

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

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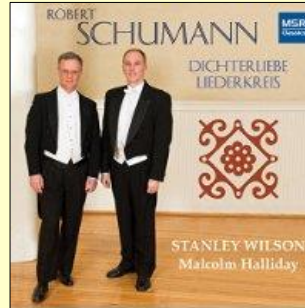


Bartók: Piano Music – Terry Eder, piano (MSR Classics)

Terry Eder, Detroit native, world traveler and piano competition winner, seems to be making a specialty of Hungarian music. If the present release of piano music by Béla Bartók is any indication, she has a real feeling for the sadness, passion, and joy in the soul of that people. Bartók, who was himself a very accomplished pianist and teacher (he numbered among his pupils the great Annie Fischer), would have been proud to acknowledge the tribute Eder pays him in this recital.

Eder shows a keen awareness of the vital rhythms and predominant moods (often subject to volatility) in each of the 45 short pieces in this recital. Her strong left hand allows her to explore the rich, deep bass of the wide-ranging 15 Hungarian Peasant Songs, Sz.71; 8 Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs, Sz.74; and 6 Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm, Sz.107. The Hungarian Peasant Songs are divided into two contrasted sections, entitled “Old Sorrowful Songs” and “Old Dance Tunes.” Eder is good at capturing the spontaneous, improvisatory nature of the songs, many of which are quite melancholy and require lots of rubato, and the generally extroverted character of the dance tunes. A keen ear for harmony is the key to interpreting the 8 Improvisations, which include pentatonic scales and polytonal harmonies, plus a subtle use of counterpoint. The pieces range in mood from sadly contemplative to raucous with an occasional hint of sarcasm, and in texture from hazy mist to full-blooded octaves in both hands.

As the title implies, Rhythm with a capital “R” is the name of the game in the 6 Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm. They involve constantly changing time and pitch intervals and unit groupings that keep Eder’s fingers continually alert. The 2 Romanian Dances, among the most popular of Bartók’s minor works and often heard in transcription for string orchestra, come across as beautifully self-contained miniatures, much as Enescu was to create in his Romanian Rhapsodies. They range in mood from quiet tremolos in the bass to



Schumann: Dichterliebe, Op. 48; Liederkreis, Op. 39 Stanley Wilson, Malcolm Halliday (MSR Classics)

Tenor Stanley Wilson and pianist Malcolm Halliday, two artists with histories of solid New England bedrock in their education and artistic careers, give us another outstanding recital that demonstrates once again that the team is greater than the individual. As with their earlier MSR Classics release “Art Songs of the British Romantics,” Halliday’s piano clarifies and extends the message of the song and the emotions expressed by the vocal line. Wilson’s voice may lack the effortless legato that some German singers have shown us, but he is second to none in his sensitive appraisal of a literary text and in particular the way emotion and meaning are interrelated in Robert Schumann’s lieder.

With Schumann, the art of the *lied* arrived at a state of affairs where the piano could no longer afford to act as mere accompaniment, but had to step forward as a full partner in the enterprise. In *Dichterliebe* (A Poet’s Loves), to texts of Heinrich Heine, the pain of unfulfilled love and yearning for an absent beloved are almost tangible to the listener. The poet’s hypersensitive emotions are realized by deft use of chromaticism and suspensions, sometimes by repeating a line or phrase to make the cadence come out right. In a number of songs, the emotion is so great or so mixed, that the piano extends the thought for some measures past the end of the vocal text. In “*Wenn ich in deine Augen seh*” (When I look into your eyes), the poet is stymied by the pain and confusion he experiences: “When you say *I love you*, I weep bitterly.” In “*Die alten, bösen Lieder*” (The old, evil songs), this reaches an extreme when the piano plays a postlude almost as long as the song itself, as if to emphasize the gargantuan task the poet envisions: to bury all his love-griefs and sufferings in a vast coffin and sink it forever in the Rhine!

Eichendorff is the more reserved of Schumann’s poets. Thus, the messages of longed-for and frustrated love in *Liederkreis* are more apt to be expressed in symbolic terms. In *Mondnacht* (Moonlit Night), the sky and earth, primeval symbols of male and female, meet

an increasingly frenzied crescendo in Dance No. 1, while humor and severity are at odds in No. 2, a scherzo-like dance whose volatility defies easy classification.

The 14 Bagatelles, Sz.38 are so intriguing in their variety of mood and treatment that they easily give the lie to their name, which signifies an easily-dismissed trifle. On the contrary, they reminded me of Chopin's Preludes in that they are truly the "beginnings" of larger matters that often end tantalizingly on the edge of fuller exploration and discovery. In their unusual chords and harmonies and occasional evocations of "night moods," especially as Eder presents them, these pieces give us a clear impression of how Bartók, the newest of the world's great composers, would soon develop.



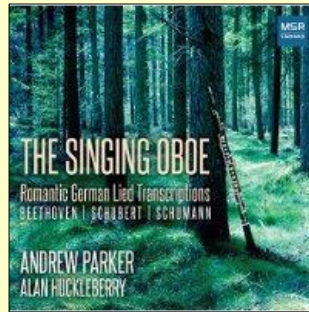
"Simca Heled Live II," Music by Schubert, Boccherini, Couperin, Ailenberg, Stravinsky (Centaur)

I've admired the work of Israeli cellist Simca Heled for some years, both individually and as a longtime member, along with violinist Uri Pianka and pianist Jonathan Zak, of the Yuval Trio. From these musicians I've come to expect a high degree of artistic integrity and commitment to the sheer beauty of the music they play. The present release, "Simca Heled Live II," was no exception.

The program begins with Franz Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata in A minor, in a fine transcription for cello and string orchestra by Zeev Steinberg. Schubert wrote this sonata as a display-piece for the arpeggione, a curious cross between guitar and viola da gamba that a friend of his had created. (You might think of it as a bowed guitar!) In any event, it soon became obsolete, as listeners failed to warm to its shrill nasal tone. It is usually heard today, as here, in transcription. Simca Heled invests more feeling in the opening Allegro than I have ever heard before, including a sense of mystery that is very engaging. The Adagio is quite lovely, even by Schubert's standard. And the Allegretto finale has a dash and a flair that allow Heled's playing to stand out against a backdrop provided by Mendi Rodan and the Israel Sinfonietta.

With the accompaniment of the Israel Philharmonic under Sidney Harth, Heled's dark, beautiful tone shines forth in the Adagio from Luigi Boccherini's noble Cello Concerto in B-flat major. In 18th century French

and share a tender kiss. In "*Waldesgespräch*" (Conversation in a Wood), we have a fully-realized drama in which all the elements of song, including subtly intense harmonic beauty and a very flexible rhythm, are perfectly brought into play. A chance encounter between an unsuspecting knight-errand and an enchantress whose heart is gnawed by guilt and pain ends tragically: "*Kommst nimmermehr aus diesem Wald*" ('You shall never again leave this forest' – with the fatal word "*nimmermehr*" repeated as in a spell.)



"The singing Oboe," German lieder transcriptions – Andrew Parker, Alan Huckleberry (MSR Classics)

Two American musicians, both recent music faculty members of the University of Iowa, are featured in "The Singing Oboe." They get to the heart, often troubled or burdened by sadness and longing, of the choice examples of German romantic lieder by Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann, heard here in insightful transcriptions. In the process, we come to a closer understanding of this wonderful genre of art-song.

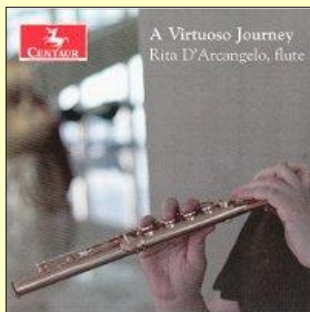
Perhaps the unique timbre of the oboe is basically responsible for this. Andrew Parker's tone is honest, secure, and penetrating, if not particularly soft or euphonious. It suits the mood of many of these songs that deal with a yearning for love that is ultimately frustrated, or of past experiences that can only be relived in poignant memories. Alan Huckleberry is the perfect partner for this recital. Don't say "accompanist," for the piano is often called upon to comment, sometimes ironically, on the aspirations expressed by such a song as Beethoven's "Adelaide," with its haunting repetitions of the distant beloved's name.

We get into the mainstream of romantic love sentiment in the Schubert transcriptions. Broken chords in gently rocking 16th note patterns in the piano underlie the deep melodic beauty of the oboe melody in "*Du bist die Ruh*" (You are peace) with its message of consolation. By contrast, "*Gretchen am Spinnrade*" (Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel) portrays the surging emotion in the heart of Goethe's heroine, with a poignant pause as she is overwhelmed by the memory of Faust's kiss. The whirring of the spinning wheel, realized by restlessly flowing 16th notes in the pianist's right hand, seems to tell us life hurries on, even as Gretchen is imprisoned forever by her memories of the lover who betrayed her. "*Nacht und Träume*" (Night and Dreams)

composer Francois Couperin's Pieces en Concert, arranged for cello and strings by Paul Bazelaire, Heled characterizes five strongly contrasted movements: a sombre Prelude, a lilting but sad Sicilienne, a jaunty hunting-piece, *La Tromba*, with its imitations of the sounds of rustic hunting horns, a tenderly melancholy *Plainte* (lament), and an extremely vigorous *Air de Diable* (*Devil's Tune*) that demands extremely deft placement of accents among its fiendish requirements.

In Leib Ailenberg's "*Lelero*" for solo cello, Heled does a beautiful job with the two contrasted moods in a work inspired by the Chasidim. Here, a rapturous dance and a poignant vocal melody remind us that the composer was, sadly, to perish in Auschwitz in 1944.

Finally, fellow Yuval Trio member Jonathan Zak joins Heled in Suite Italienne, arranged for cello and piano by Gregor Piatigorsky from Igor Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*. This work ushered in the Russian composer's Neo-Classical Period, but with considerably more musical red meat than other specimens of the genre. By not aiming at a smooth blend, Heled and Zak emphasize the quirkiness of Stravinsky's synthesis of baroque *opera buffa* with modernist impudence. The five movements, drawn from the music of the tragically short-lived Neapolitan composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736), include a tender Serenata, an odd little Aria that is more dance than song, a bracing Tarantela that demands extreme virtuosity of both Heled and Zak, and a *Minuetto e Finale* that alternates finely placed accents and high-energy rhythmical measures. In this performance it is easy to see the reasons for Suite Italienne's long-lasting popularity.



"A Virtuoso Journey"
Rita D'Arcangelo, flute
(Centaur)

Italian flutist Rita D'Arcangelo honors us with a scintillating recital of operatic transcriptions and original compositions for solo flute by 19th and early 20th century composers. This young artist has already enjoyed a considerable reputation in competitions, master classes, and the concert halls of Europe and Japan (where she has given 300 concerts). Here, she plays a beautiful instrument expressly made for her by Kanichi Nagahara, with a 14k gold flute headjoint, also by Nagahara, presented as a competition prize.

is a subtler song in which Parker and Huckleberry capture the dreamlike mood and slow pulse in the melody and the deep bass of the accompaniment.

When we get to Schumann's *Dichterliebe*, the mood of the songs is often more difficult to pin down precisely, reflecting the deliberate ambiguities and conflicting emotions in the poetry of Heinrich Heine. In the lyric "*Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome*" the piano, in an epilog, extends the emotion of the poem in which a lover is struck by the resemblance of the image of the Blessed Virgin to the portrait of his beloved. More emotionally conflicted songs tend to occur in the latter half of the collection: witness the unusually spare piano part in widely spaced octaves in "*Ich hab' in Traum geweinet*" (I wept in my dream) which causes us to focus on the oboe's tormented melody. In "*Am leuchtenden Sommermorgen*" (on a sunny summer morning) the quest for peace in the oboe's melody is again undercut by an accompaniment telling of ultimate fruitlessness. That, in turn, reflects the ironic mood of the flowers (they really *do* think and speak in German lieder): "Don't be cruel to our sister, you sad, death-pale man."



"Solo," Music for solo violin by Telemann, Bach, Schubert, Piazzolla – Tomas Cotik (Centaur)

Tomas Cotik, Argentine violinist and teacher who has spent much of his career here in the U.S., lends the ravishing sound of his instrument and his do-or-die daring to a program of challenging works for solo violin by composers Baroque to Modern. The first half is given to the Baroque: three surprisingly little-known Fantasias for solo violin by Telemann and the daunting Sonata No. 3 in C, BWV 1005 by J.S. Bach. For these works, Cotik chose a baroque bow, presumably a curved one in the German style, rather than a modern one, because "[it] helped me avoid wrong accents in this repertoire," and permitted "a lighter sound, quicker, more flowing tempi, and lively articulations."

The backdrop, of which you may be unaware, is the long-standing dispute between advocates of which bow to use. In contrast to the newer Italian technique of holding the bow lightly from above with a curved wrist, the German bow was held with the thumb placed under the bow strings, permitting the violinist to tighten or relax the bowstring tension at will. This relaxed tension allowed the performer to play on two or more strings simultaneously, and to play true chords instead of

No matter how lovely-sounding the instrument, one still has to be able to perform on it. The artistry of Rita D'Arcangelo speaks for itself in her absolutely flawless breath control which is capable of reaching the farthest stretches of her instrument's range without the slightest trace of breathiness or over-blowing, plus the ability to shape the contours of a long, graceful melodic line. These qualities, and others, are absolutely essential when performing the music of the figures on this program, all of who came along at a time when new advances in flute design, particularly the flute with a cylindrical bore by Theobald Böhm (1794-1881), gave it an enlarged tonal range and a fuller sound. The virtuosi were quick to respond.

The program includes works by Germans (Gottlieb Köhler Franz Anton Hoffmeister, Friedrich Kuhlau, Anton Furstenau) and Italians (Saverio Mercadante, Giuseppe Rabboni, Cesare Ciardi, Leonardo de Lorenzo, Giulio Bricciardi). They varied in their embrace of the new flute designs, from Ciardi who was more comfortable with the older flute that had a cylindrical headjoint and small diatonic holes, for which he wrote the elaborate set of variations on a theme from Verdi's *Ernani* that we hear on this CD, to Bricciardi, who added an extra thumb key to the Böhm flute to facilitate playing B_b. In Bricciardi's variations on "Qual Cor Tradist" from Bellini's *Norma*, D'Arcangelo shows fluency plus a keen appreciation of the bel canto qualities in the doomed heroine's aria.

Other highlights of this recital include Mercadante's florid Aria and Variations on the duet "La ci darem la mano" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Hoffmeister's ingenious Variations on Papageno's "Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja" from *The Magic Flute*, complete with its signature panpipe trills. Most difficult of all is Lorenzo's incredibly demanding set of variations on *The Carnival of Venice*, a severe test of breath control, flexibility and stamina (it lasts over 15 minutes). D'Arcangelo meets all its challenges with grace and style.



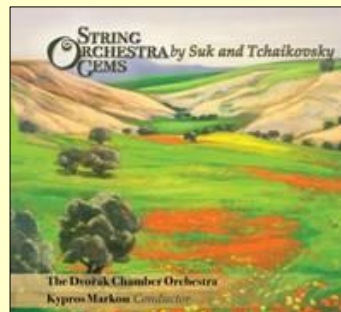
"Baroque Moments," Handel, Vivaldi, Bach – The Amadeus Duo (Naxos)

"Baroque Moments" is another easy album to fall in love with. That's because Canadian guitarist Dale Kavanagh and her German partner Thomas Kirchhoff, known internationally as the Amadeus Guitar Duo, have chosen a delicious menu of choice works by

arpeggios. There's more to it than that, but the idea is that the curved bow could allow for a softer, less aggressive and more mellow sound, appropriate for introspective passages. Nevertheless, Cotik's Telemann fantasias come across as well as they do mostly because of the zestful, improvisatory spirit he infuses into the Vivaldi-like fast movements and his quick alternations between bass and melody lines, rather than from any soft expressiveness.

The Bach C major Sonata is a different matter due to its greater complexity. The opening Adagio was epoch-making in that it introduced a slow stacking up of notes, a technique previously thought to be impossible for the violin. Its technical demands also involve strettis, inversions, and double counterpoint. Cotik is more at home in the exhilarating movements such as the concluding Allegro than he is in the slower, more deliberate ones. In the Fuga, in which he identifies no fewer than seven sections, with four parts that present the subject alternating with three virtuosic episodes, his technique seems a little forced in moments when he sequesters into a new section. And despite the rationale for using a curved bow, the sound he produces is not particularly soft or gracious. For a probing artist such as Cotik, the longer one lives with Bach's Sonatas and Partitas, the more one discovers about them. Do not expect his approach to Bach to be set in cement.

I haven't left room to say much about the four Ländler by Franz Schubert and the seven Tango-Études by Astor Piazzolla that constitute the second half of the program. In Cotik's hands, the ebullient ländler, examples of a gracefully flowing folk dance, are more than just delightful trifles, and the variations Schubert puts them through make them into virtual miniature suites. Piazzolla's Tango-Études capture the darkness, mystery and sensuality of the Argentine Tango in a modernist vein. Of note is the rapid alternation between contrasted registers that the composer uses to create the illusion of two simultaneous melody lines.



"String Orchestra Gems," Serenades by Suk and Tchaikovsky - Kypros Markou, Dvorak Chamber Orchestra (Fleur de Son)

Kypros Markou has been around the block quite a few times for an artist who is just coming to this writer's attention. The Nicosia, Cyprus native studied at the National Conservatory of Greece, the Royal College of

Handel, Vivaldi, and Bach, served up in imaginative transcriptions that reveal the essence of the music. And they've backed it with superb musicianship, cleanly defined to display the contrapuntal mastery of these Baroque masters without seeming in the least pedantic, and with a willingness to accept challenges. Sounds great? *You bet!*

We might've entitled this album "A Tale of Two Chaconnes" from the fact that we have two famous examples of that variation form, those of Handel and Bach. They are nicely characterized and contrasted, too. Handel's Chaconne in G major, HWV 435 consists of 21 highly expressive variations (the one in the minor is particularly lovely in its quiet beauty), reminding us that Handel was an operatic composer even as it recalls the dance origin of the chaconne itself. Bach's Chaconne from the Solo Violin Sonata, BWV 1004 is heard here in an arrangement for two guitars that is based on Ferruccio Busoni's stunning keyboard transcription of the same. Whatever way you encounter it, it's a remarkable work in which intellectual discipline reaches a point where it is indistinguishable from deepest passion, with a quiet episode in the minor that serves as a point of rest and contemplation before pushing on. (As Brahms famously put it, "On one stave, for a small instrument, the man writes a world of the deepest thoughts and most profound feelings.")

And that isn't all. We are also given a scintillating performance of Vivaldi's Concerto in D major, RV 93, originally written as a trio sonata for lute but usually heard on guitar today. Festive and sublime moments compete for our attention, with the Largo (famous as one of Vivaldi's "greatest hits") the most memorable feature.

Bach's Italian Concerto, BWV 971, originally written for harpsichord, brings out the best in the Amadeus Duo as they respond to its immense technical challenges. Though written for solo keyboard, this is a true concerto in terms of its breakdown into solo and *ripieno* roles, which are cleanly executed here. In it, two florid outer movements with Vivaldi-like ritornellos flank an arioso-style Andante that is a real heart-stopper. As an encore, we have Bach's arrangement of what was originally a love song by Hans Leo Hassler, "*Mein Gemüth ist mir verwirret*" (My spirit was all mixed up), which later became the basis for Bach's own Passion Chorale "*O Haupt, voll Blut und Wunden*" (O Sacred Head, Now Wounded). It can be moving in its very simplicity, as it is here.

Music in London, and in the United States at Indiana University and the New England Conservatory, where he earned a graduate degree in orchestral conducting. Since then, he has taught, performed, and conducted in so many schools, orchestras and festivals in Europe and America that I wouldn't have enough space to list them all in this column. The gray-haired veteran has been particularly active conducting college, community and regional orchestras here in the U.S., where he is currently professor at Wayne State University in Detroit and music director of the Dearborn (MI) Symphony.

For all that, he has surprisingly few current CD listings, mostly on obscure labels. In fact, the present release of string orchestra gems on Fleur de Son may afford his best chance to date to be heard by the home listener. To judge from the quality of these finely crafted and affectionately handled performances, recognition is long overdue for this conductor.

This is a very easy CD album to fall in love with. The string serenades by Tchaikovsky and Josef Suk are among the best-known in the literature. In approaching them, Markou draws on his long experience as a violinist and chamber musician. His pacing is superb, as are his choice of tempi, and his deft characterization of both serenades, the Suk firmly rooted in the string orchestra genre and the Tchaikovsky a work that is more on the symphonic scale, especially in the outer movements. Nice details, such as the gentle lift-off at the beginning of the famous Waltz from Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings and the subtle but highly effective use of portamenti in both works that creates a feeling of warmth and gentleness without ever descending to schmalz, will be appreciated by string aficionados.

The Serenade for Strings by Josef Suk (1874-1935) is a sunny work, filled with the spirit of youthful optimism we might expect of one who had just received his first success as a composer and had been buoyed by his recent marriage to Dvorak's daughter. There is not a discord or misplaced note in this sunny work that seems imbued with a love of nature and of gentle summer breezes and sunsets that suggest nostalgia, but not melancholy. The Adagio, like a love song, is simply one of the most beautiful slow movements in all the literature. This work is followed by one of a different character, Suk's Meditation on the Old Czech Chorale "St. Wenceslas," which is imbued with the spirit of Czech nationalism. Accordingly, the ensemble heard here, the Dvorak Chamber Orchestra, give it their best.

Peter Illyich Tchaikovsky composed his noble Elegy in G major for the golden jubilee of a famous actor, a rather odd choice of tribute considering the dark mood of its opening, which gradually lightens in the course of the piece. His Serenade in C major, Op. 48 has truly symphonic-scope heroics in the outer movements, the first with a towering 36-bar theme marked *sempre marcatissimo* that is reprised later at a quicker tempo in the spirited finale. Virtuosoic double-stoppings in the violins and violas add to the excitement. The zestful

sweep of the Waltz explains why it is often heard by itself as a popular piece, while the profoundly moving *Élégie* is the heart of the entire work.

Three German musicians of the present generation give stylish accounts, in close rapport and with an equally close blend, of the three Piano Trios by Johannes Brahms. Christian Tetzlaff, violin; his sister Tanja Tetzlaff, cello; and Lars Vogt, piano, show what sinewy, expertly crafted marvels these trios are.



Brahms: Piano Trios 1-3
Lars Vogt, Tanja Tetzlaff, Christian Tetzlaff (Ondine)

These three works were not made by cookie-cutter. No. 2 in C, Op. 87 is easily the most problematic of the three. It lacks the superficial charm that would typically characterize a work of this genre. More to the point, the alternation of tender and highly dramatic moments in the opening *Allegro* makes the work difficult to interpret. Also, the interplay of metrical irregularities and the general terseness of the music make it difficult to mold its harmonic and melodic contours. Despite the best efforts of the Tetzlaffs and Vogt, one is left with a feeling of edginess that succeeding movements, ending with a rather carefree finale, are able to dissipate but slowly.

Trio No. 3 in C minor, Op. 101 is a more satisfactory work that shows Brahms in complete control of his material. A sense of restlessness and urgency in the opening *Allegro energico* is contrasted by sunnier, and even folksy, material and by a gentler fabric of sound as the work moves on. In the last analysis, however, it is easier to admire the C minor Trio than it is to bestow unqualified love on it.

Trio No. 1 in B-major, Op. 8, on the other hand, is an altogether easier work to love, and that is certainly the case in the present performance. This was an early work that Brahms revised extensively, particularly in the opening movement. It has a breadth of conception and a balance and easy interplay between the strings and the piano that make it hard for the listener to resist. There is a symphonic sweep in this music that also adds to its appeal. A ghostly, flitting *Scherzo*, a gently elegiac *Adagio*, and a tonally ambiguous *Finale* (which ends, unusually, in the tonic minor) complete what is understandably the most popular of the three trios.

Given the close blend generally favored by the Tetzlaffs and Vogt, these performances will sound best on wide-ranging playback equipment (so you wouldn't want to rip them to MP3 and take them along when you're back-packing). Because of the capacity limits of the CD medium, the 83-minute program is distributed between two discs, with Trios 2 and 3 on Disc 1 and Trio 1 on Disc 2. You will want to shop around for prices, as both Amazon and NaxosDirect have listed this release at \$33.99 whereas others have priced it more reasonably as if it were a single CD.