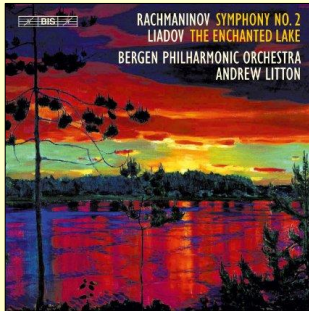


Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

February, 2016



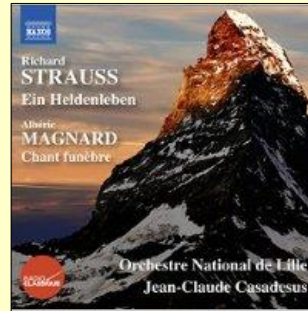
Rachmaninov: Symphony No. 2 + Liadov: The Enchanted Lake – Andrew Litton, Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra (Bis) Hybrid SACD, DSD

This new Bis Records release of American conductor Andrew Litton directing the Bergen Philharmonic in a stunningly beautiful Rachmaninov Second revealed to me in bold detail the things I'd long admired in this symphony but wasn't able to articulate precisely. It is almost certainly a one-of-a-kind work. From the sighing motif in the strings at the very opening of the Largo introduction to the opening movement, it takes hold of the listener and doesn't let up for a full hour filled with enchantment and deep brooding. There is nothing like it in Rachmaninov's other numbered symphonies, his first and third, though his Symphonic Dances come closer to recapturing the magic of the Second.

Rachmaninov worked very slowly, and consequently the Second Symphony takes its time impressing its full significance on us. It is a very deliberately paced work. That deliberation is offset by its rhythmic flexibility. It is very moody, with wonderfully expansive melodies. The melodies themselves, in the way that Rachmaninov molds them, give the symphony its overall form and dramatic character. No one else had ever used his melodic materials in the same way and to such remarkable effect.

In this recording, as in his 1990 Virgin account with the Dallas Symphony, Litton uses Rachmaninov's complete score. Thereupon hangs a tale. The full score is of such duration (63:15 in the present instance) that Rachmaninov bowed to pressure time and again to make cuts for performance purposes. Over time, the accumulated deletions reduced the duration to rather less than 40 minutes. But that was achieved at a price. This is an organically-grown work, and the cuts created an edgy feeling of discontinuity. Since 1970, the tendency has been to restore the complete symphony, both in live performances and recordings.

Litton goes further than many interpreters in restoring the repeat of the entire first movement exposition. By 1907, when Rachmaninov wrote the work, that was



Strauss: Ein Heldenleben + Magnard: Chant funèbre
Jean-Claude Casadesus, Orchestre National de Lille (Naxos)

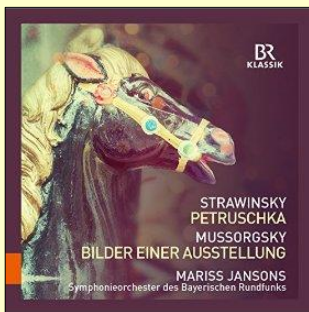
These 2011-2014 recordings capture an excellent Orchestre National de Lille (France) in splendid form under founder/director Jean-Claude Casadesus. They are filled with the necessary *esprit* to give really bravura performances of Strauss and Magnard. In the case of Richard Strauss' monumental *Ein Heldenleben* (A Hero's Life), that is particularly fortunate, as the composer demands a great deal from a large, richly scored work in terms of the orchestra that performs it.

Larger, in fact, than the personnel of the Orchestre National, who, if my head-count in their website pictures is correct, regularly number some 78-80 musicians. *Heldenleben* calls for even larger numbers, beginning with expanded woodwind and brass which, together with a very diverse percussion section, add up to some 40 or so players. When you include the string section required to give this work its characteristically lush, voluptuous sound, it would amount to not fewer than a hundred players that Strauss envisioned to realize the large-canvas work that, from the historical perspective, represents the pinnacle of programmatic music. Yet nothing seems to be lacking in the performance we hear on the present CD, so we have to assume that Casadesus had his musicians playing their hearts out, with a bravura and bloom that are very attractive.

When Strauss premiered *Ein Heldenleben* in 1898, his critics were quick to assume that he himself was the hero of the piece. He was considered a monumental egotist, and he *did* include no fewer than 30 quotations from his earlier works in the movement entitled "The Hero's Works of Peace" (*Des Helden Friedenswerke*). He also lampooned his critics with cacophonous, sheep-like bleating sounds in *Des Helden Widersacher* (usually translated "The Hero's Enemies," although "Detractors" would be more accurate). And he portrayed the joys of domestic life and love in "The Hero's Companion" (*Des Helden Gefährtin*) in ways that reminded his contemporaries of the hot-tempered,

considered an old-fashioned procedure. But it has its purpose, for the composer wanted to plant its haunting, yearning melody firmly in our minds, as he was to use it later (with great effect) in the finale, where it serves as counterpoint to the savage splendor of the movement's boisterous opening section. Other features of the work that will linger long in your memory include the scampering, rhythmically incisive Scherzo and the rising violin melody and rapturous clarinet solo in the Adagio that echo the love duet in the composer's opera *Francesca da Rimini*. And let's not forget and the cascading sounds evoking the pealing of bells at the climax of the finale, creating a mood of ecstasy for the listener. Emotionally as well as structurally, this is one big symphony, ending in the composer's characteristic four-note signature at the very end (and incidentally, scanning with the word RACH-MAN-I-NOFF).

Anatoly Liadov's mysterious tone poem *The Enchanted Lake* gets a poetically sensitive performance and more-robust-than-usual sonic support from the Bis engineers. Curiously, the music ends more than half a minute from the end of the track, and it is clearly *not* an instance of a slowly fading pianissimo. Why so much dead space? The mystery of *The Enchanted Lake* deepens.



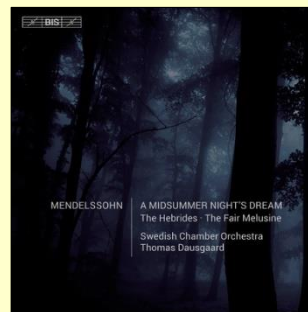
Stravinsky: *Petrushka* (1947 Version) + Mussorgsky-Ravel: *Pictures at an Exhibition* - Mariss Jansons, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra
BR-Klassik

The attraction here is that we have two powerhouses of the symphonic repertoire, captured in full-blooded performances by Mariss Jansons and the Bavarian RSO and recorded in sonics that give us all the top-to-bottom range of the music. It's been a long time (maybe never) since I've heard a *Petrushka* in this class, and the Mussorgsky *Pictures* are at least competitive with the best recordings available.

coquettish operatic diva that he married!

Much of this autobiographical stuff, of course, is beside the point today, as we have not had to deal, happily or otherwise, with the personality of Richard Strauss (1864-1949) for more than sixty years. What we are left with is a highly enjoyable romp of some three-quarters of an hour (47:34 in the present instance) that moves with such sweeping, consummate assurance that we are scarcely aware of the passage of time because we are so busy being enchanted and entertained. The sound of the orchestra in this recording is lush and sentimental without being cloying. Of special note is the solo violin of concertmaster Fernand Iaciu, pointing up the interplay of lovers in "The Hero's Companion" and the mood of the "Resignation" section of "The Hero's Withdrawal from the World and Consummation." As in Strauss' own life journey, it takes a long time for his hero to get consummated. Casadesus' pacing in this movement is superb, aided by the outstanding playing of the lower brass and a pastoral interlude for cor anglais, bassoon, harp and strings that provides just the right note of leavening to preclude stark tragedy.

A different sort of mood pervades *Chant funébre* (Funeral Ode) by French composer Albéric Magnard (1865-1914) who became a national hero when he defended his home, exchanging fire with invading German soldiers rather than surrender to them. In the end, *les Boches* won, Magnard perished, and the ode he composed in 1895 in memory of his father became his own memorial. A solemn, deliberately paced work that moves with a steady beat, lightened by a note of optimism near the end, it is given an eloquent performance by Casadesus *et cie*.



Mendelssohn: *Fair Melusine*, *Hebrides Overtures* and incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* - Thomas Dausgaard, Swedish Chamber Orchestra (Bis) Hybrid SACD, DSD, Surround

Thomas Dausgaard directs the Swedish Chamber Orchestra in warmly affectionate and nicely detailed accounts of some of Felix Mendelssohn's best-loved music, captured in optimal sonics by the engineers at Bis Records. The program actually begins with one of the composer's lesser-known items, his concert overture *The Fair Melusine*.

The story is taken from a medieval legend in France

Petrushka is performed here in Stravinsky's 1947 version, which stacks up the best as a symphonic work. At the same time, enfolded by the outer movements capturing the color, bustle and excitement of a Shrovetide Fair (the equivalent of Mardi Gras or Fasching in Old Russia), we have two central movements devoted to the deadly rivalry of the hapless clown Petrushka and the brutal and sensual Blackamoor for the attention of the fickle Ballerina.

This story-within-the-story resulted from Stravinsky's change of direction as he adapted a concert-piece evoking the local color of the fair itself into a drama with a human element that was suitable for the ballet he wanted to write. As a result, we get a strong impression of the work's montage effect, resulting from overlapping sonic images, similar to what occurs with visual images in the cinema. From the point of view of the orchestra and conductor, this places a powerful emphasis on pacing and split-second timing, areas in which Jansons and the BRSO do not fail to satisfy our expectations.

The principals in this existential drama may be puppets, manipulated by a charlatan, but the emotions of love, passion, anger, and blood lusts, culminating in Petrushka's murder, are all-too human. Add in all the flavorful details of the surrounding tableaux – maids ogled by soldiers, a peasant with a dancing bear, revelers in masks, dancing coachmen cracking their whips – and you have one thrilling orchestral work. Without losing any of the swift flow of events, Jansons captures the fine details to perfection.

There's more good work in Mussorgsky's Pictures, where the weight of the lower strings and percussion in the BRSO comes into play in numerous places, giving this work the top-to-bottom brilliance it deserves. It's all here: the noble Promenade theme, varied to suit the context on each new appearance; the poignant song of the alto saxophone in "The Old Castle," singing a lament for the vanished glory of the past; the lumbering of the ox-cart in "Cattle" through a superbly handled crescendo-diminuendo, emblematic of a toil-weary world. Even the light-pastel tableaux such as "Ballet of Unhatched Chicks in Their Shells," "Tuileries," "and "The Market at Limoges" do not seem superficial in this account, though the trenchant social commentary of "Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle" somehow manages to escapes us in the present performance.

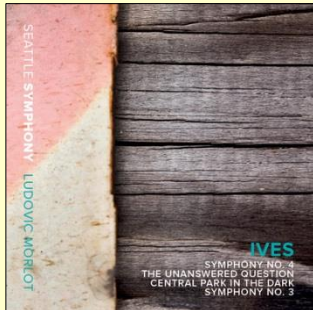
Jansons is right on the money in a fine account of the gloomy "Catacombs: *con Mortuis in Lingua mortua*" tableau, with its solemn hymn providing consolation for loss in its depiction of the dead sleeping peacefully. Two really awesome tableaux follow next: a "Baba Yaga" whose ferocity reminds us that the fabled witch of Russian folklore was not less than a cannibal, and "The Great Gate of Kiev," in which all the orchestra's resources come together in building up the magnificent climax. I can recommend this account of Pictures in spite of the fact that the competition is fierce!

and the Low Countries of a gallant knight, Raymond of Poitou, who proposed marriage to the fair Melusine, not knowing she was of supernatural lineage. She accepted, on the condition that he was never to view her while dressing or in her bath. When he finally discovered her secret – namely, that she was a mermaid or a serpent from the waist down – he was horrified. For her part, she turned into a dragon and flew off, never to return. (That's the way these things happen, folks!) Mendelssohn's music captures the essential elements of the story, including a flowing melody in the woodwinds representing the courtly gallantry of medieval times, the deepening sense of mystery, and finally discrete horror at the discovery of Melusine's secret – though the return of the courtly music at the end suggests reconciliation.

The major part of the program (49:26) deals with the famous overture and incidental music for A Midsummer Night's Dream. Mendelssohn knew the play intimately from his childhood years, and he laid Shakespeare's story out in terms that can be readily understood by those familiar with it without the tiresome necessity of consulting a literary programme. We are also given the *complete* incidental music, so we don't have any problems in continuity as we follow the quarreling fairy king and queen, Puck's mischievous spell on the pairs of moon-crossed lovers, the shimmering staccato quarter-notes in the flutes representing the nimble dances of the sprites and elves, the anxiety of the benighted lovers in the dark woods, or the mood introduced by the horns in the Notturmo as the mortals drift into slumber and awake to find the spells reversed.

It's all there, including the clumsy dances of Nick Bottom and his chums, the mock funeral march for Pyramus and Thisbe, the exuberant Wedding March, and the Final Scene music that brings all the tangled elements together and resolves all conflicts. No wonder Mendelssohn's music has enjoyed such universal popularity for almost 200 years. Under Dausgaard's guidance the members of the orchestra make thrice-familiar music sound as fresh as new paint. Especially noteworthy is soprano Camilla's Tilling's song with chorus, "*Bunte Schlange, zweigezüngt*" (Ye spotted snakes with double tongue).

The Hebrides Overture was inspired by Mendelssohn's 1829 visit to Fingal's Cave on a small, uninhabited island off the NW coast of Scotland. He was impressed deeply by the feelings of loneliness and desolation he got from this place, as well as the relentless pounding of the green, foam-flecked sea on the natural basalt formations that must have struck his imagination as resembling the pipes of some vast organ. It's all there in the swirling figures in the orchestration, the rich harmonies, and the relentless, downward plunging chords, representing the irresistible force of the elements. Dausgaard and the SCO capture all these things admirably, making this performance competitive with the hundred or so other recordings on the market.



Ives: Symphonies 3, 4; The Unanswered Question, Central Park in the Dark – Ludovic Morlot, Seattle Symphony Orchestra (Seattle Symphony Media)

Another winner on the Seattle Symphony's fine self-produced label has music director Ludovic Morlot conducting the orchestra in a program that will probably make new friends for American composer Charles Ives (1874-1954). The selections, and the no-nonsense compelling performances on this release, serve to help make an enigmatic figure more comprehensible than what we have often experienced in the past.

Did I say "enigmatic"? Ives, who by his own decision abandoned composition in January 1927, never heard many of his works performed in his lifetime, and some of those in the present program had to wait as many as four decades for their premiere performances and recordings. Among the most intriguing are the two at the heart of the program, *The Unanswered Question* and *Central Park in the Dark* (both 1908). Ives envisioned them as a contrasted pair. The former, which may have taken its title from Emerson's "Thou art the unanswered question," pits the "question", a non-tonal phrase in the trumpet, heard seven times without any change in emphasis or dynamics, against a quartet of woodwinds that attempt to "answer" it with increasing urgency and no discernible success a total of six times, falling silent at the last. All this is set against a soft unchanging backdrop of strings that Ives likened to "the silence of the Druids." One might also be reminded of lines from Stehen Crane: "A man said to the universe: 'Sir, I exist!' 'However,' replied the universe, 'The fact has not created in me a sense of obligation.'"

If that isn't enough to convey the message of a deaf and unfeeling cosmos, *Central Park in the Dark* will certainly complete the job. Quiet, slow-moving strings, heard offstage this time, convey the "silent darkness" (an Ives preoccupation) that serves as a backdrop for the sounds of woodwinds, brass, and percussion evoking human activity in the city at night – sounds that seem to drift in and out as if by chance in what is really a carefully structured Ivesian chaos. It races to a climax that is then cut off abruptly, leaving us only with the silence of the night. Whether that silence is somehow more transparent and satisfying than what we heard earlier will depend on the listener.



Music for Brass Septet: 3
Transcriptions performed by Septura
(Naxos)

The London-based brass ensemble Septura, consisting of Alan Thomas and Simon Cox, trumpets in B-flat; Huw Morgan, trumpet in E-flat; Peter Smith, tuba; Matthew Gee and Matthew Knight, trombones; and Dan West, bass trombone, have the resources and the flair to pull off an intriguing and demanding slate of Russian music. All the works on the program are transcriptions by either Cox or Knight. They were inspired by the group's frequent doleful observation that neither Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Scriabin, or Rachmaninov left any music specifically for brass ensemble, though all four frequently wrote passages of utter brilliance for the brass in their symphonies and operas. So the present endeavor by Septura is in the interest of fairness, pure and simple. Why should the orchestras have all the fun?

It begins with Quartet No. 8, Op. 110 by Shostakovich. And who but *this* composer would have marked three of its five movements *Largo*? That would normally be a recipe for tedium, but not in the present case. Seems Shostakovich was going through a period of depression at the time, and even confided to a friend his thoughts of committing suicide. (That may be debatable, as people who actually do it seldom talk about it beforehand.) More to the point, he was most certainly influenced by the sight of the ruins of allied bombing raids, still visible in many places, during a 1960 visit to Dresden. Triple-stab staccato flashes and low droning sounds in the fourth movement have suggested frantic AA fire and the humming of heavy bombers to many listeners. And the *Largo* movements may be slow, but they are filled with incidents as memorable in these brass transcriptions as they were in the string quartet version.

The Prokofiev selections include the famous March from *The Love for Three Oranges* (even more piquant here than in the famous symphonic version) and a suite of four pieces – Marche, Gavotte, Scherzo humoristique and Allemande – arranged from 10 Pieces for Piano, Op. 12. Prokofiev's love of spiky rhythms and comic effects that do not shy away from the grotesque and inelegant are well-represented.

Alexander Scriabin is heard from in a suite of pieces culled from his early career. He was nonetheless

Symphony No. 3, "The Camp Meeting," which follows next, would seem at first to be incongruous in terms of what we have just heard. In its three movements - "Old Foks Gathering" "Children's Day," and "Communion" - we hear evocations of old time religion. They reflect Ives' abiding love (which is sincere, and not ironic) for the hymns of his youth. This work makes a bizarre contrast with the two existential night-pieces that precede it in the program, although Ives, being what he is, *does* indulge in the occasional "wrong" note and off-key church bells at the end. But the basic mood of the work is positive and up-beat. It does not necessarily reflect a contradiction in Ives' character: when you are adrift in the cosmos, it's a good idea to have a reliable sea-anchor.

Symphony No. 4, which actually leads off the program, may be Ives' greatest and most ambitious work. Set for a very large orchestra that includes two pianos (used percussively), an organ, and a mixed chorus, it makes much use of sections of the orchestra that are virtually independent from each other in tone, rhythm, harmony, and so forth, so that in performance it requires several assistant conductors to hold it together (No fewer than three are credited here). The question of the reality of existence gets a thorough Ivesian working-out in the course of its four movements. The first concludes with a stirring account of "Watchman, tell us of the night" for full chorus. The second, which Ives enigmatically termed a "Comedy" (perhaps in the Dantean sense?) incorporates fleeting snatches of patriotic and popular songs and hymns such as "In the Sweet Bye and Bye," "Beulah Land," "Marching through Georgia," "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," and "Nearer, My God, to Thee" (I also seem to hear "Sweet Genevieve" and

Continued in Column 2 ==>



Ginastera: Orchestra works – Estancia, Ollantay, Pampeana No. 3 – Juanjo Mena, BBC Philharmonic (Chandos)

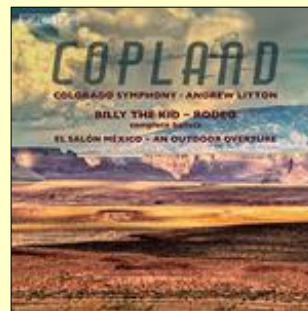
This is probably the best chance we've had in years to hear the rich and strange music of Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983) performed by a major orchestra. His distinctly modern music is unique in that it is clearly influenced by the music of the Argentine folk before it got urbanized, came under the spell of the Tango, and ultimately resulted in Astor Piazzolla and the Buenos Aires school that followed after him. There

already Scriabin, and his penchant for unusual color effects and harmonies, foreshadowing his future break with conventional tonality in favor of ever-greater chromatic freedom, are evident in these six brief pieces, marked Maestoso, Scherzoso, Lento, con Stravaganza (*and how!*), Lento, and Allegro. Indeed, the greater variety of timbres in these transcriptions for brass may bring out the character of Scriabin's writing better than the original piano versions.

Finally, we have a substantial Rachmaninov program beginning with his often-transcribed Vocalise, originally for solo voice and piano. It is followed by four of his 6 Duets, Op. 11, entitled Russian Theme, Scherzo, Romance, and *Slava!* The first-named has echoes of *Ochi chornyeh*, and the last was Rachmaninov's arrangement of the chorus from Mussorgsky's Coronation Scene in Boris Godunov. In this charming suite we hear echoes of Russian folk songs and liturgy and especially the sounds of distant bells that enchanted the composer all his life. As elsewhere on this CD program, the flavorful brass timbres in these imaginative transcriptions, plus splendid performances by septura, help to define the character of all these pieces.

Continued from previous column:

"Columbia, Gem of the Ocean"). The third movement is a fugue which, in its simplicity and purity of form, could not contrast more strikingly with the other movements. The finale, which incorporates a large percussion ensemble and puts the orchestra and wordless chorus through a taxing succession of crescendos and decrescendos, is incredibly complex, demanding the virtuosity and professionalism only possible in a major orchestra such as the Seattle.



Copland: Billy the Kid, Rodeo, An Outdoor Overture, El Salon Mexico – Andrew Litton, Colorado Symphony Orchestra (Bis Records) Hybrid SACD, Surround

On this Bis Records offering, we hear the essence of what makes Aaron Copland's music merely memorable and what makes it great. We hear it all, thanks to superb performances by the Colorado Symphony Orchestra under music director Andrew Litton, and also the first-rate support they get from the Bis engineers.

The program points up what I've always suspected

is an earthy, brooding quality to so much of his music, breathing the vastness and sadness of the Pampas, the primitive chants of the indigenous people of his country, and the hard, active life of the Argentine cowboy, the Gaucho. Add his radical composition techniques, and you have the heady brew that Spanish maestro Juanjo Mena and the BBC Philharmonic serve up here for our enjoyment.

The program consists of three major orchestral works: the “almost-symphony” suites Pampeana No. 3 (1954) and Ollantay (1947) and the complete ballet Estancia (1941), which was the work that first stamped the composer as a figure to be reckoned with. Estancia (the Ranch), like so many of Ginastera’s signature works, is infused with the vital energy of the *malambo*, an exclusively masculine dance, usually in 6/8, in which the gauchos traditionally competed with one another to prove who had the most machismo.

We hear it in the introduction, “*El Amanecer*” (Dawn) depicting the bustling life of a big ranch. Scene 3, “*La Tarde*” (Afternoon) captures the brooding melancholy of the Pampas leavened by the excitement of a Rodeo episode in which a city boy wins the admiration of a country girl by his skill in taming wild horses – an element of intrigue that provides most of the story in a ballet that is basically local color and atmosphere. The highlight of the fourth scene is a slow, magical Nocturne featuring a baritone soloist (Lucas Somoza Osterc handles it very capably in the present instance). Finally, Scene 5 marks a return to the driving 6/8 rhythms of the *malambo*, slowly at first, and then building up to a smashing climax in which the city boy wins the dance contest with the gauchos – a hypnotic moment that never fails to captivate live audiences and home listeners.

In Pampeana No. 3, Ginastera aimed at evoking the silence and the brooding aspect of that vast expanse of grassland, together with the transformations it undergoes in the changing light of the day. The “profound tranquility” (Ginastera’s description) of the Pampas in the first and third movements is contrasted by the hard-driving rhythms, especially in the lower strings and percussion, of a *malambo* characterized by repeated quarter-notes and wild syncopations, akin in spirit to the dances we heard in Estancia.

Ollantay was inspired by the culture of pre-Columbian times. The loneliness and uneasy tranquility of the night in the opening moment give way dramatically to the second, in which the warrior Ollantay and his companions prepare for battle against the Inca. Brass and percussion come to the fore in music that becomes ever more frenzied as it imposes time signatures of 5/8 and 6/8 over a basically regular 2/4. Things become more intense, ending in a coda marked *Presto e agitato* (Fast and agitated - and brother, does Ginastera mean it!) The final movement deals with the death of Ollantay and his dying prophesy that the Inca themselves will be destroyed by the appearance of the “sons of the Sun” (European conquerors), with undulating rhythms and

about Copland, namely that his enduring reputation among concert goers and home listeners is based primarily on the three great ballets on American folklore subjects, rather than his “pure” music that has no dance or program associations. That’s because he wasn’t very good at writing melodies that stay in our minds long after we’ve been exposed to them, and melody, despite the scant respect shown it by 20th century modernism, remains at the heart of music. A major reason why the Three Great Ballets (two of which we hear on the present CD) are such perennial favorites is that the choreographers Copland worked with, Martha Graham, Agnes de Mille, and Lincoln Kirstein, insisted on using themes from American music, even providing the composer with hymn tunes and cowboy songs for inspiration.

A good example of the other side of Aaron Copland can be found in the work that leads off the program, An Outdoor Overture (1938). Here, he aimed at music that would be “optimistic in tone and appeal to the adolescent youth of this country.” Consequently, a lot happens here in just over 8 minutes. It opens with a grandiose theme for solo trumpet with pizzicato accompaniment by the strings. We are then greeted with snappy march themes, more solos for flute, clarinet, and trumpet, and a big build-up to a finish in which all the themes are combined. And oh yes, the percussion section get in their licks, too! But at the end, we are just left thinking “Gee, what a brilliant job of orchestration!”

In Billy the Kid (1938) we hear the happier result that occurred when the composer had attractive source material to work with, in this case a sheaf of cowboy songs provided by Kirstein. Copland, who despised the genre, was at first sceptical but later came under the spell of these simple, unaffected tunes and used them with great freedom, altering them as necessary to fit the melodic and harmonic contours of what he had to say. The result is the compelling story of the rise to notoriety and fall of the famous American outlaw. However much Copland altered them, one can still detect the basic tunes of “Old Chisholm Trail,” “Git Along, Little Dogies,” “Good-bye, Old Paint,” and “Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie.” He did, however, omit “Home on the Range,” expaining succinctly that “I had to draw the line somewhere.” (We understand, Aaron!)

El Salon México (1933-1936), up next, was inspired by Copland’s visit to a dance hall of that name south of the border. A colorful flavor emanated from its three salons for different clientele ranging from nightclub swells to the poor folk who danced barefoot (“Please don’t throw lighted cigarette butts on the floor”). Its customers were frisked for artillery before they entered. As in his ballets, Copland incorporated authentic folk material in the score of this atmospheric symphonic sketch which ended up in part as a tribute to the Mexican people themselves – “their humanity, their separate shyness, their dignity and unique charm.”

Finally, Rodeo (1942) found Copland at the top of his

stabbing accents in the background that emphasize the point.

So, here is the kind of all-Ginastera program by a major orchestra that we have mostly been starved for since Sir Leon Goosens and the London Symphony performed *Estancia* and *Panambi* on a memorable Everest release (1960). Ginastera is not always the most immediately engaging of composers, but his immense vital energy, captured on the present release by Juanjo Mena and the BBC and released in 24 bit / 96kHz sound, speaks for itself.

form in the way he used music to paint pictures and tell a story. We are given the complete ballet in five scenes, rather than the Four Dance Episodes we often hear. "Ranch House Party," which is usually the odd man out in the symphony hall, is presented here with conductor Linton himself playing the "honky tonk" piano. Employing many of the folk and cowboy songs provided him by Agnes de Mille in her blocking of the entire show, Copland used the tools in his repertoire as composer to create indelible pictures of alienation, wistful yearning, and bursting activity as the story's cowgirl heroine discovers she can attract more men with a pretty dress and a lonesome step than she could hope to do by roping and riding. There is a beautiful bloom in the strings of the CSO in the "Saturday night Waltz" episode with its long, graceful sweep, and plenty of raw excitement in the "Hoe Down" finale (known to present-day Americans as the music under the TV commercial "Beef – It's What's for Dinner").

Beethoven: Symphony No. 5 in C minor / Symphony No. 7 in A
Manfred Honeck, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
(Reference Recordings SACD 5.1 & Stereo / CD Stereo)

The Pittsburgh Symphony, under its Austrian music director Manfred Honeck, has come out with bravura performances of Beethoven's Fifth and Seventh Symphonies that are bound to attract a lot of media attention for the superb way Honeck stages them. His emphasis is on pace, fluidity of movement, and the vivid contrasts that bring out the drama and the monumental nature of both symphonies.



Honeck does not take his Beethoven for granted. On the contrary, he is keenly aware of the ways the composer creates intense drama by the manner in which he structures events. For one famous instance, we have the double four-note motto *ta-ta-ta-Taaa*, followed by full holds, at the very opening of the Fifth Symphony. As obvious as this may seem to us today, the purpose was misunderstood throughout the 19th century, when it was generally taken as a stand-alone exordium and the tempo was taken up only after the second hold. That approach negated the vital tension between the urgency of the three eighth notes in the motto and the freezing effect of the unmeasured *Taaa* – something which Honeck clearly observes. Or listen to the measured way in which composer and conductor take the slow movement, *Andante con moto*, as it works its way through a series of variations and builds to several splendid crescendos. And the absolutely stunning way the final movement springs to life from the last bars of the scherzo speaks for itself. The maelstrom of furious activity that possesses the orchestra as the work hurtles toward its final conclusion has seldom been captured as well as it is here. The symphony, which began in C minor, ends in a really triumphant C major – a resolution that gave Beethoven's contemporaries fits, but not the composer himself, who observed "Joy follows sorrow, sunshine—rain."

The Seventh Symphony, like the Eighth which Beethoven was composing at the same time, is remarkable for not possessing a slow movement. What we have instead is a smartly and subtly paced Allegretto in the form of a double set of variations ending in a fugato. For all that, the music we actually hear doesn't seem doggedly learned. Quite the contrary. The liveness and rhythmic flexibility of Beethoven's themes as they are passed among the sections of the orchestra is nothing short of miraculous. The work as a whole is characterized by dance-like tempos, dotted rhythms, and repeated rhythmic figures – so much so that no less an authority than Richard Wagner famously referred to it as "the apotheosis of the dance." Honeck captures this aspect of the Seventh Symphony to absolute perfection.

He does this right down to the pizzicati at the end of the Allegretto. As the conductor recalls in his performance notes, the use of plucked instead of bowed notes at the end of this movement was something he learned during his apprenticeship as assistant to Carlos Kleiber, who claimed to have seen it in Beethoven's own autograph which was then in the possession of his father, Erich Kleiber, and has since been lost. Employing pizzicati is a very effective way of ending this particular movement, although I do not recall that this practice is as rare as Honeck would seem to suggest.

This conductor also pays more than mere lip service to Beethoven's metronomic markings in all four movements. The metronome had been invented in Beethoven's lifetime, and he seized upon it as a means of keeping other musicians from butchering his music through their own misguided virtuosity. The controversy over the impossibly fast tempi resulting from Beethoven's markings has continued to the present day, and was exacerbated more than a decade ago by an arguably bizarre Beethoven cycle that Sir Roger Norrington recorded with the London Classical Players. Honeck makes intelligent but not slavish use of Beethoven's metronome markings, and the results are energetic and bracing without seeming extreme. With durations of 31:21 and 38:55 for the Fifth and Seventh, respectively, his overall timings are within normal limits. And as I've previously hinted, Honeck's grasp of rhythmic flexibility and overall fluidity of movement are exceptional. Superior engineering (you can always hear the vital role of the cellos and basses at any point in either symphony) helps make this entry easy to recommend.