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"Alieva & Antonenko," Verdi, Puccini, Tchaikovsky
Dinara Alieva, soprano; Aleksandrs Antonenko, tenor
Kaunas City Symphony and State Choir under
Constantine Orbelian (Delos)

One of the unlooked-for but definitely positive results of the breakup of the USSR is that a raft load of musical talent from the former Soviet republics has found its way into opera houses and concert halls all over the world. It is nowhere more in evidence than on Delos Productions from California, which is in the process of establishing itself as the "singer's label" par excellent. Latest fruit of a very productive east-west connection is the present album of choicest arias and duets by Verdi, Puccini, and Tchaikovsky, rendered in absolutely breathtaking detail by Baku, Azerbaijan native Dinara Alieva and Riga, Latvia native Aleksandrs Antonenko. Regardless of their place of origin, they constitute a duet that might have been made in Heaven.

Alieva, with her dark velvet voice and dramatic intensity that led one of her teachers, the great Montserrat Caballé, to describe her as "a singer who possesses the gift of Heaven," gives a stirring account of herself early in the program in "*Ritorna vincitor*" (Return triumphant) from Verdi's *Aida*, revealing the ambivalence in the heart of the captive Nubian princess who is torn between love of her own country and her Egyptian lover Radamès. Her duet with Antonenko in the Entombment Scene, with the ritual chanting of the priests in the background, does full honor to one of Verdi's most effective final scenes.

Good as Alieva is as *Aida*, she is even better as Leonora in the Scene, Aria and Miserere from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, where she vows to either give her life for the imprisoned Manrico or descend united with him into the grave. With Manrico proclaiming his undying love and a chorus of monks chanting the service for the dead, Alieva rises to incredible heights of passion.

In Puccini's *Tosca*, Antonenko scores serious points as the condemned patriot Cavaradossi, sentenced to die by the cruel Baron Scarpia, as he fondly recalls the bliss of a former rendezvous with his lover Floria Tosca in "*E lucevan le stelle*" (The stars were shining, / and



Mahler: Symphony No. 4
Marc Albrecht, Netherlands Philharmonic, with
Elizabeth Watts, soprano
(PentaTone hybrid SACD)

German conductor March Albrecht leads the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra in a lithe, tastefully conceived interpretation of Mahler's Fourth Symphony. The clarity of detail in PentaTone's sonics lends itself very well to Albrecht's superior point-making and his passion for pianissimos. I, for one, felt I was coming into a better understanding of a Mahler masterwork I'd been in danger of taking for granted.

One thing Albrecht is keen on here is Mahler's irony, which was a sore point between the composer and his critics, especially as much of it is subtle. "On the whole," Mahler confided to a friend, "It has been my experience that this type of humor (which should be distinguished from wit or a merry mood) is not often recognized."

One good example of this quality in Mahler's Fourth Symphony is the scherzo, marked "*In gemächlicher Bewegung. Ohne Hast*" (leisurely moving, without haste). The great philosophical idea underlying this symphony is that of a *Himmelfahrt*, a yearning for heavenly joys culminating in a trip to Heaven as conceived by the imagination of a child. The scherzo figures prominently in this scheme, as it recalls the character of Freund Hein (Friend Henry) in medieval art as a skeleton playing the violin to lead his listeners in a *Todentanz* (dance of death). You would be wrong to describe him as a variant of the Grim Reaper, however. In Mahler's conception, based on an 1872 "Self-Portrait with Death playing the Fiddle" by Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin (the same artist who inspired Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead*), this figure is actually benign. His dance tune, a lilting if eerie melody that the violins play so persuasively in the present recording, is strangely comforting. As opposed to the way Mahler depicts it in his *Kindertotenlieder*, Death soothes us, creating a mood of holy peace and cheerfulness as we await the journey to Heaven.

That heavenly journey, in the form of a processional

the earth was sweetly scented . / The garden gate creaked / and a footstep touched the ground.” For her part, Alieva is wonderful in Tosca’s aria “*Vissi d’arte*” in which she confronts the lecherous Scarpia, who has promised to spare Cavaradossi’s life if she will give herself to him (though we should know from our previous experience of Verdi that tyrants never keep their word). “I have lived for my art, I lived for love only,” she sings, all the while preparing a surprise for Scarpia should he fail to halt the execution.

Finally, we have three numbers from Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades*: Hermann’s aria as he vows to kill himself over Lisa’s engagement to another, Lisa’s Act III aria as she waits for a rendezvous with Hermann on the banks of a canal, filled with doubts of her lover’s constancy and her own guilt at betraying her family, and finally the stunning duet when Hermann and Lisa meet at last.

In Tchaikovsky’s opera based closely on Pushkin’s tale of greed and its corrosive effect on love, the parts of the lovers are beautifully characterized by Alieva and Antonenko and rendered with a searing intensity that might very well mark these singers as the premiere operatic duo of our time. Antonenko’s Hermann, driven to the point of insanity by his obsession to discover the identity of the three playing cards that constitute an unbeatable combination, has threatened the elderly Countess, Lisa’s guardian, with a pistol if she does not reveal the secret to him, causing her death from fright. The callous lover’s only defense, that the pistol wasn’t loaded, hardly convinces Lisa. She is tortured by her guilt in having admitted Hermann to the Countess’s chambers and dismayed to realize that her own fate is entwined with that of a murderer. Passion versus conscience, desire versus betrayal: this, folks, is the stuff that great operatic duets are made of.



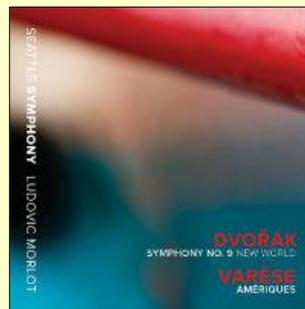
Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 5, “Reformation”
Sir John Eliot Gardiner, London Symphony Orchestra
(LSO Live) Hybrid SACD + Blu Ray Disc

John Eliot Gardiner (we are now obliged to address him as “Sir John” – and well-deserved, too) leads the London Symphony Orchestra in a Mendelssohn symphony that reverberates in more ways than one. But before we get to the main event, we are treated to two stirring overtures.

march based on a set of variations, occurs in the third movement, marked *Ruhevoll (Poco adagio)* – Peacefully, somewhat slowly – and the cheerfulness is tempered by sadness and regret for leaving the earthly life one has known. It ends in a glorious fanfare which Mahler calls the *Kleine Appell* (muster or roll call). Albrecht does a splendid job of taking the orchestra through the many changes of mood and key in this movement without undue fuss. His focus is obviously on the fourth movement finale which is to come.

That finale is a setting of the “Wunderhorn song “*Wir genießen die himmlischen Freuden*” which depicts the joys of Heaven. They are not unalloyed, however. A final irony in this child’s vision of Paradise is that it is purchased with pain: we are told that a lamb (a Christ symbol) and an ox have been slaughtered for the heavenly feast. Soprano Elizabeth Watts handles the vocal role capably, though her tone is noticeably more slender than others who have assayed it.

In conclusion, this is a more than respectable entry in a fast field of Mahler Fourth. Marc Albrecht takes his time making his points, but the total playing time of 57:53 does not seem particularly slow by present-day standards. PentaTone’s engineers have served him well in the present multichannel recording in DSD.



Dvořák: “New World” Symphony + Varèse: Amériques
Ludovic Morlot, Seattle Symphony Orchestra
(Seattle Symphony Media)

What an odd pairing, this of Dvořák’s “New World” and the Amériques of Edgard Varèse! It’s almost as if some A&R director, or perhaps Ludovic Morlot himself, had a history of insanity in his family. The intriguing program actually plays out very well, given the total commitment of Maestro Morlot and the Seattle Symphony in live recordings, made in Seattle’s Benaroya Hall, which put

Felix Mendelssohn wrote the Ruy Blas Overture to accompany a play by Victor Hugo at a request from the trustees of the Leipzig Theatrical Pensions Fund, though he at first demurred upon reading Hugo's blood-and-thunder melodrama which he found "perfectly ghastly." Happily, he had second thoughts and produced an appropriate overture for the subject, with its eerie chords, suspensions, and tremolo strings.

There are no vibrating strings, ghastly or otherwise, in the first part of the other Mendelssohn overture, *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*. Instead, static strings over a resonant bass line give us the impression of a becalmed sea – something for which passengers who experience *mal de Mer* may be grateful but sailors despise. The tempo and mood pick up in the second half as pounding tympani accentuate the feeling of joyous relief that we are nearing port. Surging figures in the strings seem to be a quotation of the repeated choral exclamation "Ich Harrete den Herrn" ("I waited for the Lord," also known as Evening Song) from Mendelssohn's Second Symphony, "*Lobgesang*" (Song of Praise) – a very effective conclusion that you will hear in your dreams for some time afterwards.

The main item on the menu is Symphony No. 5 in D major, the "Reformation," which Mendelssohn wrote as part of the 300th anniversary commemoration of Martin Luther's 39 Theses that he tacked on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg in 1530, an act that is regarded as the opening shot in the Protestant Reformation. We are given a beautiful booklet photo of the bell tower of that church, encircled with a band on which is inscribed the opening verse of Luther's hymn "*Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott, Ein gute Wehr und Waffen*" (A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and sword).

We hear this hymn melody prominently in the thrilling finale, where it does not occur just incidentally but informs the entire movement. Earlier highlights include the Dresden Amen, a famous six-note figure of which Wagner also made striking use in his opera *Parzifal*, and a rousing, toe-tapping scherzo that Mendelssohn uses to depict the levity of the German people upon receiving the good news of the Augsburg Confessional.

Throughout the performance of the symphony, the acclaimed string section of the LSO lives up to its reputation, as it takes the lead in every change of color and mood, from solemn anticipation that a great event is about to occur at the opening to joyous relief in the extroverted scherzo, and then an irresistibly triumphant peroration to the finale. Gardiner conducts this symphony with such a sense of inevitability that we would not imagine it could be done otherwise.

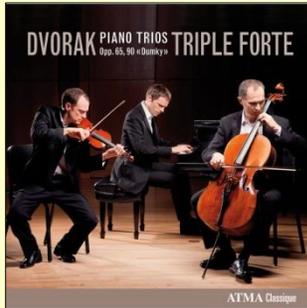
most super high-tech studio recordings you've ever heard in the shade.

Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, to give the "New World" its proper pedigree, is given a full-blooded, open-hearted performance that doesn't hold back, neither in the stunning climaxes of its opening and closing movements nor in the deeply sentimental, nostalgia-dripping ethos that makes its Largo the unforgettable experience that it is. "From the New World" is how Dvořák subtitled this symphony, and that should be taken as something like "greetings to my friends from the New World," rather than a panorama of American music. Dvořák incorporated the spirit of such influences as American Indian songs and Negro spirituals without borrowing any actual melodies, of which he himself was as prolific as any composer who ever lived. What some listeners interpret as a lazy-lying cowboy song in the trio section of the Scherzo had plenty of antecedents in the popular folk dances of his native Bohemia, from which he had been absent almost two years when the symphony was premiered in New York in December, 1893. In the final analysis, high energy and deep, authentic feeling distinguish the present performance by Morlot and the Seattle.

Paris-born Edgard Varèse, like Dvořák, sojourned in the United States, where he was to spend most of his creative life. He was living in New York when he composed *Amériques* (1918-1921). In his apartment on the West Side, he was enchanted by such nocturnal sounds of the river as foghorns and boat whistles, as well as the moan of police sirens. In this seminal work, he jettisoned such traditional musical concepts as melody and rhythm in favor of "organized sound masses," blocks of sound that coalesce until they reach a truly seismic density. In a performance by a large orchestra like the Seattle Symphony, the effect can be overpowering.

All of which, and more, makes the music of Varèse different from any other composer you are likely to have come across. To his critics, Varèse defiantly retorted that "to stubbornly conditioned ears, anything new in music has always been called noise," and he threw out the challenge "What is music but organized noises?" The composer, with his piercing eyes, dark brows, and flaring, frizzled hair that gave one the impression he'd just poked his finger into an electrical outlet, was as distinctive in personal appearance as his music. In *Amériques* he reinforced a large orchestra with a bewildering forest of percussion instruments that included, besides the usual gongs, -spiels, -phones, bells and ratchets, such oddities as the "lion's roar," "crow call," and a boat whistle.

Those police sirens? Ah, yes. Varèse prized them for their ability to represent "a continuum pitch beyond twelve-tone equal temperament." Sound impossibly sterile in its modernism? Not in the present compelling performance by Morlot and the Seattle, it isn't!



Dvořák: Piano Trios, Opp. 65, 90, “Dumky”
Performed by Triple Forte
(ATMA Classique)

“Triple Forte” is the name chosen by the trio composed of three excellent Canadian musicians in the prime of their careers – Jasper Wood, violin; Yegor Dyachkov, cello; and David Jalbert, piano. It is taken from the expressive marking (*fff*) which is known as *fortissimo*, or “very loud.” That is slightly misleading, as these guys don’t necessarily play louder than the average piano trio, but they do play with the greatest intensity and verve. They are also notable for their ability to change dynamics within the line and to change directions at speed. And they love a meltingly beautiful phrase when they come upon it. All of these qualities make them ideal Dvořák interpreters.

As opposed to their debut album of trios by Ravel, Ives, and Shostakovich – rather like juggling a beach ball, pineapple, and cannon ball in terms of diversity – there is a lot of stylistic consistency in Dvořák’s Piano Trios No. 3 in F minor, Op. 65 and No. 4 in E minor, Op. 90. Along with his “American” String Quartet, they remain the composer’s most popular chamber works. The differences are in their character and in the ways they handle some of the composer’s most engaging melodies. Op. 65 is tinged with the Slavic qualities that the world loves so much in Dvořák, beginning with the pensive, edgy theme we hear early in the opening Allegro, to be succeeded by moods of mystery, melancholy, and perhaps loss as well, as he wrote this work in memory of his mother. Color, graciousness, and flowing Bohemian dance tunes, plus a singing tone that one doesn’t always expect in a quick movement, inform the Scherzo. The slow movement, Poco adagio is clearly the heart of the matter with its beautiful cantilenas and serene melodies. The finale, Allegro con brio, based on the *furiant*, a folk dance with many changes of rhythm, alternates between fiery intensity and cheerful optimism, with joyous affirmation having the final word.

Op. 90 is the so-called “Dumky” Trio, its nickname derived from “*dumka*,” a Slavic word for reverie or meditation. It consists of six *dumky* (to give the plural) that are related in mood but are otherwise to be considered as individual, highly characterized movements that explore many different moods and contrasts. That is how Triple Forte have chosen to take



Smetana: String Quartets Nos. 1 & 2
Pavel Haas Quartet
(Supraphon)

From the Czech Republic we have the excellent Pavel Haas Quartet, consisting of Veronika Jarůšková and Marek Zwiebel, violins; Pavel Nikl, viola; and Peter Jarůšek, cello. Founded in 2002, they have already won considerable renown in competitions and in the awards garnered by their recordings. I haven’t heard everything they’ve recorded, but I’d venture to say they couldn’t have surpassed the present Supraphon release of the two String Quartets of Bedřich Smetana because that simply isn’t possible. Total commitment to the music makes these recordings stand out.

These young musicians pour themselves into their performances of both Smetana quartets, drawing out all the fire and passion their composer invested in them. That is appropriate because both are highly autobiographical, and even confessional, in tone. They represent the struggles of one who was an ardent revolutionary in the Prague uprising of 1848, and then a composer bent on creating a Czech national school in spite of disappointments and critical opposition, and finally, a man who surmounted the greatest handicap a musician ever has to face – total deafness – to create his most enduring works. Besides his cycle of tone poems *Ma Vlast* (My Country), they include both the quartets heard on the present CD.

The intensity of the Pavel Haas Quartet in these works is not excessive, given the subject. Smetana subtitled Quartet No. 1 in E minor “From My Life.” It is conversational in tone, “four instruments speaking among themselves in something like a friendly circle.” The story they recount is hopeful, stirring, and sometimes quite painful, bringing tears to the eyes of the listener who may not even be aware of the personal issues involved. It opens with an emotionally charged pronouncement by the viola and features a sustained high E in the first violin midway through the final movement, just when the music is rushing headlong toward a triumphant conclusion. That high E represents the ringing in Smetana’s ears that was a harbinger of his deafness. The middle movements are a comparatively untroubled Allegro in the style of a Polka and a Largo that seems to represent the human love that transcends the adversity of fate.

this work, even when they encounter the marking *Attacca* (continue without interruption) between Dumky 1 and 2. There are a great many vivid contrasts and sudden changes in this trio, even more so than in Op. 65, as we are given alternating moods of uninhibited lament and brooding, followed by genuine elation, dreamy introspection, tricky syncopations, and finally a brilliant, passionate finale in high spirits such as few composers other than Dvořák have managed to convey to us.



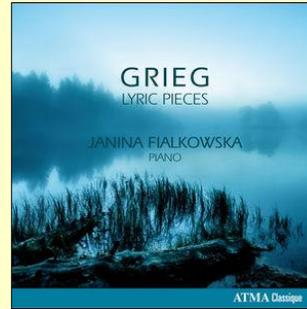
Ravel: Orchestral Works
Seiji Ozawa, Boston Symphony Orchestra
(PentaTone hybrid SACD)

Seiji Ozawa returns over the gulf of four decades to work his magic at the podium of the Boston Symphony. This time, it's in really gorgeous-sounding, beautifully detailed accounts of five works by Maurice Ravel that were originally recorded by Deutsche Grammophon in April and October of 1974. This is another jewel in Pentatone's Remastered Classics series which gives welcome re-exposure to recordings made at a time when Quad was too advanced for most playback systems. The analog machines used in the remastering process were connected to state-of-the-art DSD analog to digital converters without the intervention of mixing consoles. The results sound great, giving clarity and definition to music that is not always easy to grasp at first hearing – but well worth a second audition!

The program consists of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, *Menuet antique*, *Ma mère l'Oye*, *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, and *Une barque sur l'océan*. *Tombeau* (In Memory of Couperin) was Ravel's tribute to his 18th century predecessor, Francois Couperin, a source of inspiration for his style, elegance, and precision. Couperin would certainly have understood Ravel's credo that "sensitiveness and emotion constitute the real content of a work of art." In turning a piano suite in six movements into a sparkling symphonic suite in four, Ravel left little evidence of its origin. He dropped the Fugue and Toccata so that in the orchestral version the Prelude is followed by three dances (Forlane, Minuet, Rigaudon) characterized by coolness, intimacy, and charm, with a virtuosic oboe adding much to the overall flavor. *Menuet antique* shares many of those same qualities in its orchestra version.

Ma mère l'Oye (Mother Goose Suite) is Ravel's at his

Quartet No. 2 in D minor, equally autobiographical, was described by its creator as taking up where the first quartet left off, representing "the turbulence in music of a person who had lost his hearing." That is particularly the case in the third movement, a Moderato that is marked in part "*ma agitato e con fuoco*" (but agitated and with fire). The Pavel Haas Quartet take their cues appropriately but not excessively, allowing Smetana's music ample opportunity to speak for itself.



Grieg: Lyric Pieces
Janina Fialkowska, piano
(ATMA Classique)

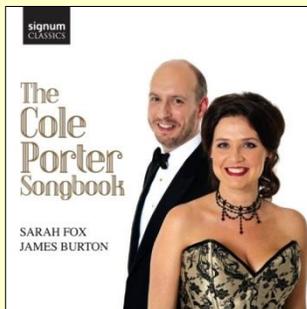
Montreal native Janina Fialkowska once again brings her glorious lyricism and sure feeling for tone color to the recording studio. This time, she gives us 25 of the best-known of Edvard Grieg's Lyric Pieces. The program includes selections from each of the ten books the Norwegian composer published between 1867 and 1901. That they were written for home use and were enormously popular in his lifetime should not disqualify them as inspired miniatures, exquisitely polished by their creator and worthy of the attention of the finest professional pianists. As Fialkowska shows us in her beautifully crafted performances, the greater the artist, the better the impression these Lyric Pieces make on the listener.

One quality we notice right away about these character pieces is their extraordinary color and vividness. That fact, more than the obviously greater availability of pianos, explains why you are more likely to hear them performed in the original piano versions rather than as arranged for orchestra – with the possible exception of the Lyric Suite (1891). There is so much vivid color and animation in them, awaiting expression by a real keyboard artist, that even the most skilled orchestration would add nothing.

That, at least, is the way I feel about such perennial favorites as "Popular Melody," "March of the Trolls," "Wedding Day at Troldhaugen," and "Homeward." Others, such as "Arietta" that opens Book I and "Remembrances" which closes Book X (and which have the effect of an *envoi* that invites us into a special world of musical imagination and a *finis* that takes us home again) are so pianistic in style, and so enchanted for that reason, that we could not imagine them set for

lushest and most discrete, and Seiji Ozawa does his best work in the whole program in bringing out the character of this work, which the composer transcribed from the original version for piano duet. We hear all the subtleties of tone color and texture in this account of a work that paints deft portraits of the Sleeping Beauty, Tom Thumb, and Beauty and the Beast. The best characterized here is the tableau, marked *Mouvement de valse très modéré* but very flexible in terms of rhythm and metre, in which Beauty seems alternately attracted by the Beast and repelled by her suspicions of the darkness hidden in his heart.

That leaves *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, allegedly composed by Ravel in tribute to Franz Schubert but actually bearing more resemblance to the full-blow Viennese waltz of his own day than to that composer's more folksy, *gemütlich* style as they range from slow and languid to extremely quick and energetic. *Une barque sur l'océan* (a sailing ship on the ocean) is to the element of rhythm what Valses is to orchestral color, as it explores all the moods and motions of its subject, whose dazzling and often calm surface conceals fearful depths in which many lives lie buried.



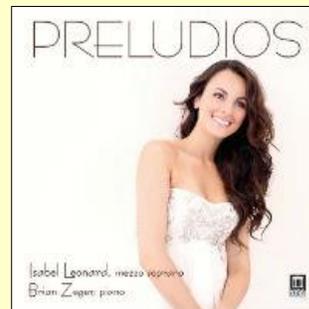
"The Cole Porter Songbook"
Sarah Fox, soprano; James Burton, piano and vocals
(Signum Classics)

Out of Signum, a label in the United Kingdom that is devoted to the best in vocal music from Renaissance to Modern, we have an engaging new Cole Porter tribute by English artists Sarah Fox and James Burton. As Burton explains in his preface to the booklet notes, the present recital aims at a "looser feel" than we might have expected from a classical concert. Fox echoes his sentiments with a wish of her own that "I hope you will enjoy our interpretations of [the songs] and will be encouraged to have a go at singing them yourselves!"

For what it's worth, Britons have been more active in rediscovering our own national treasure, the "Great American Songbook," than we have ourselves in recent years, and the present CD represents an ongoing phenomenon that shows no sign of running out of breath. Fox, the daughter of parents who grew up in the sixties on a diet of Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald records, recalls that "I knew Cole Porter songs long before I knew who Cole Porter was." If you are a first-time listener, he will be no stranger to you

orchestra.

"Notturmo" is a hauntingly beautiful piece, redolent of dark forests and long Nordic nights. "Evening in the Mountains" on the other hand, has a troubling undertone of melancholy such as some people feel towards dusk on a summer evening as the shades of night are falling like a curtain. Other pieces, such as "Norwegian Dance" (*Halling*) which imitates the distinctive sound of the Hardanger fiddle with its drone produced by four sympathetic strings under the melody strings, have a lot more vivacity. In fact, the great variety of the Lyric Pieces accounts in no small measure for their lasting popularity. (At least when you have a Fialkowska playing them!)



"Preludios," Spanish Songs
Isabel Leonard, mezzo-soprano; Brian Zeger, piano
(Delos)

What a discovery Isabel Leonard is! The New York City native, of Argentine ancestry on her mother's side, is technically described as a lyric mezzo-soprano. Both parts of the description work for her, as her flexibility in her higher range in the lighter songs is matched by the dark tone and the deep passion she conveys to us, most appropriately, in the songs dealing with the darker aspects of love, bitter irony, and death in a program that spans the full emotional range of 20th century Spanish music. "This program is close to my heart," says Leonard, "Every song tells a poignant story and each was hand-picked for this CD." The more we experience the utter conviction she applies to these Spanish songs, the less doubt we have about this statement.

The program begins with a haunting song of beautifully sublimated feeling by Federico Mompou, "*Sólo las flores sobre ti / eran como una ofrenda blanca*" (Only the flowers over you were like a white offering). Manuel de Falla's "Preludios" (Preludes) conveys a mother's

after hearing this beguiling program of 20 songs in smart arrangements by Burton himself.

Sarah Fox has the type of soprano voice that is more suitable for light opera than the heavier lyric roles, and James Burton has a much more limited range that makes one glad he is primarily a pianist, composer, arranger and choral director. No matter. Fred Astaire, who royally entertained us for decades with the Cole Porter songs he assayed in his film musicals, was no Caruso himself. The key to interpreting any Cole Porter song is to project your own personality into it and get to the heart of the matter, communicating one-on-one with your listener in the time-honored style of a cabaret or night club artist. This is what these folks do.

Being English, their precise diction may give them an advantage, as Cole Porter's notoriously sharp wit is abundantly present in such lyrics as "Anything goes," "It's de-lovely," "Miss Otis regrets," "My heart belongs to Daddy," and "Don't fence me in." Cole's wit often took the form of risqué double-entendres that radio listeners never had the chance to hear back then because they were considered too explicit for the medium – witness the rhymes for various parts of the anatomy in "The Physician," the lament of a frustrated girl who can't penetrate the professional reserve of her good-looking doctor. Some other songs that fall into this category include "Brush up your Shakespeare" and "The tale of the oyster," a ditty about a social-climbing bivalve who gets his wish to mingle in high society – and ends up an item on the menu.

There's poignancy, too, plenty of it in this recital in songs like "Night and Day," "So in love," "I've got you under my skin," "What is this thing called love?" and "Ev'ry time we say goodbye." And Fox reveals the breath control and perfect timing that make the final lines of "In the still of the night" such a heart-stopper: *Or will this dream of mine fade out of sight? / Like the moon growing dim, on the rim of the hill, / In the chill, still of the night?*

prophesy for her daughter as she listens to the suitor serenading her outside the window: it is the prelude to the greatest poem there is in the world, recalling the sadness and happiness the Pure Virgin felt in her son. Falla's Seven Spanish Popular Songs, which are often heard in instrumental settings, run the range of moods from tenderness to irony and from discrete sexual desire to the renunciation of love in the final song Polo: "*Malhaya el amor, malhaya! / Ay! / Y quien me lo dió a entender / Ay!*" (Cursed is love, cursed, / and cursed be he who made me understand it!) The passion that infuses these lyrics is echoed in the cries that punctuate it.

The warmth of these Spanish songs carries through in several songs by the poet and revolutionary Federico Garcia Lorca, including the poignant "*Nana de Sevilla*" (Lullaby of Seville). A gay-hearted flower vendor's song by Joaquin Valverde Sanjuan, "*Clavelitos*" (Carnations, symbols of love), is matched by "*Gracia mia*" (My dearest), a playful song of love won and lost by Enrique Granados. The program concludes with *Cinco canciones negras*, five darkly passionate songs of Xavier Montsalvatge that were inspired by Cuba.

Isabel Leonard's voice covers the full range of these songs, from a playful bantering that reminds us she is gaining a reputation for such operatic roles as Rosina and Cherubino to a darker quality that recalls the fact that she was a student of (in her own words) "the incomparable" Marilyn Horne. She is also as easy on the eyes as she is on the ears, so you might enjoy a visit to her website www.isabelleonard.com



Mendelssohn + Tchaikovsky: Violin Concertos
Arabella Steinbacher, violin
Charles Dutoit, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande
(PentaTone hybrid multichannel SACD / DSD)

Arabella Steinbacher, born in Munich to German and Japanese parents, continues to enhance her reputation as an artist of the widest range of sympathies with a pairing of the ever popular violin concertos of Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky. The lovely, slender tone she coaxes from her instrument, the "Booth" Stradivarius (1716), fits in beautifully with the tender romantic sentiments in the Mendelssohn. She also scores plenty of points in the more aggressively vigorous Tchaikovsky where a "fatter" tone might seem to have been requisite. In both recordings, made at the Victoria Hall in Geneva in September 2014, Charles Dutoit and the Suisse Romande lend yeoman support.

In Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64, Steinbacher gets to play to her strengths as a violinist: namely, her feeling for timbre and tone color, her discreet fire, and her polished technique. The flawless cantabile she displays fits in beautifully here, and not just in the middle movement where the requirement is most evident. Her *attacca* transitions between all the movements (a striking feature of this work) are beautifully accomplished.

The ricochet arpeggios at the start of the recapitulation were also a Mendelssohn innovation as was the fact that the soloist, who is playing almost continuously, accompanies the orchestra for extended periods when the violin isn't in the spotlight. If I have any nit to pick with the present recording, it is that it sounds as if we've heard it before. Given the enormous popularity of the Mendelssohn over the past two centuries, that's a fair assumption.

Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35 receives more robust treatment from Steinbacher and Dutoit, as is appropriate. There is a noticeable bite here in the beginning of the opening Allegro moderato, paralleled by the verve with which soloist and orchestra swing *vivacissimo* into the finale. It is to be aken without a break or pause following the quiet, contemplative ending of the Canzonetta. Steinbacher obviously relishes the matchless lyricism in this work, where both violin and orchestra are given plenty of opportunity to show their stuff. There is such an abundance of good tunes in this work that the orchestra's glorious opening melody is never heard again. That, plus the fiendish technical difficulties for which this concerto is famous, ensures that Steinbacher will have plenty of challenges to meet – and meet them she does!