

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

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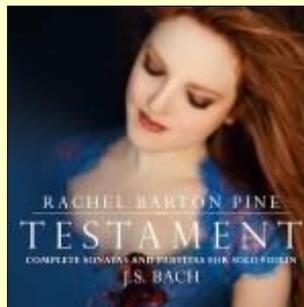


"8 Seasons," Vivaldi + Piazzolla – Liv Migdal.
Deutsches Kammerorchester Berlin (Solo Musica)

I've been especially fond of violinist Liv Migdal ever since I reviewed her Beethoven / Debussy / Strauss program on Ars Produktion in April 2014. It is with both pleasure and sadness that I announce her most recent release on Solo Musica of the "8 Seasons" of Antonio Vivaldi and Astor Piazzolla. Pleasure because it has the same slender, lovely tone she employed in the service of the music in the earlier release. Sadness because the program notes afforded my first awareness of the death of her father, mentor and recital partner, pianist Marian Migdal.

In her notes, Liv Migdal pays recalls a chance conversation with a Holocaust survivor who had been incarcerated at Terezin, as a tribute to the power of music to "mobilize physical resilience in a person who is threatened with death." For this man, the music of Bach and Vivaldi had been a tool for survival, "the pulse of life on the cusp of death." Migdal sees this quality very clearly in Vivaldi's Four Seasons. She might also have mentioned its companion work on the present program, Piazzolla's Seasons of Buenos Aires, a modern classic that looks back to the baroque master, even to the extent of quoting discretely from him from time to time.

The lithe, beautiful tone Migdal coaxes from her instrument and her sensitivity to mood translate well in the quieter moments in Vivaldi's Seasons, particularly the evocations of the night and sleep in the slow movements of "Spring" and "Autumn" and the feeling of warmth and security by the fire in a snowbound cottage with drops of snow falling from the eaves in the Largo of "Winter." And the depictions of birds chirruping and a shepherd piping in the opening movements of "Spring" and "Summer," respectively, come across with all their usual charm. With the enthusiastic support of the Deutsches Kammerorchester Berlin, she also shows herself very adept in capturing the elemental ferocity of the thunderstorm in "Summer," the rousing excitement



Bach: "Testament," Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin
Rachel Barton Pine (Avie Records)

Rachel Barton Pine really defines herself as one of the great violinists of our time in her latest release for Avie Records. The Chicago native touches base with her roots in these recordings of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas, made by Steven Epstein and Bill Maylone, a producer and engineer who have been long associated with her recording career, in the acoustically friendly confines of her home parish of St. Paul's United Church of Christ. They took their time making sure that every detail was just right, so that Rachel's "old home week" was actually spread over recording sessions on 16-18 April, 28-30 May, and 29 & 31 August, 2015. Fine wines require time to mature, and these performances and recordings are premiere vintage.

Over the years, I've heard accounts of the Sonatas and Partitas, BWV 1001-1006, regarded as the "Himalayas" of the violinist's art, that were technically superb (that's important because Bach was pushing the known violin technique to its limits). I've also heard performances that stressed the sensually beautiful and deeply moving qualities of these works. Rachel Barton Pine captures both qualities as optimally as I have ever heard it done, and without sacrificing beauty for virtuosity or vice versa. That makes these accounts as thoroughly satisfying as any I've heard.

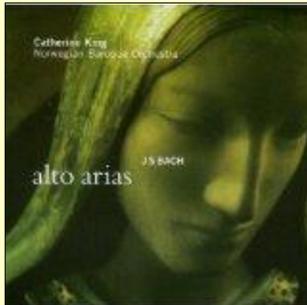
For one, her choice of tempi and sense of pacing are superb. Listen to how the wild second theme soars out from the slowly measured Adagio in Sonata No. 1 in G minor, or the way she takes various embellishments (turns, appoggiaturas, scales, and arpeggios) effortlessly within the metre. In this movement and in the succeeding fugue, she also establishes the improvisory quality that she will maintain throughout the entire set, so that her interpretations never fail to impress with their freshness and spontaneity.

Partita No. 1 in B minor is unusual for Bach in that each of its four movements, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and *Tempo di Borea* (Bourée) is followed

of the hunt in the downward-plunging rhythms of the last movement of “Autumn,” and the dissonant severity and motor rhythms of the final movement in “Winter.” But in the last analysis, the charming moments make the lasting impression.

Astor Piazzolla’s Four Seasons of Buenos Aires (actually *Las cuatro estaciones porteñas*, a “porteño” being a native of that city) captures the vibrancy of the local life through the seasons of the year in music that can be outrageously raucous and impudent, but with unexpected moments of deep, quiet feeling and passion. It embodies the spirit of the tango, which for Piazzolla was “always for the ear rather than the feet.” Originally written for a quintet of violin, electric guitar, double bass, piano, and a uniquely Argentine type of concertina known as a *bandoneon*, it is a heady fusion of jazz, classical, and Afro-Hispanic elements. More than 20 years after Piazzolla wrote *Las estaciones*, it was arranged by Russian composer Leonid Desyatnikov in the version for solo violin and string orchestra we hear in this recording. In whatever form, this work has been enormously popular for a post-war composition. This is its 61st recording to date, which tells us it is likely to be an enduring standard.

Dissonance, bordering on cacophony, creates the initial impression in a work of music that clearly takes to the streets in its evocations of the night life of Buenos Aires. It includes sensationally long glides and ascending and downward swoops in the violin part and rasping, percussive sounds from the ensemble that seem to be the result of special string techniques (they are definitely *not* electronic). Alongside which are unexpected moments of sheer lyrical beauty, as in the heart-stopping melody Migdal plays midway through *Otoño* (Autumn). This is the most convincing account I have yet heard of this work, which makes a satisfying program mate for the Vivaldi. Highly recommended.



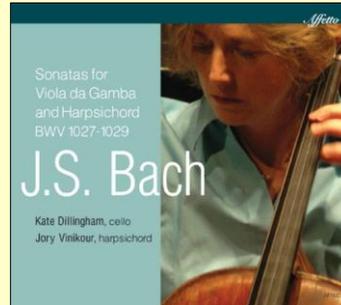
Bach: Alto Arias – Catherine King, Norwegian Baroque Orchestra (Linn Records)

“Alto Arias” features English mezzo-soprano Catherine King in a program of Bach arias for the alto voice, interspersed with tracks from his Orchestral Suite No. 2. This work’s predominantly darker tone in many of its movements proves surprisingly sympathetic with the spiritual messages in selected arias from the Matthew

by its “double,” or variation. Rachel executes every one of these doubles brilliantly, stepping off zestfully with a pick-up at the end of its respective dance. The very expressive Sarabande here is in slow 3/4 time; its double in 9/8 is quicker, but the artist is careful to preserve the same unsettled, questioning mood.

Partita No. 2 in D minor is generally regarded as the climax of the set because of its monumental “added” movement, the Chaconne, which Rachel takes through its many moods of grandeur, playfulness, meditation, peace, uncertainty, triumph and tragedy, all with consummate artistry. The annotation regards the theory that Bach wrote the Chaconne in memory of his late wife Maria Barbara as having been “convincingly debunked.” I’m not so sure about that, as one senses extra-musical associations, particularly in the present performance. The other thing you notice about this Partita is its intimacy: Rachel envisions a single fiddler, or very few of them, leading us through the steps of musical forms – Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Gigue, and even the Chaconne – that were ultimately of dance origin.

So it goes throughout the entire set of three sonatas and three partitas, in which matchless sensual beauty is in perfect harmony with technical artistry in these performances. Sonata No. 3 in C major is distinguished by the slow accumulation of notes in the opening Adagio and by its very elaborate Fugue in which Bach calls for a variety of techniques, including strettì, inversion, and a double fugue that is sometimes buried in single-voice eighth-notes. Rachel obviously relishes its contrapuntal complexities and its occasional requirement for double stops on all four strings. And she really swings her way through Partita No. 3 in E major on her modernized Guarneri del Gesù played with a baroque bow. Highlights here include the playful Courante and exuberant Gigue, sure signs that *this* partita is a real holiday for strings.



Bach: 3 Sonatas for Viola da Gamba (Cello) & Harpsichord – Kate Dillingham, Jory Vinikour (Affetto)

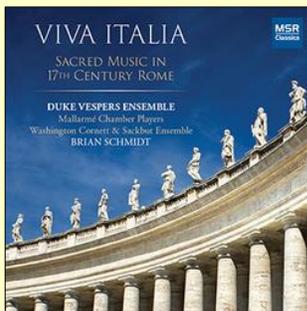
Celloist Kate Dillingham and harpsichordist Jory Vinikour, natives of New York and Chicago, respectively, promise to be the classiest connection between those two cities since the days of the fabled limited known as The Twentieth Century. Here, they go back in time to 17th century Germany to encounter J.S.

Passion and various cantatas that deal with sin and redemption. The original 2001 recording has been re-issued as part of Linn Records' ECHO series, allowing listeners a second chance to hear a first-rate program.

King's far-ranging voice is set against the background provided by the Norwegian Baroque Orchestra under director Julian Podger, with co-director Ketil Haugsand providing yeoman support on the harpsichord. Significantly, probably because the NBO eschewed any sort of star billing, there are no credits for the oboe heard in several of the arias or the virtuosic flute parts in the orchestral suite, though all are excellent.

King's voice is ideally suited for the vocal selections, conveying the deeper emotion associated with the life-changing theological moments – painful awareness of sin, heartfelt contrition, cleansing, and redemption – that Bach seemed to habitually reserve for the range and depth of the alto voice. Handel does much the same in his Messiah, but Bach had a special reason for favoring this voice because his second wife, Anna Magdalena Wilcken, was an accomplished singer in that vocal range.

In our time, Catherine King conveys both the dignity and the conviction to put over such arias as "*Buss und Reu*" (sorrow and regret) and "*Erbarme dich, mein Gott*" (Have mercy on me, my God), both from the Matthew Passion, the extended aria "*Wo zwei and drei versammelt sind*" (Where two and three are gathered in my name, there also am I) from Cantata 112, and the deep eloquence of the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) for voice and solo violin from the Mass in B minor. This program impresses with its simplicity, conviction, and well-formed contours.



"*Viva Italia*," Sacred Music in 17th Century Rome
Brian Schmidt, Duke Vespers Ensemble
(MSR Classics)

"*Viva Italia*" is a program presented by the Duke Vespers under their inspired conductor Brian Schmidt. Besides leading weekly Vespers services in the Duke University Chapel, Durham, N.C., they are very active throughout the year performing the great choral music of the Renaissance through the Baroque. They sing a *capella* motets and other polyphonic works and, assisted by such groups as the Mallarmé Chamber Players and the Washington Cornett & Sackbut

Bach's gamba sonatas in a meeting of new and old virtuosity that never fails to deliver the excitement of discovery.

Why play the three Sonatas for Viola da gamba and Harpsichord, BWV 1027-1029 on a cello rather than a gamba? Well, it seems Bach was looking in two directions in these works, back at the ever-receding twilight of an instrument that was rapidly being superseded by the modern cello, and forward at a new concept in music-making that was to herald the great chamber music works of the Classical era. The Viola da Gamba, actually a family of instruments like the recorder, was a slower instrument than the cello. It had been historically relegated to the "continuo," the small group of instruments that realized the bass line of a work for one or more melody instruments. Despite its limitations, Baroque composers often wrote pieces for the gamba, and well into Bach's lifetime it was prized by connoisseurs for its warmth and its delicate tone. Compared with the emerging cello, however, it was limited in its expression of virtuosity.

Bach threw caution to the winds in these three sonatas, writing passages that must have sorely stretched the capabilities of even the best gamba virtuosi of his day. What was excruciatingly difficult for gambists is easier to achieve, but still quite challenging, for a present-day cellist like Kate Dillingham. And despite what you may have heard about the composers of the Baroque, one's choice of instruments did indeed matter, especially for someone like J. S. Bach for whom vibrant rhythm and expressive beauty were complimented by the rigorous architecture of the music, not cast in its shade.

We find a good example of this is the opening Adagio of BWV 1027 in G major in the progressively outward-moving rhythms of the duet between the instruments in a luxuriantly flowing 12/8 time, creating a mood of ease and gallantry that we wish would last forever. But the other movements have their charms as well: the Allegro ma non tanto with the energy of a folk dance, the Andante with its lithesome arpeggios and colorful chromatic harmonies, and the Allegro moderato that springs from its final bar, heralding a finale where the two instruments continually trade lines in a masterful fugue in which expression and learned technique finally become inseparable.

Two things are evident in BWV 1027, and they set the tone for all three works. First, the keyboard is no longer subservient to the melody instrument but its full and equal partner, a breakthrough that would take music a long way towards Mozart and Brahms. Then, there's a noticeable arc in the connections between movements, and even among the three sonatas themselves. Indeed, the shapely contours of all three are among their most attractive qualities. To many listeners, BWV 1028 in D major may be the most attractive of the three for the arioso-like melody of its Adagio and the sheer beauty of the lilting Siciliano-like melody in the Andante. The trills in both instruments are fabulously accomplished here. In its three-movement structure,

Ensemble, heard to good advantage in the Sances Mass on the present program, they can assay major choral works with instruments.

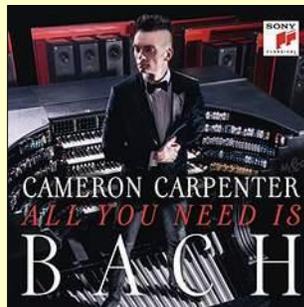
The recorded sound is good throughout the program, possessing gracious warmth and clarity without over-emphasizing either, so that the multiple polyphonic voices that interact so effectively here are not impeded by having to compete with each other or with the instrumentalists. Everything is in perfect proportion here, which is as it should be in music of this character. The Duke University Chapel, despite its name, is actually a rather large Gothic church, so that my guess is that these works must have been recorded in one of the side chapels in order to capture their intimate charm and expressive qualities.

What an attractive program this is! The spiritual beauty of Giovanni Carissimi's *O Dulcissima Mariae Nomen* (O sweetest name of Mary) and Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's *Alma Redemptoris Mater* (Loving Mother of the Redeemer), two perfectly formed gems, speaks eloquently with the spirit of the revival of Marian theology to lift the hearts of the faithful in the time of the Counter-Reformation. The less likeable side of that religious and historical movement, the militant, is captured in Marc-Antoine Charpentier's setting of Psalm 110, "Dixit Dominus" (The Lord said to my lord, sit at my right hand and I will make your enemies your footstool), which became the biblical justification for the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings. The vigorous text-painting Charpentier uses here (pounding down one's enemies, piling up ruins, scattering skulls) seems a little shocking for a composer best known for the innocent charm of his *Messe de Minuit de Noël* (Midnight Mass).

Spain's greatest composer, Tomas Luis de Victoria, is represented by settings of three of the Marian Hymns. They are *Ave Regina Caelorum* (Hail, Queen of Heaven), *Salve Regina* (Hail, Queen, Mother of Mercy), and *Regina Caeli* (Queen of Heaven). They derive all the sublime beauty that double-choir antiphonal writing can produce. In the last-named, the fast alternation of voices that commences on the word "*laetate*" (rejoice) leads to an ecstatic flurry of rejoicing.

The major work on the program, *Missa Sancta Maria Magdalena* by Giovanni Felice Sances (1600-1679) is a stunning beauty that has only recently been made available in a splendid edition by Stephen Saunders and David Hauser. This is the world premiere recording of a too-long forgotten masterpiece by Sances, an Italian composer whose family was likely of Spanish antecedents (Sances=Sanchez). The large-scale ceremonial work combines virtuosic writing for seven voices (S2:A2:T2: B) with supporting instrumental forces (6 strings, 2 cornetti, 4 trombones) in a fine balance of sumptuousness and clarity. Curiously, there is no contemporary account of any performance of this very attractive work, possibly because of the virtuosity required of all participants. May this recording amply recompense Sances for his historical neglect!

BWV 1029 in G minor is the most forward-looking of the three sonatas. The interwoven dialog between the two instruments in the Adagio, accomplished with deceptive effortlessness by Dillingham and Vinikour, is just one of its attractive features.

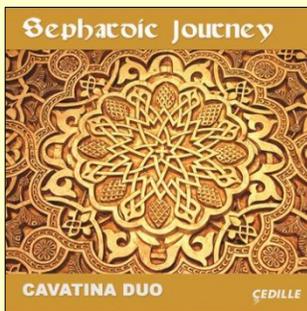


"All You Need is Bach" – Cameron Carpenter, International Touring Organ (Sony Classical)

It's a funny thing, but I came prepared to jeer when I first peeled the shrink wrap off Cameron Carpenter's "All You need Is Bach," and I ended up cheering instead. It was probably the organist's flair for unabashed showmanship, together with his new punk rock rags (dinner jacket, black tie, and blue jeans) that put me off. That and his new hairstyle that looked as if he'd spent too much time under a supersonic hair drier. And, I must admit, I do tend to shudder when I see an electronic instrument in a classical performance, having heard too many "crossover" albums for one misspent lifetime. Even the album title turned me off, recalling the bad old days when the British Invasion was sucking up all the oxygen in the world of pop music.

Well, you really *shouldn't* judge a book by its cover. I needn't have been so apprehensive, as Cameron's all-Bach recital really has a lot going for it. In a well-laid out and balanced program, we are given examples of Bach at his most intriguing, including a prelude and a passacaglia plus fugue, two trio sonatas, a captivating arrangement by the artist himself of French Suite No. 5 for harpsichord, a *very* moody chorale prelude, and an "invention" and a "contrapunctus" that transcend their original purposes of keyboard practice and musical theory, respectively. Without Cameron's sacrificing any of his well-known verve and energy, we are treated to a recital that moves, thrills and charms us, finally leaving us with an overwhelming sense of its "rightness."

Even the instrument, Cameron's own International Touring Organ (ITO), designed to his specifications by the organ building team of Douglas Marshall and David Ogletree in Needham, Mass and incorporating the sounds of his favorite American pipe organs, has a flexibility and responsiveness that are a perfect fit for this artist. And, yes, it is transportable, in a large van. The present recordings were made on the ITO in the Jesus-Christus-Kirche, Berlin, a favorite German recording venue since the 1950's for its superb



“Sephardic Journey” – Cavatina Duo
(Cedille Records)

“Sephardic Journey” is the product of a multi-year quest by Spanish-born flutist Eugenia Moliner and her Bosnian-born husband, guitarist Denis Azabagic, to discover their roots in the *Sephardim*, the Jews who were exiled from Spain in 1492 by Queen Isabella with the power of the Inquisition as coercion. Eugenia knew her Sephardic roots; Denis discovered his quite unexpectedly in the course on a visit to his own people in 1996, after the smoke of war had cleared in Bosnia. (I will leave it for you to read in his program notes: it’s a charming story.) Fueled by their enthusiasm to shed light on a rich cultural past, reflected basically in the dark beauty and instinctive emotion of its folk music, they set about gathering the resources they needed for their project, titled “Sephardic Journey.” That included commissions to five talented present-day composers of the new world to compose vibrant new works of music utilizing authentic Sephardic melodies.

On this program we have *Trio Sefardi* by Alan Thomas, *Isabel* by Joseph V. William II, *Plegaria y Canto* (Prayer and Song) by Carlos Rafael Rivera, *Love Dreams of the Exile* by David Leisner, and *Sephardic Suite* by Clarice Assad. Several of these composers have written distinguished film scores, and that is significant as the film composer, like the folk singer, needs to “cut to the chase,” to get to the heart of the matter without much, if anything, in the way of prelude. Unlike the Moors, Muslims who were likewise exiled from Spain in 1492, the Sephardic Jews left no awe-inspiring monuments like the Alhambra. Nor was their language, a Judeo-Spanish mixture known as Ladino, particularly literary. Their legacy to the world is their wealth of deeply felt songs, and that is sufficient.

The composers, all of whom are currently active in America, set to work with gratifying results, so that the pieces of “Sephardic Journey” come together as a compelling program and not just a miscellany. In Rivera’s words, “My knowledge about Sephardic music was desultory, but Eugenia and Denis’s passion for it was contagious.” Rivera visualizes his own *Plegaria y Canto* as the lament of an isolated, yet proud, soul singing her sorrows to the sea in a coastal town. In the sadness of the song, which is not without an element of hope, he sees a metaphor for the inspiring journey of a

acoustics. The sound is amazingly like that of an actual pipe organ without the occasional annoying limitation such as a sticking key or valve, and the response is immediate. This is electronic sound that is done right, without any sci-fi or horror movie associations. One interesting thing about the ITO is that you can switch temperaments, as is done in these recordings: Kimberger and Kellner in the Trio Sonatas, for instance, and equal temperament for darker-hued pieces such as the Chorale Prelude, BWV 622.

Following a surprisingly moving Contrapunctus 9 from The Art of Fugue that shows the latent emotional possibilities in allegedly pure music, Sonata No. 3 in D minor, BWV 527 surrounds one of Bach’s most famous movements, the soft and gracious *Adagio e dolce*, between bracing outer movements that Cameron takes with his customary verve. Sonata No. 1 in E-flat, BWV 525, again emphasizes the fast-slow-fast contrasts with its slow movement, yet another Adagio and again one of Bach’s all-time favorites with listeners and artists alike, as the jeweled centerpiece. These works replicate the form of the instrumental trio sonata (in which form they are sometimes performed) in that the hands are typically given the solo parts and the pedals the bass, though the latter is often, as here, very actively employed with walking eighth notes. Here the Adagio in Siciliano-like rhythms is succeeded by the Allegro finale in 3/4 time that bursts forth without a break, featuring a series of leaping eighth notes and upside-down sixteenth note runs.

The Prelude & Fugue in B minor, BWV 544, is one of Bach’s strongest conceptions. Octave leaps in the bass and daring suspensions create an irresistible forward motion in the prelude, which builds to unbearable tension under Cameron’s hands (and feet), almost as if some evil imp were encased in this prelude and were striving to break free. The fugue, in which all four voices are sounded on each recurring entry, allows the artist plenty of room as he moves about in a take-no-prisoners mood while the entries jump unpredictably from one register to another before the tension finally relaxes, the texture gets smoother, and we end in a very satisfying B major.

An unexpected delight in this program is Cameron carpenter’s own fine arrangement of one of Bach’s best-loved keyboard works, French Suite No. 5 in G major, BWV 816. The quick movements, which include Courante, Gavotte, Bourée, and a very rambunctious Gigue in perpetual motion (No Irishman could possibly dance *this* jig!), allow the artist plenty of opportunity to exercise his zest for risk-taking vivacity without actually lapsing into quirkiness. (And who is to say that Bach himself was never disposed to “let ‘er rip” when he played this suite?) Cameron has the discretion to take the stately Sarabande and the soulfully yearning Loure as slowly as necessary to preserve the unique character of each.

Cameron regards the Passacaglia & Fugue in C minor, BWV 582, as one of music’s supreme masterworks,

people in exile. Thomas' Trio Sefardi is in three well-delineated movements utilizing song melodies that define the experience of love. The second, based on "Yo m'enamori d'un aire d'una mujer" (I fell in love with the scent of a woman) describes the intoxicating effect of a moonlight encounter, while the third, "Una matica de ruda" (a sprig of rue) trades on the double meaning of the word "rue" (which is also found in English folksong) as 1) the name of an herb and 2) regret.

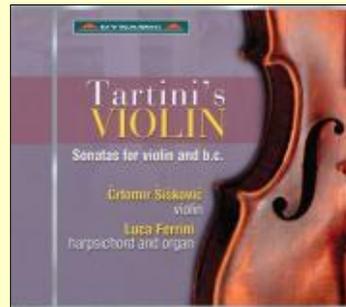
Williams' *Isabel* bears witness to the plight of a young Sephardic woman, a "converso" who was tortured by the Inquisition for her secret faith and coerced into informing on her family. Surprisingly, considering the tragic history of those times, it is the only example of a "protest song" on the program, and even here the outrage is expressed covertly and poetically: who is this woman who has come into the garden and is pulling up the flowers? Love Dreams of the Exile by guitarist and composer David Leisner uses melodies of three songs that describe various aspects of love. "Yo boli" (I flew) equates the sad, frantic search for love to a bird flitting from branch to branch. "Sus chico para amor" depicts a youth who falls in love with a shepherdess and is told "You're too young for love!" And "Va, buxcate otro amor" (Go, look for another love!) is the final kiss-off, not without a surprising moment of tenderness and nostalgia.

Clarice Assad, jazz vocalist, pianist, composer, and daughter of Sergio Assad, pours her talents into the three sections of Sephardic suite, which she visualizes as studies in human relationships: a young woman's love and betrayal in the first and the bickering of an older couple in the third. In between, we have the letting-go of an old love and the acceptance of a new one, an "in-between-place where feelings are still raw and unsettled."

All the works on this program are performed by Moliner and Azabagic, who are known professionally as the Cavatina Duo, with their accustomed style and feeling for rhythmic and sonic values. The sound of Moliner's alto flute is particularly notable for its warmth and dark, well-grounded color, allowing Azabagic's guitar plenty of room to create its own sonic space and range of moods. The supporting artists are all excellent: cellist David Cunliffe in Thomas' *Trio Sefardi*, violinist Desiree Ruhstrat in Rivera's *Plegaria y canto*, and the Avalon String Quartet, whose muted sounds make the perfect backdrop to the Leisner and Assad works. Kudos also to producer James Ginsburg, engineer Bill Maylone, and editor Jeanne Velonis, all top pros in their field.

and his intuitive and visionary performance really bears this out. Here the 8-bar ground, on which a baroque variation-form known as a passacaglia is based, is the principal subject of the mighty fugue, 124 bars over which Bach was able to exercise his full contrapuntal genius. Cameron's performance is every bit as powerful and compelling as the music itself.

That leaves the Chorale Prelude "O Mensch, bewein dein' Sünde groß" (O man, bewail your grievous sins), as passionate and gloomy as the hymn text would suggest, and Invention No. 8 in F major from the Inventions and Sinfonias (a.k.a. the 2 and 3-Part Inventions) that has more fire in it than many a beginning piano student could possibly imagine!



"Tartini's Violin" – Siskovic, violin; Ferrini, harpsichord (Dynamic Records)

Giuseppe Tartini (1692-1770), a native of Piran, Istria, then belonging to the Republic of Venice and now part of Slovenia, was one of history's most single-minded composers. Unlike his older contemporary Vivaldi, he shunned repeated offers to compose for the opera and confined his efforts almost exclusively to string instruments. Some 125-135 violin concertos and 200 violin sonatas constitute the bulk of his output, besides some 40 trio sonatas. According to legend, he became dissatisfied with his own skill on the violin in 1716 when he heard Francesco Veracini play, and locked himself in a room for some weeks until he was absolutely confident of his process as a master of the bow.

Like other composers in a fast-changing era in which the newer instruments opened up a wealth of harmonic possibilities, Tartini was a theorist as well as composer. He is credited with the discovery of the acoustical phenomenon of "sum" and "difference" tones, which had practical application for string instruments, allowing the composer to judge the sonic value of double stops in terms of the difference tone, or "terzo suono." The rediscovery of his treatise on ornamentation in the 1950's has proven invaluable to modern-day scholars and performing artists in the ongoing baroque revival.

In the present release on the Dynamic label, Slovenian violinist Črtomir Šiškovič, with Luca Ferrini as a worthy collaborator on harpsichord, presents a selection of Tartini's best-known sonatas, all with descriptive nicknames. They include "Didone Abbandonata," "The

Devil's Trill," "Pastorale," and "Staggion bella." He plays the composer's own violin, presumably the 1711 Stradivarius he is known to have acquired, which is now preserved in the Giuseppe Tartini Memorial Room in the Museo del mare in Piran.

Perhaps because it is a museum piece and has evidently not been reconditioned, Šiškovič treats it with a great deal of respect. He plays Tartini's music with a special warmth of affection in the most famous work on the program, the "Devil's Trill." As opposed to other, more "daring-do" accounts of this famous showpiece, he takes his time in the finale, where repeated onslaughts of the famous bravura cadenza with its sensational trills over double-stops make it one of the most challenging works in the violinist's repertoire. He gets the emphasis just right in these trills. Throughout the work, we get an impression of the very rich harmony, sometimes not stopping short of quirkiness, for which Tartini was famous.

"*Dido Abbandonata*," portrays the emotions of Dido, the Carthaginian queen, after she has been abandoned by Aeneas for the sake of his divinely-decreed destiny in Italy. The poignant "sighs" in the violin part reflect her distress. In the "Pastorale" Sonata, Ferrini forsakes his harpsichord for the organ in the interest of enriching the harmony of a genre of music associated with the Adoration of the Shepherds. For the only time on this program the composer calls for the non-standard tuning known as *scordatura* in order to emphasize the rustic subject. Here, the violin's G and D strings are raised a full tone to A and E, creating a bagpipes-like effect in the A major chords. A lilting Siciliana in 12/8 in the Largo finale pays tribute to this work's associations with the Nativity. Finally, the "Staggion bella" (Lovely Season) of the last sonata on the program can only be Springtime. Its melodic beauty is particularly reflected in its cantabile writing, and the insertion of a gigue helps glorify the subject, as if there could be any doubt.



Bach: The Brandenburg Concertos
Zsolt Kalló, Capella Savaria
(Hungaroton 2-CD set)

Violinist and director Zsolt Kalló leads the Capella Savaria, a finely honed chamber ensemble from Hungary, in vigorous performances of J.S. Bach's 6 Brandenburg Concertos that will certainly please listeners who look, first and foremost, for flair and excitement in these works. Beginning with the very robust Concerto No. 1 in F major, brilliantly scored for 21 players including a pair of hunting horns, three oboes and a bassoon that add immeasurably to the out-of-doors flavor of this particular Brandenburg, the instrumental numbers wind down all the way to the 8 players needed to realize Concerto No. 6 in B-flat, following a noticeable expressive curve from festivity to chamber-like intimacy that runs through the set. Tempi are consistently very quick in the present performances, resulting in a total duration of 88 minutes for a set that usually clocks in at 94-100 minutes in other recordings. The result is unfailingly zestful music-making that may be exhausting for the unwary listener, though people who favor this type of approach will find it just the sort of thing they like.

As I've implied, Brandenburg 1 sets the pace. This spacious work plays very much like a suite, rather than a concerto. My only negative critique is that the Capella Savaria takes a normal break before the fourth movement, rather than launching into it immediately. As a "bonus" movement, this Telemann-like mixture of Minuet and Polonaise should come as a totally unexpected surprise, an effect that is lost when you program a normal break after the third movement, which complaisant listeners have had every reason to believe was the finale.

Concerto 2, with its unusual and utterly brilliant quartet of soloists (trumpet, recorder, oboe, and violin) that tend to overshadow the supporting orchestra in many recordings (though *not* here) comes across with its customary aplomb and bravura, though it does not appear that the Capella's well-known zest for period instruments goes so far as to include a clarino in F for the trumpet part. Concerto 3 is scored for strings only, in chamber-like proportions that support the intimate, highly condensed nature of the music and the taut performance this ensemble gives it. In place of the "mystery" chords one sometimes hears between the two movements, Kalló improvises a neat little cadenza based on those chords. (I've heard other performances that interpolated a complete central movement, usually from one of Bach's sonatas for violin and harpsichord, at this point. Kalló's decision is, I believe, better and more authentic, as it does not destroy the tightly structured impression this concerto needs to give.)

Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 is given the requisite touch of virtuosity from Kalló on violin and a pair of recorders (played by Gabor Prehoffer and Bettina Simon). Concerto 5, with its solo parts for flauto traverso, violin, and harpsichord, is a true triple concerto for its fast, demanding roles for the solo instruments, including the stunning

moment when the harpsichord comes into its own historically in a brilliant opening movement cadenza. The slow movement, marked *Affetuoso*, makes for a surprisingly moody, and very effective, change of pace just before the finale, which is basically a gigue (jig) with fugal pretensions. Finally, Concerto No. 6, with its audacious mixture of modern strings (consisting of 2 violas plus cello) and a pair of viola da gambas, is taken very fast and with great ferocity in the outer movements. That emphasizes the languid and astonishingly moving beauty of the central Adagio very effectively, though the faster movements push the capabilities of the two gambas to their limit. In the last analysis, No. 6 manages to look forward in the history of music, with a lingering glance back at the past.



“Chronological Chopin” – Burkard Schliessmann, piano
(Divine Art, 3-CD set) hybrid SACD in 5.0 Surround

The inclusion of an all-Chopin program at the end of a monthly column devoted to the baroque may seem a little odd, but then Frédéric Chopin was a different kind of romantic composer. As the present artist, German pianist Burkard Schliessmann, observes, “Chopin’s own sense of Classical form made him a stranger to the world of phantasmagoria” - the world that absorbed much of the creative energies of composers such as Schumann, Weber, Berlioz and Liszt. In Chopin, by contrast, the feeling often strikes us clearer and at a deeper level because it comes to us through the music itself, without any extra-musical associations. With his aristocratic sense of style and his classical training, Chopin is always precise about what he has to say and was not prone to “wander about,” as other romantics were from time to time.

From the interpreter, Chopin requires the balance and clarity that Burkard Schliessmann brings to these recordings. Even amid the sound and fury of the most tempest-driven passages in such works as Ballade No. 2 in F, Op. 38 and the Polonaise-Fantaisie in A-flat, Op. 61, powerful chords in the left hand must never be allowed to overpower the poetry, the delicacy, or the poignancy of what the melody is saying.

Nor are Chopin’s lighter passages mere decorative filigree. Even in the briefest of his 24 Preludes, Op. 28, a half-dozen of which are less than a minute’s duration, there is musical substance, and Burkard is keen in bringing it out. Taken as a whole, Opus 28 is among Chopin’s most difficult works to perform as well as we hear it done in the present recording. These preludes mystified critics and performing artists alike for many years. Robert Schumann, for instance, was perplexed by them: “They are sketches, beginnings of études, or, so to speak, ruins, individual eagle pinions, all disorder and wild confusion.” The bewilderment exists only as long as one persists in viewing them as individual character pieces, rather than as a whole. Chopin was admittedly inspired to write the Preludes by the example of J.S. Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier, though he did not emulate Bach’s practice of composing preludes in every major and minor key, separated by rising semitones. In keeping with contemporary notions of harmony, his immediate model was probably a now-forgotten work by J. N. Hummel, a set of 24 preludes in all major and minor keys, Op. 67. Here, as Chopin was to observe in his own Op. 28, the chosen key sequence was a circle of fifths, with each major key being followed by its relative minor.

Alexander Brailowsky always said that the technique used to play Chopin’s music should be “fluent, fluid, delicate, airy, and capable of great variety of color.” That is easier said than done. One also has to observe the formal structure of Chopin’s music in order to bring out the poetry, or else all you will have is incontinent rhapsodizing, which is definitely *not* the impression one gets in Chopin’s music or Schliessmann’s performances of it. In his discussion of Chopin’s Polonaise-Fantaisie, Op. 61, the artist stresses that the *maestoso* character of this work calls for something that will, in the words of Franz Liszt, “bear the load, maintain equilibrium, and yet remain weightless.” In the last analysis, that is something that is to be perceived intuitively (a quality for which Schliessmann is well-known, by the way) rather than described and notated objectively. As we Americans say, “You either have it, or you don’t.” Burkard certainly has it.

In addition to his own booklet notes on his interpretation, Burkard also cites some revealing criticisms of Chopin by his fellow composers. The observation by Berlioz, for example, that “Chopin submitted only reluctantly to the yoke of bar lines; in my opinion he took rhythmical independence much too far.” Again, the Polonaise-Fantaisie comes to mind, and perhaps even more so, the Fantaisie in F minor, Op. 49, where an inward prayer, or rather a benediction, breaks through the fury of dramatic accents, anthem-like appeals to some heroic cause, and a maelstrom of roiling quavers. When the fluidity of a piece is at stake, bar lines be damned.

Another composer’s criticism that jumped out at me when I read it was Alexander Scriabin’s comment that Chopin’s intellect did not match his musical qualities, with the result that he “did not develop at all as a composer. From his first opus onward, he is present as a fully-formed composer with a clearly defined individuality.” Granted

that Chopin's individuality was always well-defined, there remains the question of his growth throughout his career. That gives meaning to the title "Chronological Chopin" that Burkard has chosen for the present 3-disc album. It is his contention that Chopin did indeed grow in stature, and in the grasp and control of his materials, throughout his life. Seen in that light, "Chronological Chopin" is more than just a reflection of an orderly mind. It is a study in how Chopin's increasing freedom and daring in handling his materials led to an increase in the power of his music to move us as profoundly as it does.

The most obvious places to study this phenomenon of increasing density, musically and emotively, are the Four Scherzos, Opp. 20, 31, 39, and 54, and the Four Ballades, Opp. 23, 38, 47, and 52. They are distributed among discs 1-3 in the order Chopin released them for publication. I don't mean to slight the Scherzos, in which, time and again, serious musical substance belies their trivial-sounding name (*scherzo* = Italian for "joke"). But for lack of space, I'm going to concentrate on Ballade No. 4, which many pianists consider the most difficult of the four both technically and musically. The first theme alone undergoes transformations involving use of counter-melodies, counterpoint, and surprisingly delicate *fioritura* reminiscent of the nocturnes. And that is just the beginning. With the development of the second theme, the musical structure becomes denser and the tension heightens as Chopin magically combines sonata and variation forms. Five stunning pianissimo chords lead suddenly into a fast, turbulent coda in counterpoint as powerful and exuberant as it is otherwise subtly crafted in other sections of this particular ballade.

From the point of view of the performer, the key to success, as Burkard shows us, is to be constantly vigilant for changes in metre, tempi, texture, and phrasing, as the music changes from gentle and deceptively naïve to powerfully intense and back again without warning, occasioning various degrees of tension and relaxation. In addition to this, Burkard brings his unique feeling for luminous color to the music to help bring out its inner life. Among pianists, there are so-called "colorists" and others who are basically attuned to form and structure. It is difficult to recall another artist in my recent experience who combines both traits as effectively as this one does. All of which, of course, makes "Chronological Chopin" such a memorable experience.