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Mozart: Violin Concertos 3-4-5
Arabella Steinbacher, violin
Festival Strings Lucerne
PentaTone (Hybrid SACD)

"It was finally time for Mozart," exclaims Arabella Steinbacher in her brief preface to her latest PentaTone release. As her previous recordings for that label have included the likes of Bartok, Prokofiev, and Szymanowski, it was only fair that she would have the chance to record music that is not only dear to her heart but also highly flattering to her strengths as an artist of the violin: namely, her love of finely laid-out timbres and delicate tone colors, her polished technique and subtle fire, and her feeling for contrasted rhythms. All find ample scope in Mozart's Violin Concertos 3, 4, and 5.

All three were written, amazingly, in the fall of 1775 and finished between September 12 and December 20. As good as were his first two violin concertos of 1773, the trio that appeared barely two years later represent a great leap forward. Listening to them in apple-pie order, one gets the impression that each is more ravishingly beautiful than its predecessor. And Mozart was still in his teens! Concerto No. 3 in G major, K216, bears witness to his seemingly endless melodic invention, his love of tone colors, and his alternations of *forte* and *piano* passages and between muted strings and pizzicato playing by the ensemble. The tenderly elegiac melody of the Adagio is the heart of the work, while the finale is a French-style Rondeau that allows Steinbacher ample scope to demonstrate her breadth of technique, and then ends suddenly in mid-measure, as if the performer had just stepped off into the wings. This was Mozart's little joke, as his audience well understood.

Concerto No. 4 in D major, K218, with its rhapsodic cantilenas and extensive dialogue between soloist and orchestra, must have created a great impression with its first audiences. In the slow movement, Andante cantabile, Steinbacher's singing tone brings out the character in the music as the violin engages in an intimate dialog with the orchestra. In the Rondo finale, titled Andante grazioso, the refrain corresponds to a folksy tune that Mozart's listeners would have recognized as that of a dance known as the "Ballo di Strasbourg" which was then all the rage.



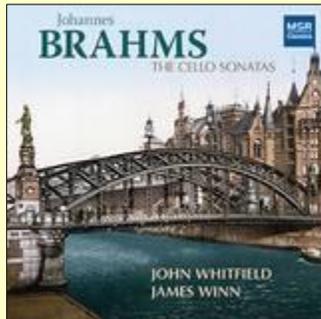
Beethoven: Symphonies 1-4; Overtures
Bruno Weil, Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra
Tafelmusik Media

Almost the last thing expects to hear these days are highest quality surveys of the Beethoven Symphonies. A quick check over the Beethoven I've thrilled to in the past – Cluytens, Casals, Jochum, Karajan, Steinberg, Walter – revealed the shocking fact that all dated from 40 or more years ago. Do I more or less unconsciously dwell in the past? Many longtime music collectors do just that. On the other hand, I get a thrill discovering new and exciting artists and recognizing them in this column. So why should my outlook on the Beethoven symphonies be arguably "out of date"?

May I suggest that conductors, orchestras, and listeners alike have absorbed so much Beethoven in the past that they are in danger of growing stale where the symphonies are concerned? An antidote for the Beethoven blahs is the present album of Symphonies 1-4 by Bruno Weil and the Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, recorded live in Koerner Hall, Toronto in 2012-2013. These vital performances stand up well on repeated listening. For once a promotional blurb rings true: "We approach these Beethoven symphonies," says Weil, "as if they were the very first performance, as though the music had been composed yesterday. There's no sense of routine with Tafelmusik musicians, and everybody's giving their all for this music, playing with a full heart and a full soul and spirit."

Don't let the name "Baroque Orchestra" fool you. In these performances Tafelmusik is considerably augmented beyond the normal forces necessary to realize the Baroque repertoire. In all, 53 musicians take part in one of more symphonies: Numbers 1-2 have a complement of 36 musicians, and 3-4 have 39. That is enough to bring out the greatness of ideas and the scope of Beethoven's imagination in these works. It includes humor. Symphony No.1 in

The first movement of Concerto No. 5 in A major, K219 is titled *Allegro aperto*, and is therefore taken in a broader, more grandiloquent way than usual. When the soloist enters, it is, unusually, with a softly expressive *Adagio* melody. Steinbacher has a great time with this melody and with that of the slow movement, also an *Adagio*. The finale, in the leisurely time of a Minuet, is interrupted midway through by a sudden change from 3/4 to 2/4 time and the introduction of such exotic effects as unison crescendos, *col legno* (wood of the bow on strings), and short musical elements. They reminded listeners vaguely of the sound of Turkish military bands, so that the entire work has come down with the nickname "Turkish" Concerto. This splashy finale makes a nice end to the program.



Brahms: Cello Sonatas 1 & 2
John Whitfield, cello; James Winn, piano
MSR Classics

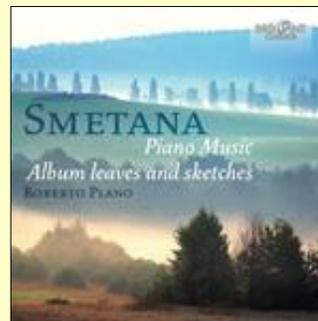
Cellist John Whitfield and pianist James Winn give honest, rugged, and frequently deeply moving interpretations of Brahms' two great Sonatas for Cello and Piano in E minor, Op. 38 and F major, Op. 99. The difference in opus numbers reflects a span of more than twenty years between the two works, so we should expect to hear significant differences as well as similarities between them.

It has become commonplace for scholars to point out a certain cautiousness in Brahms' approach to Opus 38, as if he were unsure of the cello's ability to hold its own, especially considering the lower register in which he usually casts it in this work, against the brilliant piano writing for which he was already famous. Actually, he needn't have worried, as the cellist can not only make himself heard, but, as Whitfield shows us, avail himself of choice songlike passages in both the opening and middle movements. This work was conceived as a tribute to J.S. Bach, and it is worth noting that the slow principal theme of the first movement, so eloquently intoned by the cello, and the fugue in the finale are based on Contrapunctus 4 and 13 of *The Art of Fugue*.

Baroque also are the decorative notes known as *accacciaturas*, which bridge the 2-octave leap by the cello, set against fortissimo variants of the opening theme in the piano. Sound difficult to play? It is. So are the phrasings in the middle movement, *Allegretto quasi Menuetto*, in which the Trio is mostly both quiet and staccato (Try *that* sometime). And then we have the descending octaves under the theme in triplets at the opening of the finale. More significant than the technical difficulties, however, are the interpretive ones. Here, Whitfield

C major begins with a series of accentuated dominant/tonic chord sequences in what even musically naive listeners would perceive as the "wrong" key, and only gradually is the home key revealed. The third movement, ostensibly a Minuet, is marked *Allegro molto e vivace* and is meant to be played so fast (as it is here) that it qualifies as Beethoven's first symphonic scherzo. The joking is even more prevalent in No. 2 in D major with a side-slapping folk dance imitated by the oboe and bassoon quartet in the scherzo movement and a motif suggesting hiccoughing in the finale. Its slow movement has a decidedly pastoral flavor, which accounts in large part for No. 2 being Beethoven's most popular symphony in his lifetime.

No. 3 in E-flat major, the famous "Eroica," begins with two massive E-flat chords, like a call to attention. Timing is of the utmost importance in this movement when the horns appear to come in early with the tonic melody while the strings are still playing the dominant chord (meant, of course, to heighten the excitement of the moment). Equally critical is the timing of the three horns, one tuned a semitone different from the others, to recall the excitement of a hunt. The unprecedented scale, structural rigor, and emotional depth of this work require the utmost of an orchestra, and receive it in this performance. The Fourth Symphony in B-flat major may seem deceptively gentle and sunny by contrast with its predecessor, but it, too, contains unsuspected depths of feeling such as we find in the open-air mood of the wonderful *Adagio*. The very outset of this work, in which the thematic material seems to gradually coalesce from chaos, would have reminded its listeners of the opening of Haydn's *Creation*. It is beautifully executed here.



Smetana: Album Leaves and Sketches
Roberto Plano, piano
Brilliant Classics

I almost passed on the opportunity to review this album. After all, Czech composer Bedřich Smetana is more famous for his opera *The Bartered Bride*, *String Quartet No. 1*, subtitled "from My Life," and *Ma Vlast*, the set of six tone poems celebrating his beloved homeland. The piano pieces he wrote for amateur enthusiasts to play at home, as a means of survival while he waited for his major works to

and Winn succeed so admirably that this is one of the best accounts of Op. 38 in my memory as a reviewer.

Opus 99 is, if anything, more stunning than its predecessor, largely because Brahms really let himself open up for once. It is in four movements: an exciting *Allegro vivace* in which the cello theme is heard over tremolos in the piano, an *Adagio affettuoso* with sensational pizzicati in the cello set against large piano chords, a scherzo marked *Allegro appassionato* with a melting beautiful songlike melody in the Trio, and a stirring *Allegro molto* finale in the form of a rondo. The qualifying adjectives that Brahms uses so freely are a call to the performers to "let 'er rip." The present artists are not slow in picking up their cues, making this album a memorable one.



Brahms: Piano Concertos 1 & 2
Nicholas Angelich, piano
Paavo Jarvi, Frankfurt Radio Symphony
Erato

Nicholas Angelich, American pianist who studied in France at the Paris Conservatory, has come out with a blockbuster pairing of Johannes Brahms' piano concertos that will resonate with you for a long time once you've heard them. The Frankfurt Radio Symphony under Paavo Jarvi gives support worthy of a larger and more famous orchestra. And Angelich takes both concertos as if he were born to play them.

The name "Angelich" is of German origin and translates as "angelic," just as you would expect. But if your concept of an angel is some slight, vaguely effeminate mid-Victorian creature, you can forget it, pal. You need instead to envision an angel with an enlarged wingspan and hands big and strong enough to wrap them around some of Brahms' unusually large and massive chords. The pianist has to be able to handle Brahms' high-energy rhythms without losing sight of the pervasive lyricism in both these works. His tone has to be absolutely secure, his phrasing ready to change from legato to staccato in the twinkling of an eye. Nicholas Angelich has all these traits, and more, in a well-equipped arsenal.

These works are "symphonic concertos," in the sense that pianist and orchestra are full and complete partners. Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15 (1859), did, in fact, have its keel laid down as a symphony before Brahms decided he did not yet have a sufficient grasp of the orchestra and reconfigured it as a piano concerto. The orchestral writing is still quite demanding, especially the parts for horn and tympani. At more than 50 minutes' playing time, it is longer and more massively scored than any of the *symphonies* that were then being written by

be recognized, would seem of little consequence. Then I recalled that some years ago the great Rudolf Firkusny had recorded a selection of polkas and Czech dances by Smetana, presumably for more than solely patriotic reasons. If a pianist of Firkusny's stature had thought Smetana's piano pieces worthy of recording, I felt there must be something to them.

And I figured right. As Italian pianist Roberto Plano demonstrates so eloquently in this fine new Brilliant Classics offering, these pieces, variously titled Sketches, Characteristic Pieces, and Album Leaves, may not require the wizardry of a Liszt to perform, but they reward performer and listener alike by their unfailing zest and charm. In a day long before recorded media, when home musical entertainment was what you played yourself, that counted for a lot.

In music of this sort, a feeling for nuance and interpretive skill, both of which Plano possesses in abundance, count for more than sheer virtuosity. Among the generous 76-minute selection in this CD, such pieces as Album Leaves, Op. 2, No. 4 marked *Allegro commodo, sempre marcato*, and Album Leaf in G minor (Romance) stand out for their emotional density. *Pensée fugitive* (fugitive thought) is noteworthy for its quiet, pensive mood, interrupted briefly near the end by an upsurge of feeling before it subsides to gentle resignation. Characteristic Piece, Op. 3, No. 1, is dedicated to Robert Schumann and pays him the further respect of being in his inimitable style. No. 2 in the same set, "The Wayfarer," recalls Schubert in a happy, carefree mood. No. 1 of Sketches, Op. 5 is a Scherzo in the form of a Polka, a dance which Smetana did much to popularize in its Czech style. "Rhapsody," No. 4 in the same set, fulfills the definition of the form as spontaneous, free flowing, and filled with a variety of color and mood - all in less than 5 minutes.



Mozart: Piano Concertos 14 & 27
Ingrid Jacoby, piano
Sir Neville Marriner, academy of St. Martin's
ICA Classics

In recordings made June 28-30, 2013 at London's famous Abbey Road Studios, pianist Ingrid Jacoby

Brahms' contemporaries. The opening movement (23:49 in the present performance) is as long as most whole piano concertos of the day. While the outer movements are on the heroic scale, the slow movement, an incredibly tender Adagio, allows the pianist much opportunity to score quiet, delicate, but decisively stated points. Both soloist and orchestra are called upon to "take it big" in the Rondo finale in which the piano part is fully integrated with the orchestra.

Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 83, premiered in 1881, is more intricately scored and trimly designed (even at 48:56 playing time in the present recording) than its predecessor, which is just what you'd expect in works separated by 22 years. For all that, it has virtually as much contrapuntal muscle as the D-minor concerto. It is even in four movements, just like a symphony, with a stormy scherzo, *Allegro appassionato*, as the added feature. Big oaks grow from inconspicuous acorns in the opening movement, while the finale has no fewer than five discernible themes, the third of which has a distinctly Hungarian dance character. The slow movement, an *Andante*, has an incredibly beautiful melody which Brahms later used for his song "*Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*" (Ever softer were my slumbers), first introduced by the cello and then taken over by the piano. The songlike writing in this movement, contrasted though it is by a stormier second theme, makes for a welcome balance in the midst of a beautifully conceived work.



Dvořák: Piano Trio, Op. 65 + Smetana: Trio, Suk: Elegy
Sitkovetsky Trio
Bis Records (Hybrid SACD)

The Sitkovetsky Trio, consisting of Alexander Sitkovetsky, violin; Leonard Elschenbroich, cello; and Wu Quan, piano, have come out with a stunning program of trios by Dvořák and Smetana, with Joseph Suk's *Elegy* for an encore. The performances emphasize the fine qualities of this Trio, their outstanding individual musicianship, optimal blend, and a nice regard for balance among the three instruments. They also have a keen understanding of the emotional issues contained in each of these works, for all were heartfelt memorials to deeply loved persons who had passed on. Feeling is foremost in all these works, and it is never far from the surface. First-rate recorded sound reinforces performances in which the players allow themselves plenty of breathing room.

The piano trio as it developed during the second half of the 19th century was perhaps the best vehicle of all for expressing sentiments of loss and consolation. There is something about the combination of violin, cello, and piano, the way they interact and the harmonic blends they achieve, that lent itself to this

and Neville Marriner, directing the Academy of St. Martin's in the Fields, show a remarkable degree of mutual rapport, as demonstrated by their perfect intonation, ravishing tone production, and an absolutely perfect sense of time values and pacing. That rapport is essential, considering that the object in question is Mozart. And not just Mozart, mind you, but two of his most beautiful and quirkily structured piano concertos, with a concert rondo that doesn't always behave in a subservient way.

In Piano Concerto No. 14 in E-flat major, K449, generally considered the first of Mozart's truly great concertos, the first movement opens unusually in 3/4 time, making it seem more like the beginning of a symphony. This movement features a lot of chromaticism in the strings plus some ambiguity about the key progression before Mozart makes it come out right. Another curiosity is that the cadential trill sounded by the soloist is interrupted by the cello and bass before the piano is allowed to continue the cadenza. Clearly, Mozart is keeping both audience and performers poised on the edge of alertness in this movement.

The slow movement, *Andantino*, contains the first of Mozart's heart-melting melodies. "It seems almost operatic in conception," comments Jacoby, "a tenderly lyrical soprano aria reimagined in pianistic terms." Her inspired performance bears this out. The finale, combining exuberance with a feeling of perpetual motion, is marked *Allegro ma non troppo* and is best taken, as it is here, as a jaunty, swinging walk in regular time.

Piano Concerto No. 27 in B-flat major is the last of Mozart's keyboard concerti. Its having been written in the last year of the composer's life, plus the somberness of tone that we encounter here, have encouraged some observers to see in it a foreshadowing of his death. I'd like to suggest that this view is nonsense. The concerto was premiered in March, 1791, a full six months before the onset of his fatal illness. Furthermore, it is in a major key, though the writing suggests the "major minor" mode for which Mozart was famous.

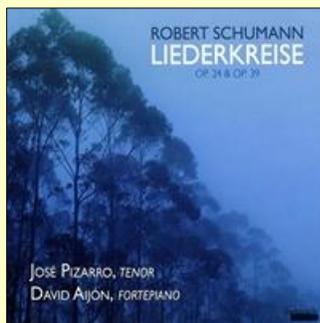
Much of the music is markedly intimate in mood. The slow movement, a *Larghetto* characterized by the simplicity of its main theme, a Romanza-style melody that goes right to the heart, makes the deepest impression. Here, Jacoby adds tasteful ornaments to the repeats, in keeping with Mozart's usual practice. Spare textures in the opening movement, unusual for Mozart, blur the distinction between soloist and tutti, making the close rapport between Jacoby and Marriner all the more critical. The finale, in which Mozart re-used the melody from his song "Longing for Spring," a theme almost childlike in its simplicity, is full of high spirits, further nixing the "harbinger of death" theorists.

There's more! The Rondo in D major, K382, a

task. Certainly, there is deeply felt grief in the elegiac melodies of Antonin Dvořák's Piano Trio in F minor, Op. 65 that makes it no surprise to learn that it was written as a memorial – for the composer's mother, in fact. The opening bars of the first movement are sweeping, passionate in mood, with dynamics that move quickly between *ppp* and *fff*. More than one commentator has pointed out the symphonic proportions of this movement. The folk-style Scherzo follows next, with a Trio that is notably melancholy in mood. The emotional high-water mark of the work is the slow movement, a *Poco adagio* with a distinctly melancholy tone that suggests suffering of spirit. The finale, *Allegro con brio*, is based in part on the rhythms of a spirited Czech dance, the *Furiant*, contrasted by a second theme in the time of a slow, tranquil Waltz before the folk dance returns to end the work on a strongly affirmative note.

Bedřich Smetana's Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 33 is, if anything, even more poignant than the Dvořák. It was written in memory of the composer's beloved daughter and namesake Bedřiška, who had died at an early age of scarlet fever. The movements are all in the elegiac key of G minor. The opening movement has a growing intensity, reflected in its darkened mood and the descending chromatic line of its principal melody. The Scherzo is notable for the duet between violin and cello, depicting unmistakably father and daughter, and the growing intensity of the dotted rhythms in the outer sections. The agitated finale offers little respite from the prevailing melancholy mood, only a brief episode in which cello and piano, once again, suggest a hymn of love from father to daughter. The ending is at last in the major key, but the overall impression of darkness persists.

Finally, Josef Suk wrote his Elegy for Piano Trio, Op. 23 as a memorial tribute to Dvořák, who was his father-in-law and mentor. Once again, the Czech folk idiom is present, this time in a melancholy song for cello and violin over a solemn and imposing piano accompaniment. The work ends peacefully.



Schumann: Liederkreise, Opp. 24, 39; Bunte Blätter
José Pizarro, tenor; David Aijón, piano
Passacaille Records

Girona, Spain native José Pizarro joins forces with fortepianist David Aijón to present two song cycles (*Liederkreise*) by Robert Schumann. The softer sound of the fortepiano, as opposed to that of the modern grand piano, allows Pizarro to focus on fine points of interpretation, including the emotional extremes in these songs, without worrying greatly about volume production. And it also helps Aijón in the exploration of nuances in the composer's *Bunte Blätter* (brightly colored leaves), Op. 99, which reveal another aspect of Schumann as a man in love.

brilliantly conceived blend of rondo and variation forms, is very bright and lively. At ten minutes' duration, it is much too long for a concerto finale and is best thought of as a stand-alone concert showpiece. It sounds fabulous in this recording.



Brahms: Ein Deutsches Requiem
Christiane Libor, soprano; Thomas Bauer, baritone
Antoni Wit, Warsaw Philharmonic
Naxos

Credit Antoni Wit with another impressive account of a great choral work. This time, it's Brahms' Ein Deutsches Requiem (A German Requiem), and Wit shows an expert's hand in shaping the contours of Brahms' masterwork while at the same time pacing it so skillfully it does not seem long to the listener in spite of its 75-minute length. The Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir are the same forces he employed in an excellent recording of the Glagolitic Mass (a.k.a. Slavonic Mass) of Czech composer Leoš Janáček several years ago.

It even features the same soprano soloist, Christiane Libor, in the aria "*Ihr habt nur Trauerigkeit*" (You therefore now have sorrow). Also on hand is the solid baritone voice of Thomas Bauer, whom I reviewed with pleasure in an earlier Naxos release of Schumann lieder. His presence is felt in the deeply meditative texts "*Herr, lehre doch mich*" (Lord, teach me to know the measure of my days) and "*Denn wir haben hier keine bleibende Statt*" (For we have here no resting place).

Choirmaster Henryk Wojnarowski deserves equal credit with Wit for the success of this performance. The choir is a sizeable one, with the resources to handle the great dynamic and expressive range of Brahms' masterwork, from *ppp* in the very opening, "*Selig sind, die da Leid tragen*" (Blessed are those who have sorrow) to *fff* at the climax of the second movement, "*Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras*" (For all flesh is as the grass), where it must be heard above the sound of divided strings, winds, and powerful, ominous drum beats – a funeral march in sound if not intent.

Ein Deutsches Requiem: What associations, favorable and otherwise, that title has meant for different listeners over the years! In the first place,

The two song cycles, both titled *Liederkreis*, have unities of mood and style in that each is based on the verses of one particular poet: Heinrich Heine for Op. 24, and Joseph von Eichendorff for Op. 39. Both cycles were products of Schumann's "Lieder Year," a torrent of creativity that stretched from February 1840 to January 1841. There is a great deal in both cycles that relates to Schumann's ardent love for Clara Wieck and his yearning to be united with her in a marriage that was adamantly opposed by her father.

Heine, the more volatile of the two poets, often strikes the perfect note to correspond with Schumann's feelings at this time in his life. "*Morgens steh' ich auf und frage*" (In the morning, I arose and asked) expresses the narrator's hope that his beloved will come to him and his disappointment that she is unable to do so, and "*Es treibt mich hin*" his impatience that the hours pass all too slowly. In "*Ich wandelte unter den Bäumen*" (*I wandered under the trees*) even the birds torment him, repeating a song associated with his beloved. In "*Lieb' Liebchen*" he compares the beating of his tortured heart to a carpenter hammering the nails in his coffin.

Even the beautiful places in the poet's memory have taken on a sinister association. The waters of the Rhein may be beautiful to the poet on a boating excursion in "*Berg und Burgen schaun herunter*," but, like his doomed love, they harbor a promise of death in their unseen depths. "*Mit Myrten und Rosen*," last poem in the cycle, contains its only ray of hope: that this book, now cold and dead, will spring to new life when his beloved opens it and reads his songs of love.

Eichendorff is the more reserved of Schumann's poets. Thus, the messages of love, longed-for and frustrated, are more apt to be expressed in symbolic terms. In *Mondnacht* (Moonlit Night), the sky and earth, ancient symbols of male and female, meet and share a tender kiss. "*Auf einer Burg*" (High on a castle) pictures a knight keeping vigil from the heights above, his beard and armor frozen and rusted with age. In the valley below a wedding procession wends its way, the bride sorrowful because she is to be married to a man she does not love. The relevance to Schumann's own forbidden love for Clara could not be clearer had he provided a slideshow!



"Jewels of the Bel Canto,"
coloratura arias of Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini
Elena Xanthoudakis, soprano
Richard Bonyngé, conductor
Signum Records

Brahms titled it "A German Requiem" because the texts are in German, drawn from Luther's Bible. It certainly is not nationalistic in tone or intention. In later years, the composer expressed the wish that he had entitled it *Ein menschliche Requiem* (A Human Requiem) because its message is for all people, regardless of faith.

It perplexed some people, in Brahms' day as well as our own, that there were no specifically Christian passages in the texts he chose. In 1868, the organist at Bremen Cathedral, Carl Reinthaler, went so far as to insert the aria "I know that my Redeemer liveth" from Handel's *Messiah* midway through Brahms' score to satisfy the demands of his clergy. In truth, Brahms rises above sectarian strife in his masterwork. His message of comfort remains consistent through his work, from the opening chorus *Selig sind, die da Leid tragen* (Blessed are those who bear suffering) to the final chorus *Selig sind die Toten, die in dem Herrn sterben* (Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord), with "selig" repeated softly at the end. The very last word of Brahms' *Deutsches Requiem* is the same as the first: "blessed."



Ravel + Gershwin: Piano Concertos
Hélène Grimaud, piano
David Zinman, Baltimore Symphony
Erato

The recent rejuvenation of the great French label Erato, which had virtually ceased to exist until it became part of the Warner Classics family, has led to some treasurable reissues from a glorious past. None more so than these Ravel and Gershwin recordings, made in May, 1997 at the Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall in Baltimore. Here, the phenomenal French pianist Hélène Grimaud works so closely with David Zinman, then director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, that it seems to be a rare instance of two minds thinking as one, two artistic sensibilities instinctively on the same page, so close is their timing and mutual rapport. It was the most memorable instance of a Franco-American accord that I could remember since Leslie Caron and Gene Kelly danced as partners in the 1951 MGM musical *An American in Paris*.

That close rapport is most apparent where it

Elena Xanthoudakis, native of the Australian state of Victoria who now makes London her home base, seems poised to make a play for the big time in opera. If she succeeds, we can point to her first solo album, "Jewels of the Bel Canto," as serving notice. She makes an auspicious debut here under the baton of veteran operatic conductor Richard Bonyngne, at the podium of the Royal Northern Sinfonia.

"Bel Canto" (beautiful singing) has meant so many things from the 17th century to the present day that it is practically useless as a meaningful term. The "Bel Canto Era," as it is used here, refers specifically to the period of the 1820s to 1840s and is associated with three composers whose operas began to be revived in the 1950s after decades of benign neglect – namely, Vincenzo Bellini, Gioachino Rossini, and Gaetano Donizetti. Xanthoudakis cites two great singers who were instrumental in that revival, Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland, as being her girlhood idols through their recordings of this highly colorful repertoire.

A more meaningful term is "coloratura soprano," used to denote the ability of the singer to use colorful decorations – trills, leaps, arpeggios – to add character and even drama to the vocal line. Essentially, they are of two types, lyric coloratura sopranos and dramatic coloratura sopranos. The lyric coloratura is generally considered to have a range from Middle C (C4) to High F (F6). Dramatic coloratura sopranos are considered to have a range from Low B (B3) to High F (F6) and are used for roles requiring greater dramatic intensity.

Certain roles have traditionally been reserved for one type of coloratura or the other. For instance, the sort of lyric soprano used to sing the part of the scheming vixen Norina in Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, whose aria "*So anch'io la virtù magica*" (I also know the magic virtue) heads this program, is unlikely to be used for the heavy dramatics needed for the title role in the same composer's tragedy *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which is considered a role for a dramatic coloratura. Xanthoudakis is equally effective in both roles, as she shows us in the scene and aria from Act I "*Regnava nel silenzio*" (Reigned in the silence of the deep and dark night) in which Lucia reveals herself to be the victim of tragically divided loyalties. The conclusion is that Xanthoudakis seems determined to show us she can handle both types of roles, much as her idol Maria Callas did.

The range of the roles she assays here is impressive. It includes Giulietta in Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (The Capulets and the Montagues), Countess Adele in Rossini's *Le Comte Ory* (Count Ory), Adina in Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* (The Elixir of Love) and Medora in Giuseppe Verdi's *Il Corsaro* (The Corsair). In Bellini's *La Sonnambula* (The Sleepwalker) Xanthoudakis shows her versatility in the second half of the heroine Amina's Act II aria with its tremendous leap in range and emotion, "*Ah, non giunge uman pensiero*" (Ah! Beyond all human thought is the joy that fills me now).

counts for the most, in the slow movements of George Gershwin's Concerto in F and Maurice Ravel's Concerto in G, two works that have so much in common one might marvel that they were seldom programmed together before this time. In the Gershwin, marked *Adagio-Andante con moto*, the blues element is apparent right from the slow melody of a trumpet solo that is then passed to a pair of flutes. The piano enters and meditates on it dreamily before it picks up the tempo and moves with it in close association with the orchestra.

In the corresponding movement of the Ravel, marked *Adagio assai*, a theme of utter tranquility is first presented by the piano alone. The piano then explores it against a gentle backdrop of slowly falling chords based on blue notes, setting a mood akin to a starlit Chopin nocturne before a C-sharp note by a solo flute breaks the spell. As so often in music, the simplest and most satisfying mood is often achieved by the hardest work. ("That flowing phrase," remarked Ravel later, "How I worked on it, bar by bar! It nearly killed me!")

Other similarities include the strikingly effective openings of both concertos. In the Gershwin, beats from the tympani are followed by an upsurge in the orchestra, informing us that something momentous is about to happen when the piano enters. In the Ravel, the stage is set by a whip crack and a snare drum roll before the piano enters with the major melody which it explores with the orchestra before settling into an eerie meditation that appears in retrospect to be a prelude to the blues-hued second theme. Hyper-energetic, pulsating ragtime rhythms in the Gershwin finale find a counterpart in the Ravel finale in quick, tricky passagework for the pianist, contrasted by interjections from the brass and woodwinds. Both finales have long been the great audience pleasers they are here.

Who is this guy?



I'll give you one guess. He succeeded Gerard Schwarz as musical director of a great symphony orchestra in the Pacific Northwest. We'll be hearing a lot about him in next month's column!

Schubert: "*Winterreise*," Complete song cycle
Jonas Kaufmann, tenor; Helmut Deutsch, piano
Sony Classical



Jonas Kaufmann, Munich, Germany native known for his operatic roles, shows he can be just as convincing in the sphere of *Lieder* (art songs). None are more challenging or rewarding than *Winterreise* (Winter Journeys), Franz Schubert's settings of 24 poems by Wilhelm Müller. In this song cycle, Kaufmann has the chance to demonstrate his histrionic, as well as vocal abilities, for there are often mood swings in the course of individual songs, reflecting the conflict in the heart of the persona, a wandering (self-proclaimed?) outcast undertaking a wintry journey in a forbidding landscape that reflects his own inner conflicts.

Winterreise was originally written with a tenor voice in mind, though the vocal part has long since been taken over by baritones, of whom Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau is the one who comes most immediately to mind. It is, in part, Kaufmann's intention to demonstrate the validity of Schubert's original intention. To that end, his expanded range, smooth legato, secure intonation and sure sense of color serve to support his point that the tenor voice is the ideal medium for *Winterreise*. And he pays close attention to the dramatics in his conception of Schubert's persona of the lonely traveler, taking care not to go over the top in operatic style.

That is sometimes more easily said than done, as Schubert's hero *does* frequently indulge in what might be considered self-pity. (And why not? Who in the world is better equipped to pity you than you yourself?) In the opening song, "*Gute nacht*", we have the self-portrait of one who has been disappointed in love and despised of men. "Good night, and good bye!" "*Im Dorfe*" (In the Village) finds him despised of dogs, as well. They strain at their leashes as they bark at him (the piano part gives a great imitation of the rattling chains) while their comfortable owners sleep peacefully on their pillows, oblivious of the traveller's grief. Distress gives way to scornful anger in *Die Wetterfahne* as he compares to the weathervane on the roof the fickleness of his beloved's affections and the insincerity of her family's promises: "What care they for my suffering? Their child is a wealthy bride!" In real life, the figure of someone "carrying a torch" for a lost love may be comical, if not deserving of derision. In the poem settings of *Winterreise*, Schubert raises it to great art. (And who is to say he is wrong in doing so?)

The poetic and musical symbolism can be far-ranging in these songs, giving Schubert the chance to use musical elements to display a great variety of emotions and moods. In "*Gefrorne Tränen*" (Frozen Tears) the wayfarer notices that his tears are frozen on his cheeks, and he chides them for being cold: if they reflected the hot tears welling up in his heart, they would melt all the winter's ice! In "*Erstarrung*" (Frozen) He looks in vain for her footprints beneath the snow where once they walked together through the green meadow. "*Die Lindenbaum*" (The Linden Tree), a spot associated with his courtship of the beloved, calls to him, "Here you will find peace." Is this a death wish?

In "*Frühlingstraum*" (Dream of Spring) he awakes from a pleasant dream of springtime and love to discover that the green leaves of his dream are only frost etchings on his windowpane, and he is mocked by a chorus of crows. Here, both Kaufmann and his accompanist, pianist Helmut Deutsch, are equal partners in an astonishing musical setting that ranges from pleasantly lilting measures of uncommon charm (even for Schubert) to sharp discords.

In "*Die Post*," the traveller hears the cheering sound of the posthorn as the mail coach approaches: will it bring a letter from his love? By now, we all know what the answer will be. In "*Der Wirtshaus*," at the lowest point in his spirits, he envisions a graveyard as a cheery wayside inn, and he wishes he could enter; but alas, all the "rooms" are taken. He imagines that a crow following him is looking to make a meal of him when he drops, and calls out to it to have courage: It won't be long now! Then, amazingly, the cycle ends on a note of happiness (or is it irony?), as the traveller feels a kinship with an old man playing a hurdy-gurdy (*Der Leiermann*). His fingers are frozen on the crank, and his begging bowl is empty. No one cares to stop and listen to his music, but no matter, he never stops playing. Rather than being depressed by the sight, as we might imagine, the traveller is elated to discover a kindred spirit: "Come with me, and accompany my songs!"