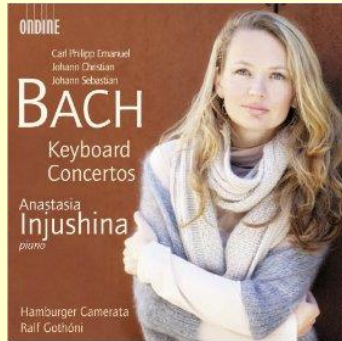


## Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

April, 2013



### J.S., J.C., C.P.E. Bach Piano Concerti Anastasia Injushina, pianist Ondine

Finnish pianist Anastasia Injushina gives us an intriguing program of works by three members of the Bach family who were instrumental in the birth of the modern piano concerto. In the process, her style, flair, and unflinching feeling for rhythms and textures guarantees our listening experience will be more than just a museum lecture in musical history, as she makes a lasting impression with her solid musicianship. Her rapport with Ralf Gothoni and the Hamburg Camerata is noticeable and immediate.

I don't know what keyboard model Injushina employs, but it would appear to be a modern piano with a light, fast action rather than a replica of a period fortepiano. That is important for the quarter-note triplets and chains of triplets in quickly flowing passagework that we find in the Concerto in D major, Wq 43 by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. In addition to her supple technique, Injushina is always aware of the gloomy and joyous nuances in mood that made C.P.E. Bach the foremost exponent of the subjective emotional style that was known in his day as *Empfindsamkeit*, a forerunner of romanticism.

In the two Concertos in D major and E-flat major from Opus 7 by Johann Christian Bach, youngest son of Johann Sebastian, Injushina presents the composer as more than just a "poor man's" Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, though "the London Bach," as he was called, clearly influenced the young Mozart's piano concerto style in his use of dynamics (something a harpsichord simply couldn't do). He cast the piano as a distinct voice in interaction with the orchestra and included optional parts for woodwinds, all of which made the genre bright-sounding and expansive. The present performances are in complete sympathy with the *cantabile* element in J.C. Bach's style, such as we find in the gracious Andante of the E-flat Concerto, an influence of Italian opera that he passed on to the young Mozart.

Finally, we get to (literally) the Daddy of Them All,



### Dvořák: "Cypresses," String Quartet No. 13 Cypress String Quartet Avie Records

As you might have guessed from the number of times I've covered this fine string quartet in Phil's Classical Reviews, I'm rather fond of them. They are, by name, Cecily Ward and Tom Stone, violins; Ethan Filner, viola; and Jennifer Kloetzel, cello. Graduates of famous conservatories in England and America, the Cypress String Quartet are home-based in San Francisco. They are such an easy foursome to get to know and love that my own (admittedly idiosyncratic) pet name for them is "the Anglo-American Grille," after the friendly eating place that Charles Laughton, as the title character, opened up in a wild west town in the classic Hollywood comedy of 1938, *Ruggles of Red Gap*.

That immediate appeal, as so often in the arts, is the result of deliberate, hard work. To quote from their own website, "during its initial rehearsals the group created a signature sound through intense readings of J.S. Bach's Chorales. Built up from the bottom register of the quartet and layered like a pyramid, the resulting sound is clear and transparent, allowing the texture of the music to be discerned immediately" ([www.cypressquartet.com](http://www.cypressquartet.com)).

We hear that clarity early in the opening movement of String Quartet No. 13 in G major, Op. 106, in the way the cello leads the other strings into the recap of the second theme. In the slow movement, *Adagio ma non troppo*, the perfect phrasing and intonation of the players brings out the inner voices in Dvořák's writing with the greatest clarity and expressive beauty. Features such as the long-drawn sigh in all the strings at its very opening have led some observers to see this movement as a backward look by Dvořák, from the security of his home in Bohemia, to the African-American spirituals that he heard in the New World. In the scherzo, *Molto vivace*, the Cypresses step out smartly in a *Skočná*, a Czech dance in quick 2/4 time that conveys a feeling of joyous exuberance. The finale is in the form of a *Dumka*, in a

Johann Sebastian Bach, represented by his very attractive Concerto in E major, BWV 1053. Two of the three movements are derived from music originally found in Bach's sacred cantatas. The upward-surgingly character of themes in the opening movement and the Allegro finale, reflecting the composer's ferocious Christian optimism, are a dead give-away as to their origin. In the slow movement, a lilting *Siciliano*, Injushina makes much of the warm glow that suffuses the music.



Brahms + Debussy: String Quartets  
Ceruti String Quartet  
MSR Classics

The fine young Ceruti String Quartet, an upcoming voice in the world of chamber music, have come out with a great calling card in the pairing of Brahms' Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1 and Debussy's Quartet in G minor, Op. 10. Consisting of Timothy Shiu and Soh-Hyun Park Altino, violins; Lenny Schranze, viola; and Leonardo Altino, cello, they give splendid accounts of themselves in works that could not be more dissimilar in texture, harmony, mood, and style. Both quartets marked an important stage in their respective composer's careers.

In this performance, the Brahms reveals itself to be remarkably cohesive in tone and organic development. Sometimes described as "terse" and "tragic," adjectives that are no doubt very subjective, it does have an underlying eighth-note motion and dotted rhythmic pulse in the opening movement that, repeated in the finale, gives the work a great deal of unity. The outer movements are also often described as "orchestrally inclined," a judgment that does not take into account the sophisticated participation of the individual players that we hear in the present recording. The lovely Romanze is more relaxed, with just the right touch in a series of gentle sighs to lend an air of resignation. But the third movement is my favorite. An *Allegretto* in duple time rather than the expected scherzo in triple time, it emphasizes the unity of mood that prevails in this work. The whimsically flowing dance that passes for the "trio" in this movement casts a nonchalant, seemingly artless charm in the present performance

As good as the Ceruti's Brahms is, I liked their Debussy even better. They are keenly in tune with the sensuality, sometimes slow and shimmering and at other times more animated, that make this epochal quartet the musical

typical slow-fast pattern where the brief opening section, a melancholy *Andante sostenuto*, is followed by a pulse-quickening *Allegro con fuoco* in fast 2/4 time which the present performers invest with a great deal of spirit.

Earlier in the program, we are treated to the utterly charming *Cypresses*, Dvořák's setting of his cycle of love songs by that title. Since the Cypress Quartet are the namesake of this work, they put a little extra into their exploration of the various moods of longing, nostalgia, and sadness for unrequited love which inform these beautiful miniatures that had personal significance for their composer.



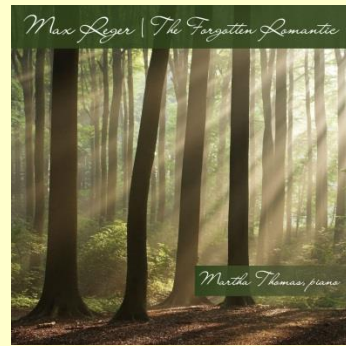
Bach: St. John Passion  
John Butt, The Dunedin Consort  
Linn records

John Butt and the Edinburgh-based Dunedin Consort are in fine form here – as well they should be, following their earlier critically-acclaimed recordings of such choral masterworks as Handel's *Messiah* (2006) and Bach's *Matthew Passion* (2008) and *Mass in B Minor* (2010). This latest effort for Linn features three of the soloists from the earlier *Matthew Passion* – Nicholas Mulroy (T), Matthew Brook (B), and Claire Wilkinson (A), whose lovely presence, along with that of Joanne Lunn (S), graces the arias. But there is a difference in the *John Passion* (*Johannes-Passion* in German), and it informs every aspect of organist/director John Butt's painstakingly researched interpretation.

The object has been to reproduce as nearly as possible the experience that Bach's congregation in Leipzig had when he unveiled this *Passion* on Good Friday, 1724. As opposed to the lush scoring and more substantial vocal forces usually employed in recordings of the more-famous *Matthew Passion*, the personnel are here restricted to an SATB *Passion* Choir, one voice to a part, and a Congregational Choir that is heard in the chorales and liturgical responses. The idea is to present the *Passion* as an essential part of the Vesper Liturgy for Easter. Butt, in his annotation, writes: "The components of the liturgy provide a very interesting window into the context in which Bach was working when he composed his *Passions*. These had to be designed in two parts to surround the sermon - arguably the most important part of any Lutheran liturgy - since it was here that the pastor sought to bring Scripture to life and persuade the

experience that it is. From the very opening of the performance, we come under the spell of its shifting, impressionistic harmonies (Is it modal or tonal, G minor or G Phrygian?). Under the influence of the Impressionist painters, the cyclic form of Cesar Franck that gives it unity, and the percussive sound of the Javanese Gamelan (noticeable in the sensational pizzicati in the second movement, marked *Assez vif et bien rythmé* (rather lively and highly rhythmic), the quartet casts an ineffable spell over the listener.

That is most pronounced in the incredibly beautiful sensuality of the slow movement, an Andantino that is marked *doucement expressif* (softly expressive), a marking that the Ceruti quartet take to heart. A work of high imagination, the quartet ends in a mood of passionate excitement which the Ceruti build very carefully in accord with Debussy's marking *En animant peu à peu* (becoming increasingly animated by degrees).



“Max Reger: The Forgotten Romantic”  
Martha Thomas, piano  
aca Digital

It's a funny thing, but I never realized how delightful these performances by Martha Thomas of piano pieces by Max Reger were when I first auditioned them two years ago. That's because I was so preoccupied with doing research and listening to the “rushes” (as they would call them in the movie business) of the then-unreleased 2-CD set for the purpose of booklet notes, that I neglected to be enchanted. That's a serious mistake! When you audition anything, you need to keep in mind how it will sound to the home audiophile, the guy or gal who listens for pleasure. What I missed then was clear to me when the finished product arrived in the mail.

A word about the album title. Martha Thomas, who grew up in Austin, Texas and studied under some outstanding pianists, including Leon Fleischer and John Perry, has applied a major portion of her energy as performing artist, teacher and lecturer to “Max Reger: The Forgotten Romantic.” If her one-woman crusade doesn't succeed in making Reger a household word, it has at least made friends for him in her many recitals and master classes at universities across the land.

Wisely, she has chosen Reger's more accessible side, namely his character pieces rather than his heavily

congregation of the priceless value of Jesus's sacrifice.”

Towards that end, Butt's present reconstruction employs an organ chorale by Bach, “*Da Jesus an dem Kreuze Stund*” (When Jesus hung upon the Cross), a congregational chorale on the same subject, and a chorale prelude by Buxtehude, before we hear the first notes of the chorus that we usually hear at the very opening in other performances. We have the same procedure of organ chorale – congregational chorale – organ chorale at the beginning of Part II. An appropriate sermon and intercession, the only spoken parts of the performance, would have preceded Part II. (They are not included as tracks on the present 2-Hybrid SACD set, but are available as free downloads on the Linn website).

All of the above contribute to the overall design of the Passion and the style and mood of this particular performance. It is honest, direct, and very serious, clearly focused on the Trial and the Scourging of Jesus as the dramatic center of the story. That's as it should be, since the emphasis in the Gospel according to John is focused on the dramatic moment when Pilate, obviously shaken, takes Jesus aside and asks him “Who are You?” and is met with the shocking reply “My kingdom is not of this world.” The rendering by the Dunedin Consort brings out the stark conflict in the Gospel story, thanks in large part to the honest, no-nonsense tone of tenor Nicholas Mulroy as Evangelist and the eloquent expressiveness of bass Matthew Brook as Jesus.



Schumann + Brahms: Piano works  
Imogen Cooper, piano  
Chandos

Seldom have I had as much difficulty starting a music review. The problem was not in Imogen Cooper's artistry at the keyboard. That was never in question. Her technique, long demonstrated in Schubert and Mozart recordings, serves her well in this Schumann / Brahms program, too, especially her nice sense of touch on the keys, her keen sense of rhythm and pacing, and her perfect understanding of mood and nuance in music where these qualities are essential.

The problem lay in the complexities of the music itself. “Tangled Dreams” (*Traumes Wirren*), the title of the next to last of Robert Schumann's *Fantasiestücke* (Fantasy Pieces), Op. 12, might serve to epitomize the situation as



contrapuntal major works in abstract forms such as his Fantasies & Fugues on Themes by Hiller and Mozart. Not only are his shorter pieces more accessible to the average listener, but they also contain his innovative traits as a composer in a form that may be easier to hear and comprehend in a work of 1-5 minutes.

The works included here comprise five collections for piano: *Silhouetten* (Silhouettes), Op. 53; *Zehn Kleine Vortragsstücke* (Ten Little Performance Pieces), Op. 44; *Sechs Intermezzi* (Six Intermezzos), Op. 45; *Blätter und Blüten* (Leaves and Flowers), and *Sechs Klavierstücke* (Six Piano Pieces). The two last-named collections were probably intended for amateurs and as teaching pieces for students, respectively (with the caution that the latter are suited to the late intermediate or advanced student).

Op. 53, 44 and 45, on the other hand, were written for performance by professionals as concert showpieces. The seven Silhouettes, beginning and ending in Reger's best burlesque vein, and with tributes to Brahms, Grieg, Liszt, Chopin, and Schuman in Nos. 2 thru 6, make considerable technical demands of the pianist. In No. 3, for instance, the expressive melody is doubled in the top and bottom voices and is written exclusively in the treble clef, resulting in a shimmering palette of sound. In "Musical Moment," No. 5 of the *Vortragsstücke*, Reger creates great expressive beauty by his dynamic shadings, colorful harmonies, and irregular phrase lengths. Thomas does a great job bringing out these features and much else besides.

That doesn't mean that the more modestly conceived pieces lack points of keen interest, not by any means! Reger doesn't slight the student or the home enthusiast for lack of such interesting features as the chromatically dense passages in the Elegie in which pulsations in 6/12 are in conflict with 3/8 figurations, the harmonically expressive beauty of Moment Musical No. 1, and the brilliantly contrapuntal Gigue, all in *Blätter und Blüten*, or the nicely shaded expressiveness and the penchant for polyphony that informs the *Sechs Klavierstücke*. In these pieces, as throughout the program, Thomas' nicely modulated, secure tone and her mastery of rhythmic and textural complexities, to say nothing of occasional passing notes that give the illusion of floating harmonic instability, all serve her performances very well. But, technical complexity aside, the pleasure principle comes first, and here Thomas doesn't disappoint us..

\*\*\*\*\*

**Note:** Tommy Joe Anderson, founder of aca Digital Recording, informs us that "Max Reger: The Forgotten Romantic" will be released in May. To purchase physical CDs and downloads, visit aca's fine new website [[acadigitalrecording.com](http://acadigitalrecording.com)] which will be finished and up to date by then.

regards Schumann. The elements in this opus, and even more so in the companion work Kreisleriana, Op. 16, are so diverse and seemingly jumbled it is hard to see the coherence in them, no matter how skilled the interpreter. That presents a difficulty for the reviewer in search of a topic sentence (after which, a typical review pretty much writes itself). Many observers just fall back on the Old Reliable as an explanation: namely that Schumann suffered from bi-polar disorder, formerly known as manic-depression - which is a nice way of saying he was "nuts." But that's a cop-out; it simply won't do.

The unifying connections are easier to trace, or at least divine, in *Fantasiestücke*, despite the fact that these 8 pieces need not be treated as a cycle and are, in fact, often performed individually as choice encores. As they are presented here, the various pieces often follow without a break, as in the sequence Aufschwung (Soaring) - *Warum* (Why?) - *Grillen* (Whims). In *Des Abends* (Evening) one can almost visualize the softly gathering dusk in Cooper's sensitive playing, while in *Fabel* (Fable) and the afore-mentioned *Traum des Wirren*, the trick is to encompass the breathtakingly quick changes in tempo and mood, typically requiring quick, smooth adjustments in hand position. Another unifying influence is the frequent use of open pedal, creating the blurred backdrop in front of which the musical image in a given piece may emerge with greater clarity.

Kreisleriana has always been, for me, the more problematical work. As emotionally varied and full of sudden changes as *Fantasiestücke*, its 8 pieces, termed "fantasies" (*fantasien*) by the composer, do not seem to have the same coherence as a cycle. They are also innocent of descriptive titles which might have served as signposts for the listener. Maybe that's just as well, since we can all make up our own minds about the experience being described. No. 2, for example, the longest of the fantasies at 10 minutes plus, with no fewer than nine expressively marked sections, has a novella-like breadth that would suggest a love story; indeed, the ravishingly beautiful theme we hear at the beginning would seem to give it away. The last, marked *Schnell und spielend* (fast and playful) will be the favorite of many listeners; Schumann used it again for the finale of his "Spring" Symphony. While I don't pretend to "get" Kreisleriana just yet, Cooper's performance, the best I've heard of this particular work, takes me a long way towards that end.

Sandwiched between these two Schumann masterworks is Brahms' 10-minute piano arrangement of the Andante in the form of variations from String Sextet No. 1, Op. 18. Apart from Cooper's artistry, I was struck, upon hearing it for the first time, by its resemblance, in terms of layout and similarity of theme, to another famous set of variations, Arcangelo Corelli's "La Follia." I have yet to read any scholarly commentary on the matter, but the similarity seems striking to my untutored ear.



Steven Stryk: A Retrospective: Volume 5. W.A. Mozart: Concerto in G, K. 216; Adagio in E Major, K 261; Quintet in G Minor, K 516; Sinfonia Concertante in E flat, K 364; Steven Stryk, violin; Oskar Shumsky, viola; The Mainly Mozart Orchestra, David Miller, conductor Centaur Records

My review copy of this all-Mozart program, Vol. 5 in the ongoing Steven Stryk Retrospective, came with a diagonal crack across the front of the jewel case. I'd like to think that the fissure resulted from the sheer intensity of the violin playing on the enclosed CD, rather than from the usual hazards of manufacture and shipping. Because, really, this is some of the most vital Mozart you are likely to hear anywhere.

It all begins with Violin Concerto No. 3 in G major, K216. Curiously, this "performance" by Steven Stryk is really a pastiche of recordings made on three different occasions. As Mr. Stryk was totally involved with the selection of the 30-CD anthology that constitutes the retrospective, it seems likely the decision was his, presumably in the interest of getting to the heart of this brilliantly virtuosic work, even if it meant combining three movements performed on different occasions, each with a different orchestra and venue. The Allegro was recorded in 1971, with Mario Bernardi conducting the National Arts Centre Orchestra of Ottawa; the Adagio was a live performance in London in 1958 with Sir Thomas Beecham and the Royal Philharmonic; and the Rondo was live in New York in 1980 with Alexander Schneider and the orchestra of the Mainly Mozart Festival. To add to the sonic variety (or disparity?), Mr. Stryk used a different violin on each occasion, a Stradivarius and two del Gesu instruments from his own fabulous collection.

These three movements are all performed by the master violinist, with deep insight, feeling, and a bold, "fat" tone that compels our attention. While there is absolutely no nonsense in his approach to the music on all three occasions, Stryk is not deaf to either the pervasive lyricism or the sly humor in Mozart's music. The happy, extroverted conversation between soloist and orchestra in the opening movement scarcely prepares us for one of Mozart's great slow movements. In D major, it modulates into a number of predictable *and* unexpected keys, with a brief excursion into B minor lending a tragic cast to music that is basically warm, intimate and reflective. In the Rondo finale, the violin plays fast, brilliant passages, a chuckling, attention-arresting theme played in quarter notes only, and a brilliant cadenza. This is followed by a coda, at the end of which the music suddenly "disappears" where we expect to hear a pompous closing – a musical joke that must have dumbfounded Mozart's early audiences. All of which is accomplished here with brilliance and utmost clarity.

That's the good part. The bad is that the sonic ambience varies between the three movements to the extent that it would have been impossible to preserve the illusion of a "single" performance, even if such had been desired. Moreover, the Adagio track contains a lot of extraneous noise and "audience participation," giving the impression that it must have been moving day at Festival Hall, and that an outbreak of flu must have been raging in London. It is a measure of Stryk's bold, full tone and utter concentration that he rose above all distractions on this occasion.

There follow an Adagio in E, K261 and a Rondo in C, K373, both of which were written as substitute movements for the Italian violinist Antonio Brunetti, who is known to have complained that Mozart's original Adagio to Concerto No. 3 was "too artificial" (i.e., it had too much creative imagination), an odd claim for a concerto. Stryk plays it in a way that emphasizes its flowing, songlike quality. Resignation and inconsolable sorrow mark the Adagio beginning of the finale of the String Quintet in G minor, K516, in which Stryk is joined by Jaime Weisenblum, 2<sup>nd</sup> violin; Rivka Golani-Erdesz and John Mair, violas; and Peter Schenkman, cello, in moments of exalted music-making. The contrast between the darkness of the cavatina-like slow introduction and the ebullient G major Allegro that follows it is both stunning and perfectly natural sounding in this performance.

The CD concludes with the Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Viola in E-flat major, K364, in which Stryk is joined in the spotlight by his longtime friend and mentor Oskar Shumsky in a 1981 live performance with the Mainly Mozart Orchestra under David Miller. Shumsky, a name that has by now been virtually forgotten by the public, was unique in being equally adept on both violin and viola. Here, he opts for the sharper *scordatura* tuning that gives his viola greater brilliance and penetrating power in dialogue with the soaring sound of Stryk's Stradivarius. In a work that is extraordinarily rich sounding and imaginative, even by Mozart's standard, the results of this collaboration of two great artists is as optimal as we are likely to ever hear it. The Andante, combining profound beauty and immense sadness, reaches depths where beauty is so keenly felt and perfectly expressed that it becomes painful.