

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

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Rossini: Six Sonatas for Strings, performed by ARSO Ensemble
Dux Recordings

Gioachino Rossini wrote these 6 sonatas, amazingly, in just three days at the age of twelve (if we are to believe the young scamp) when he was “jamming” on vacation with three of his boyhood friends. He is not entirely unparalleled in preciosity, as Felix Mendelssohn wrote his 12 String Symphonies between the ages of 11 and 14. As with Mendelssohn, Rossini wrote those sparkling little gems, in retrospect, as practice for his future career. And he likewise benefitted from the opportunity afforded by writing for a small body of strings in order to learn the intricacies of sonorous textures and blends, harmony, tone color, and the business of supporting melodies.

The difference ends here. Mendelssohn went on to become a master of the symphony and chamber music. Rossini, on the other hand, was headed for a career in opera, and these six charming early works already point the way. Despite the fact that they were intended for four strings, they are clearly *not* chamber music, and Rossini pointedly did not describe them as “quartets.” The presence of a double bass in an ensemble with two violins and a cello argues against this and in favor of the instrumental sonata that went back a long way in Italian music. And the enlarged role that the bass plays in the ensemble already proclaims “Opera” in a loud voice.

It says a lot that these early works are not considered juvenilia but have found a secure niche in the string repertoire. To say that they are “charming” is a gross understatement. The degree of independent writing for each of the instruments, another sign that we are already on the road to the opera house, allowed Rossini to change textures and harmonies with amazing ease, a trait that was to serve him well in his future career.

The ARSO Ensemble from Poland, here consisting of violinists Robert Nasciszewski and Orest Telwach, cellist Anna Nasciszewska and bassist Slawomir Ujek, are absolutely superb in their mutual rapport and high degree



“The American Album,” Dvořák, Griffes, Puts, Barber - Cypress String Quartet
Avie Records

The Cypress String Quartet celebrate hitting the big time in this, their second album for Avie Records of the United Kingdom. This program, as originally recorded in 2011 in 96 KHz/24 bit sound at the Skywalker Sound scoring stage in Marin County, California, has been augmented by a surprise in the form of a contemporary work that fits the scheme of American works inspired by the example of Antonin Dvořák’s “American” Quartet. (Of that, more later). Throughout the program, the Cypresses have ample opportunity to display their basic traits, including a love of rich harmonies, a not-too close blend that allows them ample room to manifest their individual identities, plus an ongoing engagement with one another and with the music. The works heard here reflect these strengths and preferences in various ways.

Dvořák’s “American” Quartet, No. 12 in F Major, Op. 96, is so amiable, so filled with melodies of instant appeal, that we are apt to ignore one of the main reasons for its success; namely, a free, easy handling of counterpoint that distributes its glowing harmonies and choice melodies among the players in a perfect musical democracy. From the stirring of the violins in the very beginning of the opening movement, reminding listeners of rustling leaves, to the locomotive-like rhythms underlying the main section of the finale, the work seems laden with extra-musical associations, although pinpointing Dvořák’s exact sources has proven an exhausting parlor game. Definitely *not* exhausting, but soothing and consoling, is the slow movement, with its haunting melody and much beautiful writing for the inner voices, all richly and nobly supported by the cello.

The short lived Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920) was fascinated with American Indian melodies, two of which he incorporated in his Sketches Based on Indian Themes. The first, based on a Chippewa Farewell Song with the mood of a lament, is marked *Lento e mesto* (Slow and Sad). It begins slowly and sparsely, and then

of individual musicianship. They are completely in accord with Rossini's operatic style in these sonatas. It shows in the numerous violin solos and duos and in the ensemble playing, which has the right degree of inner cohesion without lapsing into a chamber music blend. Witness the long-breathed melody as the cello takes the lead in the Andante of Sonata No. 1, followed with sensational suddenness by skipping violin passages and then a violin melody of serene beauty, underscored by a walking rhythm in the accompaniment.

Without intending to slight the other instruments, I'd like to call attention to the key role of the double bass in these sonatas (another sign that the language of opera is spoken here). We hear it in its mysterious moving accompaniment under the other instruments in the opening Allegro of No. 2, presently breaking out into an expressive melody all its own. Or the deep, passionate note the bass sounds in the Andante of the same sonata, preparing the way for a violin solo of unearthly beauty. In the Allegro of No. 3 we find the bass galumphing merrily along under a carefree ensemble melody. In the Moderato finale, it maintains a steady beat in support of a brilliantly extroverted violin solo. In the Allegretto of No. 5 we hear it pulsating under a skipping, skittering melody for the violins. Examples could be multiplied endlessly. Only in a jazz trio would we expect to hear a string bass employed with such versatility.

This was my first experience with the Warsaw-based label DUX, and it was a revelation. Founded in 1992 and possessing the most up-to-date recording technology, DUX has engineered more than a thousand recordings, including those of the Chopin International Piano Competition. In the present recording, we hear all the details with the utmost clarity, realism, and presence.



"Opera Breve," Bravura Transcriptions
Philippe Quint, violin; Lily Maisky, piano
Avanti Classic (Hybrid SACD)

Every now and then, I need to remind myself of the importance of a good old-fashioned program of bravura transcriptions in dusting off the operatic repertoire and bringing precious gems out into the spotlight. This sort of "encore" recital used to be more common in the past than it is now. Russian-American violinist Philippe Quint, with the help of pianist Lily Maisky, shows us what we've been missing in "Opera Breve."

gains in musical and emotional expression as more voices enter and enrich the harmony, finally trailing off into silence. The second, based on a Hopi festival dance, is lively and spirited, with a melodic episode. One gets the impression here that Griffes was really on to something, just before his life was cut short by Influenza.

The "surprise" here is Lento Assai (2009), a new work by American composer Kevin Puts that complements the works by the older composers on this album and does not seem out of place in such fast company. It was commissioned by the Cypress Quartet as a "response" to the "call" of the slow movement in Beethoven's Opus 135, though the present work maintains its own strong individuality for all that. Puts describes it as "a kind of musical refuge for the listener, a temporary place of peace and tranquility." I hear this strangely beautiful work rather as a consolation for pain and loss in its ever-renewed journey toward vast spaces. Very impressive.

Samuel Barber's String Quartet in B minor, Op. 11, is given a compelling performance that, nonetheless, raises more questions than it provides answers. Part of the problem was the difficulty that Barber, always more comfortable with opera, songs and piano pieces than he was the larger instrumental works, experienced with his material. That difficulty did not extend to the heartfelt Adagio, with its bold harmonic contour, its soaring movement in stepwise progressions, and the striking suspended cadence near the end – all justly famous. The tensions in the opening movement, cut short abruptly at the end, are not resolved by the finale, which develops along much the same, only terser lines. A study in controlled fury, it writes finis to this work without detracting from the Adagio, its true heart.



Schubert: Impromptus, D899; Sonata, D960
Rudolf Buchbinder, piano
Sony Classical

The man is absolutely remarkable! I must confess I'd never noticed Austrian pianist Rudolf Buchbinder very much earlier in his career. Nor, I expect, had many other international critics. The most likely explanation is that he was no youthful prodigy, but has matured steadily throughout his career, becoming ever surer in his grasp of musical values which, depending on the repertoire, can be more significant than what is usually termed "technique" (which he also possesses). Now well into

From the opening of the program, Quint scores high marks with Manuel de Falla's raw, exciting, high-energy Spanish Dance from *La Vida Breve*, the perfect curtain raiser. His tone is more restrained and refined in Lensky's Aria from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, which capitalizes on the warm vocal lower range of the violin (in this case, a rich-sounding Stradivarius on loan from the Stradivari Society). "Una Furtiva Lagrima" from Donizetti's *L'Esir d'Amore* (The Elixir of Love) adds a plaintive note to an otherwise frothy comic opera. "Melodie" from Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (a.k.a. "Dance of the Blessed Spirits") is the essence of passion tempered by classical restraint. With Maisky adding a brisk accompaniment, Quint attacks the venerable "Largo al factorum" from Rossini's Barber of Seville with renewed zest, realizing the multiple comic voices of Figaro's importunate customers with real exuberance in this arrangement by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco.

Next, we have the soft, exquisite tenderness of Richard Strauss' song "Morgen" (Morning), which Quint and Maisky optimally capture in all its quiet beauty. It is followed by a sensational account of Jascha Heifetz' arrangements from Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, consisting of "Summertime," "A Woman is a Sometime Thing," "My Man's Gone," "Bess, You is My Woman Now" (where double-stopping creates the illusion of a love duet), and a fantastic "It Ain't Necessarily So" in which our performers let it all out. Here, Maisky's highly rhythmic playing lends support to Quint's virtuosity.

After the Gershwin suite, we are given the well-loved "Cantabile" (a.k.a., "My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice") from Saint-Saens' Samson and Delilah, and the breathless simplicity of "Evening Prayer" from Humperdinck's Hansel and Gretel. And yes, we have an encore: the "Cavatina" by Joachim Raff that ranges from sadness to joyous exuberance in its brief, 5-minute span.



Schumann: *Carnaval, Faschingschwank aus Wien*
Susan Merdinger, piano
Sheridan Music Studio

American pianist Susan Merdinger does a bang-up job with Robert Schumann's *Carnival (Carnaval)*. This work, one of the staples of the romantic era repertoire, has long been a favorite among pianists for the challenges posed by its technical and emotional difficulties, including

middle age, Buchbinder (b. 1946) is a formidable interpreter of the masters he performs. I admired his artistry well enough in his recording of Mozart Concertos 23 and 25 in my March 2013 column. But he surpasses those performances in the present Sony release of major works by Franz Schubert.

Schubert, another musical figure of whom Austria is justly proud, is in my opinion one of the most intriguing of all masters of the keyboard. Too many people who don't know what they're talking about dismiss his piano works as tuneful but lacking in virtuosity. Actually, the beauty of Schubert's music is in the details, and Buchbinder is supremely aware of this. *Touch* is a requisite when playing Schubert. Sometimes keys are to be struck with firmness and resolution, and at other times they are to be nudged or caressed into the section of the music that follows. Unusual modulations into distant or unexpected keys are a trait of Schubert's. As with the works of all composers, the performer must understand the harmonic structure of a work to know what it is building towards.

With Schubert, this is not always easy, as he will often mask or delay his key resolutions. He usually does this subtly and instinctively, without sounding a gong or sending up a signal flare to let us know a change is coming. For instance, the Andante of his great Sonata in B-flat major, D960, is written in C-sharp minor, but the central section is written in A major, and touches upon B-flat, the home key. Then, after a half cadence, the music shifts to the remote key of C major, eventually turning to E major, the relative of the home key. All of this is obscured by Schubert's light-and-shade chiaroscuro, as the dreamy melody often appears as in a reverie, circling, as the booklet annotation has it, "in a seemingly weightless system of gently dabbed single notes in the bass and treble." All of which requires the infinite patience and attention to detail that Buchbinder gives it.

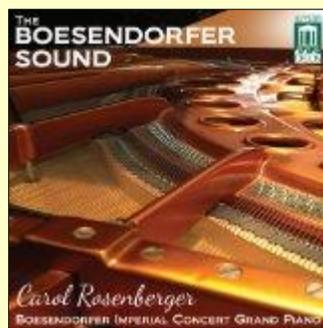
For the sake of example, I've focused on just one movement in the B-flat Sonata, and not the most famous one at that. That distinction is reserved for the opening movement, *Molto moderato*, which begins with an enigmatic march that is undermined periodically by mysterious subterranean rumblings in the bass. Buchbinder rightly interprets the mood of this movement as a meditation, dreamily melancholy but certainly not a march to the scaffold. By the time he works his way through this longest of Schubert sonata movements (20:26 in the present performance) we feel as if we have been on a world voyage. In truth, we've only just begun!

Here we are at the end of a review, and I haven't even touched on the four Impromptus, D899, deceptively improvisational-sounding but just as intricate and just as great in their own way as the sonata. Listen to the way the Impromptu in C minor begins with a question mark – a lone, single note transposed by an octave, asking plaintively for an answer – and you will hear what I mean.

its big chordal passages and disjunctive rhythms. Indeed, we run into the first challenge right from the outset in the Prélude in which musical phrases seem to push and jostle one another, like the crowd at an actual carnival. Like many artists of her generation, Merdinger seems bent on pushing the music to its limit (*Faster! Higher! Bigger!*) in this opening tableau. Later, she settles down sufficiently to draw out the quiet lyricism in such pieces as *Chopin*, an evocation of the profound beauty and deep compass of an imaginary Nocturne by its subject, and *Aveu*, a lover's vow of undying fidelity.

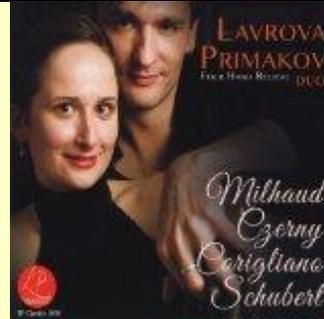
Like a real carnival in which the observer passes from one booth to the next, there is a lot of variety in this work with its big, resplendent passages alternating with more purely lyrical ones. Schumann subtitled it "Miniature Scenes on Four Notes," and indeed there is a love story interleaved in its pages, including initial attraction of two young people, deepening feeling between them, a threat to their happiness posed by a third party, and finally, the stripping away of masks (again, as at a carnival) and a reconciliation. But, as in a real love story, the current of events does not run smoothly. The overall texture of *Carnival* is about as smooth as butter brickle ice cream, causing many adjustments and hand repositionings for the performer. Its intimate moments are interspersed with passages of intense excitement, culminating in a grand march with fleeting quotations from previous scenes, and ending *Prestissimo*. Merdinger takes this conclusion to the top, making for a very satisfying ending.

Faschingsschwank aus Wien (Carnival Prank in Vienna) is a logical companion piece because of its festive setting and ebullient overall mood. Schumann still makes provision for darker moments such as the brooding interlude in the long Allegro movement and the sad note struck by the cryptic Romanze. The turbulent finale, with its many hand- and voice-crossings, is the sort of meat Susan Merdinger loves, and she makes the most of it.



"The Boesendorfer Sound," Music by Debussy, Ravel, Liszt, Chopin, Granados, Bennett, Griffes
Carol Rosenberger, pianist
Delos

Actually, the word is "Bösendorfer." But American pianist Carol Rosenberger, who studied in Vienna and knows her *umlauts*, prefers the Americanized version because her pet name for her favorite piano is "Boesie." Carol met



4-Hand Piano Works by Milhaud, Czerny, Corigliano, and Schubert
Lavrova-Primakov Duo
LP Classics

Natalia Lavrova and Vassily Primakov, inheritors of the Russian conservatory tradition transplanted in the New World, have come up with a CD of power masterworks from the rich repertoire for piano, four hands. As they explain in their booklet notes, this highly diverse program originated in the rare opportunity to expand their repertoire that was afforded by a February 2012 invitation to Hill and Hollow Music, an Adirondack retreat in Saranac, N.Y. The diversity reflected their own well-developed artistic inclinations and love of zestful (but purposeful) virtuosity.

First up on the program is Darius Milhaud's *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* (The Ox on the Roof), its curious title derived from a well-known Brazilian tango of the same name. An outrageously exuberant work, *Le Boeuf* quotes more than 30 Brazilian tunes and wends its way through numerous leys, its rondo theme coming back time and again with such endless variety that one gets the impression Milhaud must have concluded it only because he ran out of manuscript paper. Lavrova and Primakov explore this tasty 17-minute morsel with obvious relish.

Next, we have Carl Czerny (1791-1857), most of whose vast musical production, running to 861 opus numbers, has remained unperformed until quite recently. Much of the reason for this neglect may be attributed to the fact that Czerny wrote so many practice pieces for students (it being human nature to resent people who do things for our own good). Czerny's reputation as a dry composer was perpetuated by such luminaries as Robert Schumann ("It would be difficult to find a greater failure of imagination") and Moritz Moszkowski, to whom is attributed the opinion that "Czerny hated little children." As performed by Lavrova and Primakov, Czerny's masterfully virtuosic, perfectly proportioned Grand Sonata in F minor, Op. 178 would indicate that some of his music, at least, is due for re-evaluation.

American composer John Corigliano (b. 1938) is represented by his *Gazebo Dances* in four movements: Overture, Waltz, Adagio, and Tarantella. In moods ranging from sadness to elation, and written with breathtakingly economy, these pieces re-invent older forms, such as the vigorous Italian folk dance in the final

Boesie at a piano dealer's in Orange County, CA in the spring of 1979, and it was "love at first touch." Without wasting precious time, she took Boesie home. And, she reports, "it has been singing happily ever since."

Before the end of June, Rosenberger had made her first Delos recording with Boesie, whose full name, if you must know, is "Bösendorfer Imperial Grand, Model 290" (Okay, let's stick with "Boesie"). That album, released when LP records still walked the earth, was titled "Water Music of the Impressionists." It was succeeded over the years by "Night Moods" and "Singing on the Water," and from those three Delos discs the present retrospective, *The Bösendorfer Sound*, was compiled.

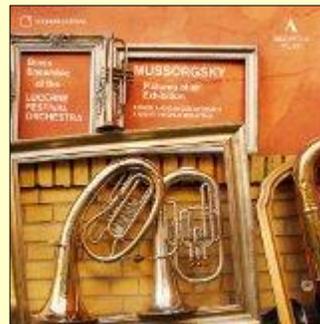
Boesie has unique qualifications for this particular program of water- and night music. Its range goes all the way down to a low C, a full sixth below the lowest note (A) on a conventional piano. With its extra notes, its solid spruce design in the inner and outer assembly and not just the sounding board, and its ample proportions, longer and wider than a standard concert grand, it has a characteristic warm, resonant sound. With its soft hammers and ability to blend tones, it has at times what Rosenberger terms "an almost 'attackless' sound." You can imagine yourself flowing as you listen to it, a quality which, together with Carol Rosenberger's consummate musicianship, makes it ideal for the present program of music by composers for whom softly beautiful sound and resonance could be paramount.

We have here the following gems. First, a Barcarolle in a free and easy style by Richard Rodney Bennett that is reminiscent of his film score for *Enchanted April*. Then Maurice Ravel's evocation of sunlight on splashing water *Jeux d'eau* (Fountains), the deep compass and almost symphonic scope of Franz Liszt's *Harmonies du soir* (Evening harmonies), and Ravel's *Une Barque sur l'océan* (Ship on the Ocean) in which the dazzling play of light and water on the surface belies the menace of its deeper waters. "The Maiden and the Nightingale" from *Goyescas* by Enrique Granados captures both the maiden's lament and the consoling (or is it disquieting?) beauty of the nightingale's song.

It's followed by: Debussy's *La Cathédrale engloutie* (The Sunken Cathedral), based on an old Breton legend of the massive sacred edifice that rises from the depths of the sea, its bells sounding and monks chanting, only to sink back again at the end. Rosenberger finds the bourdon effect of the Bösendorfer's low C ideal for this piece. Charles Tomlinson Griffes, America's Impressionist, is represented by the dreamy Fountain of the Acqua Paola and a Barcarolle in which the Venetian boatman's song uncharacteristically rises in emotion as we approach the end. Frederic Chopin's Nocturne, Op. 55, No. 2 seems beautiful but slightly tepid to me. (Have I heard it too often, or is it better suited to an instrument with a quicker action?) And finally, Rosenberger does full justice to Debussy's improvisatory sounding Nocturne in D-flat and his *Reflections in the Water*, with its constantly changing imagery, so appropriate to the subject.

movement, in a meaningful modern setting. They also cry out to be orchestrated, the four-hand piano version being a significant milestone along that road.

Finally, Schubert's Fantasia in F minor, D940, concludes the program on a note of freedom, zestfulness, and far-ranging breadth of feeling. Like the composer's famed "Wanderer" Fantasy, it combines the classical four movements (Allegro, Largo, Scherzo, and Finale) in a deceptively free-flowing fantasia that is really more tightly structured than at first appears. The hauntingly beautiful Hungarian melody in dotted rhythms that opens the work and is reprised in the finale serves to unify the work. Lavrova and Primakov obviously love exploring the many moods of this incredible work, ranging from somber, almost funereal, to angry and turbulent, and then giving way in the scherzo to brightness and simple happiness. In the finale, Schubert pulls a major surprise just before the end in the form of a cadence that pulls his themes together and condenses them in the final eight bars – a dramatic effect that sounds positively stunning here.



Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition, Night on Bare Mountain, Songs and Dances of Death
Lucerne Festival Brass
Accentus

The excellent Lucerne Festival Brass Ensemble from Switzerland score high marks with an all-Mussorgsky program that will knock your socks off. The performances are so stunning and the arrangements so superb, we feel that nothing, absolutely nothing, has been lost vis-à-vis the orchestral versions by Rimsky-Korsakov, Ravel and others that we've been used to hearing.

That's because the brass and percussion were already prominent in the orchestral versions, whereas the balance of the equation is usually tilted in favor of the strings in most of the symphonic music we hear. The tones of the deeper brass really bring out the macabre element in *Night on Bare Mountain*, and the frenzied activity is appropriately spine-tingling. I do, however, miss the extended ending that the famous Stokowski transcription applied to this work, with its soft tolling of the church bell, as it provided more time for the spirits of the dead to sink down into slumber after their night of a witches' sabbath.

Songs and Dances of Death, in a first-rate arrangement



Clementi: Five Keyboard Sonatas
Ian Hominick, piano (MSR Classics)

There's some justification for considering Muzio Clementi (1752-1832) the "father of the piano sonata." In his day, he not only developed a fluent legato style, based on a quest for ever more expressive *cantabile* (songlike) phrasing. He also passed it on to a generation of virtuoso-composers, including John Field, Johann Baptist Cramer, Ignaz Moscheles, Friedrich Kalkbrenner, Johann Nepomuk Hummel and Carl Czerny. And he had a notable influence on Ludwig van Beethoven, at least through his early Middle Period sonatas. It will be noted that most of the schools of piano teaching since that time trace their origins to one or more of these figures.

So why the benign neglect of so important a composer? It lies partly in Mozart's biased evaluation of Clementi as "a mere mechanic" who had "not a kreuzer's worth of taste or feeling." Nor has it helped that the Clementi works best known to most listeners are his sonatinas, long prized as learning pieces but less demanding musically than the full-fledged sonatas that Canadian pianist Ian Hominick plays in the present program. All five sonatas on this program show Clementi's penchants very clearly in his alternation between major and minor keys, his chromaticism, and his fondness for passages in octaves, all in the interest of making the music more expressive. It is noticeably more complicated than, say, Mozart's, requiring an artist like Ian Hominick to be continually alert for the changes. It is also a matter of taste, which Hominick possesses to a high degree. Here are trills for expressive purpose, not mere show; radiant keyboard color that is never gaudy, and delicate expressions of pathos that never descend to bathos.

For sake of example, the F minor Sonata, Op. 16, No. 6 will do as well as any. The arresting opening, a turbulent, sweeping *Allegro agitato*, reminds us of the opening of Beethoven's "Tempest" Sonata in its high drama and restless movement through a number of keys. The slow movement, an unhurried *Largo e sostenuto*, begins simply and quietly, and becomes harmonically complex through tastefully applied dissonances as it progresses, again reminiscent of Beethoven. The Presto finale uses chordal passages and runs that cover the entire keyboard to make its impact. Beethoven again. I should have said "reminds us" and "reminiscent" in parentheses, for a very good reason. Clementi got there first.

by Lucerne Brass trumpeter Steven Verhaert, continues the composer's preoccupation with death. The brass arrangements of the original song cycle are just as trenchant as the vocal versions. Mussorgsky's songs turn four normally affirmative genres – lullaby, serenade, folk dance, and triumphal march – on their heads. The presence of death informs each of them. Lullaby ends up a threnody for a dying child. Serenade is a variation on the "death and the maiden" theme in literature, with the suitor (Death) exulting at the end "She is mine!" Trepak is an eerie tale of a drunken peasant who has lost his way in a snowstorm, to be comforted by a shadowy figure (Death, of course) that pulls a blanket of snow over him for a coverlet. Finally, The Field Marshal is, again, Death in the guise of a military leader gathering the forces of a vast army of the dead in ghastly triumph.

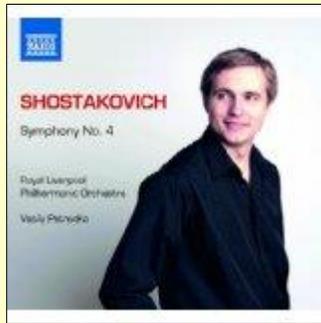
Finally, Pictures at an Exhibition, arranged for brass and percussion by composer Elgar Howarth, superbly captures the great variety of Mussorgsky's colorful excursion through an art exhibition until at last the spectator has become one with the exhibition. The Promenade theme is brilliantly varied and sounds great in each of its five incarnations. Gnomus, the portrait of an evil nutcracker in the shape of a gnome, is a far remove from Tchaikovsky's enchanted prince. The Old Castle is tinged with nostalgia for vanished greatness. The deepest point of the drama is in the tableaux Catacombs and With the Dead in a Dead Language, as profound a meditation on death as there is in music. Even the allegedly "lightweight" depictions of bustle and activity in the children quarreling at play in the Tuileries Gardens and the housewives haggling over the prices in The Market at Limoges have their place in the scheme of things for Mussorgsky, as they show the vain activities in which we engage as a contrast to the weightier matters that predominate in Pictures. Baba Yaga, with its running 16th note tremolos and disjunctive rhythmic bumps, is really terrifying in the present arrangement, while The Great Gate of Key is its usual glorious self, a fitting ending to a terrific suite. With a performance such as this by the Lucerne Festival Brass, who needs an orchestra?

Coming Next Issue . . .



Why is this young man smiling?

If you played piano as well as Andrew von Oeyen, you'd smile, too. Check out our February issue for the skinny on his superlative Debussy / Stravinsky recital.



Shostakovich: Symphony No. 4
Vasily Petrenko, Royal Liverpool
Philharmonic Orchestra
Naxos

“Searing.” “Seismic.” “Terrifying intensity.” The adjectives have already begun to mount up in reviews of the finely detailed and super dynamic recording of Symphony No. 4 in C minor, Op. 43 of Dmitri Shostakovich by Vasily Petrenko and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. These qualities should endear the CD to those audiophiles who always groove on elements that test the range and resources of their high-end systems. Considered purely in musical terms, the 4th Symphony is more problematical.

The main problem is the vastness of the canvas and its myriad of details. The 4th is twice as long as the average symphony and contains four times as many incidents. The playing time here is 65 minutes, and Petrenko is no slowpoke but rather keeps things moving along. Actually, Shostakovich adheres rather closely to the concept of sonata-allegro form. There are three themes in the first-movement exposition, and he develops them thoroughly, though he typically treats them in reverse order in the recapitulation and allows some interaction between them. The formal strictness is thus camouflaged from the listener.

The work needs enormous resources to realize it, which is another reason you haven't heard it more often. It requires 2 piccolos, 4 flutes, 4 oboes (one doubling cor anglais), 5 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, 2 tubas, 6 tympani (2

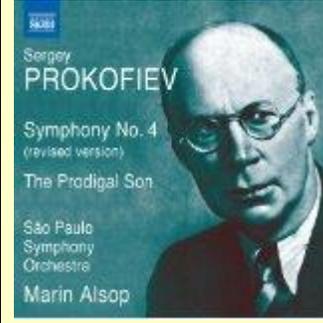


Stravinsky: Rite of Spring +
Mussorgsky: Pictures at an
Exhibition - Pentaèdre
ATMA Classique

Pentaèdre, currently the resident woodwind ensemble at the Conservatoire de musique de Montréal, has never been a group to avoid challenges. But the present pairing of two cornerstones of Russian music threatened to go the limit. Fortunately, they had expert arrangements to make their task of translating orchestral masterworks for woodwind quintet lighter, if not exactly easy.

In arranging Rite of Spring, Michael Byerly took his cue from the fact that Stravinsky already used the wind section to drive much of the score. His main challenge was what to cut out (in the end, about 12 minutes in all) so the result would not be overlong and tax the endurance of the wind quintet while still giving the impression that nothing essential had been left out of the present 21-minute version. Parts that did not work well for winds were an obvious choice, though there still remained the difficulty of transcribing the motor rhythms in the dramatic passages where the burden had rested on the lower strings and percussion.

In the end, Byerly came up with a very workable arrangement, though it is not suitable music for dinosaur-killing (*pace* Walt Disney and Leopold Stokowski, who ingeniously segued “Mysterious circles of the Young Girls” and “Sacrificial Dance” for that famous scene in the movie *Fantasia*). The rest was up to the five members of Pentaèdre to realize as vividly as they do here. The texture of Stravinsky's work comes through,



Prokofiev: Symphony No. 4,
Prodigal Son - Marin Alsop, São
Paulo Symphony Orchestra
Naxos

Marin Alsop and the Symphony Orchestra of São Paulo, Brazil give us performances of two important works by Sergei Prokofiev that reveal why they were important steps toward his future career. More than that, they show the significance of dance in everything the composer did with the orchestra.

Granted, Prokofiev's Fourth Symphony is not his Fifth, and neither is The Prodigal Son on the same level as Romeo and Juliet. But they reveal a composer who was on his way to bigger things. Like his contemporary Shostakovich, Prokofiev wrote an impressive First Symphony, classical in form, economically structured, and filled with enough engaging material that it has remained a concert hall favorite to this day. Then, like Shostakovich, he lost his way attempting to develop a mature style in Symphonies 2-3. The 1929 ballet *L'Enfant prodigue* (The Prodigal Son) was an important step forward. Here we have the alternation of lyricism and high-energy music with the sort of motor rhythms we recognize later in Romeo and Juliet (1934). A particularly fine moment here is the scene with the Seductress, with its sinuous woodwind melodies.

When Prokofiev was commissioned to write a new work for the fiftieth anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, he responded with his Fourth Symphony, in which he re-used some of the themes from The Prodigal Son. So *many*, in fact, that Serge Koussevitsky, who had given

<p>players), an expanded percussion section (6 players), celesta, 2 harps, and from 64 to 84 strings. (<i>Whew!</i> That's what I like about these overloaded symphonies: half my job as reviewer is done for me by just describing the orchestration) With all that, there is absolutely no sense of clutter. The composer's orderly deployment of all these resources resolves itself amazingly in a chamber-music economy of means.</p> <p>The architectural arrangement of the many elements that make up this big symphony is, in itself, an impressive achievement. Its clarity recalls similar achievements by Gustav Mahler in several of his largest-scale works that likewise belie their extreme length. A good example is the de facto "vaudeville" that occurs late in the first half of the 28-minute Allegro finale. Here, Shostakovich presents his elements in a variety of guises from playful to sardonic. His love of the whimsical expresses itself in a light-hearted polka for piccolos and flutes over strings and harps, succeeded by a lilting melody for horn and strings set against the chirping of the woodwinds. Then we have a mad galop, heard first on bassoon, then xylophone, a folksy melody for trombone that becomes more virtuosic upon its repetition, a lilting waltz for woodwinds over pizzicato strings, a brief climax, and then the lilting music again, this time for violins and violas over a chugging accompaniment by the lower strings. All this in only about 5 minutes' time.</p> <p>Of course, not all the music in the 4th Symphony is this light-hearted. Some of the first and third movement climaxes are absolutely pulverizing in their intensity. Many of its themes express the anxiety and anguish of life in Stalinist Russia. As with Boris Pasternak in his novel <i>Doctor Zhivago</i>, Shostakovich seems pre-occupied with defining the relation between the individual and the mass in soviet society. In the end, the answer seems to be, "Dance while you can, little man, but don't get in the path of the juggernaut."</p>	<p>arguably, with greater clarity than it does in the various orchestral versions we've been used to hearing, and the strange timbres and colors, sometimes flavorful and at other times acrid, help to create a distinctly archaic mood.</p> <p>One of arranger Stéphane Mooser's biggest challenges in Mussorgsky's <i>Pictures at an Exhibition</i> was to capture the evocativeness and poetic flavour of the original without limiting himself to the colors of the usual woodwind quintet. First, he went back to the original piano version, to clear his head of the Ravel orchestral version that we all know. Then he expanded the range of colors and timbres to use other types of winds without placing too much stress on the musicians changing instruments.</p> <p>As it is, I would give something to see how the members of Pentaèdre manage it in performance. For the record, they are Danièle Bourget (piccolo, flute, alto flute), Normand Forget (oboe, oboe d'amore, English horn, clarinet), Martin Carpentier (clarinet, E-flat and bass clarinets), Mathieu Lussier (bassoon, contra-bassoon), and Louis-Philippe Marsolais (horn, Wagner tuba). The right instrument for the right moment is crucial in this score.</p> <p>Pentaèdre comes through time and again in bringing Mussorgsky's vivid <i>Pictures</i> to life, whether they are a sad, reedy lament for a deserted castle, a lower brass-driven scene of oxen groaning under a heavy wagon load, or scampering children at play in the public gardens. The moment when the eeriness of Catacombs is replaced by the higher winds intoning the prayer for the dead is stunningly realized here. So is Baba Yaga, with its sense of the macabre (if not the disjunctive beats and thumps of the orchestral version). The musicians score impressively in the Great Gate of Kiev finale as they succeed in capturing the vastness of Mussorgsky's design.</p>	<p>the commission, needed Prokofiev's assurance that this was no mere re-writing of the ballet but a work that would stand on its own originality.</p> <p>Nevertheless, the November 1930 premiere of the Fourth Symphony was greeted with such lukewarm response that Prokofiev decided to shelve the work until he rewrote it in 1947, lengthening the development section and adding new instruments to the score: E-flat clarinet, trumpet, piano, and harp. He also expanded the percussion section, adding triangle, tambourine, and wood blocks. The differences between the two versions of the symphony are significant enough that it's customary to consider them as two different works, Op. 47 and Op. 112.</p> <p>The added instrumental timbres undoubtedly enhanced the composer's quirky but colorful orchestration, with results we can hear in the present performance of the revised version. Fine moments here include the gently lyrical second subject in the opening movement and the theme in the Andante featuring flute, piano and harp and recalling the father's love for the prodigal son at the end of the ballet. The third movement, <i>Moderato quasi Allegretto</i>, is fashioned from music associated with the Seductress in the ballet, developed as a scherzo with a trio section. And the finale, <i>Allegro risoluto</i>, features the motor rhythms I mentioned earlier, recalling the prodigal son's riotous companions.</p> <p>Most important as far as a successful performance of an improved but still imperfect work, is the attention Marin Alsop and the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra give to the vital matter of <i>rhythm</i>. No other modern composer recalled the rhythms of the dance in his symphonies as did Prokofiev. We heard it in the Gavotte moment of his "Classical" Symphony, and we hear it again in numerous places in the Fourth, enhancing the attractiveness and character of the work.</p>
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