



"A Beethoven Odyssey," Volume 3
James Brawn, piano
MSR Classics

The keenly-awaited Volume 3 of James Brawn's "Beethoven Odyssey" has now appeared. And it was worth waiting for. Brawn continues an incisive exploration of what he himself describes as "the New Testament" of piano repertoire by following the interpretive suggestions in the scores themselves. He takes them big, making this release perhaps the best installment yet in a treasureable series. On the program are Sonatas No. 2 in A major (1795), No. 17 in D minor, the "Tempest" (180-1802), and No. 26 in E-flat major, Op. 81a, "Les Adieux" (1809-1810). All reveal advances in Beethoven's thought and his approach to the piano.

Sonata No. 2 shows Beethoven accepting the received conventions of his day and at the same time challenging them. On the whole, this is a gracious work with a happy disposition. The mood of the opening movement is blithely athletic, with side voyages to various keys that would have been thought adventurous in 1795, although much of the development is in F major, which has a relationship of a third with the signature key of the work. That, plus a difficult-to-play but charming-to-hear canonic section, should have alerted Beethoven's audiences that a different sort of musical personality had just emerged. The sudden dynamic change to *forte* in the course of the recap must have raised eyebrows, too.

In the dreamy Largo (incidentally, one of the few times he ever used this slowest of tempo indications), Beethoven gets interesting effects by employing a staccato bass against lyrical chords. The third movement is a graceful Scherzo, the first time Beethoven ever marked a movement thus. The finale is a lyrical Rondo with a dramatic central section that does not dispell the general mood of the work. Areppgios and leaps spanning the entire keyboard, plus staccato passagework and chromatic chords, make this movement a challenge for the pianist and a delight for the listener.

The "Tempest" Sonata poses other challenges for the interpreter – ones that Brawn answers admirably. Muted



"The Romantic Hero," arias from French opera
Vittorio Grigòlo, tenor
Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI, Evelino Pidò
Sony Classical

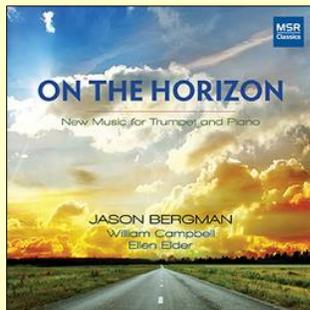
Arezzo, Italy native Vittorio Grigòlo continues his meteoric rise to the top of the operatic tenor's firmament with "The Romantic Hero," a program featuring choice arias from the French operas he has sung. So far, Grigòlo (Typesetters, *please* don't leave off the "r" in his name) has shown no sign of crashing and burning as his career continues to rise.

Though an Italian, he finds the French repertoire very congenial to his temperament because of the fire, passion, and portrayals of conflicted emotions they provide him. He is a lyric tenor (range up to tenor high C) with a palpable hint of darkness in his lower register. Whether he is classified as a pure lyric tenor or a spinto tenor depends to some extent on the role. In this program, we have examples of both the former (Hoffman in Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman*, Faust in Gounod's *Faust*, Romeo in the same composer's *Romeo et Juliette*, the title role in Massenet's *Werther*) and the latter (Don José in Bizet's *Carmen*, and perhaps also the *Chevalier des Grieux* in Massenet's *Manon*). He can rise so smoothly and swiftly to a high point of towering passion in an aria, that the listener might fear that he has indeed expired and died at the end, and not just the character he portrays. Have no fear. By the start of the next track he is back again, voice throbbing with emotion and hair shining with brilliantine.

His best portraits on this album include Don José, disgraced in his calling as a soldier but unable to forget the gypsy temptress *Carmen*, who helped bring it about, pouring out his feelings in "*La fleur que tu m'avais jetée*" (the famous Flower Song) and des Grieux's "*Ah! Fuyez, douce image*" as he rejects the memory of *Manon Lescaut* to follow a higher calling. A real surprise here is the aria "*Rachel, quand du seigneur*" in Jacques Halévy's *La Juive* as the conflicted Jew Eléazar must decide whether to save his daughter Rachel from the Inquisition by revealing she is really a Christian, thereby exposing

arpeggios at the very beginning of the development soon give way to long rolled chords ending in tremolos, thus creating the effect of a storm at sea. We have a respite of calm in the Adagio movement, though not without a series of octave triplets that Brawn compares to “tympanti rolls.” In this movement, the artist uses pauses very effectively to create suspense and pique listener expectations. The finale, which Brawn takes without a break, features more high drama, its manic intensity beginning with a significant half-step descent suggesting the galloping of horses. The climax includes a fortissimo falling chromatic scale. This work is clearly in the style of Middle Period Beethoven and Romanticism in general.

Beethoven hated his publisher’s descriptive name for Sonata 26, “*Les Adieux*,” as being too impersonal for a work in which he laid himself open. He preferred the more directly personal German “*Lebewohl*” (Fare Thee Well), and went so far as to inscribe *Le-be-wohl* over the three descending chords at the very opening of the work. We haven’t heard the last of this motto, as it provides the basis for the first and second subject groups. As we know, Beethoven was expressing his feelings of loss and anxiety for the safety of the Archduke Rudolph, whom he regarded as a friend as well as patron, who had left Vienna in anticipation of the arrival of Bonaparte. Brawn deals successfully with the conflicting emotions, forte appoggiaturas and pungent rhythms of a work in which we are already on the doorstep of Beethoven’s Late Period.

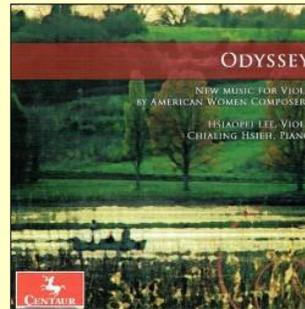


“On the Horison,” New Music for Trumpet and Piano
Jason Bergman, trumpet, with William Campbell and Ellen Elder
MSR Classics

One of the plus things about being a reviewer is that I get a “heads up” every now and then from publicists and directors of small independent labels, letting me know what’s currently flying below the radar. People like Robert LaPorta, owner-director of MSR Music, who recently emailed me to let me know about a trumpet player down on the Gulf Coast: “Phil, you’ve got to hear this guy!” Since Rob had been right on the money on such earlier “tips” as “The Valley Sings” (MS 1427) and James Cohn Symphonies (MS 1435), I thought I’d take a chance on Jason Bergman. And was I glad I did!

Bergman is part of the phenomenon of our times: a world-class soloist toiling in what might ordinarily be considered the “minor leagues” of classical music, were it

himself to danger. Another high point is the duet “*Nuit d’hyménée*” (*Night of our Nuptials!*) in Gounod’s *Romeo et Juliette*, in which the fine young Bulgarian soprano Sonya Yoncheva joins Grigòlo in a magical moment.



“Odyssey.” New music for Viola by American Women
Hsiaopei Lee, viola; Chialing Hsieh, piano
Centaur Records

The viola is the alto member of the family of string instruments. Long neglected as a solo instrument and denigrated as something for not-too-successful violinists to fall back on, it benefitted from a decided change in attitude by 20th century composers. That change, happily, is still going on today, as contemporary composers continue to find its vocal quality and the gracious warmth of its lower range ideal for what they have to say. Witness the high quality of the new music for viola on the present program of music by women composers in America.

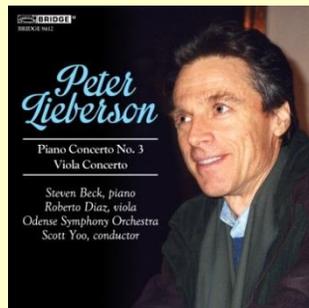
The works chosen by violist Hsiaopei Lee and pianist Chialing Hsieh, natives of Taiwan who currently teach at American universities and have made their homes in this country, is notable for the close partnership of both artists and the range of expression in the music. First up is the Sonata for Viola and Piano by Libby Larsen, a work that impresses by its exuberance and color. The first movement successfully encompasses many different influences: vocal and instrument jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, mambo, and even swing. Elsewhere, we have jazzy syncopations, open string passages, harmonics, trills, tremolos, and dynamic changes. It’s like they used to say about New England weather: if you don’t like what you’re getting at the moment, wait a bit.

Jasmine Flower by Victoria Bond uses the melody of the traditional Chinese folksong of that name as the basis for an intriguing set of variations. Bond describes the work as “a desire to break free of the orderly and explore the complex, asymmetrical elements that constitute the song.” As in all good variations, the original melody, simple, flowing, and supple, is never far away. *Dreams*, by Rachel Matthews, contrasts a soothing lullaby, heard in the opening movement and recounted in the third, with an agitated middle movement that seems to evoke a momentary bad dream before peacefulness is restored. It is simple in its design and its use of traditional harmony, but quite satisfying.

not for the fact that so much of the creativity and the impetus for continuing innovation in contemporary music and the way it finds its audience is taking place today on the level of community and regional orchestras, woodwind symphonies, and small ensembles of all descriptions. When you consider Bergman's talent and his credits (which you can read for yourself in the program notes on the MSR Classics website), it seems very impressive for someone who would seem, to judge by his photo in the CD booklet, to be still on the sunny side of 30. You have to ask yourself if he would have been wasted had he occupied a chair in a major symphony orchestra?

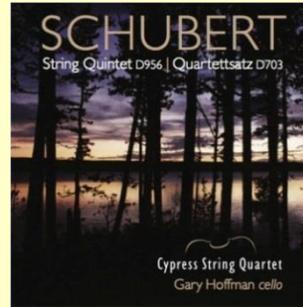
The works Bergman has selected for this program are all by composers who are still very much alive – Kevin McKee, Antonio Guerreiro, James Stephenson, John Stevens, Erik Morales, and Jose Pasqual-Vilaplana. All except the last-named, a Spaniard, are active on the contemporary American scene. All write direct, flavorful music that is easily accessible by the less musically sophisticated listener and still a challenge for those with a formal musical background. It seems a shame to focus on only a couple of major works, but I was really struck by Stevens' *Sonata for Trumpet and Piano* (2008) in which pianist Ellen Elder is an equal partner with Bergman, underpinning his sensational lyricism with a bass line that ranges from clangorous chords in the opening movement to restless, agitated passages later on. All the while, Bergman demonstrates the full range of what the trumpet can do in the way of a smooth legato and bracing staccato ascending scales and slides. His mastery of dynamics is heard in the *Adagio* in the way he trails off the melody into inaudibility at the very end. This is bravura playing in the service of music, not just for its own ends.

Morales' *Concerto for Two Trumpets* (2013) is in three movements, titled "Boldly," "Rubato," and "Allegro." Evidently a man of few words, he prefers to let his music, an infectious mixture of classical, jazz, and pop, speak for itself. There's no orchestra, just two trumpets and a piano, but Morales' work is every bit a concerto in design and scope. Bergman is joined here by his mentor, William Campbell, in music that takes hold of you and doesn't let go. Listen to the excitement in the ascending canonic passages, and you'll hear what I mean.



Lieberson: Piano Concerto No. 3, Viola Concerto
Steven Beck, piano; Roberto Diaz, viola
Scott Yoo, Odense Symphony Orchestra

Hillary Tann, Welsh composer now based in the U.S., uses some of the simplest of means to create the impression of timelessness in the outer sections of *The Cresset Stone*, while the inner sections contain allusions to medieval plainchant. Finally, Taiwanese-American composer Chi-Chen Wei cites the influence of her own Chinese culture, in the form of landscape paintings, and their implied relation of nature to the human soul, in "Between Spring and Hills V, *Odyssey*." Considering the work's spare textures, a more revelant inspiration may be the delicate brushwork of Chinese calligraphy.



Schubert: String Quintet in c major, D956
Quartettsatz in C minor, D703
Cypress String Quartet, with Gary Hoffman, cello
Avie Records

The Cypresses have done it again! With the collaboration of Canadian cellist Gary Hoffman, the San Francisco-based Cypress String Quartet, consisting of Cecily Ward and Tom Stone, violins; Ethan Filner, viola; and Jennifer Kloetzl, cello, have come out with a matchless account of Schubert's great Quintet in C major, D956 that emphasises its symphonic scope and luminous, dark-hued colors. And they follow it up with a thrilling chaser in the form of the intense, tightly wound *Quartettsatz* (Quartet Movement) in C minor.

The Quintet opens with a weary, drawn-out "sigh" from all strings, giving a foretaste of the really expansive movement that is to follow. That sigh is soon followed by a more turbulent section heralding the first melodic theme. The second theme, both lyrical and march-like at the same time, grows out of a duet between the two cellos. This opening movement is remarkable both for its symphonic breadth and for Schubert's predilection for shifting to relatively distant keys – in this instance, C major, E-flat major, G major, A major – without adhering too closely to the rules for key modulations. That, of course, is mostly of interest to scholars and professional musicians. For the average listener, the important thing is the way the music goes directly to the heart. There's also the matter of the staccato arpeggios, first in the violin and then the cellos, that decorate the musical line in the development section, lending it a haunting beauty.

The *Adagio* is sublimely lovely in its outer sections, contrasted by a turbulent central section that occurs at about 4:45 and may constitute an horrendous shock for listeners who aren't prepared for it. The texture of the

Bridge Records

This is evidently the recording premiere of two major works by the late American composer Peter Lieberon (1946-2011). Considering the quality of both Lieberon's Viola Concerto and his Piano Concerto No. 3, it qualifies as an important event. Some outstanding talents went into it: pianist Steven Beck, violist Roberto Diaz, and the excellent Odense (Denmark) Symphony Orchestra under Scott Yoo. And they do not disappoint. Though both concertos, and particularly the piano, have modernist features that may be off-putting to some listeners, both of them reveal their abundant lyricism more readily on second and subsequent listenings.

That's unfortunate, since new music doesn't always get a second chance to make a first impression. Lieberon, who has with some justification been termed a musical "maximalist," has loaded a lot of musical substance into works that clock in at just under 56 minutes combined duration in the present program. In Piano Concerto No. 3, the composer's influences are spiritual and literary as well as musical, and include, besides the latter-day Stravinsky, his abiding interests in Vajrayāna Buddhism, of which he was a devotee most of his adult life, and the mysticism of St. Francis of Assisi, whose "Canticle of the Sun" provides the inspiration for the title of the second movement.

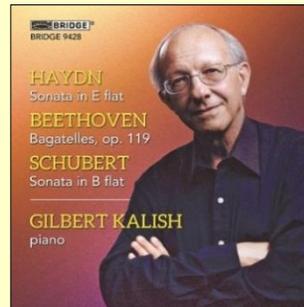
The piano is used primarily as a percussion instrument, which it is technically (although many composers, as we know, have derived musical bliss by appealing to its better nature). Only gradually does Lieberon's lyricism work its way to the fore (Samuel Barber, as well as Stravinsky, were poles of his musical world) and the final movement ends with a refreshing fugato. Lieberon's harmonic language in this rondo finale is essentially triadic, as he loves to superimpose triads over unrelated bass notes, recalling a similar procedure found in jazz, which is yet another influence in Lieberon's heady musical vocabulary. Credit both Beck and Yoo with keeping alert for the many rhythmic and textural changes in a complex core.

The Viola Concerto is more accessible to the listener upon first hearing, perhaps due to the fact that the instrument itself is more unabashedly vocal and lyrical by nature, qualities the composer celebrated constantly in his music. Said Lieberon, "The expression is very direct, so it's not a difficult piece to hear." It's not so easy for the performer, however, as the music requires Diaz to be continually on top of such technical elements as the quadruple stops and hazy string harmonics in the opening movement. Like the piano concerto, the viola concerto unfolds in a very comprehensible three-movement form, though most of the material in the opening movement and elsewhere evolves from a "seed-syllable" as a motivic kernel, rather than in traditional sonata-allegro manner.

That kernel provided Lieberon with the stimulus to invoke an imagination which never fails him in the present work. The Viola Concerto meant a great deal to him

Scherzo, also on an expansive scale, takes advantage of the presence of two cellos to create a greater volume of sound. The Trio section of this movement is an unearthly slow march of dark, elegiac character that is yet another feature that has led some observers to surmise Schubert was foreshadowing his own death (probably incorrectly, since it marks a new direction in the composer's music). The Hungarian folk-influenced finale, marked by the insouciant interplay of major and minor modes, is interrupted near the end by an alien D-flat trill in the cellos, an indication that we will not have a conventional happy ending, but rather one characterized by resignation and defiant acceptance, which is not the same thing. The final two notes, D-flat and C, are played forte in all parts, as if to emphasize the point.

The *Quartettsatz* in C minor is an isolated work that may have been intended as the opening Allegro movement for a complete quartet. It is marked by its concentrated energy and its unforgettable opening: a shimmering tremolando in which the four players enter canonically. The Cypresses, typically, give it all they have.

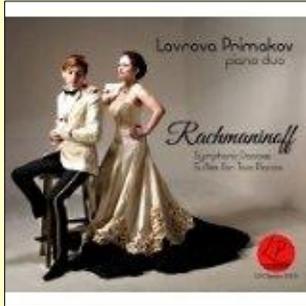


Haydn: Sonata No. 62 in E-flat + Beethoven: Bagatelles, Schubert: Sonata in B-flat, D960
Gilbert Kalish, piano
Bridge Records

New York native Gilbert Kalish has long been noted as a musician's musician and a collaborative artist. That's understandable, considering his long association with other artists, particularly singers Dawn Upshaw and Jan DeGaetani, and his long-continuing activities with such organizations as the Boston Symphony Chamber Players and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, as well as the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, of which he was a founding member back in 1962. A champion of contemporary music, he has exerted a far-reaching influence on generations of musicians as professor and performance faculty chair at SUNY Stony Brook.

With all that going for him, one tends to forget that Kalish can be a formidable artist whenever he has had a chance in the spotlight by himself. In this Bridge release, his first solo album in decades, he presents valedictory works by Haydn and Schubert, plus the first really convincing performance I've ever heard of Beethoven's 11 Bagatelles, Op. 119. At age 78, his fluid legato passagework, plus the musical insight that allows him to get to the heart of a given work in a sure, unhurried way

personally, as his late wife, beloved soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, began her career as a violist and only switched to voice fulltime when he was in her thirties. (She made up for lost time – and *how!*) Lieberson premiered the work in 1992, and then returned to it in 2003, expanding the toccata-like finale with an Adagio introduction that satisfied the need for a slow movement. The revised work gives a final impression of being great-hearted and songful, as befits its inspiration.



Rachmaninoff: 2-Piano Suites, Symphonic Dances
Lavrova-Primakov Duo
LP classics

Natalia Lavrova and Vassily Primakov, Russian expatriates in America (LP Classics, their self-owned label, is located on Kosciusko Street in Brooklyn, N.Y.) have come out with a radiantly beautiful CD release of Sergei Rachmaninoff's most important music for two-piano duo. Thoughtful, deeply insightful, and smoothly flowing performances bring out the best elements in Suites 1 and 2 plus the composers own transcription of his Symphonic Dances. In some moments in the two Suites, they even succeed in making Rachmaninoff's luxuriant if sometimes vapid music sound better than it is.

A word about the duo-piano genre. This type of music is written to be performed by artists playing two grand pianos with the right (curved) sides of the cases facing each other. That is done to facilitate the sight lines since, as in chamber music, it is vitally important to see one's partner. It is thus distinct from music for piano four-hands (at which Lavrova and Primakov are also adept), in which both performers are seated on the same bench and play the same keyboard. The sound of a duo-piano recital can be very impressive, indeed, as the range and depth of the sounds produced rival that of a symphony orchestra.

Of the two Suites, No. 2, Op. 17, is the more substantial. It opens *alla Marcia*, with unusually large and thick chords underscoring the stirring march tempo, and it ends with a rousing, non-stop Italian dance, the Tarantella. In between, there are two softer, more expressive movements, Valse and Romance. Suite No. 1, Op. 5, also called *Fantaisie-Tableaux*, is less conventional, as the four movements are all inspired by literature in the form of poems by Lermontov, Byron, Tyutchev, and Khomyakov. They are titled, respectively "Barcarolle," "La Nuit ... L'amour" (The Night ... Love), "Les Larmes" (Tears), and "Pâques" (Easter). There is

that makes the most of the discoveries he finds there, pay handsome dividends. In Haydn's Sonata No. 62 in E-flat, he reveals himself to be in perfect possession of the composer's juxtapositions of *piano* and *forte* dynamics, as well as often quirky accents. There's nothing superficially showy here: from the bold, rich chords at the very opening to the tempo changes and contrasts in sonorities in the symphonic-sounding finale, everything is designed by Haydn for the specific emotive purposes that Kalish is so adept at bringing to light.

Credit Kalish with an equally handsome achievement in the Bagatelles. The word itself suggests the trivial or ephemeral, and my prior experience of interpretations by other pianists had taught me that I could take or leave them. Mostly, I'd left them. But Kalish's performances were revelations. Under his hands, they emerge as individualized minatures, each pregnant with possibilities for further development, much as are Chopin's Preludes. Listen to No. 7 in C major with its mysterious trill at the beginning and the mounting drama toward the end, and you will hear what Beethoven had in mind.

The great work on the program is Schubert's long-limbed Sonata in B-flat, D960. The ominous-sounding left-hand trill at the very opening puts us on our guard. The pauses that occur in the course of the movement, repeatedly interrupting the slow, thoughtful melodic line, are overcome only by dint of patient persistence. The key change that occurs in the choric-sounding first subject is wonderful to hear in Kalish's performance, as it magically signals the determination to continue on in spite of all impediments. The slow movement, enclosing a pensive nocturne-like melody of great beauty even by Schubert's standard, is taken by Kalish in a way that emphasizes its transcendent, semi-improvisatory character.

More pleasant peril awaits the artist in the Scherzo. Marked *Allegro vivace con delicatezza*, it requires the performer to play with great energy *and* great delicacy, perhaps better described as "precision," exhortations that would seem to be counter-intuitive. The Trio section in B-flat minor has an uneasy, slightly edgy quality with its nervous accents and syncopations. The finale, in which elements of charm, pugnacity, vigor and irony are found in a heady, irresistible mix, features a seemingly endless flow of melody over an uninterrupted and highly rhythmic flow of sixteenth notes. Superb technique, allied with the musical insight of a lifetime, enables Kalish to bring this musical mulligan stew, comprised of so many diverse elements, to a very satisfying conclusion.

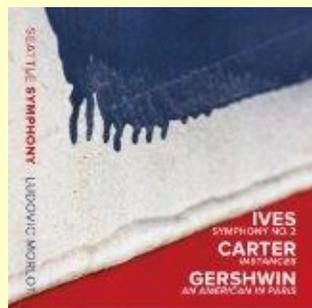
perhaps too much of a prevailing mood of soft enchantment in the first three movements, though the execution by Lavrova and Primakov is exquisitely subtle and beautifully expressed, and the afore-mentioned tears do become more anguished as the piece progresses. The “Easter” tableau builds to a pitch of intensity, similar to what we hear in Rimsky-Korsakov’s Russian Easter Overture, and then just subsides. Perhaps Rachmaninoff meant it to be followed by a choral hymn?

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45, the major work on the program, was Rachmaninoff’s own arrangement of his orchestral work. The premiere of the duo-piano version was given by the composer and Vladimir Horowitz at a private party in Beverly Hills in August 1942 and is said to have been Rachmaninoff’s last public appearance. A symphony in conception, if not in name, it is in three movements: a *Non Allegro* that begins slowly and almost inaudibly and builds gradually in rhythmic power and expressiveness, an *Andante com moto* that has the gloomy atmosphere of a slow waltz danced in the dark on a deserted ballroom, and a rousing finale, contrasting *Lento assai* and *Allegro vivace* sections. This work allows Lavrova and Primakov opportunity to display their fantastic rapport and incredible sense of timing, and their expressive phrasing is often hauntingly beautiful.



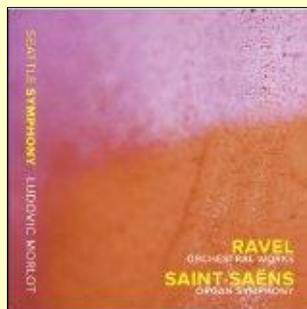
Seattle Symphony launches exciting new label

Ludovic Morlot was truly “the man who came to dinner.” The Lyon, France native, well-travelled as a guest conductor on three continents, was engaged to do the same with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra in 2009. They ended up liking him so well in Seattle that they invited him to succeed now-Conductor Laureate Gerard Schwarz upon his retirement. Beginning with the 2010-2011 season, Morlot has wasted no time establishing himself as an engaging, dynamic leader with a penchant (à la Schwarz himself) for innovative and exciting programming. Check the opening salvo of three releases on the orchestra’s new in-house label, Seattle Symphony Media, for a promise of things to come.



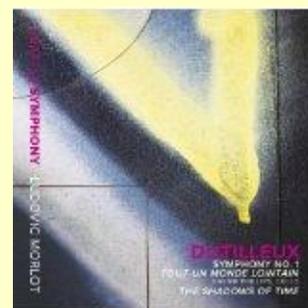
Ives: Symphony No. 2 “ Carter: Instances, Gershwin: American in Paris— Ludovic Morlot, Seattle SO

Three 20th century works that Ludovic Morlot considers “modernist” – each in its own way – constitute



Ravel: Orchestral Works + Saint-Saëns: Organ Symphony – Ludovic Morlot, Seattle SO

This program of symphonic favorites by Ravel and Saint-Saëns cannot help but evoke an enthusiastic



Dutilleul: Symphony No. 1, *Tout un monde lointain* (Xavier Phillips, cello), *Shadows of Time* – Ludovic Morlot, Seattle SO

The third offering in the initial Seattle Symphony Media may be more for

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| <p>this exciting release. The first, Charles Ives' Symphony No. 2, which he wrote around the turn of the century but which was never performed until its rediscovery in 1951, already shows his predilection for including "quotations" of American popular songs, hymn tunes, marches and patriotic anthems in the fabric of all its movements. I put "quotations" in quotation marks because Ives used just what he needed - a piece of a melody here, a dominant rhythm there - without any intent to quote it in its entirety. That is what European composers have done for centuries. If the folksy sources in his music strike us more than they might otherwise have done, it's precisely because we <i>are</i> Americans. Had he wanted to write a pictorial symphony, as he did later in "New England Holidays," he would have done so.</p> <p>As it is, Symphony No. 2 is a "pure" symphony. As if to emphasize the point, Ives begins the opening movement with a fugue in the strings and concludes the finale with an even mightier fugue. Rigorous contrapuntal elements predominate, perhaps as a nod to his composition teacher at Yale, Horatio Parker, but maybe also as a "Take that, yuh" to his musically conservative mentor. The amazing thing about the Second Symphony is that it's so very entertaining in spite of all the learned devices. Credit the popular elements for providing much of the leavening.</p> <p>As Morlot conducts this work, it crackles with excitement. It is often described as a symphony in five movements, but Morlot correctly recognizes the second slow movement, a broadly stated <i>Lento maestoso</i>, as actually a prelude to the rousing finale, and he takes it without a break. That finale, <i>Allegro molto vivace</i>, builds to a pitch of excitement, then ends on a blatantly dissonant 11-note chord, which obviously pleases the live audience.</p> <p>Elliott Carter, history's longest-lived composer (1908-2012), died a month before his 104th birthday. The amazing thing about his career was that he composed little of lasting value until the mid-1940's, and then</p> | <p>response, as is borne out by the applause of the live audiences at the ends of both Ravel's Rapsodie espagnole and Saint-Saëns "Organ" Symphony. As far as interpretations are concerned, Morlot seems to hold back in both halves of the program, exploring the nuances, of which there are plenty to choose from, and waiting until the finales to really turn the orchestra loose.</p> <p>Rapsodie espagnole is preceded by two shorter Ravel works: Alborada del gracioso and Pavane pour une infante defunte. The first, translated "Morning song of a clown," features much colorful, animated music that is contrasted in the central section by a poignant bassoon solo before gaining momentum again towards the finish. The latter, translated "Pavane for a deceased princess," is slow, its sadness understated. The mood befits Ravel's tribute to a vanished past for which he was inspired by a Velasquez painting of a little princess at play, surrounded by attending maidens and a dog. He had the sobering thought that this solemn-looking child had been dead for three centuries. The slow, elegant strains and subtle dissonances in the music bear out this mood.</p> <p>Rapsodie espagnole is an evocation of Spain in 4 strongly characterized movements. <i>Prélude à la nuit</i> (Prelude to the night) starts <i>pppp</i> (softer than a whisper) and never rises above a mezzo-forte. Morlot is tuned in to the dynamic subtlety of this movement and the diaphanous quality of its textures. The rhythmic vitality of the <i>Malagueña</i> movement comes across very well in the present performance, as does the languid quality of the sultry <i>Habanera</i> (Ravel strived to evoke "a fragrant land, caressed by the sun.") The finale, <i>Feria</i>, a picture of a festival day, unfolds in blazes of glory surrounding a quiet central episode with a haunting melody spun by the English horn, subtly decorated by a clarinet, as if Ravel were loath to bid adieu to this evocation of a land he loved (but, curiously, never visited, except in his imagination). Morlot captures this mood very well, and the musicians of the Seattle SO give a good account of themselves</p> | <p>acquired tastes than the other two. The late French composer Henri Dutilleux (1916-2013) was long-lived, but the quantity of his work doesn't bear this out because he was so very exacting that he chisled and polished his writings over a long period of time before he released them. There are three symphonic works on the present CD: Symphony No. 1 (1951), <i>Tout un monde lointain</i> for cello and orchestra (1970), and <i>The Shadows of Time</i> (1997).</p> <p>In all of them we find Dutilleux's preoccupation with refined orchestral textures, complex rhythms, a preference for atonality over tonality, and a principle of "reverse variation" by means of which a theme is not stated initially but is revealed only gradually after tentative, partial expositions. He was intrigued with symmetrical structures, both within an individual movement and in the context of the larger work, to a point bordering on obsession.</p> <p>Symphony No. 1, most accessible of the three works on the program, begins idiosyncratically with an entire opening movement in the form of a variation technique known as a passacaglia. It emerges from silence, and is followed by a very active scherzo in perpetual motion. The third movement, an Intermezzo described by its creator as in the form of "a continuous melodic line that never goes back on itself," contains most of what the typical listener would describe as lyricism in this work. The mood conveys more sadness, however, than solace. The finale opens with an explosion of orchestral sound, including big tympani strokes and sustained pitches from trumpets and other instruments, before it settles into a theme and variations. There's a lot of intricate structural detail in this work but, significantly, very little of what is conventionally termed melody.</p> <p>The cello concerto, titled <i>Tout un monde lointain</i> ("a whole distant world") is in five interconnected movements, each inspired by a quotation from <i>Les fleurs du mal</i> (flowers of evil) by Charles Baudelaire, the 19th century French symbolist poet who is credited with</p> |
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| <p>made up for lost time with numerous bursts of creative energy in the sixty or so years that were left to him. "Instances" was written in his final year and here receives its recording premiere. As Morlot interprets it, it is engaging and witty. It unfolds kaleidoscopically as it ranges from nervous activity to a happily lyric idea, heard initially in the brass. Typical of this economical composer, Carter gets in a lot of music in just under eight minutes.</p> <p>If it seems odd for Morot to include An American in Paris (1928) in a program of modernist works, it is only because we've been accustomed to viewing "modernism" as synonymous with "music that people really don't like to hear" and George Gershwin's enormously popular symphonic poem shatters the image. Actually, Gershwin was instrumental in infusing jazz and blues elements into the musical mainstream, as he did here. Morlot runs a fairly taut ship with this score, keeping the music lively and filled with vitality in the outer sections and slowing down in the middle, as our imaginary American succumbs to homesickness in the form of a "blue funk" that suddenly overcomes him amid a flurry of activity in the gay city that includes evocations of the unique sounds of Paris taxi horns.</p> <p>Morlot uses the printed score, as opposed to the uncut version, which is about three minutes longer and contains choice passages for flute and bassoon, that Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle employed in their 1992 recording. That recording, available in the Seattle Symphony Collection, makes for an interesting comparison and contrast. Here's an idea: if you have the scratch, why not add both to your library?</p> | <p>both as an ensemble and in the frequent instrumental solos scattered throughout the work.</p> <p>Camille Saint-Saëns claimed he gave "everything I had" to the creation of his "Organ" Symphony (No. 3 in C minor). It is easy to believe this after even the most casual audition of the massively scaled symphony. Enlarged instrumental requirements bring out the best musicianship of the orchestra, which includes the sound of the C. B. Fisk tracker organ in Seattle's Benaroya Hall, played here by Joseph Adam. There's a great deal of textural variety in this work, which features quiet moments, such as the soft plucking of cellos and basses in the Poco Adagio, followed by the entrance of the organ on a sustained A-flat note. This moment creates an indelible impression, as do the brass fanfares, the muscular polyphonic writing, the pastoral interlude, and the final blaze of glory in the grand finale, which really lives up to its marking of "<i>Maestoso</i>" (Majestic). Once again, the organ is right in the midst of it all, making this symphony a memorable experience.</p> | <p>having coined the term "Modernism" (<i>modernité</i>) for man's tentative, and sometimes nightmarish, existence in a modern metropolis. As performed here by cellist Xavier Phillips, the cello part is very difficult, involving glissandi, pizzicati and <i>col legno</i> (the wood of the bow on the strings), pointillistic and percussive effects, in addition to more regular bowing. It is not, however, bravura in the usual sense of the word, as the cello is usually integrated into the work's intricate textures rather than occupying the spotlight. The high point occurs in the third movement, where wild arabesques build in intensity to an almost hallucinatory mood (which Baudelaire would certainly have loved).</p> <p>The Shadows of Time was inspired by Dutilleux's memories of France under the Nazi Occupation, but is not topical. Rather, it is concerned with "distant events whose intensity, in spite of the impress of time, has never ceased to haunt me." To that extent, we have the tick-ticking of temple blocks and, in the third of five tightly connected interludes, the sounds of three boy sopranos asking "<i>Pourquoi nous?</i>" (Why us?).</p> <p>We are told in the booklet notes that, under Morlot's direction, the Seattle Symphony "has embarked on a survey of the composer's complete orchestral works." That shouldn't be too burdensome a task, as Dutilleux was so extreme a perfectionist that he left us only about two major works per decade over the last sixty years of his life. Still, my advice to Ludovic Morlot is to space them widely enough apart that he doesn't lose his audience.</p> |
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