Phil's Classical Reviews

Dvořák, Khachaturian: Violin Concertos – Rachel Barton Pine, Teddy Abrams, Royal Scottish NO (Avie)

This pairing of violin concertos by Dvořák and Khachaturian was a natural for Rachel Barton Pine. The Chicago native who has risen steadily in stature to the point where she is regarded as one of the world's premier violinists has always been attracted to the use each composer makes of the rich ethnic music of his own culture. She recalls having first encountered both concertos at the age of fifteen (*!*), after she had played through all the usual standards we known and love, and has performed them regularly since she was in her teens.

Such loyal championing is important as both concertos still often seem curiously in need of friends after all this time. The Dvořák, which was premiered in Prague in 1883, initially acquired a bad rap because its dedicatee was dissatisfied with its allegedly excessive repetitions in the final movement and an orchestration that tended to overwhelm the soloist. Dvořák's publisher even tried to persuade him to change the ending of the opening movement, which flows seamlessly into the second, presumably because the procedure was considered radical (although Felix Mendelssohn had done the same in his own violin concerto many years earlier).

These objections pose no problem for Rachel, whose firm, slender tone

Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 1, Four Ballades – Lars Vogt, Royal Northern Sinfonia (Ondine)

Once again, Lars Vogt scores impressively. The Düren, Germany native celebrates his recent appointment as music director of the Royal Northern Sinfonia at The Sage, Gateshead by playing *and* conducting Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15, a really formidable undertaking for a work of such tremendous scope and complexity. Leading a work of this magnitude from the piano, observes Vogt, "requires … more independence from the orchestra and an incredibly deep sense of trust." To mention just one issue, who takes charge of the rubato? Often, it isn't the piano, and yet *someone* has to do it, because you can't perform the opening movement, to give just one example, without the discretely calculated departures from strict time that *rubato* implies.

The answer involves the kind of give and take that you commonly have in a chamber orchestra, and which, Vogt implies In the booklet interview, could be applied to a much larger orchestra as well. The concertmaster is important, of course, but other musicians can also take turns leading in a democratic situation in which "leading and following constantly occur very flexibly." Vogt even talks of the back desks in the orchestra taking the lead in giving the tempo a push and generating the vital energy that a work of the present magnitude

Bach: Italian Concerto, Chorale Preludes + Scarlatti: Sonatas Polina Osetinskaya, pianist (Melodiya)

Pianist Polina Osetinskaya, a native of Vilnius Lithuania, made her debut with orchestra at the age of eight performing J.S. Bach's Concerto in D Minor. She went on to study at the Lyceum school of the St. Petersburg Conservatory in Russia, and then at the Conservatory itself, where her teachers were Marina Wolf and Vera Gornostayeva. Through the years she has retained her love of Bach, a passion that is abundantly evident in the present album from Melodiya.

In this program, Bach shares time with Domenico Scarlatti, who is represented here by five of his keyboard sonatas: E Minor, K.98; B Minor, K.377; B Minor, K.87; D Minor, K.32; and D Minor, K.141. Because he wanted to place the emphasis in these pieces on the advanced technique and harmonic theory that went into them, Scarlatti labeled them *Essercizi* (exercises) and cautioned his public: "Do not expect, whether you are an amateur or a professional, a deep idea in these compositions; this is just an intricate musical joke, the purpose of which is to build up your confidence in playing the clavicembalo."

That may very well have been Scarlatti's primary intention, but there is also an evocative quality in many of these pieces that cannot be ignored, and Osetinskaya is quick to detect it and convey it to us. There

is capable of working its way easily though any orchestration. And her collaborator Teddy Abrams knows just when and how to unleash the full resources of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra for best effect. The opening Allegro movement is innocent of significant orchestral tutti, most of the exposition being handled by the soloist, though Dvořák later makes it up to the boys in the band in the Adagio with its rich chamber music-like dialogue between violinist and orchestra, evocative of the Czech countryside.

The robust symphonic sound of the finale with its folk-inspired music includes the evocation of bagpipes in the accompaniment, the use of a melancholy *dumka* (meditation) in the middle section, and a *furiant* with its typical pulse-quickening rhythms of two against three. Dvořák, in a nice inspiration, brings back the dumka in the coda in a major key with its basic character transformed triumphantly.

Aram Khachaturian, an Armenian from what is now present-day Georgia, infused his Violin Concerto with vibrant rhythms and sweeping melodic lines based on themes characterized by a dreamlike beauty reminiscent of his homeland. It was premiered in 1940 by David Oistrakh who praised it for its vividness, sincerity, and melodic beauty.

Even given its auspicious premiere, I don't seem to encounter it as often in the concert hall or on recordings as you might expect. That's probably because it's so fiendishly difficult to perform that only the greatest artists like Rachel Barton Pine want to risk their reputations on it. The violin is almost continuously employed for most of its 40-minute length, but Rachel herself admits that her favorite moment in the entire work is actually near the end of the second movement when the violin drops out and the entire orchestra swells up passionately and takes over the melody ("I stand there thinking that I have the best seat in the house!")

"As a diehard heavy metal fan," she confesses, "the powerfully rhythmic opening really fit my personality." requires. "When individual chords stand there in a static pose, nothing else can keep on moving."

All of which, of course, is much more meaningful to musicians themselves than it is to the home listener or the concertgoer. *We* have the leisure to sit back and enjoy the enchanting and profoundly moving music in a work like the Brahms First Piano Concerto without troubling our minds about the means by which it comes across as persuasively as Vogt and the RNS convey it to us here.

This particular concerto was an epoch-making achievement for the 26-year old Brahms. He originally laid it out as a symphony, then changed his mind and reworked it as a piano concerto. It still retained a very remarkable symphonic breadth, which is noticeable right from the downbeat on the stirring, scintillating chords by the orchestra at the very opening, like the outbreak of a violent thunderstorm. And then the pianist enters, taking up a quarter-note figure from the cellos directly into the left hand. The pianist actually presents the second theme of the exposition all by himself, in the course of about 20 measures, in a wonderful expression of incredible beauty and solace that functions almost like a cadenza.

Thereafter, the piano is integrated to an unusual degree into the structure of the orchestra, with little scope for the showy virtuosity the audiences of Brahms' day expected of a soloist. Something new had been added: a synthesis of symphony and concerto, longer (49:02 in the present account) and more profound than any of the symphonies his contemporaries were writing. It enabled Brahms to present on the broadest psychological canvas something like the depiction of a human life with all its emotions and conficts, ending in a mood of radiant triumph. Vogt puts this integration even more clearly: "The pianist is doing his job only when he is perceived as part of the whole story."

Vogt takes his exploration of the young Brahms, in all his passionate convictions, into his interpretations of the Four Ballades, Op. 10. Moving from the D Minor Concerto to these character pieces results, naturally, in is a a genuine sadness that cannot be denied in K.32, for instance, while K.141 seems to celebrate the vitality of everyday life in Spain in its vibrant rhythms and key-rattling repeated notes. For many listeners they will conjure up the clicking of castanets, strumming of guitars, pulse-quickening dance rhythms, and the sound of hand-held drums.

The Bach selections consist largely of transcriptions of organ chorale preludes and other instrumental works by distinguished pianists such as Wilhelm Kempff, Alexander Siloti, Andre Tharaud, and Egon Petri. Osetinskaya does some of her best work in chorale preludes such as the Kempff transcriptions of the serenely majestic *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* (Come now, Saviour of the Nations), BWV 659, and the chorale *Jesus bleibet meine Freude* (Jesus, Joy of Man's Desiring) from Cantata 147. *Ich ruf' zu Dir, Herr Jesus Christ* (I cry unto Thee, Lord Jesus Christ), also transcribed by Kempff, finds Bach masterfully using a poignant melody to depict the spiritual state of the sinner who longs for salvation: at first hesitant, and then anxious and pleading.

Osetinskaya plays up the simple directness and contrapuntal beauty in the well-loved chorale *Wachet auf, Ruft Uns die Stimme* (Awake, the voices call us), again in a Kempff transcription. The Tharaud transcription of the Sicilienne from the Organ Concerto in D minor, BWV 596 (which was itself Bach's own transcription of a concerto for 2 violins and cello from Antonio Vivaldi's Opus 3), uses a graceful processional-like pace to make its points. I haven't even mentioned the charmer of them all: Egon Petri's transcription of *Schafe können sicher weiden* (Sheep may safely graze) from the "Hunt" Cantata,

The high point of the program is Bach's Italian Concerto in F Major, BWV 971. In three movements, Bach creates a world of peace, serenity and unhurried conversation. Says Osetinskaya: "This is my protest against the present time, in which you have no time for anything at all." Though written for keyboard

She also has a yen for Oistrakh's cadenza, which she plays here, the ending of which she considers "a great headbanging moment." The languorous, yearning melody in the middle section of the slow movement appears in a variety of registers and dynamics. Rachel follows Oistrakh's suggestion to mute the solo violin, and the effect is really sensational. The finale is an abandoned dance in the "Oriental" style that earlier generations of Russian composers had employed more or less for added color, but which is of the essence in *this* work.

a reduction in form but not, by any means, in emotive power. "They're genuine dramas in a minature format," observes Vogt, "but at the same time are actually kept quite simple." The directness of expression in all four of these pieces is one of their greatest strengths.

A ballade is supposed to have a story connected with it, and so do these four specimens of the genre, though the impressions and moods we get from them are often ambivalent.

Continued Below

solo, this is a true concerto breaking down clearly into solo and *ripieno* roles. Osetinskaya executes it with evenness, economy, and really wonderful warmth of feeling. Two outer movements with Vivaldi-like ritornelli flank an Andante in the style of a deeply moving arioso. Florid embellishments and a mood of gentle pathos make a lasting impression on the listener in this performance.

One final quote from the present artist: "I lulled my kids to sleep to Bach's cantatas for many years." As the father of a restless child myself, I can vouch for the observation!

No. 1, which takes its inspiration from the Scottish ballad "Edward" with its lurid tale of patricide and remorse, is given an interpretation by Vogt that plays up its dark foreboding and madness: "I always feel like I'm just covered with blood." No. 2 is a (comparatively) light-heated caprice with a somewhat melancholy lullaby in its center.

Many observers have seen No. 3 as a Mendelssohnian scherzo with elves tripping through the gloaming, but Vogt sees it rather in terms of darker, spookier evocations. (I agree with him!) No. 4, longest and dynamically softest of the set, is seen by the artist as a meditation: "is this perhaps death, and one has not properly noticed it at all?" Vogt's instinct is to view the Ballades more or less as a cycle, rather than individually, and to play them in 1-4 order for the sake of preserving the impression. Again, I agree with him.

In a live recording made in Munich this past February, Bernard Haitink leads the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (*Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks*) in a really distinguished performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125, known as the "Choral." Haitink retired from concert life this past September after an amazing 65-year career. In retrospect, that is not too long a time to really get to know and understand as many-faceted a work as the Beethoven Ninth.

Beethoven: Symphony No. 9
Bernard Haitink, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra
(BR-Klassik)

Actualy, the Ninth represented a new step forward in the evolution of the symphony, which had grown out of two musical genres that were basically entertainment vehicles, the orchestral serenade and the operatic overture. In the beginning, not much was expected of it in terms of great music that would carry a message. Older concertgoers in Beethoven's day must have remembered quite a few occasions when the musicians would receive a new score still wet from the copyist's ink, with the result that the first performance was in fact a run-through (and often must have sounded like it). The mature symphonies of Haydn and Mozart changed all that in that a new symphony might henceforth be considered a work of some musical and intellectual stature that required the effort and dedication of conductor and orchestra working together in rehearsal to understand all its features and the best way to present it.

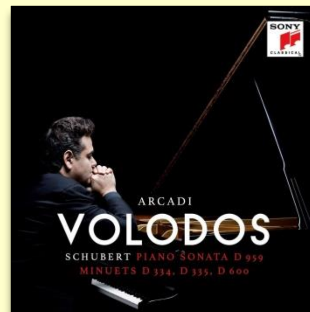
Due to time constraints in my personal life, I find myself returning to the Ninth Symphony for my listening pleasure only at long intervals. When I do, I am surprised to recall every musical turn and phrase, so well does Beethoven make his points and characterize his themes. I also have the happy experience of discerning the differences in various conductors' interpretations, their timing and the relative emphasis they give to the various phrases and gestures. Beethoven encourages *that*, too. Within a solid conception, he provides a certain amount of latitude to the interpreter, as all great works of music must have.

At a total duration of 71:58, this Beethoven Ninth must be the longest I have encountered on record. That is probably due to Haitink's including a few often-omitted exposition repeats, rather than any lethargy in his timing, which is exceptionally firm and steady, and his spot-on cueing in conducting this score. The duration may be long, but the symphony doesn't *seem* long, given Haitink's superb pacing and the overall vision he demonstates in a solid interpretation. Following the majestic opening movement, in which fragments of theme and harmony gradually evolve and coalesce with stunning impact into waves of increasing intensity, and the Scherzo, marked *Molto vivace*, its relentless forward momentum spurred on ceaselessly by urgent commentary from the brass, we come to the slow movement, *Adagio molto e cantabile*. The key word here is *cantabile* (songlike) a feature which must apply as consistently and pervasively as Haitink has it here in order to be effective as a transition to the finale. This Adagio is shorter, at 13:17, than most other interpretations I have heard – for example, Rafael Kubelik (16:29), Andre Cluytens (17:23), and Bruno Walter (17:28) – but Haitink's choice of timing permits a natural transition to the second part of the movement, marked *Andante moderato* (at a moderate walking pace).

It is a trifle odd to have the positions of slow movement and scherzo reversed, as Beethoven does here, but we sense his rationale for it in the stunning way the finale, *Presto – Allegro assai vivace*, follows the Adagio with scarcely a break. It is an altogether remarkable movement, not the least for the fact that Beethoven intruded the human voice, in the form of SATB soloists and a chorus, into the realm of absolute music. This was made possible because the composer had long desired to set Friedrich Schiller's *Ode: An die Freude* (Ode to joy) to music and its monumental concept of all mankind embracing joy as the key to universal happiness and brotherhood seemed a "natural" for this particular spot in the Ninth Symphony. Haitink's insightful direction certainly makes it appear so, and he is aided in this effort by an excellent mixed chorus and by the quartet of vocalists, Sally Matthews (S), Gerhild Romberger (A), Mark Padmore (T), and Gerald Finley (B) who carry so much of the weight in this movement. The impassioned outcry of the bass soloist at the very opening of the Ode to Joy, "*O Freunde, nicht diese töne*" (O friends, no more of these sounds!) never fails to give me goose bumps. And I will say this of Haitink's interpretation: it makes the case for a choral ending for this particular symphony more plausibly than I have ever heard it stated.

Vivaldi: The Four Seasons – Luka Šulić, cello; archi dell' Accademia di Santa Cecilia (Sony)

Luka Šulić, with the enthusiastic assistance of friends from the archi dell'accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome, give spirited performances of Antonio Vivaldi's enduring master work, The Four Seasons. This is the first recording I have encountered with the violin solo part arranged for cello, which is Šulić's instrument. In some ways, it is a natural extension in the repertoire of an instrument that



Schubert: Sonata in A, D959; Three Minuets – Arcadi Volodos, piano (Sony)

A new release by Russian pianist Arcadi Volodos is a sufficiently newsworthy event in itself to attract our attention, and that goes double when the subject is Franz Schubert. Here he makes a persuasive case for the greatness of the Sonata in A Major, D959, centerpiece in the arch of three great sonatas the composer penned in the last year of his life.

"Caruso 1873" – Roberto Alagna, tenor; Yvan Cassar, pianist & conductor, Orchestre National d'Ile de France (Sony)

Once again, we are treated to the exceptionally smooth and richly nuanced voice of tenor Roberto Alagna. This time, it's with a difference, for the program is an unabashed tribute to his artistic forebear, the trailblazing, legendary figure of Enrico Caruso (1873-1921). In a painstaking labor of love and homage to his predecessor, Alagna

Vivaldi himself did much to liberate from its role as a member of the *basso continuo* and make it a star in its own right.

The singing tone of the cello fits in nicely with the eloquent cantabile passages one finds throughout the Seasons. And its slow, deep tone is perfect for the Largo movements in "Spring," where the music describes a drowsing shepherd (who is soon roused by the barking of his faithful dog) and "Winter," depicting the weary traveller's contentment by a warm, cosy fireside while the rain pours steadily outside and water drips from icicles in the eaves.

As you've probably inferred, unless you've lived all your life up to now in some dismal cave where the ravishing sounds of this work have never been heard, Vivaldi does a lot of picture-painting in the Seasons. It was, in fact, his genius to extend descriptive music from the realm of the short character piece to a major canvas with a scenic panorama of the passing seasons and the human activities associated with each of them. Lest there be any doubt, he even appended four explanatory sonnets to serve as guides to stimulate the imaginations of both listener and performing artist.

Šulić does a superlative job in realizing the solo part in his own arrangement for cello, which people often incorrectly assume to be a "slower" instrument than the violin. Indeed it is, normally, as in the almost disspirited call of the cuckoo from the depths of the woods in the midst of the torpor of a summer's day or the snoring of drunken peasants sleeping off the inebriation following a festive harvest home in "Autumn." But it can also move very quickly when it negotiates the slithering passages describing the howling of the North winds in "Winter," and where the slurred staccato quarter-notes in the finale help us to almost *feel* the discomfort of a wayfarer trying to walk without falling on slippery ice.

These performances demand, and receive from the members of the archi dell'accademia, more than is

Critics will forever differ on just how much of a personal testament the last three sonatas, D958, D959 and D960 were for the short-lived Schubert (1797-1828). For what it's worth, the composer completed all three in September 1828 and performed them on a single evening later that month. Since they all run up to 40 minutes or more in actual performance, that would require an impressive output of stamina for an invalid! My take on the matter is that Schubert had been in declining health for some time, and the death the previous year of his revered idol Beethoven made him even more aware of his own mortality. I am convinced that his response to that awareness was to live every day to the fullest and fill his remaining time with as much creative energy as possible.

Whatever Volodos' personal take on the "end of an era" controversy, his own performance seems to bear out the assessment that D959 in A Major was indeed a sort of testament. It is there in the opening movement, based on choice chords followed by arpeggios while the performer is still tasked with maintaining a moderate tempo. Discipline versus unfettered freedom.

The next movement, *Andantino*, is like a slow, dispirited barcarolle, in the midst of which a furious and totally unexpected outburst erupts. Is it a cry of anguish, existential despair, or possibly even madness? Whatever it is, we are unprepared for it, and it completely interrupts the sense of harmonious time that the opening movement was at some pains to create.

The innocent and playful Scherzo is much better-behaved, with only a brief digression into a descending minor scale in the contrasted Trio before it resumes its graceful, waltz-like character. The finale is in the form of an expansive rondo. It requires the pianist to be ever alert for subtle changes in mood, texture, and rhythm. Volodos takes them into account in a very admirably paced performance in which he even intrudes some pregnant pauses to keep the tension pumped up before

goes so far as to sublimate his own style and artistic personality in favor of that of "The Great Caruso" (to quote the title of the famous 1951 film starring Mario Lanza).

That labor was aided immensely by Alagna's own memories of listening together with his teacher Rafael Ruiz, a huge Caruso fan, to many of the old records his predecessor had made before his rather premature demse at age 47. Fortunately for us, Caruso was one of the earliest opera stars to make recordings, and he threw himself into the new medium with the boundless enthusiasm that was one of his main character traits. All in all, Caruso left some 300 recordings to posterity, and that's not including numerous wax cyclinder takes that he melted immediately after auditioning because they failed to meet his exacting standards.

I can't exaggerate how zealously Alagna pursues the task of presenting Caruso to us in all his characteristic traits and peculiarities. "If a particular phrase or passage was too high for him," observes Alagna, "he had no qualms about transposing it, even in mid-duet." That Caruso did not push his voice beyond its limits is true enough, and he often took a breath between words to help him hit a high note. He was basically the inheritor of the *bel canto* style laboring in an era given over to *verismo*, but he didn't trouble his head too much about the distinctions, which he reconciled agreeably. "Facility and beauty of sound came before power and vocal acrobatics," says Alagna.

It is one thing to say that Caruso's takes on some of his recordings are faster than written. And it's easily attributable to the limitations of all the recording media available to him in his day: wax, bakelite, and early 78's. Everyone did that, of necessity. The trick was in how to shorten an aria without sacrificing its essential character, and Caruso showed his mastery of this time and again. In reproducing Caruso's style, Alagna explores every phrase, every inflection, every idiosyncratic way he had of landing on a note or releasing it. Even more significant are what

normally required of the supporting cast in realizing a basso continuo. They are very active participants in creating so many of Vivaldi's special descriptive effects, from the round dance of nymphs and shepherds with the simulated accompaniment of bagpipes in "Spring" to the plague of flies and gnats in the Adagio and the gathering thunderstorm in the Presto of "Summer" and the rousing sounds of a hunt on horseback in the Allegro finale of "Autumn."

The recordings were made in a rather bright accoustic environment at Forum Music Village, Rome, Italy For my own listening experience, I found it advisable to cut down on my normal volume level in order to enjoy the rich wealth of detail in all these performances.

he proceeds to the final pages. At 41:44, this traversal of D959 is a wee bit on the long side, but the length seems entirely justified, and there are no longeurs.

Filling out the program are two Minuets, in A Major, D334, and E Major, D335, plus a longer and more involved Minuet in C-sharp Minor, D600 with Trio in E Major, D610. The first two items might have been take-outs from a larger composition or else standalone pieces that may have been intended for dancing.

The much longer Minuet and Trio was more obviously intended for inclusion in a symphony or some other major work. In Volodos' interpretation, at least, it reveals a symphonic scope and a multiplicity of incidents that tend to that conclusion.

Caruso did under the heading of what Alagna calls "mistakes that aren't mistakes." In *Chiudo gli occhi* from Jules Massenet's Manon, for instance, he invents ornaments, breaths, and phrasings, while in the duet *Qual volutta trascorrere* (What wondrous pleasure) from Verdi's I Lombardi, he actually seques into the soprano line at one point. (Alagna hints that Caruso tasted a breath of freedom, in moments such as these, that we are denied today.)

The 20 tracks on the program include favorites such as the well-loved Neapolitan song *Santa Lucia,* Ruggiero Leoncavallo's *Mattinata* (The Dawn), Tchaikovsky's much-neglected, and deeply evocative, *Sérénade de Don Juan* (sung in French), and Francesco Cilea's duet *No, piu nobile* (No, you are nobler than a queen) from Adriana Lecouvreur, to cite just a few of the more brilliant highlights. It also incldes quite a few rarities, ending with *Tu ca nun chiagne* (You who do not weep) by Ernesto de Curtis, recorded as a bonus track in which Alagna and the sound engineers endeavor to create a facsimile of how Caruso's vocal artistry must have actually come across in spite of the "vintage" sound of his era.

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