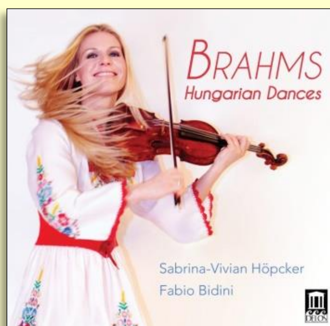


Brahms: Hungarian Dances (arr. Joachim) - Sabrina-Vivian Höpcker, violin; Fabio Bidini, piano (Delos)

Violinist Sabrina-Vivian Höpcker and pianist Fabio Bidini give outstanding performances of seldom-heard arrangements (at least on record) of some of the most popular light classics of all. These are the 21 Hungarian Dances of Johannes Brahms that were arranged for violin and piano in 1871 and 1880 by his concert partner and longtime friend, Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim. Brahms had originally composed the dances for piano four-hands and later brought out versions of 1-10 for solo piano. As orchestrated by Brahms, Dvořák and many others, the Hungarian Dances are ever-popular items in the pops repertoire. Yet curiously, I can’t recall ever running across these arrangements for violin and piano in more than three decades as a reviewer.That is all the more surprising when you consider what a no-brainer it would seem to be to have these moody and scintillating dances performed by that favorite instrument of the Gypsies, the violin!

Höpcker and Bidini are an ideal team to popularize the Joachim arrangements. Höpcker, a native of Hamburg, Brahms’ city, has been praised for her bravura playing, blending calculated reserve with a willingness to really “let er rip” when the music requires it. (That’s not a model on the booklet cover, by the way, it’s the artist herself.) She is exceptionally adept in her choices of rubato, expecially when the music

Dvořák, Elgar, Schumann: Cello Concertos + Strauss Don Quixote Kim Cook, Cello (MSR Classsics)

Kim Cook does it again! The Nebraska native, Distinguished Professor of Cello at Pennsylvania State University, and world traveler shows us why each of her new releases on MSR Classics is a keenly anticipated event. With the assistance of two outstanding orchestras from Russia and the Czech Republic, she puts across four of the greatest beauties from the repertoire for cello and orchestra by Elgar, Strauss, Dvořák, and Schumann. In these works the inner beauty of her instrument shines forth irresistibly.

Sir Edward Elgar’s Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85, leads off CD1 in a rather subdued, yet smoldering and passionate mood, a reflection of the uneasy time (1919), so soon after the great tragedies of the World War and, as it happened, not long before the death of his wife Alice. The plaintive mood of the opening movement is succeeded by the real darkness of the Lento (when I first heard it, I was struck by the thought that *I myself* might die imminently) to which the the warmth of the Adagio provides a measure of consolation. The finale of the four-movement concerto strikes a note of encouragement reminiscent of Elgar’s Pomp and Circumstance days, but with a difference. My thoughts turned to Tennyson’s Ulysses urging on his comrades: “We are not that which we were. Though much has been lost, much

Schubert: Symphonies Nos. 1, 6 René Jacobs, B’Rock Orchestra (Pentatone SACD)

Ghent, Belgium native René Jacobs has been widely acclaimed for many years as a countertenor vocalist and founding director of ensembles, with more than 260 recordings to his name. The Antwerp-based B’rock Orchestra which we hear under his baton in the present pairing of Schubert symphonies, bills itself as “Period instruments, 21st century ideas, timeless joy.”

More to the point, B ‘rock has often been cited by the press for its characteristic sound, which is said to “ooze theatre and colour,” making it ideal for this particular conductor. Under Jacobs’ direction, they perform two symphonies from Franz Schubert’s youth that are somewhat derivative but also have much that is new to say for themselves.

Symphony No. 1 in D Major, D82 shows the influence of Schubert’s immediate predecessors in the Classical Era. For instance, we hear a tribute to Beethoven in both opening and final movements, a means that helps to unify the work in a cyclic manner. René Jacobs describes Refrain A in the second movement as “probably inspired” in its melodic and elegiac character by the second movement of Mozart’s “Prague” Symphony. Ditto the fast *alla breve* markings in the fourth movement, which Jacobs likens to those in Cherubino’s aria “*Non so*

slides smoothly down from a really tempestuous passage to a moment of great tenderness and intimacy. Her timing and that of her partner Bidini, an honors graduate of the Conservatorio Santa Cecilia, have to correspond in tempo and rubato. Says Bidini: "The two musicians must express the character of the music in the same way. If a detail is missing, the ensemble suffers." Bidini also makes the observation that the length of certain notes in the piano part, also their phrasing and articulation, corresponds to the tone colors of that other favorite Hungarian instrument, the cimbalon.

Johannes Brahms himself modestly disclaimed original authorship of the Hungarian Dances, the melodies of which were the common property of the Hungarian musicians who had fled their country after the failed revolution of 1848, thereby leaving himself open to contemporary charges of pagiarism that now seem foolish in the light of history. The melodies, of course, are only the very beginnings of the Hungarian Dances. The skilfully wrought arrangements are of supreme importance. (Just for the record, Joachim identified numbers 11, 14, and 16 as "pure Brahms.") As Tchaikovsky discovered with the folk idioms of his native Russia, once you get the knack, you can begin to compose your own melodies, which are not discernable from the folk originals except to scholars.

Dances 1-10, which Brahms published in 1869, have been the more popular with audiences while 11-21, which he released in 1880, have been generally favored by scholars and musicologists, and incidentally by Brahms himself, as having more features that lend themselves to scholarly discussion. That includes increased emphasis on counterpoint and greater use of canon in part-leading. While eight of the Dances 11-21 are in minor keys (compared with six instances of the same in Dances 1-10) the minor key signatures in 11-21 tend to be truly minor in affect, as opposed to those in 1-10 which are often in a "major-minor" mode that poses no barrier yet remains."

After the Elgar, in which Cook receives subtly understated support from the St. Petersburg State Symphony Orchestra under Arkady Shteinlucht, we are given a striking contrast of mood in Richard Strauss' Don Quixote, with the orchestra conducted by Gerardo Edelstein. If the Elgar looks back with nostalgia tinged with sadness at a vanished era, Strauss' grand tone poem based on Cervantes' curious saga of the aged Spanish don who loses his reason after reading romances of bold knights-errant, is filled with impudent details that serve to bring it all down to earth as the composer thumbs his nose at the musical excesses of the Romantic Era.

Yet, true to the spirit of Cervantes' novel, Strauss' Don Quixote is not all burlesque. The Don may be crack-brained in his battle with the windmills, mistaking them for raging giants, or a flock of sheep that he takes for an invading army. But there's also a serious element to the saga, relating to the power of the creative imagination, misapplied though it may be on occasion. The moment of lucidity when the Don's mind clears just before his death is beautifully done here.

The sensitive warmth of Cook's exalted performance on the cello, which is the voice of Don Quixote, is superbly countered by the down-to-eath realism of his squire, Sancho Panza, whose nonetheless limited imagination is portrayed by up-and-down scales in the viola part, here performed perceptively by Anna Vainschtein. The dialogue between the two instruments in Variation III is the heart of the matter.

CD2 starts off persuasively with Schumann's Cello Concerto in A minor, Op. 129, a work that was slower to gain acceptance that we might have imagined from its wealth of ravishing melodies (even by *this* composer's standard). In particular, there's a twilight beauty in the cello's intimate discourse with other instruments in the slow movement that reminds us the composer was one of the masters of German *lieder*.

piu" from Don Giovanni.

Other elements reveal the teenaged composer really feeling his oats. We sense the demon rhythmic accuracy that his contemporaries praised him for right from the animated opening of the first movement, while his use of an Andante in the nature of a rocking Siciliano instead of the expected Adagio shows he wasn't afraid to innovate. His insertion of a waltz in place of the Minuet in 3 was the further consequence of an envelope that Beethoven had begun pushing in the really fast tempo of the Minuet in his own Symphony No. 1, moving in the direction of a true Scherzo. And in his bold exploration of unexpected keys in the final resolution in the fourth movement Franz Schubert showed the world he had a mind of his own.

One of the first things Schubert's contemporaries noticed about his Symphony No. 6 in C major, D589, was a preponderance of woodwinds which at times seemed to make the string section almost subordinate. The unstable key modulation in the introduction to the first movment (C major > C minor > E-flat major > A-flat major > C major), a progress from happiness to despair and back again, shows us Schubert wasn't afraid of being adventuresome in terms of the harmonic theory of his day.

At the very end of the opening movement, Schubert sets off a firecracker in the way the music explodes totally unexpectedly in acelerated tempo and loudness, a really stunning touch. The second movement, an Andante that is not truly slow despite the great beauty of the melody, makes much of the contrasts between war and peace, the difference being the inclusion of trumpets and tympani whenever Schubert wants to evoke the former (As Jacobs remarks in his program notes, the valveless natural trumpet of the day had a more martial sound than its modern valved successor).

The dance movement, which Schubert for the first time terms a "Scherzo," makes much of its abrupt changes in tempo and its

to their general exuberance. Even here, we have dances, such as No. 15 in B-flat major, where Brahms returns to the rollicking style, color and brighter mood of Dances 1-10. No. 17 in F-sharp minor is another example of a dance with subdued outer sections that enfold more vivacious material. But don't just take my word for it: it's all here for the listening!

The program just might have saved the best for last, a superb account of Antonin Dvořák's Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104, in which Kim receives yeoman support from the Bohuslav Martinu Philharmonic under Edelstein. This work derives much of its success from the fact that, as was the case in the Schumann, the cello does not rush headlong into confrontation with the full orchestra, especially the brass and percussion, but chooses its confidants for intimate conversation among the various woodwinds, especially the flute and reeds.

Continued below ====➔

unconventional harmony, while the Trio section is shockingly leaden and dispirited by way of contrast. The main subject of the finale is in the tempo of a fast écossaise. The movement builds to a grand climax through several stirring march episodes, which Jacobs sees as a clear foretaste of what was to happen in the "Great C Major" Symphony.

The big moments for the orchestra, particularly the peroration after the quiet statement of the opening theme and also the sensational fortissimo that will give you goose-bumps at the very end of the finale, are there, of course. But elsewhere, the glowing sound of Dvořák's instrumental writing creates a deceptive impression of more robust scoring than is actually the case.

This work can be tremendously demanding of the soloist, in ways of which the listener is not aware. The strong, beautiful singing tone of the cello is not something one can take for granted. It's hard work. That is especially the case with the diminuendos and the muted passages found in the opening movement and the poignant Adagio. The latter features one of the most wonderfully lyrical melodies in the whole literature when the cello sings a deeply moving song over counter-melodies in the woodwinds and pulsating rhythms in the strings. At one point, the cellist is called upon to play double stops accompanied by left-hand pizzicato on the open strings. The movement ends with the cello playing harmonics very quietly, a truly magic moment before the furious onslaught of the finale.

Haydn: Symphonies 49, 87 + Mozart: Sinfonia Concertante, K364 Harry Christophers, Handel and Haydn Society (Coro)

Harry Christophers, internationally famous as the founder of the UK-based choir The Sixteen, has also been the director of the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston since the 2009-2010 season. At the podium of the H+H, he shows himself just as formidable a conductor of the symphonic repertoire as he is a choral director. The present Coro release, his fourth with the Society, is a real beauty, revealing all the reasons we love Haydn (and Mozart, too*!*)

Haydn's Symphony No. 49 in F minor is known as "*La Passione*" because its opening movement is, unusually,

Haydn: String Quartets, Op. 50
The Amati Quartet
(Divox)

The Amati String Quartet, consisting of Willi Zimmermann and Katarzyna Nawrotek, violins; Nicolas Corti, viola; and Claudius Herrmann, cello, was formed in 1981 and won numerous awards and the applause of critics and audiences alike before they ended their concert career in 2009. From their discography, it would seem that one of their specialties was performing lesser-known works in the repertoire. The present performances of Haydn's Op. 50 Quartets, recorded in Zurich in February, 1995 and June, 1999 and released here on the Swiss label Divox, are a notable exception.

an Adagio, and a darkly brooding one at that, reminding listeners of a Passion chorale. As such, it was often performed during Lent and Easter during Haydn's lifetime. The somber mood of this movement colors much of the rest of the work, including a *sturm-und-drang* Allegro, a more relaxed but not exactly carefree Minuet, and a fiery Presto finale.

We next have Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante, K364 for Violin and Viola. It dates from sometime in the Summer or Autumn of 1779, though curiously there is no extant record of any contemporary performance of a work that seems to have been created for the greatest popularity. Indeed, K364 has often struck me as one of the most perfectly satisfying works of Mozart's era (or any else's for that matter). From the moment in the opening movement when violin and viola emerge together out of the orchestral crescendo, like song sparrows rising from the morning mist, we know we are in for a work of pure delight and enchantment. In this performance, concertmaster Aislinn Nosky and violist Max Mandel make the most of the generous amount of time they have in the limelight in a work that partakes of both double concerto and symphony genres without the slightest strain.

As a mixture of strength and tender lyricism, the Sinfonia Concertante is a marvel. Mozart was careful to keep the violin from overshadowing the viola by often casting the parts in octaves, as he does on their first appearance, and by using a sharper scordatura tuning to give the viola added brilliance and penetration. An elegiac middle movement marked Andante combines immense beauty and profound sadness, reaching depths in which its beauty is so keenly felt and perfectly expressed, it becomes coexistent with pain. The finale, a Presto in the form of a cheerful and spacious Rondo, makes for the perfect ending.

Symphony No. 87 in A major, the last to be completed of Haydn's six "Paris" Symphonies, is a perfect example of his later style. We hear one of its distinctive characteristics right away in the Vivace opening, bustling with excitement, warmth, and joy that tell us right away why Haydn is celebrated as one of music's supreme rhythm masters. The sublime Adagio, with its melody entrusted to an ethereal flute, and the Menuet with a deftly colored melody by a solo oboe in the Trio, will both stay with you for a long time after you've heard them. A lithe, playful, and masterfully poised Finale concludes the work.

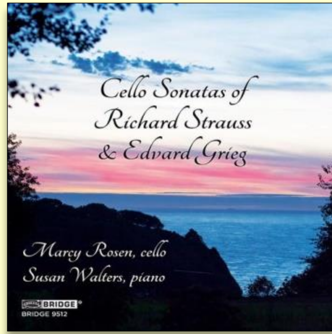
We should bear in mind that the individual quartets comprising Opus 50, the "Prussian Quartets," are not merely free-standing entities but comprise an organic whole. There was a reason why string quartets were published in sets of six in Haydn's day. The consumers of these sets were just as much competent amateurs who got together and played for recreation as they were professional musicians and their audiences. Six seemed to be an optimal number of quartets to work through in a full evening of quartet playing (We're talking now about musical enthusiasts, for whom a player who wanted to snuff out his candle and go home early might well have earned the scorn of his companions as a shirker!) As they were often played over the course of an entire evening, a set of quartets needed to have some musical cohesion, some glue to hold the interest of all the participants, and not be just a miscellaneous collection.

Much of this glue was a result of the unexpected, of which Haydn was a past master. This was the "harmless mischievousness" Haydn's contemporary Ignaz Ernst Fedinand Arnold spoke on in relation to the master's music. Innocuous themes, initially easy to grasp, are no longer are what we imagined them to be after a while, but something new and marvellous, and small kernels coalesce to become major themes, changing character in the process.

Or take the way the tempo changes in the finale of Quartet No. 5 in F major, "The Dream," from a dancing triple metre to a unfamiliar duple. The humor in Haydn's music is not the sort that strikes us on the noggin to compel our attention. It is a subtler humor that might have provoked smiles, and even pleasant laughter, among the participants in a quartet evening when they realized that Haydn was up to his old tricks!

For example, his tempo indications are not always as advertised. The Adagio cantabile of No. 2 in C major is more vigorous than we might have expected, more similar to the Menuetto that follows it. The finale of No. 6 in D major employs a lot of bariolage (the quick alternation between strings with the same pitch, one fingered and the other open), the resulting dissonance giving this quartet its nickname of "The Frog."

All these, and many more subtle touches of humor and mood require the deft phrasing and elegant, polished ensemble playing that the Amati Quartet bring to the task. They may be at their best in Quartet No. 4 in F-sharp minor, a key seldom used in those days because of the many sharps in its signature. The opening, marked *Allegretto spiritoso* ("spirited") is characterized by an omnipresent rhythm (short-short-short-long) that runs through the movement like a subtle precursor of Beethoven's Fifth. An audacious double variation in which an introspective major theme alternates with a sterner episode in the minor is a special feature of the Andante. Major-minor contrasts impishly interrupt the dance movement, a Menuetto. The finale, Allegro molto, features a vigorous fugue, one of Haydn's finest.



Grieg, Strauss: Sonatas for Cello & Piano
Marcy Rosen, Susan Walters
(Bridge Records)

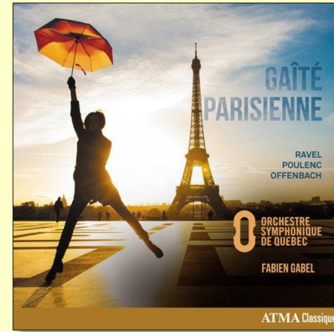
Marcy Rosen and Susan Walters, longtime partners on cello and piano respectively, have come out with an outstanding release on Bridge Records of cello sonatas by Richard Strauss and Edvard Grieg. The Grieg, thanks in part to the recording explosion that has taken place in the digital era (not to ignore its own considerable merits) has gained a larger audience in the recital hall in recent decades. The Strauss, at this writing, is still in need of friends, a slight that this recording may help to rectify.

Strauss, of course, is far better known as the composer of operas and tone poems. His father, however, took pains to ensure that his gifts for color and melody would not be wasted by insisting on a strict classcal training for his son – there was to be no composer for study later than Mendelssohn, whom he held up as a model.

The results are apparent in the handful of chamber works the young Strauss composed in his student days. His Sonata in F major for Cello and Piano, Op. 6, dates from his nineteenth year. The clean lines of the formal layout in the very opening of this sonata provide opportunities for both instruments to enjoy the limelight. Its slow movement, *Andante ma non troppo*, is in the form of a quiet, meditative "song without words" whose melody, sometimes soaring but mostly subdued, verges on deepest sorrow before it dies away, sadly and mysteriously. The finale starts off in a spirit of Mendelssohnian playfulness, grows in energy to a climactic point, and then gives way to a softer passage for piano alone before we return to the broad-based assertive mood we heard in the work's opening.

Edvard Grieg, stiff chafing from his publisher's demand that he write yet another suite of incidental music for Ibsen's play Peer Gynt, a task for which he had little enthusiasm, began work on his Sonata in A minor for Cello and Piano, Op. 36, as a means of "finding himself" once more as a composer. Yet, curiously, this finely wrought work is filled with the spirit of Norwegian song and folk dance that made the Peer Gynt music so commercially successful.

The sonata, which Grieg finished on April 7, 1883, is a



"Gaité Parisienne," Music by Ravel, Poulenc, Offenbach – Fabien Gabel, Orchestre symphonique de Québec (ATMA Classique)

Under the baton of Fabien Gabel, the Orchestre symphonique de Québec gives us a program of consistently sparkling, frequently impudent, and occasionally sad music by three composers who registered their takes on Parisian gaiety, and otherwise had little in common.

Maurice Ravel's enduringly piquant Noble and Sentimental Waltzes (*Valses nobles et sentimentales*) reflected his lifelong fascination for the waltz genre. The eight polished gems in the orchestral version range from languid to lively in character and are filled with witty surprises in the way of harmonic and rhythmic contrasts. Gabel is constantly attuned to Ravel's descriptive markings of these undeniably French and modern waltzes as guides to their interpretation: *Modéré, Assez Lent, Modéré, Assez animé, Presque lent, Assez vif, Moins vif*.

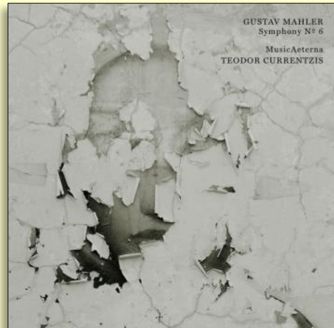
Francis Poulenc composed *Les Biches* to a commission for "a kind of modern *Sylphides*, a ballet of atmosphere." His response to this vague request was to create a series of tableaux in a contemporary drawing room, depicting the pleasures of love and sensual delight epitomized by *la Vie gai*. The title *Les Biches* has the double meaning of "does" and kept women in a decadent social milieu.

The music has the worldliness and range of moods we often associate with Poulenc. The central tableau, "Rag-Mazurka," an incongruous combination of two music genres, starts off up-beat and extroverted, but darker undertones begin to emerge. At the very end, I pictured a semi-mondaine sitting before her mirror late in the evening after the excitement has passed, wondering if the joy in her life as a *soubrette* is really worth its downside.

Gaite Parisienne (Parisian Gayety), the title work of the album, is the name of the suite compiled in later years by conductor Manuel Rosenthal (1904-2003) from the operas and ballets of Jacques Offenbach. These are among the world's favorite pieces by Offenbach, including a rambunctious Polka, a catchy little march (*Tempo di marcia*), a Quadrille that is more infectious

marvel of form and expressive content coming together beautifully, beginning with the theme in the opening *Allegro agitato* in which a neighboring semitone helps strike a mood of supressed passion, the "agitation" suggested by the marking. The slow movement, *Andante molto tranquillo*, is true in mood to its marking, being mostly hushed and very deeply expressive, like one of the composer's songs. The finale, a dark-sounding *Halling* (a Norwegian folk dance) marked *Allegro molto e marcato*, provides both partners ample opportunity for display.

and lively than the formal 18th century dance would suggest, and a Valse lente that is the epitome of the slow waltz genre. And of course there's the famous (or is it infamous?) CanCan from Orpheus in the Underworld. It is heard three times, as the original CanCan of the opera, as an Allegro on Tr. 18, and finally reprised in the course of the sublime Barcarolle from Tales of Hoffman, where its presence is rather strange, to say the least. (But perhaps Offenbach himself would have approved?)

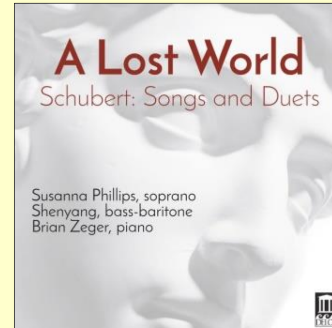


Mahler: Symphony No. 6
Teodor Currentzis, MusicAeterna
(Sony)

Gustav Mahler composed his Symphony No. 6 in A minor in 1906, the year before the untimely death of his daughter, the loss of his post with the Vienna Imperial Opera, and the diagnosis of his own ultimately fatal heart condition. Its dark prevailing mood seems prophetic of the calamities he was to experience the following year. At 84+ minutes' duration, there are longer Mahler symphonies, but none more likely to leave the unwary first-time listener limp with exhaustion. It is probably the least popular of the Mahler symphonies, and for good reason.

Mahler himself coined the sobriquet "Tragic" for this symphony, and although he deleted it before its publication, the name remained. The opening movement, *Allegro energico, ma non troppo. Heftig, aber markig* (Not too fast. Vigorous, but marked) opens with a stunning and unremitting march theme with heavy percussion. It is opposed by a sweeping second subject which Mahler wrote as a portrait of his wife Alma. While both themes are developed with great imagination, the dominant impression of brutal, relentless force created by the march remains. Almost unnoticed amid all the fury is the fact that the movement is in perfectly standard sonata form with a repeated exposition.

The Scherzo movement, marked *Wuchtig* (Forceful) begins with another march-like theme. It morphs into a bizarre, grotesquely stamping dance full of percussive strokes and shrieking woodwinds, with a curious old-fashioned waltz inserted as the Trio. The *Andante moderato* is pastoral, nostalgic, yearning, and plaintive,



"A Lost World," Schubert Songs and Duets – Susanna Phillips, soprano; Shenyang, bass-baritone (Delos)

The idea for this song recital came about several years ago when the Metropolitan Museum of Art asked pianist Brian Zeger, a frequent accompanist of singers, to put together a program of German lieder inspired by the glory and pathos of Greek Antiquity. It was to coincide with an exhibit of artifacts from the site of ancient Pergamon, in present-day Turkey. Having previously worked with soprano Susanna Phillips and bass-baritone Shenyang, natives of Huntsville, Alabama and Tianjin, China when both were students at Juilliard, Zeger knew well their capabilities. The program seemed a natural.

The myths and legends of Ancient Greece brought out the best in the three late early 19th century German poets whose work we have here: Friedrich von Schiller, Wolfgang von Goethe, and Johann Mayrhofer. It was probably no coincidence that the sensational discoveries Heinrich Schliemann unearthed at the site of the fabled city of Troy occured during their lifetimes.

Having said that, I must add that the selections in this all-Schubert recital are as rarely heard as they are sublime. Only "*Ganymed*" (Goethe), which showcases Phillips' delightful soprano voice, is regularly included in lieder programs. Even among Schubert fans, most of these beautiful songs will have the added charm of being unfamiliar.

The program opens with "*Die Götter Griechenlands*," The Grecian Gods (Schiller), a nostalgic glance at a vanished age when the world was young. Phillips' voice is ideal for the gentle pathos in a song such as this. In "*Hektors Abschied*," Hector's Farewell (Schiller), she

like a beautiful memory of happier times that is inevitably overshadowed by darker harmonies as in the coming of nightfall.

The 31-minute *Finale: Sostenuto* is epic in scope and conception. It is the catharsis of the symphony, with a sweep that is filled with incidents, including a powerful march, that accumulate into three climaxes of almost unbearable intensity. Each of these climaxes is punctuated by a sensational stroke of the symphonic hammer, which Mahler conceived as blows of fate, the last of which topples a proud, majestic tree. Alone of all Mahler's symphonies, the Sixth ends, quietly and unremittingly, in the minor key.

Greek-Russian conductor Teodor Currentzis (b.1972) studied at the National Conservatory, Athens and in Russia at the St. Petersburg State Conservatory, and founded the Orchestra MusicAeterna in 2004. In the present performance, he does a splendid job marshaling the soaring melodies and the lush harmonies that stand in contrast to the symphony's stark contrapuntal texture. The recorded sound is superb, capturing the rich wealth of detail in a truly remarkable work.

sings a nobly impassioned duet with Shenyang to the text in which Hector's spouse Andromache urges him to withhold himself from battle with Achilles before the walls of Troy, an encounter that we know will bear fatal consequences.

Shenyang's rich, sonorous voice, with a range that goes right down to the basement, is put to good use in the lieder dealing with human suffering: *Prometheus* (Goethe) and the dark, gloomy atmosphere of the afterworld: *Gruppe aus Tartarus*, Scene from Tartarus (Schiller) and *Fahrt zum Hades*, Journey to Hades (Mayrhofer). Goethe's Prometheus is defiant toward Zeus, King of the Gods, to the end: "Here I sit, making men / In my own image, / A race that shall be like me, / That shall suffer, weep, / Know joy and delight, / And ignore you, / As I do."[1]

In *Elysium* (Schiller) Phillips has some of her finest moments, deploying her lyrical charm to depictions of lovers walking arm in arm through verdant meadows, in murmuring shade and golden dreams in which all the pain and struggle of life is a forgotten memory.

Now, here's an idea whose time has come. The Chineke! Foundation was established as recently as 2015 to provide career opportunities for young Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) classical musicians in the United Kingdom and Europe. It was the brainchild of Chi-Chi Nwanoku, who was a founding member of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and remained its principal bassist for 30 years. She used all her peruasive energy and the prestige of her OBE (Order of the British Empie) to urge the creation of the Chineke! Foundation and its flagship orchestra of the same name. "My aim," she says, "was to create a space where BME musicians can walk on stage and know that they belong, in every sense of the word. If even one BME child feels that their colour is getting in the way of their musical ambitions, then I hope to inspire them, give them a platform, and show them that music, of whatever kind, is for all people."

Rachmaninov: Piano Concerto No. 3 + Sibelius: Symphony No. 2 – Gerard Aimontche, Roderick Cox, The Chineke! Orchestra (Signum)

With Nwanoku's "pep talk" in mind, I was disposed, as always, to give a minority a fair audition in my review of these live recordings made on July 16, 2017 in the Southbank Centre's Royal Festival hall. But the reality exceeded my expectations. These were terrific performances of major works by Rachmaninov and Sibelius, characterized by always-vibrant sound from every chair of the orchestra, plus a knack for momentum-building that serves two otherwise different works very well indeed. Under the baton of Roderick Cox, who would seem to be an American, to judge by his education and his work as associate and guest conductor in many U.S. cities and at the Manhattan School of Music, the orchestra responds with alacrity to works in which one has to be ever-vigilant for cues indicating chages in tempo, dynamics, and phrasing, to say nothing of the big, bold gestures in both.

[1] We must remember that Zeus was a tyrant, not the loving God of Judeo-Christian tradition. It was Prometheus, not Zeus, who created the human race in defiance of Zeus.

Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30, is one of the most demanding works in the repertoire for its big, massive chords set against nimble quicksilver passagework and surprisingly delicate arpeggios. The left-hand passages and widely-spanned chords are particularly difficult for the performer. Fortunately, Cox and Chineke have an excellent pianist with whom to collaborate in Gerard Aimontche, an artist who has performed in venues from Carnegie Hall and the Royal Festival Hall to the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, and interestingly, possesses jazz as well as classical credentials, being a semi-finalist in the Monteux Jazz Competition. That versatility comes into play in the "Rach 3," which features a closer integration of soloist and orchestra than I can remember hearing in any other account of this work. Both work together to build up to its big, ferocious climaxes. In long stretches playing with the orchestra, as well as in a sensational first-movement cadenza of the deepest emotional compass, this work demands an enormous output of stamina and absolutely secure phrasing from the soloist. Aimontche is more than equal to the task.

Providing unity and continuity to the entire work is a soulful melody heard right from the outset of the opening movement. It is of surprisingly limited range, covering less than an octave and moving mostly in single-tone steps. We hear it in all three movements, where it variously takes on the character of a song, a liturgical chant, or a Cossack march, depending on the context. In this performance, the transition without a break from the dreamy Adagio to the fury of a finale in fast cut time that sweeps everything before it, is nothing short of sensational.

A break follows between CD1 and CD2, replicating the intermission break that must have occurred in the actual live performance. Even if it were possible to squeeze 84+ minutes of music onto a single disc, it would be artistically unwise to do so. Jean Sibelius' Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 43, is about as diametrically opposed to the Rachmaninov in the way it develops as two works could be. The Finnish composer can be as slow in his developments as the Russian is boldly impetuous. Great themes grow out of little kernels in Sibelius, and his thematic materials have a disconcerting tendency to move at different speeds. He has often been termed a "nature poet," but the slow curves his developments follow seem to be based on human emotions that are sometimes smoldering and at other times burst suddenly into flame. *They*, more than any process of key resolution, determine the colour, the orchestration, and the contours of the music in the Second Symphony.

That works out just fine in terms of the present performance, in which Roderick Cox and the orchestra play to one of their strong points, which is a noticeable love of tone color. That makes them a natural for Sibelius, who did not like blending instrumental timbres for the sake of lushness. The brass and woodwinds have a real "bite" to them, and Cox makes much of the sound of pizzicato cellos and basses in the beginning of the Andante where they have the stage to themselves for the first 2:45 before giving way to other sections of the orchestra. In the third movement, he gives us an unusually long and rather awkward pause of about 12 seconds between the Vivacissimo and Lento sections, without a plausible explanation. On the other hand, his timing is right on the money in the stunning attacca transition from this scherzo, actually beginning just before the end of the movement, to the slow, relentless buildup in the finale – a finish that draws rapturous applause from the live audience.

Oh, about the name *Chineke*? It was Nwanoku's coinage based on the word *Chi* in the language of her Nigerian forebears, referring to "the spirit of creation." It was inspired by a use of the word in the novel Things Fall Apart by Nobel laureate Chinua Achebe.