

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

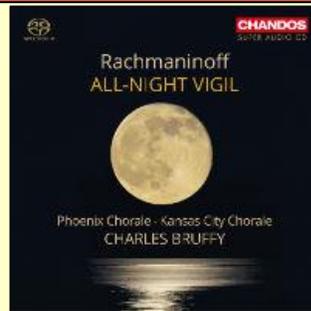
June, 2015



Sibelius: Symphonies No. 2 & 7  
Thomas Søndergård, BBC National Orchestra of Wales (Linn hybrid SACD)

Danish conductor Thomas Søndergård gives us an exciting glimpse into what one hopes will prove to be an entire Sibelius cycle with a really irresistible pairing of Symphonies 2 and 7. This young maestro, who enjoys the rare honor of being Principal Conductor of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, heard on the present release, and Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra; shows he really knows his Sibelius (and *how*) in this sonically alert Linn Records SACD, which was made in association with BBC Radio 3. His Sibelius Second holds its own in fast company as one of the best I've ever heard, and his Seventh is the *only* really convincing account I've heard of a work that seems to mystify most interpreters.

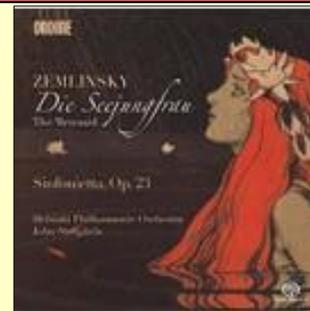
Pacing is one of the most vital elements in interpreting a Sibelius score, and Søndergård obviously knows what he's doing in this department. The underlying pace of the music tends to be slow, allowing ample time for great themes to grow out of the smallest 3- and 4-note kernels. At the same time, the various thematic sections often move at different tempi, creating problems for the unwary conductor for whom Sibelius is not a basic course in his repertoire. As did Bruckner, Sibelius favored an "unmixed" timbral palette, which means he was not fond of blending instrumental timbres for the sake of



Rachmaninoff: All-Night Vigil  
Charles Bruffy, Phoenix Chorale and Kansas City Chorale  
Chandos hybrid SACD, DSD

Acclaimed choral director Charles Bruffy brings the resources of both his chorales, Phoenix and Kansas City, together in a gorgeous account of Sergei Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil. It's all the more impressive as this work is so quintessentially a part of traditional Russian culture, and yet I do not spot a single Russian surname among the listing of personnel. Bruffy nonetheless captures the vital spirit of a choral work that, written in 1915, has been described by historians as marking the end of an era in Russian culture and music.

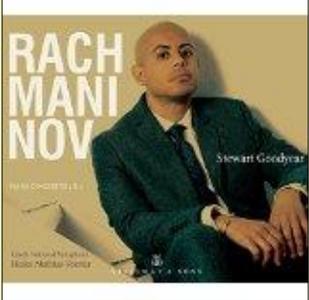
The All-Night Vigil is sometimes known as "Vespers," although the appellation correctly refers to only the first 6 of its 15 sections, those appropriate to the canonical hour of Vespers in the Russian Orthodox Church. Ten of the sections were actually based on traditional chants. They fall into three categories: Greek Chant, Kiev Chant, and Znamenniy Chant, which is characterized by its florid unison melismas that are unforgettable once one has heard them. The other five sections were so heavily influenced by traditional chant that the composer himself referred to them as "conscious counterfeits." These sections (1, 3, 6, 10 and 11) are so carefully integrated into the overall style of the All-Night Vigil that it would take a well-informed expert to tell the difference.



Alexander Zemlinsky: The Mermaid (*Die Seejungfrau*); Sinfonietta  
John Storgårds, Helsinki PO  
Ondine hybrid SACD, Surround 5.0

Zemlinsky's Mermaid, like the heroine of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, persists in her quest for love or at least acceptance in the concert hall. As this latest performance by John Storgårds and the Helsinki Philharmonic demonstrates, the work has a lot going for it in the way of lyricism, symphonic substance, and that rarest of qualities, a flavoring of pure enchantment. Described by its composer as a "fantasy in three movements for large orchestra," it follows the general outlines of the original story. Thus, the listener should have little difficulty identifying the storm in which the Mermaid saves the life of the shipwrecked Prince, the encounter with the Sea Witch in which she loses her tongue in exchange for legs, and the ending in which she is united with the spirits of the air and her new-found soul soars towards the realm of eternity.

Zemlinsky's lush orchestration streams memorable themes throughout the symphonic poem (it is *not* a symphony), successfully capturing the Mermaid's moods of wonder and enchantment at her first experience with a mortal. It is not passionate love, significantly, for she is not a mortal herself, though she has stirrings of longing in that direction. One particularly lovely theme, heard first in the strings and later the entire orchestra, has a lifting effect on the listener.

<p>lushness. His brass chorales tend to be somber, with a bite in the higher brass that adds real distinction to the coda that writes an unmistakable <i>finis</i> to the majestic finale of the Second Symphony. Søndergård navigates the BBC Wales into the attacca transition from the restless scherzo to the big buildup of this finale as well as anyone I've heard since Karajan and the Philharmonia on EMI Angel (1961) – and that's going back a <i>long way</i>!</p> <p>Søndergård shows an admirable change of pace in his Sibelius Seventh. More subtle in its tempi and original in its single-movement form that allows a process of organic growth beyond even the Second, this symphony benefits greatly from the patient, informed approach this conductor brings to it. Its moods change so imperceptibly that we are surprised at the end to discover the distance we have travelled. Like the Second, the Seventh Symphony requires a standard orchestra, proving that big concepts are not necessarily the result of big instrumental forces. Under Søndergård's direction, the orchestra makes unhurried progress toward the most affirmative C major ending in the literature. Most vitally, he captures the essential lyric beauty of this work better than I can ever recall hearing it.</p>	<p>The impact of this work in a performance such as this is immediate, appealing to the emotions and the senses as it creates its own all-enveloping world in which time seems suspended. Bruffy, accordingly, is in no hurry with a performance in which, despite a timing of 75:34, the duration actually seems irrelevant. As opposed to the all-male chorale that Rachmaninoff originally used at its premiere, Bruffy employs a nicely-balanced SATB ensemble. I find that fact particularly gratifying since the women's voices fill out the harmony more beautifully for my money than the tenor voices that originally assayed the treble parts. (From having heard Russian opera, I can assure you that you wouldn't want to hear traditional Russian tenors in these roles.) The other thing for which I'm grateful is the competency of Bruffy's basses who undertake the <i>profundo</i> roles that are so very difficult for non-Russians. Did I say <i>difficult</i>? The range drops as low as the third B-flat below middle C in section 5, [translated] "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace." This verse was so personally relevant to Rachmaninoff that he requested it be sung at his own burial service.</p>	<p>The opulent orchestration tends to be a trifle dense in places, making for difficulties in recording that are resolved with some success by the Surround 5.0 sonics of the present SACD. John Storgårds does a commendable job of pacing the orchestra through the course of a rather long work (47:36), getting the various moods just right and managing the tricky general pause following the drum whack in II and the even trickier <i>luftpause</i> before the hymn in III with sufficient composure to pull them both off.</p> <p>Sinfonietta, Op. 23 is shorter, less lushly scored than The Mermaid, reflecting the musical and political climate of 1933 as opposed to 1905. Though no less poetical than the earlier work, its themes are harsher, terser, more economically stated. This distinguished work clearly breathes the air of the world of Hindemith and Weill, and not that of Richard Strauss. Expressive as they are, I really couldn't recall any of its themes afterwards, a problem I did not have with The Mermaid. (Can it be I'm just a romantic at heart?)</p>
 <p>Rachmaninov: Piano Concertos 2, 3 Stewart Goodyear, piano; Heiko Mathias Forster, Czech National SO (Steinway &amp; sons)</p> <p>Canadian pianist Stewart Goodyear really has an opportunity to shine in these two favorite piano concertos by Sergei Rachmaninov, and he wastes no time in showing his stuff. These radiant performances allow</p>	 <p>Berlioz: Symphonie Fantastique Seiji Ozawa, Boston Symphony Orchestra (Pentatone hybrid SACD)</p> <p>Seiji Ozawa directs the Boston Symphony in a lively account, nicely detailed and beautifully paced, of Hector Berlioz' epoch making Symphonie Fantastique (1830). This is a gem in Pentatone's Remastered Classics series, which gives</p>	 <p>"A Billie Holiday Songbook" Lara Downes, pianist (Steinway &amp; Sons)</p> <p>In time for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Billie Holiday's birth (7 April 1915), pianist Lara Downes gives an affectionate and intelligent tribute to a great American vocalist who helped pioneer the style of jazz singing we associate with her name.</p>

<p>him to display his remarkable finger dexterity in meeting the composer's demands for sensational arpeggios, long keyboard runs, and the really BIG climaxes in which he shares honors with conductor and orchestra. Rachmaninov, whose own unusually large, strong hands enabled him to create impressive-sounding, gigantic chords, offers the performer no mercy in Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 3. Nor does Goodyear ask for any. He meets the challenges of two very demanding works head-one. At the same time, the sense of touch is unerring in our impressive young artist who is so sensitively attuned to the living tones and bronze-like sonorities for which this composer was famous.</p> <p>From the bell-like tolling of the piano at the very opening of Concerto No. 2 in C minor, we sense Goodyear is in control of his material and in accord with the contemplative mood the composer wants to establish. The orchestra picks up the pace thereafter and the music becomes more agitated and unstable, but we never lose sight of this firmly-established mood in the course of a work characterized by a romantic pessimism and a deep reverie tinged with sadness. The piano's interactions with other instruments, most importantly flute, clarinet, oboe and violas, serves to comment on its deeply pensive thoughts. Pianist and orchestra rouse themselves to meet the demands of successive challenges throughout the work, which ends very fast, ecstatically and triumphantly in a stunning fortissimo climax.</p> <p>Concerto No. 3 in D minor is even more demanding on the soloist than its predecessor. In fact, it is one of the most formidable works in the entire repertoire. With its loud chords, fiendishly difficult left-hand passages, and ferocious climaxes, it calls for absolute certainty in phrasing, which includes some surprisingly delicate arpeggiation for a work one usually associates with big, bold gestures. The lushly romantic Intermezzo movement moves, breathtakingly and without pause, into the finale, consisting mostly of variations in cut time (<i>alla</i></p>	<p>welcome re-exposure to quadrophonic recordings made by Deutsche Grammophon in the '70s when Quad was ahead of its time. The analog machines used in the process were connected to state-of-the-art DSD analog to digital converters without the intervention of mixing consoles. Typically for this series of "remastered classics in full bloom," we are given a bouquet of flowers for eye appeal on the booklet cover.</p> <p>In this instance, the artwork being poppies, the choice of flower is very appropriate, as this "Episode in the Life of an Artist, in Five Parts" was allegedly inspired by an opium dream and composed by Berlioz in a white-hot fit while he was still under its influence, or so he said. (That should be taken with a grain of salt, as Berlioz was inclined by temperament to "sex things up" in the interest of self-promotion).</p> <p>What <i>is</i> undeniable is that Symphonie Fantastique, with the dream-like, often hallucinatory images that it conjures up, was a radical departure for the dawning romantic era, premiering as it did only 2-3 years after the deaths of Beethoven and Schubert. This was the first of a new breed of "program symphonies," in which the old rules of sonata form were jettisoned in order to explore extra-musical associations that appealed vividly to the senses. The carry-over of themes, particularly the <i>idée-fixe</i> (obsession) which is associated with the hero's hopelessly desperate infatuation for his beloved and recurs in various guises, charming, passionately longing, and finally nightmarish, provides the key that holds the work together.</p> <p>For its day, Berlioz' requirement for an orchestra of around 90 pieces must have seemed wildly excessive, although it would be commonplace for a major orchestra today. But his choice of specific instruments such as the tubular bells sounding C and G and the eerie, scratching effect created by <i>col legno</i> (back of the bow on the strings) bowings in the nightmare episode of a grotesque witches' sabbath reveal a lot about</p>	<p>These are sensitive performances by a Steinway Artist who is herself the daughter of a jazz musician. The stylish arrangements were all made by Jed Distler, with the exception of "Blue Moon" (Teddy Wilson) and "Willow Weep for Me" (Marian McPartland). They take us as far as the piano can into the magic world of a very special singer who left her mark on her contemporaries and whom Frank Sinatra paid a supreme compliment when he described her as "the greatest single musical influence on me."</p> <p>The difficulty is that you can go only so far in any tribute to "Lady Day" (as she was affectionally known) when using the piano, an instrument limited in its ability to approximate the warmth of a true vocal vibrato. I'm reminded of an anecdote attributed to Ray Ellis, who made the arrangements and conducted the orchestra for the last album in Holiday's tragically short life, <i>Lady in Satin</i> (1958): "I would say that the most emotional moment was her listening to the playback of "I'm a Fool to Want You." There were tears in her eyes... After we finished the album I went into the control room and listened to all the takes. I must admit I was unhappy with her performance, but I was just listening musically instead of emotionally. It wasn't until I heard the final mix a few weeks later that I realized how great her performance really was."</p> <p>The key words here are "listening musically instead of emotionally." Billie's voice was undeniably thin and lacked range, and decades of hard living had replaced her early color and fresh, youthful appeal with a harsh, raspy quality. But she always had a way of getting to the heart of a song, and to the very end her commitment to expressing it was total. With Louis Armstrong as an unlikely influence, she strived to make her voice sound like an instrument, and she succeeded to the degree that her performances were unique and memorable to all who heard them.</p> <p>All of which is to say that a piano rendition of a Billie Holiday song, even when recorded with the</p>
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breve) of music we have previously heard. The work ends (as did Concerto No. 2) in Rachmaninov's personal signature, a triumphant four-note motto that says "That's all, folks" in no uncertain terms!

Both concertos give Goodyear a real workout and an opportunity to show us his wares, which include, besides what we observed earlier, a beautiful living tone and sensitivity to changes in rhythm and dynamic shadings. I note in passing that the Toronto native studied with Oxana Yablonskaya at the Juilliard School and Leon Fleisher, Gary Graffman and Claude Frank at the Curtis Institute. He is a credit to all of these fine teachers.

the composers purpose to stimulate the senses of his listeners.

Ozawa handles the pulse-throbbing March to the Scaffold with his usual taste and discretion, omitting, as others have done, the vulgar pizzicati at the end depicting the hero's head tumbling into the basket at the foot of the guillotine. The poignant call-and-response between English horn and offstage oboe in the Scene in the Country is as sensitively executed and optimally recorded as I have ever heard it, conveying the pain of separation and loss, which is reinforced by the roll of tympani we hear at the end.

sincerity and style which Downes brings to the task, cannot capture the essence of this vocal artist. If it stimulates the listener to go further and look up look up the original singer, who is still well documented on LP records, digital remasterings for compact disc, and videos of live performances readily available for auditioning on YouTube, then it has served its purpose as a tribute.

The 22 tracks include such Lady Day favorites as "God Bless the Child," "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You," "I Wished on the Moon," "What a Little Moonlight Can Do," "The End of a Love Affair," "Strange Fruit," "Good Morning Heartache," and "In My Solitude."



Messiaen: *Des Canyons aux étoiles* Christoph Eschenbach, London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO) 2-CD

Christoph Eschenbach and the London Philharmonic, in a live recording made 2 November 2013 at the Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall, take us on a journey to an exotic land – the United States – whose natural wonders inspired French composer Olivier Messiaen to create a monumental work that allowed him, among other things, to indulge his religious mysticism, his experience of synesthesia, and his passion for American songbirds.

*Des canyons aux étoiles* (From the Canyons to the Stars) was commissioned by the American philanthropist Alice Tully as part of the U.S. Bicentennial Celebration. Perhaps at a suggestion from his patron, Messiaen visited Utah and was struck by the natural wonders of a state that yields to none in that department. They include the towering red-orange spires of Bryce



Ravel: *Daphnis et Chloé* (complete), Pavane for a Dead Princess Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Rotterdam Phil. Orch. (Bis hybrid SACD, DSD)

Yannick Nézet-Séguin is quite a busy fellow these days. Besides being music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, principal guest conductor of the London Philharmonic and artistic director/principal conductor of the Montreal Orchestre Métropolitain, he is also music director of the Rotterdam Philharmonic, which he conducts here in a beautifully paced account of Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloé*. (It's easier to name cities where the diminutive French Canadian *isn't* than where he currently is).

Ravel's masterpiece based on a pastoral romance by the Hellenistic poet Longus has never done well on the ballet stage. Ravel described it as a "choreographic symphony." There are few noticeable footfalls in the music such as serve as a guide for a composer of classical ballet.



Poulenc: *Mass in G major*, 4 Penitential Motets, 4 Christmas Motets, 7 Chansons – Noel Edison, Elora Festival Singers (Naxos)

I must admit that I almost passed on reviewing this CD. Its program of choral music by Francis Poulenc initially turned me off. I only began to warm to it after repeated listenings. It wasn't the fault of Noel Edison and the Elora Festival Singers. They do a commendable job with music that strains tessituras towards the upper limits, requiring the performers to adjust to rising (and destabilizing) semitones, unexpected chromatic passages, and urgent staccato exclamations.

I was at first puzzled by the lack of sonic balance in the numerically equal SATB chorus, as if the composer intended to place the emphasis on the treble voices, with the idea that the higher and shriller the voices, the more spiritual the music – a bias many modern composers seem to share. (On a

<p>Canyon, the natural amphitheatre of the Cedar Breaks, and the rock towers of Zion National Park. Nowhere has erosion done a more artistic job on the landscape. The vivid colors of the sandstone formations quickened Messiaen's afore-mentioned experience of synesthesia, in his particular case experiencing musical sounds as colors and vice versa. The sights he witnessed at Zion became for him a metaphor for the Celestial City itself.</p> <p>The 100-minute work sprawls over 12 movements in which Messiaen shows none of the time-constraint that obsesses other composers. That he heard time differently from others is undeniable. The also used silence as an element of music (so don't be in a panic to check your audio system whenever the sound appears to "drop out.") The unusual orchestration includes featured soloists on piano, horn, xyloimba, and glockenspiel, an impressive array of percussion for an orchestra that consists of only 13 string parts, plus slightly expanded winds and brass. The soft sounds of nature are evoked by the whisperings of a wind machine, the <i>éliophone</i>, and a sand machine, the <i>géophone</i> (the latter was so novel Messiaen locked it up in his room after rehearsals prior to its premiere to prevent piracy).</p> <p>Messiaen's scoring varies from one movement to the next. "The Resurrected and the Song of the Star Aldebaran" is basically for strings, whereas many of the movements evoking birdsong are more sparsely and precisely scored, using the bewildering variety of percussion instruments plus the piano employed in a percussive role (why does that not surprise us?) Pianist Tzimon Barto has the stage to himself in "The Mockingbird," allowing him to display his mastery of dynamic shadings. And hornist John Ryan gets to display all his wares in "Interstellar Call," including flutter-tonguing, closed notes, glissandos, and faint oscillations made with the keys half-closed. Urgency bordering on despair is evident in this movement, as if Messiaen were commenting on man's puny attempt to bridge</p>	<p>Instead, most of the music is vaguely evocative and diaphanous in texture, rather than dramatic.</p> <p>In the story, the gentle shepherd Daphnis is in love with the maiden Chloe. He is no man of action; instead, his forte is footwork, and his light, graceful dance easily wins him the prize in a contest with the clumsy cowherd Dorcon (derisive laughter in the woodwinds accompanies the latter's demise). The prize is a kiss from Chloe, whose favor Daphnis proceeds to lose when he falls for the flirtacious "other woman" Lycaion, whose presence in the story is solely for that purpose. Chloe leaves the sacred grove and is immediately abducted by pirates. Daphnis swoons dead away as he receives the news. In desperation, he prays to the statues of the Nymphs, followers of the god Pan, who immediately come to life.</p> <p>In the camp of the pirates, Chloe does a tenderly pathetic dance of supplication. It falls on the deaf ears of her captors, whose fierce <i>Danse guerrière</i> leaves no doubt about what they have in mind for her. The god Pan <i>does</i> hear her, however, and appears as a gigantic shadow in silhouette against the mountains. The pirates flee in confusion, their passion for lust being supplanted by the desire for self-preservation.</p> <p>Act III is the best-known part of the ballet. It contains virtually all of the music for Daphnis et Chloe Suite No. 2, which is the form in which most listeners will encounter a ballet that is otherwise rather slow moving and occasionally vapid. It opens with a brilliantly orchestrated Sunrise (<i>Lever du jour</i>) in which the woodwinds evoke the cries of a diversity of songbirds such as would have made ornithologist / composer Olivier Messiaen sick with envy. A shepherd recounts the story of Pan and Syrinx, legendary origin of the art of music, as the lovers act it out in pantomime. The ballet concludes with a <i>danse générale</i> in the form of a rousing bacchanale.</p> <p>This is not an easy work to conduct, or to put over convincingly. Besides</p>	<p>positive note, listening to all these stratospheric trebles did have the beneficial effort of relieving my sinuses during the pollen season here in Atlanta!)</p> <p>There are four works on the program: three liturgical works (Mass in G, 4 Penitential Motets, and 4 Christmas Motets) and 7 Chansons on poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) and Paul Éluard (1895-1952). The last-named poems have texts that sound bizarre to non-surrealist sensibilities. They seem to partake of the perverse French notion that what you say in a poem doesn't have to make sense as long as the imagery is striking. Actually, the emphasis on suffering in different parts of the human body in these seven ostensibly secular poems is surprising religious. It recalls the medieval hymn <i>Salve mundi salutare</i>, which was a personal, devout meditation on the seven wounds of Christ.</p> <p>The most familiar work on the program, and the one easiest for the first-time listener to respond to, is the Mass in G, which Poulenc composed in memory of his father. The single-minded purity of its emotional striving is paralleled by the extreme virtuosity required of the performers. This is the Ordinary of the Mass, omitting the Credo, which, as a formal declaration of the Catholic faith, would tend to slow down the proceedings. The 17-minute Mass moves so swiftly and smoothly we are amazed when it comes to its conclusion. (You can, of course, use your remote to encore this gem, which anticipates Poulenc's more famous Gloria.)</p> <p>The remaining two works on this CD comprise four penitential motets for the season of Lent (translated: <i>Fear and trembling have come upon me, You are my chosen vine, The day grew dark, and My spirit is laden with sorrow</i>) and four motets for the Christmas season: <i>O magnum mysterium</i> (O great mystery), <i>Quem viditis pastores dicite</i> (Whom have you seen, shepherds?), <i>Videntes stellam</i> (When they saw the star), and <i>Hodie Christus natus est</i> (Christ is born today). The serious nature of</p>
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interstellar space by mere technology. If so, it is a rare instance of this composer's humor.

The finale, "Zion Park and the Celestial City," ends on a radiant A major chord in the strings, while the tubular bells ring out in a vision of longed-for glory (It's OK to turn up your volume at this point!)

the paucity of dramatic music (with a few exceptions), one has to cue a very large orchestra which includes a mixed chorus singing wordless open vowel sounds to enhance the emotional affect of the music. With a typically French passion for *le Mot juste* (the right word, or gesture) Ravel uses a very large variety of woodwinds, brass, and percussion sparingly and for maximum effect. Nézet-Seguín directs it all with his customary precision and grace, making this a more than competitive account of Ravel's masterwork. As a bonus, we are given a fine performance of the enduringly popular Pavane for a Dead Princess, in which hornist Martin van der Merwe eloquently underscores its melancholy and nostalgia for a vanished past.

the Penitential Motets does not, of course, permit any levity to offset the prevailing austere mood, but the Christmas motets allow Poulenc the chance to introduce a little discrete lightness amid all the reverence.



"Cavatina at the Opera" Eugenia Moliner, flute; Denis Azabagic, guitar (Bridge Records)

Flutist Eugenia Moliner and guitarist Denis Azabagic, spouses who perform under the name of the Cavatina Duo, give us a recital that might have been titled "Musicians at Play." The natives of Spain and Bosnia who now reside in Chicago explore the wonderful world of 19<sup>th</sup> century salon music on this CD. Don't be turned off by the word "salon": the genre was a way of presenting the music of the opera to discriminating listeners in the fashionable salons of Paris.

It is well worth your listening. The fantasies, variations and potpurri by contemporary guitar and flute virtuosos on operatic music by Bizet, Rossini, Mozart, Verdi, and others make you realize how lucky those hand-kissing salon habitués were. With utterly breathtaking brilliance



"Poetry in Motion," Music for Flute, Viola, and Harp performed by the Fire Pink Trio (MSR Classics)

The three mischievous-looking ladies on the booklet cover are a tip-off to the fact that there's a lot of pure delight for listeners as well as music-makers in this album. Even the title "Poetry in Motion" will conjure up, for older listeners like myself, happy days of our gloriously misspent youth. The Fire Pink Trio – comprised of Debra Reuter-Pivetta, flute; Sheila Browne, viola; and Jacquelyn Bartlett, harp – take their name from the modest wildflower that overwhelms the Appalachians with an astonishing display of beauty in springtime.

The repertoire of music for a trio of flute, viola, and harp was virtually created by Claude Debussy, who was apparently the first composer of major importance to realize the possibilities for delectable color and



"Convergences," Music by Johannes Brahms and Andrea Clearfield – Barbara Westphal, Christian Ruvolo (Bridge Records)

German violist Barbara Westphal proves once again that she really knows her stuff when the subject is Brahms. Here she lends the distinguished tone of her viola – full, rich, dark, and beautiful – to insightful transcriptions of his Violin Sonata in G, Op. 78 and his Cello Sonata in E minor, Op. 38, along with *Convergences*, a new work by an American composer.

Without making Brahms' Op. 78 sound exactly idiomatic in its transcription from violin to viola, Westphal allows us to follow the logic behind the arrangement even as she explores the rich lyricism of this work. From the gentle lift-off provided by the piano just before the entrance of the violin in the opening movement, we feel we are

<p>and a confidence that lets them take calculated risks in stride, the Duo take us on an enchanted itinerary through some of the most luxuriant music of 19<sup>th</sup> century opera.</p> <p>We begin with François Borne's atmospheric and moody <i>Fantasia Brillante</i> on Themes from Bizet's <i>Carmen</i>. This splendid showpiece provides a jewel setting for such highlights as Carmen's Habanera, the <i>Chanson bohème</i>, and of course, the Song of the Toreadors (which all of us have sung in the shower at one time or another). It is followed by a lively Potpourri from Rossini's <i>Tancredi</i> in a brilliant setting by guitar virtuoso Mauro Giuliani that features a stunning cavatina and march that give both Moliner and Azabagic plenty of opportunities to glitter.</p> <p>Next, Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Mozart, by Giuliani's closest guitar rival, Fernando Sor. The theme, which Sor took from its Italian version "O cara Armonia," is that of Papageno's song "Das Klinget so herrlich." The jolly bird-catcher sings it in <i>The Magic Flute</i> while he plays the magic bells that send Monostatos' henchmen into a siege of Saint Vitus' Dance just when things look dark. In the opera, it's a comic song and not particularly distinguished, but its simple melody allowed plenty of opportunity for delicious variations. The modern arrangement for flute and guitar by Alan Thomas gives us more delicious arias such as the infectious "Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja" (another one of my personal in-the-shower favorites!)</p> <p>Variations on "The Carnival of Venice" by Francisco Tarrega and Giulio Briccialdi, proves once again the wisdom of choosing a simple theme. In his modern arrangement, Alan Thomas visualizes a whole ensemble of stock characters from the <i>Commedia</i> acting out comic and poignant scenes. Thomas' hand is again evident in his arrangements of a Fantasy of Themes from <i>La Traviata</i> by Briccialdi and Emanuel Krakamp and Fantasia on Themes from Weber's <i>Der Freischütz</i> by fabled flute virtuoso Paul Taffanel.</p>	<p>delicious texture of these three diverse instruments –blown, bowed, and plucked. Flute and harp had been used together in duos in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Debussy strived to recapture the spirit of that earlier era. His happy inspiration in his Sonata was to use the viola as a perfect intermediary between them. Its sound had always fascinated him as "Frightfully melancholy... I don't know whether to laugh or cry about it. Perhaps both?"</p> <p>Other composers were slow to follow the path Debussy had broken for them, so it is no coincidence that all the other figures in this enticing recital are still very much among the living: Adrienne Albert (b.1941), Dan Locklair (b.1949), Manuel Moreno-Buendia (b.1932), and Sonny Burnette (b.1952). Albert's Doppler Effect aims to replicate the well-known illusion created by a moving sound source in which the pitch rises as it approaches us and drops as it recedes away. The title may sound purely academic, but the joyous spontaneity of Albert's music belies that impression.</p> <p>Locklair's Dream Steps uses the spirit of the blues plus classical forms like barcarolle and recitative to create a five-movement dance suite of seemingly endless delights, all in the spirit of "new music that doesn't frighten audiences." The fourth movement, Ballade in Sarabande, has the harpist rap on the sounding board, which adds to the eerie atmosphere of this particular moment while affording a sort of "tragic relief" from the prevailing spirit of fun.</p> <p>Debussy's Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp speaks for itself in its magical charm derived from archaic sounds and fresh inspirations such as the airborne flute melody that arises spontaneously from the Interlude, <i>Tempo di Minuetto</i>. Moreno-Buendia's Suite Popular Española does not need its title to identify the composer as Spanish to the core. The inspiration of his predecessors Falla and Rodrigo is evident throughout the movements of this suite: Divertimento, Fantasia, Danza, Nocturno, and Rondo. In the</p>	<p>in for some exalted music-making, and we are not wrong. Brahms derived the main theme of this movement from the head motifs of his deeply moving songs, <i>Nachklang</i> (Remembrance) and <i>Regenlied</i> (Rain Song), a fact that accounts for so much of the sadness and warm nostalgia that characterizes this movement. In fact, the Rain Song pervades the entire sonata as a rhythmic motif, providing the foundation for a funeral march in the Adagio and the leading theme in the Allegro finale.</p> <p>Having said that, I should add that the general mood of the present performance is neither unduly gloomy nor anguished. Pianist Christian Ruvolo's clarity and sureness of touch and placement allows Westphal's viola to roam freely and luxuriously, knowing that it has a safe haven to tie to. (Brahms was at pains to make known to his contemporaries that this is a sonata for violin and piano, and <i>not</i> just an accompanied violin sonata.) Beautiful tonal shadings, plus a steady approach to Brahms' writing that does not permit the exciting rhythms of the opening and closing movements to run away from them, makes the performance by these artists a winner.</p> <p>If anything, Westphal and Ruvolo are even more confidently at ease with Brahms' Opus 38, which opens with weighty tones that have the potential to veer into tragedy, were it not for the surprising delicacy with which the composer places the cello between the hands of the pianist. The song-like beauty of the principal string theme and the delicious interplay between the instruments in this performance help assure the main impression we take away from this extended opening movement is that of expressive beauty rather than strife. There is no Adagio in this work (an omission Brahms' contemporaries lamented), but the abundant lyricism of this movement makes up for it. After a pulse-quickening Menuetto that sounds more like a middle European folk dance, we come to a very muscular and highly rhythmical fugal final that opens in descending octaves.</p>
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<p>The former contains a very rich selection of arias from Verdi's opera, including "Ah, fors' e liu," "Parigi, o cara," "Sempre libera," and the ever-popular drinking song "Libiamo." The <i>Freischütz</i> Fantasia utilizes the haunted music from the eerie Wolf's Glen scene in Carl Maria von Weber's opera.</p>	<p>Nocturno, the composer calls upon the violist to emulate a guitar-like vibrato, adding to the plangent tones of the other instruments. Finally, Sonny Burnette's Cruisin' with the Top Down ends the recital on a bouncy, up-beat mood.</p> <p>So, bring on a round of drinks for our performers – and make 'em Pink Ladies!</p>	<p>Westphal and Ruvolo obviously have a grand time with it.</p> <p>Mediating between the two Brahms masterworks is Covergences (2008) by American composer Andrea Clearfield. This 11-minute work, commissioned by and dedicated to Barbara Westphal, is a brilliant development based on intervals and harmonic elements heard in the first two measures. An energetic and soberly lyrical dialog between the two instruments, this work follows its convergences and transformations with a Brahmsian logic that does not make it seem out of place in the present program.</p>