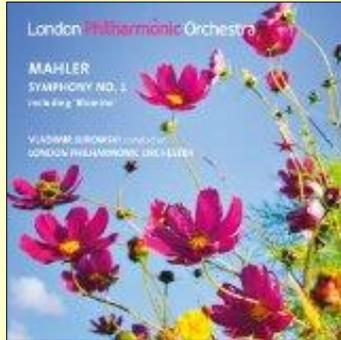


Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

"Classics We All Know and Love"

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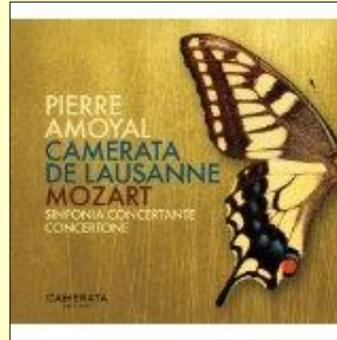


Mahler: Symphony No. 1
Including "Blumine" Movement
Vladimir Jurowski, London Philharmonic
LPO

The London Philharmonic Orchestra's self-produced label has never shown to better advantage than in this latest release of Mahler's First Symphony under the baton of Vladimir Jurowski. Recorded at the Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall, it has all the virtues of a live recording, including an attractive spontaneity that is hard to replicate in a recording studio, and none of its drawbacks such as undesirable audience noise. Even in a very fast field of competitive versions of this, Mahler's most-recorded symphony, the beauty of this account by the LPO commends itself.

This recording features the composer's deleted *Blumine* (Flowers) movement in its original second position. Jurowski justifies its inclusion on the grounds that it falls into the pattern in the early symphonies 1-3 in that an intermezzo comes between the opening movement and a robust scherzo, thus providing a meaningful link with these works. That is a matter of debate, as the dreamily beautiful *Blumine* goes nowhere in particular and actually replicates the pianissimo mood of a world slowly coming to life in the earliest light of dawn that we've already been given early in the opening movement. Following it with the scherzo movement amounts to a rude shock. Still, Jurowski's interpretation makes the best argument I've heard for its inclusion, and at any rate you can always use your music system's remote to bypass it if you wish.

The other thing you notice in Jurowski's account of this work is his absolute fidelity to Mahler's very expressive tempo markings, even at the expense of making the performance marginally slower than most. At around 44 minutes playing time (excluding *Blumine*) it is still "within the ballpark" and, to my mind, pays dividends when the conductor and orchestra slow down to focus on the exquisite loveliness of Mahler's softly lyrical moments. These are, surprisingly, quite a few, even if you don't



Mozart: Sinfonia Concertante in E-flat, K364
Concertone in C major, K190
Pierre Amoyal, Camerata de Lausanne
Warner Classics

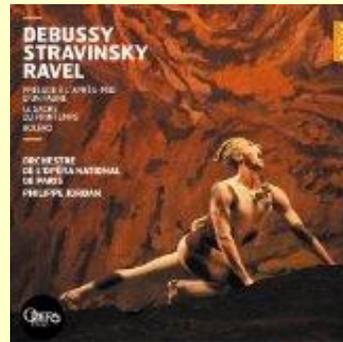
This and the concurrent Tchaikovsky release by violinist Pierre Amoyal and the Camerata de Lausanne are all new recordings, and not reissues or live transcriptions. They were made in a famous venue, the Salle de musique, La Chaux de Fonds, Switzerland. The Mozart was recorded in April, 2012 and the Tchaikovsky the following month. Not only is the sound optimal, but the performances are a salve for a jaded reviewer, renewing my faith in the unique beauty of the string orchestra.

Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Viola, justly celebrated as one of his supremely beautiful works, has never sounded lovelier or more compelling than it does here. From the magical moment when the solo violin and viola make their entrance after the introduction by the strings in the opening *Allegro maestoso*, like the morning sunlight dispelling rain and mist, we know we are in for something special, even by Mozart's standard. And we are not disappointed.

The *Andante* movement in C minor continues and deepens the very noticeable love duet between the two instruments that is the most remarkable feature of this work. As Amoyal observes in the note he appends to the booklet annotation, "It is . . . a rare privilege to be able to share such an emotional experience with your life partner," alluding to his wife Yuko Shimizu Amoyal who graces the viola part. Mozart ends the luminous finale, dovetailing soloists and orchestra, with an ascending "Mannheim rocket," rather than the expected crescendo, which was yet another inspired touch.

The Concertone ("grand concert") in C major, K190 was another hybrid form, combining soloists and orchestra in a manner reminiscent of the concerto grosso. Curiously, this work has been eclipsed by K364, though it is hardly inferior in the quality of its writing and its easy-going

count *Blumine*. They include the section in the opening movement in which Mahler quotes the melody of the *Wayfarer* song “*Ging heut Morgen übers Feld*” (I Went This Morning over the Field), so wonderful in its pristine innocence, the Trio section of the Scherzo movement that provides contrast with the jaunty *Ländler* in the outer sections, and the reflective interludes in both slow movement and finale. The symphony concludes here with a maelstrom of symphonic activity followed by the most triumphant finish imaginable.



Debussy / Stravinsky / Ravel
Philippe Jordan, conductor
Orchestre de l'Opéra National de Paris
Naïve Classique

Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. Ravel's *Bolero*. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. We've heard them all before. So how can we justify this compilation by Philippe Jordan and the Orchestre de l'Opéra National de Paris? There are three reasons: history, sound, and style.

History. For the record, only Ravel's *Bolero* was premiered by the Paris Opera Orchestra. But that orchestra has been closely associated with all three masterworks over the past hundred years and has done much to make them cornerstones of modern music. Today it is a very large orchestra even by international standards: 111 personnel are listed in the booklet annotation. Not all, naturally, are present in any single work, but the vast resources allow us to optimally hear the moments in *Afternoon of a Faun* and *Rite of Spring*, in particular, in which chamber-like scoring brings out the character of instruments and instrumental groups.

Sound. Think of the muted horns, strings, and harp at the very opening of Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, creating the impression of a hot, hazy summer afternoon, or the way the Faun's wandering of desire is conveyed to us musically by the way the melodic kernel is passed from flute to oboe to a duo of flutes, changing its character ever so slightly with each exchange. The composer even gives us a bar of total silence at one point, allowing us to savor the musical quality of negative space within a continuous flow of sound.

Rite of Spring uses its large orchestral forces sparingly, relying on the woodwinds, beginning strikingly with the woody call of the bassoon in the opening moments, to

sharing of material among the soloists and with the orchestra. The four soloists – 2 violins, oboe, and cello – are heard taking a swing at the opening exposition, with Amoyal and award-winning Japanese violinist Ami Oike distinguishing themselves in the violin roles and Fulvia Mancini doing the honors on cello. The oboe part, played by Andrey Cholokyan, calls for special commendation, as it contains some of Mozart's most sensually beautiful writing for the instrument.



Tchaikovsky: *Serenade for Strings in C, Op. 48*
Souvenir de Florence in D minor, Op. 70
Pierre Amoyal, Camerata de Lausanne
Warner Classics

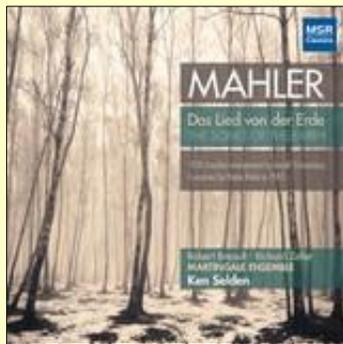
Just when we thought it was safe to take Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings* for granted, along comes Pierre Amoyal and the Camerata de Lausanne to show us we were wrong. The top-notch performance is evident from the very opening *Andante* with its stunning 36-bar introduction that calls for considerable double-stopping in the violins and violas, whereby Tchaikovsky builds up magnificent chord structures. This striking introduction, which appears again in altered form in the coda of the fourth movement to tie the whole work together, is marked unusually "*sempre marcatissimo*," which is an extreme form of *marcato*, indicating that a note or passage thus marked is to be played louder or more forcefully than the surrounding music. Mozart intended his *serenade* as a tribute to Mozart, though its obvious Russian character comes out from the very first.

The *scherzo* movement, a triple-time *Waltz*, is one of the composer's supreme examples of the genre and the most enduringly popular movement with the public. But as Amoyal and his cohorts show us, the center of gravity in this work is obviously its profoundly moving and meditative *Élégie*. The Lausanne players give all they've got to the rousing *Cossack* dance and *fugato* in the finale, a procedure of which Tchaikovsky would certainly have approved.

The companion work on this CD, Tchaikovsky's *String Sextet in D minor*, is popularly known as "*Souvenir of Florence*," though like the *Serenade* it is thoroughly, aristocratically Russian to the tips of its long fingernails. It is usually performed, as here, in the string orchestra version for 13 players rather than as the original chamber

define the precise character of the music, while a vastly expanded percussion section with 5 timpani, bass drum, gong, triangle, tambourine, cymbals, and strings employed percussively is used to heighten the driving motor rhythms and the sensational climaxes. Or consider the cascades of brass and percussion that wash over the listener at the conclusion of Ravel's rhythmically hypnotic Bolero. All three works on the present disc were epoch-making in sonic terms and the present performances really bring this quality out.

Style. The very sensual, and even sexually evocative, nature of the music in each of these works is captured very effectively by Philippe Jordan and the Orchestre de l'Opéra. Time has dimmed their impact in this regard surprisingly little.

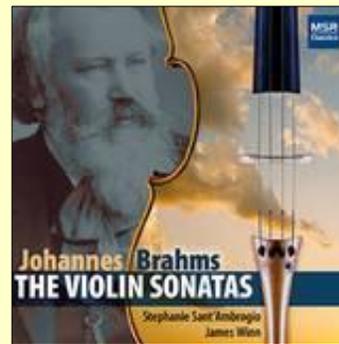


Mahler: Das Lied von der Erde
Ken Selden, Martingale Ensemble
MSR Classics

"*Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod*" (Dark is life, is death) is the refrain we hear at the end of three stanzas in the initial lyric, "Drinking Song of the Earth's Sorrow" of Gustav Mahler's masterpiece *Das Lied von der Erde*. It might serve as a metaphor for the entire song-symphony. Translated The Song of the Earth, this work has a rare cohesion and unity of purpose that surpasses his earlier attempts at combining song and symphonic genres in Symphonies 2, 3, 4 and 8. Premiered only a year and a half before Mahler's death, and having been written during the period when he first perceived unmistakable signs of his own mortality, it meant a lot to Mahler.

On the present offering by Ken Selden and the Martingale Ensemble, composed of energetic young musicians from the Pacific Northwest, we have a very sensitive account of the ethos that informs *Das Lied*. In fact, it is one of the main features of their performance of a work that is unified in terms of theme and mood more than is common in Mahler, whose major works usually impress us by their heterodox combination of elements. An awareness of death and the impermanence of life, love, and beauty informs all the poetic texts from *The Chinese Flute*. This was an anthology by Hans Bethge of German transliterations of Tang Dynasty Chinese poetry, mostly by Li T'ai-po, the best-loved of China's "romantic" poets. A miracle coalesced in this work in which a notably sympathetic string vibrates across the centuries

work. It opens, without introduction, in a withering blaze of frenzied activity that manages to be simultaneously exhilarating and malevolent, building to a fortissimo in the recapitulation. The slow movement, *Andante cantabile*, is true to its name innocently romantic and songlike, with the melody in the violin underscored by a bed of pizzicati in the cellos. In the middle, all the strings swarm together in tight formation like a flight of bees, a really striking effect that will not fail to capture your attention. The scherzo, a lightly textured Allegretto in 2/4 time, and the rousing finale, with its gypsy melodies and vivacious foot-stamping measures, are, like the earlier movements, Russian to the core, and the present performance brings this out to the max.



Brahms: Violin Sonatas 1-3
Stephanie Sant'Ambrogio, violin;
James Winn, piano
MSR Classics

Violinist Stephanie Sant'Ambrogio and pianist James Winn, both celebrated concert artists and faculty members at the University of Nevada, Reno, give one more distinguished account of themselves in Johannes Brahms' three Violin Sonatas plus the early Scherzo in C minor, WoO3. As in their earlier MSR Classics release "Late Dates with Mozart" (MS1305), Sant'Ambrogio cultivates an elegantly seamless, slender tone in the high sustained notes and passages. But she rises to the occasion in the moments of denser chromatic texture and heightened emotion, and Winn keeps the pacing and the numerous changes in tempo well under control.

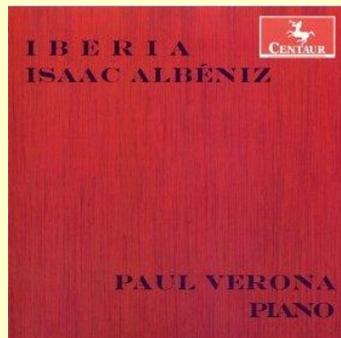
But (no offence to Mozart), there's more to consider here than in their earlier collaboration. The Brahms sonatas are always more than just melody and accompaniment. They are true partnerships in which the instruments frequently exchange roles and take turns leading the music off into different, often unexpected, directions after a development has been completed. As if to emphasize the new equality in the history of the genre, Brahms titled Sonata No. 2 in A, Op. 100 "Sonata for Piano and Violin," though the description fits all three works.

Sant'Ambrogio and Winn are equally well equipped, temperamentally and technically, to handle the lyrical impulse that is so noticeable in all three sonatas. Brahms

from the Tang poets to Mahler.

As the present performances make clear, there is a lot of sadness in life. The things that provide solace for this sadness – beauty, love, the heady impetuosity of youth – are ultimately impermanent and illusory, like the optical illusion in the water of the double image of an arching, moon-shaped bridge and porcelain pavilion in “*Von der Jugend*” (Of Youth) or the hot passionate yearning in a proud maiden’s eyes as he watches her sweetheart galloping away in “*Von der Schönheit*” (Of Beauty). What is the answer, in the face of the transitory nature of things? Should we just retreat, as the poet does (not altogether seriously) in “*Das Trunkene im Frühling*,” asking “What is spring to me? Let me be drunk.” The answer is actually contained in this unpretentious lyric, which hints at the eternally recurring renewal of the earth in “*Der Abschied*” (The Farewell), last and most deeply moving poem in the collection, in which the very earth itself seems a living, breathing creature.

To say that Selden and his cohorts realize these elements better than the majority of those who have undertaken *Das Lied von der Erde* is to give them no more than their due. Their grasp of the nuances in text and score is helped by use of the 1983 completion by German composer Rainer Riehn of Arnold Schoenberg’s 1920 chamber arrangement. In re-scoring for string and wind quintets plus two percussionists, with piano, celeste and harmonium filling in the harmonies, nothing of importance has been lost in the process. In fact, it carries forward Mahler’s own breaking down the symphony orchestra itself into a series of chamber groups. The resulting intimacy goes right to the heart of the matter. The “celestial” tones of the celeste and the reedy quality of the harmonium actually enhance the atmosphere of this work, which goes considerably beyond conventional *chinoiserie* in evoking the spirit of its timeless subject.

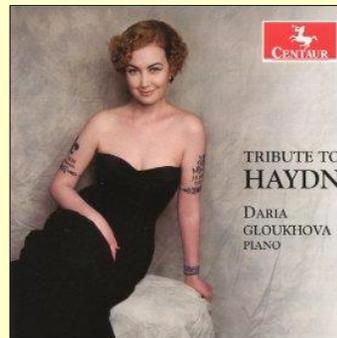


Albeniz: Iberia (complete Books 1-4)
Paul Verona, piano
Centaur Records

American pianist Paul Verona, to judge from his photos on various websites, is long of tooth and grey of hair. He did, in fact, study at both Juilliard and the Manhattan School of Music in the early 1980’s and has been a professional musician for 38 years. I mention these facts only to emphasize the long preparation required before

used the head melodies from some of his most beautiful love songs in the first two. Sonata No. 1 in G major is known as the “Rain” Sonata for its use of the melody from his song *Regenlied* (Rain Song) in all three movements, though the composer also quoted from his *Nachklang* (Remembrance). In No. 2 in A he was even more liberal, quoting from his own *Wie Melodien zieht es mir leise durch den Sinn* (Like melodies it steals softly through my mind), *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer* (Ever gentle were my slumbers) and *Auf dem Kirchhofe* (In the churchyard) as well as Walther’s Prize Song from Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger*, *Morgenlich leuchtend im rosigen Schein* (Morning light streaming in rosy glow), all of these songs filled with evocations of love in its many aspects, including nostalgia. Only in No. 3 in D minor did Brahms *not* borrow a melody from an actual song, though the cavatina for the violin in the Adagio is truly a “song without words.”

Their affinity for the lyricism in all these works gives Sant’Ambrogio and Winn an advantage over most of the competition (and it *is* keen). But their mastery of Brahms’ ever-shifting moods and textures, his use of cyclic form in Sonata No. 1 and his call for the purest cantabile from the violin in the finale of No. 2 require sophisticated artistry of the first order. In No. 3, the technical demands – including a *subito* forte in the piano and bariolage bowing in the violin, plus considerable use of syncopated rhythms and off-beat accents, all in the opening movement – are extreme. Elsewhere, we have sudden modulations and crescendos, double-stopping and quasi-improvised arpeggios in the violin in the slow movement, and then a breakneck symphonic frenzy as the finale hurtles to its conclusion. None of this is for the faint of heart. Sant’Ambrogio and Winn take it all in stride.



“Tribute to Haydn”
Daria Gloukhova, piano
Centaur Records

It’s hard to pass up the opportunity to review anything new by Russian pianist Daria Gloukhova. Since she’s a gal with tattoos on both arms (honoring Hummel and Schumann), I don’t think I’d dare: I might be too scared! But seriously, this artist is a notable risk taker in the interest of musical truth as well as body art. She takes as

one has the temerity to undertake **Iberia**, the final masterpiece of Spanish pianist and composer Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909). For to know Iberia is to know the soul of Spain itself, and that requires years of dedicated study. Given the historical divisions and the regional variety of that country, where the average Spaniard identifies first with his home province and only after that with Spain itself, it is a daunting task for an outsider. It is significant that Paul Verona wrote his dissertation on "The Iberia Suite of Isaac Albéniz" and no coincidence that the present Centaur release is his recording debut. Perfection can't be rushed.

The other factor, also requiring years of preparation, is the daunting virtuosity required to perform this suite of twelve pieces, divided into Books I-IV, in which the degree of difficulty ranges from *very* to *fiendishly* difficult. Albéniz himself once contemplated burning the entire suite as "unplayable" (happily for posterity, he relented). There are many accidentals and exotic notations scattered throughout these scores. The pianist has continually to re-think hand placements, as Albéniz's uncommonly dense writing frequently requires the hands to play over and even through each other.

One sometimes hears Iberia compared with Franz Liszt's Transcendental Etudes in terms of difficulty of execution. The difference, for my money, is that the voluptuously beautiful music of Iberia is much more interesting for the listener than its Lisztian predecessor. The prowess required of the executant, of course, speaks for itself. It includes keeping separate time notations differentiated clearly between the hands. Not only does Albéniz call for alternating 6/8 and 3/4 meters to keep the gentle sway of the Gypsy-influenced serenade *Rondeña* moving ahead gracefully, but in *Almería*, another evocation of his native region of Andalusia, he requires the pianist to alternate meters of 3/4 and 6/8 in the left hand and to maintain a 6/8 in the right, while the *copla*, a song interlude, is written in three staves and marked in a duple meter of 4/4 over two measures of 6/8 in the left hand.

The miracle of Iberia is that, for all the virtuoso technique involved, the music is much more than merely the sum of its pianistic prestidigitation. Technique is always the servant of emotions and evocations of beauty that appeal vividly to the senses. In the afore-mentioned *Almería*, for example, the *copla* expresses the feelings of loneliness and isolation experienced by the miners of that region. Verona sees the music at his point as suffused with regret and resignation. But there are also gentle scintillations of color in the accidental notes. Listening to them, I imagined a wonderfully refreshing sense of beauty striking a miner, after his enforced isolation underground, emerging at night after a long shift to glimpse the incredible beauty of the Andalusian night.

One other notable feature of Verona's playing is that he takes his time in these pieces, allowing their great beauty to sink in with the listener. We are told that a complete performance of Iberia takes about an hour and a half. It is, in fact, possible to record them all on a single 80-

her cue Mozart's famous quotation about his older contemporary and mentor, "There is no-one who can do it all - to joke, to terrify, to evoke laughter and profound sentiment - and all equally well, except Joseph Haydn." And she goes on from there to give us a Haydn recital that is unlike any other pianist's. Blandness and classical restraint have nothing to do with Haydn - not if Gloukhova can help it.

Of all of history's notable composers of piano music, Josef Haydn was the only one who comes to mind that was not a concert-class pianist and had to rely on others to spread his fame in that medium. He was nevertheless not content to write merely great music for the piano, but he also wrote great piano music (if you get what I mean). He stretched the limits of the piano of his day, even as he wrote distinctively beautiful and surprisingly moving music for it.

Says Gloukhova: "Haydn refreshes, charges you with some kind of violent energy." Quite often, he takes you unawares in the midst of a seemingly pleasant passage in which you suddenly discover you have wandered beyond your depth. (As musical scholar Daniel Chua puts it, "If you hear only happiness in Haydn, then the joke is on you.") You can feel these charges of energy in his rhythms and textures, as Gloukhova shows us in the opening movement of Sonata 52, where surging rhythms unexpectedly run counter to the flow of the music.

Temperamentally, Gloukhova is ideally suited to be a Haydn interpreter because she is in tune with the elements of mood, emotion, fluid expression, and spontaneity that one must contend with simultaneously. That's not easy. It requires a lot of hard work to get it right. Haydn was a past master of tempo and rhythm. His fast movements tend to be propulsive, particularly his finales. Those in Sonatas 52, 47 and 46 are either *Presto* or *Prestissimo*, while that of Sonata 12, also heard on the present program, is marked *Vivace*. His Menuets have a pronounced downbeat and can be very brisk, inclining towards true one-to-the-bar scherzos. At the same time, he can also be very tuneful. ("If you want to know whether you have written anything worth preserving," he once observed, "sing it to yourself without any accompaniment.") His slow movements, like the Adagio in 52, to which Gloukhova adds her own Tchaikovskyan "lyrical digression," can be very moving indeed.

Gloukhova's alertness to Haydn's tempi works hand in hand with her mastery of his moods and rhythms in the concluding work on the program, the popular Piano Concerto in D minor. "I completely relied on my own feeling," she admits, "frankly closing my eyes on what has been written in the scores." In many, many places, particularly in the moments when the soloist re-connects with the orchestra at the end of Gloukhova's own cadenzas for each of the three movements, her judgment and instinct are "right on," adding to the palpable excitement of the performance. Her variations in tempo in the opening *Vivace* add increased zest and bring out the lyricism of the gorgeous movement.

minute compact disc, though not without doing the music a great injury. Verona negotiates this work in 109:49, and the beneficial effect of his unhurried expressiveness is felt in many places, not merely in *Fête-dieu à Seville* (Corpus Christi in Seville), in which the progress of the music, like that of the religious procession it evokes, is interrupted by pauses of hushed adoration. Isaac Albéniz died in 1909 when recordings were still in their infancy, and to my knowledge never recorded any of these pieces. I can't help but feel that he would have approved of Verona's approach to them.

For a more insightful evaluation of this artist than I can give you, check out Lynn René Bayley's excellent Fanfare magazine review of Gloukhova's earlier Grieg/Field/ Mendelssohn recital (Centaur 3145). It's also posted on the artist's website at www.gloukhova.com



Beethoven: "Middle" Quartets, Op. 59
Miró String Quartet
Longhorn Music

The Miró Quartet, artists-in-Residence at the University of Texas in Austin, do their academic partners proud in this fine new recording of Beethoven's three Opus 59 String Quartets, crown jewels of the composer's "Middle Period." Consisting of Daniel Ching and William Fedkenheuer, violins; John Largess, viola; and Joshua Gindele, cello, the Miró distinguish themselves by an unusually beautiful blend, a superb sense of pace and timing, and strong individual musicianship. The last-named trait reveals itself not only in flawless part-leading but in the easy way the individual musicians shift gears smoothly between melody and accompaniment without breaking stride.

All these skills are vital to the success of these quartets. No. 1 in F major sets the tone for the entire set with a very long-limbed running melody in the cello over brisk accompaniment by the other strings leading off right away without a slow introduction, and with all the bravura and aplomb of a rodeo rider right out of the chute. The cello melody also establishes the key of F major with its very first cadence, another sign that Beethoven is wasting no time establishing the character of this work, and indeed the whole set. With its long duration (9:41 in this recording) and its delayed recapitulation, this movement establishes the pronounced symphonic character that is another striking feature of Opus 59. The second movement, marked *Allegretto vivace*, is more elaborately structured than any conventional scherzo and trio. The slow movement, a deeply moving *Adagio molto e mesto*, lives up to its expressive marking (*mesto*=sad), and then springs immediately into vibrant life in the *attacca* transition to the robust finale. It is a thrilling, defining moment, and The Miró Quartet pull it off as superbly as I've ever heard it done.

That finale uses, as does the scherzo movement of Quartet No. 2 in E minor, a Russian melody from a collection that was supplied Beethoven by his patron, Prince Razoumovsky, Russian Ambassador to Austria. Some writers view this as Beethoven's condescending to his noble patron, but I don't feel that is the case. Razoumovsky was ahead of his time in recognizing the vitality of Russian folk music when most of his class turned their noses up at it and looked to the west for inspiration. For his part, Beethoven was never inclined to ignore a melody just because it was popular. In both quartets the infusion of the folk genre proves a healthy tonic. In Quartet No. 2, the scherzo follows the slow movement, a *Molto Adagio* that Beethoven marked at rather grandiloquent length *Si tratta questo pezzo con molto di sentimento*, play this piece with great feeling (It seems he didn't entirely trust his fellow musicians to figure it out for themselves.) In this movement, which has been compared to the "*Heiliger Dankgesang*" (Hymn of Thanks to the Divine) in the Late Quartet Op. 132, the Miró Quartet slow things down to accommodate the quiet, steady outflowing of feeling. The performance length (12:05) is entirely warranted in this occasion, as the Miró players suffuse this movement with a softly beautiful glow.

Quartet No. 3 in C major begins with a strange cadence based on a diminished F sharp chord that Beethoven's contemporaries must have assumed was a copyist's error. Then the music seems to wander aimlessly for quite some time before the composer establishes the dominant of C major. Even today, though it's possible for a modern string quartet to take such harmonic venturesomeness in stride, audiences may be disconcerted by this opening. Once again, the Miró Quartet's skill in pacing and their feeling for Beethoven's high-profile rhythms come into play in a rather economically structured quartet. These traits are most evident at the moment when the coda to the exceptionally brisk but gracious Menuetto gives way without a break to a blistering, breathtaking finale.