

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

December, 2012



Handel; Messiah (Complete)  
Karina Gauvin (s), Robin Blaze (a), Rufus Müller (t), Brett Polegato (b)  
Ivars Taurins, director  
Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra and Chamber Choir  
Tafelmusik Media (2-CD)

*What*, yet another Messiah? You bet, and a good thing too! Handel's masterwork has retained its popularity (at least in the English-speaking world) for 270 years with no likelihood of abating. It may be said to have been the first "classic" in the history of classical music in terms of being revived year after year, for generation after generation of enthusiastic performers and listeners. How many of us have participated in performances with church choirs or civic choruses over the years, not even including audience participation "sing-alongs"? Even I got roped in on more than one occasion, and I am no singer (*You will have to take my word on this*).

So why should you hear this latest Messiah, recorded live on December 14 to 17, 2011 at Koerner Hall in Toronto? Well, there are plenty of reasons. To begin with, this is an exceptionally smooth performance in which all the elements are well integrated, the product of a director and ensemble that have been doing their thing since Ivars Taurins found the Tafelmusik Chamber Choir in 1981. That includes a full quarter-century's tradition of performing Messiah as an annual event. There is a nice balance between the 24 voices in the chorus and the number of instrumentalists, 24 plus continuo organ. The vocalists are all top-rate, too. Karina Gauvin is exquisite in the soprano arias such as "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion" and her wonderful, heart-melting duet "He shall feed us flock" with Robin Blaze.

The latter, in the alto role, is more satisfying than any counter-tenor I can recall hearing in this part. That type of male voice has been known to set my teeth on edge, something I happily did not experience when listening to his well-modulated voice with its graciously soft glow. It went well in the alto part, which, as Handel conceived it, carries so much of the message of comfort in this work. Tenor Rufus Müller is authoritative and direct in such key



"Prima Donna"  
Karina Gauvin, soprano  
Arion Baroque Orchestra, Alexander Weimann  
ATMA Classique

"Prima Donna," being an album of soprano arias from Baroque opera, is perhaps not for everyone, requiring a special sort of listener and listening expectations. The wide range of so many of these arias, soaring up to the occasional high C, is one daunting requisite. But they also require a voice of absolute purity and clarity, one capable of taking trills and other embellishments smoothly and securely within the same breath stream as the aria. Canadian superstar Karina Gauvin meets all of the above requisites with plenty in reserve, as she demonstrates in these splendid 24 bit, 96 kHz recordings with Alexander Weimann and the Arion Baroque Orchestra. It makes for an enchanting hour's listening.

With the exception of *Tortorella se rimira* by Leonardo Vinci and *Addio caro* by Antonio Vivaldi, all the tracks on the present program are the music of George Frideric Handel and represent the cream of some 25 major works that he wrote and produced in London between 1711 and 1739 to capitalize on the current vogue for Italian opera. The 13 Handel selections include three instrumental numbers – the stirring overture to *Lotario*, and two gracious slow movements from his Concerti Grossi, the Largo to Op. 3, No. 1 and the Adagio to Op. 6, No. 8 – all performed with warmth and style by Arion.

The other 10 Handel selections are all soprano arias – and *what* arias they are! Many are hauntingly beautiful, even to the non-Baroque specialist. They include such gems as *Verdi piante, erbetto liete* and *No, non potrai* from Orlando, *Ombre pallide* from Alcina, and *Da te parto* from Flavio, arias dealing with all the extreme emotions and conflicts of the human heart: love, longing, passionate desire, honor, betrayal, and ultimately, death (Handel's heroines tend to have short life expectancies, even by Baroque opera standards). They conclude with two of the composer's very best, *Ah! Mio cor!* from Alcina and *Care selve* from Atalanta. These last two are rendered by Karina Gauvin with the right amount of

passages as the *accompagnato* “Comfort ye, my people” and the following aria “Ev’ry valley shall be exalted.” And Brett Polegato is one lyric baritone who takes the high dramatics in “All nations I’ll shall” and “I will dash to pieces” straight, without giving us the impression he’d rather be playing Mephistopheles. So there is much to savor here in the voices.

The big choruses such as “Hallelujah! The Lord God Omnipotent reigneth” and “Worthy is the Lamb” are grand and glorious without overwhelming the sound of your teenager’s video games. Enhancing our enjoyment of an extremely smooth Messiah are the 24-bit, high definition sonics. And, oh yes, for those who’d like to enjoy an afore-mentioned “sing-along” version, Taurins and company can oblige us with that, too. (See [www.Tafelmusik.org](http://www.Tafelmusik.org) for a DVD that promises to afford much pleasure.)



Telemann: Flute Duos, TWV 40: 141-46  
Steven Zohn and Colin St-Martin, baroque flutes  
Centaur

Steven Zohn and Colin St-Martin, American baroque flutists and scholars, make their points persuasively in these works by the incredibly prolific Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767). Telemann came along at just the right time in music history to make his mark in many genres. That includes these pathbreaking duets for transverse flute that represent the transition from music written for the end-blown wooden flute (*blockflöte*), or recorder. These instruments have a distinctively attractive mellow sound in their middle register that is quite different in quality from their predecessor, the recorder, and their successor, the modern Boehm flute with its keyed mechanism and circular tone holes.

Telemann particularly endeared himself to succeeding generations of flute students and music lovers by the clarity and regularity with which he laid out his duets. Said contemporary flutist Friedrich Ludwig Dülon: “I owe my security in keeping time entirely to [Telemann’s pieces], for they are written throughout in a partly canonic and partly fugal texture.” That was of particular importance to an artist like Dülon because he happened to be blind, and therefore unable to get vital visual clues when performing duets with a partner.

For the modern listener, all this technical stuff, including the afore-mentioned clarity of Telemann’s writing, makes

pathos and feeling that goes considerably beyond the sheer range and vocal prowess it takes to achieve them.



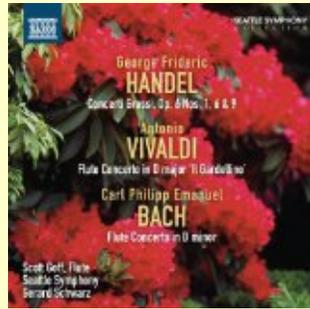
“Sounds from the King’s Chamber,”  
Music of Abel, Falkenhagen, Meusel, Weiss  
Performed by Duo Kirchhof  
Centaur

Lutz and Martina Kirchhof, performing together as the Duo Kirchhof, present a program of rare and delectable music in a manner that, so we gather, has seldom been heard in its authenticity since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. With Lutz playing a 13-choir, 24-string Lute and Martina a 7-string bass viola da gamba, they bring new life to almost forgotten works by Sylvius Leopold Weiss (1686-1750), Gottfried Meusel (1688-1728), Karl Friedrich Abel (1723-1787), and Adam Falkenhagen (1697-1761).

The Duo Kirchhof, who take their zest for authenticity to the extent of living in a renovated 17<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse in their hometown of Weilburg, Germany, breathe the exalted air of music that was composed mostly by court composers for the benefit of their princely patrons in the quiet hours when they needed to relax from the demands and pressures of the day (Insomnia, in fact, seems to have been an occupational malady among the nobility of that day). But these fantasies, suites and concertos for solo and duo instruments were not simply “wallpaper,” more than music for mere relaxation. As the period conceived it, this was music with a lofty dimension. As the Duo Kirchhof express it in their website, “The music is best listened to in a calm and relaxed state – perhaps with your eyes shut – or only with the intent to re-experience self-composure and spiritual depth.”

From the Prelude and Fantasy by Weiss at the opening of the program, we know we are in for a rarefied, intimate experience (one best heard, by the way, at a lower volume than your customary listening level, so as not to distort the sound of lute and gamba, more delicate than that of the modern instruments that succeeded them). The three Concertos by Gottfried Meusel, played with style and elegance by the Duo Kirchhof, have a wealth that makes one marvel that these are all world premiere recordings. The Vivace of the Concerto in C major is of special interest because it bears a resemblance to the well-known Sonata in D major, K491 by the composer’s contemporary, Domenico Scarlatti. Martina explores Abel’s Suite in D minor with a zest that reminds us that its composer was the last in a long line of

for music of the greatest melodic charm, stylishness, economy, and wit (the last-named a word we have not had as much occasion to use since the composer's day). These duets are not in simple canonic imitation, but rather both parts contain interesting, well-developed melody lines. His quick movements, such as the Prestos that conclude the Sonatas in B minor and A major, are zesty and bracing, while slow movements such as the *Piacevole* (Peaceful) movement of the E-minor Sonata and the moving Sarabande, marked *Largo*, of the A major, are deeply expressive in the best baroque vein.

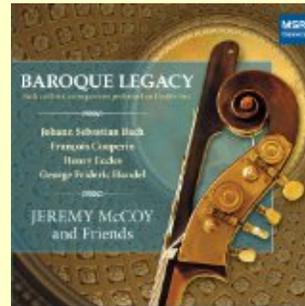


Handel: Concerti Grossi, Op. 6. Nos. 1, 6, 9  
 Vivaldi: Flute Concerto, Op. 10/3, "Il gardellino"  
 C.P. E. Bach: Flute Concerto in D, W22  
 Scott Goff, flute; Gerard Schwarz, Seattle SO  
 Naxos

These days, it's refreshing to hear Baroque music played by regular symphony musicians, not just period music specialists. Refreshing, but not surprising. For some time now, conservatory students have treated the scholarship and performance styles needed to perform the Baroque repertoire as part of their regular career preparation, and not something exceptional. We hear this new emphasis in idiomatically excellent 2008 performances of Handel, Vivaldi, and C.P.E. Bach by members of the Seattle Symphony under the direction of Gerard Schwarz.

In particular, the Seattle string section, which over the years has matured into one of the very best among American orchestras, is distinguished by its dark, layered sound that makes it ideal for the textural contrasts between the smaller group of soli and the larger body of strings that give the Handel Concerti Grossi, Op. 6 their special flavor and dramatic appeal. Handelian grandeur is evident from the very opening of Concerto No. 1 in G major, in contrast to the languid, poignant yearning of the *Affettuoso* opening of Concerto No. 6 in G minor. Both are in marked contrast to the Largo opening of No. 9 in F major, in which bare chords and unusual harmonic progressions and dynamic changes lend an experimental feeling to the music. The concertino players – violinists Simon James and Michael Miropolsky, cellist Theresa Benshoof, and harpsichordist Kimberly Russ – make beautiful music against the backdrop of the larger ensemble. Of special interest here are Musette of No. 6, with an unusually elegiac melody above a bagpipes-like drone in the bass that made it a great favorite with Handel's audiences, and the 2nd and 3rd movements of

gamba virtuosi. And finally, Lutz brings out the bravura and the imagination inherent in the Sonata in F major for solo lute by the all-but-forgotten Falkenhagen.



"Baroque Legacy," Bach, Handel, Eccles, Couperin performed on double bass by Jeremy McCoy and friends  
 MSR Classics

This wasn't my first acquaintance with Jeremy McCoy. I'd encountered him earlier on "Dialogues for Double Bass" (Bridge Records). As on that occasion, McCoy, assistant principal bassist with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, shows his keen interest (one might even term him an *agent provocateur*) for extending both the virtuosic range and the repertoire of an instrument that is usually relegated to the more or less thankless job of supporting the melody line of an orchestra's string section. In these arrangements McCoy does not merely content himself with a mere "Hmm, so it can be done *that way*, too" demonstration. Rather, with the assistance of his colleagues, he makes the transcribed works his own.

Heart of the program are J. S. Bach's three Sonatas for viola da gamba and harpsichord, BWV 1027-1029 in which McCoy, cognizant of the tendency of a harpsichord to be overwhelmed by the sound of a modern double bass and the tendency of a modern piano to return the favor as regards the bass, has sensibly opted for a small portable organ, played with style and brio by Matthew Larkin, to partner his richly resonant double bass. From the opening adagio of the Sonata in G major, BWV 1027, with its broad tempo and forward moving 16<sup>th</sup>-note divisions in beat that overcome any tendency toward foursquare regularity by keeping the music continually moving beyond the bar-lines, we are in for some smartly alert music making. The interplay of bassist and organist in the ensuing Allegro movement really engages our attention. Following so soon after the Adagio, the music assumes the character of a prelude and fugue, although Bach doesn't describe it as such. A hauntingly beautiful Andante and an exuberant Allegro moderato conclude this well-loved work.

Bach's Sonatas BWV 1028 and 1029 are given hardly less memorable performances, capitalizing on the unique timbre of the double bass' dark, deep lower register, the surprisingly lyrical warmth of its middle register (at least the way McCoy plays it), and its greater quickness *vis-à-vis* the original instrument for which these works were

No. 9, with their echoes of the famous birdcalls in Handel's Organ concerto in F, "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale" as evidence of his remarkable facility in reworking earlier material and making it new and fresh.

Soloist Scott Goff brings his expressive prowess to bear in the latter half of the program, consisting of Vivaldi's well-loved Flute Concerto in D major, "*Il gardellino*" (The Goldfinch) and C.P.E. Bach's powerfully moving Flute Concerto in D minor, W22, which transcended the genre's contemporary limits as a species of musical entertainment to emerge as a very persuasive major work in its own right. Goff casts a spell over the listener with his account of the Cantabile movement of the Vivaldi, an evocation of the rapturous song of its avian subject on a morning bathed in golden sunlight. For a different reason, the spacious Andante of the Bach concerto is its most memorable movement, a respite of serenity (though not without dramatic contrasts) between the emotionally charged outer movements.

Though not advertised as such, the present compilation of previously unreleased performances makes a first-rate Baroque "sampler." (I plan to send it to my friends for Christmas.)



Handel: Ode for the Birthday for Queen Anne, Zadok the Priest, Dixit Dominus  
Jeannette Sorrell directs Apollo's Fire  
Avie Records

"United nations shall combine, / to distant climes the sound convey / that Anna's actions are divine, / and this the most important day! / The day that gave great Anna birth / who fix'd a lasting peace on earth." Three hundred years later, modern music lovers do not have an inkling of the shameless exercise in propaganda embodied in that chorus from George Frideric Handel's Ode on the Birthday of Queen Anne (1713). The "lasting peace" referenced in the lyrics was the Peace of Utrecht, which was so bitterly opposed in Parliament by the Whigs that the beleaguered monarch was moved to create twelve new "Tory peers" in order to ensure its passage.

Well, as they say, "Time wounds all heels," and what we are left with today is some stirring, if occasionally bombastic, choruses, enthusiastically rendered by the Cleveland-based baroque orchestra Apollo's Fire and their chorale, Apollo's Singers, all under the spirited direction of their founder, Jeannette Sorrell. The two

written. Both have striking third movements, in the former a graceful Sicilienne, and in the latter a magical Adagio with a quasi-improvisational rhythmic freedom that strikes a uniquely attractive balance between strictly contrapuntal and fantasy-like procedures. Both have rousing finales, exuberantly affirming the joy of living.

Interleaved with the three Bach sonatas are three other charmers. First, Handel's Sonata in C major, an early work in the slow-fast-slow-fast form of a Corellian *sonata de chiesa* but already exhibiting Handel's bold up-tempo approach to the fast movements and a unique feeling for lyricism in the warmly tender Andante. English composer Henry Eccles is represented by his Sonata in G minor, long used as an attractive training piece. François Couperin's *Pièces en Concert*, based on a 1924 arrangement originally for cello by Paul Bazelaire, gives McCoy's instrument the chance to stand out as first among equals in a setting featuring a quartet of strings ad a second double bass added as continuo. The third movement, *La Tromba*, stands out for its imitation trumpet calls, with the deeply affecting slow movement, *Plainte*, a close second.



Bach: Goldberg Variations, BWV 988  
Takae Ohnishi, harpsichord  
Bridge Records

Japanese harpsichordist Takae Ohnishi graduated from the Toho Gauken School of Music in Tokyo and did her graduate studies at the New England Conservatory and Stony Brook University. She now belongs to the world, thanks to the far-flung community of Baroque revival enthusiasts and the consequent need to travel internationally, giving lectures and master classes and performing from San Diego to Rome to the Orient. On a fine double manual instrument based on an original 18<sup>th</sup> century Ruckers model (Marc Ducornet, Paris 2010) she gives accounts of J. S. Bach's Goldberg Variations that are as scintillating as they are precise.

As you may know, Bach wrote the Goldberg Variations for one Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, a musician in the service of a diplomat who suffered from chronic insomnia, with the idea that these engaging pieces for harpsichord, played by Goldberg in an adjacent room, would afford his patron relief during his sleepless hours. The idea was a good one. People imagine that a person experiencing insomnia would require a pleasant smarm of soft, soporific music to sooth him, but actually the very

principal vocalists are soprano Kiera Duffy and mezzo-soprano Meg Bragle, whose eloquent voices are heard, respectively, in the arias "Let all the winged race with joy" and "Eternal source of light divine." Prefaced by the solemn processional "God save the King! Long live the King!" from the anthem Zadok the Priest, it sets the tone for a program that might have been titled "Music that Royals Simply Groove on."

Further evidence of this theme is Handel's setting of the Latin Vesper *Dixit Dominus*, a virtuosic showpiece for choir based on the Latin text of Psalm 110, whose opening verse may be translated "The Lord said unto my lord: sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." Buttressed by the verse "Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchisidech," it was a *locus classicus* for the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, to which Queen Anne would certainly have subscribed.

Apollo's Singers, who come across rather stridently in the opening verse of Zadok the Priest with its demands for stretched tessituras, redeem themselves handsomely in the final item on the program, Handel's grand and glorious double chorus from the oratorio *Israel in Egypt*, which concludes with the powerful sentence "The horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea." That refers, of course to the destruction of Pharaoh's host in the Red Sea as they pursued the Israelites. (Come to think of it, that was a notably *bad* day for the royals.)



Bach: Sonatas & Partitas, BWV 1001-1006  
Cecylia Arzewski, violin  
Bridge Records

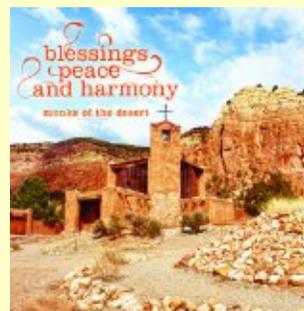
These are J. S. Bach's masterworks for unaccompanied solo violin, and Cecylia Arzewski plays them with as much authority as you are ever likely to hear them. The basic problem to be overcome in each one of these six works is the fact that the violin, essentially a melody instrument, must at all times create and sustain two or more independent polyphonic lines of musical discourse. More than that, it must be done cleanly, with no fuzziness or uncertainty in phrasing or articulation, so that the purpose of the music is evident at every point. Arzewski does this with such single-minded clarity that even the listener who may not have the technical grasp of a musical scholar will have an instinctive sense of the issues at stake. Therein lies the secret of Ms. Arzewski's achievement.

opposite is true. The insomniac mind needs stimulation, it needs a workout.

And the Goldbergs were just what the doctor ordered! They consist of an Aria, a well-supported melody with 30 variations. The latter occur in groups of three, with the third being an imposing canon in which the melody in one hand is imitated by the other in a succession of ever-increasing intervals, from a canon in unison (Var. 3) to a canon at the ninth (Var. 27), thus increasing the listener's interest as the game progresses.

Ohnishi shows herself in complete sympathy with Bach's artistic purpose in these variations, conveying emotion as well as humor, sometimes delicately etched and at other times broad, as in the *quodlibet* (Var. 30). This is a deliberately incongruous medley of two German lyrics, one a sentimental love song, the other the sort of thing any tavern habitué of Bach's day would have recognized.

Of particular interest is Ohnishi's superbly accomplished way with the variations in the second position in each group of three (5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, 26, and 29). Baroque scholar Ralph Kirkpatrick has termed them "arabesques." Performing them requires dazzling feats of prestidigitation, with much hand-crossing and considerable freedom and flexibility of arms, hands, and fingers. That Ohnishi applies the dazzle in each instance without detracting from the deeper musical values beneath is no mean accomplishment. Just listen to the authority with which she invests the stunning French Overture in dotted rhythms (Var. 16), or the way she encompasses the wide interval leaps in Var. 5 and the seeming suspension in time and space of the three voices at the conclusion of Var. 21, and you will hear a first-rate Bach interpreter at work.



"Blessings, Peace, and Harmony"  
Monks of the Desert  
Sony Classical

In a year that has turned out improbably in more ways than simply musical, we should not have been surprised that this CD featuring the Benedictine monks of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert near Abiquiu, New Mexico should have had such a run on the classical charts. Many non-monastic, even non-religious listeners have found Gregorian chant ideal for relaxation and a feeling of being "centered." Researchers have detected beneficial changes in brain waves among subjects

Other composers such as Westhoff, Pisendel and others whose names are scarcely household words today had previously attempted partitas (suites) for solo violin, but none with the wide harmonic range and the complete exploration of all the instrument's capabilities that Bach invested in these monumental works. Nor do they resonate inside us and touch as many aspects of our human emotions and experiences as do Bach's.

The six works consist of three Sonatas, basically in the Italian style, and six suites of dances, or Partitas, in the French, all treated by Bach with great freedom and individual character. The technical prowess needed to realize these creations speaks for itself. The impeccable double- and triple-stopping that we find so frequently, as in the lively *Tempo di Borea* (that is, in the manner of a French dance, the Bourée) in Partita No. 1, is but one example. Another is the use of *bariolage*, the rapid alternation of the same note on open and stopped strings, such as we find in the Prelude of Partita No. 3. And Bach is continually enhancing the harmony in so many movements throughout the set by introducing third and even fourth voices at key points, as he does in the warmly expressive Andante of Sonata No. 2.

And that's to say nothing of the need to bring out the character and the particular emotional affect in each of the 36 movements throughout the set. None of these are "throw-aways" where technical competence alone will suffice for the performer. Consider the deeply yearning Adagios that begin Sonatas No. 1 and 3, the problematic Allemande in Partita No. 1 with its irregular (and strictly *non-danceable*) rhythms that take us a long way from the secure world of that highly sociable old German dance, or the delicious humor injected into the *Loure* of Partita No. 3 by the bagpipes-like drone in the bass. Arzewski encompasses all this, and much more, without detracting in the least from Bach's polyphonic purpose.

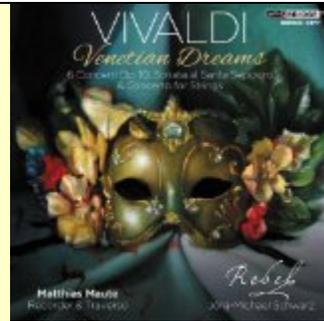
We find the high point of Bach's grand design, and Arzewski's artistry, in the famous *Chaconne*, a series of 64 variations on a ground bass line, in Partita No. 2. Here the intense drama, leading up to the climactic moment when the tonality shifts from the minor to the major, can be felt in no uncertain terms, even by the most naïve listener, as the emotional and structural highpoint of the music. Nowhere in music is architectural form and intense spiritual beauty more closely aligned than here, and Arzewski brings it off to perfection.

exposed to its influence. The monks themselves embrace it after a long work day because, in the words of their superior, Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB, "the kind of singing that we do calms the spirit and helps us live in peace with our world and with one another."

In his booklet notes, the Abbot explains that the monks are not chosen for exceptional vocal ability. Quite the contrary. In this centuries-old vocal tradition, everyone sings, and the stronger voices help to bring the weaker ones into harmony, so that they function together as one body, producing a sound that is "strong, clear, precise, and beautiful," even to the extent of breathing together. As you listen to "Blessings, Peace, and Harmony," you can imagine how such cohesion would take place in a setting such as Christ in the Desert, where the monastery itself seems to be the natural outgrowth of the sun-baked rocky setting.

As an outsider commenting on a vocal tradition best practiced by people living together in a permanent community and sharing common values to a degree we seldom experience in the modern world, I'd like to make a few observations. The 23 selections on the present disc are not intended to encompass the whole course of a liturgical day. Rather, they reflect the variety of Gregorian Chant as an ancient tradition that has come down to the present day essentially unchanged but still subject to subtle influences over time that have kept it vital (it has *not* been "dipped in bronze" for preservation). We have, in essence, two settings of the Mass here. The more cohesive one is designated "Mass III." The other, more widely varied with the inclusion of roles for solo voices, is apparently a compilation, with its sections described as Kyrie IV, Gloria IX, Sanctus IV, and Agnus Dei IV. Four beautiful Marian Antiphons, each appropriate to a different season of the church year, are also included in the program.

Some of the most expressive music on this disc is to be heard in the five Alleluias that conclude the program. One might even detect a certain "folk" influence in some of these selections, which might seem startling for a tradition in which a recent tendency to transcribe chant in a notational style using a five-bar staff, as opposed to the traditional four-bar staff, might be regarded by some as "avant-garde." But the monks take it all in stride, producing a sound that is flexible, harmonious, and down-to-earth, as opposed to floating in some timeless and ethereal sphere. And they keep the music moving right along in a way that reminds us that these are *American* monks, after all!



Vivaldi: "Venetian Drams," including Flute Concertos, Op. 10  
 Matthias Maute, recorder and traverse flute  
 Rebel, directed by Jörg-Michael Schwarz  
 Bridge Records

The New York-based baroque ensemble REBEL (pronounced "reh-Bel") has come out with a Vivaldi program that will probably generate some controversy as well as amazement. That's no surprise, as REBEL has often been an *agent provocateur* in its approach to the music of the baroque era. The present album containing Vivaldi's 6 Recorder Concertos, Op. 10, the Sinfonia *al Santo Sepolcro* in E-flat, RV130, and the Concerto for Strings in G minor, RV157, shows them up to their old proclivities. These are generally hard-driven, gilt-edged performances in which tempi are frequently exaggerated at both ends of the spectrum. The tempi in the Allegro and Presto movements of Op. 10, Nos. 1 and 2, for instance, are very fast indeed, while the Largo molto of the solemn Sinfonia comes across like a slow descent into the holy sepulcher of the title.

On the other hand, Concerto no. 1 is known by the popular nickname "*La Tempesta di Mare*" (Storm at Sea). Given Vivaldi's flair for descriptive music, the breakneck tempi may be justified as a depiction of the fury of the elements. The same approach to the first Presto in Concerto No. 2, *La Notte*" (The Night) may find similar justification because of its subtitle "*Fantasm*" (Ghosts). These malevolent spirits are indeed *very* active, in keeping with the depiction (by REBEL, if not Vivaldi) of a *very* troubled night's sleep, an impression not entirely relieved by the uneasy mood of its Largo movement, "*Il Sonno*" (Sleep). Insomniacs, beware!

That bracing approach to tempi pays further dividends in Concerto No. 3, "*Il Gardellino*" (the Goldfinch), in which soloist Matthias Maute eschews the alto recorder he employs in all but one of the other Opus 6 concerti in favor of a "sixth flute" (that is, a soprano recorder, the descant voice of the family and small enough to fit easily inside one's coat pocket). In the fast outer movements, his virtuosity is positively sensational as he produces the notes as rapidly as is humanly possible. In the Cantabile movement, Maute's soprano recorder shows what it does best, birdsong imitation, as it unfolds a glorious stream of trills and other decorations, recalling the characteristic song of the goldfinch. This enchanting moment, by itself,



Bach: Violin Concertos Nos. 1 & 2  
 Concerto for 2 Violins; Concerto for Violin, Oboe  
 Vesko Eschkenazy, violin  
 Alexei Ogrintchouck, oboe  
 Concertgebouw Chamber Orchestra  
 PentaTone (Hybrid SACD)

These four attractive works have retained their hold on listeners since Johann Sebastian Bach introduced them to the patrons of Zimmermann's Coffee House in Leipzig in 1729, right down through to the present day. And no wonder: they have lots of color, irresistible movement, breathtaking economy, and good melodies that keep coming back at the listener when they are most wanted. All in all, they have held their popularity for almost three centuries, with no chance of abating.

What we don't realize today is something that must have really struck Bach's first audiences: their modernism. We are so used to hearing these works that we think they were the norm, the characteristic style of the Baroque era. Actually, they represented the new Italian sound to Bach's listeners. This was the concerto style of Vivaldi brought over the Alps and transplanted in fruitful German soil. It was based on the principle of the ritornello, by means of which a melody keeps recurring, coming back at the listener in a slightly changed form, sometimes in a different key or passed between soloist and orchestra. In these solo violin concertos, it is important to have an optimal clarity in order to hear these delectable *ritornelli*, so Bach went lighter on the contrapuntal texture than would have been the case in the older, more traditional concerto grosso form, hence their modern sound.

These four solo concertos – including the 2 Violin Concerto in D minor, BWV1043, in which featured soloist Vesko Eschkenazy is joined by the Concertgebouw CO's concert master Tjeerd Top – are so darned attractive that hardly any well-played account can fail to make a favorable impression on the home listener. What gives an edge to these performances, recorded in the Netherlands in May 2012, must surely rest in the stylish flair of soloists Eschkenazy and Ogrintchouck and their close rapport with a string ensemble with which they have been successfully associated for some time. The slow movements of the solo violin concertos in particular are show-stoppers: the handsome Andante of Concerto No. 1 in A minor and the overwhelmingly beautiful Adagio of No. 2 in E major. In the Concert for Oboe and Violin in D minor, Eschkenazy is even upstaged in

is worth the purchase price of the CD.

As for the rest of the program, Maute turns to the *traverso*, or transverse flute, in Concerto No. 4, for the only occasion in the program, because its warm, mellow tone and florid sound stream are better-suited to the simpler, more “modern” idiom of the music. He returns to his alto recorder in Concertos 5 and 6, where its sound is more idiomatically ideal to the key and character of these works. And the afore-mentioned Concerto for Strings is taken by REBEL in a way that emphasizes its zest and breathtaking economy.

certain moments by the seamless, beautifully supported lyricism of Ogrintchouck’s reed. And in the magisterial 2-Violin Concerto, Top makes his presence felt beside Eschkenazy as more than a mere echo of the Russian’s brilliance. It’s all captured with an immediate presence in first-rate DSD sound.



“A Christmas Festival”  
Brass Band of Battle Creek  
MSR Classics

A swell stocking-stuffer is this hard-to-resist offering from the 31-member Brass Band of Battle Creek (MI). They give us a rousing program of Christmas favorites heard in settings that are sometimes reverent and well-behaved and sometimes decidedly *not*. Steeped in the British brass band tradition of large ensembles of strictly brass and percussion instruments, there is a lot of scope and flexibility in these virtuosic arrangements, especially those based on pops favorites such as “Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, with its heady mix of salsa, swing, and trombone solo. Ditto “Frosty the Snowman,” in an arrangement by BBBC bass trombonist Mark Frost that features his patented “cannon shots” in the instrument’s lowest register. “Motown Jingle Bells” is virtually indescribable in its outrageously stylistic mixture that pays eloquent homage to the Motown tradition.

Side by side with the low-down hoe-down element, we have more or less traditionally conceived brass band settings of the sublime Christmas favorites. There is: the chorus “For unto us a Child is born” from Handel’s Messiah, “Angels from the Realms of Glory” with its splendid build-up to a (*well*) “glorious” finish, a stirring “March of the Toys” from Victor Herbert’s *Babes in Toyland*, and a setting of the “Ukrainian Bell Carol” with its swirling miasma of polyphonic sounds. My favorite of the whole program happens to be “O, Holy Night,” featuring a solo on the euphonium by Steven Mead that is both mellow and poignant in its replication of the human voice. The program concludes with yet another exercise in musical hi-jinks in the form of Leroy Anderson’s ever-popular medley of pops and carols, “A Christmas Festival.”