

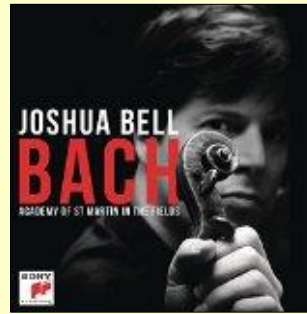


"The Mozart Album," Piano Concertos Nos. 17, 24; Sonatas, K.282, 283, 310 – Lang Lang, piano Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Vienna Philharmonic Sony Classical

What could a 31-year old Chinese pianist with a reputation for concert-hall theatrics that some critics have characterized as worthy of a rock star have in common with an 84-year old Austrian conductor long noted for his no-nonsense approach to classical period style? In the instance of Lang Lang and Nikolaus Harnoncourt, the common accord and noticeable mutual sympathy they achieved in the recording sessions for this piano concerto album came together with remarkable ease as soon as they found they had one thing in common in the way they viewed Mozart.

That common insight - and it's a major thread running through Piano Concertos 24 in C minor, K.491 and 17 in G major, K.453 - is simply this: Mozart's concertos brought into the realm of instrumental music, perhaps for the first time, the language of opera. They are rife with echoes of operatic dialogue and aria. We find it in the beautifully sad aria-like section the soloist plays following the first-movement cadenza in K.491. It's the only time Mozart uses this procedure in any of his mature concertos, and the effect is heart-stopping. This is also one of only two Mozart piano concertos in a minor key, a fact which contributes much to the mood in the slow movement, a somber Larghetto. And, like an opera, this work has a full complement of pairs of woodwinds, being in fact Mozart's most fully-scored work of its kind. Is it just mere coincidence that he was at work on *The Marriage of Figaro* at the time?

In K.453, another type of mood predominates in the Andante. Here, intimacy and extrovert brilliance are the order of the day, reflected in the operatic-like banter between voices. The Mozart magic continues on CD2, where Lang has the stage all to himself in Piano Sonatas 5 in G major, K.283; 4 in E-flat major, K.282; and 8 in A minor, K.310. Lang's beautifully detailed approach and the care with which he assays small but vital increments of time without lapsing into fussiness infuses his performances of these three sonatas with



Bach: Violin Concertos 1, 2; Chaconne, Air, Gavotte
Joshua Bell, violin
Academy of St. Martin in the Fields
Sony Classical

American violinist Joshua Bell reaffirms his longtime commitment to the music of J.S. Bach with a stunning and enlightening program that will stretch the ears of listeners who might've taken the old boy for granted. He is given yeoman support by the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, whose high-energy participation, particularly in the two violin concertos, pushes Bell to ever greater heights and depths of feeling. And the recordings, produced, recorded, mixed and mastered by Adam Abeshouse, add to the impression of a master violinist at the top of his art.

The first thing that would have struck Bach's German contemporaries about Violin Concertos Nos. 1 in A minor, BWV 1041 and 2 in E major, BWV 1042 is their use of Vivaldi-style ritornelli in which a main theme in the opening movement is heard later in fragments, piquing the listener's interest. One could also talk about the use of *bariolage*, quick alternation between static and changing notes, to create striking acoustic effects in the finale of the A minor Concerto, or the use of ostinato and ground bass in the slow movements of both concertos to enhance the rich harmonies. But the thing most listeners will probably respond to most immediately is the incredible loveliness of the slow movements. If you are listening to the serene beauty of the Andante of the A minor concerto in Track 2, you might well consider it the most touchingly beautiful slow movement you have ever heard – an impression that will last until you hear the Adagio of the E major on Track 5. The finales of both concertos bear out what Bell says of them, that they are reminders that "Bach's music is full of dance, humor, and sheer fun!"

Then we come to the famous Chaconne from Solo Violin Partita No. 2, and if you are familiar with the career of Joshua Bell you will know that he has long had a "Jones" (as we used to call it in American slang) for this sublime piece of music, even to the extent of playing it in the L'Enfant Plaza Station in Washington,

an uncanny beauty. “If you only hear the notes and a nice melody,” observes Lang, “it’s easy to understand, but to get every turn and every note-length right, and to understand how the different characters sing . . . requires a lot of detail in your interpretation.” That approach pays handsome dividends in K.283 with its concise economy of means and the sudden mood-change midway through the opening movement. We hear it also in the alertness of the second movement in K.282, titled Menuetto I – Menuetto II. A sonata without a true slow movement usually indicates pianistic brilliance, and we are not disappointed.

K.310 is one of only two Mozart sonatas cast in a minor key. When Mozart does this sort of thing, it is always with a cause. Even if we did not know that he was distraught by his mother’s recent death at the time he wrote it in 1778, we would sense that something was wrong by the haunted mood of the finale – not the sort of thing one expected of a Presto – and the quiet, chilling final passages as it reaches a conclusion.



Concertos for Flute & Harp
 Maria Cecilia Muñoz, flute; Sarah O'Brien, harp
 Kammerorchester Basel conducted by Yuki Kasai
 Ars Produktion (Hybrid SACD)

This gorgeous-sounding SACD from the Ratingen-Germany-based label Ars Produktion is really a feast for the listener. Not only does it live up to the high-quality sound listeners have come to expect of this label, but it features engaging young artists in a repertoire for two instruments that fit each other’s harmonic needs like a glove in beautiful works by Mozart and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.

But first we have a latter-day tribute to C.P.E. Bach by the late German composer Hans Werner Henze (1926-2012). If this affinity of composers separated by 200 years seems odd, we may view it as homage from one avant-gardist to another. That’s because “the Hamburg Bach,” as he was known to his contemporaries, was one who pushed the envelope in his day in the direction of “future-oriented harmonic structures” (Henze) and ever-greater emotional expression by means of contrasts. We hear this in Henze’s intelligent transcription for flute, harp, and strings of Bach’s Fantasy in F-sharp minor for harpsichord with violin accompaniment (1787). In the present performance by Maria Cecilia Munoz and Sarah O’Brien, this eerie but

D.C. during rush hour, as he memorably did one April day in 2007. He has always considered it “one of the greatest achievements of any man in history” and “the most perfect and complete piece of music ever written for the violin.” That fact makes it a little odd that he would perform it here in an orchestration by Julian Milone of Felix Mendelssohn’s arrangement for violin and piano. But there is no contradiction, as the expansion of the Chaconne’s rich harmony beyond what any violin – even Joshua Bell’s – can only suggest makes perfection even “more perfect.”

More sublimity awaits us in the form of the Air from Orchestral Suite No. 3. For a finale that leaves us in a happy toe-tapping mood, we have the merry Gavotte en Rondeau from Violin Partita No. 3 in another Milone setting, this time of Robert Schumann’s arrangement for violin and piano. If you are not a Bach aficionado after taking in all of this, there is no hope for you!



Mozart: Piano Works: Neglected Treasures
 Anastasia Injushina, piano
 Ondine Records

Anastasia Injushina was born into a family of Russian engineers in Brazil and heard her first taste of classical music, Dvořák’s Violin Concerto, at the ripe old age of three. She immediately showed a decided aptitude for music, though her mother had to wait until their return to Russia several years later to enroll her in formal studies. She moved to Finland, where she now resides, in 1991. A self-professed “hyperkinetic” chamber music participant, she founded the Spring Light Chamber Music Festival in Helsinki.

Injushina’s repertoire is far-ranging. But as she showed us in her earlier Ondine release of piano concertos by the Bach family, she has a particular interest in the music of the exciting period when Baroque styles and conventions were beginning to give way to the new homophonic music of an era that would in time be termed the “Viennese Classical Period.” The young Mozart emerged right in the middle of it all.

Mozart, as a precocious child, had earlier received instruction from Johann Christian Bach, youngest of the Bach sons and a foremost figure of the day, quite literally while sitting on the older composer’s knee. But

undeniably beautiful music has a spell-binding effect on the listener.

The spellbinding continues with Muñoz, a brilliant young flutist from Argentina, in the spotlight in Bach's alternate version for flute of his great Harpsichord Concerto in D minor, Wq.22. This is a work of considerable musical substance in which a spacious Andante provides a respite, though not without dramatic contrasts, between the electrically charged outer movements. In the (literally) breathtaking finale, Muñoz' control and incisiveness are most impressive, as she articulates a steady volley of notes as fast it can possibly be sounded on her instrument without slurring.

The program concludes with the warmest and most gracious of concertos, that for Flute, Harp and Orchestra in C major, K299 by Mozart. Here, the soaring exuberance of Muñoz' flute is complimented by the warm resonance of the harp's mellow lower register. Both soloists' parts are challenging, perhaps even more for the harpist as the frequent patterns of five and ten notes, which do not fall easily under a harpist's fingers, have led some scholars to speculate that the part was originally intended for keyboard. That's scholarly flyspecks, however, as our performers resolve all difficulties in the course of a work in which a scintillating Allegro is followed an irresistibly beautiful Andantino that weaves an undeniable nocturnal charm, with a buoyant Rondeau for the finale.



Khachaturian: Piano Concerto + Prokofiev: Piano Concerto No. 3 – Nareh Arghamanyan, pianist
Alain Altinoglu conducts RSO Berlin
PentaTone (Hybrid SACD)

Nareh Arghamanyan has done it again! The Armenian-born pianist strikes a mother lode in her most recent release on PentaTone Classics. Once again, it is music close to her heart in the form of stunning piano concertos by Aram Khachaturian and Serge Prokofiev (No. 3) that allow her to display her piano technique in matters large and small.

The demands of Khachaturian's sole Piano Concerto (1936) are fierce indeed. Much of the time in the opening movement, *Allegro ma non troppo e maestoso*, she is in an intimate communion with the soul of the piano. But she is also required to interact with the massive forces of the orchestra, pounding out

later on, as a young man in Vienna, he came under the influence of a circle of Baroque polyphony enthusiasts that met on Sundays under the leadership of Austrian diplomat Gottfried van Swieten to listen to choice examples of the old style by masters like Bach and Handel. Many pieces heard on the present program of "neglected masterworks" reflect this influence and the conscientious effort of the young Mozart to reconcile the two schools of musical thought, old and new. He did this with varying degrees of success in such works as his Suite in C major, K399; Prelude and Fugue in C major, K394; and Allegro in B-flat, K400.

In these works, Mozart's intention may not be fully realized, but the results are charming and persuasive nonetheless, thanks to the warmth and consistency of Injushina's approach and the very beautiful tone she cultivates. That is particularly true of the just-mentioned Allegro, with its lithe rhythms and the seemingly effortless spontaneity she imparts to them. Also of note is the fragmentary Sonata Movement in G minor, K312; a very personal work in which romantic feeling veers between melancholy and resignation. That work, given Injushina's sensitive interpretation, justifies the term "neglected treasure."

Elsewhere, that appellation is not entirely correct, as the two sets of variations heard here, on the French nursery tune "*Ah vous dirai-je, Maman*" and an aria from a comic opera by Gluck, "*Unser dummer pöbel meint*," are far from unknown as examples of Mozart's charm and wit. And who would have thought that the Andante in F major, K616, which he wrote for a gizmo like the mechanical organ, would sound as natural and beautiful as Injushina makes it appear?



Mozart: Piano Concertos Nos. 12, K414 and 23, K488
Marianna Shirinyan, piano; Scott Yoo, Odense SO
Bridge Records

Marianna Shirinyan, a native Armenian who currently lives in Denmark where she is artist-in-residence with the Odense Symphony Orchestra, gives a memorable account of two of Mozart's most significant piano concertos. Sensitive and nuanced performances by this Steinway Artist bring out the glowing beauties in Piano Concertos No. 12 in A major, K414 and 23 in a major, K488, the first a seminal work that helped characterize Mozart's mature concerto style and the latter the final fruition of that same style that we now

the repeated three-note motto of F, B-double-flat, and A-flat in dynamics ranging from forte (*f*) all the way to quadruple forte (*ffff*). In the opening measures of the slow movement, *Andante con anima*, the pianist is absorbed in a slow, quiet meditation that is barely above the threshold of audibility when the movement opens, and then is heard against an eerie, otherworldly backdrop provided by an unusual instrument.

The eerie sound is customarily that of the flexatone, a handheld percussion instrument in which two wooden balls are suspended in a frame on either side of a thin metal sheet and are manipulated by the player to produce a haunting tremolo. In keeping with Khachaturian's original intention, the present performance substitutes a musical saw, which has a softer sound that allows Arghamanyan to take her time scoring delicate points in the piano score, of which there are surprisingly many. The finale is fast-paced, featuring glissandi, repeated notes, tremolos, and trills on top of high-energy syncopated rhythms that sound to western ears "like jazz," although they are very much a part of the Armenian and Georgian folk ethos that Khachaturian turned to for inspiration.

Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto (1921), like the Khachaturian, frequently involves the intrusion of witty and wicked dissonances into the most innocent lyrical passages, so the performer has to be on her toes for sudden interruptions in timing and rhythm that require frequent re-positionings. The concerto opens *Andante* with a long, lyrical melody in the clarinet, before the *Allegro* section begins, featuring fast scalar passages and a long, upward glissando for the pianist before she interacts in spirited exchange with the pulsating sounds of the orchestra.

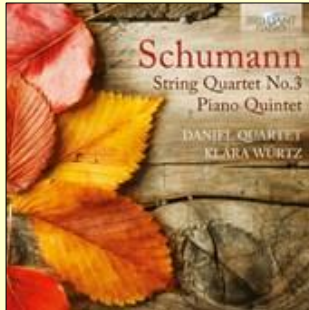
The slow movement is the form of a theme with five variations, the first beginning with a long trill followed by a glissando run up the keyboard, prescient of George Gershwin's clarinet wail at the opening of *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), while the fourth features an eerie dialog between pianist and orchestra, with falling thirds from the piano creating the same sort of otherworldly effect that Khachaturian was to cultivate in his own Piano Concerto. The *Allegro* finale contains further dialog between soloist and orchestra, much of it in a mood that Prokofiev himself described as "argumentative," as lyricism runs smack up against sarcasm. The pianist is required at one point to run up and down the keyboard in fiendishly difficult double-note arpeggios. The concerto ends with a breathtaking flourish. Amazingly, it finishes in C major, regarded as the most "consonant" of all keys.

term "Mozartean."

K414 was one of a trio of piano concertos of 1782 that Mozart himself described as "entirely new" in concept. Booklet annotator Malcolm MacDonald has it right on the money when he characterizes these works as the moment when "the concept of the concerto as a *drama* – practically a commonplace to all succeeding generations – first arises." It is music imbued with the ethos of opera buffa, with its wealth of arias, duets, and dialogues ranging in mood from deeply sorrowful to rejoicing, all expressed in a style so pervasive, smooth, and all-embracing that the world now calls it "classical." To Mozart's contemporaries, these works breathed the smoothly-integrated style of Johann Christian Bach, and Mozart did in fact pay heartfelt tribute to the memory of the recently-deceased "London" Bach by using one of his themes in the *Andante* of K414. But there was a difference, as Shirinyan and conductor Scott Yoo reveal in a strikingly insightful performance. There's an expressive, personal element at work here, sublimated within Mozart's seemingly impersonal style and full, subtle harmonization that is all the more effective for being quiet and understated.

In K488, the performances by pianist and orchestra conspire with the beautifully full and lush recorded sound to enhance the impression one often gets in this work that it is the apex of the Mozart piano concertos. Certainly, Mozart was very prolific in musical ideas here, even by his usual standard. That includes a third lyrical theme, heard after the exposition is apparently finished, that figures large in the development section and delays the appearance of the cadenza, an idiosyncrasy that is carried off so smoothly and naturally that most listeners are probably unaware of it unless they are the scholarly types who always follow the music with the score in their hot little hands. (Most of the rest of us are too busy being enchanted to care.) As in K414, Shirinyan does a distinguished job with the cadenza.

The succeeding *Adagio* is so lushly populated with woodwinds that they seem like a wind serenade, providing a backdrop for the piano's soft dynamics and surprisingly dark ruminations, both of which Shirinyan puts across very well. The dark introspection is dispelled by a lively and vivacious rondo finale, with several false endings before the real one occurs.



Schumann: String Quartet No. 3; Piano Quintet
Klara Würtz, piano; Daniel Quartet
Brilliant Classics

Hungarian-born pianist Klara Würtz, noted for her sensitivity and personal involvement with the music she plays, joins forces with the Daniel String Quartet, founded in Israel and now based in Amsterdam, for a performance of Robert Schumann's trend-setting Piano Quintet in E-flat, Op. 44 in a manner that brings this work to immediate, vibrant life. On the same disc, the Daniel, famed for their "grandly emotional style," give a distinguished account of the composer's String Quartet in A, Op. 41, No. 3. Both works tell us a lot about Schumann and the goals he was reaching for.

Both these works were products of Schumann's "chamber music year," 1842, in which, with a single-minded passion, he wrote nothing of significance except chamber music: the three Quartets, Op. 41, the Piano Quartet, Op. 47, and the afore-mentioned Piano Quintet, Op. 44. Previously, with the sort of white-hot obsession that would eventually land him in the bug house, he'd devoted the years 1840 to *lieder* (art songs, more than a hundred in all) and 1841 to symphonic music, including his "Spring" Symphony and the first version of his Fourth Symphony.

The A major Quartet, performed with deepest feeling by the Daniel Quartet, shows Schumann investing the string quartet form he'd received from the classical era with a wealth of vocally-based expressiveness and directness. The forcefulness and harmonic richness of this work have long led observers to term it "pocket-sized orchestral music," but a closer inspection reveals qualities that we have prized ever since as hallmarks of the romantic era: its speech-like declaration in the opening bars, the manifest energy of its outer movements and the use of melodic rhythms (or rhythmic melody) in its finale. The slow movement, Adagio molto, is the most remarkable, and here the Daniel Quartet display their grand style to best effect.

The Piano Quintet has long been famed for its "exuberant" and "extroverted" character. This is particularly noticeable in the opening Allegro *brillante* (glittering, or sparkling) and the forceful finale, Allegro *ma non troppo*, in which the theme is combined with the opening movement's main theme in a mighty double fugue. This preoccupation with counterpoint



Fauré / Schumann / Bartók: Sonatas for Violin, Piano
Jade Duo
MSR Classics

The debut album of the Jade Duo is noteworthy on several accounts. First, these talented young Chinese artists who studied in their native country and in the U.S. at the Manhattan School of Music have chosen a program of comparatively under-acclaimed (though far from unknown) sonatas for violin and piano by three major composers. In addition, they have set no easy task for themselves in selecting three of the more difficult items in the repertoire in Gabriel Fauré's Sonata No. 1 in A, Op. 13; Robert Schumann's Sonata No. 1 in A minor, Op. 105; and Bela Bartók's Sonata No. 2, Sz76.

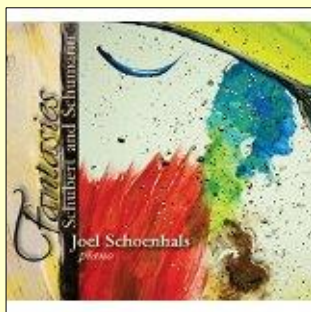
The Fauré comes first in the program, and it is certainly the easiest pill to swallow, for the same reasons that Camille Saint-Saëns cited at the time of its premiere: "novel forms, exquisite modulations, uncommon tone colors, [and] the use of the most unexpected rhythms." All of this is clothed in Fauré's (seemingly) effortless style, which includes the extended and augmented chords in the piano accompaniment in the opening movement, the very graceful arpeggios in lilting 9/8 time in a slow movement in the form of a Barcarolle, and the hopping syncopations in the finale. All of which must be made to appear perfectly easy and natural.

The Schumann follows next, and here the main difficulties are stylistic. The opening movement, marked "*Mit leidenschaftlichem Ausdruck*" (with passionate, or sorrowful, expression) requires a fine sense of discretion from the performers in terms of *how much* expression is too much? That is the more problematic in view of the historical fact that the composer in 1851 was already showing symptoms of the depressive condition that would cause him to be admitted to an asylum three years later. Certainly, there is noticeable anguish in the opening movement narrative, though later the mood settles into areas that are less easily defined. Even the slow movement, a flowing pastoral song, contains pleasant peril for the performers in the constant imitation between the voices and the indication that the flowing sixteenth notes in the accompaniment must not be connected.

Bartók's Sonata No. 2 is the hardest nut to crack. To its astringent folk idiom that was quite different from the

and fugue was Schumann's acknowledgement to J.S. Bach, and incidentally a means of increasing the harmonic richness in his own music. Another thing about this work was that it "standardized" the setting of piano plus string quartet for the romantic era. Previous quintets had utilized the piano plus violin, viola, cello and double bass, which are the instruments used in Schubert's famed "Trout" Quintet. Schumann's use of a string quartet with the piano tightened up the genre, so that it played more like a symphonic work than a more leisurely serenade.

Schumann's quintet also owes a debt to Schubert's Piano Trio No. 2 in its use of a definitely funereal march in the slow movement, where the mood contrasts strongly with an agitated episode that is marked by descending octaves in the piano, doubled by violin. Ascending and descending scales and use of perpetual motion in the second trio characterize a brilliant scherzo. The driving finale with the afore-mentioned double fugue invites enthusiastic participation by all hands, including the steady tread and precisely articulated phrases emanating from Klara Würtz at piano. Affectionate and stirring!



Schubert + Schumann: Fantasies in C Major
Joel Schoenhals, piano
Fleur de Son

American pianist Joel Schoenhals scores impressively high marks in his performances of major works by Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann that define the Romantic Era and the aspirations of both composers. With his brilliant technique and deep insight into the music, Schoenhals lays these two great works bare. But in the process, like a hunter who starts more rabbits than he could possibly shoot, his approach ends up leaving more questions unanswered than a more superficial approach would have done. In the end, perhaps, some of the questions may simply be unanswerable.

In his famous "Wanderer" Fantasy in C, D.760, Schubert used a theme from his own song of the same title. In its probing restlessness, it reflects the anguish of the wanderer in search of home, love, acceptance, and fulfillment. It falls into four well-defined movements that are played without pause: Allegro con fuoco, Adagio, Presto, and Allegro. Echoes of the theme recur in all the movements, giving it the cohesion that you

Gypsy style the 19th century had come to regard as "Hungarian music," Bartók added elements that gave his music a distinctive flavor: its extensive use of the tritone, its excessively vocal and rhapsodic character, and its harsh dissonances and frequent changes in tempo and dynamics. The unusual indication "*sempre battuto e ruvido*" (always struck and rough) regarding tone clusters, sounds positively forbidding. In the final analysis, an expertly crafted account of this work, such as the Jade Duo give us here, will always win more kudos from those who really understand the genre and its difficulties than it will from the general public.

It all makes for an auspicious recording debut for these young Chinese artists, Shuai Shi on violin and Zhen Chen on piano. With luck, we should be hearing of them for years to come. In the meantime, you can look them up on their website at www.jadeduo.com



"Dances for Piano and Orchestra"
Joel Fan, piano; Christophe Chagnard conducts
Northwest Sinfonietta (Reference Recordings)

American pianist Joel Fan has been appearing in a lot of places lately, from Carnegie Hall and Kennedy Center to Good Morning America and Late Night with David Letterman. His personality and his keyboard excellence have won him friends and admirers.

I can't say as much for the music on this new release by Reference Recordings, however. The opportunities for virtuosity certainly appear to be there, and Fan makes the most of them, with seeming effortlessness and a minimum of fuss. And most, if not all of the works in the present program are relatively unknown and seldom performed.

That, in fact, is just the point. Fantaisie-Ballet, Op. 6 by French composer and conductor Gabriel Pierné contains a good deal of exuberance and good spirits, concocted with the sort of brilliant orchestration for which the composer, a close colleague of Debussy, was famous. The tone is charming and genial, and the borrowing of the opening music from Leo Delibes' *Sylvia* suite announces right from the beginning that this work will be a tribute to the ballet.

Other works on this CD partake so much of a spirit of easy virtuosity and urbanity that the program ends up being blander than we had a right to expect. They

can hear so clearly in Schoenhals' performance. Even more, there is a unity of mood resulting from restating the driving rhythm of the fiery opening in different ways in each of the succeeding movements, as well as contrasted feelings within the same movement. There's an upsurge of dark, troubling emotion in the latter half of an otherwise affirmative Adagio which had begun with such serene, quiet beauty. Consolation and despair are often at odds with each other as effortlessly flowing, quicksilver passages are succeeded by storm driven ones. At the end of the day, we are unsure as to how to assess the claim one often hears from critics that the heroic element has finally overcome strife victoriously. In this interpretation, we have the less comforting feeling that the poet has merely survived, to resume the same dire struggle again the next time.

Robert Schumann wrote his Fantasia in C, Op. 17 as a love message to his future wife, the pianist Clara Wieck, to assuage his pain at their separation. In truth, this strangely beautiful work puzzled Clara in a number of ways, particularly as reflected by her inability to understand the significance of the personal message in measures 65-67. Schumann's choosing to focus on this particular moment amid the passionate lyricism of the slowly coalescing cosmos of feeling that was his opening movement, marked *Durchaus fantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen* (thoroughly fantastic and sorrowfully laden) does seem a little odd. Even the probing interpretation by Schoenhals does not quite resolve the mystery, though elsewhere he has his finger on the pulse of this compelling movement. That includes the dynamics, which range from thumping fortes to almost inaudible repeated notes at the end. The middle movement is a march, culminating in syncopations that still have the power to astonish today. The finale, in which Schumann enriches the harmony to the point that the listener has the impression of viewing a starry night sky, is perhaps the best part of the present performance.

As a final note, Schumann's Fantaisie was so avant-garde for its day that he was not able to find a publisher for it. Even today, as Schoenhals shows us through the quiet eloquence of his approach, one gets the feeling of a work that is pushing the envelope in terms of what music can be made to do.



Ravel + Chausson: Piano Trios
Trio Solisti

include such rarely heard items as *Vals Capricho* by Mexican composer Ricardo Castro Herrera, Camille Saint-Saëns' *Valse-Caprice* in A-flat major ("Wedding Cake"), Carl Maria von Weber's *Polonaise brillante*, Op. 72 in the arrangement by Franz Liszt for piano and orchestra, and Louis Moreau Gottschalk's *Grande Tarantelle*, Op. 67 in a galloping 6/8 rhythm and in a splashy reconstruction and arrangement by Hershy Kay. Even Frédéric Chopin's Krakowiak in F major, despite the promise of its syncopated dance melody, comes across as no better than the composer's fourth-best effort for piano and orchestra, after the two concertos and the *Andante spianato et grande polonaise brillante*.

In many ways, the most interesting item on the program is the obscure fantasy for piano and orchestra *Dark Dancers of the Mardi Gras* by the little-known American composer Charles Wakefield Cadman (1881-1946). It crackles with excitement, as befits its subject, and ends dynamically with a fortissimo (*fffz*).



Beethoven: The Middle Quartets
Performed by the Cypress String Quartet
Avie Records

Once again, the San Francisco-based Cypress String Quartet show us what they're made of. The finely-tuned Anglo-American ensemble consisting of Cecily Ward and Tom Stone, violins; Ethan Filner, viola; and Jennifer Kloetzel, cello, reveal themselves to be the Beethoven quartet for our times by their perfect blend, mutual sympathy, and the great freedom with which they take on their individual roles, working together to mold the bold contours in the composer's mature Middle Period writing. Beethoven knew exactly what he had to do in these so-called "Middle Quartets" (Opus 59 nos 1-3; Op. 74, and Op. 95), and so do the Cypresses. Recorded by engineer Mark Willsher in 96 kHz, 24 bit sound at the Skywalker Sound scoring stage, the sonics reveal a first-rate quartet at the top of their game.

The three Opus 59 Quartets of 1806 are known as the "Razoumovsky set," after the name of the Russian diplomat to the Austrian court who commissioned them. In terms of virtuosity, they required a quantum leap in the performers who executed them, from the driving rhythms and the extensive use of fugato that gives them a symphonic-like breadth to the piling up of

Bridge Records

The Trio Solisti are phenomenal. Composed of Maria Bachmann, violin; Alexis Pia Gerlach, cello; and Adam Neiman, piano, they live up to their name as a “trio of soloists,” each with his/her distinctive artistic profile but capable of interacting in ways that bring out the thorny beauties in some of the world’s most challenging works for piano trio. That includes the two works by French composers heard on the present disc.

Maurice Ravel’s Trio in A minor was six years in the planning, but he began in earnest only during the spring of 1914 and hurried to complete it in five weeks during that summer, spurred by his desire to enlist in the Great War. Amazingly, Ravel’s intricately constructed Trio shows no evidence of haste, nor does it have one superfluous bar of music. There is a lot in this work to keep our performers on the alert for shifts in metre, dynamics, and ever-changing time divisions. The opening movement draws on the rhythms of the *Zortziko*, a dance from the Basque country where Ravel’s people originated. It’s in 8/8 time with each bar being divided into 3+2+3 rhythmical patterns. The lively scherzo is called a *Pantoum*, after a Malaysian verse form in which two themes are developed in alternation, the second and fourth lines of one stanza becoming the first and third of the next. Complicating the peril for the artists, the scherzo is in 3/4 time, while the trio is in 4/2.

All of which must be executed very quickly and precisely, creating a tremendous feeling of excitement. (Ravel, though he was an accomplished pianist, admitted that the piano writing here was beyond his capability.) Lest you think that this work is all cool, objective technique, the slow movement that follows, a variation form known as a *Passacaille*, is the heart of the matter, a slow, melancholy reverie in which the theme is passed from one instrument to another as it builds to a climax, then dies away. More complication awaits us in the finale, *Animé*, with its virtuosic writing for all three instruments, its alternation between 5/4 and 7/4 time and its brilliant coda. One can imagine Ravel saying to his pal George Gershwin: “If you’ve got rhythm, I’ve got more!”

It is a tribute to Ernest Chausson (1855-1899) that his Piano Trio in G minor does not seem outclassed by the Ravel, but takes its place beside it as a compelling work of music. As performed by the Trio Solisti, this brooding Baudelairian work, with its major / minor ambiguity and powerfully conceived material, recalls both the influence of Chausson’s mentor Cesar Franck in its cyclic handling of themes, and that of Brahms’ Horn Trio in the exuberance of its rollicking intermezzo, marked *Vite* (fast, and no joking!) With its contrasts between dark melancholy and burgeoning *élan*, the wonder is that this very attractive work by Chausson received absolutely no attention when it was premiered in Paris in 1882, and was never performed again until it was published in 1919, twenty years after the

incidents in a way that can only be resolved by the sudden appearance of an unrelated theme, serene and lovely in its conception, arising on a single instrument from the wreck of a glorious smash-up. Always, there are challenges to be met, problems to be resolved. These are memorable quartets, not so much from the presence of pure lyricism as from the use of what might be termed “melodic rhythm.” An example is the very opening of Opus 59, No. 1 in F major, in which the cello, unconventionally, starts things moving with a long-limbed but quite symmetrical theme with a throbbing accompaniment, calculated to engage us intellectually as well as emotively (I sometimes hear it in my dreams: it’s that catchy).

As the movement progresses, we discover the opening theme was not a tune in any self-contained sense of the word, but a launching pad for motives that pervade the entire movement. Beethoven very effectively delays the recapitulation, thereby increasing our expectation. Midway through, an elaborate double fugue takes us into distant flatted keys. Throughout, the performers must display considerable verve and aplomb to make it all work. And that, mind you, is only the *opening* movement of the first of the Middle Quartets.

Count Razoumovsky made a special request of Beethoven that he incorporate a different Russian theme in each of the three Op.59 Quartets. We find this procedure in the jaunty finale of No.1 in F, the rhythmically infectious Allegretto of No. 2 in E minor, and a melody in 6/8 introduced by the pizzicato cello in the opening Andante *quasi allegretto* of No. 3 in C. Not only does the inclusion of folk themes increase the popular appeal of these quartets, but it also provides clues as to the harmonizations that Beethoven will use.

We come next to the Quartet in E-flat, Op. 74, known as the “Harp” after the ear-catching plucked passages that charm our attention in the opening movement as pairs of instruments alternate notes in an arpeggio, resembling the characteristic sound we associate with a harp. This work has always been popular due to its relatively untroubled lyricism. In fact, it has been hailed as one of the works that marked Beethoven’s arrival as a “romantic” composer. But even here, we have a few disquieting elements. The finale seems ambiguous to me: is it a case of “the pleasures of pure lyricism win the day,” as booklet annotator Nicholas Mathew would have it, or is it hard-won triumph over struggle? Succeeding generations have enjoyed this quartet, even as they found it difficult to pigeon-hole.

But the most problematical of the Middle Quartets is easily the “*Serioso*” (serious) in F minor, Op. 95. At 21 minutes, it is the shortest of them all, owing to its terseness of expression, its jumping to distant keys without use of proper modulations, and its extreme emotional confrontations. No wonder Beethoven resisted for several years his publisher’s entreaties to publish this strange, disturbing work that he regarded

composer's untimely death from a bicycle accident. What the critics must have been thinking, if they were thinking, is a mystery that this outstanding performance by the Trio Solisti only deepens.

as strictly for the *cognoscenti* and not the music public of the recital hall. It actually looks forward to the Late Quartets of 1825-1826, which may explain why the Cypress Quartet chose to perform and record the late works first, rather than taking the quartets in apple pie order. If you want to understand a prophesy, it helps to have already taken a peek into the future.



"Encanto del Mar," Mediterranean Songs
Placido Domingo
Sony Classical

Placido Domingo goes on and on, with no end in sight. That's in keeping with his oft-quoted self-assessment: "When I rest, I rust." The Madrid, Spain native who moved to Mexico with his parents at the age of 8 in 1949 and studied at the National Conservatory of Music, went on to a career in opera that is now the stuff of legend. And he keeps on exploring new avenues, as a conductor and a baritone. That's right, I said "baritone." You didn't misread the last sentence. Placido has long been noted for the breadth of his vocal range, and it is one of music's little ironies that one of the celebrated "Three Tenors" originally auditioned for the Mexico City Opera in 1959 as a baritone before he was asked to sight-read some tenor arias and was accepted as such.

At any rate, such distinctions matter a lot more in the opera house than they do in the realm of popular song and folk music, which is the proper setting for "*Encanto del Mar*" (romance, or enchantment, of the sea), the latest release in more than one hundred recordings by this artist. It is easily one of the most charming albums you will ever hear, a compilation of love songs, celebrations of the beauty of the Mediterranean and the countries whose shores it washes. It encompasses songs of nostalgia, sadness, joy, bitterness and regret in ten different languages and dialects. They are as follows:

Mediterráneo (Spanish)
Estate (Italian)
En Méditerranée (French)
Aranjuez (Spanish)
Anghiulina (Corsican)
Torna a Surriento (Neapolitan)
No potho reposare (Sardinian)
Lamma bada (Arabic)
Adio Kerida (Ladino Jewish)
To Yasemi (Greek)
Reginella (Italian)
Layla layla (Arabic)
El cant dels ocells (Catalan)
Del cabello más sutil (Spanish)
Plaisir d'amour (French)

In the first three songs on this album you can almost see the brilliant Mediterranean sunlight and taste the spray of the sea. *Aranjuez* and *El cant dels ocells* are familiar melodies from their settings by Joaquin Rodrigo (the well-

loved Adagio of his Concierto de Aranjuez) and Pablo Casals (cello arrangement of the Catalan "Song of the Birds"). The Arabic love songs weave repeated phrases such as "*Aman, aman, aman*" (Surrender, surrender, surrender) into hypnotic spells. "*Adio Kerida*," sung in Ladino, the language of the Sephardic Jews, expresses the bitterness of one whose beloved has been unfaithful to him, which is yet another aspect of love. And Domingo's warm, tenderly expressive popular-style voice comes into its own in such a lyric as *Del cabello más sutil* (I want to make a chain from that so soft hair you wear in braids). Backed as required by supporting singers and instrumentalists on guitar, harp, cello, bass, soprano saxophone, guitar, and percussion in various tasteful arrangements, it all makes for a very attractive program.

By the way, you may have read the internet comments of disappointed Domingo fans to the effect they felt this album was "limp" and "undemanding." Begging to differ, I feel that is a lot of bunk. Opera buffs accustomed to listening to their heroes storming the ramparts of heaven of behalf of love, country, and "*Mama Mia*" don't always realize that it takes a very different vocal style to sing the popular and folk repertoire. In my opinion, Plácido Domingo has the emphasis just right here, in an album you will be listening to with pleasure for a long time.