

Phil's Classical Reviews

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"Contemporary Voices,"
The Pacifica String Quartet with Otis Murphy, saxophone
(Cedille)

The Pacifica Quartet now consists of Simin Ganatra and Austin Hartman, violins; Mark Holloway, viola; and Brandon Vamos, cello, the artists pictured above on the booklet photo. It's always a pleasure to review this quartet because of their exuberant performance style, their wide-ranging repertoire, and their versatility, taking the spotlight as individuals or dropping back seamlessly into the ensemble as the music requires. Their distinctive sound is bold and bright. In their performances, the sheer joy of music making comes across unflinchingly.

That's true even when the subject matter contains much that is sad or tragic, as it does in the first work on this program, String Quartet No. 3 (2012-2013) by Shulamit Ran, an Israel native who resides in the U.S., where she has taught at the University of Chicago for some years. The work is subtitled "Glitter, Doom, Shards, Memory." Its third movement, "If I perish – do not let my paintings die," is a quotation from the Jewish painter Felix Nussbaum (1904-1944), who persisted in his art almost to the very end when he was imprisoned at Auschwitz. More than a simple means of coping, it was a triumph of the spirit over the horrific circumstances in which he and many others suffered and died.

That triumph of the spirit is the key to interpretation here. Says Shulamit Ran, "This is my way of saying 'do not forget' - something that, I believe, can be done through music with special power and poignancy." Ran nevertheless describes the work itself as 'pure' music independent of narrative, something that lends itself admirably to the string quartet medium. The opening movement, "That which happened," starts off innocently, as if unaware of the darker forces, already beginning to emerge, that will shatter the sweet normalcy most of us take for granted in everyday life.

Voices (1993) by Jennifer Higdon, the second of our three Pulitzer Prize-winning ladies, is described by its composer as the telling in music of three different



Amy Johnson: "Portrait of an Artist"
MAV Symphony Orchestra under Steven Mercurio
(MSR Classics)

Iowa-born soprano Amy Johnson studied with Joanna Levy at the Manhattan School of Music and went on to win prestigious bel canto and operatic competitions. Originally a mezzo, she is now a soprano with an expanded tessitura and truly impressive breath control, both of which she employs to good effect in her CD, "Portrait of an Artist."

The selections on the program include arias and scenes from famous operas as well as operas in need of a friend. In all of them, Kay lavishes the qualities cited above. Only a few of the selections are of arias we all know and love, so that the program may be a source of adventure or of disappointment, depending on one's expectations.

The little-known items include "One Little Lie" from Stephen Schwartz' *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, "Luigia's Prayer" from Sacco and Vanzetti by Anton Coppola, *Nada Dura* (Nothing Lasts) from Simon Bolivar by Thea Musgrave and "Sharon's Entrance" from Robert Livingston Aldridge's *Elmer Gantry*. The best of the lot, for me, was the last-named, which captures the moment when the title character, a drifter, comes under the spell of the female evangelist "Sister Sharon" Falconer (who is Sinclair Lewis' take on the famous real-life figure Aimee Semple McPherson). The English-language aria has the charm of simplicity, directness and vocal purity, as befits the moment: "Can you feel a little of that joy now? / That's the Lord. / The sun embraces the stony earth. / Sweet rain caresses the land."

Little-known selections from operas by famous composers predominate. One of the most memorable is the scene from Act I of Leos Janáček's *Kát'a Kabanová* in which the heroine of the title pours out feelings of apprehension concerning her vague yearnings for love and the freedom to experience life: "I'm falling into sin. / It's like standing on the edge of a cliff with someone pushing me, / and nothing to grab onto!"

images. The first, "Blitz," is not meant to describe what happened to London in 1940, but is nevertheless imbued with a terrific amount of restless energy, "always on the verge of explosion." The second image, "soft enlacing," is calmer than the first. Higdon likens it to a walk through a dark house in the middle of the night: "while the floor feels solid under the foot, the rest of the world, to the eyes and ears, seems to be moving shadows."

The third movement, "Grace," has a number of associations, being basically a state in which a quiet presence exists in the soul when we are at peace. As Higdon observes, the direction of movement in the three images is from frenzied to calm, specific to vague, and darkness to light.

That may serve in turn to describe the overall movement of the three works in this program, culminating with Quintet for Alto Saxophone and String Quartet (2007) by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, which is pure music and pure fun. The movements have no titles or expressive markings, but are characterized only in terms of their quarter-note signatures. The first two movements may be described as slow and fast respectively, while the third is both slow and fast. As Zwilich observes, the alto sax, played here by guest artist Otis Murphy, "brings a luscious singing quality and a certain sassy attitude to the mix, while the strings offer their amazing agility and variety of articulation, color, and phrasing." That briefly describes the Pacifica Quartet, who always seem to be at their best when they have another instrument to play with and against. (See my reviews of other Cedille offerings by this engaging foursome in my Classical Reviews for 8/2014, 5/2017, and 10/2019.)



"Folias and Fantasias,"
Music of Marais & Telemann
The Cavatina Duo
(Bridge Records)

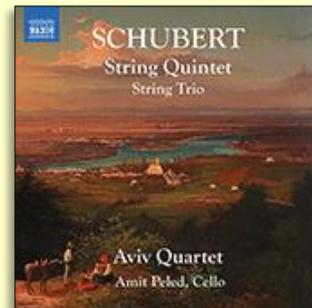
The Cavatina Duo do it again! Flutist Eugenia Moliner and guitarist Denis Azabagic, natives of Spain and Bosnia who now reside in Chicago, apply their distinctive artistry to music by two Baroque composers who left their mark on music as daring innovators. In these performances style and sensual beauty go hand in hand.

French composer Marin Marais (1656-1728) was renowned in his own day as a master of the viola da gamba. He was but forgotten in more recent times until

Less memorable is the aria *Dis-moi que je suis belle* (Tell me that I will be beautiful forever) from *Thaïs* by Jules Massenet, in which the title character beseeches her mirror to tell her she isn't growing old and losing her sex appeal. (Gosh, when's the last time a woman ever had a thought like *that?*) We are given banality where we might have expected something more sublime from a legendary temptress turned saint, and no amount of vocal artistry by Ms. Johnson can disguise the fact.

The best selections on the program are by Richard Strauss, beginning with *Mein Elemer* from *Arabella*, in which the heroine expresses her apprehensions about meeting a man who may prove to be connected with her destiny: "Is it the stranger with whom I've never even spoken one word, / yet he has drawn me to him through the darkness?"

Even better is the notorious Final Scene from *Salome* in which the heroine addresses the severed head of Jochanaan (John the Baptist) in language so steeped in sexual desire that it shocked Strauss' first audiences in 1905 (and is still pretty potent today!): "Ah, you wouldn't let me kiss your mouth, Jochanaan! / Well now I will kiss it! / I want to bite into it with my teeth, as one bites into a ripe fruit." With first-rate support from the MAV Symphony Orchestra of Hungary, Amy Johnson gives her all in this unforgettable scene.



Schubert: String Quintet, String Trio
Aviv Quartet; Amit Peled, cello
(Naxos)

The Israel-based Aviv Quartet consists of Sergey Ostrovsky, 1st Violin; Philippe Villafranca, 2nd Violin; Noémie Bialobroda, Viola; and Daniel Mitnitsky. Cello. In Hebrew, the word *Aviv* signifies "spring," implying the spirit of freshness and spontaneity these musicians aim to convey to us. Those qualities are vital when the subject is the music of Franz Schubert, in which any forcing of artistic issues would only betray the cause.

On the program are two Schubert works that compliment one another. First, the lesser-known String Trio in B-flat,

his music was featured in the soundtrack of the French film *All the Mornings of the World* (*Tous les matins du monde*). Marais is showcased beautifully here in his *Folies d'Espagne*, thirty-two variations on the 15th century Spanish tune *La Folia* (Madness) that has been used memorably in recent times by Rachmaninoff and numerous other composers. Originally conceived as a dance to ward off the plague, it was characterized by wild, frenzied movement, as if the dancers had been driven out of their minds.

Marais' handling of his *La Folia* variations is wider-ranging than just that, and evokes much that is graceful in its variety of textures, rhythms and characters. Originally conceived as a minor key chord progression in triple time in the manner of a Sarabande, *La Folia* involves more up-tempo measures than we would normally associate with that slow Spanish dance. Moliner and Azabagic, taking their cue from Marais' own suggestion that this work for solo gamba would sound well in transcriptions for other instruments, present a flowing panoply of moods and characters, noble and stately, tender and delicate, fiery and introspective. Moliner employs all the enchanting grace notes, slurs, and melifluous phrasings her flute is capable of, and Azabagic recalls the Hispanic origin of the dance by occasionally substituting quasi-flamenco strummings for Marais' figured bass.

Hamburg-based composer Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767) is represented by Twelve Fantasias for Flute without Bass. As in similar works for solo violin or solo keyboard, this most prolific of history's composers found the free fantasia to be an optimal form for expressing the variety of rhythms, moods, character and emotion he wanted to explore. Setting himself the additional challenge of writing each fantasia in a different key from A major to G minor, Telemann created twelve works, each complete in itself, that taken altogether create a monumental impression.

These fantasias are no mere cookie-cutters. There's a lot of variety within each one. No. 2, for example, is a mixed-style work consisting of an opening movement in the manner of a church sonata (*sonata da chiesa*), followed by a heart-melting Adagio in flowing melismas, and concluding in a spirited dance, the bourée. Fantasia No. 8, on the other hand, has a plaintive quality as its dominant impression, beginning with its sombre opening in the tempo of an allemande and concluding with a passepied imbued with a noticeably weightless feeling. Both serve to offset its spirited central section in gigue time. Fantasia 12 concludes the set in fine form with a range of emotions from dark to light and from pensive to carefree, in styles of both song and dance.

The Cavatina Duo have sought to revive an old baroque practice of turning solo instrumental works into graceful duos that would heighten the affects already present in the music. To that end, composers Johannes Tappert (Marais) and Alan Thomas (Telemann) were called upon to create the handsome guitar parts and realizations we have here. Moliner and Azabagic use these to bring this

D581, in which Ostrovsky takes the honors on violin. A four-movement 22-minute work in the style of a classical divertimento, its transparent texture allows full play to an abundance of charming, dance-inflected measures, especially in the Minuet and its contrasted Trio. When you first experience this work you will wonder where it has been all your life and congratulate yourself for having discovered it.

By contrast, the String Quintet in C, D956, has long been recognized as one of the great works in the chamber music literature. The fact that a second cello rather than a viola has been added to the basic string quartet moves the work out of the lighter divertimento genre into a sphere where the sonorities are richer and deeper, giving the work a real symphonic breadth and depth. Further, it allows for dialogues to be developed between two contrasted groups with the viola as intermediary poised to join either camp. The presence of the second cello (here played by the distinguished Israeli cellist Amit Peled) permits a further base line to be drawn. Another advantage of the quintet medium is that it enables the two cellos to be heard in parallel thirds or sixths, enriching the harmony.

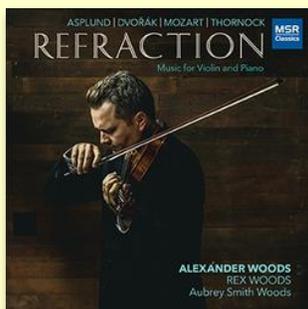
Following a drawn-out exhalation in all the strings, like a weary sigh, the opening movement utilizes chords with increasing degrees of tension, followed by dramatic arpeggio figures, to build up the drama while the most glorious of melodies is initially entrusted to the first cello. Staccato arpeggios, heard first in the violin and then in the cellos, decorate the musical line in the development section, lending it a haunting beauty.

For many listeners, the most enchanted movement of all may well be the Adagio. The music seems to come from another world, apparently without motion or urgency, as if we were suspended between reality and dream with only some ghostly pizzicati in the second cello to recall us to the world we know as they serve to underscore the melody. A turbulent middle section, occurring some four and a half minutes in, may constitute a shock to listeners who aren't prepared for it. Even those who *are* may still be taken unawares by the sudden upheaval, heralding a wild journey into distantly related keys. Then the ethereal music returns, this time with elaborate accompaniments above and below the melody.

The gracious dance-like character of the Scherzo is likewise unsettled by the trio section in which the music takes on the nature of an unearthly slow march of dark elegiac character (Was Schubert foreshadowing his own death, which occurred only a month after he completed this work?) The folksy finale, marked by the carefree interplay of major and minor modes, is interrupted near the end by an alien D-flat trill in the cellos, an indication we are not in for a happy ending but one characterized by resignation and defiant acceptance. The final two notes, D-flat and C, are played forte in all parts, as if to emphasize the point. They also recall the drawn-out sigh that opened the work 56 minutes earlier, bringing us full cycle. In a masterwork in which the most skillfully employed counterpoint is handled so subtly that we are

music to immediate, vibrant life as valuable contributions to the repertoire for flute and guitar.

more conscious instead of Schubert's wonderful lyricism, the performance by the Aviv Quartet and Amit Peled is always on the spot with the right emphasis.

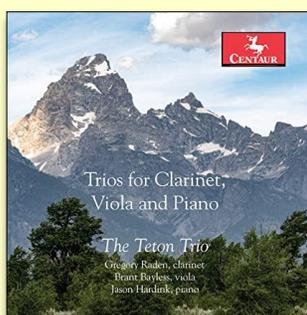


“Refraction,” works for violin & piano: Asplund, Dvořák, Mozart, Thornock. Alexander Woods, Rex Woods (MSR Classics)

U.S.-Canadian violinist Alexander Woods currently resides in Salt Lake City where he is on the music faculty of Brigham Young University. His grasp of classical forms and his obvious affection for the music he performs on the present album speak for themselves. Included are two composers the whole world knows and loves and two of our contemporaries whose works here receive handsome world premiere recordings.

Four Romantic Pieces, Op. 75 were Dvořák's re-writing for violin and piano of a set of four bagatelles or miniatures for two violins and a viola. The four pieces were originally titled as follows: *Cavatina*, *Capriccio*, *Romanza*, and *Elegia*, descriptions that can still serve as a guide for performers. Despite, or perhaps because of the fact that they are uncomplicated in emotion and form, they can take on a rich life of their own in performances such as we have here by Alexander Woods and his father, pianist Rex Woods. The last of the pieces, marked *Larghetto*, is particularly well characterized in its gentle warmth and sadness.

Mozart, the other luminary we spoke of, is represented by his Violin Sonata in B-flat Major, K378. An unusually attractive work, even by Mozart's standard, its lyricism flows naturally and unhurriedly in themes that are typically introduced by the piano and developed, embellished,



Trios for Clarinet, Viola & Piano
The Teton Trio
(Centaur)

The Teton Trio consists of clarinetist Gegory Raden, violist Brant Bayless, and pianist Jason Hardink. All are native or transported westerners with numerous associations with the west coast, Salt Lake City, and the Grand Teton Musical Festival in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Is there any connection between the abundant fresh air and sunshine they are used to experience 'way out yonder and the artistic freedom and joy they cultivate in their music making?

If there is, look for it in the present album of trios for clarinet, cello, and piano by composers from Mozart to Schumann and beyond. We find it abundantly in the opening Andante of Mozart's Trio in E-flat Major, K498, in which the composer audaciously uses a simple gruppetto of notes some 41 times, giving a strong impression of monothematic music, but taking care to vary each repetition sufficiently to keep from falling into monotony. Indeed, there is enough variety in this music in 6/8 time with a gentle swing to keep us continually engaged.

The viola, an unusual choice of instrument where one might have expected a cello, serves to mediate between the piano and clarinet, setting up a pattern in which the two upper instruments alternate and reply to each other. As Mozart uses it, the viola seems to have been born to fill in and enrich the harmonies between two diverse instruments. The writing is so



“Russian Piano,” Vol 3: Prokofiev, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff - Euntaek Kim, piano (MSR Classics)

Korean-American pianist Euntaek Kim scores high marks in his revealing performances of three sonatas by Russian composers. His own program notes may help the listener appreciate the different ways in which all three pose difficulties for the performer – problems Kim overcomes with admirable artistry.

Taking them in the order in which they occur on the program, Sonata No. 2 in D Minor, Op. 14 (1912) reveals a lot about Sergei Prokofiev as an emerging major musical figure. It is in four movements. The first pays its respects to sonata form, but in steely tones that are all Prokofiev. The second is a light but diabolical scherzo. The third is described by Kim as pensive, heavy-hearted and lyrical, with elements of Russian folk music. The fourth is in perpetual motion, by turns optimistic, taunting, and humorous. It all comes across with breathtaking economy in Kim's account.

Following the keyday of Russian romanticism, Prokofiev was a markedly different kind of composer, one whom Kim characterizes as “disinterested in delivering anything other than what is apparent: good, innovative harmony, counterpoint and captivating passagework.” We know that Prokofiev would go on to discover the human, emotional element in music in the '30's when he began work on his ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. But that is another story.

and extended by the violin. All three movements are utterly charming, but the middle one, *Andantino sostenuto e cantabile*, in which gentle cross-rhythms nudge an unfolding love duet between the two instruments, calls for special attention.

The two works by present-day composers are both unexpected pleasures rather than the chore a reviewer often anticipates with new music. More than that, both have a noticeable spiritual dimension that appeals strongly to Woods – or rather, to *the Woods*, as the present album is very much a family affair. In his *One Eternal Round* for two violins (2015), Christian Asplund (b.1964) uses echo effects including a sort of “hocket” (a very old musical device that goes back as many centuries as you can count on your fingers) followed by progressively shorter note values that ratchet up the intensity into a fine frenzy of 16th notes. The general movement is cyclical and upwards in music that “transcends the linear experience of time” (Asplund). In this performance, Woods is joined by his wife Aubrey Smith Woods in a close partnership that serves the music well.

Finally, *A Crust of Azure* (2013) by Neil Thornock (b.1977) for violin and piano is in three movements whose titles evoke spiritual associations: *Tremulous Whirl*, *Refraction of Sky*, and *Lavender Shroud*. Echoes of the music of the Roma, acquired by the composer during two years spent in Romania, are to be found in the opening movement, along with the crystal-clear impressionism of Ravel in the middle movement. In the finale, Messiaen-like chords create a haze that coalesces into a solemn-sounding chorale just before the end.

In this, as well as in the other works on this MSR release, Alexander Woods reveals himself to be an artist who is disinclined to perform any music that he is not absolutely in love with. That’s a good omen for a long and satisfying career.

intuitive the work itself gives the impression of just having sat down one fine day and written itself. Which is, of course, the seldom-realized aim of every great composer.

That’s just the opening. The surprises continue in the middle movement, a Menuetto and Trio where we might have expected a slow movement. Largely due to the presence of the viola, the mood gets progressively dark until an ascending chromatic scale on the clarinet (what could be more idiomatic?) leads us back into the Minuet. After this movement, the emotional core of the work, Mozart gives us an Allegretto in the form of a Rondeau. We are back in the home key of E-flat as the clarinet initially states the theme before passing it on to the piano. All three instrument get in their licks in an immensely satisfying finale in which form, texture, and feeling are all in perfect balance.

Where do we go after that? There’s a lot more on the program, beginning with Raden’s excellent transcriptions of two of Franz Schubert’s finest songs, *An den Mond* (To the Moon) and *Der Müller und der Bach* from the song cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin* (The Fair Maid of the Mill) in which the lovesick miller pours out his grief to the innocently flowing brook that is destined to become his grave.

There follow, first: a beautifully constructed Trio for Clarinet, Viola and Piano in A Major, Op. 264, by Carl Reinecke, an all-but forgotten figure today but esteemed in his long life (1824-1910) as a concert pianist, teacher, and (as we can infer from the high opus-number of this work) a very prolific composer. By turns graceful, bittersweet, and serenely beautiful though sad and folklike, it deserves the wider audience the Teton Trio are capable of bringing to it. The same goes for Jules Massenet’s “Under the Lindens” (*Sous les tilleuls*) from *Scenes Alsaciennes*, the tender depiction of lovers strolling along a shaded path on a summer afternoon.

Finally, we have Robert Schumann’s *Märchenerzählungen* which means nothing more or less than “Fairy

Alexander Scriabin’s Sonata No. 8 in a single movement must have seemed even stranger in 1913 than it does today. Kim describes its core as “a solemn motif whose melodic contour dances around a triadic frame in languid half steps and yearning leaps of diminished and augmented intervals.” Frenzied thrashings increase, seemingly with a will of their own, as the sonata heads toward the expected key resolution. Then Scriabin really shocks us as the music ends suddenly, not with a cadence but a question mark, a dominant ninth, in spirit akin to his famed “mystery chord.”

Scriabin’s harmony in this sonata is very much reminiscent of what we find in his tone poem *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* (1910), and in fact the music actually sounds symphonic in nature, rather than purely pianistic. It is also filled with instances of Scriabin’s notoriously difficult writing for the left hand, darting up and down the keyboard in a manic frenzy that Kim handles with great poise.

We end with Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Sonata No. 1 in D Minor (1908), a masterful achievement with an emotional range guaranteed to take a lot out of both performer and listener. Estimating this work would have a duration of some 45 minutes, the composer briefly contemplated re-writing it as a symphony. He wisely reconsidered upon realizing that it was actually conceived in pianistic, not symphonic, terms.

It also turns out that Rachmaninoff over-estimated its playing time. In the present performance, Euntaek Kim clocks in at 37:57, and he is no speed demon. On the contrary, he is temperamentally inclined to take his time, faithfully observing indications in the score as to tempo, rhythm, and dynamics, and savoring the wealth of mood and emotion he finds there. He is particularly adept at articulating the pensive moods of melancholy and sadness in the slow movement.

Most importantly, Kim clearly grasps the two underlying programmatic themes in this work, themes that testify to the composer’s religious faith. First, we have the *Dies Irae*, (Day of Wrath), the Latin chant for

Tales." Schumann left it to us to add our descriptions to four pieces that are unfailingly charming, mellifluous, and light-hearted.

the dead, which he often employed thematically to the point of near-obsession. To be sure, Death is as implacable as it is inevitable, but it does not have the final word.

That is reserved for the triumphal joy of Resurrection and eternal life. This is represented on the piano by tones evoking the ringing of church bells, a sound that had strong associations of nostalgia and joy for Rachmaninoff and the Russians of his day. The conflict, the dichotomy between the symbols of death and resurrection. makes for the drama in this work, particularly in the Allegro molto finale where we have several solemn evocations of the tolling of a distant bell in the clear air beginning around 5:02 and 13:33 into the movement.