

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

July, 2020

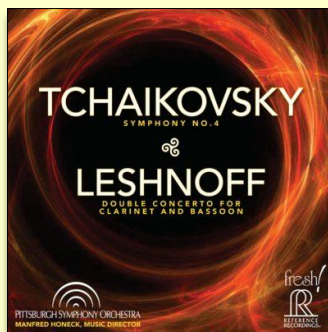


Danaë Vlasse: *Poème*:  
Songs of Life, Love, and Loss  
Hila Plitmann, Robert Thies  
(MSR Classics)

Danaë Xanthe Vlasse, who resides in Winnetka CA, has a unique artistic profile as composer, pianist and poetess. Her work in each capacity is on display in the present program. More than that, she reveals an ongoing fascination for French poetry, the various influences of which are found in this CD entitled *Poème: Songs of Life, Love and Loss*.

Vlasse's collaborators in this album are soprano Hila Plitmann, pianist Robert Thies, soprano Sangeeta Kaur whose voice is heard in duet with Ms. Plitmann on several tracks, and cellist John Walz, the rich sound of whose instrument comes into play at a key moment in the final song.

This is an ambitious program by an artist and/ /composer whose reach perhaps exceeds her grasp. Her piano is heard to best effect in two selections, Nocturne No. 4, "pour Nelson," and Fantaisie No. 2, "Schwanengesang" in which her own poem "Swan song" is the unheard inspiration, as stated in the booklet, for the piano fantasy. In both instances, her own taste as composer prevailed. The Nocturne takes its inspiration from Eugene Field's 19<sup>th</sup> century poem "A Lullaby," in which the death of a child is commemorated by the mother's wish that angels will convey to him that same lullaby he knew when slumbering on her bosom. Such a poetic setiment would have



Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 4  
Leshnoff: Double Concerto for Clarinet  
& Bassoon - Manfred Honeck,  
Pittsburgh Symphony (Reference  
Recordings SACD 5.0 & CD Stereo)

Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4 in F Minor is the first of the composer's three great symphonies we all know and love. As it was with No. 6, the "Pathétique," it is a very personal work, front-loaded with powerful material. It is also suffused with dance measures that recall his three great ballets. And it is obsessively doom-laden, reminding us of the ever-present power of Fate that looms over us.

Is this the geatest of the three last symphonies? One could easily accept that assessment, judging by the total commitment with which Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra pour themselves into it. From the opening fanfare by the horns with the trumpets soon joining in, we know we are in for serious business, gripping material that will hold our attention to the end. This is tempered somewhat by a languid waltz that occasionally takes on an eerie aspect that will be heard again and at times seems positively ghoulish. At 16:28 in the opening movement, the trumpets sound an A-flat in triple *fortissimo*, which, as Honeck observes in the program notes, would have sounded "enormously sharp" played on the instruments that Tchaikovsky had available to him. (It's still pretty awesome today!)

More doom-laden material follows in the course of this work, with romance in the



Puccini: Complete Songs for Soprano &  
Piano - Krassimira Stoyanova,  
soprano; Maria Prinz, piano  
(Naxos)

Most people think of Giacomo Puccini as exclusively an operatic ccomposer, and for the most part, he was. The complete songs for soprano and piano, performed here by Bulgarian soprano Krassimira Stoyanova and her compatriot, pianist Maria Prinz, prove a highly attractive exception, all the more so for their having been almost totally ignored.

These songs are a miscellany, the basic *raison d'être* being an exploration of the various ways a well-supported soprano voice can enhance choice pieces of poetry. By date, they range from 1875 to 1919, or pretty much throughout Puccini's career in music. The earliest are juvenalia of a higher caibre than one might expect. *La Primavera*, short, serene and confident, with smoothly arpeggiated figures, was probably written in 1880 when Puccini was a conservatory student in Milan. *Ad una morta!* (1882) is a prisoner's plea to a soul in heaven who has escaped the prison of earthly life: could she tell him of the joys that await him in heaven? A solemn melody rising from the depths, minor-key hues, and increased emotion in the second stanza show us that Puccini was well on his way to finding his calling as an operatic composer, especially as the creator of tragic heroines..

Another early song, *Ad Te* (To Thee, 1875), makes much of speech

been extremely difficult to set to music as a song lyric without lapsing inevitably into the maudlin.

The symbolist aspects of Vlasse's poem "Swan Song" would have created problems of a different sort, in a line such as "An ailing grace lies mourning, despairing/ Delirious from the fragrance of a water lily's fresh palette of nascent pastels." Here, the imagery is simply too effusive to lend itself to a good song lyric, a problem that I find in much of modern French poetry and also in English poetry inspired by the same.

Ironically, the most convincing piece of French poetry found in this program was written by Victor Hugo, who was renowned for his novels rather than his verse. Entitled "Demain, dès l'Aube" (Tomorrow at Dawn), it describes Hugo's feelings upon journeying to a village at some distance northwest of Paris to lay a bouquet of holly and heather in bloom on the grave of his daughter. The imagery, and the mood it conveys, are simple and direct. The movement of the poem takes a downward bend in the falling dusk and the distant sails of the boats descending towards Harfleur. The music follows the poetry simply and with economy. Of the imagery of a poem, as with the visual images in a cinematic montage or the themes in the opening movement of a work of music, the best advice is generally to "keep it simple." And memorable.

In her settings of her own poems such as "Barbara," inspired by "Paroles" (Words, 1946) by Jacques Prévert, and also "Rêverie, *La Lune* (The Moon), Vlasse's poetic imagery can be extremely complex, involving her prowess as both pianist and composer. Her assured piano technique is complimented by Hila Plitmann's vocal artistry, always right on the money as she manages long, complex musical phrases and really stunning cadences with flawless beauty and impressive breath control. One wishes to hear more of this vocal artist in the future.

The same wish applies to the multi-talented Danaë Vlasse. As poet, composer and pianist, I think she is on the right track, and I look forward to hearing more from her in future recordings.

form of an *Andantino in modo di canzona* (in the manner of a song) that has strong echoes of Tchaikovsky's great pathetic love stories, Romeo and Juliet and Francesca da Rimini. The music is neither particularly joyful nor sad, but hovers somewhere between the two extremes, with a fresher-feeling middle section for contrast. It's as if happiness, always fleeting, were for other people and not we ourselves.

A brief inside-out Scherzo with alert pizzicati enfolding a trio of woodwind and brass provides some contrast, though "the mood seems neither funny nor sad" (Tchaikovsky), but rather grotesque and confused. To that end, Honeck has taken pains to inject additional phrasings, based on his assessment of what the composer clearly had in mind but did not notate.

The "Fate" motif from the opening movement returns in the finale, but is finally eclipsed by a warm Russian folk melody and a lively peroration at the very end. Says Honeck, "I believe that even the end should have an unbridled forward drive, without a hint of *ritardando*," and he calls for "a wild increase of tempo" until the end, taking place in stages at 7:41 and 8:10. That accords with reports of enthusiastic response at the work's 1878 premiere that included repeated calls and stamping of feet by Russians who knew a great symphony when they heard one!

It says a good deal for the companion work on this album, Double Concerto for Clarinet and Bassoon by our American contemporary Jonathan Leshnoff, that the listener's interest does not drop off when it follows the Tchaikovsky. That's because Leshnoff, who has long had a keen appreciation for the melifluous lyrical capabilities of the clarinet, came to have a greater understanding of those of the bassoon in his research prior to composing this score. The challenge was "how to combine and juxtapose the sprite clarinet with the heavier color of the bassoon and be sure that the bassoon stood out from the texture."

How Leshnoff accomplished this, and additionally have the two solo lines complement each other perfectly and then interact with the orchestra

inflections over rapid arpeggios and reiterated chords in the piano, ending with the memorable line: "Kiss me, and you will instantly drive the whole world from my mind." *Terra e mare* (Earth and Sea, 1902), a work of the composer's mature years, evokes the sounds of nature – the stormy wind in the poplar trees, the far-off sound of the sea – to describe a troubled sleeper's state of mind, a really accomplished fusion of poetry and music, sound and sense.

Nineteen soprano songs over a period of forty-four years (1875-1919) hardly indicates a constant preoccupation with art-song as a medium, and we should not be surprised to discover that many of the later songs were composed on special occasions or for inclusion in popular journals. *Inno a Diana* (Hymn to Diana, 1897) was written for a hunting club, of which Puccini was an avid member. *Inno a Roma* (Hymn to Rome, 1919) was a stirring anthem composed for patriotic purposes, while *Morire?* (To Die? 1917), written for a charitable cause to raise funds for the war-strapped Italian Red Cross, asks the question: can we the living hope to know what lies on the far shores beyond this life?

Two of the songs are religion-inspired, *Beata Viscera* (after Luke, 11:27) and *Vexilla regis podeunt* (from a first-century Christian text). Reflective, hushed, or emotional by turns and with much expressive beauty, both songs were written as duets for soprano and mezzo-soprano over florid organ accompaniments. In these songs, aided by the miracle of modern digital mastering, Krassimira Stoyanova sings both parts, a triumph of disciplined phrasing and timing such that the voices overlap and meld in perfect harmony.

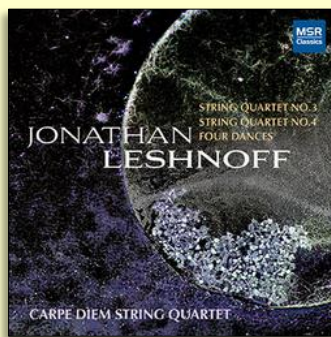
The keenly sensitive interpretations of Krassimira Stoyanova and Maria Prinz remind us, time and again, that these songs were something more than just an occasional pastime or a diversion for Puccini from his main business, which was opera. In quite a few of them we find pre-echoes, and sometimes even the actual melodies, associated with his operatic heroines, or else a prefiguring of ideas that were to be more fully developed in *Tosca* or *Madama Butterfly*. Conveyed to us by

individually and together provides mystery and excitement in the three movements of this double concerto. In Movement I, ethereal textures resulting from flutes in a low register and divided strings in higher ones create a translucent sound world that enables the clarinet and bassoon, played here by Michael Rusinek and Nancy Goeres, respectively, to stand out in high profile.

**Continued Below:**

the beautiful smooth voice and wide vocal range of Stoyanova and supported by Prinz's extremely sensitive accompaniments, these songs possess undeniable charm in their own right. Every Puccini fan needs to have them on his/her music shelf.

Movement II has the solo bassoon and two orchestral bassoons engage in the spotlight in a humorous, tipsy waltz. In Movement III the orchestra both counters and supports the two solo reeds in building a zestful, propulsive finale with a sense of "instruments at play." Come to think of it, that is part of the rationale for a double concerto. Great fun!



Jonathan Leshnoff: String Quartets 1 & 4, Four Dances – Carpe Diem String Quartet (MSR Classics)

The more I hear of American composer Jonathan Leshnoff, the more I like him. This new MSR release showcases three works for string quartet that have markedly different personalities. Two of them were written expressly for the ensemble we hear on this CD album, the Carpe Diem String Quartet, consisting of Charles Wetherbee, 1<sup>st</sup> violin; Amy Galluzzo, 2<sup>nd</sup> violin; Korine Fujiwara, viola; and Carol Ou, cello.

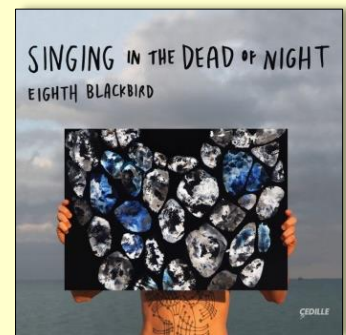
"Carpe Diem," in Latin, means "seize the day." The members of this young quartet do just that (and *how!*), responding instinctively and with enthusiasm to Leshnoff's delicious music. As they say in classical circles, "Life is short, so play your encores first." That might serve to describe the Four Dances for String Quartet (2014). Each of these pieces are capable of standing on their own, beginning with a rather moody Waltz that alternates insouciantly between a straight triple meter in 3/4 and a reflective theme. The next movement is a Pavane in a quieter mood. The third is a scherzo, titled



Rachmaninoff: Trio élégiaque Nos 1, 2 Vocalise – Hermitage Piano Trio (Reference Recordings)

The Hermitage Piano Trio takes its name from the famous palace museum in St. Petersburg. They are strong-minded Russian musicians now based in the United States, by name Misha Keylin, violin; Sergey Antonov, cello; and Ilya Kazantsev, piano. All together they cultivate a superb feeling of ensemble and a no-nonsense approach to the work at hand, traits that pay handsome dividends in the two "elegiac" trios of Rachmaninoff.

A word on "elegiac," in French, *élégiaque*. This became a tradition in Russia, beginning in 1882 when Peter Illich Tchaikovsky premiered a work dedicated to the memory of a friend and colleague, in this instance Nikolai Rubinstein who had greatly influenced the composer and whose loss was keenly felt. The general mood of such a work was that of a solemn meditation, sad but not excessively emotional or maudlin, in keeping with a tribute paid to a person's life and enduring memory. It is, additionally, a meditation on death, something Russians tend to view as a



"Singing in the Dead of Night" music by David Lang, Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe, performed by Eighth Blackbird (Cedille)

The contemporary music ensemble Eighth Blackbird takes its name from a line in American poet Wallace Stevens' poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, "I know noble accents and lucid, inescapable rhythms; but I know, too, that the blackbird is involved in what I know." In taking their name from this literary allusion, they emphasize their never-ending quest for new modes of expression waiting out there in the dark to be brought to light and explored. As lecturers, performers in workshops, discussions and summer festivals, they are much involved with the music of the future.

Launched in 1996, the group we now have here consists of Nathalie Joachim, flutes; Ken Thompson, clarinets; Matt Albert, violin and guitar; Nick Photinos, cello and harmonica; Matthew Duvall, percussion and accordion; and Lisa Kaplan, piano and accordion. Joachim, Albert, and Thompson also double on auxiliary piano, and most of the members are heard at various times

"Chas Tanz," referring to the nickname by which the other members call the first violinist. It is suffused with a lot of infectious energy (a life portrait, perhaps?) The finale is entitled "Furlane," recalling the Forlane, a lightly tripping dance used by Bach and Rameau – and in modern times by Ravel in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. The whimsical spelling might reflect Leshnoff's humorous take on the old baroque dance, here rendered as a lively, propulsive, upbeat romp in 6/8 time that really "makes the fur fly."

The two numbered quartets, both dating from 2011, are by their nature pure music and serious business, beginning with Quartet No. 3. The kernel idea of this work is stated right at the opening, marked *Grave* and living up to its name. It is laden with sad, melancholy overtones that prove to contain the seed of more positive fruition in the third movement finale, marked *Allegro with Spirit*. This movement begins energetically and builds up to the point where the kernel idea returns, triumphantly this time. In between we are given a delightfully wistful, dance-inflected movement entitled *Romance*.

As Leshnoff recalls, the initial inspiration for String Quartet No. 4, surprisingly, was a melody he heard at a recorder recital given at his daughter's school and performed by her and her fellow students. The sound and spirit of this melody, which Leshnoff found pure and uplifting, inspired the translucent quality of the second movement, marked *Slow and Pure* but nonetheless possessing a compelling quality in addition to its obvious charm.

The movements are: 1) *Largo, molto rubato*; 2) *Fast*; 3) *Slow and Pure*; 4) *Fast*; and 5) *Largo, rubato*. The inside-out arch design compels our attention, as does the fact that all five movements are linked and are performed without interruption. The first is brief and rhapsodic, the second possessed of tremendous energy, ending abruptly and without resolution. After the comparatively innocent yet somewhat contemplative *Slow and Pure* middle movement, the short fourth movement is characterized by a relentless forward drive and still manages to unite the themes of the quartet in a short space of time (2:10). The fifth and final

natural part of life.

The Russian character of the elegiac trio might also allow the composer to cultivate nostalgic sounds that call forth the images of vast distances, far horizons, the tolling of church bells and singing of choirs, among other associations.

Rachmaninoff composed two *Trios élégiaque*, the first an 1892 work cast in one continuous movement. It was not dedicated to the memory of any one person but was doubtless influenced by his haunting memories of a malaria epidemic that had taken its toll in Russia the previous year and which he himself had contracted. A brooding and reflective work, it opens with a rising four-note motif that, as scholars have observed, has the same rhythm as the rising motif, played backwards, in the opening of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. A work packed with conflicting issues of hope and despair, this Trio in G minor is given a performance by the Hermitage Trio that is the most convincing I have yet heard.

Trio *élégiaque* No. 2 in D minor (1893) was dedicated to the memory of the recently-deceased Peter Illyich Tchaikovsky and shares some notable characteristics with it, such as its wide range of expression and its monumental length, both works being about 50 minutes' duration. In both, the piano is clearly first among equals. In his opening movement Rachmaninoff has four expressive markings of *meno mosso* or *piu mosso* (mostly or rather sad), and they set the mood for a work that is even more powerfully concentrated in its emotional affect than its predecessor.

As did Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff casts the second movement as a theme and variations, here marked *Quasi variazione*. Though darker and more concentrated in mood than the Tchaikovsky with its bountiful variety, reflecting the rich, full life of its dedicatee, the Rachmaninoff has its moments, beginning with the pale sunlight that begins to disperse the darkness of the opening at about 5:10, leading into an outburst of gaiety (unusual for Rachmaninoff) at 6:34. The solemnity returns about 8:03 and deepens in sadness. A wonderful

taking a hand with the metals and sandpaper, non-traditional tools that must be heard to be appreciated.

All of this versatility has its place in their new Cedille release, *Singing in the Dead of Night*. The program consists of three works by present day composers. All receive world premiere recordings. We begin with *These Broken Wings* by David Lang, which is heard on Tracks 1, 3, and 5, interspersed with *The Light of the Dark* by Michael Gordon (Tr.2) and *Singing in the Dead of Night* by Julia Wolfe (Tr.4).

The reason for splitting up the three movements of Lang's *Broken Wings* becomes clear when we realize that these three statements take time for listeners to absorb. Lang himself admits that his opening movement, *These Broken Wings*, Part 1, requires the "incredible stamina and intense concentration" of all its performers, an observation that might also apply to Part 2, which is dominated by sad, falling gestures and the use of an old musical form, the *passacaille* (a.k.a. *passacaglia*), requiring a good deal of discipline of the artists. The impression of labored effort we get from Lang's use of certain minimalist procedures is dispelled by Part 3, "Learn to Fly," which provides a needed emotional release for artists and listeners by conveying a mood of triumph as the "broken" elements come together.

Concerning *The Light of the Dark*, written expressly for Eighth Blackbird, Gordon relates that upon discussions with the members concerning the "other" instruments they played, "I imagined a chaos onstage, with the musicians grabbing the nearest available instrument and playing on it." The result was about the nearest thing you will ever hear to a classical "jam session," complete with a heavy metalesque cello, metallic crashes, virtuosic fiddling, and some sensational glissandos gliding around in the soupy mix. Gordon packs an impressive amount of flavorful musical substance into just eleven and a half minutes, and the gals and guys of Eighth Blackbird respond with enthusiasm.

As Julia Wolfe explains it, her *Singing in the Dead of Night* evokes "the still and surreal nighttime experience of being

movement, another Largo, slow and contemplative where we would expect a livelier finale, brings the quartet full circle in a surprisingly satisfying way that we could not have imagined.

Keep your eye (and ear) open for more from Jonathan Leshnoff. There seems to be little he cannot do in the way of instrumental music and he certainly knows his craft. He may turn out to be the first great composer to emerge in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

(See also my review of Leshnoff's Fourth Symphony and his Guitar Concerto in the September 2019 posting of Phil's *Classical Reviews*.)

moment occurs around 10:25 when the music evokes the feeling of a soul soaring high above the steppes. At about 13:30, the music changes again to a mood of positive triumph, and then the prevailing elegiac mood returns once more at 14:40, taking on the aspect of absolute gloom around 17:44. The movement ends with the strings leading the way to music of incredibly consoling warmth and beauty.

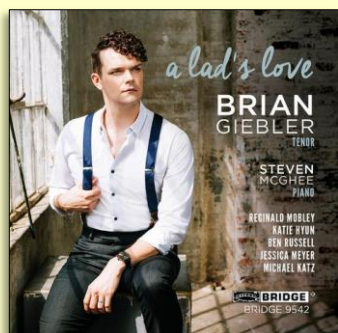
Unlike Tchaikovsky, who added a grand final variation for the de facto finale of the work, Rachmaninoff wrote a whole third movement to serve that function and even included march-like rhythms to create a feeling of hard-won triumph. A recap of the first movement main theme returns as an old friend.

To the credit of the Hermitage Trio, this 50-minute work never seems tedious, so intensely concentrated is their account of its emotional content. This is really the most convincing performance I have yet heard of a very challenging work. As a refreshing change of pace, the present album includes the ever-popular Vocalise, a wordless song that will never grow old.

*Audiophiles:* This beautifully detailed and engineered release is a "Prof Johnson 24-bit HDCD Recording." As if you had to guess!

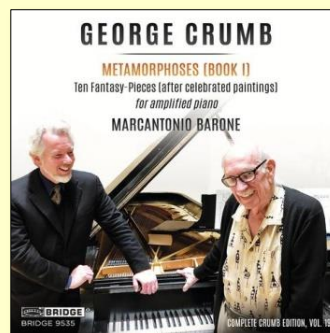
the only one awake." She sees it as a metaphor for the creative process itself, in which something of value is created out of the void. Initially, the eerie nighttime setting is something of a nightmare, with strange silences, dissonances, and sandpaper sounds interspersing the forward drive of the percussion, which includes piano. Just before midway in the 19-minute work, the music, driven by the percussion, shifts into overdrive as the creative process really heats up, soaring, swooping, wailing and moaning in a sensational flight of the imagination as every trick in Eighth Blackbird's conjuring bag comes into play.

Much credit goes to Cedille's great production team of producer Elaine Martone, recording engineer Bill Maylone, production assistant Jeanne Velonis, and mastering engineer Michael Bishop, all names we've had occasion to recognize in the past.. 24-bit digital recording has seldom been as well utilized as it is here.



"A Lad's Love," songs by English composers – Brian Giebler, tenor; Steven McGhee, piano (Bridge Records)

"A Lad's Love" is a tribute to a discernible vein in certain early 20<sup>th</sup> century composers of English art songs and the poets who inspired them. That vein includes longing for a love that was lost, never realized, or incapable of being expressed. There's a deep sense of nostalgia in many of these poems and in their song settings, reflecting sadness and regret for one's lost youth, for an ever-receding time in



George Crumb: Metamorphoses (Book I): ten fantasy pieces Marcantonio Barone, piano (Bridge Records)

American composer George Crumb's Metamorphoses: Book I (2015-2017) is described as "ten fantasy pieces (after celebrated paintings) for amplified piano." Therein lies a story. Like Mussorgsky before him, Crumb aims to transform visual art into sound as the Russian did in his Pictures at an Exhibition for solo piano. Unlike Mussorgsky, Crumb employs the piano as a percussion instrument, or rather a whole percussion ensemble in one instrument, using a bewildering

English rural life, and for companions who are gone forever, or as A.E. Housman referred to them memorably in *Ludlow Fair*, “the lads who will never grow old.”

Housman, author of the timeless classic *A Shropshire Lad*, struck a vein that has resounded for a great many years in English poetry and prose. In the above quotation, he even showed prescience, well before the time of the Boer Wars and World War I, for the lost generation who were to perish or have lives painfully affected by the horrors of war. In addition, the fact that many (though not all) of the poets and composers represented here were homosexuals who experienced deep sadness and regret for love that could not be openly expressed due to societal attitudes and the penalty of the law adds to the poignancy and the understated emotion of many of these lyrics.<sup>1</sup>

The present album, “A Lad’s love,” finds the perfect artist for conveying the deep emotions, both expressed and subdued, in these poem settings by such composers as Ivor Gurney, Peter Warlock, Benjamin Britten, Roger Quilter, John Ireland and Ian Venables. He is American tenor Brian Giebler, and his voice, high and well-placed, is admirably suited for presenting these songs with a refreshing truth and a riveting directness that compels the listener’s attention. He finds the perfect artistic partner in pianist Steven McGhee, one of the best in the business and a collaborator of long standing.

The program begins with seven selections from Housman’s afore-mentioned *Ludlow and Teme* (1923) and “In Flanders” (1917) both by Ivor Gurney (1890-1937), a composer who personally experienced the terror of war, having been the victim in France of a mustard gas attack. The emotion expressed in these songs, both nostalgic and tragic, is enhanced, as it is later in this album in a selection from Venables’ eloquent *Songs of Eternity and Sorrow* (2004), by the presence of assisting artists. They are as follows: Katie Hyun and Ben Russell, violins; Jessica Meyer, viola; and Michael Katz, cello. Their participation is all the more vital for being understated, creating a substratum underneath frequently emotional songs that helps keep them from going over the top.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976), the most recognizable name on the program, is represented, first, by his *Canticle II: “Abraham and Isaac”* (1952), a beautifully wrought setting of the biblical text in the manner of a medieval style of imitation known as organum, for tenor, alto, and piano. Giebler and McGhee are joined here by countertenor Reginald Mobley, whose voice is alternately sequenced and blended with Giebler’s tenor to create a rich color palette. They are particularly effective when they sing together in the passages proclaiming the word of God.

Britten’s song cycle *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes* (1937-1941), heard later in the program, is remarkable for such lyrics as “Night covers up the rigid land” and the title song, both settings of W.H. Auden’s poetry which find perfect objective correlatives for the emotions Britten aims to express. There is

variety of “prepared” or “augmented” piano techniques, working inside the sound box frame and directly on the strings themselves and using keyboard and pedals in strange and unusual ways.

Ten paintings by 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century artists served to stimulate Crumb’s imagination. They are as follows: *Black Prince and Goldfish* (Paul Klee), *Crows over the Wheatfield* (Vincent Van Gogh), *The Fiddler and Clowns at Night* (Marc Chagall), *Nocturne: Blue and Gold* (James McNeill Whistler), *Perilous Night* (Jasper Johns), *Persistence of Memory* (Salvador Dali), *Contes barbares* (Paul Gauguin), and *The Blue Rider* (Wassily Kandinsky). Most or all of them are well-known to students of modern art.

Crumb’s purpose in *Metamorphoses* is not to aim at a precise musical analog for each painting (No “Mickey Mouse” music here!) but to capture the ethos, expressive tone and range of each. For instance, Whistler’s *Nocturne: Blue and Gold*, also known as “Southampton Water,” depicts a dim nocturnal scene with flecks of light on the dark waters of the harbor, the masts of ships etched against the dark sky, a fog of bluish grays, and a ghostly orange-gold sun setting on the horizon. Plucked and strummed strings blend with those played on the keyboard, as Crumb calls for precisely notated pedalling and dynamics, plus the alternating use of fingernail and fingertip on the actual strings. Gauzy, slowly oscillating patterns emerge and recede. An eerie sound is created by the pianist intermittently striking the wire coil of a suspended string drum. Whatever else the listener thinks of this piece, the expressive range is indeed impressive.

Much credit for the success of these pieces is due the persistently applied artistry of Marcantonio Barone, an American pianist of Italian and German heritage who has taught at the Bryn Mawr Conservatory of Music since 1980. In a program such as this, his diligence as inside-the-piano technician comes into play as much as his prowess at the keyboard and on the pedals. In a piece such as Crumb’s visualization of Kandinsky’s *Blue Rider*, for instance, it is difficult to visualize the artist’s right hand using a yarn stick to pound the strings at three pitch levels in the lowest octave while the left hand plays a thunderous ostinato on the keys. This is just one example among many I might have cited that illustrate this artist’s versatility. One might suspect the participation of an assisting percussionist, were not the booklet annotation quite explicit on this point: Barone, amazingly, does it all himself!

Who other than George Crumb would have thought to create the shimmering aura of sympathetic vibrations he achieves in Klee’s *Goldfish* simply by having the middle pedal continually holding the dampers away from the strings at the bottom octave? This simple device allows the foreground figures, Klee’s insouciantly swimming goldfish, to stand out in high relief.

One could cite an impressive catalog of Crumb’s extended techniques, some of which reflect his admiration for John

<sup>1</sup> We should remember that homosexuals faced the penalty of imprisonment in England until the law was relaxed in 1967, as they also did in many of the United States (including our own Georgia).

even a rare, and probably unique, example of deliberate humor in “The sun shines down,” a poem comprised solely of commonplace sayings and truisms that reveal the speaker to be one whose mind seems unprepared to deal with the deeper questions of life.

Cage’s pathbreaking 1943-1944 suite for prepared piano. The intriguing question remains: is his *Metamorphoses* *really* music, or is it rather a compendium of extended techniques? Time will tell. In the meantime, I suspect Crumb will not have many actual disciples –his music is too personally idiosyncratic– but forthcoming composers will be inspired by it to pick and choose what they need.