

Phil's Classical Reviews

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Schumann: Cello Concerto, Works for Cello & Piano
Sol Gabetta, Cello (Sony Classical)

Another outstanding album by Sol Gabetta features all the know works for cello by Robert Schumann. The Argentine cellist of French and Russian descent is at the peak of her artistry in the Cello Concerto in A minor, Op. 129, with the support of Giovanni Antonini and the Basel Chamber Orchestra. This work of broad compass that Clara Schumann praised for its “romanticism, verve, freshness, and humor” was not premiered until four years after the composer’s death, owing in part to his final illness as well as to the fact that it represented a new concept in the genre, being a synthesis of symphonic and concertante principles. Its unusual form, in which all three movements are linked seamlessly, helped make more palatable its heady mixture of different states of mind and emotion.

How extreme was that? Well, I had the feeling while listening to this performance that it might have been the work of a Russian, rather than a German composer due to its emotional range. It is also a very lyrical work, reflective of the fact that Schumann was one of the great masters of German art song, or *lieder*. The brooding initial mood of the opening movement, the intimate discourse of the cello with other instruments in the slow movement, and the stirring impetus imparted by the marchlike finale, all achieve their desired effect in this performance.

Of interest is the fact that all the instruments heard in these recordings have a certain vintage flavor. That includes the 1725 Matteo Goffriller cello that Gabetta uses in all the chamber works and the 1759 Guadagnini she plays in the concerto. The 1847 Streicher fortepiano that her partner Bertrand Chamayou plays, and the fact that the players of the Kammerorchester Basel perform exclusively on gut strings, further enhance this flavor. I have heard Beethoven recordings done with a similar approach in which the result



Brahms: Sonatas for Violin & Piano Wen-Lei Gu, violin;
Catherine Kautsky, piano (Centaur)

Pianist Catherine Kautsky and violinist Wen-Lei Gu, both professors of music at Lawrence University, Appleton, WI, show a remarkable rapport, a deft sense of phrasing, and a keen awareness of subtle, almost imperceptible, changes in rhythm and mood, plus unfailingly beautiful tones that serve Brahms’ Three Sonatas for Violin and Piano to perfection. In the process, they characterize these sonatas to a degree that one seldom encounters in the recital hall or on recordings. All these qualities, and more, make their performances memorable even in very fast competition.

In the course of her highly readable program notes, Kautsky has her finger on the unique differences that make these three sonatas what they are; namely, “an egalitarian approach to the two instruments, an essentially traditional approach to first movement sonata form, and a deep lyricism that capitalizes on the innate singing quality of the violin and challenges the pianist to match that cantabile sound.”. Indeed, the flow of the melodies, particularly in Sonatas 1 and 2, seems so spontaneous that it belies the hard work both artists must invest in making it sound deceptively natural and easy. Brahms actually quoted the melodies of two of his best, most nostalgic songs, *Regenlied* (Rain Song) and *Nachklang* (Distant Echo, or Remembrance) in Sonata No. 1 in G Major, Op. 78. We hear further echoes of his songs in the radiantly beautiful Sonata No. 2 in A Major, Op. 100. They are: *Wie Melodien zieht es mir leise durch den Sinn* (Like melodies, it steals softly through my mind), *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer* (Ever gentle were my slumbers), *Auf dem Kirchhofe* (In the Churchyard), and *Komm bald* (Come soon).¹

The trick here is to make the outflowing of poetic sentiment in these works perfectly natural and avoid any cloying sweetness or declamatory postures in the process. To that end, the two partners must seem at

¹ We also have a brief quotation of Walther’s Prize Song from Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger*, *Morgenlich leuchtend im rosigen Schein* (Morning light streaming in rosy glow), a song likewise deeply evocative of love and remembrance.

invariably came across as a limited concept. In these Schumann works, on the other hand, the vintage sound serves the personal, intimate nature of the music very well indeed.

The chamber works include the Adagio and Allegro, Op. 70; the Fantasy Pieces (*Fantasiestücke*), Op. 73; and the Five Pieces in Folk Style, Op. 102 all highly delectable works of considerable variety and flavor. We need not see too much in the fact that Schumann suffered from the extremes of what we should now term manic-depressive illness, for which he had to be hospitalized, during the years in which he composed these works. All his career (from at least as early as *Carnaval*, 1834), he was one who pushed the envelope in the direction of ever greater emotional expression and changes of mood. These works were the culmination of that ongoing preoccupation.

From the point of view of the performer, one always has to be alert to frequent abrupt changes of mood. In the Fantasy Pieces, for example, these changes are reflected in the expressive markings *Zart und mit Ausdruck* (Tender and with Expression) in the first piece and *Rasch und mit Feuer* (*Sudden and with Fire*) in the third, with *Lebhaft, leicht* (Lively and Light) in the middle mediating between the extremes. Gabetta and her partner are ever attuned to these signposts, and the results are always satisfying.



Liszt: Transcendental Etudes – Andrey Gugin, piano
(Piano Classics)

Russian pianist Andrey Gugin presents intelligent and spaciouly proportioned accounts of the Transcendental Etudes of Franz Liszt. These 12 etudes were a cherished obsession of Liszt's, dating back to 1826 when, at the tender age of fifteen, he wrote a youthful set of pieces called *Étude en douze exercices* (Study in 12 Exercises), S.136. The idea took hold of him, and eleven years later in 1837 he published a set of far more technically difficult exercises under the title *Douze Grandes Études* (Twelve Grand Studies), S137. Finally, in 1852, he revised the *Douze Grandes Études* and published them as the Transcendental Etudes (*Études d'exécution transcendante*), S139, which is the form in which we have then here. In revising the *Douze Etudes*, he made some of the etudes easier and less formidable, to compensate for the heavier action of the

times, as do Gu and Kautsky, to be one person, breathing together and instinctively anticipating each other's moves. Particularly in the violin, the lyricism must occur as naturally as new blossoms bud forth in spring or the colors of sunset gradually deepen in an summer evening.

Sonata No. 3 in D Minor, Op. 100, alone of the three, is filled with a prevailing mood of restless agitation. The development section of the opening movement sets the tone for this unrest in the piano's unceasingly dominant pedal tone in the bass, with quarter-notes repeating one single pitch, while the pianist must rigorously adhere to Brahms' marking *sotto voce sempre*. Not easy, *tha!* In this sonata, the technical demands in the opening movement alone include a *subito forte* in the piano and bariolage bowing in the violin, plus considerable use of syncopated rhythms and off-beat accents. The Adagio allows the violin to take center stage with a softly glowing melody. Following a beguiling intermezzo, marked *Un poco presto e con sentimento*, the finale hurtles along with a breakneck frenzy that includes double stops in the violin and daring leaps in the piano. In the process of sonatas 1-3, we have moved almost imperceptibly from tender lyricism to turbulent unrest.



"Guitar Gala Night" – Amadeus Guitar Duo, Duo Gruber & Maklar (Naxos)

Now, this is what I consider a *real* gala: a moment when intelligent, talented people get together and show us all the witty, charming, and deeply moving things of which they are capable. The performers we hear in this program, in 2- and 4-guitar arrangements, have been around long enough to really know their business. Canadian guitarist Dale Kavanagh and her German partner Thomas Kirchhoff recently celebrated their 25th anniversary as the Amadeus Duo, and the team of Christian Gruber and Peter Maklar have been together for 30 years. Their accumulated wizardry is on display here in a program of popular favorites, plus other pieces that *should* be popular (and certainly will have more friends after the exposure they get here!)

We begin with Dances from *Terpsichore* (1612) by

newer piano models that had rendered them virtually unplayable, and he eliminated all intervals greater than a tenth for the sake of pianists with smaller hands than his own.

Very importantly, Liszt added descriptive titles to all but two of the etudes as aids to the performer's imagination, though it should always be remembered that the music existed prior to any programmatic associations the titles might suggest. Only Etudes 1 (Preludio) and 2 (Molto vivace) are innocent of titles. These are the ones that correspond most closely to the idea of pure music. Most observers generally consider No. 4 (Mazeppa), No. 5 (*Feux follets*, or Will o' the Wisps), No. 8 (*Wilde Jagd*, or Wild Hunt), and No. 12 (*Chasse-neige*, Snow Storm) to be the most difficult of the set. Rapid double-note passages constitute the principal technical difficulty in No. 5, while the furious tempi and spiky cross rhythms of No. 8 would seem to suggest a demonically possessed hunter, a spiritual cousin of Carl Maria von Weber's hero in *Der Freischütz*. The tremolos and chromatic scales of No. 12 conjure up a relentless snowfall with wind-driven sprays. By contrast, No. 3 (*Paysage*, Rural Landscape) and No. 11 (*Harmonies du soir*, Twilight Harmonies) are more straightforward impressionistic pieces.

In approaching the Transcendental Etudes, Gugnin seems to be more focused on the technical aspects of the music than he is in characterizing them in ways corresponding to their suggestive titles. That is entirely appropriate since, as stated earlier, the etudes existed before Liszt applied titles to them and they should not be viewed strictly as character pieces.

In a piece such as No. 4 (Mazeppa), however, Gugnin does not make as much as he might have done of the drama in the music. Inspired by the legend of the Cossack hero who died for the cause of freedom, it is the only one of the Transcendental Etudes that Liszt was to later re-set as a symphonic poem. Its range of moods from stirring and tragic to tender and sad, and the frequent alterations and hand-crossings suggesting the galloping of a horse, right down to the hero's last heartbeats captured in soft chords, make this a natural choice for a more dramatic treatment.

Michael Praetorius (1571-1621), a German who was ahead of his time as composer and music theorist. The sprightly dances in honor of the Greek muse of the dance (Ballet, Volte, Bourree, Ballet II, Courante and Volta) have lost none of their original freshness in this spirited modern arrangement for four guitars.

There follow selections by two 18th Century Italian composers who knew the guitar well: an arrangement for four guitars of a sensational Spanish dance, the Fandango, from the Quintet, Op. 40, No. 2 by Luigi Boccherini and a set of *Variatione concertanti*, Op. 130 by Mauro Giuliani whose requirements for virtuosity shine forth in a bracing performance by Kavanagh and Kirchoff. Dale takes the stage by herself in her own Three Pieces (1998), dedicated in part to her daughter. The first two pieces reveal familiar sides to a young child's life that any parent will surely recognize: the very active child, "Melissa" and the child lost in thought, "Contemplation." The third, "A la Fuego," pays homage to Libre Sonatine, a well-known piece by Roland Dyens.

Next, the Gruber-Maklar Duo hold forth in their own duo-guitar settings of Manuel de Falla: the colorful and ever-popular Spanish Dance No. 1 from La Vida Breve and two selections from El Amor Brujo (Love, the Sorcerer): "The Magic Circle" and the awesome "Ritual Fire Dance" with its pounding ostinato that recalls the unquiet spirits of the dead that are summoned up in the gripping story of love and jealousy. Then we have Falla's "Danza del Molinero" (Miller's Dance) from The Three-Cornered Hat, evoked in all its lusty enthusiasm.

The program concludes with all four artists attempting the well-nigh impossible: replicating the range of texture and color in Alexander Borodin's In the Steppes of Central Asia (arr. Ippo Tsuboi). They make a compelling case for this four-guitar version of one of the most atmospheric and lonely-sounding of all symphonic works.



Palestrina, Missa "Tu es Petrus"
Choir of St. Luke in the Fields
David Shuler, director
(MSR Classics)

Director of Music David Shuler directs the Choir of St. Luke in the Fields of New York in performances of the *a capella* vocal music of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594) that show us why the native of the self-named town in the Sabine Hills above Rome came to be regarded as one of the greatest composers of his day. The SATB choir of six male and eight female voices are employed in ways that emphasize the clarity as well as the richness of Palestrina's polyphony.

Both elements in his music are vital because Palestrina lived in crucial times for a composer in Catholic Europe. A succession of strong-minded Popes, culminating in Gregory XIII, an architect of the Counter-Reformation who put into effect with great energy the far-reaching recommendations of the Council of Trent, had a impact on every aspect of Catholicism, and music was no exception.

The legend that Palestrina saved polyphony (many-voiced vocal music) from being abolished by the Church has been debunked by recent scholarship as untrue, or at least not *literally* true. What the Council inveighed against were the extreme excesses of Renaissance polyphony represented by such works as the highly impassioned *Miserere* of Gregorio Allegri (1582-1652) and the setting in no fewer than 40 separate voices of *Spem in alium* by the English composer Thomas Tallis (1505-1585), settings that arguably sacrificed the distinctness of the word for an overall impression of vast other-worldly imensity.

Palestrina's one-to-a-part vocal settings and his evenness of approach that avoided the excesses of emotion in so much of the music of his predecessors paid off handsomely. In his continuously flowing vocal lines, there are few leaps between notes. When one occurs, it is immediately countered by a stepwise motion in the opposite direction. Textural clarity and a general avoidance of dissonance characterize his art.

The present program shows the range of Palestrina's art, from the gently poignant, flowing measures of *Sicut cervus* with its text drawn from Psalm 42 (As a hart longs for streams of water, so my soul thirsts for you, O



"War and Peace," Sonatas by Prokofiev, Ferguson,
Messiaen. Betül Soykan, violin; Juan Pablo Andrade,
piano (Centaur)

Betül Soykan and Juan Pablo Andrade, natives of Turkey and Costa Rica and currently professors of violin and piano, respectively, at Wichita State University and the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, give compelling performances of works by Sergei Prokofiev and Olivier Messiaen. In between, we are given a wonderful sonata by Howard Ferguson that I found all the more exciting because it (and its composer) were totally unknown to me.

Prokofiev's Sonata in F minor, Op. 80 is listed as No. 1, even though it was completed later than Sonata No. 2 in D, Op. 94. He worked on it over a long period of time (1938-1945), partly because he was preoccupied writing three orchestral suites and a set of piano pieces to promote his Romeo and Juliet ballet and also due to the Nazi invasion and his subsequent relocation to a composers' retreat far from the front. It was also a very personal work for him, which may help to account for its long gestation period. Like the second sonata, it was played at concerts in Russia as a morale-raiser, though its affect is strikingly different, encouraging its listeners to prepare themselves for a long haul, whereas the second sonata typically charms and delights us.

Swirling figurations and slithering scales in the violin in the opening movement, *Allegro assai*, were said by the composer himself to suggest the wind sweeping over forgotten graves, an allusion that would have recalled memories in Prokofiev's audiences of the Stalinist purges as well as the sufferings incurred by the war. The succeeding scherzo, aptly titled *Allegro brusco*, has an air of rude defiance which is tempered somewhat by an airborne melody in the violin. The *Andante* attests to the composer's lyrical genius, while the finale, *Allegroissimo*, calls for the sort of devil-defying virtuosity from both performers that Soykan and Andrade are prepared to deliver. Just before the 5:00 point in this movement, we hear once again those slithering scales in the violin that we heard in the opening movement. The work ends quietly and decisively.

Irish-born composer Howard Ferguson (1908-1999) was released from active duty in the RAF because his long-running series of Lunchtime Concerts at the Nationally Gallery in London were deemed important as

God) to the simplicity and directness of the Offertory sentence *Caro Meo* (My flesh is the true food, and my blood is the true drink).

The *Missa "Tu es Petrus,"* like the Motet of that text, was clearly intended to be performed on the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, and was traditionally cited by the Catholic Church as its patent of authority over Christendom ("Whatever you shall bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will be released also in heaven"). That accounts for its joyful nature and also for its textual clarity which had to register boldly, especially in the Credo, which contained the articles of the faith to which every Catholic had to subscribe. The contrapuntally dense *Kyrie* and the luscious *Sanctus* for four voices come across well in these performances. My favorite section of this Mass is the wonderful *Gloria*, in which I imagined the voices as long clouds drifting slowly over a burnished sky, such as one often sees in summer in Mediterranean lands.



"Saariaho x Koh," works by Kaija Saariaho, with Jennifer Koh, violin (Cedille Records)

Korean-American violinist Jennifer Koh, a Chicago native, has long been a champion of Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho. On this album entitled "Saariaho x Koh," she shows her versatility in collaboration with various other artists in five works by Saariaho that demand, and receive from her, the utmost in precision and strikingly effective tone. In the process, she explores Saariaho's world of evocative soundscapes and interrelated timbres in which any lack of complete sympathy with the composer's intention would have been disastrous.

Tocar (To touch, 2010) for violin and piano, exemplifies Saariaho's passion for having instruments "touch" one another. In *Tocar*, as she relates, her intention was to discover ways in which "both instruments move forward independently, but also keep an eye on each other," provoking the further question: "How does an idea or a person touch us?" Together with pianist Nicolas Hodges, Koh does just that, in a work in which piano and violin at times take on each other's characteristic textures and timbres while, as Saariaho puts it, "the violin line is released from the measured piano motion, continuing its own life outside the laws of gravity."

morale raisers. His Sonata No. 2, Op. 10 for Violin and Piano was influenced by the war, though it was not completed until 1946 and was premiered the following year. Like the Prokofiev with which it stands comparison as a worthy album-mate, it requires a constant, intense dialogue and intertwining of parts between both partners to achieve its effect. We are told that Ferguson's admiration for Bartók pervades the third movement, *Allegro vivo*, though once again, a comparison with Prokofiev struck me as more apt.

Lastly, we have the final movement, "Praise to the Immortality of Jesus," that Oliver Messiaen arranged from an earlier organ work and included as the final movement to his apocalyptic Quartet for the End of Time (*Quatuor pour la fin du temps*), a work profoundly influenced by his experience as a prisoner of war in a German concentration camp. As is typical of this composer for whom the supernal world was ever in his consciousness, his response to that situation evoked the eternal and the spiritual, rather than any overt mood of anger or defiance.



"Old Fashioned," art songs of the early 20th century Brian Mulligan, baritone; Craig Rutenberg, piano (Bridge)

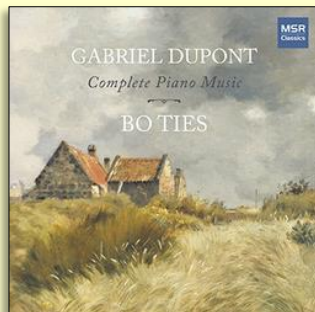
In "Old fashioned," Irish-American baritone Brian Mulligan pays tribute to the popular art songs that flourished in America in the early twentieth century. Capably assisted by pianist Craig Rutenberg, former Head of Music of the Metropolitan Opera, he registers obvious delight in exploring a repertoire made famous by great American baritones of yore such as Nelson Eddy, John Charles Thomas, Lawrence Tibbett, and Leonard Warren.

Benefiting from Mulligan's honest, gimmick-free voice, these songs come across in all their original freshness and are clearly *not* museum pieces. The 21 selections include such favorites of yesteryear as "On the Road to Mandalay," "Bluebird of Happiness," "Roses of Picardy," "The Sweetest Story Ever Told," "Birdsongs at Eventide," and "When I grow too old to dream." The last-named, by Sigmund Romberg with lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, was one Mulligan remembers hearing in his childhood, as performed on TV by Linda Ronstadt and the Muppets, though he admits to having been too young to have seen the original broadcast in 1980

Saariaho's compositions are often inspired by the world of nature, as in *Cloud Trio* (2009) for violin, viola, and cello, which evokes her time spent in the French Alps, where "high in the mountains, one often sees many different layers of clouds, having all different forms, speeds, and textures." The phenomenon finds its correlation in this work, where, for example, the cello makes use of a high register in which the bow glides from the bridge to the fingerboard. *Light and Matter* (2014), heard here in its recording premiere, dates from a time when the composer resided in New York next to morningside Park, where she took delight in observing the changing rhythms in the interaction of colors and shadows on tree trunks as the day moved from sunrise to sunset. Her discovery that "Time is light" comes across to us in the inspired performances of Koh, cellist Anssi Karttunen, and pianist Nicolas Hodges.

Aure (breath, 2011) is a delicate, fragile work (as its title suggests), heard here in an arrangement for violin and cello. *Graal Théâtre* (1994) for violin and orchestra, in which Koh interacts with the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble under Conner Gray Covington, is in two movements titled *Delicato* and *Impetuoso*, providing the artist with opportunities to display her sensitive interpretation of the pain and questioning inherent in this work.

Ultimately, Saariaho's music reflects the dilemma of the modern composer, caught in limbo between suspicion of past forms and daydreams of the future and what it might hold.



Gabriel Dupont: Complete Piano Works, performed by Bo Ties (MSR Classics)

Bo Ties (pronounced *teece*) is a real person. The Minnesota native had an unorthodox musical education, which you can read for yourself in the program notes. His feeling for color and shimmering movement in music has helped make him an outstanding interpreter of French music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In particular, it led him to champion the all-but forgotten music of Gabriel Dupont (1878-1914), a fact that makes the present album a real discovery. Though Dupont composed several operas, which we are told were well-

(Ouch, that really dates me, as I celebrated my 75th birthday this past August! Thank goodness these songs really *are* timeless.)

In my other life as an avid collector of films from the old Hollywood (you know, before the movies began to look just like television) I first encountered many of these songs in the pictures, in moments such as: Penny Singleton singing Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" in *Blondie in Society* (1941), "The Trail of the Lonesome Pine" in an elegant rendition by Oliver Hardy in *Way Out West* (1937) with a comic parody by Stan Laurel, and Sterling Holloway singing "The End of a Perfect Day" to Barbara Stanwyck and Fred McMurray in *Remember the Night* (1940). Lest it seem as if the comedians had all the good songs, we should recall the deeply moving scene in *The Snake Pit* (1948) where Olivia de Havilland's fellow asylum inmates sing "Goin' Home," based on music from Dvořák, to keep up their drooping spirits at Christmas time!

Brian Mulligan may have approved "Old Fashioned" for the title of the present album, but he certainly doesn't consider these songs passé. Quite the contrary. He finds lasting values that we could do well to take to heart in today's confused and divided world in songs such as "There is No Death" and "I'll see you again," or in Vincent Youman's immortal classic "Without a Song."² Together with his accompanist Craig Rutenberg, Mulligan makes a persuasive case for the enduring greatness of all these wonderful old songs.



Schubert: Octet in F Major for Wind and Strings, D.803 Les Soloistes OSM Chamber Ensemble (ATMA Classique)

Franz Schubert's great F-Major Octet for Wind and Strings was commissioned by a patron who wanted something just like Beethoven's Septet in E-flat, right down to the specification of having six movements connected by identical key relationships and played by the same seven instruments in a generally happy, optimistic mood. Well, you just don't dictate your terms *like that* to any serious composer. To Beethoven's original ensemble, Schubert added a second violin, completing a string quartet. More significantly, while

² You know the words: "Without a song, the day would never end. / Without a song, the road would never bend. / When things go wrong, a man ain't got a friend, / without a song."

received at the time of their debut, his name would be totally lost to history today were it not for a handful of determined scholars and musicians.

As you might guess from his dates, Dupont's life was cut short by bouts of illness, specifically tuberculosis, which frequently necessitated his long convalescence in Cap-Feret, Arcachon on the southwest coast of France, a spot noted for its dunes, pine forests, and broad expanses of open, sun-flecked sea.

All of this figures into the two suites of piano pieces Dupont composed at this time: *Les Heures dolentes* (1903-1905) And *La Maison dans les dunes* (1907-1909), which may be taken together as his personal testament. If the earlier suite presents the portrait of an invalid struggling with the consequences of illness and isolation, the latter shows how a return to the life-enhancing beauty of nature restored his spirits.

In a very personal style containing elements of Robert Schumann-like romanticism in its fleeting, contrasted moods and the impressionism of Debussy in its wandering harmonies, Dupont created musical images whose colours are tinged as much with melancholy as sun-dappled beauty. The darkness, understandably, is more apparent in *Les Heures dolentes* (*The Sorrowful Hours*), which contains contrasted images of rain and sun, evocations of children playing and bells ringing on a Sunday afternoon, and a nightmare presaging death in *Nuit blanche – Hallucinations* which is succeeded at last by *Calme*, in which the reassuring sound of bells is heard once more, a symbol of quiet acceptance after great suffering.

The ten pieces of *La Maison dans les dunes* (*The House in the Dunes*) form a correlative of, and lend a completion to, the darker moods of the earlier suite. A sense of wholeness is restored in such pieces as *Voiles d'eau* (Sails on the water), *Le soleil se joue dans les vagues* (The Sunlight plays on the waves), *Le soir dans les pins* (Evening in the pines)³ and *Clair d'étoiles* (Starlight). The suite ends with *Houles* (Swell), depicting the power and immensity of the sea in its massive chords and cascading arpeggios.

Connecting the two suites is thematic material, first heard in *Les Heures dolentes* and re-occurring in a more complete form in the later suite as *Mélancolie du bonheur* (Melancholy of Happiness), the idea being that the happiness of our lives is tempered by the sad thought that it is ephemeral and is destined to disappear one day.

there are light-hearted moods in his Octet, there is also a lot of serious, impassioned material that has a disconcerting way of jumping out at us unawares.

Andrew Wan, who has been the concertmaster of l'Orchestre symphonique de Montréal since 2008, leads seven of his orchestra mates (Olivier Thouin, violin; Victor Fournelle-Blain, viola; Brian Manker, cello; Ali Kian Yazdanfar, double bass; Todd Cope, clarinet; Stéphane Lévesque, bassoon; and John Zirbel, horn) in a really distinguished performance of the Schubert Octet, filled with requisite amounts of fire, zest, plausible mystery, and graciousness. In the process, all of the above participants except the double bass have the chance to savor choice Schubert's melodies in solos or duets.

If you think that means Schubert had little regard for the bass, you would be wrong. *Au contraire*, the bassist is continually involved throughout this work, keeping the momentum moving with florid arpeggios, underscoring the melody lines with resonant pizzicati, and, in the introduction to the sixth and final movement, joining with the cello in a sensational series of disquieting tremolos before the Allegro bursts forth in a mood of unrestrained happiness. If you listen closely, it's amazing how much of the success of this work is due to this usually unsung instrument.

There's a wealth of fine moments for all the participants in this Octet, which Schubert himself saw as a means to "pave my way towards a grand symphony." In the opening movement, which is strongly characterized by its insistent "dotted-eighth sixteenth" rhythms, the horn introduces the second subject in gaily rocking sixths and octaves and finishes the movement by taking the lead in the nostalgic coda. In the second movement the clarinet takes the lead in an Adagio heard over an accompaniment in the strings of 16th-note arpeggios. The third movement is an exuberant open-air scherzo marked *Allegro vivace*, its breezy melodies in dotted rhythms supported by a staccato bass line in the cello.

The fourth movement is a set of variations, of which the most remarkable feature is the striking contrast between the dramatic fifth variation, with its relentless 32nd notes in the second violin and viola, and the sublime sixth variation in the upper register and in the key of A-fat Major. A gentle, elegant Minuet with a lilting Ländler-like Trio could serve as music for dancing. It is followed by a finale heralded by volatile dynamic changes, tremolos in the cello, and a capricious duet by first violin and clarinet, just before things *really* accelerate and the work ends in glorious fashion.

³ In my own state of Georgia, I can attest to the wonderfully calming influence of a red sunset seen through a row of pines. We may assume French pines do not differ in that respect from their American cousins.



“From Hungary to Taiwan”
Formosa String Quartet
(Bridge Records)

The Formosa String Quartet, comprised of Jasmine Lin and Wayne Lee, violins; Che-Yen Chen, viola; and Deborah Pae, cello, are a young ensemble that have been attracting raves from San Diego to Chicago, and from Lincoln Center to Wigmore Hall. The zestful enthusiasm and love of colorful harmony and deep-felt expression in their playing give further significance to “Formosa” (most beautiful), the name given by the Portuguese explorers who were the first Europeans to discover what is now the island nation of Taiwan, the home of the Formosa Quartet.

This recording project was inspired by similarities in the folk roots, going back hundreds of years, in the music of Béla Bartók in Hungary and modern-day composers in Taiwan, both countries that have been open geographically and historically to foreign invasions and the cultural influences that followed close upon them.

Hungarian Folk Songs (2008) was composed for the Formosa Quartet by Dana Wilson partly as a sort of entrée into, and as a means of understanding, Bartók’s string quartets. The eight folk songs from which Wilson took his inspiration were drawn from recordings of traditional music in order to be as authentic as possible. While freely admitting the difficulty of notating for a string quartet their complex embellishments, slides and rhythms, to say nothing of the sounds of hurdy-gurdy, bagpipes, and voice, Wilson does a wonderful job conveying the vibrant flavor of these songs in terms of mood: playful, sorrowful, humorous, dramatic or exhilarating as the case may be.

Song Recollections (2016) by mainland Chinese composer Lei Liang was a tribute to his friends from Taiwan. It conveys his excitement at discovering the “incredibly beautiful songs” that are part of the Taiwanese heritage of the Formosa Quartet. With the titles “Praying for a Rich Millet Harvest,” “Triumphant Rite Song,” “Ghost Lake,” “Drinking Song” and “Lullaby,” Liang does a splendid job conveying the spirit of these folk songs of the aboriginal Taiwanese tribes through the medium of the string quartet (no easy task). In the process, we hear non-idiomatic sounds, like the scintillation of small percussive instruments and the deep sound of tubular bells, that belie the fact that they are realized solely by the resources of a string quartet, without the participation of any other instruments.

Wei-Chieh Lin’s *Taiwanese Folk Songs* (2017) goes back for its inspiration to popular songs of an earlier era with titles such as “Hengchun Folksong,” “Dark Sky,” and “Rain Night Flower.” The evocative mood in these songs is particularly strong in the first, “Seaport Goodbye,” written in 1939 by Taiwanese composer Wu Cheng-Jia, based on his love affair with a Japanese woman that was tragically ended by the unfortunate events of that time.

I haven’t forgotten Béla Bartók. The present performance of his *String Quartet No. 4, Sz. 91* (1928) by the Formosa Quartet made me begin to understand for the first time what this composer’s string quartets are really “about.” Bartók’s ethos is quite different from the music of the gypsies⁴ that people usually associate with Hungary. He despised the popular gypsy music of his day as showy and trivial and went back for inspiration to the music of the native Hungarians, the Magyars. That posed difficulties for Bartók in that the *parlando-rubato* rhythms and tricky dance-like tempos inherent in this type of folk music were not easy to assimilate into the style of his string quartets.

It took some time, but assimilate them he did, as *Quartet No. 4* bears evidence. And that’s not all that makes Bartók’s writing distinct. As booklet annotator Ronald Robboy puts it, the composer discovered that the simpler the melody, the more complex the harmonizations that could go with it. Bartók’s harmony, which he ultimately derived from Debussy, tended toward a new concept of the chromatic scale, every tone of which might be used freely and independently. Schoenberg had already exalted the chromatic scale to primary importance, but he and his followers made the serious mistake of severely limiting it by subjecting it to strict serial procedures. Bartók, on the other hand, stacked his chromatic scales vertically, rather than laying them out horizontally, thereby greatly increasing the harmonic richness of his writing.

The other thing you notice about the *Fourth Quartet* is Bartók’s penchant, amounting almost to an obsession, for an overriding symmetry in his music. In this five-movement work, it is reflected most obviously in an arch that he

⁴ See my October, 2018 review of “Alla Zingarese” by the Civitas & Gypsy Way Ensembles (Cedille Records) for an appreciation of this kind of music.

called “bridge form,” A-B-C-B-A. The middle movement C is a haunting Lento that qualifies as a remarkable example of “night music” in a composer who was extraordinarily sensitive to small nocturnal sounds such as bird calls and the scrapings of crickets. Here, a moving parlando recitative in the cello is heard above a quiet, static cluster of pitches in the other instruments like a human presence observing and responding to the natural world.

In this movement and elsewhere, The Formosa Quartet show a remarkable sensitivity to one another and to the music. The difficulties include demands for disembodied-sounding glissandi, eerie *sul ponticello* bowing below the bridge crossing, growing intensities of pitch that can change the character of a movement, and Bartók’s signature pizzicati with strings snapped against the fingerboard. All these, and more, the Formosa Quartet take into stride with their exceptionally smooth technique and sensitive blending. This is an ensemble that will bear watching.