

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

January, 2016



Benita Valente, Volume 2  
Benita Valente, soprano, with assisting artists  
(Bridge Records)

This handsome tribute to the great American soprano Benita Valente is based on recordings she made between 1980 and 1985, when she was at the very peak of her vocal artistry. The Delano, California native who happily is still among us and is quite active as an inspired teacher, is represented in a program of German *lieder* (art songs) by Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, Richard Strauss, and Hugo Wolf. Of particular interest are the ways in which the songs reveal the psyche of women in love in a range of states from sadness and despair to elation and astonishment at love's revelation.

Schubert is heard from first, in songs mostly based on poems by Goethe: the breathlessly unforgettable *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (Getchen at the Spinning Wheel) with pianist Cynthia Raim, and three Songs from Mignon, with Lydia Artymiw at the piano. The first-named song is brilliantly characterized by the rising emotion of the singer over a steadily whirling accompaniment in the piano as Gretchen recalls her rendezvous with Faust, stopping suddenly and dramatically at the memory of his kiss ("*und ach, sein Kuß!*") From that point, the song continues on slowly and pensively, as Gretchen vainly attempts to pick up the pieces of her shattered life. Psychologically, this is one of the masterpieces of all lieder, and the close sympathy and superb timing of singer and accompanist bring it off to perfection.

The good work continues as Valente and Artymiw take on Schubert's Mignon Lieder 2-4, the most famous of which is the last, "*Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt*," in which Valente's vocal artistry, allied with sensitivity to the poetic text, follows the deepening emotional progress of the text with its repeated lament that "None but the lonely heart" can understand such sorrow. With Raim and clarinetist Harold Wright, she also gives us a moving account of the Romanze, "*Ich schleiche bang' und still*" (I creep, fearful and silent), D787, a jewel rescued from Schubert's failed opera *Die Vesperschwärmer* (The Conspirators). The text in the CD booklet is actually that of the better-known



Brahms: String Quartets (2), op. 51  
New Orford String Quartet  
(Bridge Records)

The New Orford Quartet, consisting of Jonathan Crow and Andrew Wan, violins; Eric Nowlin, viola; and Brian Manker, cello, was formed in 2009, taking its name from its similarly named predecessor that disbanded in 1991. That organization in turn took its name from the Orford Arts Centre in Ontario. So now you know.

What you *don't* know, but will hear as soon as you put this new release of Brahms' Op. 51 on your CD player, is the precision and warmth cultivated by the New Orford, a winning combination that has been cited by critics as "sweet, balanced, and technically unassailable," qualities that make these artists ideal interpreters of Brahms' masterworks.

I have been historically slow to warm up to these two string quartets because I found the performances I'd heard to be less than enchanting. George Bernard Shaw, a passionate Wagnerite who was definitely no friend of Brahms, famously described the composer as "a sentimental voluptuary." Even today, it is a common assumption that Quartet No. 2 in A minor, with its somewhat more leisurely flowing of spontaneous lyricism, stems from earlier material than its predecessor. No doubt that is a reflection of the modern prejudice that a work filled with attractive melodies that people actually *enjoy* listening to must date from an earlier period, before its composer got wise to himself.

The larger issue for interpreters of these quartets is how to characterize them. Brian Manker, in his program notes, describes the finale of Quartet No. 1 in C minor as "a tragedy on the order of the Greek epics, where the arrow of time is pressing forward... relentlessly." Though most observers concede Quartet no. 2 to be less "terse" and "tragic" that its opus-mate, its finale is often cited for its conflict between theme and accompaniment – ignoring the fact that its meter is based on the Czárdás, a Hungarian dance that *will* do just that sort of thing.

The main issue encountered when interpreting Brahms'

Romanze from Rosamunde – a forgiveable error, as both songs have a similar title and feature clarinet as well as piano accompaniment.

That doesn't leave much space to talk about the three Schumann songs *Die Lotusblume* (Lotus Blossom), *Du bist wie eine Blume* (You are like a flower) and *Maienwurmschen* (Lady-Bird), songs that explore the secret language of lovers concealed in familiar objects of nature. Nor does it allow me to discuss the poetic beauties in a program of ten Strauss songs that include such favorites as *Allerseelen* (All Souls Day), *Die Nacht* (Night), and *Cäcilie* (Cecilia), or the six Wolf songs including *Er ist's* (It is spring), *Verschwiegene Liebe* (Secret Love) and a very sensual *Im dem Schatten meiner Locken* (In the shade of my tresses). In all these lieder, the incredible purity of Valente's tone, flawless through her entire range, is matched by sensitive accompaniment by Lee Luvisi (Schubert) and Cynthia Raim (Strauss, Wolf). That is vital, as the piano is often called upon to continue on after the vocal text has ended, underscoring and reinforcing the emotion of the song.



Mendelssohn: The String Quintets  
Harrington Quartet, with James Dunham, viola (Centaur Records)

The Harrington String Quartet, in residence at West Texas A&M University, never fail to thrill audiences with the exuberance of their playing, and in places a lot farther-flung globally than just the Texas Panhandle. Consisting of Tomas Cotik, first Violin; Keith Redpath, second violin; Jennifer Kozoroz, viola; and Emmauel Lopez, cello, they are joined here by guest violist James Dunham in the two String Quintets of Felix Mendelssohn. The results are simply wonderful.

Quintet No. 1 in A major, Op. 18, composed in 1826, the same year as his Octet and his Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream, reflects the early maturity of its 17 year-old composer. There is lightness and economy of purpose in the first violin's melody, grounded by quarter-notes in the lower strings; and then Mendelssohn adds drama to the development with triplets, 16<sup>th</sup> note runs, and arpeggios. That, mind you, is just what occurs in the opening Allegro con moto. (And when Mendelssohn says "con moto," he really means it!) Succeeding movements include an Intermezzo with a hymn-like character, a scherzo combining pianissimo and staccato in the same passages, and a spirited finale with echoes of

Opus 51 results from the way themes of remarkably different character evolve organically from one another. Rather like Aesop's fable of The Six Blind Men and the Elephant, it all depends on what part of the beast you have hold of at the moment. Manker cites the way the material used in all the movements of No. 1 springs from the rhythmic and melodic contour of its opening theme, like "a natural foreshadowing." Two very striking examples are the way in which the Allegretto of No. 1 changes character to a broader, more expansive theme at about the 4:35 mark, and the way the charming serenade intrudes on the opening Allegro non troppo in No. 2 at 1:22 and again at 5:15 like a welcome outburst of sunshine. The New Orford Quartet capture these moods and changes of character to perfection.



Schubert: String Quintet in C, D.956  
Brentano Quartet, Michael Kannen  
(Azica Records)

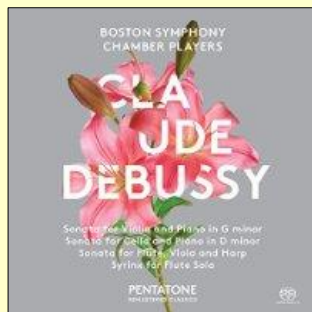
The Brentano String Quartet, comprised of Mark Steinberg and Serena Canin, violins; Misha Amory, viola; and Nina Lee, cello; are joined by cellist Michael Kannen in as sublimely beautiful a performance as I've yet heard of Franz Schubert's great String Quintet in C major. Recorded in performance at Buckley Recital Hall, Amherst College, the near-perfect acoustics and the solid sonic support from the production team of Alan Bise and Bruce Egge bring out all the fine points in a very memorable presentation.

That business about the second cellist is more significant than you might imagine. Most string quintets feature an extra viola as fifth player, a fact that tends to emphasize the inner voices in the harmony. Without detracting from that aspect of the work, Schubert's scoring lends a deeper sonority to music conceived with a true symphonic breadth. This work takes almost a solid hour to perform (57:30 in this instance), but must seem to be utterly unhurried, as it does in the present account, particularly in the opening Allegro ma non troppo and the succeeding Adagio (one of Schubert's few movements to be so marked). The former begins with a long "sigh" from all the strings, and is characterized as it develops by unexpected harmonic turns, expansive chords, slowly increasing tension, a duet between the cellos, and at the very end, a magical and unorthodox modulation from G major to A major in which even listeners who aren't musically educated can sense that something wonderful has transpired.

Beethoven's Quartet Op. 18, No. 1 in its use of running 16<sup>th</sup>-note triplets under the melody.

Quintet No. 2 in B-flat Major (1845) sees Mendelssohn in his full maturity, capable of making his music express anything he wants. The first violin takes charge of the adventuresome theme in the opening movement, its forte dynamics supported by ominous tremolos in the lower strings. The brief scherzo is made more attractive by superb fluidity and pace, enhanced by elegant pizzicati. The deep point of the work is the Adagio, filled with beautiful pathos and evocations of vocal music in a solemn, prayerful mood. The finale, Allegro molto vivace, is given added glamor by explosive 16<sup>th</sup>-note runs.

Mendelssohn has been criticized, perhaps unfairly, for his conservative musical style. He saw no need to jettison the conventions we now term "classical" and attract attention to his music by indulging in "revolutionary" novelty à la Berlioz, and Wagner. Was he right in doing so? Certainly, he was a composer whose grasp was exactly equal to his reach, and the result can be very satisfying, especially in his memorable pictorial and expressive effects. Today, uninspired performances can make his music seem stodgy. Great ones, like the Harrington Quartet and Dunham give us in these recordings, bring out the lithesomeness, vitality, and unexpected depths of emotion that make his best music ever more revelant in today's nervous world.



Debussy: Three Chamber Sonatas - Boston Symphony Chamber Players (PenaTone SACD)

It gets better as it goes on, this series of Remastered Classics reissues of original quad stereo recordings. This release has the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, consisting of Joseph Silverstein, violin; Burton Fine, viola; Jules Eskin, cello; Doriot Anthony Dwyer, flute; Ann Hobson, harp; and Michael Tilson Thomas, piano, in March 1970 recordings of Debussy's last trio of chamber works plus Syrinx for solo flute, that all sound startlingly alive in their new guise.

These are the 3 sonatas Debussy wrote in 1915-1917, of a projected series of six he conceived as a tribute to French art that was cut short by his final illness. There is no slackening of his creative powers here, however, but a summation and a keener statement of principles that had driven his music. We hear this in the Sonata for Violin and Piano, where the rhapsodic nature of the music is

The Adagio is so tranquil and other-worldly that many listeners (several filmmakers among them) have heard in it a meditation on death and eternity, its solemn measures relieved by a suddenly turbulent middle section. As the Brentano Quartet and Kanner show us, pacing and timing are the essence here, in music that can't be forced or hurried and mustn't telegraph its passionate mid-movement outburst.

The Scherzo exploits the open strings of the lower instruments in an unusual way, reinforcing the feeling of symphonic breadth in the music. The finale, an Allegretto in rondo form, has the feeling of a serenade that could go on forever in its sheer exuberance before it ends, as the work began, on a long-drawn cadence. Throughout their intimate exploration of the heart and mind of Franz Schubert, the artists remain true to their avowed purpose in recording as "the capturing of an otherwise evanescent extended moment in time, a moment of communion with each other and with our audience."



Wagner: Wesendonck Lieder, Tristan Prelude + Elgar: Sea Pictures, Angel's Farewell – Sarah Rose Taylor, mezzo-soprano; Nigel Potts, organ (MSR Classics)

These were a lot of new experiences for me. I'd heard Wagner's Wesendonck lieder before, but only in the version with piano accompaniment, a limited concept in which Mathilde Wesendonck's poetry sounded as banal as it really is. Organist Nigel's Potts' inspired organ arrangement of Wagner's orchestral version lends an appropriately exalted feeling to music conceived in the composer's post-*Tristan* vein, opera rather than art song.

This CD is memorable for giving many of us on this side of the Atlantic our first chance to hear New York-based English mezzo Sarah Rose Taylor. With her ravishingly beautiful voice, her sensitivity to nuances in a poetic text, and her skill at molding the contour of a vocal line, it is no surprise to hear that she has been much in demand as recitalist, opera singer, and vocalist in choral works. This is a great new voice that you simply *must* hear.

Taylor gives further evidence of her vocal loveliness in Elgar's Sea Pictures and "The Angel's Farewell" (to souls bound for the Lake of Purgatory) from *The Dream of Gerontius*. As in the Wagner lieder, we have occasion to recall the old adage that great music trumps bad poetry in art song. A definite plus here is Nigel Potts' performance

emphasized by the frequent use of swelling tones and long lines. A burst of energy in the slow movement, marked "Fantastic and Light," is soon extinguished, a feature characteristic of this trio of masterworks.

Sonata for Cello and Piano is for many listeners the most troubling of the three, with its collapse of boundaries between melody and ornamentation and its changes in timbre and tempo. The music is often nervous in character, particularly in the "Serenade" movement in which the cello plays stunning pizzicati where Debussy's audiences had a right to expect long legato melodies.

Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp was an 18<sup>th</sup> century genre that Debussy resurrected to suite his purpose of creating an ever more expressive interplay of timbres from three diverse instruments: blown, bowed, and percussive. The soaring melody that breaks out unexpectedly in the flute in the opening movement, "Pastorale" always has a stunning impact for me as often as I've heard it. A feeling of free improvisation, in conflict with repressed passion, creates a certain tension in this work, which comes across as abstract music-without-borders, in spite of its undeniably rustic flavor.

Syrinx, originally titled "*Flûte de Pan*," was Debussy's evocation of the origin of music in Greek antiquity. Tonally ambiguous with its whole-tone scales and fragmentary melodies, it has intrigued listeners and bedeviled flutists since Debussy penned it in 1913. Thus, it makes a fitting conclusion to an intriguing program.



Chopin: Piano Sonata No. 3, Polonaise-Fantaisie, 2 Nocturnes – Charles Richard-Hamelin, piano (Analekta)

Charles Richard-Hamelin is one of the rising pianists of his generation. The native of Lanaudière, Québec put us on alert to follow his rising star when he won the silver medal and the award for best sonata performance at the 2015 Chopin International Piano Competition in Warsaw. Among his finer qualities is his keen appreciation of the architecture of a work of music. From that comes the sonority, the layering of textures, the color and the poetic truth of his performances. Knowing the structure, he knows where he is going.

The present all-Chopin program plays to Richard-Hamelin's best qualities. It begins with Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Op. 58. Virtually in a dead heat in number of

of his transcription of Elgar's orchestral setting at the Schoenstein organ of Christ & St. Stephen's Church, New York. Together with a performance by harpist Grace Cloutier that helps illuminate Elgar's rich harmonies to perfection, we feel that we haven't missed anything by not having an orchestra.

Potts' prowess is also on display in his transcription of The Prelude to Act I of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, which goes beyond the usual standards of organ transcription to actually sound better than most orchestral versions I've heard. That is particularly true when the "*Liebestod*" theme is heard in the context of the climactic chord change that has been famously (and possibly, even correctly) cited as opening the door harmonically to the music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, this is one beautiful sounding album. Produced by Paul Spicer and engineered by Richard Price and Wayne Hileman, it is a splendid example of Candlewood Digital's Natural Presence Recording.



Saint-Saëns: Violin Concertos 1-3  
Andrew Wan, violin; Kent Nagano, Orchestre symphonique de Montréal (Analekta)

Andrew Wan, as accomplished a concert violinist as he is a member of the New Orford String Quartet (see Brahms review, above) gives smoothly flowing, lyrical accounts of the three concertos of Camille Saint-Saëns that reveal the composer as the apex of French romanticism. With the support of Kent Nagano and the Orchestre symphonique, these performances exude a real flair and breathe the flavor of a rich, luxuriant period in French art.

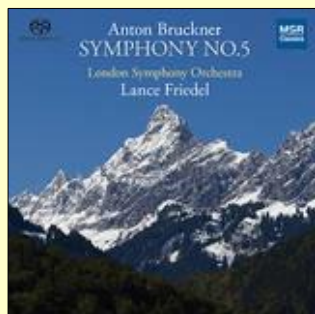
Because he composed it for the Spanish gypsy virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate, and therefore included plenty of opportunity for display as well as musical substance, Saint-Saëns' Violin Concerto No. 3 has always been the favorite with audiences. From the fervid opening by the orchestra, followed by a gorgeous melody by the violin, we know we are in for a treat. Wan does not disappoint us, as he meets all the interpretive challenges in a work characterized by impressionistic subtlety, warmth and seemingly endless melodic inspiration. The slow movement, an Andante quasi allegretto in the form of a barcarolle, is another high point. A cadenza, played over the murmuring of the orchestra, leads right into the most affirmative finale imaginable.

recordings with Chopin's Sonata No. 2, the "Funeral March," it has gained steadily on it in popularity in recent decades as we've come to recognize the composer's sure handling of sonata form, including the occasions when it was expedient to bend the rules. The gravity of its sudden, turbulent opening theme serves to emphasize the filigree lyricism of the second theme that follows it. The texture then thickens, in ways that engage an artist of Richard-Hamelin's temperament, before it lightens as we approach the coda. The Scherzo, "*Molto vivace*," at first seems an excrescence, a trifle that seems to go nowhere, considering the overall seriousness of the work.

We realize what Chopin has been up to when that Scherzo, a flurry of only two minutes or so, leads us to the Largo, a deeply serious, darkly melodic rumination over a gentle 8<sup>th</sup>-note accompaniment in the bass. This wide-ranging meditation of almost 10 minutes' duration is followed by the finale, *Presto non tanto*. With its urgently driving impulse, its requirement for very agile fingerwork, and its build-up to a smashing finish, it brings out the best in this young master of the keyboard.

Polonaise-Fantaisie in A-flat major, Op. 61, actually has more in common with the Ballades as a piece with an implied narrative than it does the Polonaise. For one thing, it is quite literally un-danceable, even by persons blessed with high stamina. For another, its constant changes of mood, tempo, and character mark it as a work of great complexity, together with moods of agitation, melancholy, and nostalgia. Richard-Hamelin brings out all these elements and more.

The two Nocturnes, in B major, Op. 62, No. 1, and E major, Op. 62, No. 2, reveal the great freedom of design and thematic fluidity that characterize Chopin's last works. The first, a bittersweet conception with an inner yearning for peace, is handled by Richard-Hamelin with all the poise and elegance it deserves. The second, rather more extroverted than its predecessor, ends quietly and resignedly, as if Chopin, in a premonition of his own death, were reluctant to let it go.



Bruckner: Symphony No. 5 in B-flat  
Lance Friedel, London Symphony Orchestra  
(MSR Classics hybrid SACD)

MSR Classics is bursting its buttons over this new release that has American conductor Lance Friedel leading the London Symphony Orchestra in Anton

As wonderful as is Concerto No. 3, we shouldn't overlook the abundant beauties of Nos 1 and 2. The first, written by the composer at the age of 24, shows a fine attention to form and movement in addition to understandably youthful exuberance. Often described as a *konzerstück* in a single movement because of its interaction between soloist and orchestra, it is actually a finely crafted concerto in which its three movements follow *attaca* (without a break). The melody of pastoral nature in the slow movement, *Andante espressivo*, calls for special attention in a work characterized by melodic innocence and naturalness.

In some ways, I actually liked Concerto No. 2 better than its more famous successor. A brusquely compelling *Allegro non troppo* opening is followed by a charming *Andante* with harp and woodwind accompaniment. The finale is in two parts, an *Allegro scherzando* that leads immediately into a bracing *Allegro vivace*. Wan and Nagano obviously enjoy the expressive cantilena in the *Andante* of this work and the virtuosic playfulness of its finale.



Saint-Saëns: Symphony No. 3, "Organ"  
+ new works for organ and orchestra – Olivier Latry,  
Jean-Willy Kunz, organists; Kent Nagano, Orchestre  
symphonique de Montréal (Analekta)

Kent Nagano, at the podium of the Montréal Orchestre symphonique, leads the orchestra in a smashing account of Camille Saint-Saëns' enduringly popular Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 78. A pair of new works for organ and orchestra by contemporary composers, showcasing the talents of two fine young organists, comprise the second half of the program.

Though generally known as the "Organ" Symphony, the Saint-Saëns Third actually features the organ only in the second and fourth movements, but its presence is felt immediately in both instances. In the *Pogo Adagio*, where it enters softly but firmly in a key of A-flat which soon resolves to a warm D-flat, the organ carries on an intimate dialog of incredible loveliness and deepest consolation with the strings. In the *Maestoso – Allegro*, it sounds a note of triumph with as decisive a C major chord as you will hear in all music, as it leads us into one of the most thrilling finales in the symphonic repertoire. That finale, utilizing fugal polyphony and a *pastorale interlude*, moves through a variety of textures

Bruckner's Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major. Quite apart from the excellence of the performance, this is MSR's first-ever hybrid SACD in high-definition stereo and Surround. That's important because of all the vital detail that is of the essence in this work. MSR chief Robert LaPorta is always urging listeners to "turn it up," and in this case it is sage advice if you want to hear the *pianissimo* passages at the beginnings of several of the movements (you know, those icky dynamic markings that composers *will* write occasionally to play with our minds and have us believe we've suddenly been stricken deaf).

More to the point, the exquisite care Lance Friedel takes in pacing this account of the Bruckner Fifth allows us to hear it in finer perspective than is usually the case. In fact, it allows us to place Bruckner himself as basically a composer with classical antecedents, rather than a true romantic. This issue has long been confused because of the composer's childlike admiration of Wagner, which is reflected in his slow unfolding of chromatic harmony and his colorful orchestration, particularly in the brass section. Contemporary critics used him as a whipping-boy for Wagner himself, deriding his music as "formless."

How utterly wrong such criticism was comes across in the present performance. Far from being formless, Bruckner was obsessed with form, which is evident in the way he develops three thematic groups each in the opening movement and the finale. Friedel takes pains to shape the contours of these themes, so that Bruckner's purpose becomes clearer as we go along. In his program notes, he talks about such features as the constantly shifting harmonies, the architectural symmetry of the work as a whole, and the use of cyclic form as the final movement resolves issues the opening movement began. (This symphony is, in fact, ideally suited to those concertgoers who like to follow the performance with their own miniature scores. That fact alone disqualifies it as a "romantic" work, for there is obviously no literary subtext here. This is "pure" music, if ever there was.)

Everything directs us toward the finale. As earlier commentators, notably among them the great German conductor Eugen Jochum, have pointed out, "the climax is not merely in the last movement but at the very end, in the chorale.... The first, second, and third movements seem almost a vast preparation." This Allegro moderato begins softly with an Adagio introduction, as did the opening of the symphony but it soon veers off in a different direction. As in the opening, there are three theme groups to be developed, plus an intricate double fugue. Because the details must not be obscured, numerous dynamic subtleties need to be observed.

In the present recording, Lance Friedel does all this and more. In the course of a 25-minute movement, he makes the relationships clear through his superb sense of pacing and dynamics, keeping the full force of the orchestra in reserve until the very end.

and tempi, all taken superbly by maestro Nagano. This finale makes the strongest contrast with the soft, gentle mood of the opening movement, which ended in plucked notes in the cello and bass and a long sustained note in the organ at the opening of the Poco Adagio.

I am not as sanguine about the two companion works on this CD, A Globe Itself Infolding by Canadian composer Samy Moussa (b.1984) and *Maan Varjot* (Earth's Shadows) by Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho (b.1952). Both have limitations that would seem to reinforce the growing suspicion that contemporary composers have painted themselves into a corner. The Moussa utilizes a murky color palette that leaves some ambiguity as to whether the organ is melding with the orchestra or vice versa. A rather static work, it creates no real impression of where it is going. The Saariaho explores micro-tonalities and multi-layered dynamics (for those who appreciate that sort of thing) but does not appear to have gone anywhere at the end, despite a lot of spiky textures, polytonal miasmas, and raw excitement. The effect is basically cacophony, something which has added up to greatness only once in music history (*Rite of Spring*, 1913). But really, you will want to acquire this CD for the Saint-Saëns, and it is worth your hearing.

### *Coming in February:*



It's an oasis in the midst of one of the world's great cities, a place of rest and peace and a rendezvous for strolling lovers. And Charles Ives celebrated its nocturnal beauty in a memorable composition you will hear about in next month's column.

These Early Quartets are based on recordings selected from no fewer than ten complete cycles of the Beethoven quartets that the Budapest String Quartet performed at the Library of Congress during its 22-year tenure there. As such, they are a vital part of our musical history. Do not look for audiophile-class sound here. These live recordings, provided to Bridge Records by the Music Division of the Library of Congress and produced for Bridge by Becky and David Starobin, were obviously intended for archival purposes, and *not* public release. The sound is undeniably rough, particularly in the earlier recordings which were made in 1943-1944, before the advent of tape recording in America. Even as experienced a post-production engineer as Bridge's Adam Abeshouse, who is credited with the restoration and mastering, would have found it difficult to "scrub" these early recordings: it would be like a dental cleaning in which you risked removing the enamel along with the tartar.

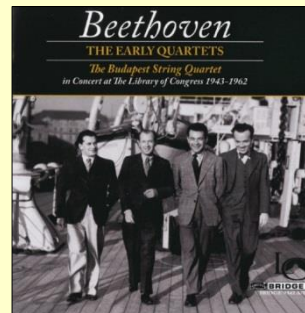
Warts and all, these performances are the living record of the Budapest String Quartet performing Beethoven for a wartime generation who needed and perhaps understood the greatness and the humanity of that composer better than we do today. It was an era in which Americans anxiously scanned the morning papers and watched for the mail bringing news of their loved ones at war. As displaced Russian Jews who had left Berlin in 1934 under the pressure of Nazi death threats, the Budapest Quartet had more reason than most to dread the news from Europe. They play their Beethoven as if their very lives depended on it. The intensity of their performances, with bold transitions and individual instrumental lines that often seem to leap out at us, compel our attention by their great urgency and eloquence.

Without invoking an "authentic" period style (as the term is understood today), they give us an impression of how Beethoven must have seemed to contemporaries who were totally unprepared for his powerful rhetoric. Right from the beginning of the opening *Allegro con brio* of Quartet No. 1, in which a gently curving theme with repeated notes is taken with an intensity Beethoven's audiences would have found shocking, they knew they were in for something new in the polite world of chamber music. That is soon confirmed by the slow movement, marked *Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato*, in which the passionate intensity of the latter section leaves the more lasting impression. (For what it's worth, Beethoven is said to have been inspired by the harrowing Tomb Scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.) In these "Early Quartets" (written, incidentally in 312564 sequence, rather than the order they in which they were published as Opus 18), Beethoven significantly substituted a scherzo in place of the expected minuet. Only in Nos. 4 and 5 did he actually write a "Minuetto." In both cases the result is scarcely danceable, even by the most athletically gifted.

The recordings of Quartets 1-3 on CD 1, all from 1944, feature Edgar Ortenberg in his early performances with the quartet after he had replaced Alexander Schneider as second violin. That was before the sheer fatigue of a year-round schedule with these high-energy Russians (Joseph Roisman, 1<sup>st</sup> violin; Alexander Kroyt, viola; and Mischa Schneider, cello) had begun to cause his playing to deteriorate. Here, Ortenberg is still clearly at the top of his game. All the performances on CD 2 are with Schneider as second violin, a 1943 recording of No. 5 and 1960 and 1962 accounts of 6 and 4, respectively. By this time in music history, the first violinist had long ceased to be the virtual dictator that he was in the early days of the genre, but the Budapest represented an opposite extreme in democracy, arguing, sometimes quite vociferously, the various points of interpretation and performance style (you get some idea of this kind of give-and-take in a rehearsal track, given as a bonus on CD 2). As a result, you have thrilling moments when an individual voice comes to the fore with a clear message, as does Boris Kroyt's viola as it "swings" into the contrasted section of the opening *Allegro ma non tanto* of No. 4. The way Alexander Schneider's violin leads the way into the climactic variation in the third movement, marked "*Andante cantabile*," of No. 5 is another striking instance, of which there are many in this set. Joseph Roisman's rhythmically incisive leadership and Mischa Schneider's steady underpinning in support of every single track in the entire set speak for themselves.

Quartet No. 6 was conclusive proof, if any were needed, that Beethoven had truly arrived as a musical force to be reckoned with. With its mysterious octaves in the Adagio, its syncopated accents, ties that extend beyond the bar lines and the resulting (and deliberate) confusion between 3/4 and 6/8 in the Scherzo, this quartet will keep performers and audience on the alert for the unexpected. But its most remarkable feature, which the Budapest pull off with the greatest mastery, is the somber (and partly atonal) Adagio opening, entitled *La Malinconia* (Melancholy) of the finale and the astonishing way it is succeeded by the light, fleet-footed scamper of the Rondo section. Only a Beethoven would have juxtaposed a contrast like that!

[ Note: Look for reviews of the Middle Quartets in my April column and the Late Quartets later in the spring.]



Beethoven: The Early Quartets  
Library of Congress Recordings  
Budapest String Quartet  
(Bridge Records 2-CD set)



Russian Piano Concertos  
Joshua Pierce, piano  
(MSR Classics)

What a find this is! Joshua Pierce recorded five of the six Russian piano concertos in this 2-CD set in Eastern Europe between 1988 and 1991, and they appeared without much fanfare on such obscure labels as Carlton Classics and Phoenix USA. Their reissue in superb remasterings on MSR gives them a fair chance to be heard by a wider audience. This is a treasure trove of the best of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Khachaturian. What more do you want: egg in your vodka?

From the opening of the ever-popular Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor by Tchaikovsky, we feel we are in for an exalted musical experience as both Pierce and conductor Paul Freeman, at the podium of the RTV Symphony Orchestra of Slovenia, are right on the money with its smartly-paced excitement. They handle this supremely lyrical work as if it were second nature, but without taking it for granted. Pierce's solid pianism includes a beautiful tone that stays amazingly limpid throughout the work's **wide** dynamic range.

This performance unflinchingly holds our interest, so the work doesn't suffer, as it often does, from a slackening of intensity when the opening Allegro gives way to the lovely Andantino. The finale is as overwhelmingly triumphant as you've ever heard it. Really, this account is a revelation. The same goes for Tchaikovsky's too-seldom heard Concerto No. 3 in E-flat major. The composer did not live to complete the work in three movements as planned, and it is often heard, as here, in its only finished movement, an *Alllegro brillante* exhibiting big block chords, octaves and scale runs in the piano part. An exuberant main theme is contrasted by a lovely slow melody. Frequent tempo changes keep both Pierce and Freeman on their toes.

Rimsky-Korsakov's Piano Concerto in C-sharp minor is surprisingly under-valued today, at least outside of Russia. With the able assistance of Kirk Trevor and the Slovak National Symphony, Pierce makes us wonder all the more at its neglect, for it is as lovely in its folk-like lyricism as it is economic in form. Good humor and musicality prevail in a work in which Pierce clearly relishes its vivacity and bravura passages. A very satisfying gem in just 13 minutes.

CD2, in which Joshua Pierce is partnered by Freeman at the podium of the Berlin Radio Symphony on Tracks 1-3 and the RTV Symphony-Slovenia on 4-10, continues the excitement in ways that reveal the 20<sup>th</sup> century concertos of Prokofiev, Khachaturian and Shostakovich to be more a continuation than a break with the Russian romantic tradition. From its opening Allegro, we feel the visceral intensity of Khachaturian's Concerto in D-flat major (1936) in a three note signature that will be the genesis of every theme we hear in this movement. In the Andante, this performance eschews the musical saw which the composer originally intended, instead using conventional instruments played *unconventionally* to convey its exotic, dreamlike beauty (Kudos for the tender melody played by the bass clarinet). Pierce takes the driving, bouncy rhythms in a compelling and utterly brilliant finale with deceptive ease.

In a mood of self-deprecation, Dmitri Shostakovich may have hurt the popularity of his Piano Concerto No. 2 in F major when he described it as having "no redeeming artistic merit." It is really a very attractive work, more cheerful than we usually expect of this composer. The outer movements are bouncy (I envisioned the Moscow Circus) and they require the pianist to frequently play octaves and unisons in fast passages. The slow movement is subdued, warm, and tinged with melancholy. Pierce takes this moment for all it is worth.

Finally, we have Sergei Prokofiev's Concerto No. 1 in D-flat major (1912), which served as an unmistakable calling card for the recent conservatory graduate. The opening theme emerges out of a whirling cyclone of notes, which is heard again at the work's conclusion, a scherzo that turns out to be the finale. The tempi in these outer movements are of two kinds: fast and faster. The slow movement is dark, gloriously so, with an abysmal climax. Pierce and Freeman make it a thing of sinister beauty.

We've noted Joshua Pierce's dynamic artistry in numerous places in the course of this review. His high-profile intensity in the fast, trenchant, and stunningly rhythmical passages speaks for itself, and he is just as keenly attuned to the warm, deeply felt moments in the slow movements of all these works. Now, let's talk for a moment about the conductor who strides step-for-step with him in most of these performances. Paul Freeman, like Pierce, was a figure who has been under-recognized by the critical and musical establishment in the U.S. His death last July 21<sup>st</sup> received scant attention from the media. Being an African-American, he must have realized early-on that he had little chance of landing an appointment as music director with a major orchestra, and so he went international on a grand scale. In a career of more than forty years, he guest-conducted more than 100 orchestras around the globe and made some 200 recordings. Long before *Perestroika*, he was a welcome presence and a good-will ambassador when conducting orchestras in Russia and the Soviet Bloc. He will be missed.