojourn included his Florida Suite, of which "The River" has become a concert favorite in recent years; and Appalachia (1903), heard on the present disc. The last-named is a symphonic ode for orchestra and voices that,

a not-too poignant funeral march, contains all the gloom we are likely to find in this generally up-beat symphony, and even it ends in a brilliant passage. Three dance-oriented movements ensue, in an unusual five-movement structure Tchaikovsky consciously based on Schumann's "Rhenish" Symphony. Asymmetrical phrase lengths and swelling tones predominate in the ensuing *alla Tedesca*, which might well pass as a scene from Swan Lake, with all its graciously flowing movement and its lovely solos for clarinet and bassoon.

Following a gently elegiac Andante, the fourth movement is a Scherzo with a marchlike trio that is probably the weakest of the lot. The finale is a vivacious Allegro *con fuoco* ("with fire") in the manner of a Polonaise. Marked *tempo di Polacca*, it has given this work the misleading nickname of the "Polish symphony." Actually, this Polonaise is decidedly festive, in the Imperial Russian style, and certainly not in a nationalistic vein such as Chopin would have employed. As a gloriously zestful dance in which the theme keeps coming back with variations in the manner of a rondo, it makes for a smashing conclusion to an under-estimated work.

by the way, takes its title from an Indian name for the entire eastern United States, not just the mountainous region we normally think of. As performed by the very capable Florida Orchestra under Stefan Sanderling in close collaboration with the Tampa Bay Chorale under James K. Bass, this keenly awaited recording captures the splendor of the setting and the spirit of a well-known folk song: "Aye, honey! I am going down the river in the morning / Heigh ho, heigh ho, down the mighty river. / Aye, honey! I'll be gone when the whippoorwill's a calling." The work calls for, and receives, the closest rapport between forces as Delius characteristically streams the chorus through the orchestral writing when it first makes its almost subliminal presence.

Leon Williams, the baritone soloist, barely has a chance to get warmed up in *Appalachia*, but his rich, imposing voice assumes a role of key importance with in *Sea Drift* (1903), Delius' magnificent setting of a text from Walt Whitman's *Sea of Grass*. Singer, chorus and orchestra take us through the various mood changes in a poetic work that uses the haunting call of the lonely survivor of a pair of nesting water fowl to epitomize the human experience of loss, pain, and the search for consolation: "Do not be decoy'd elsewhere, / That is the whistle of the wind, it is not my voice. / That is the fluttering, the fluttering of the spray. / Those are the shadows of leaves / O, darkness! O, in vain!"