

Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

February, 2020

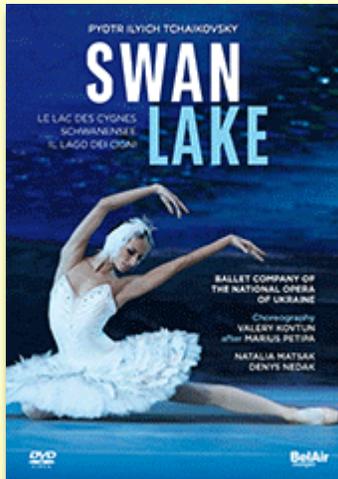


“Bravura: Favorite Showpieces for Piano & Orchestra”
Joshua Pierce, piano
(MSR Classics)

Joshua Pierce has the opportunity to display his unusually broad scope as a pianist in *Bravura*. This compilation of recordings made between 2000 and 2007 relates to the definition of “bravura” as a bold, brilliant music technique, and also a musical work or passage requiring the same. This is Pierce’s 24th release to date on the MSR Classics label, and it’s one of his best. Together with the Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra under longtime collaborator Kirk Trevor, Pierce makes a highly attractive program of works over the past two centuries absolutely irresistible.

Starting with Richard Addinsell’s 1941 Warsaw Concerto, a single-movement work comprised of music from his film score for the UK movie *Dangerous Moonlight*, crying out against the bombing of Warsaw by the Nazis. Compassionate, filled with sweeping gestures and emotions, it packs a lot into barely eight minutes.

George Gershwin’s Variations on “I Got Rhythm” comes across here as a fantastically imaginative mixture of styles, treatments and textures, with jazzy blues, complex rhythms, a nice swaying feeling, with a *valse trise* in long, sad notes and also a penchant for sensational repetitions in the so-called “Chinese” Variation – all that and more, served up with style and flair. In other words, “bravura.”



Tchaikovsky: Swan Lake
Ballet Company of the National
Opera of Ukraine
(BelAir DVD)
Also available in Blu-Ray

On the shores of a mountain lake in a fairy-tale kingdom, Prince Siegfried and his friends gather to dance and celebrate his coming of age. He is received into an order of knighthood, and his mother the Queen presents him with a crossbow to hunt the wild swans. (The bow used here as a prop is so obviously a toy that Siegfried’s only chance of actually killing a swan is for the hapless creature to expire in a paroxysm of laughter at the sight of the harmless device.)

It is just as well, as all the swans are actually princesses, placed under an enchantment by the wiles of an evil, shadowy figure, Von Rothbart by name, whose menacing presence is felt in all three acts of the ballet. In Act I, Scene II, Siegfried meets and falls in love with Odette, the most beautiful and regal of the swan maidens, and in the pale moonlight they dance a tender *pas de deux*, ballet’s time-honored way of falling in love and exchanging vows.

In Act II, in a ball at the royal court, Siegfried must choose the maiden to whom he is to be engaged. He



Brahms: Clarinet Sonatas & Trio
Marie Ross, clarinet; Petra Somlai,
piano; Claire-Lise Démettre, cello
(Centaur)

If you take Marie Ross’ impish smile and wild synthetic hair coloring as your cue to expect *outré* accounts of Brahms’ late works for clarinet, you will only deceive yourself. The plucky New Zealander’s zeal, shared by her European associates, Claire-Lise Démettre and Petra Somlai, flows in the opposite direction. These artists seek to recapture the aesthetic of Brahms’ own day. That involves, first, a notion of tempo elasticity, the “flexible pull and push of time.”

It was instinctive for the musicians of Brahms’ day to view crescendo and diminuendo not only as dynamic markings but also tempo indications. Applying both together involved more of a “hairpin” turn than would be possible with 20th/21st century performance practices. *Portamento*, the technique of creating a sliding connection between notes, and the use of vibrato to heighten expressive moments instead of employing a constant sound, were more or less second nature in those days. As Ross observes, the instruments in a chamber ensemble would often purposefully come in before or after each other in order to enhance an aesthetic in which expression and meaning were intimately connected. Much of this was lost within a comparatively few years after Brahms’ death, to be replaced by an entirely different set of modern

Variations on Mozart's "*La ci darem la mano*," Op. 2, based on the duet between the Don and Zerlina in Don Giovanni, was Frédéric Chopin's first big hit. With its audacious rhythms and mixture of styles, ending in an infectious *Alla Polacca* finale, it seems to share a kinship over a great distance of time with Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm," though the composers' lives did not overlap by almost sixty years!

Up next, Camille Saint-Saëns' Caprice-Valse, Op. 76, nicknamed the "Wedding Cake," is a delicious French pastry with non-stop piano set against counter-melodies in the strings, and with such markings as *leggiero e brillante* (light and brilliant) and *capricciosamente* (capriciously) to serve as guides to the interpreter.

The late American jazz critic and composer Paul Turok (1929-2012) is heard from in his Ragtime Caprice, an imaginative creation based on a whole series of original ragtime-infused ideas and textures. In the hands of Joshua Pierce, who worked closely with Turok in designing the present album, the result comes across with more integrity than just a mere "cross-over." In Turok's words, it is "absolutely stunning."

Franz Liszt's Polonaise Brillante, Op. 72, an orchestration and re-working of Carl Maria von Weber's earlier *Polacca brillante*, took the rather mundane original and made it into a showpiece for piano and orchestra, adding a new introduction and a sweeping piano cadenza. The very noticeable liveliness reflects Weber's original subtitle, *L'hilarité* (hilarity or unbridled joy).

Duke Ellington's far-ranging "New World A'Comin'" was completed in 1945, in an auspicious time at the end of the Second War when the whole world was hungry for peace and returning Black servicemen, in particular, were not inclined to resume their old roles as second-class citizens. As arranged for orchestra by the Duke's longtime collaborator Maurice Peress, the milieu of free and set tempos, jazzy rhythms, wrong notes and a rollicking "gut bucket" style makes room for a

selects one who almost exactly resembles Odette, only dressed in a black costume instead of white. He presents her to his mother for her blessing, not realizing that the Black Swan is in truth Odile, the daughter of Von Rothbart. Now the sorcerer's plot becomes apparent: to gain a kingdom through Odile's deceitful marriage with Prince Siegfried. Discovering his deception too late, Siegfried rushes off into the night in a state of distraction as the pathetic beating of a swan's wings are heard at the window.

Meanwhile, back at the lake . . . Odette reports the tale of Siegfried's betrayal to the swan maidens, who are distressed to hear the news that their hoped-for deliverer has failed them. (Not *too* distressed, however, for they are still able to dance more of the delicious ensembles and *pas de trois* that delighted us in Act I.) Siegfried enters, beseeches Odette to forgive his lapse of faith, and they are at last reconciled when he vows to give his own life to defeat Von Rothbart's evil spell. The wicked necromancer enters and makes a last desperate effort to maintain his power, to be foiled when Siegfried rips off part of his costume. The spell is broken, and all ends well.

That, briefly, is the plot of Peter Illych Tchaikovsky's immortal Swan Lake, a truly epoch-making moment in the history of the Russian ballet in that it took what had previously been a mere entertainment comprised of a miscellany of dances and made it into a compelling three-act drama infused with conflict and emotion. What we have here is basically the original choreography by Marius Petipa, with later additions by Lev Ivanov and Alexandre Gorski, in a version that was premiered in 1986 by Valery Kovtun. The current production, with staging and costumes by Maria Levitskaya, was filmed in HD at the National Opera of Ukraine in Kiev in June, 2019.

So much for the credits. The aural and visual results are simply gorgeous, reinforcing the mood of this particular production. Not only are the principals (Denys Nedak as Siegfried, Yaroslav Tkachuk as Von

assumptions.

Ross and her colleagues carry their passion for re-creating the lost sound world of Brahms' era into their choice of instruments. Ross uses two clarinets, both by the Berlin maker Oskar Oehler, one in B from the 1890's and the other in A from 1905, with ties to Richard Mühlfeld, the legendary artist of the clarinet who commissioned the two Sonatas, Op. 120, that lured Brahms away from his resolve to retire from composition after the publication of his final sets of *klavierstücke*, Opp. 118-119 that were to have been his musical last will and testament. Somlai's piano is a New York Steinway from 1875, while Démetre uses a cello with gut instead of synthetic strings and goes so far as to play without an end-pin.

In a funny kind of way, it all pays off with a "period" sound that comes across as real music-making and not just a collection of museum pieces. The darker sound, particularly that of the piano, takes a little time for modern listeners to re-adjust their ears and expectations, but there is a real pay-off in terms of warmth and expressiveness in an aesthetic in which expression and meaning, color and shape, are intimately connected. We have all heard recordings in which the period sound was about as attractive as period dentistry, but *this time* it's the real McCoy.

Sonatas No. 1 in F Minor and No. 2 in E-flat Major are clearly related as members of the same family but differ in terms of the basic affects they reveal. No. 1 is intimate and personal, beginning with an opening *Allegro appassionato* characterized by a wide emotional range from passionate declamation to quiet resignation at the end. By contrast, the *Allegro amabile* opening of No. 2 is more restrained in its mood of gentle warmth and graciousness, though it too has its moment of rebelliousness in the scherzo, marked *Allegro appassionato*, which follows it. Both sonatas, in different ways, are characterized by an abundant wealth of natural, flowing lyricism. The same goes for the warm, lovely melody introduced by the clarinet in the Adagio of the Trio

bluesy piano solo.

Pierce and Trevor end with the madcap virtuosity of Henry Litloff's whirlwind Scherzo from Concerto Symphonique No. 4, a rousing finish to a delightful program.

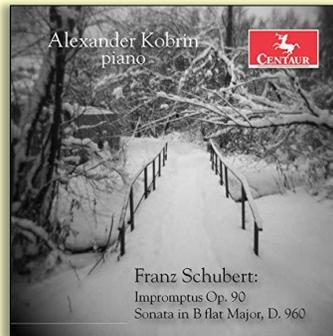
Rothbart, and Natalia Matsak in the dual role of Odette and Odile) superlative, but the entire company exudes style, professionalism, and an athleticism that serves this Swan Lake to perfection. Well danced, little swans!

for all three instruments in A Minor, Op. 114. The nostalgic Ländler-like theme in its third movement, *Andantino grazioso*, speaks for itself in terms of Brahms' calculated spontaneity, and sets us up for an impassioned finale.

Russian pianist Alexander Kobrin once again shows his zest for performing the major works in the repertoire, as well as his disregard for the fierceness of the available competition. At issue here are works by Franz Schubert that will challenge any pianist's mastery of their boldly changing rhythms, textures, and colors. The performer also has to be ever alert for moments when the hands change roles.

The Four Impromptus, Op. 90 lead off the program. What sort of creatures are they? They are certainly not the casual trifles the word implies, nor do they constitute a sonata in all but name. Each has a well-developed character of its own and can stand by itself. There is no compelling reason to play them all together, yet curiously, one seldom encounters them singly in either concerts or recordings, but almost always as a set in 1-4 order.

As Kobrin shows us, the Impromptus are beautifully contrasted, starting with No. 1, in the form of a slow march beginning in C minor and ending in soft radiance and release from pain in C major: a rather obvious key resolution developed in a far from obvious manner by Schubert. In No. 2 in E-flat, the long skeins of songlike triplets that begin the piece are caught up short in the B section by a sensational cadence followed by much rhythmically off-beat material. No. 3 in G-flat, based on a song from *Rosamunde*, makes for a charming contrast with its predecessor by means of its delicate colorings and shy half-lights. The cascading arpeggios and restless murmuring chords of No. 4 in A-flat create yet another striking contrast, just after we have been so gently lulled by the soft, languid lyricism of No. 3.



Schubert: Piano Sonata in B-flat, D 960; Four Impromptus, Op. 90
Alexander Kobrin, piano
(Centaur)

Piano Sonata in B-flat Major, D960, up next, is an astonishing work, even by comparison with the two other sonatas that Schubert finished in the very last year of his pitifully short life (1797-1828). Once again, we sense the presence of a final testament to a life in music in this exceptionally long 47-minute work that is simply loaded with compelling material that will stay in your memory for a long time.

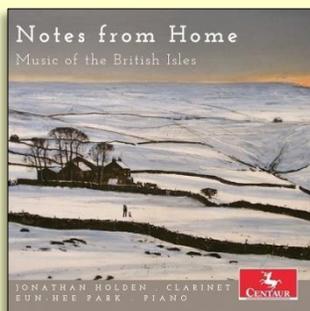
The opening movement of D960, *Allegro molto moderato*, is packed by Schubert with such diversity of themes and incidents that it requires more time and room to develop (22:40 in the present account) than many complete sonatas by his contemporaries. It begins with a steady march that is interrupted on several occasions by upheavals in the bass. Contrary to expectation, they *rise* instead of falling, potentially creating more of a disjunction than they might otherwise have done.

The journey resumes. The rumblings are heard once again, succeeded by a more hopeful theme leading upwards. Chord structures become more elaborate. Laughter intrudes about 9:35, becoming more jocose, and around 11:29 there is a dramatic shift to a minor key.

Heavy chordal passages are often contrasted with single notes as Schubert uses discretely disturbing changes and interjections to tantalize the listener rather than throw him off the trail. Another dramatic key change and cadence occur around 20:18, and yet again at 21:34. About 21:50 the steady march resumes. It continues until the end of the movement, marked by enigmatic rumbling chords. We are left with the impression of something unsettled, yet hopeful. As in a human life, we are confronted with a journey in which the undertaking itself, and the events we encounter, are the real thing rather than our final resting place.

Modulations to distant or unexpected keys, a favorite trait of Schubert's, are to be found in the Andante. It begins in C-sharp minor, but the central section is written in A major and touches upon B-flat, the home key. After a brief cadence, the music shifts to the remote key of C major, before turning to E major, the relative of the home key. Understanding these unusual key relationships as well as Kobrin does is absolutely essential if one is to divine where Schubert is heading. This artist is also keenly attuned to the way the melody is given a dream-like quality by the gauze-like chiaroscuro of its setting.

The serious matters having been dispensed with, we are ready for a holiday in the final two movements. First, we have a Scherzo marked *Allegro vivace con delicatezza* but with a surprisingly edgy trio section based on nervous accents and syncopations. Then, we are given an infectious and seemingly endless Allegro finale characterized by equal amounts of charm, pugnacity, vigor and irony over an uninterrupted flow of sixteenth notes. Marvelous fun!

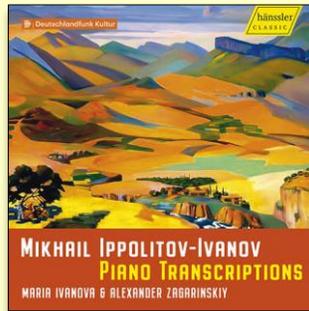


“Notes from Home,” Music of the British Isles – Jonathan Holden, clarinet; Eun-Hee Park, piano (Centaur)

British-American clarinetist Jonathan Holden and his partner in this recital, Korean pianist Eun-Hee Park, both of them enjoying busy careers as soloists, chamber musicians, and educators, give us an impressive display of their skills in “Notes from Home.” We have here seminal works of seven composers from the British Isles, in music that reveals the fascination they all felt for the clarinet and its wild possibilities.

Charles Villiers Stanford (1857-1924), as Professor of Composition at the Royal College of Music for many years, exerted an influence on a number of younger composers whose work is heard in this album. His own style, as well as his reverence for the late clarinet works of Brahms, is revealed in *Caoine*, an Irish lament with alternating lyrical and rhapsodic episodes. William Yeats Hurlstone, a Stanford student, had his life cut short tragically at the age of 30. His Four Characteristic Pieces include a dramatic Ballade, a Croon Song in the style of a lullaby with a decidedly popular flavor, an Intermezzo with a lot of playful interaction between the instruments, and an enigmatic Scherzo that invites the partners to give it all they’ve got.

Sir Arthur Bliss, another Stanford student, is heard from in his 1916 Pastoral in A for Clarinet and piano, written in memory of his brother who was killed in the Great War. The piece shows Bliss’ well-known love of tone color as it explores the rich interior of the clarinet’s chalumeau register before breaking out into a

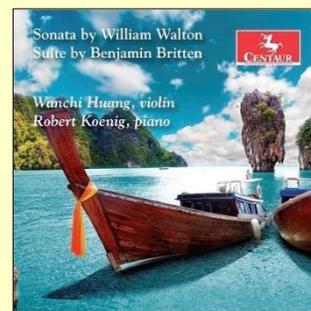


Ippolitov-Ivanov: Piano Transcriptions - Maria Ivanova, Alexander Zagarskiy, duo-pianists (Hänssler Classic)

Concert pianists Maria Ivanova and Alexander Zagarskiy, both Moscow natives and graduates of the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, have concertized as a duo since 2004. They specialize in really stunning arrangements of symphonic works by Russian composers, an area of endeavor that promises to be heard more often in our concert halls and on recordings as time goes by.

Why is that? One reason is that we can hear all the elements of a symphonic work, particularly how its enchanting melodies are built up and supported, in ways that further enhance our enjoyment. Just as we can often see and experience more from a black-and-white film than we might when we are distracted by the gaudier hues of Technicolor. In the past, composers often used duo-piano arrangements of a symphonic work-in-progress as a working tool in order to determine what instruments to use and how to structure the harmonies. Speaking as a home listener, I find that this approach can enhance one’s own pleasure as well.

The Russian composer we hear on this album, Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov (1859-1935) labored long in the vineyards of music as a scholar, professor, founder of music societies and conductor. As a composer, he showed a keen fascination with the folk music of the Caucasus region, principally what was to become the present-day Republic of Georgia. The best-known fruits of this interest were his two Suites of Caucasian Sketches, Opp. 10 and 42, heard on the present album.



Walton: Sonata; Britten: Suite Wanchi Huang, violin Robert Koenig, piano (Centaur)

As she revealed in her earlier recordings of solo sonatas by Eugène Ysaÿe and the sonatas and partitas of J.S. Bach, Taiwan native Wanchi Huang loves challenges in music and doesn’t back off from the most demanding works of all (see *Phil’s Reviews* for January, 2013 and November, 2015). Here she shows us she can take on the repertoire for violin with a collaborative artist with equal aplomb. In this case, it is Robert Koenig, the Saskatchewan-born pianist who has collaborated with many of the current generation of artists. He shows us why he is so sought-after for his ability to quickly develop a solid rapport with his performance partner.

That’s very important in the case of the music we are given here by English composers William Walton and Benjamin Britten, as both works have been much neglected and there are few interpretations on record to go to for research when undertaking them. Affect and nuance are everything in both these works where contrasts and changes often come about very suddenly.

Walton wrote his Sonata for Violin and Piano expressly for the great violinist Yehudi Menuhin, who premiered it with his brother-in-law Louis Kentner (they were married to sisters) soon after Walton finished it in 1948. Kentner, an almost forgotten name today but one of the finest pianists of his time, developed a very close rapport with Menuhin over the years. That same closeness is needed in this particular work, and Huang and Koenig display it

splendid altissimo at the end. As a memorial, it is remarkable for a spirit of gentle warmth, whereas we might have girded ourselves for pathos.

The Wordsworth Miniatures of Edwin Roxburgh are basically drawn from the poet's Intimations of Immortality ode. The colors and effects the composer applies range from flowing cantabile writing to exhilarating ascents and flare-ups, all in keeping with the titles: Calm is the Fragrant Air, Waters on a Starry Night, Thoughts that often lie too deep for tears, and The Cataracts Blow Their Trumpets.

Gerald Finzi's Five Bagatelles range in degrees of difficulty from the three delightful middle pieces (Romance, Carol, Forlana) which are accessible to players of moderate skill, to the fiendish difficulty of the outer ones that include a demonstrative Prelude marked *Allegro deciso* and a trickily contrapuntal Fughetta that will keep both performers on their toes.

The late Richard Rodney Bennett (1936-2012) did it all in a career that included his admired work as a jazz pianist, his film scores, and his chamber and symphonic works. His Sonatina for solo clarinet was written as a competition piece and shows it in the demands it makes on the performer (and to which Holden shows himself more than equal).

Lastly, John Ireland's Fantasy-Sonata for Clarinet and Piano exhibits the characteristics of both genres in its opposition of free and strict forms. This gorgeous work gives both Holden and Park a golden opportunity to display their individual skills and very close teamwork.

Suite 1, perhaps the more evocative and colorful of the two, begins with *Dans le défile* (In the Mountain Pass), which paints a breathtaking picture of the rugged scenery one encountered on the road to Tiflis. *Dans l'Aoule* (In a Village) includes a lovely folksong melody as the center piece of an equally authentic folk dance. *Dans la Mosquée* (In the Mosque) evokes the cry of a Muezzin the composer recalled from a visit to Batumi on the Black Sea. Lastly, *Cortège du Sardar* (The Procession of the Sardar) loses none of its opulent color and excitement in the arrangement we have here for piano, four hands.

Suite 2 begins with a *Lamentation*, traditionally ascribed to a Georgian princess who had been banished from her homeland for her complicity in the murder of a Russian general. There follow a tender *Berceuse* (Lullaby), a wildly exciting *Danse Lesghine*, or courtship dance, and a splendidly dashing, warlike *Marche Georgienne* (Georgian March).

In the last analysis, Ippolitov-Ivanov's best-known music, which in this program also includes a Turkish March, Op. 55, and an Armenian Rhapsody, Op. 48, embodies the spirit of Orientalism in a deeper and more insightful way than his Russian contemporaries often treated it. In the present program Maria Ivanova and Alexander Zagarinskiy convey this authentic spirit to us through their thoughtful performances.

admirably.

Don't put too much stock in the markings. "Tranquillo" for instance means something different in the opening movement marked "Allegro tranquillo," where there is an uneasy tension underneath the flowing tempo, than it does in Var. VII, the last of a set of variations that constitutes the middle movement. There, the feeling is rather one of calm and wholeness. Variations III-VI jostle one another with a manic disjunction (a Walton trait) that calls for our performers to be continually alert for changes: *Alla marcia molto vivace*, a very terse *Allegro molto*, then an *Allegretto con moto*, and a *Scherzando* that is another exercise in terseness. It all ends decisively in a breathtaking coda marked *Molto vivace*.

Britten's Suite for Violin and Piano, Op. 6, an early work when he was still under the tutelage of his mentor John Bridge, reveals much of the impulsive, restless inventiveness of the 22-year old composer. The caution to be alert for sudden striking changes that I mentioned earlier *a propos* the Walton sonata goes double here, given also that a suite typically has fewer formal constraints than does a sonata. Huang and Koenig have a great time tussling with Britten's impish and sometimes impudent writing in the work's five movements: a brief *Andante maestoso*, a March, a *Moto perpetuo* marked *con fuoco* (with fire), a Lullaby marked *Lento tranquillo* in which the flowing violin melody is underscored by a deeper piano accompaniment moving at half the speed, and lastly an audacious Waltz, marked *Vivace e rubato*, that invites the generous handfuls of rubato our performers apply. As the music fades to silence at the end, the mike picks up some audible breathing (presumably Huang's) that reveals her total involvement with the music.