

Berlioz: *Symphonie Fantastique*
Robin Ticciati, Scottish Chamber Orchestra
Linn Records (Hybrid SACD)

Robin Ticciati, the youthful new principal conductor of the Scottish chamber Orchestra, gives a commendable account of himself in his debut recording with the orchestra, comprising Hector Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*, with the overture to *Béatrice et Bénédict* as a chaser. The main feature, of course, is the symphony. Here Ticciati leads the SCO, augmented to 65 pieces for this work, in a nicely nuanced and characterized performance that preserves the work's essential tautness and its surprising regard for symphonic form, albeit of a decidedly literary and romantic cast that marked a bold departure from the classical symphony. The playing by the SCO is strong enough to have been a credit to a much larger ensemble. In sum, this account of the *Fantastique* is competitive in what is, admittedly, a very fast field.

We all know the story by now. Berlioz' programme is the story of a young artist of vivid imagination and morbid temperament, prone to what Berlioz calls "the wave of passions" (*la vague des passions*). In despair over a lost love, this young man (presumably a surrogate for the composer) attempts to take his life through an overdose of opium. The dose does not prove lethal, but plunges our hero into a series of reveries and dreams, some beautiful and tinged by nostalgia and passionate yearnings, others outright nightmares, in which a long musical theme, some 40 bars in length, is associated with the artist's beloved, recurring in various guises throughout the symphony. This is Berlioz' famous *idée fixe* (apparently his own coinage), which he uses to give cyclic unity to the work. With its built-in rising and falling patterns, this theme beautifully epitomizes the successive moods of aspiration and dark despair which the hero experiences in his emotionally vulnerable and highly nervous states of mind.

Perhaps because the present performance is so highly nuanced, it is also fairly lengthy, about 55 minutes in all, so that Ticciati's skill in maintain the pacing and tautness of a long-limbed work is put to the test. He passes the



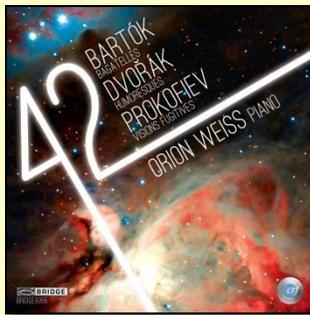
Mahler: *Rückert-Lieder*, Brahms, Schubert, Sibelius
Julia Morgan, mezzo; Amanda Johnston, piano;
with Jody Davenport, viola, in Brahms' *Zwei Lieder*
MSR Classics

Canadian mezzo-soprano Julia Morgan, with the close collaboration of pianist Amanda Johnston, gives deeply insightful, intriguing performances of some of the great German *lieder* (art-songs) by Brahms, Schubert, Sibelius, and Mahler. Her sheer vocal power may not qualify her in the class of some of the operatic aircraft carriers we sometimes hear assaying this repertoire, but her voice has other qualities that are more appropriate to the nuances we find in *lieder*, including a velvet smoothness and a flawless way of handling a musical line that serves these songs very well.

Most important, she has the requisite intelligence to bring out the subtleties in poetic texts in which meaning and emotion are not always perfectly straightforward or transparent. Most often this is due to the sense of the lyric itself, be it the submerged longing of a secret love or a heart not yet willing to reveal itself, as in Schubert's setting of Johann Mayrhofer's *Abendstern* (Evening Star): "Why do you linger alone in the sky, / Oh, beautiful star? And you are so gentle, / Why does your brothers' sparkling swarm / Distance itself from your image?" Or, take the first of Gustav Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder* based on songs of Friedrich Rückert: "Look not into my songs! / I cast my eyes downwards, / As if caught in the midst of a wicked deed. / I cannot even trust myself / To watch them grow. / Your curiosity is pure betrayal!"

Brahms' *Gestillte Sehnsucht* (Stilled Longing), to another Rückert text, provides a further example: "When no more on the eternally distant stars / Does my longing linger; / Then the wind and the little birds / Whisper away my life and my longing." In other songs, the emotion is more direct and personal, as in Jean Sibelius' setting of a poem by Richard Dehmel: "The moon is hidden by the garden's gate, / Its light flows over the lake. / The willows stand so silently, / My neck burrows into the moist clover. / Never before have I loved you so!" And how effectively Morgan drops her voice to its lower register in the final line of Schubert's Mayrhofer song *Auf der Donau* (On the

test in the opening movement (*Rêveries – Passions*) and the third (*Scène aux champs*, Scene in the Fields), the movements with the moments where bad performances of the *Fantastique* usually go home to die. And Ticciati and the orchestra certainly capture the excitement and grotesquerie of the final two movements, the *Marche au supplice* (March to the Scaffold), in which the dreamer witnesses his own execution, and the *Songe d'une nuit de sabbat* (Dream of a Witches' Sabbath). The build-up to the fall of the guillotine and the roar of the crowd, the impudence of the servants of evil powers and their and mockery of the chant for the dead are all conveyed vividly in musical terms. Individual instrumental touches that are so important to the total effect such as the striking of the tubular bells, the vulgar dance tune played by the C clarinet, and the eerie *col legno* bowing by the violins, come through optimally in the final satanic scene.



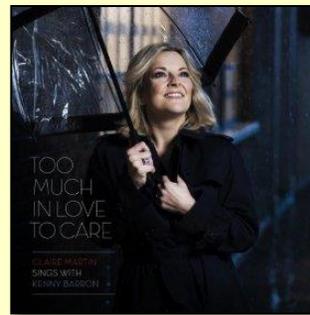
Dvořák: Humoresques; Bartok: Bagatelles;
Prokofiev: Visions Fugitives – Orion Weiss, piano
Bridge Records

Los Angeles native Orion Weiss scores impressively in his first album for Bridge of pieces by Dvořák, Bartok and Prokofiev. His beautiful, well-centered tone and firm sense of rhythm and proportion serve him well in a program of miniatures with big implications for the future that capture a crucial 20-year period in which the music of the future, emerged from the late romantic era. In a curious way, that seems natural repertoire for the 30 year old Angelino who describes himself as a “computer-age son of space-age parents,” and who takes delight in his after-the-fact discovery that the number of tracks on the present CD, 42, were identical to his own “personal” number, as the nebula in the sword of Orion corresponds to No.42 in 18th century French astronomer Charles Messier’s catalog of fixed astronomical objects.

So much for numerology. The proof of the album is in the performances, and Orion’s luminously beautiful playing serves the needs of the music to perfection. It begins with the 8 Humoresques of Dvořák that are interspersed in the program with the Bartok and Prokofiev. It is too easy to underestimate these charming works that have a lot of variety in mood and nuance in spite of the fact that they have an unvarying form (ABA rondo form, 2/4 meter, 72 beats to the minute). Call them “miniatures” if you like, but they have the same immediately accessible folk-style melodies, glowing harmonic warmth, and ever-changing variety that characterize the composer’s “New

Danube): “In the small boat we become anxious; / Waves, like time, threaten impending doom.”

Morgan gives the best account of herself in some of the best lieder on this program, such as Mahler’s setting of Rückert’s *Um Mitternacht* (At Midnight), truly a dark night of the soul in which the poem ends on a note of acceptance: “Lord! Over death and life / You keep watch / At midnight!” And in the incomparable *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (I am lost to the world) she exhibits marvelous breath control and shows her keen poetic insight in a song in which the emotion runs on past bar line and printed text, to be continued by Johnston’s eloquent pianism: “I am dead to the world’s tumult, / And I rest in a peaceful realm! / I live alone in my heaven, / In my love and in my songs!”



“Too Much in Love to Care”
Claire Martin Sings with Kenny Barron
Linn Records (Hybrid SACD)

The good news here is that the Great American Songbook is alive and well. It has been transplanted on the soil of the United Kingdom, where it is watered daily and tended with loving care by Claire Martin. The songstress grew up in Wimbledon on London’s south side, where she had learned all of Judy Garland’s songs by age 12 and had begun pouring through the Ella Fitzgerald Songbooks. From that time, her fate was sealed. Now, as Britain’s top jazz vocalist, she could teach Americans a lot about their own priceless (and somewhat neglected) tradition. Though it’s possible to cite precedents from Anita O’Day to Shirley Horn, with side trips through Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, and Carmen McRae (influences that she freely admits), in the last analysis Claire’s way of molding and styling a song is distinctly her own, as it must be with all great jazz artists. You pay homage to your antecedents, of course, but then you you go on to do your own thing as naturally and un-selfconsciously as you possibly can. That’s essential. Your art has to be a vibrant, living thing, continually exploring new realms instead of just being the stuff of Preservation Hall.

To that end, Claire has all the tools: a voice ranging from smokiness to bright, breathless ecstasy with plenty of room to move around in between and an intelligent approach to the lyrics that allows her to penetrate to the very heart of the matter. Her vocal style is pure jazz, so

World” Symphony and “American” Quartet. They were important enough to Dvořák that he suspended work on his last two string quartets in order to write them. Of particular importance to many listeners are Dvořák’s nods to Stephen Collins Foster in the fifth Humoresque, which incorporates a variant of “Oh, Susannah,” and the ever-popular seventh (ditto “Suwanee River”), which Orion wisely reserves for the last on the present CD, lest its overwhelming popularity distort the program.

As opposed to Dvořák’s perfectly self-contained Humoresques, the Prokofiev and Bartok pieces are never performed individually, but always as whole sets. That is particularly the case with Prokofiev’s *Visions fugitives*, Op. 22, which seem to be tantalizing “beginnings” of things rather than complete utterances. Prokofiev took his title from a verse of Russian poet Konstantin Balmont: “In every fugitive vision I see whole worlds.” Weiss does a wonderful job characterizing the fleeting beauty of these 20 cryptic visions, by turns energetic, expressively beautiful, harmonically rich, pensive and sad. No. 7, marked “*Pittoresco*,” is remarkable for its leisurely flowing broken chords, while No. 8, “*Commodo*,” is my personal favorite for its Debussy-like impressionism and its shy, elusive melody.

Stravinsky’s 1913 *Sacre du Printemps* is usually given credit for being the opening shot in modern music. But Bartok’s more modest 14 Bagatelles, Op. 6 (1908), as I hear them in Orion’s finely delineated performances, may be more to the point. Bartok’s compositional style incorporated frequent ostinatos, near-unisons, parallel octaves and harmonic adventures that took Hungarian folk-inflected materials into a realm where they were almost unrecognizable, all in the name of more precise expressiveness. It keeps Orion continually on his toes and brings out the best in him. Of particular interest is Bartok’s autobiographical use in Bagatelles 13 and 14 of the same motif, in different guises, to characterize two aspects of the same woman: “The Ideal” and “The Grotesque.” (Hmmm, sounds like an ex-wife.)



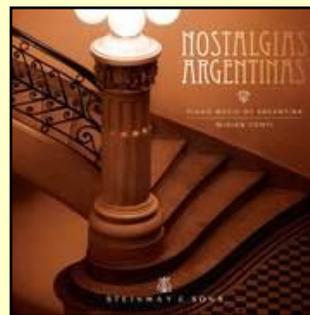
Bach: The Goldberg Variations
Sachiko Kato, piano
Centaur

Japanese-American pianist Sachiko Kato shows an extraordinarily light touch on the keys that serves J. S. Bach’s Goldberg Variations very well. The Osaka native who grew up in Los Angeles and studied at Juilliard,

self assured it doesn’t have to wail or shout to assert its credentials. Sometimes she pins the specific gravity of a song on a phrase or even a single word that really smacks you in the kisser, though she delivers it with a velvet glove. As she does in the Bob Russell/Carl Sigman lyric *Crazy he calls Me*, made famous by Billie Holiday: “Like the wind that shakes the bough / He moves me with a smile / The difficult I’ll do right now / The impossible will take a little while.” Or the eternally popular *How Long Has This Been Going on?* by George and Ira Gershwin: “Oh, I feel that I could melt / Into heaven I’m hurled / I know how Columbus felt / Finding another world.”

Claire’s supporting cast for this album, the first she has made in the U.S. in fifteen years, are all aces: pianist Kenny Baron joins forces with the (unrelated) Washingtons, bassist Peter and drummer Kenny, who together comprise two-thirds of the famed Bill Charlap Trio. It is beautiful to hear the smooth and interesting ways these artists interact jazzwise with one another and with the vocalist. Add guest artist Steve Wilson on alto sax in the Louis Alter/Sidney Mitchell 40’s hit swinger *You Turned the Tables on Me*, and you have a mix that is all the more effective for its less-is-more emphasis.

That puts the focus on Claire Martin. This is her album, and her vocal chemistry is felt in the way she engages with every one of the 13 songs. You don’t just experience it in a timeless Gershwin lyric like *Embraceable You* or the Jule Styne/Sammy Cahn *Time after Time*, but even in a song like *I Only Have Eyes for You* that you might have suspected would lose some of its freshness in all the years since Harry Warren and Al Dubin penned it in 1934. (With Claire singing it, brother, *not a chance!*) Mostly, when I hear Claire Martin singing, I’m reminded of yet another song lyric, this time by Paul Medeira and Jimmy Dorsey: “In this world of overrated pleasures / and underrated treasures / I’m glad there is you.”



“Nostalgias Argentinas”
Mirian conti, piano
Steinway & Sons

Argentine pianist Mirian Conti gained much acclaim for her 2010 recording of Chopin’s Mazurkas for Steinway & Sons. Now, in “Nostalgias Argentinas,” her second release on that label, she turns to a subject very close to her heart, namely the music of her native country. Given

where her teachers included Russell Sherman and Jerome Lowenthal, cultivates a quickness in these variations that makes them move through our consciousness with a fleetness that does not preclude the time necessary for their immense musical and philosophical riches to make its impression. So lightly do her hands move across the keyboard that she recalls the original instrument for which Bach wrote this set of variations, the harpsichord, without actually attempting to replicate its sound (which would be both impossible and undesirable). Under her hands, what often appears in other recordings to be ponderous and labored soars toward heaven and plunges to the depths. At 59:15, as opposed to around 75 minutes for many competitive versions, these Goldberg Variations hardly seem to have begun before we reach the final Aria da capo. All the more reason to encore them!

Whether or not we believe the story that Bach wrote the variations for a certain Count Kaiserling who was plagued by insomnia, the fact remains that this music (with no attempt at disparagement) is the perfect prescription for that malady. When we experience insomnia, it is because our minds are too active at bedtime. What we need is not the soothing smarm of musical "wallpaper." On the contrary, we need something to engage our mind, our imagination, and all our senses, to address the total person and give it a real workout. The Goldberg Variations do this better than any other music that I know.

From the opening Aria that forms the basis for the 30 far-ranging expressions of musical imagination that are to follow, Kato makes her presence felt. The Aria itself, a Sarabande in $\frac{3}{4}$ time with tastefully expressive ornamentation, seems to promise infinite riches for further development. We are not disappointed. Bach continually presents us with engaging contrasts. Var. 13, for example, a slow, gentle Sarabande with a melody in 32nd notes embellished by swelling tones (*appoggiaturas*) and the later addition of a second voice, appeals to the inner person, while the succeeding Var. 14, a rapid toccata with many trills and other ornaments that requires considerable hand-crossing, was described by Glenn Gould (one of Kato's heroes) as "one of the giddiest bits of neo-Scarlatti-ism imaginable."

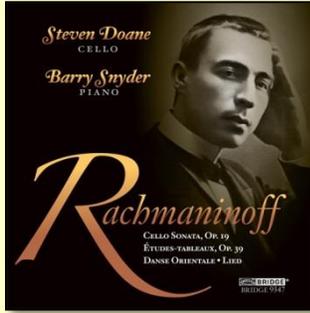
When we get to Var. 25, an Adagio in two parts, we have arrived at the deep-water mark of the set. Wanda Landowska characterized it as the "black pearl" of the Goldberg Variations. Gould described this world-weary cantilena as "a master-stroke of psychology," occurring at the precise moment in the set that it does. As we listen to the thoughtful way Kato approaches this solid synthesis of deep beauty and dark passion, and especially in the way we almost gasp when the second part occurs so unexpectedly (and so rightly), we are in the presence of one of music's great treasures.

a deserved opportunity to be heard by a wider audience are eleven composers who have all arisen since the resurgence of interest by Argentines in their national music began in the 1930's. They are: Emilio Balcarce, Carlos Lopez Buchardo, Mario Broeders, Gilardo Gilardi, Carlos Guastavino, Osmar Maderna, Remo Pignoni, Julián Plaza, Florio Meliton Ugarte, Pedro Sáenz, and Horacio Sálgan. They may not be household names to you, and were previously unknown to me, but all are worth getting acquainted with. As conveyed to us by Conti's persuasively expressive artistry, each of these composers has something to say.

Happily, these composers all found inspiration, to a greater or lesser degree, (mostly greater) in their vibrant native musical tradition, as titles such as *Tango*, *Valse Criollo*, *Milonga*, *Baillecito*, *Canción*, and *Vidala* readily reveal. Though influenced by many of the musical trends of the past hundred years, the foreign influences have been largely French and Spanish and, I am happy to say, do not include such stultifying 20th century movements as Serialism or Minimalism. On the contrary, these are composers who aim to enchant and move us. Like their Spanish contemporaries of a generation earlier, they begin with their priceless folk and popular traditions and take them considerably beyond the simple folkloric level, even as they recall nostalgic echoes of it, as Buchardo does in his remarkable *Canción del Carretero* (Wagoner's Song), the original of which is a sad complaint: "O my dearest! Come back to my love / My house is in ruins / And the river weeps amidst the willows / Because your lips no longer sing."

Sáenz, in *Aquel Buenos Aires* (That Old Buenos Aires) found inspiration in such dances of the people as the Tango, which originated in the slums and the cafes of that city, or the Milonga, a rhythmic dance with stressed pulses that is as much song as it is dance. It can be very melancholic on occasion, as is Broeder's *Milonga pampeana*, which is suffused with sadness and longing and the desolation of the vast Argentine grasslands, the pampas. Guastavino, on the other hand, was very consciously a romantic of an earlier tradition who found his inspiration in the great masters of the piano such as Schubert, Chopin, and Rachmaninoff, though his music is still infused with the dark nostalgic mood that one thinks of as characteristic of Argentina.

This 72+ minutes program will hold your attention to the very end, concluding with Maderna's aptly named *Lluvia de estrellas* (Meteor Shower, or Rain of Stars) and Plaza's *Nocturna*, a lively showpiece with echoes of the indescribably lush, weeping sound of the bandoneon, an Argentine folk instrument that I will leave to you to look up on Wikipedia. As conveyed to us with affection and insight by Miriam Conti, "Nostalgias Argentinas" is well worth your listening.



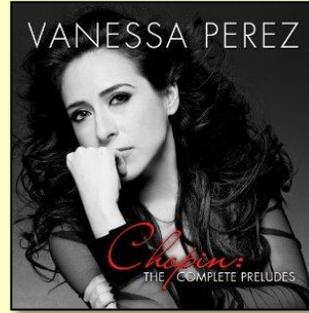
Rachmaninoff: Works for Cello and Piano
Steven Doane, Barry Snyder
Bridge Records

Cellist Steven Doane and pianist Barry Snyder, both of whom have combined enviable careers in the concert hall with long and distinguished tenures as professors at the Eastman School of Music (30 and 40+ years respectively), have just had only their third Bridge Records release. It was worth the wait because it's a real beauty! The subject is Rachmaninoff, and Messrs. Doane and Snyder have a lot to say on the subject.

The program features most of Rachmaninoff's works for cello and piano. Besides the short pieces *Lied* (a.k.a. Romance) and the exotic *Danse Orientale* with its gypsy and possibly Hassidic flavors, the major work here is the composer's Sonata in G minor, Op. 19. The 4-movement work is large in scope and wide-ranging in terms of expression and feeling. As such, it is a real test for the well-honed technical and interpretive skills of our artists. The opening *Allegro moderato* has a *Lento* introduction with a melancholy six-note motif that we will hear in various guises throughout the work. Right from the beginning, Rachmaninoff paints on a broad canvas, as the opening movement alternates between a resolutely driven first subject, primarily given to the cello, and slower one, tinged with regret, given mostly to the piano.

The second movement is an energetic Scherzo with a contrasted lyrical central section, redolent of the enchantment and mystery of vast spaces, that affords the cellist ample opportunity for expression. The slow movement, an Andante, is based on an even lovelier melody that is shared by both instruments, and has a nostalgic accompaniment like the sound of distant bells. It rises to a climax, then dies away with a mood of resignation. While the piano, Rachmaninoff's instrument, is typically entrusted with guiding the music into its various changes of mood and theme, the cello role calls for special notice, being idiomatic in terms of broadly flowing vocal melodies and progressive in terms of its frequent demands for staccato bowing and the growling affect it assumes in its lowest register at the end of this movement. The energetic, rhythmical finale alternates, once again, between vivacity and lyric expansiveness, allowing both players to make an indelible impact.

Barry Snyder takes the solo spotlight in the composer's nine *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 39. As the name implies,



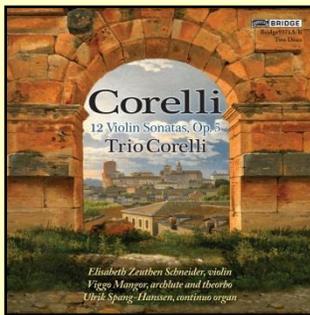
Chopin: Complete Preludes
Vanessa Perez, piano
Telarc

"The way I play this music may not be stereotypically 'beautiful' – it may be more raw than some," says Vanessa Perez of her first album for Telarc. "But I wanted the music to sound organic and real, above all. I didn't want pretty. I wanted honest." When the Venezuelan-American pianist talks about the fiery lyricism and the passionate intensity she invests in Chopin's 24 Preludes, Op. 28, that's a more laudable ambition, to my mind, than what one experiences in other artists' recordings, which is to highlight the most famous preludes and under-characterize the others. Her quest for perfection shows in the way she phrases and articulates these precious gems, *especially* the ones that may seem the most uncut.

Her approach to the Preludes is to invest each and every one with an immediate presence combined with the most crystalline clarity, as if *this* were to be her final word on the subject. That contrasts to the initial confusion many of Chopin's contemporaries experienced when he published the Preludes in 1839. Robert Schumann's reaction was typical: "They are sketches, beginnings of etudes ... ruins, individual eagle pinions, all disorder and wild confusion." That bewilderment is excusable in an age when the synthesis of all the arts had progressed so far that listeners would have expected Chopin's Op. 28 to be a set of "characteristic" pieces, each with its own implied watercolor sketch or "programme."

At the same time, just because these preludes are not "characteristic" pieces does not mean they should be lacking in character, for those who appreciate the difference. Like Bach in his Well-Tempered Clavier, Chopin intended to employ each of the major and minor keys, though the difference could not have been more striking. Bach's preludes are encyclopedic, in ascending chromatic order and always ending in a fugue. Chopin composed his Preludes utilizing a circle of fifths, each major with its relative minor, and he eschewed fugues. The most important difference you notice, even in the most cursory listening, is that these are self-standing pieces that can be performed either individually or as a set. The fact that many of Chopin's preludes are very short in duration (a full third of them less than a minute) might seem to confirm Schumann's observation that they seem fragmentary, in the original sense of "beginnings of

these are pieces that tell a story, though Rachmaninoff, as was his custom, refrained from assigning precise nicknames to them because he wanted the performer to provide his own imagination. Some years later, when the Italian composer Ottorino Respighi asked him to reveal his inspirations prior to orchestrating four of the Opus 39 and one of the Opus 33 set, Rachmaninoff was obliged to break his silence. For example, No. 2 in A minor, with its sad mood, shifting textures, arpeggiated figures in the left hand and hand-crossings that make it such a challenge for the pianist, was "The Sea and the Gulls." No. 7 in C minor, as we might have guessed from its measured pace, melancholy mood and near-quotation of the "Dies irae," is a funeral cortège, accompanied by "fine, insistent, and hopeless rain." We might have expected Rachmaninoff was pulling Respighi's leg in characterizing No. 6 in A minor as "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf," were it not for its increasingly hectic pace and its voracious chromatic runs that suggest some hungry denizen of the woods! And the strikingly up-beat No. 9 in D major, with its irresistible momentum, could be nothing other than a "March." The level of difficulty for the performer is no less daunting in the other five etudes, for the executing of which Snyder deserves commendation.



Corelli: 12 Sonatas for Violin & Contino, Op. 5
 Elisabeth Zeuthen Schneider, violin; Viggo Mangor, archlute and theorbo; Ulrik Spang-Hanssen, organ
 Bridge Records

The Music. Corelli revolutionized instrumental music by making it independent in its own right and not merely an accessory to vocal music, the theatre, and the dance. Op. 5, released on New Year's Day, 1700, was his final word on the subject. Sonorously rich and deeply moving church sonatas on Disc A contrast with more varied chamber sonatas on Disc B. Sonata No. 12 is the famous set of Variations on the "La Folia" theme that has inspired composers for more than 300 years.

The Performances. This is the best account I have ever heard of these works. Three Danish artists who perform as the Trio Corelli keep the lines and proportions of the music absolutely clean and pure. As Ms. Zeuthen Schneider puts it: "the 'long' sound of the organ and the short and distinct plucked sound of the theorbo [provide] a wonderful magic carpet for the violin to fly on."

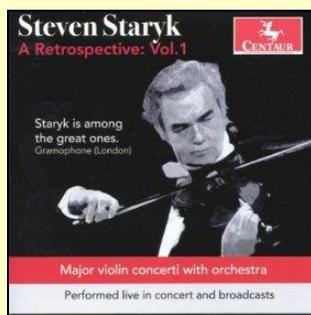
The Sound. A-1 sonics courtesy of Trio member Viggo Mangor, one of Europe's best sound engineers.

things," but on closer analysis each has its own well-defined emotional center, a fact which Vanessa Perez is keen to bring out in her keenly focused performances.

On the present CD, the amount of dead time between tracks is kept to a bare minimum, emphasizing the cumulative impact of the Preludes on the listener. The usual rationale for this "white space," which typically makes the total duration of a CD some 2-3 minutes longer than the individual tracks added together, is to allow one musical moment to make its effect on the listener's consciousness before proceeding to the next. I like the minimal spacing they apply here because it keeps the performance of the music focused on a "concert," rather than a "studio" mode (which is, incidentally, highly congenial to Ms. Perez).

The diversity of the Preludes is remarkable. For instance, Prelude No. 13 in F-sharp may be in a major key, but it has a pronounced minor-key mood, with a connotation of sorrow or loss. Perez does some of her best work when capturing the essence of each piece in terms of its tonal center. No. 15, the "Raindrop," one of the best known of the Preludes, is also one of the most satisfying in terms of a beginning, middle, and end. Perez does a great job of defining its violent contrasts (portentous, stormy and dramatic in the outer sections, enchantingly beautiful and tender as a lovers' tryst, in the middle) and its abrupt key changes. No. 24, with its formidable technical demands including a pervasive thundering five-note pattern in the left hand as the right plays trills, arpeggios, and rapidly descending chromatic scales, closing with three booming single notes in the lowest D on the piano is clearly one of her favorites, and she throws herself into it with abandon.

Also included are Chopin two "posthumous" Preludes, 25 in C-sharp minor and 26 in A-flat major, the charming Barcarolle in F-sharp, and the profoundly moving and far-ranging Fantasia in F minor. The two last-named are among Chopin's greatest piano works, and they call forth some of Perez' best developed technical skills and interpretive insight. The Barcarolle, in ABA form with a lilting 12/8 in the left hand simulating the gentle rolling of a venetian gondola, has the widest range of dynamics and variety of expression. Perez is wonderful when leading up to the magical moment in the central section when Chopin changes the single-line melody into parallel thirds, transforming it into a duet. The result is an intimate conversation between lovers, the spell of which is not dissipated by fortissimo chords at the end. The Fantasia begins with a steady march-like tread in the accompaniment and wanders into distant keys as it veers between hope and tragedy. The radiantly beautiful central section, an oasis of calm and serenity that ultimately proves illusory, is beautifully rendered here.



Steven Staryk: A Retrospective, Vol. 1
 Violin Concertos by Paganini (No.1)^a, Beethoven^b, Mozart (No.5)^c,
 Shostakovich (Op.99)^d +Saint-Saëns: Introduction and Rondo
 Capriccioso^e
 Centaur Records

- a. *Norddeutscher Rundfunk Symphony Herman Michael*
- b. *Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Bernard Haitink*
- c. *CBC Vancouver Chamber Orchestra, John Avison*
- d. *Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Sir Andrew Davis*
- e. *London Festival Orchestra, Douglas Gamley*

In the course of a very active international career, Steven Staryk was the “King of Concertmasters” and a prince among teachers. He was also among the greatest masters of the violin that we have witnessed in our time. Now that he has recently celebrated his 80th birthday (b. Toronto, 1932), it’s time for a retrospective, like the one Centaur Records has just culled from the artist’s own 30-CD archive of selected recordings. When you hear the selections on the present 2-CD set, you will probably wonder, as I did, “Where has this guy *been* all my life?” Recognition by the general public of an artist whom the British magazine *Gramophone* proclaimed “among the great ones” has been incredibly slow in coming. His technique and artistic temperament were never in doubt.

Staryk attacks the five major works heard on the present program boldly, with the greatest assurance, fortified by his marvelous bow control (witness the sensational spiccato bowing in the opening movement of the Paganini Concerto in D) and the impeccably clear stopping he employs in the riotously fast finale of the Shostakovich, to give just two examples. He was the absolute master of the moods, tempo fluctuations and tonal shadings in the works he performed. In two of the best performances on this program, the Beethoven with the Royal Concertgebouw of Amsterdam and the Shostakovich with the Toronto Symphony, he had the additional advantage of having been concertmaster of these orchestras, so he had an insider’s view of just what to expect from conductor and ensemble to a degree that a guest artist never does.

To say that the performances in this 2-CD set are “bold” would be an understatement. Staryk pushes the limits of bravura to the point where it is dangerously close to excess, but he never lapses over to that extreme. In the opening movement of the Mozart, and particularly in the Paganini, knowing the difference is critical. In the latter, the extended use of double-stops, both chromatic and in harmonics, is one remarkable feature. Another occurs in the opening of the third movement, where Paganini calls for the violinist to play a rapid downward scale A-G-F#-E-D, both bowed and pizzicato, on an open D string. And the composer’s famous *bel canto* style is very much in evidence in this performance. Even the orchestra seems inspired by Staryk’s presence. You’d expect playing like you hear on this disk from a major world orchestra such as the Concertgebouw or the Toronto, but the humble North German Radio Orchestra, under a conductor with whom I was totally unfamiliar, really surpass themselves here.

One more example of Staryk’s prowess, and then I’ll give my fingers a rest before I wear them to a nub. The Shostakovich Concerto No. 1 in A minor requires utmost concentration from both violinist and orchestra because of its deep, pronounced and fluctuating moods and its demand for high-energy playing for long stretches at a time. There is a special challenge for the performer to make it palatable to the listener because so much of this music is dire and pessimistic. That is especially true of the first two movements, an opening Nocturne marked by waves of fear and trembling (I got a mental image of Edvard Munch’s famous painting *The Scream* while listening to this movement) and a grotesque Scherzo based on a sarcastic dance in quadruple time. The turning point of the entire work is the Passacaglia, in which the mood changes slowly to one of calm, assured resolution. Of the greatest emotional depth, this movement challenges the soloist with its long, pure, expressive melodies requiring seamless artistry all the way to the end of a bowing, and an extended cadenza that leads us right into the high energy finale, titled *Burlesque*. The music here is raucous, in a mood of levity marked by impudence that is nonetheless a form of celebration and life-affirmation. In this work, Steven Staryk has some of his best moments.