

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

July, 2013

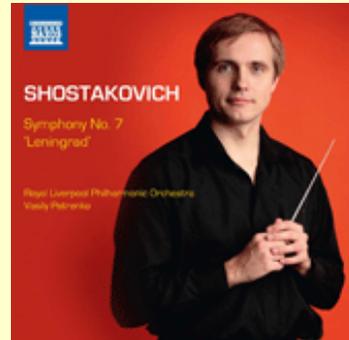


Brahms: Late Piano Works, Opp. 116-119  
Gwendolyn Mok, piano  
MSR Classics

New York City native Gwendolyn Mok began her formal studies at the Juilliard School, did her graduate work at Yale University and SUNY Stony Brook, and is now coordinator of Keyboard Studies at San Jose State University in California. But some of her most telling experience was as the very last student accepted by the Lithuanian-born French pianist Vlado Perlemuter in 1994. Among the other dictums of that great pianist and teacher were his insistence on beautiful tone color and a singing legato, on pedaling with the ear rather than mechanically by foot, building a crescendo without hurrying and a diminuendo without slowing down, and learning a piece of music from the bass upwards.

Doubtless, those lessons which Mok was quick to absorb helped to make her the outstanding Ravel interpreter that she has been. But when the subject came to Brahms, and specifically the twenty *Klavierstücke* (piano pieces), Opp. 116-119 that illuminated his last years with a blaze of inspiration, she found the challenge a lot like learning the piano all over again: As opposed to Ravel's studied, precise phrasing, "You almost need bear paws!" Once again, buoyed by her enthusiasm for a new-found love ("Listen to this," she tells her students when lecturing on Brahms. "This is going to knock your socks off"), Mok proved a quick learner.

Helping her in the effort are two period instruments in the SJSU collection that Brahms himself would have found very congenial for their sound: an 1860 Érard from France and an 1871 Streicher from Vienna. The specially priced 2-CD release offered by MSR Classics was the result of splitting the four sets of piano pieces between CDs according to how well they sounded on each instrument, with Opp. 116 and 118 on the Érard and Opp. 117 and 119 on the Streicher. Both are noted for their beauty of tone and the fact that no fuzziness in definition exists when playing octaves due to the fact that



Shostakovich: Symphony No. 7, "Leningrad"  
Vasily Petrenko, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic  
Naxos

Vasily Petrenko, Russian-born chief conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, scores his best triumph yet in an ongoing Shostakovich cycle with the RLPO. Considering that the work at hand is Symphony No. 7, Op. 60, the famed "Leningrad," that is saying both quite a lot and not enough about the accomplishment.

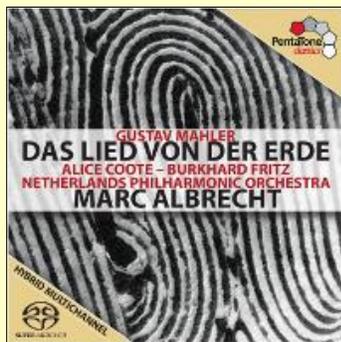
This is a big symphony, not just in playing time (79:15 in Petrenko's unhurried performance) but also in terms of the size of the orchestra and the number of incidents for which points must be made in the score. The forces are large, if not gargantuan: 3 flutes (doubling piccolo and alto flute), cor anglais, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 6 trumpets, 6 trombones, tuba, timpani, up to 6 percussion (including 3 side drums that really make their presence felt in the outer movements), 2 harps, a piano, and strings. At the same time, this is the most "Mahlerian" of Shostakovich's symphonies in terms of the scoring and the economy with which the composer deploys it. In fact, only in the opening movement do we get a feeling of real excess.

That impression is deliberate, for it is in this movement that Shostakovich gives us his personal feelings about war. There is nothing glorious about it: war, embodied by the Nazi invasion of Russia and the siege of Leningrad, is presented as blind, impersonal, and utterly destructive, a juggernaut bent on destroying every living thing in its path. Driving rhythms and ostinatos, in the context of a movement in rigid sonata-allegro form, give the feeling of something inexorable. That continues in the second movement where a mood of sorrow and remembrance, first introduced by a plaintive melody in the oboe, is interrupted in mid-movement by more martial music. As in a real war, we scarcely have time to bury and lament our dead before fresh onslaughts appear.

In the third movement, Petrenko and the RLPO do some of their best work in the eloquent cantilena and chorale

the strings of both are parallel-strung rather than cross-strung, as is the case in a modern piano. As a broad generalization, the Érard lends itself to coaxing a warm, melodic tone of almost symphonic breadth that can support the melody optimally, and the Streicher to a golden, burnished sound in all available timbres and textures which permits the artist a more intimate relation with the music.

To demonstrate her points, Mok follows her informative discussion with producer David v. R. Bowles on Disc2 with demonstrations of modern versus period instruments: the quietly intense, inwardly reflective Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 116, No. 2 on the Érard and the gracefully light and extroverted Intermezzo in C major, Op. 118, No. 3 on the Streicher. Listen, and see what you think. Prepare to be enchanted! As Clara Schumann said wonderingly of Brahms' piano pieces, "He combines passion and tenderness in the smallest of spaces."



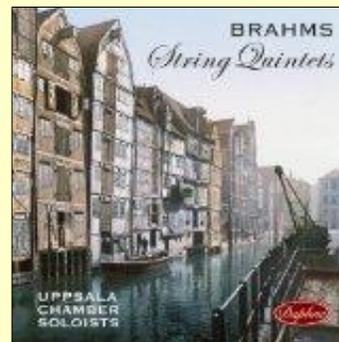
Mahler: Das Lied von der Erde  
Alice Coote, mezzo; Burkhard Fritz, tenor  
Marc Albrecht, Netherlands Philharmonic  
PentaTone

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) wrote *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth) near the end of his life, and he considered it his most personal work. Certainly the German poetic texts by Hans Bethge based on translations of Chinese poetry of the Tang Dynasty afforded plenty of opportunity for Mahler to reflect on the illusory nature and impermanence of love and beauty, loneliness and alienation, and the sad thoughts attending on one's final leave-taking from it all.

For the record Li T'ai Po, original author of four of the six lyric poems that are set here, died in his prime of life, as did Mahler. He was the most prominent "romantic" of all Chinese poets and frequently celebrated the love of beauty (feminine and otherwise) and the pure joy of drunkenness in his poetry. The sentiment we hear repeated at the ends of the verses in the first song setting, *Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde* (Drinking Song of the Earth's Sorrow) "*Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod*" (Dark is life, dark is death) is in keeping with the spirit of both the Tang poet and the Late Romantic composer.

that provide a much-needed point of reflection and renewal before we plunge into the finale. That final movement begins slowly and quietly on the deep bass note that ended its predecessor. But it soon picks up pace and builds to a truly enormous climax, in which music of alarm and strife alternates with an intensely wrought sarabande-like progression as circling string figures close in on the final, ferocious climax. The symphony ends in C major, ironically the key of sunlight to the 18<sup>th</sup> century theorists, but the mood is pretty bleak for all that. Is it triumph, or simply dogged determination?

With its multiplicity of incidents and its extremely wide dynamic range from barely audible to ear-splitting, the Seventh Symphony most have posed a formidable challenge for producer and editor Andrew Walton and engineer Mike Clements, two of the most seasoned pros in the U.K. The same challenges will make it a delight for equipment buffs who will be in audiophile heaven for hours, tweaking and positioning their components.



Quintets for Strings, Opp. 88, 111  
Uppsala Chamber Soloists  
Daphne Records

The old Swedish city of Uppsala is the seat of the Archbishop of Sweden and home to the oldest university in Scandinavia. It also boasts the Uppsala Chamber Orchestra, from which spring the Uppsala Chamber Soloists, heard on the present CD. From the evidence of my ears, they are an ensemble who approach their work with precision, mutual sympathy, and a real feeling of joy.

In these recordings of Brahms' two string quintets, the Soloists consist of Nils-Erik Sparf and Klara Hellgren, violins; Susanne Magnusson and Bernt Lysell, violas; and Erik Wahlgren, cello. Sparf and Lysell alternate in playing first violin and second viola between these two works. My guess is that they must have arm-wrestled for the viola part. That's how harmonically rich the two quintets are and how intriguing the inner voices! For instance, in the opening movement of Op. 88 the first viola introduces the major-third relationship - main theme in F, secondary theme in A - that will dominate all three movements. And the violas really command attention in the introduction to the Adagio of Op. 111.

Of course, the riches in both these works are so broadly distributed among all the parts that everyone gets to

The orchestra Mahler required for his song symphony was huge, consisting of piccolo, 3 flutes (1 doubling second piccolo), 3 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 3 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons (1 doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, bass tuba, timpani, bass drum, side drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, tamtam, glockenspiel, celesta, 2 harps, mandolin, and strings. That's a lot more personnel than any modern orchestra can afford to have at its disposal, even allowing for add-ons.

Still, the moments in the opening movement when all the orchestra is playing at once create problems for tenor soloist Burkhard Fritz, forcing him to trespass on a heldentenor range to overcome the sheer volume of sound. It's been suggested that Mahler was attempting to replicate the sound of an actual Chinese vocalist. If so, it was a mistake, as the shrill quality of the Chinese male voice can be distinctly unpleasant to western ears. Fritz does much better in the more economically scored moments such as we find in *Von der Jugend* (Of Beauty) in which the poet stops to reflect on the illusion of the same in the image of a moon bridge and a jade green pleasure pavilion reflected upside-down in a lake.

On the whole, I am more impressed with mezzo-soprano Alice Coote, for her sensitive interpretation of Mahler's sound=sense equations in such deeply nostalgic and moving songs as *Der Einsame im Herbst* (The Lonely One in Autumn): "The Autumn in my heart has lasted too long: Sun of Love, will you never shine again, to gently dry my bitter tears?" In the final song *Der Abschied* (The Farewell), the beauty of her voice is heard to good effect, reaching far beyond the barlines to a wonderfully transparent accompaniment by quiet-voiced instruments such as mandolin, harp, and English horn: "I am going away, I shall wander in the mountains, seeking peace for my lonely heart... My heart is still and awaits its moment."

This moment, I feel, was a conscious leave-taking by Gustav Mahler, who knew that he was in declining health and was destined never to reach old age. The poignant mood is beautifully captured here in this interpretation by Coote, conductor Marc Albrecht and the members of the Netherlands Philharmonic. It is underscored by the closing lines that were added by Mahler himself: "Everywhere the good earth blossoms in Spring, and becomes green once again! Everywhere and forever, distant spaces shine their blue light! Forever... Forever..."

Kudos are also due the Dutch engineers who have recorded this wide-ranging work in a true soundstage perspective, with dynamics that range from the splashing evocation of the spirited horses of the gallant youths in *Von der Schönheit* (Of Beauty) to the soft closing of the final verse with its repeated mantra "*Ewig... ewig*" (Forever.. Forever), its final chord, as Benjamin Britten once put it, "imprinted on the atmosphere."

enjoy his or her moment in the Scandinavian sunlight – even the first violin. These are among the most cheerful and affirmative of Brahms' later works. The middle movement of Op. 88, which has characteristics of both slow movement and scherzo, keeps the Soloists on their toes with its changes of tempo and character as it presents its themes in ABACA form. The energetic finale combines sonata and fugal form in the manner of Beethoven's Third Razoumovsky Quartet, to which it pays eloquent homage.

The Adagio movement of Op. 111 is, if anything, even more charming than the cantabile section of the middle movement of its predecessor. And the finale, taken with considerable zest and evident delight by the Soloists, ends with a pastiche of Hungarian gypsy music, marked *Animato*. I wonder why these two attractive works are not performed more often?



Grieg: Violin Sonatas 1-3,  
arranged for violin and chamber orchestra  
Henning, Kraggerud, violin  
Tromsø Chamber Orchestra  
Naxos

One finds beauty in unlooked-for places. In this instance, it is Tromsø, Norway, which is actually situated at 69°40' or more than 3 degrees above the Arctic Circle. It turns out to be a progressive little city of 69,000 on the Norwegian coast, its high latitude being offset by the warming influence of the Gulf Stream. On the evidence of their committed playing under violinist Henning Kraggerud, the Tromsø Chamber Orchestra must exert a warming influence, too, lightening up many an evening in the city's fine modern *KulturHuset* while distracting the local citizens from the joy of winter sports and the beauty of the Northern lights.

They show themselves to good advantage in this premier recording of Three Concertos for Violin and Chamber Orchestra, imaginatively arranged from Edvard Grieg's Sonatas for Violin and Piano, Opp. 8, 13, and 45. It was long a dream of Kraggerud, an educator as well as performing artist, to arrange these works as concertos for the younger generation of Norwegian violinists to take with them as a calling card when they went out into the world. He was obliged to put the project on hold for a few years until he was appointed the orchestra's artistic director in September, 2012 and was delighted to find



Korean Art Songs  
 Kyoung Cho, soprano  
 Centaur Records

Soprano Kyoung Cho, a native Korean who has graced many a concert hall and opera house in the western world, sings a program of songs that must be close to her heart, if we are to judge from her total commitment to them. Assisted on piano by Karen Kyung-Eun Na, a first-rate collaborative artist, Cho's beautifully supported voice floats effortless and seamlessly up to her highest register, a realm of utter sublimity.

These art songs, first volume in a planned vocal series, are the product of a special time in Korean history. After five centuries under a dynasty that had sealed the country off from the outside world, Koreans awoke in 1910 to discover the need to preserve their musical folk heritage before it disappeared forever. Some of the songs heard here are basically folk songs transcribed as such, while others are "Korean western" songs by composers employing western musical tools to an idiom steeped in their own culture.

Personally, I don't understand a word of Korean language. That did not prove much of a hindrance to me, and it probably won't for you either, since the emotion in these songs crosses cultural barriers. As in the art and folk songs of the western world, the lyrics mostly deal with themes of longing for love ("New Arriving," "Perhaps my Beloved is Coming," "Because of You") or nostalgia for a remembered place ("Song of Hometown"). "Bird To-Ryung" seems to evoke a bird in flight, with an imitation of birdsong as well. As in western poetry, images of the natural world can be used as correlatives for the specific emotion of a poem; thus, "Leaves of Heart Bonding Grass" "Azalea," and "Narcissus Jonquilla," to judge from the strong emotions in these songs, would seem to have more than just a botanical interest. The hauntingly beautiful "Barley Field" (*Boribat*), introduced to western listeners by Sumi Jo almost 20 years ago, makes a welcome reappearance here.

Continued in the next column =====>

that they had an outstanding arranger among their members, Bernt Simen Lund. The collaboration between Kraggerud and Lund went so quickly that the orchestra was able to premier the three "new" concertos in November, 2012 and record them on 7-11 January, 2013. They judiciously added woodwind parts to the string orchestra to give the concerto versions added appeal and character (as if such were needed!) and filled out the orchestration to account for the sustaining effect of the piano pedals in the original. The results seem natural and idiomatic, as well as pleasing to the ear.

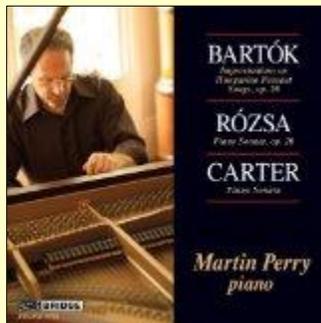
In the process, the character of the original sonatas, which are among Grieg's finest and best-loved larger works, has been preserved. The two earliest works are both very nationalistic, owing in large part to the inclusion of folk-like material. The *Allegretto quasi andantino* of Op. 8 has a melody of utterly natural charm and sweetness, as well as the potential for development, while Grieg experiments with glowing harmonies in the finale. Beauty allied with mystery, plus a darker, more dramatic mood that intrudes upon music of guileless simplicity and charm in the slow movement, *Allegretto tranquillo*, characterize Op. 13

But it is Op. 45 that will probably have the most extensive life in the concert hall as a violin concerto. Light and shadow, nostalgia and yearning, meditation and stirring activity in the original, all find their equivalent in this excellent arrangement. It might persuade us it had been conceived as a concerto if we didn't know better. Grieg makes much of two Norwegian themes, a well-supported vocal melody and a dance both gracious and pulse quickening. They appear in different harmonic guises and rhythms in all three movements, imparting an unusual sense of unity to this work. The finale, *Allegro animato*, is here given a rousing performance.

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Continued from the previous column:

"Longing for Mount Keum Kang" refers to one of the world's most beautiful mountains, famed for its rugged landscape and the changing colors of the seasons. The title has a special significance for South Koreans. Because of the fortunes of war and politics, the site ended up in North Korea. Until quite recently, tourists from South Korea had been encouraged to visit Keum Kang, and more than a million have availed themselves of the opportunity. If there is to be ongoing productive communication between the two Koreas, perhaps vocal artists such as Kyoung Cho will be instrumental in thawing the ice.

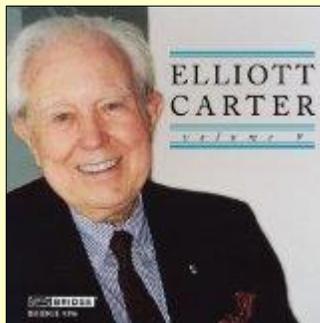


Bartók, Rózsa, Carter: Music for Piano  
Martin Perry, piano  
Bridge Records

California native Martin Perry is a frequent hiker on “The Road Less Travelled” when it comes to modern music for the piano. And when the subject is Béla Bartók, Miklós Rózsa, and Elliott Carter, composers who left the musical world more complex than they found it, he needs to apply all of his keyboard dexterity and his mastery of such matters as complex rhythms, polyrhythms, and exquisite dynamic shadings.

Bartók’s *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs, Op. 20*, is actually the simplest work on the program, granted the composer’s treatments of his folk material are far from simple, straightforward renditions. He takes music based on Dorian and Mixolydian modes and makes it more interesting by constantly altering the perspective through changes in harmony, ostinato rhythms, and aggressive syncopations – all of which require an alertness by the executant that Perry provides.

Miklós Rózsa, a major name in the world of cinema for the number of Oscar nominations he garnered in the course of scoring some 100 Hollywood films ranging from film noir to adventure saga and toga epic, drew, like Bartók, on his Hungarian folk ethos. He has belatedly gained a reputation for his “serious” works, as well. His *Piano Sonata, Op. 20* makes us wonder what we’ve been missing all our lives, especially given a demon interpreter like Perry. The impressionistic slow movement,

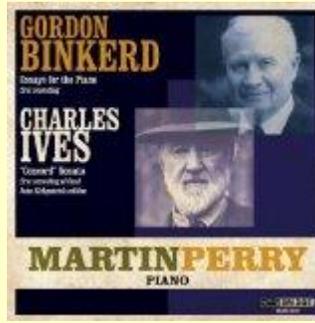


Elliott Carter Edition, Vol. 9  
Rosalind Rees, David Starobin,  
Tony Arnold, Charles Rosen and  
Steven Beck Bridge Records

This is the ninth volume in Bridge Records’ tribute to the late Elliott Carter. It certainly covers his wide range as a composer, his outrageous wit, and his almost manic obsession with pushing the envelope on behalf of new colors, new textures, and new ways of making his music more expressive.

The major work is Carter’s *Piano Concerto* in a 2001 recording with pianist Charles Rosen supported (or, considering the nature of this extraordinary work, perhaps we should say “opposed”?) by the Basel Sinfonietta under Joel Smirnoff. It takes an artist of Rosen’s stature and temerity to tackle a work in which the piano’s crystalline clarity and sonata-style introspection is pitted against a darker, heavier, and sometimes malevolent sounding orchestra. In what often seems like a metaphor for the dilemma of the modern artist in a world that can be both oblivious and distracting, the piano and orchestra go their separate ways for long stretches, engaging in up to eight rhythmic and textural layers, each subject to its own idiosyncrasies of acceleration and ritard.

As Carter put it humorously, “The piano is born, then the orchestra teaches it what to say. The piano learns. Then it learns the orchestra is wrong. They fight, and the piano wins – not triumphantly but with a few sad, weak notes – sort of Charlie Chaplin humorous.” That is not *quite* what happens, and it leaves out the important role of a concertino of



Gordon Binkerd: Three Essays  
Charles Ives: “Concord “ Sonata  
Martin Perry, piano  
Bridge Records

Pianist Martin Perry, still treading “The Road Less Travelled,” makes his most significant journey to date with the “Concord” Sonata (Piano Sonata No. 2) by Charles Ives (1874-1954). It was long considered unplayable by critics and scholars, some of whom even declared it to be either intended to be orchestrated or else meant for study as “pure” music without actually being played (You know, the way Bach’s *Art of Fugue* was supposed to be). Well, Martin Perry “proves the rogues they’d lied” in his present recording, showing us that the “Concord” can indeed be realized in terms of the piano, and very persuasively, too.

Significantly, this is the premiere recording of John Kirkpatrick’s final edition of Ives’ masterwork, to which he devoted a lifetime of study. To cite booklet annotator Drew Massey, “Ives’s thick dissonances have been replaced at points with pure octave and fifths, and the meter of the work has been meticulously notated by Kirkpatrick.” In the process, and without actually re-writing a single note of the music, he removed a great deal of the uneasy modernist edginess from Ives’ work and made it more amenable to the keyboard and more accessible to the listener.

As we know, Ives was inspired by the spirit of Transcendentalism in New England, 1840-1860, and his four movements are titled *Emerson, Hawthorne, The Alcotts, and Thoreau*. Without actually attempting a physical deceptions of his subjects,

marked Andante *con calore* (with warmth), is my favorite. Its mood is basically nocturnal, giving way to more impassioned rhetoric before subsiding at last into nostalgic beauty and the sound of distant bells in its softly resonating chords.

Carter's Piano Sonata (1945-46, rev. 1982) is timeless in its American neoclassicism as the composer evokes Ives and Copland while still maintaining his own secure identity. With its restless, headlong scurrying movement, its use of rubato and "metrical modulation," and the gigantic double fugue in its second (concluding) movement, it is not for a performer less dauntless than Martin Perry. At the end, it concludes in a cadence of quiet splendor spanning the entire keyboard.

seven instruments – flute, cor anglais, bass clarinet, violin, viola, cello and double bass – that mediate between piano and orchestra and sometimes assume the role of "Job's Comforters" (Carter's own term) in their relation to the former. If the piano is not cast in its traditional heroic role, it nevertheless wins out in the end by its quietly insistent tenacity. In the last analysis, Carter's Piano Concerto strikes me as a forerunner (or perhaps a harbinger?) of the music of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century – always assuming that the human race doesn't succeed in destroying itself in the meantime.

As for the rest of the program, we have song settings of poems by Shakespeare (*Tell me where is fancy bred?*), Hart Crane (*Voyage*), and Walt Whitman (*Warble for Lilac Time*), the first featuring soprano Rosalind Rees accompanied on guitar by David Starobin, the latter two featuring soprano Tony Arnold with the Colorado College Festival Orchestra under Scott Yoo. The Whitman poem, with its abundant imagery appealing to all the senses in a vivid celebration of nature in spring, is the best realized.

Elsewhere, pianist Steven Beck, in *Two Thoughts about the Piano and Tri-Tribute*, explores Carter's almost obsessive search for expressiveness in theme and texture. The *Slow Wind Quintet* conclude the program, each member doubling his own instrument with another as they take their tessituras from the depths to the extreme heights in the composer's late work *Nine by Five* (2009).

Ives captures their life, thought, and character. Here we have the cool analytical mind of Emerson the essayist and philosopher, and the light fantastic qualities in Hawthorne the fiction writer. "The Alcotts" comes across like a peaceful Sunday morning and an evening musicale in the family parlor enfolding a moment of sterner music to remind us that the Alcotts were staunch Abolitionists. "Thoreau" is for me the most difficult study to grasp, as befits a many-sided figure who was passionately involved in the quest for intellectual freedom in a way that often seemed curious to his contemporaries.

Ives' 46-minute Sonata is preceded in the program by *Three Essays* on poems of Thomas Hardy by Gordon Binkerd (1916-2003). Binkerd has been mostly forgotten by posterity, and from my initial listening I did not marvel the reason why. Though the Nebraska native was cited by his admirers for capturing the open spaces of the American Midwest in his music, the cool, uneventful tone of the first two Essays sounded to my ears like the musical equivalent of watching corn grow. Only the Third, incorporating staccato accents and polytonal harmonies in a piece that covers the keyboard, proved more interesting, but not enough that I'm likely to return to Binkerd anytime soon. But then, Ives is the primary attraction here.