

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

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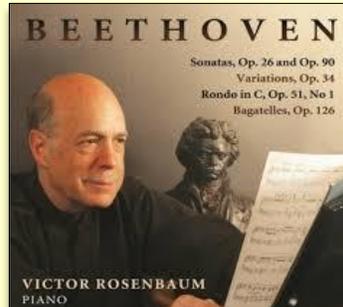


"Refuge," Works for Solo Violin by Bach, Ben-Haim, Bartók – Liv Migdal (Genuin Classics)

"Refuge" may seem a strange title for the present album. But, as the electrifying young violinist Liv Migdal explains it, the word seemed apt as a metaphor for the way the music heard here was a form of refuge for the three composers – J. S. Bach, Bela Bartók, and Paul Ben-haim – and for Yehudi Menuhin, the master violinist associated with all three. A refuge during the crucial phases and dramatic moments of all their lives.

For Migdal, Bach's Sonata for Solo Violin No. 3 in C Major, BWV 1005 from the great set of Sonatas and Partitas is a whole world of music encompassed by a single instrument. Migdal characterizes the opening Adagio as intoning "a heartbeat embarking on a journey of the soul," exploring bold harmonic horizons before returning home to C Major. It is followed by one of the longest and richest double fugues Bach ever conceived, with complex contrapuntal structures that lead back to eloquent individual voices.

A journey of a different sort occurs in Bach's use in this same fugue of the chorale *Komm heil'ger Geist* (Come, Holy Spirit), which is identical in its first seven notes with the melody of another chorale, *An Wasserflüssen Babylon* (By the Waters of Babylon, there we sat and wept), the one verse serving as balm for the sorrow expressed in the other. A deeply expressive Largo, in Migdal's words



Beethoven: Piano Sonatas, Opp. 26, 90; Rondo; Bagatelles – Victor Rosenbaum (Bridge Records)

Victor Rosenbaum's Beethoven is always a keenly awaited delight for yours truly. It's all the more gratifying to hear this pianist once again after he has been absent from this column for more than a decade. There's a reason for that. The Indianapolis native who studied with some eminent teachers in his earlier years has been busy returning the favor ever since, passing on what he has learned in lectures, master classes and workshops for students and educators in schools and music centers around the globe.

All the more reason to treasure this well-packed (80:25) CD release from Bridge. Many of the program items show Beethoven at his wittiest and most inventive, in music that also moves us on occasion as only he could. We begin with the Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 26. This is primo early-period Beethoven, opening unconventionally with a lyrical theme-and-variations movement that is mostly upbeat with the exception of the requisite minor-key variation.

A playful Scherzo is followed by the most memorable movement of all, a Funeral March on the Death of a Hero in slow, measured tread with drum rolls and imitations of musket fire. Clearly a predecessor of the similar movement in the "Eroica" Symphony, it also anticipated the funeral march, in all but name, in Chopin's own B-flat minor sonata, as



Chopin: Complete Études, Opp. 10, 25 - Diana Jaworska, piano (Centaur Records)

Diana Jaworska, Polish pianist who now resides in the south of France, has just come out with another challenging program to match her earlier Centaur release of Chopin's complete Preludes (see *Classical Reviews*, 10/2018). This time, it's the 24 Études, Op. 10 and Op. 25, and "challenging" is indeed the right word.

There are good reasons why you will seldom have the opportunity to hear the complete Études performed all together in the recital hall. Even on records they are a comparative rarity. The basic reason is that they require a multifaceted interpreter in at least three or four respects. First, we must keep in mind the fact that they are resolutions of technical difficulties from the composer's point of view. Second, they require of the pianist a "transcendent" technique requiring the greatest flexibility of arm and hand extensions. Chopin was also interested in strengthening what had traditionally been regarded as "weak" fingers, plus a totally unprecedented independence of both hands that was needed to meet the expressive demands of the music he was pioneering.

Third, individual études need to come across as real music, and not merely a keyboard practicum. Finally, there's an implied harmonic theory at work here, similar to, though not as thoroughly pursued as in the Preludes. Few pianists possess all the qualities of mind, temperament,

as well as in her performance, "opens all the sluices" for the virtuosic Allegro assai as an expression of all-encompassing joy.

The Sonata for solo Violin, Sz.117 by Béla Bartók was commissioned by Yehudi Menuhin in 1943. It was a critical time in the life of the composer who had left his homeland, Hungary, out of bitterness at its imminent pact with Hitler. A great and powerful work, it was destined to be Bartók's last completed composition. Like the Bach, it is in four movements in alternating, contrasted tempi. It begins with a *Tempo di ciaccona*, related in spirit to the great Chaconne from Bach's D Minor Partita but skilfully interwoven with intervals and harmonies from Hungarian folk music. It also has a mighty fugue for its second movement, followed by a lovely Adagio titled *Melodia* that for many will be the high point of the work. The stirring finale, a fervent Presto, is aptly described by Migdal as a "shadowy, spectral dance" which "breathes air that drifts and blows."

Paul Ben-Haim (1897-1984), another figure who left Germany after the rise of the Third Reich in 1933, resettled in the British Mandate of Palestine where he influenced generations of composers and performing musicians in his long life. The chastly beautiful and economical Sonata, which he composed on a commission from Yehudi Menuhin, was premiered in February, 1952 in Carnegie Hall, the same place where Menuhin had given the Bartók its premiere eight years earlier.

What Migdal terms "pulses of rebellion" drive the opening Allegro energico, while the finale generates a blaze of energy, "an irresistible pull back into life." In between, we are given the strange, softly persuasive and haunting beauty of the slow movement, *Lento e sotto voce*, which our artist describes as "a lament that seems to waft across from another planet," emerging from and then disappearing into nothingness. (It made yours truly want to hear more of this much-neglected composer!)

did its Allegro finale in perpetual movement.

Six Variations in F Major, Op. 34, is unique in not basically adhering to the key of the theme, as one was supposed to do, but uses a sequence of descending minor and major thirds to pass through a series of keys, exploring their colors and traditional characters. The results are bold and fortuitous, even if Beethoven never again repeated the experiment.

Rondo in C Major, Op. 51, No. 1, like its companion, is a study in the use of form to release the poetry in music. In this instance, Beethoven used triplets to accelerate the phrase, ending with a powerfully assertive cadence.

Sonata in E Major in two movements, Op. 90, contrasts a powerful and dramatic first movement in e minor with the flowing Schubertian lyricism of the second movement in the richly endowed key of E major. Beethoven really loved the gracious theme which returns at every convenient opportunity.

Finally, we have the Bagatelles, Op. 126. The word normally suggests something trifling or ephemeral, but take a look at that opus number. It marks the six Bagatelles as contemporary with two *really* big Beethoven productions, the Ninth Symphony and Missa Solemnis. Considering that Beethoven told his publisher these small-scale works were among "the best I have written," they bear close inspection. Not every pianist can make as much of them, but under the hands of as informed an interpreter as Rosenbaum they emerge as individual miniatures, pregnant with possibilities for further development, much in the same way as Chopin's Preludes.

Rosenbaum also has the technical equipment to put across a program as varied as this, including a sure, confident tone and a steady pulse in the accompaniments. The qualities he cites in the Bagatelles, "invention, idiosyncrasy, depth of feeling, and range of expression," are present throughout the recital.

and technique to do equal justice to all these elements in the Etudes. Consequently most performing artists pick and choose those pieces that best suit their artistry and style for program items and encores, rather than playing all 24. The most popular of the Études in this regard tend to have been favored (by posterity, not by Chopin) with characteristic names: for instance, numbers 3 in E major, Op.10, "Tristesse," 1 in A-flat major, Op.25, "Aeolian Harp," and 12 in C minor, Op.25, "Ocean,"

Jaworska does commendably well with most of the nicknamed études. Her "Tristesse" and "Aeolian Harp," for example, possess all the requisite warmth and feeling that Chopin intended, while her "Revolutionary" Étude, Op. 10, No. 12, conveys the mounting excitement of an incipient revolt. The nickname of No.5 in G-flat major, Op.10, the "Black Key," for once, is based on the reality of its layout on the keyboard rather than any poetic fantasy, as it is written to be played entirely on the black keys. Jaworska does a splendid job with this, one of the more technically difficult of the études due to its widely spaced intervals. Curiously, she seems challenged by the similarly disjunctive elements in the other G-flat Étude, Op. 25, No. 9, opting for a slower and more deliberate approach than I have been used to hearing.

That slow, deliberate approach is also evident in the way Jaworska takes the normally rambunctious Étude in F major, Op. 25, No. 3 and in the outer sections of Op. 25, No. 5 in E minor, though in the latter instance she really captures the flow and warmth of its middle section. She is well attuned to the emotion in Op 25, No. 11 in A minor, nicknamed the "Winter Wind" for the way its maelstrom of chromatic passagework for the right hand, reinforced by a vehement rhythmic motif in the left, conjures up the image of an icy wind howling over forgotten graves. Her Op. 10, No. 6 in E-flat minor, though innocent of a descriptive title, gave me the image of a softly moaning night wind conveying long-forgotten memories. A wonderful moment!

Han-Jui (Henry) Chen, a native of Taiwan who has taught double bass in the U.S. at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and Ball State University among other notable achievements, teams with Canadian pianist Lucas Wong in performances of music by 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century French composers Franck, Debussy, Fauré and Hahn that bring out the distinctive quality in all these works..



“Ma Contrebasse Chérie” French violin sonatas, transcribed for double bass - Henry Chen (Centaur)

First up in the program is César Franck’s great Sonata in A Major. It was originally written for violin, but, as the increasing number of inspired performances in transcription for the cello and double bass in recent years have shown us, it is not the exclusive idiomatic property of that instrument. Indeed, the warmth of the lower voices fits the harmonic language and the wealth of vocal-inspired melodies in this work very well indeed.

This is a true sonata for string instrument *and* piano. The latter, in fact, often leads the way into a new section. From the gently swaying and rocking motion of the opening Allegretto, with its quicker contrasted episode, to the exciting turbulence of the Allegro, the exhilarating sense of boundless exploration in the third movement, and the thrill of the chase in the finale with its voices in canon, there’s a constant demand for the close collaboration of partners we witness here in Chen and Wong.

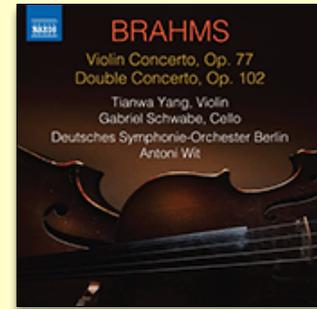
By itself, the fact that the Franck sonata is set in four movements conspires to give it an uncommon breadth, truly symphonic in scope. The main melody of the opening movement recurs in different guises in all the succeeding movements, lending the work its distinctively coherent cyclic unity. That unity must seem to occur with the greatest naturalness in order to be effective.

Furthermore, the cantabile writing and the way the relative emphasis is passed between instruments call for the partnership between performers that Chen and Wong are ideally equipped to give it. Their patient and deeply insightful approach pays dividends in a work in which warmth and grandeur wander hand in hand.

Claude Debussy’s Sonata for Cello and Piano was no doubt a hard pill for its earliest audiences to swallow because of its collapse of boundaries between melody and ornamentation and its frequent changes in timbre and tempo for which they were not prepared. There is a certain nervous character to this music, particularly noticeable in the second movement, “Sérénade,” where the instrument plays plucked string passages in a place where Debussy’s audiences had a right to expect long, slow, expressive melodies.

These pizzicati, to my mind, sound even more hauntingly effective in the present transcription for double bass than they do in accounts of the original violin version that I have heard. Chen and Wong take the transition between this movement and the finale, marked *Animé, léger et nerveux* (lively, light, and nervous) with the greatest assurance.

I haven’t said anything about the *mélodie*-derived pieces, Gabriel Fauré’s *Poème d’un Jour* and Reynaldo Hahn’s *À Chloris*, but the lyrical beauty in both of these song transcriptions speaks for itself in the present performances. That goes especially for the Fauré, whose three sections titled *Rencontre, Toujours, and Adieu* (First Meeting, Forever, and Farewell) would seem to indicate the poignancy of a passionate, short-lived romance.



Brahms: Violin Concerto; Double Concerto – Tianwa Yang, violin; Gabriel Schwabe, cello; (Naxos)

Chinese violinist Tianwa Yang has made continuous progress toward her stature as a world-class artist all through the past decade. She has finally arrived, gloriously, in accounts of two of the most rewarding listening experiences in all music. With the able assistance of Antoni Wit and the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester of Berlin, she exults in Brahms’ Violin Concerto in D, Op. 77 and Double Concerto in A minor, Op. 102, two works to test any violinist’s artistry.

The Violin Concerto opens with an introduction by the orchestra, which increases in fire and commitment upon the entry of the soloist. This is Brahms the classical romantic in all his glory, and Yang and the orchestra make superb work developing one of his most heartfelt themes. With our eyelashes still wet from the opening movement and its cadenza, we are taken into an Adagio illuminated with great sentiment and lyric beauty. (Of particular interest is the interplay of the violin with the horn, which we may take as Brahms’ memorial to his father whose instrument it was.) The Adagio’s last dying measures are followed almost immediately by a rousing Hungarian finale, mounting in excitement to the very end.

More sensual beauty awaits us in the Double Concerto, where Yang is partnered by cellist Gabriel Schwabe in a work in which the voices of the two instruments interweave, savoring glowing harmonies and blends. Occasionally, they even extend one another’s lines, giving us the momentary illusion of a single instrument with an incredible range!

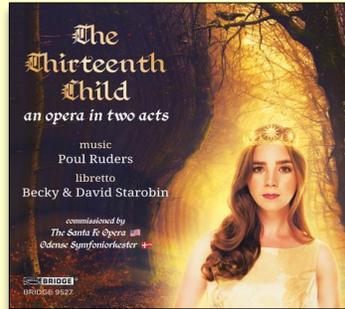


20<sup>th</sup> Century Harpsichord Concertos by Leigh, Rorem, Kalabis, Nyman. Jory Vinikour; harpsichordist (Cedille)

How stunning, and illuminating, are these performances by Jory Vinikour of harpsichord concertos by 20<sup>th</sup> century composers! With the superb assistance from Scott Speck and select members of the Chicago Philharmonic and optimally recorded sound by producer James Ginsburg and engineer Bill Maylone, they really put the venerable old instrument on the map of modern contemporary music. The four works presented here are neither neo-baroque nor are they condescending. Rather, they reveal the harpsichord as a distinctive voice that still has a lot to say to people in modern times.

We begin with the 1934 Concerto for Harpsichord and Strings by Walter Leigh (1905-1942), a promising English composer whose life was cut short in action during the Second War. With its appealing melodies, concise structure and idiomatic solo writing that fits the instrument perfectly, this work craves greater audience exposure. The slow movement, an Andante with warm, dark coloring, has such a gentle folkwise character that it could only have been written by an Englishman.

American composer Ned Rorem (b.1923) wrote his Concertino da Camera for harpsichord with a small ensemble of mixed strings and winds 'way back in 1946, but the work was consigned to a trunk where it lay unperformed for many years. Now, 73 years later and amazingly still alive and vital at age 95, Rorem expresses his delight and gratitude to Jory Vinikour on the occasion of its world premiere recording, in a letter

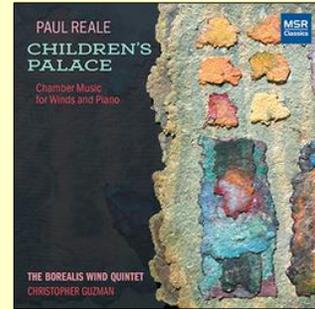


Poul Ruders, *The Thirteenth Child*, opera in two acts with soloists, the Bridge Academy Singers and Odense Symphony Orchestra conducted by David Starobin and Benjamin Schwartz (Bridge)

The *Thirteenth Child* is a new work by Danish composer Poul Ruders that I don't quite know how to evaluate. The libretto by Becky and David Starobin is based on *The Twelve Princes*, a lesser-known story of the Brothers Grimm that has the "once upon a time" character of a fairytale. Now, fairytales, by their very nature, don't have to be strictly plausible in everyday terms, but this one is really strange. The Starobins admit they were at pains to re-write the episodic story in a more linear fashion and flesh out the characters with a greater degree of motivation than one finds in the original, all in the interest of a staged production.

It seems there were this King and Queen who reigned in the mythical kingdom of Frohagord, by name Hjarne and Gertrude (sung here by bass Matt Boehler and mezzo-soprano Tamara Mumford). Their happiness is overshadowed by the prophesy that their twelve children, all sons, are destined to plot against their father and kill him. To forestall this dire fate, Hjarne and Gertrude have a thirteenth child, a girl on whom the crown will descend as sole heir. The twelve princes wander off into self-imposed exile in the forest. In their memory, Gertrude hand-embroiders twelve shirts decorated with "lilies red as blood." The royal house, though shaken, endures.

When the *Thirteenth Child*, Lyra (sung by soprano Sarah Shafer) comes of age, Queen Gertrude, on her deathbed, beseeches her to seek



Paul Reale: *Children's Palace*, chamber music for winds & piano The Borealis Wind Quintet with Christopher Guzman, piano (MSR)

"Children's Palace," the title of both this album and the Sonata for Flute and Piano heard first on the program, was inspired by the fanciful name the Chinese give to their recreation centers where grade-school children go after school to study music (both western classical and traditional Chinese) or just relax with a lively game of ping-pong. As American composer Paul Reale remembers from the occasion of his visit to China for a concert at the Shanghai Conservatory, the cacophony of sounds, musical and otherwise, from busy young minds and bodies at play in the children's palaces was simply immense!

This is not to say that Reale's music is programmatic in any sense of the word. No doubt the name seemed a perfect metaphor for the sort of creative play that Reale himself loves to engage in as music educator and composer. "I have always thought of wind chamber music as fanciful problem solving," he writes in his booklet notes. And as he demonstrates in the three movements (Introduction – Lament – Triumph) of his *Transfiguration* for Clarinet and Piano, "I like the idea of using thematic material which develops in different ways and different places."

Reale's work=play ethic is reflected in one way or another in all the items heard in this program, beginning with *Children's Palace* – Sonata for Flute and Piano, with its airy flights of fancy in snippets of pentatonic music combined with elements of French Conservatory contest pieces, salon, folk and avante-garde.

quoted in the booklet annotation. How momentous a rediscovery this was is evident from the very opening bars of the *Allegro non troppo*, a cheerful toccata with exuberant cross-hands writing that prompts Vinikour to lustily proclaim: "Ned Rorem meets Scarlatti!" The slow movement, *Molto Moderato*, is notable for its gently melancholy writing throughout the ensemble, while the *Presto finale* is a dance in 6/8 time that invites, and gets, great virtuosity from all hands.

Concerto for Harpsichord and Strings by Czech composer Victor Kalabis (1923-2006) is in a distinctly modern idiom. Its finely balanced keyboard textures are essential to offset any impression of heaviness, allowing the harpsichord to always shine through. That is vital because the work is uncompromising in its reflection of the harsh times in which Kalabis lived in a country that was occupied by the Nazis and went through more trials when the Communists took over. An interlude of almost unbelievable tenderness provides some solace amid the prevailing uneasiness that is accentuated by mysterious footsteps in the lower strings. An urgent, questioning dialogue between the harpsichord and a solo violin underscores the mood of the work.

Finally, the Concerto for Amplified Harpsichord and Strings (1995) by British composer Michael Nyman (b.1944) is a work that Vinikour describes as "electrifying and outrageous." It inhabits a basically minimalist sound world with a maximal volume of passion and conflict that pushes the technical capability of the harpsichord to the limit. The outer sections elaborate the stirring rhythms of a tango, and the work ends in a mighty cadenza that requires a short movement entitled "post-cadenza" as a kind of cooling-off period.

That's it for a program packed with excitement and musical substance. If this great new offering doesn't win a Grammy Award in the category of new and rediscovered music, there is simply no justice in the industry!

out her twelve brothers, present them with the shirts as a token of her faith, and bring them back once again to Frohagord where the wounds of the past will be healed: "We shall be whole, we shall be healed."

All this happens in Act I. In Act II Lyra marries her cousin Frederic (Alasdair Kent, tenor), heir to the throne of the neighboring kingdom of Hauven. In his minority, his wicked uncle, the regent Drokkan (bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam) plotted to seize the throne for himself, but he proves a bungler. At the wedding feast, the Twelve Princes, regaining their human form, foil Drokkan's plot, driving him into a great bonfire. (Oh yes, they'd been transformed into ravens when Lyra inadvertently cut out the red lilies, to atone for which deed she must remain mute for a period of seven years—intolerable fate for a soprano!)

If the story strikes you as a lot of contrivance in an opera whose two acts span only 78 minutes, you may be justified in thinking so. This new work is somewhat in the manner of Debussy's *Pelléas and Mélisande*, and its vocal milieu is basically that of heightened speech or *sprechstimme*, rather than the well-supported, florid, and highly melodic arias we are accustomed to in grand opera.

I'm trying to be objective in discussing a style of opera of which I am not, in fact, fond. The strained tessituras of the singers and their striving for special effect are not music to my ears. There are even moments in which the vocal line extends beyond the normal range of a singer's voice, introducing a kind of vocal gender-bending that I don't find very attractive (Gertrude's imploring words on her deathbed to Lyra in Act I, Scene III, "find your brothers, heal our wounds," are one example.) Otherwise, Gertrude's farewell to Lyra is eloquent and even moving on its own terms. So is Lyra's response "Oh, mother, your hand still warm guides me, your strength be mine, forever hold me in your arms." This scene, to me, is the high point of the opera.

Sonata for Oboe and Piano is in three movements whose titles provide further instance of a composer at play in the manner of Charles Ives' *Three Places in New England*. "Chimera," a shape-shifting mythical creature, is the perfect metaphor for what Reale aims at in his music, while in "Aura Lea," the old American folk song is heard to gradually coalesce from phrases played by both instruments. "Flea Circus," true to its name, jumps about fancifully; it may get in your hair but, as these are well-behaved trained fleas, it won't get under your skin!

Sonata for Bassoon and Piano makes use in several places of the old liturgical chant *Dies irae*, which Reale describes as music "intended to scare a person into seeking redemption." It's not quite as fearsome as *that* in Reale's treatment which reduces the chant into four-note fragments in the course of a highly imaginative development that utilizes the dark, warm timbre of the bassoon in conjunction with a really elaborate piano part.