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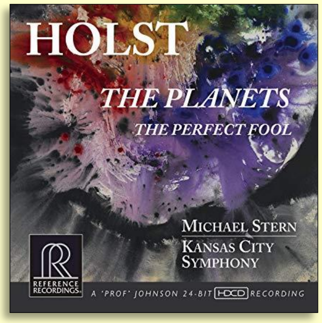
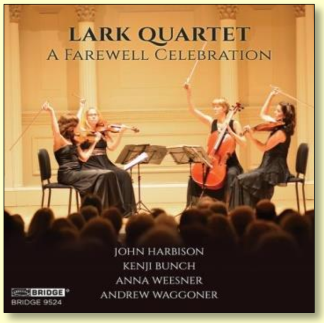


Holst: The Planets; The Perfect Fool
Michael Stern, Kansas City Symphony
(Reference Recordings Hybrid SACD)

It’s another “Prof” Johnson 24-bit HCDC Recording in SACD 5.1 from Reference Recordings! That’s the good news for audiophiles. For the rest of us, Michael Stern’s account of Holst’s The Planets has all the great features this incredibly richly scored symphonic suite has to offer. It is served up in a no-nonsense performance and delivered in a 50-minute package that is so superbly paced we are left at its conclusion marveling that it is over so soon – and hungering for more.

In The Planets, as his fellow British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams put it, Gustav Holst (1874-1934) found "the perfect equilibrium" of the mystic and the melodic sides of his own nature. Of interest is the fact that the various planets are arranged by Holst not in the order they occur in the solar system, but in such a sequence as to achieve the optimal musical contrasts in sensual beauty and emotive affect. In addition, the composer called for an unusually large number of players to handle his richly detailed score: in the present performance, no fewer than 18 substitute or extra musicians are credited in addition to the Kansas City Symphony’s usual ample number of personnel. In his passion for just the right mix of symphonic colors, Holst added an English horn, E-flat and bass clarinets, organ, and celesta.

With the exceptions of our own planet and Pluto (which has recently been reclassified and dropped from the fraternity as sub-planetary), all of the planets are represented in Holst’s scheme. "Mars, the Bringer of War" opens the work with a march in a relentless and inherently unstable 5/4 meter, while fanfare-like figures are heard in the tenor tuba and trumpets. Writing at the precise moment when the First World War was breaking out, Holst expresses his deeply personal feelings about the hollow glory and inhumanity of war itself. “Mars” is structured in a broad ABA form, each section rising to a climax, and finally concluding with a crashing unison of



Lark Quartet: “A Farewell Celebration”, music by
Harbison, Bunch, Weesner, Waggoner
(Bridge Records)

The Lark Quartet remain true to their legacy of provocative and imaginative programing in their latest (and last?) album, “A Farewell Celebration.” The present members of the all-female string quartet are Deborah Buck and Basia Danilow, violins; Kathryn Lockwood, viola; and Caroline Stinson, cello. In this program of strikingly original works by contemporary composers, they display the high-profile playing, noticeable mutual sympathy, and total commitment to the music for which this quartet has been famous, with only a single turnover in membership, for the past thirty years.

String Quartet No. 6 by John Harbison (b.1938) was written in 2016 and corresponds to this composer’s long standing fascination for the physical and emotional aspects of musical tones. It is in four movements. *Lontano* has the first violin at a psychological and temperamental distance from the other players who constitue a string trio and play in a more relaxed style. *Canto sospero*, which would translate as “sighing song,” lives up to its name as a long melody is explored, suspended, displaced, and nearly abandoned, to recur again at the very end as a memory. *Soggetti cavati* is based on two sets of initials (tones) representing American patriarchs – “the found object and the forthright plan,” as Harbison puts it. *Conclusioni provvisorie*, finally, casts the first violin and the string trio at odds, as in the first movement, eventually revealing a common vocal source, which the composer tantalizingly leaves for the listener to guess.

Megalopolis (2017) by Kenji Bunch (b.1973) was written for the Lark Quartet with Yousif Sheronick, Kathryn Lockwood’s husband, in an outstanding (and very demanding) role as percussionist. The title *Megalopolis*, meaning a chain of large urban areas or cities, is intended to suggest the interrelationships in our global landscape, as expressed through music that pays its the entire orchestra.

"Venus, the Bringer of Peace" follows, its chaste, serene beauty providing a salve for the unrelenting brutality of the opening movement. It is beautifully and transparently scored for this purpose with the the healing sounds of harps, flutes, celesta, and strings, plus a solo violin that creates its own unforgettable presence.

“Mercury, the Winged Messenger” has its own distinctive sound palette of melodic fragments, elusive rhythms, and bitonality (it is in two keys in nearly every bar), leaving an impression of lightness and speed by rapidly swinging between chords. By contrast, "Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity" embodies the radiant happiness of a person who enjoys life for all it is worth. It is cast in an ABACABA form, with a central section containing a broadly stated tune which was later set as a patriotic hymn, still known to all Britons as “I vow to Thee my Country.”

"Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age" presents its subject as a slow, cold, weary, and desolate procession that is twice interrupted by the sound of bells. The first interruption is disturbing and panicky, the second calmer, leading to a sense of resignation and a glimpse of the vastness beyond the veil of life. The Planets closes with a pair of sharply contrasted movements. First, “Uranus, the Magician” is a fantastic scherzo that evokes Dukas' Sorcerer's Apprentice in its energy and lightning changes, the similarities even extending to the use of staccato bassoons. "Neptune, the Mystic," by contrast, is tuneless, expressionless, and shapeless, its distant affect conveyed to us by a pair of harps. It fades slowly away to silence at the close with a wordless six-part female chorus.

The Ballet Music, Op. 39, from Holst’s one-act opera The Perfect Fool recaptures something of the demonic energy of the “Uranus” movement from The Planets, as it depicts a wizard performing a rite in which he invokes the Spirits of Earth, Water, and Fire. (What happened to “Air”, the fourth element? It was probably busy supplying the vital needs of Holst’s fantastically imaginative writing for the woodwinds and brass!)

In the last analysis, skill in pacing and timing are vital attributes that any conductor must possess in undertaking Holst’s Planets, a work that currently has 91 listings in Arkivmusic.com, a tribute to its immense popular appeal in spite of the great resources needed to perform it. Michael Stern puts it across here with taste and discretion.

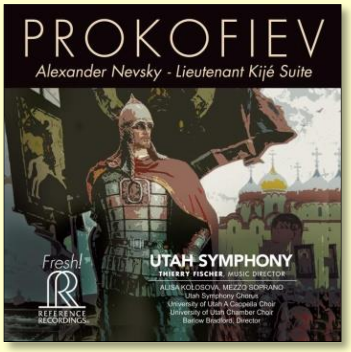
respect to Nigerian musical superstar Fela Kuti. It recalls the rhythmic energy, jagged improvisational melodies, call and response elements, and hypnotically static harmonies asociated with his music. (This is no easy task for a classical string quartet to encompass, by the way, even with Sheronick’s inspiration and assistance.)

Eight Lost Songs of Orlando Underground (2018) by Anna Weesner (b.1965) is the rather poignant story of a blues guitarist who wonders what his life would have been (both musically and in terms of a lost lady love) had he followed his penchant for notated composition in a classical vein. With the deeply moving presence of clarinettist Romie de Guise-Langlois adding to the richly layered sounds of the Lark Quartet, the music explores the fascination for Mahler, musical retrograde, and five-syllable sequences (*how we used to dance, how you broke my heart, why won’t she come back*) of Orlando, the thinly-veiled pseudonym for an actual blues artist. Once again the reader is challenged to Name that Tune(smith).”

Finally, Ce Morceau de Tissu (this piece of thin fabric) for Two Quartets (2016), composed by Andrew Waggoner (b.1960) expressly for the 30th anniversary of the Lark Quartet, takes its inspiration from The Political Harem (*Le harem politique*) by Moroccan feminist writer Fatima Mernissi, which questions whether the veil, and the stereotypes it perpetuates of Muslim women, should persist in modern times as the essence of Muslim identity. For this performance, the present members of the Lark Quartet are joined by the original Lark Quartet consisting of Kay Stern and Robin Mayforth, violins; Anna Kruger, viola, and Laura Sewell, cello.

The dynamic we have here is that of two string quartets eventually coming together in sound and purpose as one octet. Intially, the two groups share the same materials, but pursue them along different paths that sometimes intersect. Sometimes, the two groups comment on each other antiphonally, but from different perspectives. Finally, they collide in a violent climax (at about 11:11 in this track), after which “they come together, for the first time in the piece, around a shared theme that pulls them upwards and unites them in a common purpose” (Waggoner). As a dialectic for social change, as well as a means of resolving musical ideas into a satisfying conclusion, it all comes across very well. The rich sonorities cultivated by this convocation of Larks, past and present, contribute immensely to the effectiveness of the music.

Is “A Farewell Celebration” indeed the last hurrah for this remarkable quartet of ladies? If so, they have certainly gone out with a bang. Check their website for latest news at **larkquartet.com**


PROKOFIEV
Alexander Nevsky - Lieutenant Kijé Suite
Fresh!
REFERENCE RECORDINGS
UTAH SYMPHONY
THIERRY FISCHER, MUSIC DIRECTOR
ALISA KOLOSOVA, MEZZO SOPRANO
Utah Symphony Chorus
University of Utah A Cappella Choir
University of Utah Chamber Choir
Barlow Bradford, Director

Prokofiev: Alexander Nevsky, Lieutenant Kije Suite
Thierry Fischer, Utah Symphony; Alisa Kolosova,
mezzo-soprano
(Reference Recordings)
SACD 5.0 & Stereo / CD Stereo

Thierry Fischer, music director of the Utah Symphony, takes the orchestra through a spirited account of Sergei Prokofiev's Alexander Nevsky cantata, together with the Utah Symphony Chorus, University of Utah á Capella Choir, and University of Utah Chamber Choir under director Barlow Bradford. There are also 14 extra musicians serving to augment the orchestra, attesting to the scale and diversity of the composer's scoring.

Prokofiev derived the cantata from his film score for Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic masterpiece Alexander Nevsky. This film, concerning the valiant defense of Russia under the leadership of the historic figure of the title against an invasion of Teutonic Knights in 1242, was a thinly veiled allusion to the threat posed by Nazi Germany in the uneasy period before the outbreak of what Russians call The Great Patriotic War. The 1938 film was withdrawn after the signing of the non-aggression pact with Germany the following year, and then brought back into circulation as a potent morale-raiser in the aftermath of the Nazi invasion in 1941.

Did I say "potent"? Prokofiev and Eisenstein, knowing they had a tiger by the tail, worked more closely on the details of the film score than would normally have been customary. In general, Prokofiev's scoring followed the suggestions in Eisenstein's finished episodes, but in the climactic, grippingly dramatic Battle on the Ice, the music took precedence, with the filmmaker cutting in his pictorial imagery as a montage in which music and image mesh together. It all worked out magnificently.

There are seven sections in the score. In the first, "Russia under the Mongol Yoke," the sufferings of the people are depicted in the film by images of devastated villages and pyramids of skulls bleached white in the sun, due to the atrocities of Genghis Khan and his host. The music is searing, eerily dissonant and mostly static. In the film, Nevsky tells his people there will be a time to deal with the yellow invaders later, after Russia has met an even greater danger from the west.

"Song for Alexander Nevsky" is upbeat and radiant, with the grandeur of an anthem as it recalls Nevsky's earlier triumph over an army of Swedes on the River Neva. The stirring voices of tenors and basses in the opening stanza, augmented by contraltos in the second, depict Russians coming together with a purpose.

The music then shifts to the depradations of the Teutonic Knights in the city of Pskov. In the film, they are depicted as helmeted, faceless figures, wantonly torturing citizens and even tossing a distraught child into a blazing bonfire. In their jingoistic Latin chant, Prokofiev indulges in a trenchant parody of this crusading fraternity for whom a holy war is little more than an opportunity for plunder (with an obvious parallel to current world conditions). The fourth section, "Arise, People of Russia," is a rousing exhortation that we will hear again in the fifth and seventh movements.

The next section, "Battle on the Ice," is an altogether unprecedented recreation of the tense emotions, the cries of battle, as Nevsky's men absorb the assault of the mounted attackers, lock them in a stalemate, and then relentlessly push back against them with grim determination. At one point, the music recalls the song heard in the previous section, "In our Russia, our native land, no foe shall live." The moment in the score when the frozen lake breaks up under the weight of the heaviy armored invaders is terrifying in its impact.

The sixth section, "Field of the Dead," is a deeply poignant lament for slain heroes, sung effectively here by mezzo-soprano Alisa Kolosova: "I shall not marry the one who has good looks; / earthly beauty passes away. / But I will marry the one who showed valor." The seventh and last section, "Alexander enters Pskov," depicts the joy of the people at their deliverance, in a reprise of the Song of Alexander Nevsky for full chorus, with bells and sensational woodwind sounds adding to the mix.

As you might well imagine, Alexander Nevsky is not easy to record satisfactorily because so much of its music is cinematically conceived, with discords and clashes that challenge the recording team as much as they do the performers. The present live recording, made in the Maurice Abravenel Hall in Salt Lake City, Utah by a recording team from Sound/Mirror, Boston, is one viable solution to the problem of capturing an extremely varied work as a complete, whole experience.

Oooops, I haven't said anything yet about the companion work, Prokofiev's ever-popular *Lieutenant Kije* Suite. Taken from the score for a satirical movie about a character who does not in fact exist (his name itself signifies a blot), it chronicles his make-believe life beginning with his birth, heralded by an offstage cornet. In between, we have the hero's courtship ("Romance"), a sumptuous weddding, his lively troika ride with his bride, with a lugubrious saxophone hinting at an unpleasant ending, and finally Kije's Funeral, with the same cornet theme we heard at the beginning fading into silence. Under Fischer's baton, it all comes across well, in a performance that lets us hear a surprising depth of feeling alongside the piquant satire.

PIANO CLASSICS
ENESCU
Piano Sonata Op.24
Suite Op.18
Saskia Giorgini

Enescu: Piano Sonata, Op. 24, Suite, Op. 18
Saskia Giorgini, piano
(Piano Classics)

Italian pianist Saskia Giorgini expresses her love for one of the 20th century's most remarkable, and until quite recently most neglected figures, Rumania's Georges Enescu. One of he most talented of classical musicians, being equally in demand as pianist, violinist, and conductor, he was also one of the great violin teachers. His pupil Yehudi Menuhin described him as "the most extraordinary human being, the greatest musician and the most formulative influence I have ever experienced."

Add in Enescu's total lack of interest in self-promotion, and there is little wonder that so much of his music has been neglected until fairly recent times. He is still little-known to the general public outside of his two Rumanian Rhapsodies, and even there the music goes considerably beyond its simple folkloric influences. The latter include a noticeable mood that the composer characterized as "sadness even in the midst of happiness, dreaming, and a tendency even in fast sections towards melancholy." Music that seems to shift naturally and restlessly between major and minor.

Alongside his fascination for heterophony and polyrhythms and his sensitivity to timbres, Enescu's music comes across as very personal and original, with a general feeling of improvisation. In an era in which composers were becoming more obsessed than ever with schematic designs, tone rows and precompositional techniques, he strikes the listener as an intuitive figure for whom one thought leads to another in the most charming manner.

Saskia Giorgini brings out all these elements, and more, in her peformances of Enescu's Suite, Op. 18 and his Piano Sonata No. 3 in D, Op. 24, No. 3. The Suite encompasses seven pieces. *Mélodi*e (song) is simple and beautiful in contrast to both the darker evocative atmosphere of *Voix de la Steppe* (Voice of the Steppes)

DOVER QUARTET
THE SCHUMANN QUARTETS
Azica

Schumann: String Quartets 1-3
The Dover Quartet
(Azica)

Robert Schumann was a composer who liked to throw himself into his work with single-minded dedication. In 1840, just as he had finally overcome the last legal impediments to his marriage with his beloved Clara Wieck, he composed nothing but *lieder* (art songs), many of which were love songs in which he poured out his inmost feelings. At Clara's insistence, 1841 was a year exclusively devoted to symphonic music, and he came out with his First Symphony and the early version of what was to become the Fourth. 1842 was the chamber music year, and it witnessed no fewer than six major works for chamber ensembles, including the three String Quartets, Op. 41, which he composed in a white heat in the space of only six weeks!

The remarkable thing about this burst of creativity is that there is absolutely no trace of slipshod work such as we might expect in Quartets 1-3. On the contrary, they reveal Schumann's careful study and assimilation of everything he'd learned from his predecessors Haydn and Beethoven, plus he took the genre a step further, infusing it with his own unique inventiveness and lyricism. Significantly, he showed a penchant for writing idiomatically for the individual strings that makes these quartets the model of a real democracy at a time in music history when the first violin was still inclined to assume the role of an autocrat.

That last-mentioned trait must have a special appeal for the Dover Quartet, consisting of Joel Link and Bryan Lee, violins; Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, viola; and Camden Shaw, cello. Since their sweep of the 2013 Banff Competition, this outstanding American quartet have seen their career take off, and they are much in demand here and abroad. As I noted previously on the occasion of their all-Mozart debut album (see *Classical Reviews* February, 2017), their vibrant, tone, textural transparecy and utter commitment to the work at hand

and the affect of the appropriately named *Mazurk mélancolique* (Melancholy Mazurka), a transformation of the traditionally lively Polish dance. *Burlesque* is a miniature marvel of jocularity, with popular dance parodies and cimbalom sounds (Giorgini compares it to a soundtrack for a Charlie Chan silent movie), while *Appassionato* comes across like a love declaration. The last two numbers in the suite, *Chorale* and *Carillon Nocturne*, connected by an *attacca*, bear witness to Enescu's ability to write highly evocative music, particularly capturing atmospheric sounds heard at night from across a distance.

Piano Sonata No. 3 is another Ensecu marvel, ostensibly opening in a neoclassical style that becmes increasingly chromatic and modal. Saskia describes the slow movement, marked *Andantino cantabile*, as "one of the most beautiful pieces of music I know," sublimating and entwining folk idioms along the lines of a *doina*, or meditation. In the process it creates its own dark sound world that holds our rapt attention until, at the last, when "it all rarefies in the air." The last movement comments on, and recombines, thematic material from the previous two movements, fracturing, densifying, and transfiguring it in the process. "A magic jungle," as Saskia terms it. Music such as this draws on all the sonorous resouces of the instrument this artist has a her disposal, a Bösendorfer Model 280VC with its extensive keyboard range.

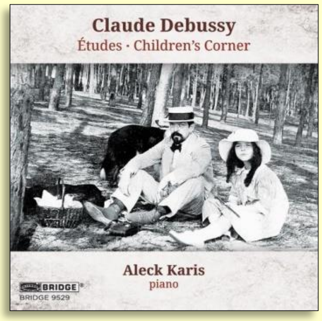
serve them very well when the subject is Schumann.

Quartet No. 1 in A minor reveals the influence of the composer's predecessors as well as his own mental restlessness, which he shows in the surprising turn from A minor in the introduction to the first movement to a brighter F major for the presentation of the main theme with its beautiful arching melody. The Andante in A-B-A form superimposes floating arpeggios upon a hymn-like melody in the opening, becoming ever more animated in the middle section. Poetry and sheer inventiveness vie for pride of place in this first quartet.

The opening movement of Quartet No. 2 in F major is based almost entirely on a beautiful theme sung by the first violin. The way Schumann manipulates his material for best expressive effect in this basically monothematic movement shows real mastery. He also exhibits it in the slow movement Andante *con Variazoni*, in which the four variations are as follows: lyrical with ribbons of scales for accompaniment; flowing with pizzicati in the viola and cello; dark and subdued; and playful and light, based on versions of the main melody. The unusual structure of this movement which takes the form: theme-variations-theme repeated- coda, calls for special attention.

Now we come to the last, Quartet No. 3 in A major. We might expect it to be a work of consolidation following two very imaginative and experimental, works. But no, Schumann is still experimenting with form and expressive beauty in the quartet medium, and the Dover Quartet respond by turning up the heat. A falling fifth provides the kernel from which the main theme and much of the first movement grow. The scherzo, *Assai agitato* (rather agitated) is a set of variations – the first dreamy and evanescent, the second a bounding galop in 6/8, the third in densely packed imitation – all before the theme itself is given out by the first violin and viola in canon. The Adagio is filled with romantic feeling (another love-letter to Clara?)

The finale, an Allegro marked *molto vivace* (and *how*!) is a rondo in thirteen clearly delineated sections, making much use of melodic rhythms (or is it rhythmic melody?) for striking effect. The forcefulness and harmonic richness of this work have long led observers to term it "pocket-sized orchestral music," and the members of the Dover Quartet are not slow in taking their cues from Schumann's richly innovative writing.



Debussy: Etudes, Children's Corner Suite
Aleck Karis, piano (Bridge)

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Aleck Karis once again reveals himself the avid proponent of new music or, in the case of Debussy's Etudes, older path-breaking music still in need of being better understood. For years I avoided reviewing the Etudes because I failed to comprehend their purpose. They weren't pointed enough to qualify as character pieces or encores. Nor did they cover enough territory to present a harmonic theory or a keyboard practicum. What was slow to dawn on me was their real *raison d'etre*, which was so important the ailing Debussy stole time from a full slate of compositions in the last productive year of his life to commit them to paper.

The composer might have ensured these pieces greater popularity by giving them descriptive names, but such was not his purpose. They are not character pieces in any sense, nor are they intended to support a universal theory of harmony. What we have here is a key to understanding what Debussy's new music was all about: not the piano but *his* piano, not music itself but *his* music and the sound world it inhabited. Nearing the end of his life, he did want want to be misunderstood by posterity.

The Etudes are organized in two books. Book I has the titles For the Five Fingers after M. Czerny, Thirds, Fourths, Sixths, Octaves, and Eight Fingers. In Book II the titles are: Chromatic Degrees, Ornaments, Repeated Notes, Opposed Sonorities, Composed Arpeggios, and Chords. Debussy dedicated them to the memory of Frédéric Chopin, whose own Etudes served to inspire him. "For the Five Fingers" takes a sly dig at Carl Czerny, whose studies Debussy found abhorrently dry and dull. (He marks this piece *Sagement*, implying that it is intended for well-behaved children.) "Fourths" is floating, dreamlike music, all in intervals of a fourth, allowing the music to flow in unexpected directions.

"Octaves" is an exuberant flight of fancy that bears out the expressive markings *Joyeux et emporté* (joyous and carried away) and contains numerous passages where octaves are alternated with single notes. "Ornaments" defines the term in the broadest possible way that goes far beyond the simple trills and mordents of baroque practice, moving through ten different key signatures with shifting tempos and moods. "Chromatic Degrees" explores the tricky business of writing chromatic music in half-steps with different harmonies. "Opposed Sonorities"

HAGEN QUARTETT BRAHMS KIRILL GERSTEIN
String Quartet op. 67 Piano Quintet op. 34
myrios classics

Brahms: String Quartet, Op. 67 Piano Quartet, Op. 34
Hagen Quartet, Kirill Gerstein (Myrios)

The Hagen Quartet started off as a family ensemble in 1981. Originally comprised of siblings and cousins who had studied at the Salzburg Mozarteum, they currrently consist of three original Hagens (Lukas, violin I; Veronika, viola; and Clemens, cello; plus Rainer Schmidt, violin II, who joined them in 1987. As they prepare to celebrate their 40th anniversary, they are joined by pianist Kirill Gerstein in a pairing of works by Johannes Brahms that reveal both his lyrical gifts and his resourcefulness in dealing with problems.

First, the decidedly *un*-problematical work: String Quartet No. 3 in B-flat major, Op. 67, a product of the years 1875-1876. At this stage in his career, Brahms had worked through all the issues of form, texture, and balance that everyone encounters when writing a quartet, and so this work flows with the greatest naturalness and (seeming) simplicity. It starts off in a jaunty mood with a joyous theme reminiscent of Mozart's "Hunt" Quartet (which coincidentally the Hagens released three years ago. See *Phil's Classical Reviews*, June 2016). The second movement, an Adagio, features a cantilena for the first violin, containing one of Brahms' most beautiful melodies. The third movement may even top the second in loveliness, thanks to a wonderful lyrical outpouring by the viola over the other three strings muted, which some observers have likened to Brahms' declaration of love to an instrument whose solo potential has been so often ignored. The finale, a *Poco Allegretto* with variations on a lilting melody, can be cheerful and folksy, or else insistent and even insolent, as the interpretation requires. Variation 7 reprises the jaunty hunting theme from the opening movement, helping bring matters full circle in what remains one of Brahms' most popular and satisfying chamber works.

By contrast, few works gave Brahms as much trouble as his Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34, on which he labored off-and-on between 1862 and 1866, in various forms: as a string quintet, a quintet for piano and strings, and even a sonata for two pianos. His friends, including famed violinist Joseph Joachim, added to his confusion by noting that in some places the textures were too thin and in others too thick, and that the work itself was over-long. Eventually, Brahms released the Piano Quintet in the form we have here. It is undeniably long at 43:25 in the present performance (and the Hagens are no concerns the effect created by keys a half step apart. It ends in a shimmering chord featuring F Major above E-sharp Major above F-sharp Major. Well, you get the idea: these Etudes are not for well-behaved children, but for naughty miscreants who are inclined to venture beyond received tradition to see what music can be made to do.

As opposed to the Etudes, the items in the Children's Corner suite really are character pieces. Debussy began writing them after the birth of his daughter Claude-Emma, known affectionately as "Chouchou." As the titles imply, these pieces appeal strongly to a young child's imagination. They basically relate to Chouchou's favorite toys: a serenade for a doll, a lullaby for a stuffed elephant, a glass globe with swirling snowflakes, an entertainer dancing an irrepressible cakewalk, an evocation of a shepherd piping wistfully on his flute in the solitude of a cardboard theatre,. Karis' performances endow them all with the vivid life that Debussy intended.

ANALEKTA
CHARLES RICHARD-HAMELIN
CHOPIN: BALLADES & IMPROMPTUS

Chopin: Ballades *&* Impromptus
Charles Richard-Hamelin, piano
(Analekta)

What I said about Québec native Charles Richard-Hamelin in an earlier review on this website still goes: "Among his finer qualities is his keen appreciation of the architecture of a work of music. From that comes the sonority, the layering of textures, the color and the poetic truth of his performances. Knowing the structure, he knows where he is going" (*Classical Reviews*, January 2016). The present release of the 4 Ballades and 4 Impromptus by Frédéric Chopin serves to further solidify his stature as one of the great Chopin interpreters of his generation.

What, exactly, is a *ballade*? The name itself goes back to a poetic form of troubadour times. All four of the pieces heard in this album pay homage to the old genre by being cast in the "ballade metre," either 6/4 or 6/8, and are evocative of moods: lyrical, tender, heroic, mysterious, tragic, or nostalgic, as the piece requires. Chopin wisely did not apply descriptive titles to any of his ballades, something that would have tended to trivialize them by making them seem like program music. But the very nature of these intimately-scaled masterworks would seem to invite the listener (and the interpreter) to supply his or her own associations, whether deliberately or subconsciously.

For instance, a pianist friend of mine once confided to

slowpokes). And it still creates problems today with its textural densities, an issue which our performers handle very well in the present program.

Most importantly, the Hagens convey the true symphonic scope of a fascinating work, along with its abundance of romantic feeling, of which the rather dark opening Allegro is but a preview. The slow movement is a lyrical Andante, albeit tinged with melancholy, and the Scherzo an heroic march, animated by a driving rhythm that is accentuated by a restless syncopated undercurrent. The Finale, perhaps the most remarkable movement of all, begins very quietly with chromatic notes rising from the strings, and then a section of sobbing strings over piano chords followed by faster music in the body of the movement. In this finale, the mood shifts unpredictably from buoyant to urgent, almost pleading, and then to a savage restlessness as things build to a climax

SONY CLASSICAL
BEETHOVEN
VIOLIN CONCERTO
LEONIDAS
KAVAKOS
SYMPHONIEORCHESTER DES
BAYERISCHEN RUNDFUNKS

Beethoven: Violin Concerto, Op. 61
Leonidas Kavakos, violin / conductor
Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (Sony)

Leonidas Kavakos has been a concert headliner for long enough now that he can afford to demand a few prerogatives. Having performed the Beethoven Violin Concerto in D, Op. 61 for many years under some of the world's eminent conductors, he now has the rare opportunity to conduct it as well as playing the violin solo. And having already been in residence with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, he was ready to exercise his passion for conducting. His long association with this orchestra gives him a noticeable rapport with his fellow musicians, evident from the very opening.

Compared with other performances you might have heard of the Beethoven, Kavakos opts for a relatvely larger body of strings, offering a greater range of possibilities in terms of dynamics and tone color, and making it easier to produce graduated shades of *piano* phrasing. With a playing time of over 25 minutes, the opening movement has an extraordinary breadth arising from Beethoven's use of the ritornello form he inherited from the previous era. Here an extended tutti precedes the eagerly anticipated entrance of the violin, another master touch of this composer.

One other thing you really notice about this work is the role Beethoven gives to the tympani, heard from the very outset in a series of quiet strokes that led some early me that the coda, marked *Presto con fuoco* (very fast, with fire) that interrupts the quiet mood and gently rocking meter of Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23, crashing in upon it like an unwelcome intruder, recalled for her the experience of a couple of her acquaintance who had lost their infant child to SIDS. It's *that* tragic.) Where could the composer possibly go after that kind of upheaval? Chopin chooses to end very dramatically with a double-octave scale keyboard run.

In Ballade No. 2 in F major, Op. 38, the first section is quiet and delicate, like the dance of sylphs in the moonlight to which it has sometimes been compared. The contrasted section is marked "*Presto con fuoco*," just as in Ballade No. 1, but this time the thrust is on zestful risk-taking rather than deadly menace. Ballade No. 3 in A-flat, Op. 47, is given a moving interpretation that emphasizes the contrast between the simple dancelike warmth of the lullaby or reverie that serves as the first theme and the dark, passionate music that roils ceaselessly beneath it, threatening to rise to the surface and take over the piece, as it does here, beginning at the 5:39 point. The key to performing this tightly-structured ballade lies in the way one heightens and then releases the tensions of contrasted sections, matters in which Richard-Hamelin shows himself to be very proficient.

Finally, Ballade No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52, by turns intense, sublimely beautiful, nostalgic, melancholy, and powerfully expressive, works the magic of its kaleidoscopic changes in harmony and emotion by the use of contrapuntal complexities and tensions that are heightened by thrilling arpeggios and chords.

As opposed to the Ballades, which may be performed individually with no compelling reason to present them all together in the same concert program, Chopin's four Impromptus do not possess the same stand-alone quality. The possible exception is the Fantasie-Impromptu in C-sharp minor, Op. 66, with its warm central melody that inspired a popular song in more recent times ("I'm always chasing rainbows"). Individually, they do not possess the same specific gravity as the Ballades. Instead, the emphasis tends to be on florid arpeggiation (as in Impromptu No. 2) and a semi-improvisational technique that allows disparate ideas to flow into each other organically rather than develop in a formal manner.

Richard-Hamelin shows a nice sensitivity to these characteristic features in the Impromptus, as he also does for the harmonies Chopin explored in such unusual keys as F-sharp Major (No. 2, Op. 36) with six sharps in its key signature, and G-flat Major (No. 3, Op. 51) with its gaudy array of sharps and flats. The Impromptus are mostly experimental in nature, allowing Chopin to push the envelope toward the ever-greater expressive beauty that Richard-Hamelin so obviously loves to explore.

detractors to dismiss the work itself as a "kettledrum concerto." It is also employed to great effect in the cadenza to the opening movement, from about 20:30 to 22:10 on Track 1, almost like a call-and-response partner to the violin before the violin eventually takes up the melody again (24:40) and the orchestra re-enters (26:24). It is an altogether remarkable cadenza, even by Beethoven's standard, full of multiple stops, extended double trills, rapid chromatic runs, and arpeggios over four octaves. It more than satisfies the double purpose of a cadenza, giving ample play to the imagination that went into its creation and the virtuosity of the violinist.

The second movement, a *Larghetto*, is remarkable for its serene beauty that provides a respite from the dramatic unrest of the previous movement. At its heart is a violin solo over plucked strings, another master touch of Beethoven from which emanates a tranquil, organic lyricism. The full orchestra re-enters with a new melody and eventually lets forth an outburst, leading into a cadenza. That, in turn, takes the work into the final movement, a Rondo marked by a folk-like robustness and dancelike energy. The violin is called upon to produce some sensational stops (which really sound great the way Kavakos takes them in this performance!) and a lovely singing melody that will stay with you for some time after you've heard it.

There are, in fact, no fewer than three short cadenzas in the transition to the finale and within the finale itself. Kavakos based them on Beethoven's own piano versions. Together with the gigantic first-movement cadenza of which we've already spoken, which Kavakos likewise based on the composer's piano version (Op. 61a), and which he vows to publish "one of these days," they add immensely to our perception of what a great achievement this Violin Concerto is.

Disc 2 of the 2-CD slimline is give over to Kaakos' other passion, a love for chamber music which he pusues avidly, as other concert headliners have done, as a refreshment for the soul. His rapport with his colleagues from the BRSO is quite evdent in Beethoven's Septet in E-flat for Violin, Viola, Clarinet, Horn, Bassoon, Cello and Double Bass, Op. 20. This 40-minute opus, which was one of the composer's most requested works in his own lifetime, plays like a divertimento in six movements that include a very lyrical Adagio Cantabile, a really up-tempo Menuetto, a splendid Theme and Variations, and an Andante con Moto in march time as as a spirited finale.

Filling out the disc are two sets of variations for piano and violin *ad libitum*, Op. 106 and 107, on folk songs which Kavakos plays with his recital partner, pianist Enrico Pace. There was a vogue for folk songs, especially from other lands, in Beethoven's Vienna, so don't be surprised to hear a Scottish air such as "Peggy's Daughter" or "Bonny Laddie, Highland Laddie" popping out from this bouquet of folk-inspired charmers.