



Lalo: *Symphonie espagnole* + Manén: *Concierto español* – Tianwa Yang, violin; Darrell Ang, Barcelona Symphony Orchestra (Naxos)

Tianwa Yang, native of Peking, China, first came to our attention with her stunning recordings of the Spanish composer Pablo de Sarasate. She continues her notable exploration of music of and influenced by Spain with two stunning works for violin and orchestra, one world-famous, the other shamefully neglected (until just now, that is!)

The famous work, called *Symphonie espagnole*, was premiered by no less a figure than Sarasate in 1875, and was a great success. Like so many famous “Spanish” works, it was composed by a Frenchman, Edouard Lalo. One of the things you notice about this brilliantly scored and virtuosic work is its episodic nature. It is in five movements, including the moody *Intermezzo* (which was often omitted by performers in the past but is included here). Any of the five could stand by itself as a concert piece or an encore. All are filled with strong musical substance evocative of Spain in mood and rhythm.

It opens with a boldly assertive *Allegro* that has an expressive second theme and a wonderful coda. The *Scherzando* is alert, pulse-quickening, in a habanera rhythm over a backdrop of alert pizzicati in the strings. The *Intermezzo* continues the predominate lyricism in a moody vein. The *Andante* showcases poignant and brilliant passagework for the violin plus a coda with a resounding final chord. The *Rondo finale*, with its breathtaking orchestral rhythms that do not obscure the violin’s eloquence, is a show-stopper in every respect. Little wonder *Symphonie espagnole* has remained in the standard repertoire since its premiere.

So what can we say of the “shamefully neglected” work we mentioned earlier? *Concierto español* was the work of Barcelona-born composer Joan Manén (1883-1971). He was prolific in every genre and a famous violinist who performed before the crowned heads of Europe. Manén toured the world five times, giving some 4,000 recitals and concerts. A child prodigy, he continued



Prokofiev: *Romeo and Juliet*, complete ballet Vasily Petrenko, Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra (LAWO)

Vasily Petrenko, the outstanding young Russian conductor who has been getting a lot of glowing reviews in the media in recent years, especially for his Shostakovich and Prokofiev, has really outdone himself now. So have the members of the Oslo Philharmonic. This is an absolutely stunning account of *Romeo and Juliet*, living up to all our expectations in terms of strong, robust sound, nuance, and tempi that are just what Prokofiev ordered. In 144 minutes of great music making, there’s not a single instance of slow cueing, not a single slurred note, not a tempo selection that isn’t right on the mark. We’re talking about a perfect performance, folks.

Normally, when critics talk about a performance like this, they qualify their praise by the deadly adjective “correct,” meaning that conductor and orchestra have hedged their bets by taking a safe approach. That isn’t the case here. Petrenko and his Norwegian colleagues meet the challenges head-on in a very demanding score requiring the utmost in precision, endurance, and solid musicianship from every chair of the orchestra.

Sergei Prokofiev classified the elements in his music into four categories: the lyrical, the grotesque, the dissonant, and the “*toccata*,” or motor element. In his *Romeo and Juliet* ballet, he found ample score for all four. Happily, the lyrical makes the greatest impression here, though the others are also quite evident. Despite a brief moment of weakness late in the composition process when he toyed with the idea of a happy ending for *Romeo and Juliet* (which all the previous score would *not* have supported), Prokofiev really knew his Shakespeare, and particularly this play. Realizing that it would constitute a major part of his legacy, he compiled no fewer than three choice orchestral suites and a set of solo piano pieces in order to keep its music constantly before the public.

One consequence of his wily propagandizing is that more music listeners are familiar with the suites and

performing in public until 1959, when he was in his 76th year. At his death in 1971, he was virtually forgotten.

That is all the more lamentable when we hear Tianwa Yang's gorgeous performance of *Concierto español* in the present recording with the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra and National Orchestra of Catalonia under Darrell Ang. This work, which Manén premiered in 1897 and later revised in 1935, is remarkable for its lyricism and also its dance rhythms (in a note to the orchestra, he indicated the performers should aim at the tempo of a Viennese waltz). We also hear the first appearance of a lilting Spanish theme that will achieve fruition in the slow movement – *Lamento-Adagio ma non troppo* – where it takes on a rhapsodic, yearning quality. This unforgettable movement seems to drift slowly over a Spanish landscape like a cloud illuminated by the colors of sunset and dusk.

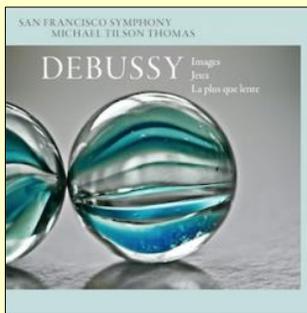
In the finale, *Allegro molto* with a Tarantella rhythm, the Spanish theme makes a final appearance, tinged with nostalgia. There's also a reference to Edouard Lalo, bringing the program full cycle. This performance really makes us wonder where this work, so easy to love at first hearing, has been all our lives.

piano pieces, all of which are highly listenable but do not give any idea of the story's continuity, than they are with the complete ballet. Petrenko and the Oslo make a compelling case for hearing *Romeo and Juliet* in its entirety. When you do that, you are aware of the moments of powerful persuasion and comparative relaxation (as in real life) and the way Prokofiev streams his most memorable themes throughout the score for greatest impact.

The heart of the story is the scene in Juliet's garden in which Shakespeare's lovers exchange their vows; namely, the Balcony Scene, Romeo's Variation, and Love Dance. We hear echoes and evocations of this deeply moving music later on in the story in Romeo's fateful meeting the next day with Tybalt, Juliet's Montague-bating kinsman who tries to goad him into a duel. Romeo demurs, and the strains of the love music from the garden scene tell us why: his mind is filled with the soft enchantment of that scene in a way that allows no room for blood-enmity. Likewise, when Juliet is alone in her room in Act III, her fear of the terrors of being immured in the vault of the Capulets after the sleeping potion has lost its effect are assuaged by that same love music, which recalls Romeo for her and strengthens her resolve to see it through.

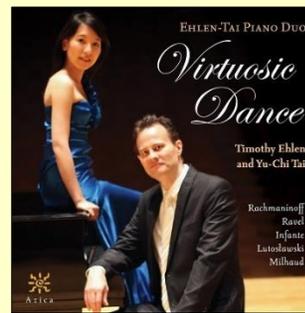
To be continued, below ==>

I could talk at greater length about other elements in the music – the scintillating street dances, for instance, or the Ball at the Capulets, both of which contribute immensely to the colorful atmosphere of the Italian Renaissance (and incidentally, keep all the members of the ballet company happily employed) or the ways in which Prokofiev underscores the impending tragedy by bringing up the brass at key moments with a flawless sense of dramatic timing. But all that would require a whole book, not just a simple review. In the meantime, as it is all there in the music, you are much better off listening to the sumptuous feast that Prokofiev – and Petrenko – have served up for your enjoyment. I'll go further: if you don't add any other item to your CD shelf in 2017, *get this one!*



Debussy: *Images, Jeux, La plus que lente*
Michael Tilson Thomas, San Francisco Symphony
(Avie) Hybrid SACD in DSD

Michael Tilson Thomas, music director of the San Francisco Symphony, really says a mouthful when he characterizes Debussy's later orchestral works, which include all the items on the present program, as posing "some of the greatest challenges in the whole repertoire for both conductor and instrumentalists." We have here *Jeux* (1913), *Three Images for Orchestra* (1912), and Debussy's rarely-heard salon arrangement of his slow waltz *Le plus que lente* (1912). His absolute genius for



"Virtuostic Dance," music of Rachmaninoff, Ravel, Infante, Lutoslawski, Milhaud – Timothy Ehlen and Yu-Chi Tai, duo-pianists (Azica Records)

The first-rate piano duo of Timothy Ehlen and Yu-Chi Tai give us infectious performances of some prime classics from a rich repertoire. A word, first, about the genre itself. This is music written to be performed by artists playing two grand pianos with the curved sides of the cases facing each other. That is done to facilitate the sight lines because, as in chamber music, it is vitally important to see one's partner. It is distinct from music for piano four-hands in which both partners are

discerning the unique sensual voice of each instrument and combining them in unusual ways is very much in evidence in all three works. So are his untraditional harmonies based on parallel chords (sometimes described as “chordal melodies”), occasional use of pentatonic scales, and overlapping rhythms or “polyrhythms,” something other composers were slow to embrace until after WWII.

Images, first up, is in three panels, reflecting Debussy’s love of triptychs: *Gigues*, the first, uses high-profile dance rhythms to create an evocation of Scotland, though the Scottish ministry of tourism would probably be loath to use this sad, chilly piece for promotional purposes. The theme is played by the oboe d’amore, a relic of the baroque era that provides just the right timbre to evoke the sound of bagpipes in a world long ago and far away. *Rondes de Printemps* (Dances of Spring), the last of the Images, celebrates the coming of May “with its wild gonfalon banners” in an eccentric five-beat rhythm and highly charged energy that does not let up until the end.

The middle panel, *Iberia*, was Debussy’s ripest tribute to Spain. It is itself in three sections: “By the Highways and Byways,” “Night Fragrances” (*Les parfums de la nuit*), and “Morning of a Feast Day.” Cross-rhythms of twos against threes keep the listener on the edge of expectation. Debussy’s instrumentation features a prominent role for clarinet, ever-present castanets, and ever-changing combinations of instruments to evoke the enchantment of the night, brilliant sunlight, strumming guitars, folk fiddlers, and people dancing. The transition between the quietly mysterious *Parfums de la nuit* and the outburst of raw exuberance in *Le Matin d’un jour de fête* that follows it without a break is absolutely stunning in this recording.

Until I heard the present account of *Jeux* (Games) I’d never thought much about this wicked little ballet whose story concerns the amorous adventures of a boy and two girls searching in the rough for a missing tennis ball. The pungent rhythms, constantly changing textures and syncopations make it sound more like a primitive mating ritual from the forest of the Amazon or the jungles of Sumatra than love-games among ultra-civilized moderns (“I say, anyone for tennis?”)

Finally, Debussy’s own arrangement of *Le plus que lent* reveals a depth of significance I never would have suspected from my previous acquaintance with the original piano piece, whose title (literally, “the slower than slow”) was Debussy’s sly dig at the current vogue in Paris for slow, sentimental waltzes (*valse*s *lentes*).

The quality of the music and its demon realization by MTT and the San Francisco Symphony aside, this Avie offering by way of SFS Media was recorded and processed in breath-taking 192 kHz, 24-bit sound and DSD, making it ideal listening for audiophiles who want to test all the resources of their systems. Need I say more?

seated on the same bench and play the same keyboard. (Of course, duo-pianists can, and often do, play four-hand repertoire as well.) As the present recital shows us, the sound of a duo-piano recital can be very impressive, as the range and depth of sonority can rival that of a symphony orchestra.

First up is Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Suite No. 2, Op. 17 for two Pianos. It opens *alla Marcia*, with unusually large and thick chords underscoring the stirring tempo, and ends with a rousing, non-stop Italian dance, the Tarantella, a dance of olden times originally associated with the delirium produced by the bite of the Tarantula spider. In between, we have a vigorous waltz and an expressive Romance that is at the heart of the work. Maurice Ravel’s *La Valse* is next, a work also existing in solo piano and orchestral versions. This 1921 work was Ravel’s take on a pre-WWI world hurtling toward destruction on the steady beat of a Viennese waltz. And for sure, there is a tremendous crescendo at the end, like the musical equivalent of a train smash-up. But, as Ehlen and Tai show us, there is beauty and persuasive charm as well, in a genre that has proven remarkably versatile over the past 200 years.

Manuel Infante’s Andalusian Dances (*Danses Andalouses*) captures all the musical qualities we associate with the old Spanish province of Andalusia. In three movements entitled *Ritmo*, *Sentimento*, and *Gracia*, we have the steady pulse and swaying rhythm of its dances with castanets and the warm, expressive character of its songs. Polish composer Witold Lutoslawski’s Paganini Variations (1941), on a theme that also inspired Brahms, Rachmaninoff, and many other composers, is a brilliant, highly imaginative piece in which the composer invests an impressive amount of musical substance in less than six minutes. Polytonality and spiky rhythmic effects between the two pianos do not obscure the feeling Lutoslawski has in this work.

Finally, as the perfect conclusion to a very satisfying recital, we have the two-piano version of *Scaramouche* (1937), a work its composer, Darius Milhaud, arranged a bewildering number of times for small orchestras and various instruments. It remains one of his most appealing works. The name “Scaramouche” (Little Skirmisher) refers to a stock character of the Commedia dell’arte. Biting harmonies and rhythms in the opening movement (*Vif*) are succeeded by warmer, gentler music (*Modéré*). The heady finale, *Brasileira*, is infused with the spirit of the Samba.

Nicely-centered tones and alertness to changing rhythms and textures by both artists make this CD release an easy album to recommend.



Janáček: Suites from *Jenůfa*, *Káťa Kabanová*, *Fate*
Tomáš Netopil, Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra
(Supraphon)

Czech composer Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) was a late bloomer, already in his fiftieth year, when he composed his first operatic success, *Jenůfa* (1904). The nine operas he eventually composed are distinguished mostly by dark stories of love passion, psychological realism, and the dire fate of their heroines, which he enhanced by his striking harmonies and techniques such as lengthening and shortening time values for dramatic effect. The main problem is that the librettos are all in Czech, which is not widely spoken throughout the world, and much of their effectiveness rests in the ways Janáček used the cadences and inflections of that language to increase the emotive power of his music.

One way of getting over the language barrier is by means of the suites, sometimes amounting to actual symphonic poems in their scope and persuasive thrust, that various arrangers have drawn from the operas. In the present program, the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra under the inspired direction of Tomáš Netopil gives us three of these. First we have *Jenůfa*, in an arrangement by Tomáš Ille to a concept by Manfred Honeck, two figures whose suite from Dvořák's *Rusalka* I previously recognized in my *Classical Reviews* for June, 2016. A lot happens in *Jenůfa*. The heroine of that name is a village girl who has become pregnant by her cousin. Fearful that her indiscretion will be discovered, she unwisely confides in her insane stepmother, who first hides the newborn infant and later drowns it in a millrace. On the eve of her marriage to another man, *Jenůfa* is falsely accused of the murder. Though the truth finally comes to light, most of the music of this lurid tale is wildly emotional, with occasional moments of not exactly unbridled joy provided by Janáček's inclusion of Moravian folk dance melodies and an undulating harp in the final scene as *Jenůfa* and her husband resolve to face life together.

Káťa Kabanová, based on *The Storm*, a Russian drama by Ostrovsky, has an equally distressed heroine. *Káťa*, stuck in a provincial town where she is married to an older man she does not love, is obsessed by her fears that she will be unfaithful to him if he leaves her even for a day to go to the market. When her worst fears are realized, she cannot live with



Charles Richard-Hamelin, piano, plays
Beethoven, Enescu, Chopin (Analekta)

Canadian pianist Charles Richard-Hamelin continues to impress in this, his second release on the Analekta label. His "keen appreciation of the architecture of a work of music" that I noted in my review of the earlier release (*Phill's Classical Reviews*, January 2016) is very much in evidence here, along with an even finer perception of the sonority and color that one can derive from a keyboard. This young artist, who continues to study on a regular basis with pianist Jean Saulnier in Montreal even as he pursues an international career, is already so accomplished now, it's frightening.

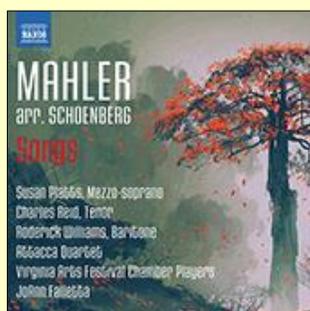
Richard-Hamelin's talents are well showcased in an intelligently selected program that begins with Beethoven's *Rondos for Piano*, Op. 51. These two works that never seem to have attracted the attention they deserve are fascinating studies in the use of form to release the poetry in a piece of music. Though they may be reminiscent of the composer's predecessors Haydn and Mozart, there is much Beethoven here in the use of triplets to accelerate the phrase in No. 1 in C major and the experiment of nesting rondo within ABA form in No. 2 in G major.

George Enescu, a composer who was as remarkably accomplished a pianist as he was a violinist, is heard from next in his *Suite No. 2 for Piano*, Op. 16, a work that takes venerable Baroque forms (*Toccata*, *Sarabande*, *Pavane*, *Bourée*) and fills the old bottles with sparkling new wine, some of which recalls the folk music of Enescu's native Romania. This neglected work reveals its immense charm in Richard-Hamelin's sensitive performance, in which such diverse elements as the arpeggiated chords underneath the tender melody in the *Sarabande* and the irresistible rhythmic thrust of the *Bourée* receive equal importance.

Enescu submitted the suite to a competition under the subtitle "*Des cloches sonores*" (*Ringling Bells*), which might serve as a metaphor for the bell-like sonorities Richard-Hamelin explores throughout this program. We find them also in the Chopin section, particularly in the rather neglected *Introduction et Rondo in E-flat*, Op. 16. Here, Richard-Hamelin obviously enjoys the full, clear tones in a piece to which Chopin might well have appended the description "*brillante*." *Ballade No. 3 in A-flat*, Op. 47, is given a moving interpretation that

her guilt and drowns herself in the Volga. The music in Janáček's opera is appropriately dark and ominous with aching harmonies that build in intensity toward the fateful climax. The present suite by Czech composer Jaroslav Smolka has many passages in which the voices are replaced by instruments, including a highly effective trumpet solo.

Finally, the 1905 opera *Osud* (Fate) alludes to a notorious affair of the day. Janáček penned it in an attempt to clear the reputation of a woman who had been maligned for her love affair with a famous orchestra conductor. So controversial that it could only be performed 30 years after the composer's death, the music of Fate reveals Janáček's deep understanding (from his own personal experience, be it noted) of the psychology of a woman in love. František Jilek's arrangement captures this essential element.



Mahler: Songs, arr. Schoenberg – Susan Platts (m/s), Charles Reid (t), Roderick Williams, (bart); Attacca Quartet; JoAnn Falletta, Virginia Arts Festival Chamber Players (Naxos)

The overriding idea of *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth), is that there is a lot of sadness in life. The things that provide solace – beauty, love, the heady impetuosity of youth – all are ultimately impermanent and illusory, like the optical illusion in the water of the double image of an arching, moon-shaped bridge and porcelain pavilion in “*Von der Jugend*” (Of Youth) or the hot passionate yearning in a proud maiden's eyes as he watches her sweetheart galloping away in “*Von der Schönheit*” (Of Beauty). What is the answer, in the face of the transitory nature of things? Should we just retreat, as the poet does (not altogether seriously) in “*Das Trunkene im Frühling*,” asking “What is spring to me? Let me be drunk.” The answer is actually contained in an unpretentious lyric which hints at the eternally recurring renewal of the earth in “*Der Abschied*” (The Farewell), last and most deeply moving poem in the collection, in which the very earth itself seems a living, breathing creature.

Das Lied is a miracle of artistic sympathy between creative minds in vastly different times and places, from the poets of Tang Dynasty China to their paraphrases by German poet Hans Bethge in *The Chinese Flute*, their transcendently beautiful settings by Gustav Mahler, and the arrangements for chamber orchestra

emphasizes the contrast between the simple melody of the lullaby or reverie that serves as the first theme and the dark, passionate theme that roils restlessly beneath it, always threatening to rise to the surface and take over the piece. Ever the master of musical form, this pianist relishes subtle thematic relationships in the Nocturne in E-flat, Op. 55, No. 2, showing us in the process how melancholy and moving this surprisingly abstract piece in a major key can be. He concludes in grand style with the “Heroic” Polonaise in A-flat, Op. 53 with its powerful melody underscored by an ostinato in restess 8th note octaves, like a revolution boiling to a head.



Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 2; Concert Fantasia Eldar Nebolsin, piano; Michael Stern, New Zealand Symphony Orchestra (Naxos)

That Peter Illyitch Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 2 in G major, Op. 44 has long dwelt in the shadow of his more famous First Concerto can easily be verified. (Arkivmusic.com currently has 33 listings of this work as opposed to 211 of its predecessor). The inequity of its comparative neglect is held up for our inspection in an outstanding new release of the Second by Russian pianist Eldar Nebolsin and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra under Michael Stern. Actually, there are certain similarities between the two works, as well as important differences.

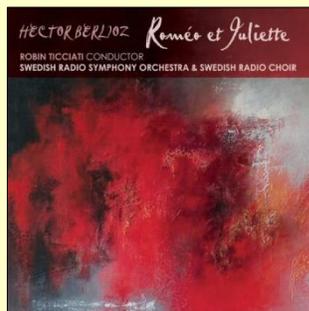
As was the case with the First Concerto, Tchaikovsky's critics made much of the excessive length of the opening movement of the Second, as well as its episodic nature. Like the First, it opens in a sensational manner with a big melody that is stated demonstrably by the orchestra and is taken up by the piano. The difference in this case is that it proves to be an actual theme that does not sink into oblivion after it has served its purpose as a curtain raiser but occurs again at the end of the development. Even more than the First, this is very much a front-loaded concerto, with a duration of 21:41 in the present recording, opposed to 22:08 combined for the other two movements.

The most striking thing about the Second Concerto is

by Arnold Schoenberg and his pupils for the Society for Private Music Performance. Finally, we have the inspired account of this work by JoAnn Falletta and the Virginia Arts Festival Chamber Players, part of an ongoing rediscovery of the Schoenberg arrangement that, in scaling down Mahler's mammoth orchestration, allows vocalists to interpret and illuminate the poetic texts without straining their tonsils past endurance.

Tenor Charles Reid and mezzo-soprano Susan Platts obviously relish exploring these nuances that make the poetry come alive against a backdrop of transparent, luminous sound: "*Dunkel is das Leben, ist der Tod*" (Dark is life, dark is death). The consolation is that the earth – life itself – is continually renewed through all eternity: "*Ewig ...Ewig...Ewig!*"

The other first-rate voice we hear on the present disc is that of baritone Roderick Williams. Its dry, direct and honest quality is perfectly suited to Mahler's Songs of a Wayfarer (*Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*). I'd never actually realized how melancholy and death-obsessed these four poetic texts (by Mahler himself) were until I heard them interpreted with such searing intensity here. The persona reflects on his sorrow occasioned by his sweetheart's wedding to another, how the pain in his heart is like a glowing knife, and how his beloved's two blue eyes have been a source of love and sorrow. Even a walk on a beautiful day provides no solace for the downcast lover, for whom the songs of the birds are merely chidings that remind him he is out of accord with nature. That this is probably the most pessimistic lieder cycle since Schubert's *Winterreise* (Winter Journeys) is strikingly apparent in this performance.



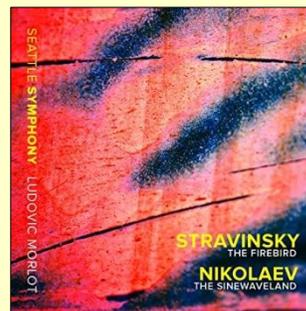
Berlioz: Roméo et Juliette – Robin Ticciati, Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra & Chorus (Linn Records) 2-CD package with booklet

Robin Ticciati conducts the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra and Swedish Radio Choir in a performance of the complete Roméo et Juliette by Hector Berlioz that reveals both the beauties and the warts of this uneven work. First the warts, then the beauties....

Berlioz' basic problem was that he couldn't decide whether he was writing a symphony with voices or an opera, and his indecisiveness shows badly. His biggest difficulty, surprisingly, was in portraying Romeo and

its slow movement, Andante non troppo. Here, the piano shares the spotlight with solo violin and cello, who together introduce a warmly nostalgic melody, sad but not depressing, with a lilt near the end that will stay in your memory for a long time. The piano doesn't even get a crack at it until about the 3:45 mark in a movement that, with a timing of 14:41 that includes splendid cadenzas for both violin and cello over syncopated chords in the piano, is no hurry to finish weaving its magic spell. The piano itself opens the finale, marked *Allegro con fuoco* ("with fire," and how!) that makes up in stunning propulsive energy, a loaded structure with no fewer than three themes, and considerable panache throughout what it lacks in length (7:27).

The Concert Fantasia in G minor, Op. 56 concludes the program with yet more excitement and fine melodies that distract our attention from its interesting two-part structure (I: Quasi Rondo / Andante mosso and II: Andante cantabile / Molto vivace) that Tchaikovsky handles with great skill. In the second section, we have a solo cello and solo horn that interact with the piano in ways that recall to some extent the slow movement of the Second Concerto. Even more neglected than the concerto, it cries out for more attention in our concert halls. Just as in the concerto, Tchaikovsky's melodies tend to be easily grasped and memorable, so that they greet us as old friends when they recur. (As the Oak tree said of the Spanish moss, Tchaikovsky's supreme gift for melody "really grows on you!")



Stravinsky: Firebird Ballet + Nikolaev: Sinewaveland Ludovic Morlot, Seattle Symphony Orchestra (Seattle Symphony Media)

Who says you can't strike gold twice in the same mine shaft? The Seattle Symphony certainly has, in this outstanding account of Igor Stravinsky's Firebird under current music director Ludovic Morlot. It is easily the best recording of the complete ballet that I have heard on record since this same orchestra recorded it in 1986 under Morlot's predecessor Gerard Schwarz (see *Phil's Classical Reviews* Jan, 2013). As in the earlier account of this luminously beautiful work, strong, incisive musicianship from every chair of the orchestra plays a

Juliet themselves. Astonishingly, he made no attempt to paraphrase the original dialogues of Shakespeare's "star-cross'd" lovers, but instead chose to narrate the events of their meeting and the Balcony Scene, with which we're all familiar, instead of letting R & J speak for themselves. Consequently, they are never allowed to become real, living characters. Furthermore, the libretto (presumably Berlioz' own) is filled with the sort of impossibly exalted sentiments and perfumed essences that have given French poetry a bad name.

The problem with most of the world's love poetry is that it is, ultimately, pretty banal. Love, in the last analysis, is an inarticulate feeling, rather than something that can be expressed precisely in words. In this play, Shakespeare's love poetry proved to be the happy exception. So why did Berlioz choose to ignore it in favor of his own poetic drive?

The listener who is familiar with only the usual Four Scenes from *Roméo and Juliette* is completely unaware of these issues. In fact, you can use your home listening system's remote to access only those tracks that make for a very satisfying purely orchestral suite: in the present instance, *Romeo Alone*, *Feast of the Capulets*, and *Scène d'amour* (Garden Scene), on CD1, Tr. 5-7 and the *Queen Mab Scherzo*, *Romeo at the Vault of the Capulets*, and *Death of the Lovers*, on CD2, Tr. 1, 3, and 4. These scenes capture the essence of the love story and its tragic ending, and are all well-rendered in the present recording,

Curiously, Berlioz favored the solo male voices in this work over the female vocalist (the wonderful voice of mezzo-soprano Katija Dragojevic, as Juliette, is sadly wasted here). Tenor Andrew Staples is appropriately arch in the wickedly scathing aria taken from Mercutio's "Queen Mab" speech, the theme of which is the illusory nature of love. And – surprise of surprises! – the best arias and the choicest dialogue are given to Friar Lawrence (bass Alistair Miles) in the Great Finale (Tr. 5-7) on CD2, where he chastises and reconciles the feuding families. This final scene, which breathes all the excitement and drama of grand opera, is a complete *volte-face* of the narrative-ridden earlier half of the symphony. Which again makes us wonder: just what did Hector Berlioz have in mind?

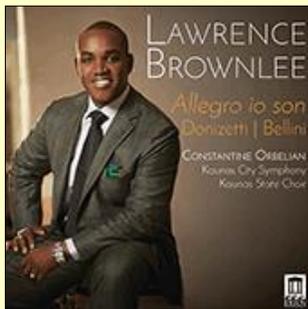
major role in the success of the recording. These musicians aren't afraid to let it out when called upon to do so in moments that create the unique fairy tale *cum* nightmare mood at which the composer strived.

It opens at midnight. Prince Ivan, having lost his way in the forest, wanders into the enchanted garden of Kastchei, an evil sorcerer whom we will encounter later. The atmosphere is laden with a mood of mystery and danger created by slowly moving lower strings, delicate scrapings, subtly nuanced queep-queeping sounds, glissando harmonics, and sliding string sonorities. Suddenly, the Firebird, a fantastic creature, appears (flute arpeggios and sensuously swooping glides). Ivan, after a struggle, manages to subdue the Firebird and wins *her* promise (the role is danced by the prima ballerina) of aid if ever he should be in need.

Said need is not long in arising in the form of Kastchei's retinue of ghastly creatures. Demons, goblins, trolls, and living skeletons – their variety is limited only by the costume designer's imagination. They make Ivan their prisoner. When things look darkest, the Firebird intervenes. With her supernatural power, she casts a spell over Kastchei and his infernal horde. They begin to dance, slowly at first and then with ever-increasing frenzy in an orgy of percussive bumps, angular rhythms and raucous off-beat accents, even including blaring, flatulent sounds from the brass (these are infernal creatures, remember). Kastchei's power of darkness is shattered forever, the Firebird intones an enchanting lullaby (oboe and strings), and all ends well for Prince Ivan and his beloved, the most beautiful of Kastchei's twelve captive princesses.

The "filler," if you want to call it that, is *Sinewaveland*, a 2011 work by Russian composer Vladimir Nikolaev (b.1953), intended as homage to the rock music great Jimi Hendrix, whose recordings Nikolaev credits with inspiring him to pursue serious music. With its unusual harmonics and sound effects, its gripping pulses and rhythms, and its overall improvisatory quality, *Sinewaveland* sounds like the kind of tonal world its dedicatee loved to explore, handled with taste and discretion. Nikolaev seems to have something here. Is he on his way to helping music out of the corner into which too many composers have painted it? Only time will tell.

Keep scrolling, folks, there's more!



“Allegro io son,” Arias of Donizetti and Bellini – Lawrence Brownlee, tenor; Constantine Orbelian, Kaunas City Symphony (Delos)

Lawrence Brownlee is a renowned opera singer who didn't start out with opera in mind. An Ohio native who grew up singing gospel music, he didn't discover the classics until his student days at Anderson (SC) University and the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University. He is now a resident of Atlanta, but we don't get to hear him much in these parts because he is usually flying off to engagements at the great opera houses of three continents. He is now universally recognized as the tenor of choice when the subject is the demanding Italian operatic style known as *bel canto*.

Several years ago, Delos released his premiere album of Rossini arias (see Phil's Classical Reviews, October 2014). What I said about him then goes double for this latest album of arias by the other two great figures in *bel canto*, Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini: “This artist has a voice as liquid as golden honey but it is capable of rising to the peak of his range and intensity on the shortest notice. His High D seems deceptively effortless, while his High F takes a little more effort to achieve, but is still within his capability.”

The present program does not often call upon Brownlee to rise above High C, but otherwise it tests his versatility in choice arias from some of his favorite operas. They include the buoyant “*Allegro io son*” (Happy as a finch, happy am I) from *Rita*, Ernesto's delightful serenade with guitar “*Com é gentil*”



Mozart: Arias – Anett Fritsch, soprano; Alessandro de Marchi, Munich Radio Orchestra (Orfeo)

German soprano Anett Fritsch (b.1986 in Plauen, Saxony) is the first opera singer I can recall who does not make a secret of her birth year. Her candor does not stop there. She approaches her roles with the insight of an experienced actress, reasoning that there is more to Countess Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro* than simply torpid suffering and wounded pride. Likewise, Susanna, in the same opera is more than just “merely flirtatious and too clever by half,” or the page Cherubino (a favorite “breeches” role for sopranos) simply a wannabe-manly in his impatience to grow up.

As an actress Fritsch is aware that “Mozart's characters all develop tremendously in the course of one single evening.” As a singer, she is perceptive enough to let the music guide her in developing a character. And by the way, it is rare for the same soprano to have sung all three roles – Countess, Susanna, and Cherubino. She reasons that these roles all partake of the same tessitura, but that is only true if one has the seamless range of an Anett Fritsch. The empathic differences in Cherubino's “*Non so piu cosa son*” (I no longer know what I am), Susanna's “*Deh vieni, non tardar*” (Come now, delay not, lovely joy), and the Countess' “*Porgi amor*” (Love, grant relief to my sorrow) reveal the range of this remarkable singer.

Fritsch likewise scores high marks in *Don Giovanni* for her Zerlina



“Dolce Vita,” Italian Songs - Jonas Kaufmann, tenor; Asher Fisch, Orchestra del Teatro Massimo di Palermo (Sony)

Jonas Kaufmann, native of Munich, Germany, has spent much of his life in Italy, drawn by the sunshine and shadow, the love of song that seems to come naturally to Italian throats, and the common outlook on life as something in which supreme happiness and suffering are intermingled, as is reflected in the title of this album, “*Dolce Vita*” (Sweet Life). His expanded tessitura and sensitivity to the inflections and elisions in the Italian language that make him an ideal tenor for Puccini, and *spinto* roles in general, also give him an edge in the popular songs that he sings in this album.

To say that these “hit parade” songs require a operatic voice is to misunderstand their significance. Opera arose from the magma of Italian popular song, and they share the same roots. Only one famous operatic composer is represented among the 18 songwriters in the present album. That is Ruggero Leoncavallo, of *Pagliacci* fame, who also penned the sensually beautiful love song *Mattinata*, where the serenader compares his beloved to the white beauty of dawn, graced by slender pink fingers of light.

Caruso is a poignant tribute to the recently-deceased operatic great: (translated) “Here, where the sea shimmers and the wind howls, on an old terrace above the Gulf of Sorrento, a man embraces a girl after weeping.” Art beomes life, in the magic way that opera has of transforming appearances and feelings, confounding time itself.

(How soft the April night is) from Don Pasquale, and the sighing aria "Seul sur la terre" (Alone upon earth, in my misery I have nothing) from Don Sebastien, all by Donizetti. We are then given four arias by Bellini, including the glorious "Son Salvo" (Safe am I, safe at last) from I Puritani, in which the cavalier Arturo takes his cue from a troubadour song sung from within a nearby house by his beloved Elvira (here, the lovely, warm voice of soprano Victoria Miskunaite, which makes us long to hear more of this singer).

The program concludes once again with arias by Donizetti: two each from L'elisir d'amore (including the tender "Una furtiva Lagrima" (a secret tear) and from La fille du régiment, ending with the exultant mood of the scene in which Tonio wins the consent of the hardened veterans, who have a fatherly stake in the matter, to wed Marie, the "Daughter of the Regiment."

("Batti, batti, o bel Masetto," Beat me, beat me, dear Masetto) and Donna Elvira ("Mi tradi, quell' alma ingrata," That ungrateful man has betrayed me), two arias that further reveal the range of her character portrayal. In *Così fan tutte*, the third of Mozart's operas to librettos by Lorenzo da Ponte, she deftly portrays its two heroines, the proud, wounded Fiordiligi ("E parti," He has left me) and the scheming Despina who figures that any girl of fifteen should know all the angles about the ways of the world and how to get everything she wants from a man ("Una donna a quindici anni").

Anett Fritsch is also noted for her Pamina in Mozart's *Magic Flute* (*Der Zauberflöte*), but she decided to save those arias for another occasion, as the present album clearly focuses on the da Ponte operas. We end, instead, with two fine concert arias, including "Misera, dove son" (Sorrowful am I). All of which gives us something to look forward to in the future. (*Non tardar, Pamina!*)

The spell is furthered in such songs as *Parla piu piano* (Speak more softly and no one will hear, we're living our love, you and I) and *Il Canto* (See how time loses memories. There remains only the song of a love that never dies). Love has the taste of bitter memory in a song like *Non ti scordar di me* (The swallows flew away from my cold and sunless land, in search of spring and violets, nests of love and happiness). Aside from Ruggero Leoncavallo, I have not listed the names of the songwriters because you wouldn't know them anyway unless you were Italian. The songs speak eloquently for themselves.

In a song like *Un amore così grande* (A love so great) or *Catari, Catari, core 'ngrato* (Caterina, Caterina, ungrateful heart), Kaufmann is given plenty of scope for over-the-top vocal production that is often tempered by his incredibly smooth legato and ability to drop his voice *sotto voce* in moments of the quiet reflection following towering passion or grief. The effect is simply *great!*