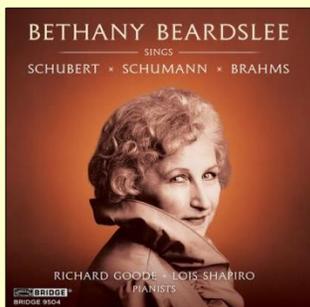


Phil's Classical Reviews

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Bethany Beardslee sings Lieder by Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms (Bridge Records)

The American soprano Bethany Beardslee (b.1925 and, happily, still among us and living in retirement) had a long and extraordinary career, especially as regards her commitment to modern composers from Schoenberg to Babbitt. Her flawless diction and flexible, expressive voice, ranging from silvery high notes to a warm middle range, was well suited to the many works of music she premiered.

She was also well-known for her contempt for commercialism in music. In a 1961 *Newsweek* interview, she said: "I don't think in terms of the public.... Music is for the musicians. If the public wants to come along and study it, fine. I don't go and try to tell a scientist his business because I don't know anything about it. Music is just the same way. Music is not entertainment."

Fortunately, Beardslee's disdain for things commercial did not extend to making recordings, and there are some two dozen extant listings in her discography. Many of the composers whose works she championed would not have been familiar to the average listener. The present Bridge Records release of 1984 and 1986 recordings of songs by Schubert, Schumann and Brahms, made in the Chapel at Wellesley College, proves the happy exception.

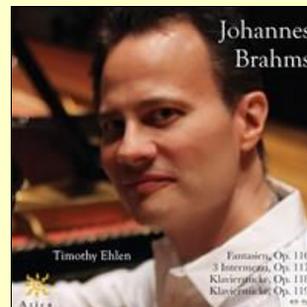


Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5 Alessio Bax, piano; Simon Over, Southbank Sinfonia (Signum)

Alessio Bax, the native of Bari, Italy who now lives in New York City when he isn't concertizing worldwide, gives a really stunning account of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, the "Emperor." With the very capable assistance of Simon Over and the Southbank Sinfonia, Bax relishes exploring Beethoven's splashy cadences and full-bodied sounds that overwhelm the listener with their warmth of color and stirring rhythm.

Beethoven premiered the "Emperor" in 1811. After two centuries as a show-stopper in the concert hall, it is rather late in the day to engage in the business of tweaking new insights out of this venerable war horse, and Bax and Over, to their credit, do not attempt to do so. This pianist's keyboard runs and flourishes are nothing short of sensational, and Over adds to the excitement in the climaxes by compressing time values between notes. But these are no more than the customary discretions that one allows a really good pianist and conductor at the top of their form.

"Life is short, so play your cadenza first" would seem to be Beethoven's motto in leading off the Allegro with a cadenza by the solo piano, a procedure usually reserved for the final lap. Also new was Beethoven's practice of writing out his cadenzas in full score. As a respite from the



Johannes Brahms: 20 Piano Pieces, Op. 116-119 – Timothy Ehlen (Azica)

Timothy Ehlen is currently professor of piano at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign in addition to his busy recital career here and abroad. His teachers have included John Perry and Paul Schenly. I have earlier reviewed several installments in his now-complete cycle of the Beethoven sonatas. As much as I enjoyed them, I must admit that I find his Brahms Piano Pieces, Op. 116-119, even better.

I'll say more. Ehlen is at or near the head of his class in the way he brings out the essential character of each of these twenty *klavierstücke*, including their expressive qualities and the way mood, harmony, or rhythm may change suddenly and unexpectedly in the midst of a piece. Under Ehlen's hand, the quiet, meditative pieces such as the Intermezzo in E Major, Op. 116, No. 4, can float like slowly moving clouds over a landscape, while the faster, more energetic and agitated ones such as the Intermezzo in F minor, Op. 118, No. 4, an Allegretto marked *un poco agitato*, can be characterized by unquiet moods that or may not be dispersed at the end.

In these ultimate specimens of a great genre, the character piece, transcendence and bliss, passion and strife are to be found, occasionally in the same piece. The Ballade in G Minor, Op. 118, No. 3, is bouncy and athletic, but with a

These three composers were at the apex of the German art-song genre known as *lieder*. Aided by two first-rate accompanists on piano (Lois Shapiro in the Schubert and Schumann selections, and Richard Goode in the Brahms), Beardslee explores the manifold beauties of a program that includes the “usual suspects” in a lieder recital of this scope, plus comparative rarities that will cause long-time lieder buffs to sit up and pay attention.

The former include such perennial favorites as Schubert’s *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel) with the increasing excitement of Goethe’s heroine as she daydreams of her lover Faust, and *Der Einsame* (The Solitary One) a lied in praise of contentment and self-sufficiency in which piano figurations suggest the crackling of a fire’s embers and the chirping of crickets in the solitude. Schumann’s *Widmung* (Dedication) also fits the description of a lieder favorite in its rhapsodic mood: “You my soul, you my heart, / You my bliss, O you my pain.” Brahms’ *Wir wandelten* (We wandered together) is yet another favorite, a psychosocial study of two lovers walking together where the piano fills in their unspoken thoughts.

The rarities in this program include Schubert’s tempestuous setting of Schlegel’s *Waldesnacht* (Forest Night) in which flashes of lightning in a dark forest night symbolize a summons from God, and also *Die Gefangenen Sanger* (The Captive Singers) where the poet equates the plight of the caged songbirds whose song, instead of joining the gentle forest breezes, is smashed back into the hard stone dwelling, with his own situation. Schumann’s *Der Schatzgraber* (The Treasure Seeker) ends violently, with stone and rubble falling down upon the foolish plunderer while angels weep. And Brahms, in his setting of Heine’s *Der Tod, das ist der kuhle Nacht* (Death, it is the cool night) contrasts the weariness unto death of the poet with the refreshing song of the nightingale that he hears in his dreams.

mounting excitement in this opening movement, the piano takes up the second theme quietly and softly, soon to be augmented by the eloquent presence of the horns.

The slow movement, *Adagio un poco moto*, is the emotional heart and soul of the work. The pianist takes the lead here in a deeply felt, private meditation which we are permitted to witness. The moment when the closing gesture by the piano leads *attacca* into a rousing, galloping, triumphant rondo finale in 6/8 time is superbly accomplished in the present performance.

The recorded sound is engineered to allow the kind of spatial separation of bass and treble that was often the ideal in stereo LP recordings in days of yore. The inobtrusive sounds of the lower strings and tympani underneath the piano’s meditative thoughts in the Adagio are also beautifully captured in the sonics.

Even at a playing time of 37:34, there’s no sense in trying to find a compatible album mate for the “Emperor” Concerto. There just aren’t any suitable candidates, so the alternate is to fill out the program with lesser material that is still attractive and occasionally intriguing. The “intriguing” slot is aptly filled by Piano Sonata No. 27 in E minor, Op. 90, with its contrast between the lean, brusque intensity and concentration of the opening movement and the lighter, more relaxed, bucolic mood of the second (and final) movement.

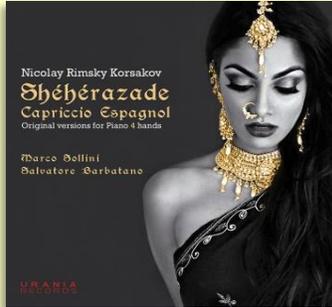
The “lesser” slot is taken by a lithe Polonaise in C major that Beethoven wrote for the Empress of Russia. Very much in the Russian style and almost danceable, it of course lacks the strong element of Polish nationalism with which Chopin was to infuse the genre. We also have a short suite of Contredancesⁱⁱ Op. 14, that are mostly appropriate as encores to a lighter program. The exception is No. 7 in E-flat Major which leaps out at us when we realize with a shock of recognition that Beethoven used it again in the finale of his “Eroica” symphony!

splendidly contrasted mood in its middle section that Ehlen relishes for its inspired part-writing and radiant harmonies in the third-related key of B major. The greatest tenderness and bliss, plus quietly sophisticated rhythms, exist in the previous piece, the Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 118, No. 2, marked Andante *teneramente* (i.e., tenderly). A different mood exists in the Intermezzo in E-flat Minor, Op. 118, No. 6, marked *largo e mesto* (slow and sad) which moves like a nocturnal procession swept over by wispy arpeggios. Sad, but not utterly dispirited, is the way Ehlen takes this remarkable piece.

Clara Schumann famously said of Brahms that, in these pieces, “He combines passion and tenderness in the smallest of spaces.” Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the three Intermezzi that constitute Op. 117. These pieces of profound intimacy and even sorrow happen to be favorites of Ehlen, particularly the first of the set which was inspired by a cradle song whose gently rocking movement in its outer sections has given it the name “Scottish Lullaby.” The middle section in the parallel minor suggests a dark foreboding which is dispelled by the return of the mood of the opening section. In Ehlen’s inspired interpretation the impression of darkness still lingers in our memory.

In the recital hall, there is no compelling reason to play all these Piano Pieces in the same program or to play them consecutively, so they are usually interleaved with other music. On the compact disc, on the other hand, attending to all twenty in the same listening session can be a uniquely rewarding experience that gives us a vivid impression of their variety, subtlety, and expressive beauty. The program culminates with the dramatic force of the Rhapsody, aptly marked *Allegro risoluto*, that concludes Op. 119, a piece that Timothy Ehlen gives a really stirring send-off.

These are but a few of the twenty selections in a very wide-ranging program filled with emotion and striking imagery. And, yes, these songs are very entertaining!



Rimsky-Korsakov: Shéhérazade, Capriccio Espagnol – Sollini & Barbatano, piano 4-hands (Urania)

The Italian piano duo of Marco Sollini and Salvatore Barbatano give us inspiring performances of Rimsky-Korsakov's Shéhérazade and Capriccio Espagnol in the original versions for piano 4 hands. In the process, they allow us to hear the elements that make up these long-established war horses of the symphonic repertoire as we've never heard them before.

First, a word about the piano 4 hands genre. This means you have two pianists, designated *primo* and *secondo*, sitting on the same bench and sharing the same keyboard. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, before classical music got to be leaner and more acerbic, this was a good way for a composer to assess what he needed to do in writing a fully scored version of a lush symphonic work. The composer could hear the harmony and counterpoint optimally in order to determine what instruments to use for his purpose. In other words, it was a valuable working-tool, one that the general public seldom or never had the chance to hear.

The fact that this is the first time in almost forty years as a reviewer that I have ever encountered these two symphonic standards arranged for piano duo, either in the recital hall or in recordings, indicates to me that Rimsky-Korsakov probably



Rachmaninov: Piano Concerto 3; Corelli Variations – Boris Giltburg, Carlos Miguel Prieto, Royal Scottish National Orchestra (Naxos)

Back in 1996, a movie called *Shine* was a box office hit. Now all but forgotten, its story dealt with a pianist's mental obsession about Sergei Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto. In the urban mythology of the day, the "Rach 3" came to acquire a bad rap as "the concerto nobody could ever play, and if you could you wouldn't want to because it would make you go insane."

Well, as Moscow-born Israeli pianist Boris Giltburg shows us, the situation isn't quite as hopeless as all that. True, Piano Concerto No. 3 is a dense, thematically rich work in which the pianist is often required to play very intensely for long stretches, both with the orchestra and in a sensational first-movement cadenza, requiring an enormous amount of stamina and concentration from the performer. It refuses to settle into a predictable pattern and just "play itself." But it has its compensations.

Foremost of these is the melody, heard right from the beginning in the opening movement. It is memorable, being of limited range: less than an octave and mostly moving in single-tone steps. Various taking on the character of a song, liturgical chant or march, we will hear it again in the second movement, where it occurs twice, and in the finale. It helps to unify and provide continuity to a work that is long (43:40 in the present



"The Devil's Trill," Music for Violin & Piano by Mozart, Brahms, Hába, Tartini – Auerbach-Pierce Duo (MSR Classics)

Violinist Dan Auerbach and pianist Joshua Pierce have been playing together as a duo since they met in the 1990's. Here, they give us their best in a program ranging from Mozart to Hába, with side-trips to Brahms and Tartini. It is an intriguing lineup, to say the least.

"The Devil's Trill" takes its name from a work of Venetian composer Giuseppe Tartini (1692-1770) who divulged to a confidant several years before his deathⁱⁱⁱ that he had been inspired by a dream in which the devil appeared to him and revealed the secret of how to play the sensational trill we hear in Violin Sonata in G Minor, where it is played over what have been described as double stops or a melodic line in accented quavers. That trill makes it one of the most difficult works in the entire repertoire. We get hints of it early-on before a succession of hammer blows heralds the final section where it is fully realized.

Mozart wrote his violin Sonata in E Minor, K304 in 1788 after the untimely death of his mother, who had accompanied him to Paris during his unsuccessful sojourn there. It is his only sonata (of 42) in a minor key, inviting speculation as to his personal grief. It is to be found there in the chromatic harmony of the opening theme and its repeated quarter-note accompaniment. As

never intended them for public performance. That has nothing to do with their inherent value as real music. The 4 hand versions of both works, particularly Shéhérazade, are treasure-troves of great music, imaginatively conceived and executed. They represent a rich repertoire that has come to light in recent decades because of the emergence of teams of performing duo pianists and the veritable recording *explosion* that has taken place in the digital era.

Sollini and Barbatano take us on a thrilling journey (dare we say a magic carpet ride?) through Rimsky's Shéhérazade, allowing us to hear the fantastic architecture and the rich sonorities and timbres that make this work as compelling an experience as it is, linked together by a series of light and dark musical motifs that suggest atmosphere rather than depict a narrative in specific terms. There is no "Mickey Mouse", i.e., physically descriptive music, in Shéhérazade, only the power of suggestion to free our imaginations, with descriptive titles such as "The Sea and Sinbad's Ship," "The Tale of the Kalendar Price," and "The Festival at Baghdad" to serve as guideposts.

In particular, the pure enchantment and airborne movement of "The Young Prince and the Young Princess" really come to life in this performance. The accompaniment underneath the florid melodies and melismas in this work is generally of such sonority and compass that I could imagine Sollini and Barbatano Indian-wrestling to determine who would get to play *that* part!

Capriccio Espagnol is explosive and rhapsodic, a pure showpiece based on the characteristic rhythms of the various regions of Spain. The zest that our artists invest in it makes it the perfect encore for this program.

performance, and neither Giltburg nor conductor Carlos Miguel Prieto are inclined to be slow pokes), of symphonic scope, and structured in an over-arching vault, like the ceiling of a Russian Orthodox church.

We are in for a long narrative here. It is reminiscent of a great Russian novel with its recurring themes and a richness of incidents that contribute to the overall impression of unity and cohesion rather than just mere diversity. Among the signposts along the way is a first-movement cadenza that will recur later in the finale. Rachmaninoff actually wrote two cadenzas, the original a meditation of profound gravity and deep emotion, the second light-fingered, lyrical, and even discretely humorous (perhaps a sop to the composer's critics?) Giltburg wisely opts for the darker original cadenza, which carries much more weight and provides a link to the Finale.

Two other moments really stand out in my memory. One is the very opening of the Adagio movement, marked Intermezzo. There is a sense of a vast, melancholy open expanse here in the widely spaced chords, like the feeling you might get from surveying the ruins of your village the morning after a gigantic sinkhole had swallowed it up. The other is the repeat in the Finale of the soft, dreamy second theme from the opening movement. Occurring here at the perfect psychological moment, it provides solace and a pause for calm reflection amid the ferocious pace of a movement where incidents seem to jump out at the listener in breathtaking succession – at least in *this* performance!

Giltburg's prowess is every bit as formidable in the companion-piece, Variations on a Theme of Corelli, for solo piano. This work provides a link with the Third Piano Concerto in which the second movement is also a set of variations. The Corelli Variations are, of course, based on the old 15th century tune *La Folia* (Madness) which was originally a dance to ward off the plague. Without quite losing site of its Iberian origin, the composer takes us on a far-ranging journey that is varied,

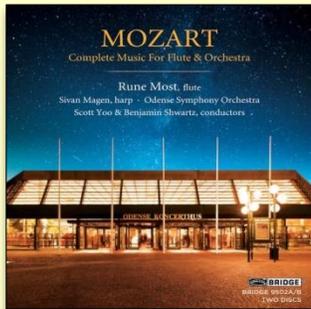
was his custom, however, Mozart was discrete about revealing his emotions, so that his contemporaries might well have admired the gracious elements in this sonata without suspecting any underlying grief. Auerbach and Pierce are definitely in tune with the emotional ambiguity of this work.

Brahms was another composer who wasn't accustomed to wear his heart on his sleeve. Nevertheless, there is much of the inner man in Violin Sonata No. 1 in C Major, Op. 78, including his use in the finale of material from the head-motif he had used in two of his tenderest songs, "Regenlied," and "Nachklang" (Rain Song and Remembrance). It is just the bare beginning of a melody and its pattering accompaniment, but it is sufficient. From the gentle lift-off at the opening of the work through the expressive passage that succeeds it, and then the sudden outburst in the Vivace that follows like a painful memory, it is a prequel of the thematic, rhythmic, and affective changes that occur throughout the sonata.

Auerbach applies his lean tone and demon precision throughout this work. I might have preferred a broader tone and greater warmth in the slow movement, where it is most applicable, though I see his point in the contrasting section where the dotted rhythm is suggestive of a funeral march. Pierce supports and complements him with assurance in a work in which the piano is always more than mere accompaniment.

Alois Hába (1893-1973) was a Moravian composer who was greatly influenced by microtones. These are intervals smaller than semitones that are not customarily found in the Western way of tuning, but which occur often in music of the Gypsies where they enrich the musical expression like generous dashes of paprika. Hába's Music in Quarter-Tones for Violin Solo, Op. 9B, ranges from tortured, coruscating tones to flamboyant rhythms and even a touch of humor. This type of music is very congenial to both Auerbach and Pierce, who have participated in numerous microtonal

	<p>exhilarating, and also quite personal. With a sad Intermezzo occurring midway through the variations and an eloquent coda at the end, this work provides Giltburg with the sort of meat on which he likes to feast.</p>	<p>music festivals over the years.</p> <p>In his total commitment to microtonal music, Hába favored athematicism (which means he wasn't interested in developing themes). Therein lies the rub. His music will appeal most to the rare listener who doesn't instinctively listen for melodies but who will respond to a musical work of this sort with a contented smile that says, "What great microtones!"</p>
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Mozart: Complete Works for Flute and Orchestra
 Rune Most, flute: Sivan Magen, harp
 Odense Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Scott
 Yoo and Benjamin Schwartz (K315) (Bridge)
 2-CD slimline set

It must be years since I last listened to anyone's recordings of the works heard in this program. From the moment I began auditioning these performances, I realized what a dolt I'd been. These four works – the Flute Concertos, K313-314, the Andante in C, K315, and the Concerto for Flute & Harp, K299 – reveal the youthful Mozart at his most engaging, writing immediately appealing music for patrons who, unfortunately, defaulted or cheese-pared the young man from Salzburg when it came to paying up. But that's a different story, which is well documented in the booklet notes.

You will hear absolutely nothing of Mozart's struggles in those years in the music itself, which is unfailingly delightful and occasionally moving in ways that did not exceed the bounds of propriety in its day, even as it discretely opened contemporary listeners' ears to its ravishingly beautiful sounds.

K313 in G Major is a work of rare melodic beauty and invention. The most extraordinary movement is the radiant Adagio in which the warmth of the solo flute appears to good advantage against a shimmering backdrop provided by the two orchestral flutes. The Rondo finale in minuet tempo contrasts grace and humor with a surprise ending. K314 in D Major, on the other hand, was Mozart's rewriting of his earlier Oboe Concerto in C major, with changes in phrase endings and dynamics in addition to the necessary key-change that made it, to my mind, even more attractive and sparkling than the original. The theme of its finale bears a striking resemblance to an aria that was to appear five years later in his opera *Abduction from the Seraglio*. The Andante in C, K315 is an orphan, the only finished movement from a never-completed concerto. Its lyrical elegance makes us wish its fate had been otherwise.

The high point of the program occurs in the Andantino of the Concerto for Flute & Harp, K299, a handsome hybrid of concerto and symphony concertante. In this slow movement, orchestral winds and divided violas provide a backdrop reminiscent of a nocturnal serenade, against which flute and harp sing an exalted duet. The quick-paced finale, in the tempo of a gavotte, brings in the orchestral horns and oboes, creating a festive concertante mood.

In these recordings Danish flutist Rune Most performs on a wooden flute, made by Howell Roberts, that has an appropriately warm tone in its middle register and a surprising brilliance in the higher tones that is everything one might expect instead from an instrument of precious metal. He plays his own cadenzas in K313-314. Israeli harpist Sivan Magen, currently the principal harp of the Finnish Radio Orchestra, joins him in K299, in which the cadenzas are by Robert V Levin. All the cadenzas are tastefully in keeping with the style of Mozart's day, which he raised considerably above the level of mere Rococo decorativeness.

The recordings, made in Carl Nielsen Hall, Odense, Denmark, were produced by David Starobin (K314-315 and K299) and Viggo Mangor (K313). Mangor, himself a musician of some distinction, was the session engineer and editor for all the recordings, and Adam Abeshouse was mastering engineer. You can credit this recording team for warm, persuasive sound that is audiophile-class without jamming the fact into our ears.

ⁱ He didn't trust other pianists not to mess up his concertos with showy, empty pianistics.

ⁱⁱ It seems that nobody ever bothers to tell you what a contredanse was. (From the sound of the word, it would seem to be a dance that you did to protest what other people were dancing.) Actually, a contredanse was a French folk dance, based on an English original. It was danced by 2 or 4 couples, usually in a quadrille, or square. In Beethoven's day it was popular in the homes of the nobility and the bourgeoisie in England, France, and Germany. New dance music was always in demand, and composers such as Beethoven and Schubert did not consider it beneath their dignity to compose such trifles.

ⁱⁱⁱ Significantly, Tartini did not attempt to capitalize on this sensational story for its obvious PR value during his active career. In those days, if you claimed diabolic inspiration for anything, you stood a chance of being visited by agents of the Inquisition, who might give you something that would make The Third Degree seem like child's play!