

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

February, 2018

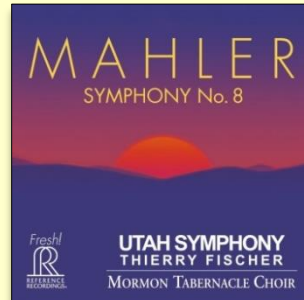


"A Beethoven Odyssey," Vol. 5
James Brawn, piano
(MSR Classics)

James Brawn adds to his status as a world-class Beethoven interpreter in this latest eagerly awaited installment in his series "A Beethoven Odyssey." We are served up unjustly neglected sonatas that have not achieved the highest acclaim, partly because none has a memorable nickname. Yet all four sonatas in this program capture an exciting moment in Beethoven's career when, still in his twenties and in full possession of his hearing, he was establishing himself concurrently as both virtuoso and composer.

First, we have Piano Sonatas Nos. 5 in C minor, 6 in F major, and 7 in D major, Op. 10. They reveal a young Beethoven already famed as much for his broad humor as for his breathtaking virtuosity. No. 5, in three contrasted movements, features dramatic intensity, warmth and pathos, in a work notable, particularly in its day, for its extreme dynamic range. The organic way themes sprout forth in the opening Allegro and the playful nervous energy that informs the Prestissimo must have made quite an impression on Beethoven's audiences.

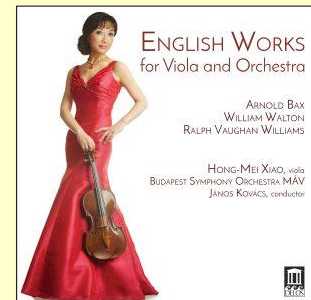
No. 6, the shortest and lightest of the three, allows the artist the chance to display fine fingerwork in the trilling figurations, broken octaves and hand crossings of the opening Allegro. Another sure audience-pleaser is the *opera buffa*-like high-low dialog between the hands at opposite ends of the keyboard. The Allegretto, a minuet in the place of a slow movement, strikes an



Mahler: Symphony No. 8 - Thierry Fischer, Utah Symphony Orchestra (Reference Recordings Hybrid SACD)

The first thing you notice about Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 8 in E-flat Major is its requirement for mammoth forces. In the bad old days before symphony musicians got union scale, it was termed the "Symphony of a Thousand," and that was indeed almost exactly the number of instrumentalists and singers that were present at its premiere in Munich on September 12, 1910. The singers are present almost continuously throughout the entire work (at times in the past they were even obliged to remain standing throughout the performance!), making the Eighth in effect a synthesis of symphony and oratorio. In Mahler's own words, "Try to imagine the whole universe beginning to ring and resound. These are no longer human voices, but planets and suns revolving." Mahler felt justified in calling for cosmic forces because his subject was nothing less than the miracle of divine love and the redemption and salvation of a sinner.

The present performance, recorded live at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City 19-20 February, 2016, is realized by something less than a thousand musicians, but the numbers are still impressive, involving an augmented Utah Symphony Orchestra, 8 SATB soloists, a Mormon Tabernacle Choir of just under 400 members, and the children's voices of the Madeleine Choir School. Mahler often uses these forces sparingly, so that his textures frequently have an amazing chamber music-like clarity. When they are massed, as in the climax of the Latin hymn *Veni, creator*



English Works for Viola and Orchestra by Bax, Walton, Vaughan Williams Hong-Mei Xiao, viola (Delos)

Hong-Mei Xiao, Chinese violinist who studied at Shanghai Conservatory and at SUNY Stony Brook in the United States, shows her virtuosity on the viola in a program devoted to music by three eminent English composers: Arnold Bax, William Walton, and Ralph Vaughan Williams. On the present CD, the willowy beauty cultivates an irresistible warmth that encompasses the full tonal range and expressive capability of the viola, larger and longer-necked cousin of the violin that has too often been sold short by composers as a solo instrument.

Having said that, it is small wonder that English composers of the 20th century have shown an unusual partiality for this instrument, as its range and the warmth of its lower register correspond to that of the human voice, particularly as we find it in the folk songs of the British Isles.

Arnold Bax, one of the earliest, was remarkable for his coruscating colors and luminous harmonies. We find these qualities, plus a keen appreciation of instrumental timbres and a real melodic freshness, in *Phantasy for Viola and Orchestra* (1920). Hong-Mei captures the spirit of this composer, who is still in the process of being re-discovered, in his love of folk songs, marches, and dances, including the fiddle music of Ireland, his adopted homeland. A gorgeous vocal melody at about the 4:00 mark and a rousing dance at about 8:00 reveal this composer at his best. (I say "about" because it is difficult to be more precise about the timings of fetching

untypically serious mood in the first half of the measure (It scans with the alto aria "Who may abide the day of His coming?" from Handel's Messiah). Then the tempo picks up in the second half and we realize that it *is* in dance time after all. In the scurrying Presto finale, Beethoven puts the theme through a myriad of changes. All of this requires more than mere technique. You also need to have a feeling for comedy, in which regard James Brawn exceeds all other performers I have heard. (His own pet name for this sonata is "the Jester.")

No. 7, in four movements that follow the classical pattern fast-slow-dance-fast, is the longest and greatest of the Op. 10 sonatas. It starts off with a "Mannheim rocket," a device based on a phrase in ascending staccato octaves followed immediately by a legato descending phrase: a sure attention-grabber. The slow movement, *Largo e mesto* (Slow and Sad), has funereal connotations in its repeated notes, evocative of bells or drum taps. Its slow progress creates an unbearable tension, relieved only briefly by an uplifting theme that struggles hopelessly against the prevailing gloom (Brawn imagines the mournful sobbing cries of a man in torment) until the movement finally evanesces into almost inaudible fragments at the end. We return to life and joy, and even a little fun, in the Menuetto and Trio. The Rondo finale seems to ask a not-too-serious question many times over, allowing opportunity for numerous changes in dynamics, notes, and rhythm, and ending in an abrupt dramatic silence.

Sonata No. 10 in G major, Op. 14, No. 2, finds Beethoven up to his old tricks in terms of rhythmic ambiguity, with many key changes, sudden pauses, dramatic contrasts, and (yes!) even a jest: a Scherzo in Rondo form that takes the place of the usual finale.

spiritus (Come, Creator Spirit) which constitutes Part I of the symphony, the effect can be overpowering, bathing the listener in melismatic waves of sound – Mahler's preoccupation with "planets and suns revolving." After the big surge that accompanies the words "*Accende lumen sensibus*" (Illuminate our senses), the the pace picks up as the music moves relentlessly to its climax.

Following Part I, which is as powerful a presence in music as an audience could be reasonably expected to endure in just 22 minutes, Part II, the remainder of the symphony, is Mahler's fantastic setting of the final Scene from Goethe's Faust. Here, the vocalists come into play along with the choirs and orchestra as various symbolic figures (two holy hermits, a Marian theologian, a *Magna Peccatrix*, who is presumably the Woman Taken in Adultery, Maria Aegyptica, and a Samaritan Woman) plead before the Queen of Heaven for the redemption of Faust's soul. They are joined by Gretchen, the woman Faust had cast aside. The Chorus of Blessed Boys here represents the need for a simple, childlike faith, a frequent theme of Mahler's. The singers' tessituras are stretched, but never strained beyond the breaking point, and Part II comes across more satisfactorily than we might have expected for all its complexity.

Thierry Fischer, at the podium, keeps things moving so briskly that the Eighth clocks in at just a few seconds under 80 minutes' total duration. (I've heard other accounts that ran as long as 98). He does an admirable job with the score's great proliferation of cueing-points, so the performance comes across smoothly as well. And he builds the really **big** climaxes in Part I with commendable assurance. The sonic engineers do their part as well, so that the overall acoustic possesses remarkable clarity. All of that is essential in a recorded work that you may not want to audition every day of the week but will want to enjoy optimal sound when you do hear it.

melodies that seem to magically emerge from the mist and vanish back into it in a work that is so *very* rhapsodic in nature.)

Sir William Walton's Concerto for Viola and Orchestra (1929) is significant for its vibrant musical language and synthesis of romantic, impressionistic, and modern sounds. As Hong-Mei shows us, this is one of Walton's finest works. The finale is particularly inspired, with a ravishing viola melody that holds our attention between 9:29 and 11:00, and then is succeeded, after an oboe passage in which you can almost taste the reedy timbre, by an even more poignant melody for the soloist.

Ralph Vaughan Williams' Suite for Viola and Orchestra (1933-1934) is filled with the elements that make this composer's music so compelling, and occasionally exasperating. After a Prelude that seems to include an English folk tune, the suite swings with manic alacrity among seven strongly contrasted movements: a charming Carol, a rambunctious Christmas Dance, a moving Ballad, a disjunctive Moto Perpetuo, and a Musette that, unusually for a simple folk dance, rivals the Ballad as the deep point of emotion in this suite. It concludes with a really strange Polka Melancolique that, true to its name, is so dispirited that one would never be tempted to dance to it, even if such a thing were possible, and then an electrifying Galop that is far removed from the quiet simplicity of the Carol.

All of this provides Hong-Mei with abundant opportunity to display her prowess as she negotiates the slides, stops, rhythmic passages and gorgeous tonalities that make the music of "VW" what it is. Kudos are also due the Budapest Symphony Orchestra MAV under Janos Kovacs for their yeoman support in helping make this album one of the new year's best surprises.

N.B.: For a fascinating documentary on this orchestra and the role it played in lifting the spirits of Hungarians after the disaster of WWII, just Google "The Rolling Orchestra: A History of the MAV Symphony Orchestra."

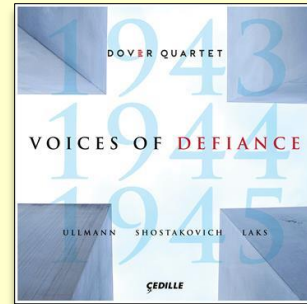


Busoni: Piano Music, Vol. 9
Wolf Harden, piano (Naxos)

German pianist Wolf Harden, a native of Hamburg, does a bang-up job with the latest installment of his ongoing series of the piano music of Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924). This composer was born near Florence, Italy, studied in Vienna and Leipzig, and resided in Berlin for most of his adult life. The pieces on Vol. 9 in the series all date from Busoni's early years, between the ages of 11 and 15. They are not for that reason jejune. On the contrary, they show an amazing maturity that is absolutely frightening in one who was still too young to shave. The work of other famous composers of such tender years – one thinks of Mozart's earliest piano concertos, Mendelssohn's string symphonies, Rossini's string sonatas – reveals their composers in the process of becoming. At a comparable age, Busoni had already arrived.

Busoni. Who was one of the great pianists of his era, left behind few recordings but an enormous number of piano rolls, giving us an idea of what his prowess must have been. As a piano teacher, he listed Claudio Arrau and Egon Petri among his pupils, while Kurt Weill was the most prominent of his composition students. His own music is exciting, accessible, and endlessly thought-provoking, qualities found even in the earliest works on the present album. His influences included J.S. Bach, whose contrapuntal style he absorbed and assimilated into his own music and also the persuasive expression, and occasional quirkiness, of Robert Schumann. One of his best-known piano works in fact is his inspired arrangement of the Chaconne from Bach's Violin Partita No. 2.

Harden's robust, compelling performances make the best possible case for this composer. The program starts off with *Una festa di villaggio* (A Village Feast, 1881) which contains a variety of character pieces: preparations for the feast, a triumphal march with a wistful central section, a scene in the church with chorale-like harmonies, the festivities themselves, a spirited dance, and the calmness of evening (*Notte*) as the final piece. *Klein Zaches*, the most successful of the three *Racconti fantastici* (Fantastic Tales, 1878) depicts the antics of a misshapen and malevolent dwarf with richly expressive chords and an element of the sardonic that would become part of Busoni's mature style. *Suite campestre* (Pastoral Suite, 1878) includes five more characteristic pieces, including a thrilling hunt (*La caccia*), the headlong figurations of rustic revels (*L'orgia*), and the slow, heavy tread of the hunters and revelers as they wend their way homeward. *Pregghiera della sera* (A Village Prayer) looks forward to Busoni's later style in its ambivalent mixture of resolution and weariness.



Voices of Defiance: Ullmann, Laks, Shostakovich
Dover String Quartet (Cedille Records)

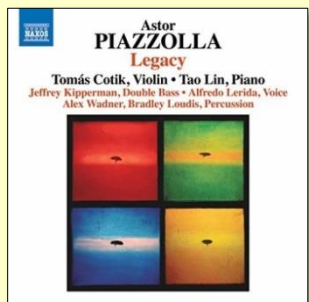
What a find this was! The Dover String Quartet, consisting of Joel Link and Bryan Lee, violins; Milena Pajaro-van den Stadt, viola; and Camden Shaw, cello; have outdone themselves in vital performances of three works of music that convey the suffering, pity, and terror of some of the darkest pages of human history. "Even disregarding the historical context," writes Shaw in the course of his illuminating booklet annotation, "the music itself is so powerful that it can bring tears to one's eyes." (Personally, I can testify to that!)

It is an intriguing program, with two works, as unknown as they are compelling, enfolding one of Dmitri Shostakovich's greatest quartets. Opening the program, we have String Quartet No. 3, Op. 46 by Viktor Ullmann (1898-1944). Born in the present-day Czech Republic, he died in the Auschwitz death camp, as did so many others, simply for the crime of being a Jew. In October, 1944, knowing the fate that awaited him, he entrusted the safekeeping of the manuscript to a friend, so that this powerful personal testament in music might survive him.

It is a remarkable work, revealing the influence of both Schoenberg and Debussy in its mix of Impressionism and 12-tone technique. Freely using tonal music and Debussy-like harmony to temper the 12-tone material, Ullmann created a more attractive-sounding work than would otherwise have been possible. The dreamy atmosphere of the very opening is dispelled by a violent, grotesque explosion in demonic $\frac{3}{4}$ time that eventually dances itself out. "An enigmatic and hauntingly beautiful combination of twelve-tone writing and otherworldly harmonies," comments Shaw. The second, and final, movement begins with all four voices in unison and without any supporting harmonies, so that we are at first unsure whether the mood is upbeat or mocking. At length, we are given another explosion, a ghostly stretto and a thundering fortissimo that unambiguously sounds a note of triumph.

Shostakovich's Quartet No. 2, Op. 68, almost as long in its 36-minute duration as the other two works on this program combined, has a mind-boggling diversity of elements in a work that is virtually of symphonic scope. Composed in the comparative peace of the Soviet artists' retreat outside Ivanovo in 1944, it still reflects the terrors of total war. Though Shostakovich had been spared the ultimate horror of incarceration and death that Ullmann faced, the Russian composer, who had actually lost more of his personal friends to the Stalinist purges than had perished in the war, was still

Danze Antiche (Ancient Dances, 1878-1879), *Cinq Pièces* (Five Pieces, 1877), and *Gavotte* (1880) pay homage to the popular dances of Bach's era and beyond (Minuetto, Gavotta, Giga, Bourée) with a propulsiveness and, occasionally, a terse momentum that are all Busoni.



Astor Piazzolla Legacy – Thomas Cotik, violin; Tao Lin, piano (Naxos)

Thomas Cotik, Argentine-born violinist and teacher who has done some of his best work right here in the USA, is featured once again with his longtime concert partner, Chinese-American pianist Tao Lin, in a program that is guaranteed to make even more friends for the creator and master of the *Tango Nuevo* style, Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992). Honoring Piazzolla on the 25th anniversary of his death, The thirteen tracks on the present CD show the range of moods and textures of one whose music is always very affective, frequently steeped in sadness and melancholy when its tempi and rhythms are most lively.

The stunning arrangements are mostly by Cotik himself, with the further assistance of Osvaldo Calo. They are basically arranged for violin and piano, with the presence of a double bass and a pair of percussionists as occasionally required to enhance a particular piece. We even have a speaking voice in *Balada para un loco* (Ballad for a Madman) to lyrics by Uruguayan poet Horacio Ferrer which appear to comment on the close kinship of madness and creative imagination. One of the finest pieces in this program is *Adios Nonino*, which Piazzolla wrote in memory of his father, in which the mood of dignified sorrow is succeeded at the end by an outburst of joy as if to celebrate a life that is being remembered.

Las cuatro estaciones porteñas (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires, “porteño” being a colloquialism for a native of that city) capture the vividness of life throughout the seasons of the year. Originally written for a quintet of violin, electric guitar, double bass, piano, and a uniquely Argentine type of concertina known as a *bandoneon*, or “squeezebox,” it has frequently been transcribed and has been recorded more often than any other new classical work of the past 30-40 years. Its moods can be outrageously raucous and impudent, with unexpected moments of deep, quiet feeling and passion such as we are given at the end of “*Otoño porteño*,” Autumn. Being a heady fusion of jazz, classical, Afro-Hispanic music, and perhaps even *klezmer*, this music goes right to the heart. Thomas Cotik and Tao Lin masterfully convey the range of moods in music that can be impudent, melancholy, and so flavorfully dissonant one can taste its sadness, changing

keenly aware of the destruction and suffering it had brought about in the course of his rounds as an air raid warden during the long, desperate siege of Leningrad. Consequently, there is an immense amount of imagery in this work which, as Shaw affirms, calls for personal, subjective responses from its interpreters.

An initial ambiguity occurring in the first movement, said to be in A major, results from the fact that the triad is missing from all of the chords, making them open intervals that are not clearly in major or minor mode. “The tone is forceful and strong,” writes Shaw, “but is it good or is it evil?” In the second movement, Recitative and Romance, thoughts of darkness and death melt away into tender, dreamlike imagery, which is in turn replaced by increasing distortion and agitation, and then a cacophonous explosion near the end leaves us in confusion and distress.

In the Waltz movement which follows, muted strings create a ghostly, otherworldly mood that, nonetheless, erupts into shocking violence. The incredibly fast metronome marking, twice that of a normal waltz, lends a sinister aspect to the music – “heightening the chilling impression that this Waltz may not be for the living,” as Shaw aptly puts it. The finale, a Theme with Variations, builds with consummate pacing to an adrenaline-pumping climax that is punctuated at the very end by “three soul-crushing A-minor chords.” Affirmative or negative? We are still left with this agonizing ambiguity.

Szymon Laks (1901-1983), virtually unknown today, is a real discovery. He was a Polish Jew who escaped being gassed at Auschwitz for two and a half years, until the camp was liberated, by virtue of the fact that he was expected to play music for the entertainment of the guards. The experience, described in his memoir *Music of Another World*, left him with ambivalent feelings about the value of music itself (and perhaps twinges of “survivor’s guilt,” as well?)

At any rate, Laks worked out his feelings about his experiences of incarceration and eventual freedom just after the war ended in his String Quartet No. 3 (1945). He based it largely on traditional Polish folk melodies, morale-lifting songs and dances that he had been expressly forbidden to play by his captors during his internment. In this work there is a noticeable progress from darkness and melancholy to something resembling happiness, and even joy, in which you don’t have to use much literary license to imagine the feelings of a released prisoner returning at last to his beloved home village.

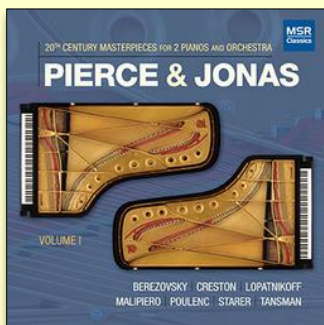
Unmistakable rhythms in the opening movement evoke, appropriately, the whistle and the movement of a train. One train took Laks to Auschwitz, and now another train takes him home. The exaltation he feels does not come without painful memories. The second movement, with its two melancholy, lonesome themes, is described frankly by Shaw as “one of the most impassioned and heartbreaking movements for string quartet I’ve ever heard.” The third movement, with its long, invigorating stretch of unison pizzicati, brings us back to fresh air and sunlight, preparing us for the final experience, supported by the rustic-sounding drone of open fifths, of the homecoming itself. The mood is at first hesitant, as if one does not trust his own heart, and then is gradually replaced by

without a moment's notice, as is its prerogative.

We also have the influence of the *milonga*, a precursor of the tango, with its curiously stressed pulses and irregular rhythms offsetting a steady beat, in "Introduction *al angel*" (Introduction to an Angel), music expressing fervent admiration for a beautiful woman.

feelings of real joy and happiness. Life has begun again!

The pacing by the Dover Quartet, here as elsewhere throughout this program, is superb. A wealth of wonderful detail really justifies the use of 24-bit recording for these performances.



20th Century Masterpieces for 2 pianos & Orchestra by Lopatnikoff¹, Tansman¹, Malipiero¹, Berezovsky², Poulenc², Starer³, Creston² – Joshua Pierce & Dorothy Jonas Piano Duo
David Amos, Slovak State Philharmonic¹ and National Symphony Orchestra of Polish Radio/TV²
Carlos Piantini, Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra³
(MSR Classics, 2-CD slimline)

The great piano duo of Joshua Pierce and Dorothy Jonas really shine in the present remasterings of 1992-1997 recordings. So much so that I'm glad I overcame my habitual reluctance to review unsolicited CD's when this package from project manager Robert LaPorta arrived in the mail with a brief post-it note alerting me that this was something special. *Was he ever right!* This collection of seven unsuspected masterworks for 2 pianos and orchestra underscores the special quality of a musical genre that did not exist in its present form until the early 20th Century.

As opposed to music for piano 4-hands in which the partners share the same keyboard, the duo-piano genre is written to be performed by artists playing two grand pianos with the right (curved) sides of the cases facing each other to facilitate the sightlines. Just as in chamber music, it is vital to see one's partner and the conductor as well. The soloists are designated Piano I and Piano II, but that should not be taken to mean that one is subordinate to the other. Both pianists handle the themes, often tossing them back and forth to one another and the orchestra. The excitement resulting from this sonic mix is like no other in music, and the range and variety of the sounds and rhythms produced can rival that of a symphony orchestra.

Of the seven items on the program, the only one you are likely to have encountered before, even in years of concert-going, is the Concerto in D minor for 2 Pianos and Orchestra by Francis Poulenc. It has all the qualities people love (and sometimes loathe) in Poulenc, including a wide-ranging chromatic palette and a heady mixture of musical influences (children's songs, French music hall-inspired tunes, Balinese gamelan rhythms and dissonances, and New World jazz and blues), all incorporated into Poulenc's distinctively manic style and served up with a rhythmical variety that keeps the listener on the edge of expectation. The Larghetto, which Eric Salzman's booklet annotation characterizes as "pure neo-classicism: Mozart with wrong notes," is the most memorable movement.

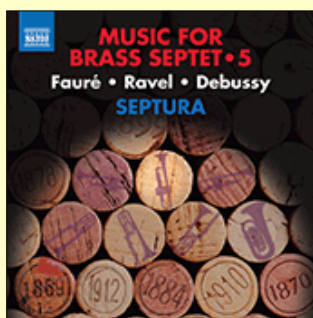
As for the other composers, the works by Nikolai Lopatnikoff (1903-1976), Nikolai Berezovsky 1900-1953), and Paul Creston (1906-1985) received their recording premieres in the present performances by Pierce and Jonas. The opening Allegro risoluto in Lopatnikoff's Concerto for 2 Pianos and Orchestra establishes the neo-classical concertante style right off in its spirited by-play between the two soloists and with the orchestra. The simple lyrical beauty of the Andante movement makes for a touching moment of calm and repose between the outer movements with their hammered chords and big right- and left-hand leaps and scales by the soloists. Berezovsky's Fantasia for 2 Pianos and Orchestra, in a single tightly-wound movement, is very modal and very Russian. The St. Petersburg native who lived and worked with distinction in the U.S. for many years incorporates numerous tempo changes into an exciting work in which the soloists are never silent and strike noticeable sparks with the sizeable orchestra. Creston, the son of Italian immigrants, reveals his distinctively American style in the course of bouncy figurations, triplets, dotted figures and occasional right-hand melodies in the course of his Concerto for 2 Pianos and Orchestra (1951). Without being in the least sentimental, the slow movement, *Andante pastorale*, affords Creston the opportunity for some blues-y music that makes for a nice contrast with the frantic outer sections.

Gian Francesco Malipiero (1882-1973) spent most of his very long life in his native Venice, except for student years in Vienna and Bologna, dying in the house in Asolo, just north of Venice proper, where he lived his last half-century. In spite of that fact, he was no moss-bound recluse but a composer whose brand of neo-classicism, imbued with a pervasive chromaticism and a strangely affecting inward poignancy, even in the fast passages, gives a work like Dialoghi No. VII for 2 Pianos and Orchestra a distinctive voice. Themes and counter-themes in the two pianos pique our attention. The slow movement, a Lento, contains a

poignancy that is all the more affective for being voiced with the restraint that was perhaps Malipiero's heritage as the scion of a proud old Venetian family.

Alexandre Tansman (1897-1986), a native of Łódź, Poland, was, like Malipiero, much enamored of the music of Igor Stravinsky, with whom he studied. We find distinctive traces of it in the neo-classical style of his Suite for Two Pianos and Orchestra, which premiered in Paris in 1930. It combines elements of a typical baroque dance suite and a concerto grosso in a modern idiom. The fourth movement, a set of variations ending in a vigorous double fugue, is the most intriguing. The variations pay tribute to the baroque by including a very expressive Sarabande, and Tansman honors his Polish heritage in a sprightly Polonaise. Finally, Robert Starer (1924-2001), a Vienna native who was much honored during his long residence in the United States, is represented by his Concerto for 2 Pianos and Orchestra (1996), a work remarkable for its attention to matters of rhythm and pulse, its unusual configurations that include a quirky 2/4 + 5/8 played first by the soloists and then spreading to the orchestra, and its build-up to big climaxes. The verve with which Pierce and Jonas toss the themes between themselves and the orchestra betrays their fondness for this work.

Kudoes are also due an often unsung figure, the remastering engineer. I have heard several of the items on this program in a previous CD release on another label and did not find it to have the distinction and clarity that I hear in the remasterings by Richard Price of Candlewood Digital, made expressly for the present compilation

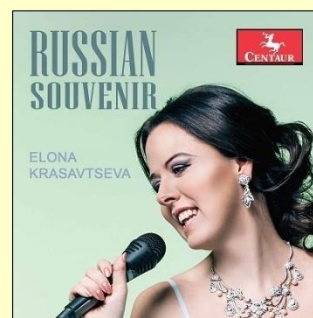


Music for Brass Septet 5: Fauré, Ravel, Debussy – performed by Septura (Naxos)

I really didn't expect Septura would be able to top their earlier release of Russian music (see my *Classical Reviews* for February, 2016), but darned if they haven't gone ahead and done it. A real plus here are their arrangements of specimens by Ravel and Fauré of "la Mélodie," the art song genre of which I have never been particularly fond in the past, despite the French roots of my own family.

To the French, *mélodie* has a distinctly different connotation from *chanson*. The latter are songs that are more or less in the folk tradition. *Mélobies*, by contrast, are in the art song tradition and are set to lyrics by French poets of literary stature. They are roughly the equivalent of German *lieder*, but tend to be more subtle in emotion, much of which is conveyed by their imagery rather than stated directly.

The focus on imagery is particularly important in the selection of six *mélobies* by Gabriel Fauré, as arranged with discretion and beauty by Matthew Knight, one of Septura's two trombonists. The long melismas of "*Après un rêve*" convey the sadness of one's being unable to recall an experience in all its vividness. "*Le Papillon et la Fleur*" is a whimsical flirtation of a butterfly and a flower, exquisitely conveyed by a teasing trombone and a forlorn flugelhorn. "*Automne*" is sad and brooding, and "*Fleur jetée*" (rejected flower) uncommonly impassioned, reflecting their respective subjects. "*Le Secret*" is



"Russian Souvenir," traditional songs performed by Elona Krasavtseva, voice (Centaur)

The delightful voice of Russian folk singer Elona Krasavtseva is heard to optimal effect in "Russian Souvenir," a program of folksongs and romances, some of which will be very familiar to you. Most of these songs are accompanied by instruments, but two are sung a capella: "Wed on the Water" and "River." These are "crying songs" from northern Russia, sung by the girls who prepared the young bride for nuptials that were considered sad events because she might expect to travel far from her native village and her family – and Russia is so very vast!

Other songs are more cheerful, even rousing. The enchantment of the night is captured in such lyrics as "Moon-lit Night" and "Moonlight Shining," while the ever-popular "Kalinka-Malinka" embodies the excitement of two lovers' rendezvous by the garden gate. "Oh, You Wild Veld," "Mother Dear, it's dusty in the field," and "Dear Friend of Mine" are among the other traditional Russian and Ukrainian favorites.

Of particular interest is "Along an Endless Road," the melody of which was used for "Those were the days, my friend, we thought they'd never end," the 1968 hit by Welsh pop artist Mary Hopkin that temporarily pushed the Beatles off the top of the charts. (*Remember?*)

Krasavtseva is accompanied on the non- a capella songs by

appropriately both discretely erotic and melancholy, and “*Les Roses d’Ispahan*” conveys the languid heat and the fragrant blossoms of its eastern setting.

Maurice Ravel’s *Trois Chansons* are the composer’s re-creation of the folk ethos of the chanson, set to his own poetic texts. The first contains vivid impressions of the varieties of love: first erotic and frightening, then a dreamy first love, and finally, a pecuniary marriage sans illusion (*Nicolette*). It is followed by the somber contrasts of mood in “*Trois Beaux Oiseaux du Paradis*” with its sad refrain “My beloved is away at war,” and finally an insouciant romp in the woods by children oblivious of their elders’ dire warnings (*Ronde*). First-rate arrangements made by Septura trumpeter Simon Cox capture all these moods.

That doesn’t leave much space to describe the more familiar items in the program, such as Ravel’s *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (Pavane for A Dead Princess) and a suite of five selections from *Ma Mère l’Oye* (Mother Goose) that include the infectious rhythms of *Impératrice des pagodes* (Empress of the Pagodas), the dark sensuality underscored with pain and fear of *Les Entertains de la Belle and de la Bête* (Beauty and the Beast) and the sensationally rising fanfares in scales at the end of *Le Jardin féerique* (The Fairy Garden).

Claude Debussy is represented by six piano preludes, as selected and handsomely arranged by Simon Cox: *Des Pas sur la neige* (Footsteps in the Snow), *La Fille aux cheveux de lin* (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair), *Minstrels*, *General Lavine*, *Bruyères* (Heather), and *La Cathédrale engloutie* (The Engulfed Cathedral), pieces variously filled with enchantment, mystery, and (in the case of General Lavine) a studied, teetering eccentricity, as befits a circus entertainer of the day who danced on stilts!

Beautiful recordings compliment the artistry of Septura, whose members include, besides those already mentioned, trumpeters Philip Cobb and Huw Morgan, trombonist Matthew Gee, bass trombonist Daniel West, and tuba player Peter Smith.

the distinctive sounds of a variety of instruments, including piano, guitar, accordion, *bayán* (a chromatic button accordion developed in Russia in the 20th century), and *domra*, a long-necked instrument of the lute family with a round body and three or four metal strings.

Who is this guy?



He was one of the truly great conductors of the 20th Century, but I wonder how many of today’s classical listeners would even recognize his name? I really got an earfull of this style listening to some choice remasterings on a label from Italy. To find out more about him, be sure to look in on Phil’s Classical Reviews for March.