

Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

June, 2018

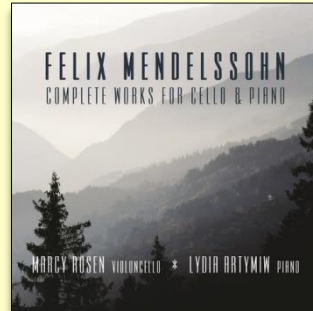


Schubert: Piano Trios No. 2, D929; D897, "Notturmo" – Trio Vitruvi (Bridge)

Violinist Niklas Walentin, cellist Jacob la Cour, and pianist Alexander McKenzie constitute the members of the Trio Vitruvi. I haven't previously heard this upcoming trio of young artists or even been able to find out much about them. All I have to go on to recommend them to you is their total commitment to the Schubert they play on this album and the dynamism and zest they invest in their performances. Come to think of it, that's the way it should be.

Franz Schubert, as we know, was destined to live only 31 years, his life cut short by illness. What's more, he knew he was dying, and in his twilight years he wrote down his final musical works in a white heat of inspiration, with an energy that was astonishing for an invalid. These works include his three last Piano Sonatas, String Quartets 13-15, his last song cycle *Schwanengesang* and the "Great C Major" Symphony. They also include two magnificent Piano Trios, a contrasted pair that were written at more or less the same time.

Of these last piano trios, No. 2 in E-flat, D929, which is heard on this album, is more difficult, if not positively forbidding, to approach than the more amiable No. 1 in B-flat, D898. Consequently, we don't often get performances of the calibre the Trio Vitruvi give us here. There seems to be a keen awareness of

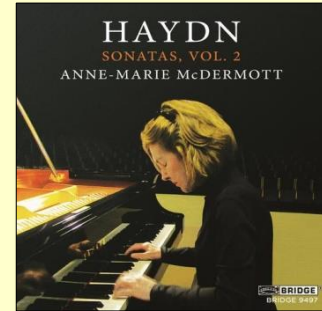


Mendelssohn: Complete Works for Cello & Piano – Marcy Rosen, Lydia Artymiw (Bridge)

Felix Mendelssohn's two Sonatas for Cello and Piano are at the apex of his many excellent works of chamber music. This album shows us why, as cellist Marcy Rosen and pianist Lydia Artymiw give their all in these works. The recordings, made by producer Judith Sherman and engineer / editor Jeanne Velonis in the LeFrak Concert Hall of the Aaron Copland School of Music, Queens College, Flushing, NY, 25-27 January, 2017, allow the first-class performances to speak for themselves.

It is still not widely known that Mendelssohn wrote Cello Sonata No. 1 in B-flat, Op. 45 in 1838 as a birthday gift for his 16-year old cellist brother Paul (for whom he also was to compose Sonata No. 2 five years later). Brotherly love aside, there is a gracious amount of warmth and joy in this work, as well as a really song-like cantabile that must have seemed strikingly new for the instrument. The opening of the first movement, *Allegro vivace*, begins quietly and confidently, before the parts diverge and things really begin to heat up. The music establishes a true equality of cello and piano as they engage in dialog, occasionally trading parts.

The second theme establishes the cello as a truly melodic instrument capable of executing fast passages over very rapidly repeating piano chords.¹ Mendelssohn makes much use of the cello's dreamy,



Haydn: Piano Sonatas 37, 39, 46, 48 Anne-Marie McDermott (Bridge)

U.S. pianist Anne-Marie McDermott does it again, in another fine album of piano sonatas by Franz Josef Haydn (see my Classical Reviews, March 2015). On the program are Sonatas XVI: 37, 39, 46, and 48 from the Hoboken catalog. The selection features some of the best qualities of Haydn's music: his wit and brilliance in the outer movements, his slow movements that have a way of drawing us into unsuspected depths, and the finely conceived balance and well-proportioned but flexible architectural strength that are the hallmarks of his style.

The structure of Haydn's sonatas can be quite different from those of Mozart, with which the listener may be better acquainted. With Haydn, form and proportion take the place of Mozart's *bel canto*, though their affective qualities can be just as striking. He was almost unique among the composers of really great piano music in not being a virtuoso on the instrument, but he understood its capabilities and wrote music that played to its strengths.

As was Mozart, Haydn was aware that he was writing music for two different classes of listeners: the *cognoscenti*, those intellectuals who could appreciate the finer points of a composition, and the somewhat larger number in his audience who were merely concerned with finding easy listening for pleasure, and he

death in this work, especially in the staccato accents that help create the atmosphere of the finale in which quotations from earlier movements assume a totally different, even sinister, character. (The present performance, by the way, is of the Bärenreiter Edition of 1975, which restores the substantial cuts in the finale that Schubert Made after its premiere in December, 1827.)

The opening movement of the E-flat Trio launches no fewer than three themes that serve various purposes in the exposition and the overall harmonic design. (The third is a *lied*-like, melancholy little number that we will hear again in the finale.) The most memorable feature of the slow movement, *Andante con moto*, is a haunting melody in which the cello takes the lead. It comes across as a slow funeral procession over dotted figurations in the piano and violin. With increasing emotion and subtle major-minor alternations, it makes an indelible impression, especially in the way the Vitruvi interpret it.

There follows a deceptively playful movement, marked *Scherzando: Allegretto moderato*, that involves a lot of delightful interplay between the parts and some solid foot-stamping on the first beat of the trio section that recalls rustic dancing. The finale, which clocks in here at 19:19, alters the impression of ballroom dancing by use of a staccato minor theme in cut time that changes into 6/8. (Do not listen to *this* music unless you are in a well-lighted room with no dark shapes lurking in the corners!) The funeral march from the *Andante* keeps coming back no fewer than four times – the third of which with the staccato theme used as counterpoint – until it finally resolves itself into an ecstatic apotheosis in the coda. This work is of long duration (50:26 here) but there are no longeurs in the music. And anyway, who's watching the clock with an account such as this?

Continued below ==>

The Trio Vitruvi leave us with a thrilling encore, a single-movement Piano Trio in E-flat, D897 that has come down to us under the title "Notturmo." A *lied*, supposedly inspired by a song Schubert is alleged to have heard sung by construction workers driving piles for a pier with alternating rhythmic strokes, lies at the heart of this little 8-minute serenade. It is built on the simplest, most effective of means: a semitone upwards, a mediant downwards. Charming!

emotionally rich tone, discretely holding back on the piano part so that it challenges its partner but does not overwhelm it. The playfully wistful *Andante* is followed by a spontaneously joyful *Allegro assai*. Passionate, energetic and supremely confident, ending quietly, it is just the sort of music appropriate for a birthday ode.

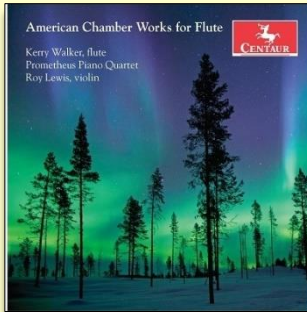
Sonata No. 2 in D, Op. 58, is on a larger scale than the first, with four movements instead of three. The opening *Allegro assai vivace* in 6/8 time is marked by its powerful momentum and exuberance. The puckish second movement, marked *Allegretto*, begins in a frolicsome manner but gradually changes into something deeper and almost menacing (or is it perhaps the natural *gravitas* in the voice of the cello?) It alternates with a major-key song without words (a Mendelssohn specialty) that provides consolation. The *Adagio* movement has the cello ruminating in a passionate manner through various minor keys, harmonized with big rolled chords in the piano that take on the aspect of a heaven-seeking chorale. The spirited finale, marked *Molto allegro e vivace*, morphs into a rollicking rondo that concludes matters in really high spirits.

And that's not all, folks! We also have a jewel of a romance, Op. 109, entitled "Song without Words," and a melancholy and rarely encountered *Assai tranquillo* in B minor in which sadness is mingled with lyricism. Opening the program are the *Variations Concertantes* in D Major, Op. 17, a far-ranging work containing many brilliant and exhilarating passages for both instruments.

accommodated them both. In an era before recordings and the internet, you seldom had a second chance to make a first impression with a new work, so Haydn took pains to involve his audience with catchy, vivacious music in the outer movements, reserving the slow inner movement for unsuspected depths of subtlety.

For want of space, I'm going to focus on Hob. XVI: 46 in A-flat Major, as it crystallizes all the finer points of Haydn's style. The opening *Allegro moderato* uses trills in its first subject to engage our interest, and the finale is a very busy *Presto* that leaves us in an up-swung mood. In between, we have the heart of the matter, a deeply moving and persuasive *Adagio* that draws us into its world of increasing emotive and contrapuntal subtleties in an unhurried manner. It is, curiously, in D-flat Major, a key characterized by four flats in its signature. Romantics like Chopin and Liszt often employed it, but it wasn't commonly used in Haydn's day.

At a duration of 27:28, McDermott takes her time exploring the intricate beauties of this sonata. For an interesting comparison, I listened to Charles Rosen's older recording on Vanguard LP VCS-10131, which clocks in at 18:09, though the difference in timing is something I couldn't attribute solely to the artists' different choices of tempi. A notable exception is the *Presto* finale, which McDermott observes as marked and which Rosen takes as a *Prestissimo*. In both of these recordings, the emotion of the deeply moving *Adagio* comes through clearly.



American Chamber Works for Flute
Kerry Walker flute; Prometheus
Piano Quartet; Roy Lewis, violin
(Centaur)

This may be your best chance to hear the music of some of America's pioneers in classical music from the turn of the 19th Century. Additionally, all the artists heard here are distinguished chamber musicians. That Kerry Walker, who studied flute and performed as a duo with no less a figure than Julius Baker, should be the top-featured artist is a reflection of the fact that her instrument is at the heart of all the pieces by Arthur Foote, Amy Beach, Charles Griffes, and Roy Harris. But don't neglect to listen for the myriad of fascinating ways her flute interacts with the other instruments to make music as enchanting as it is sophisticated.

Poem for Flute and String Quartet by the sadly short-lived Griffes (1884-1920) is a rhapsodic work with a haunting melody at its center. It is one of his best-known compositions. Ravishing tones, textures, and harmonic relationships are the essence of a figure who has been termed "America's Impressionist."

Roy Harris (1898-1979) had a penchant for singing lines and modal harmonies that were often at odds with his terse means of expression. The idiosyncratically titled Four Minutes, 20 Seconds for Flute and String Quartet (it actually clocks in here at 4:30) reveals him at his most intriguing.

Arthur Foote (1853-1937), a native Bostonian who was one of the founders of the American Guild of Organists, shows a decidedly French influence in Three Pieces for Flute and Piano, Op. 31B: an idiomatic



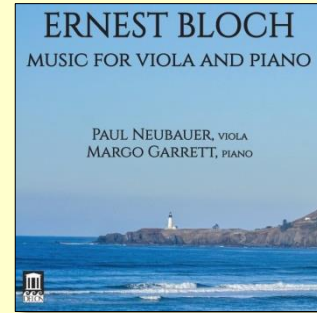
"I Play French Horn" – Bob Watt,
horn; Todd Cochran, piano
(MSR Classics)

Bob Watt is phenomenal. As a young man, he was offered a position as principal assistant French horn of the Los Angeles Philharmonic by music director Zubin Mehta. He stayed with the LAPO until retirement 37 years later, frequently playing solos with that orchestra and as a guest artist elsewhere.

Los Angeles proved a fruitful location for Watt, for it put him in touch with the wide spectrum of the latest developments in pop, jazz, R&B, and film scoring, all of which continue to excite his interest. Music scholars and the general public may like to mark boundaries between classical music and all the various popular genres, but to musicians themselves, "It's all music."

The present CD release affords Watt the opportunity to share his musical world with us. In the course of this album you will hear not only the smooth-flowing, mellow mid-register tones evocative of nature that we are used to thinking of in terms of the French horn, but also the dark sound of its deepest register and the brilliant tones of its highest that remind us that the horn is, after all, a member of the brass family.

You get a clear impression of its idiomatic sounds in the faith-inspired pieces: *Amazing Grace*, *Steal Away*, *How Great Thou Art*, and the Bach chorale *Lord, I Cry to Thee*. All are heard in arrangements by pianist and composer Todd Cochran, whose distinguished collaboration with Watt goes a long way toward making this album the experience that it is.



Bloch: Music for Viola and Piano
Paul Neubauer, viola; Margo Garrett,
piano (Delos)

It's a funny thing, but you can almost always name Ernest Bloch whenever a friend pops a disc in the machine and asks you to "Name That Composer." The music of Bloch, (1880-1959) is instantly identifiable by its conflict between formal restraint and rhapsodic emotion. There's an economy here, even in large scale works, that gives the impression there are no throw-away phrases or wasted notes. The music of this hard-minded composer is quite personal and individual, considering his broad range of influences, from Bach to Modern, including the modes and rhythms of his own Jewish tradition.

As Paul Neubauer and Margo Garrett, performers on the present album, explain it, the digital audio tapes from the March, 2001 sessions had been unaccountably misplaced for a number of years, until just recently. What a loss that would have been, you may judge for yourself. The recordings were not merely salvageable, they were magnificent. The performances help to enhance our insight into one of the great voices of the past century.

Suite for Viola and Piano (1919) is laid out in four movements: *Lento*, *Allegro ironico*, *Lento*, and *Molto vivo*. Bloch claimed to have been inspired by a vision of the Far East – Borneo, Java, and Sumatra. And for sure there is much in this music that you could relate to an eastern setting, beginning with a mysterious phrase in the third measure of the opening when the viola enters with what Bloch himself termed "a kind of

Aubade Villageois, a softly glowing *Melodie*, and a rustic *Pastorale* reflecting a love of nature. The most memorable part of his Nocturne and Scherzo for Flute and String Quartet (1919) is the Nocturne, which reminded me of Griffes' piano piece "The Night Winds" in its uncanny evocation of mood and atmosphere.

Amy Beach (1867-1944), another Bostonian, was a woman who did not let the social conventions of her day cause her to shy away from composing large-scale compositions (she wrote several fine symphonies). Her Theme and Variations for Flute and String Quartet reveals a sure grasp of harmony and counterpoint, especially in Variation VI, marked *Largo di molto. Con gran' espressione*, in which the strings sensationally broaden the tempo at a vital point. The writing for all the parts is simply gorgeous (when this lady marked a movement "with great expression," she meant it!) Variation IV, an Andantino in the manner of a slow waltz, is one of the most effective, while the final Variation VII lives up to its playful marking of *Allegro giocoso*.

The variety of tones and techniques doesn't end here. We get a whole lot of sounds they just don't teach in the music schools. Sounds that you only work out for yourself when you're jamming with your pals. We have a short dissertation in the strange, unpredictable, alternative things the horn can be made to do in three pieces by Cochran, *Laughter*, *Humor*, and *Satire*, where the horn is variously muted, stopped, or played with unusual configurations when you blow air into the mouthpiece after it has been flipped over and mounted on the horn's lead pipe. In *Laughter* we get the impression of someone struggling valiantly to suppress a laugh, only to have it burst with an explosive sound like a squib.

Watt and Cochran do some of their best work together in the latter's arrangement for French horn and piano, with support from drums and bass, of Dave Brubeck's alto sax classic Blue Rondo a la Turk. Watt's improvisational style particularly shines in the blues riffs in a piece that paid tribute to Mozart's original by taking it apart and reassembling it with bold imagination.

A piece that is personally meaningful to Watt is his own arrangement, with Cochran, of *Gullah Novella*. Along with percussionists and a chorus of male voices plus Cochran's piano, Watt pays tribute to his West African forebears who toiled as slaves on the cotton plantations of the Sea Islands off the South Carolina coast. It was back-breaking work, made bearable by the indomitable spirit of a work song.

savage cry, like that of a fierce bird of prey." As in a tropical jungle, elements of light and darkness contend in this suite until we reach an up-tempo finale which even has a mood of what annotator David Brin terms "energetic cheerfulness," which is almost the last thing you expect to find in this composer.

Suite for Solo Viola (1958) is a very remarkable work in four interconnected movements, played without pause. Bloch implies harmony and counterpoint in this work much as did J.S.Bach in his suites for solo cello and unaccompanied violin. At the end, the music simply breaks off, an indication Bloch was in his final illness and did not have the stamina to complete the work.

Finally, we have Five Jewish Pieces (1950-1951) that Bloch wrote to celebrate his 70th birthday. He later broke them down into the two works we have here, the Suite Hébraïque and Meditation and Processional. Dynamic contours and glowing tones make for attractive music in both works. Neubauer and Garrett are not slow in making the best of their opportunities.



“Beaux Soir,” French Music for Oboe & Piano – The Lumina Duo (MSR Classics)

Two ladies, oboist Meredith Hite Estevez and pianist Jani Parsons, are the Lumina Duo. Their avowed goal is “to heal, stir, call to action, and light up our dark world through the power of music.” Their hour-long programs, given in communities across the country, are unabashedly focused on social issues.

That fact is not reflected in the present program. Rather, the focus here is on the elements of light, color and mood in impressionist painting and poetry as inspiration to French composers. We have here a variety of “songs of love, loss, and longing, wordless melodies, unique arrangements, and new takes on old favorites.” Granted, all of that has its place in bringing light to Darkest America, though it would be interesting to know what the Lumina Duo’s social issues agenda is all about.

For the present, this is a great introduction for home listeners to an intriguing and enthusiastic duo. In a short program that clocks in at just over 47 minutes, we are given flavorful arrangements of works by Koechlin, Ravel, Silvestrini, Fauré, Debussy, and Messiaen that perk up our ears and our imaginations.

Ravel’s piano Sonatine is heard here in a transcription for oboe and piano that emphasizes the light and clarity of music written in a refined classical structure. In the opening movement, *Modéré*, the oboe soars in long expressive melodies over a piano that savors freer textures and harmonic language than we might have expected in a piece conceived

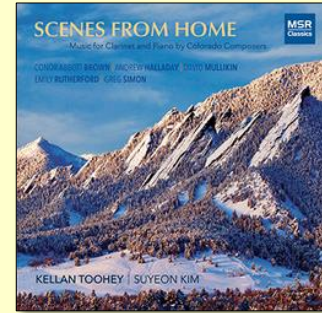


“New Standards,” Music for Bassoon & Piano – Ann Shoemaker, Kae Hosoda-Ayer (MSR Classics)

“New Standards” takes its title from the proposition that for a work of music to be recognized as a standard in its repertoire, we need not wait for its composer to be deceased a hundred years. Half the composers in this imaginative, far-ranging recital by U.S. bassoonist Ann Shoemaker are still very much alive, and so is their music.

With the capable assistance of her frequent recital partner, pianist Kae Hosoda-Ayer, Shoemaker coaxes her instrument (a Fox 660 red maple bassoon) to do all the things the instrument is traditionally supposed to excel at, utilizing its penetrating tone, wide range, and surprising ability to scamper rapidly up and down scale passages and cultivate a warm, flowing legato – and a few other features besides.

Most of the composers in the present program are / were either French themselves or lived and studied in France. All pushed the envelope in terms of the instrument’s capability in ways that make their works living standards. We begin with Gabriel Grovlez (1879-1944) whose graceful *Sicilienne et Allegro Giocoso* reflects his well-developed lyric qualities and also pays tribute to the *Sicilienne* from *Pelléas et Mélisande* by his mentor Gabriel Fauré. The American composer Joseph Schwantner (b.1943) is represented by *Black Anemones*, originally a song setting of a surrealist poem by the Colombian poet Agueda Pizarro, then re-set for flute and piano, and finally set once more for bassoon and piano. In all these versions, the music reflects Schwantner’s unusual feeling for



“Scenes from Home,” Music for Clarinet & Piano – Kellan Toohey, Suyeon Kim (MSR Classics)

American clarinetist Kellan Toohey grew up in Boulder, CO. He definitely reflects his roots in this program of inspiring new works by composers associated with Colorado, with most of whom he has worked closely on the compositions we have here. Further, we have a gracious amount of music inspired by the great natural beauty of his home state.

Three Poems by Emily Rutherford (b.1993) are perfect miniatures in a landscape that is rhythmically and melodically complex enough to justify Toohey’s comment, “I am still amazed that a work of such depth could come from someone so young.” Along with his recital partner Suyeon Kim he takes obvious delight in exploring its dominant moods, ranging from pathos to exuberance.

Early Winter Spires by Conor Abbott Brown (b.1988) takes its name from the awesome mountain of that name in the Boulder area that provides an enduring challenge to rock climbers in its spectacular thousand-foot spires that flank the mountain like the buttresses of a gothic cathedral.ⁱⁱ The music, appropriately, climbs to a peak and then “rappels off piano-chord ledges into a remote valley.” Toohey worked closely with Brown, an old high school chum, in adapting this clarinet and piano version from the middle movement of the latter’s Clarinet Concerto.

Suite Antique by David Mullikin (b.1950) is a neo-baroque work in five movements: a bright, spitted Sinfonia; a florid Air, reminiscent of J. S. Bach; and then a rollicking Gigue, a poignant Lament, and an

in a classical style. A disarmingly simple Menuet and a sparkling finale marked *Animé* complete the picture of elegance and beauty. A little later in the program, we hear a fine arrangement of the slow movement, *Adagio assai*, from Ravel's Piano Concerto in G in a setting in which the English horn spins out endless melodies over cascading scales and shimmering trill-like gestures in the piano.

That English horn, the oboe's deeper voiced cousin on which an oboist often doubles (as Estevez does here) is also heard at the very opening of the program in Charles Koechlin's *Au Loin – Chant pour Cor Anglais et Piano*, a work steeped in restless movement and mystery that permits dramatic interplay between both instruments.

The Lumina Duo score some of their very best points in transcriptions of two memorable songs. First, Gabriel Fauré's "*Après une rêve*" (After a Dream) with its troubling disparity of "image" and "mirage," evokes the timeless experience of questioning an incredibly beautiful love: is it real or illusion? Claude Debussy's "*Beau Soir*" evokes the even sadder thought, expressed in the complex rhythmic interplay between oboe and piano, that life, love and beauty are as fleeting as waves in a stream.

Six *Études* for Oboe by Gilles Silvestrini (b.1961), inspired by six paintings of Impressionist masters, are intended to stretch the technical and expressive limits of the solo instrument. They do just that, and Estevez meets their demands admirably. She also scores high marks for the mysterious vocalise (a wordless song) that is heard in all its endlessly flowing effervescence in *Vocalise-Étude* by Olivier Messiaen.

luminous, evocative color.

In his *Nine Brief Pieces*, Pierre Max Dubois (1930-1995) shows the piquancy, wit, and charm of *Les Six*, and in particular his own composition teacher, Darius Milhaud. The artist is required to exercise remarkable breath control, especially in the staccato passages in the fast movements. *Variations Concertates* by Ida Gotkovsky (b.1933) is written in five movements (*Lyrique/ Linéaire / Vêloce/ Expressive/ Ostinato*) that serve to display various capabilities of the bassoon: high to low range, with expression from melodic and lyrical to strident and detached, all at a wide variety of tempi. Alexandre Tansman (1895-1986), a Pole who made Paris very much his home, shows his best style in *Suite for Bassoon and Piano* both in the syncopated rhythms of the outer movements and the haunting beauty of the *Sarabande* they enfold.

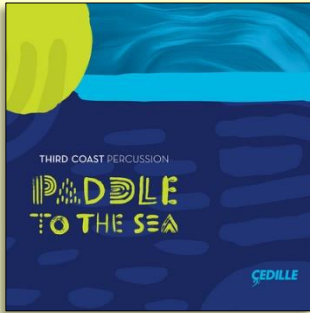
Charles Koechlin (1867-1950), friend and colleague of Ravel and Milhaud, reveals the darker side of his evocative artistry in a way I had never imagined him capable in *Three Pieces for Bassoon and Piano*. Shoemaker admits to being intrigued by the stories each piece appears to contain: first a cautious foray into uncharted territory in wide intervals and frequent fermatas, then a simple and innocent *Andante moderato*, and finally a darkly ominous and despairing *Andante sostenuto*.

Etude No. 5 by John Steinmetz (b.1951) consists of a whimsical (and challenging!) set of variations on the familiar cowboy song "Streets of Laredo." Brightening by Marcus Karl Maroney (b.1976) sets unique pitfalls for interpreters in its requirements for increasing tempi, slowly brightening modes (dark to light), and movement from stasis to activity, all of which occur gradually and don't always proceed at the same rate. Finally, the rhapsodic, fresh and energetic *Scherzo* by Oleg Miroshnikov (b.1925) ends the program on a ringing high note.

exuberant *Finale* that will invite toe-tapping from the listener. Even compared with other works in a similar vein by such greats as Ravel, Respighi, and Stravinsky, Mullikin's *Suite Antique* measures up pretty darn well.

Five Scenes from Our Aspen Grove by Andrew Halladay (b.1982) describes the human experiences of love and loss through the progress of the seasons of the year in a grove of Aspens. The music suggests the fluffy buds of early spring, the fresh green leaves of summer, the rich, vibrant colors of the fall, the brown carpet on the earth after the leaves have fallen, and finally the gray trunks of the aspens against a winter snowscape. A *ritornello*, heard at the very opening, is added-to in the succeeding movements note by note until a five-note melody is complete. What you don't get from the previous description are the flavorful timbres and rich interaction of Toohey's clarinet and Kim's piano that help make the harmonies work so well.

Lastly, *Two Orchids* by Greg Simon (b.1985) chronicles the composer's deeply personal experiences in moving from his home in Denver to another part of the country, with the image of a transplanted orchid as an emblem of continuity. The music, featuring great leaps and runs in the clarinet part and cascading rhythms in the piano, begins and ends with soft sounds, like the falling of quiet raindrops in a pond. In between, we are given rising, soaring music in the clarinet, a nostalgic middle section, and then an ascent to a second peak before the music gradually descends to the calm mood of the beginning. Superb collaboration between Toohey and Kim makes the various moods of this memory piece come alive as a continuous experience.

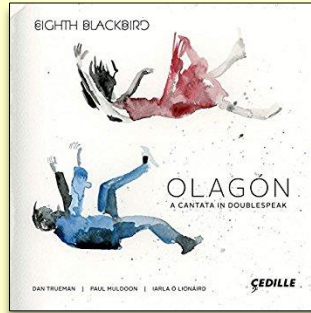


"Paddle to the Sea"
Performed by Third Coast
Percussion (Cedille)

This release by the Chicago-based Third Coast Percussion is a real ear-opener. A percussion section is part of every symphony orchestra, but we normally don't take much notice of them unless they "talk out of turn" with a strange or intrusive sound that the composer puts in for a special effect. They are not melody instruments in the usual sense of the word, but they provide the rhythmic impulse that helps the melodies in the orchestra come to life. So this release is for justice. It is overdue recognition for all the wonderful things a percussion ensemble can do all by themselves.

Third Coast Percussion consists of Sean Connors, Robert Dillon, Peter Martin, and David Skidmore. All together, they play a bewildering variety of noise-makers that would make any naughty young child green with envy. They deploy them with such persuasiveness and discretion that we are not overwhelmed by the various sounds of their instruments. On the contrary, we are charmed, delighted and intrigued.

They do some of their best work in their own self-authored suite *Paddle to the Sea*, which they wrote as the score to a film of the same title. Right from the theme based on a simple melody on pitched desk bells over skittering woodblocks, ceramic tiles and other quirky sounds that we hear in the opening movement, "The Lighthouse and the Cabin," we sense we are in an enchanted world in which the placid, insistent, and sometimes exuberant tones of tuned cowbells, drum set, marimba and keyboards create images in our



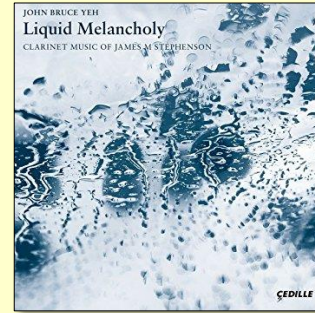
"Olagón: A Cantata in Doublespeak"
Performed by Eighth Blackbird
(Cedille)

The alternative music ensemble Eighth Blackbird takes its name from a line in American poet Wallace Stevens' best-known poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, in which the eighth stanza proclaims "I know noble accents / And lucid, inescapable rhythms; / But I know, too, / That the blackbird is involved / In what I know." By which, I suppose, the poet is saying there is a dark inspiration behind a poem that is more than just the sum of the technical skills that went into it.

This group, launched by six Oberlin Conservatory grads in 1996, now consists of Nathalie Joachim, flutes; Michael Maccaferri, clarinets; Yvonne Lam, violin & viola; Nick Photinos, cello; Matthew Duvall, percussion; and Lisa Kaplan, piano and bitklavier. Over the years, the chaste, economic style of Eighth Blackbird has earned it numerous awards for its collaborations with poets and other musicians. Now, we can brace ourselves for one more.

Olagón: a Cantata in Doublespeak is the creation of Irish poet Paul Muldoon, who has lived, taught, and won many academic and literary honors in the United States. The name *olagón* traditionally refers to a deep, conflicted cry, which is a metaphor for what this poem is about. It invokes two characters from Irish folklore, the warrior-queen Medhbh and her husband Ailill.

The story is carried down to present-day Ireland, where Medhbh and Ailill are involved in disputes epitomizing the conflicts and discontents of a modern world marked by political



"Liquid Melancholy," Clarinet Music
of James M Stephenson – John
Bruce Yeh, clarinet (Cedille)

"Liquid Melancholy," the title piece of this CD, derives its name from a phrase used by Ray Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451* as a metaphor for a character's attempted suicide. Taken as the title for the present album, it's somewhat misleading. There are melancholy moods, to be sure, in this collection of works by Chicago-based composer Jim Stephenson, but there are even more moods of contemplation, searching, exuberance and joy. Even the noticeably bluesy mood in the "Blue" section of *Colors* is not depressing. Or, as an African American friend of mine once observed, "It's really amazing how something called the blues can make you feel so good."

All the works heard here feature the clarinet, an instrument that fascinates Stephenson by its ability to play smooth, fluid lines at all dynamic levels. All feature the inspired artistry of John Bruce Yeh, currently the longest-serving clarinetist in the history of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (since 1977 and still going strong). He gives us a clinic on all the wonderful things the old licorice stick can do and still sound idiomatic.

In "Liquid Melancholy" (2011), the title-piece, Yeh is capably backed by the Lake Forest Symphony under Vladimir Kulenovic. The 'liquidity' of the clarinet writing is one of the first things you notice in a concerto for clarinet in which the composer's avowed aim was "to write "some deeply personal and intimate music."

The previously-mentioned *Colors* (1997) represents Stephenson's impressions of the four colors that

minds of flowing water and waves. They also evoke strong feelings of loneliness, longing for security, release, and danger. As all good film scores do, Paddle to the Sea creates a musical narrative that can stand by itself as well as enhance the poetry of the visual images in a motion picture.

The other items on the well-filled program (TT=78:52) are by other composers and voices that have profoundly influenced Third Coast Percussion. The four movements from the suite *Aguas de Amazonia* by Philip Glass, arranged here by TCP, evoke the mystery of the Amazon River and its tributaries. Compressions, rarefactions, and repetitive patterns are the essence of a figure who considers himself a composer of "music with repetitive structures" and abhors the tag "minimalist." The late American composer Jacob Druckman (1928-1996) carries on the aquatic metaphor of the present album in *Reflections on the Nature of Water*. It is organized in pairs of movements taken without pause, that mutually influence and mirror one another (Crystalline-Fleet, Tranquil-Gently Swelling, Profound-Relentless). The presence of the marimba, flickering gestures, and a stillness between notes inform this music.

Chigwaya, a traditional melody of Zimbabwe used to summon water spirits, is heard here in a truly hypnotic arrangement by Musekiwa Chingodza, whom the members of Third Coast Percussion consider a mentor. We hear the sounds of the mbira (a thumb piano), drum, shakers, and voice parts rhythmically chanted. All create a unique sound world in less than five minutes.

part for Bruce Yeh's clarinet, as Stephenson explains, was not too difficult a task as both clarinet and trumpet are often pitched in B-flat and both utilize techniques of slurring and tonguing. The music reflects the flair of the original trumpet dedicatee in a flavor that recalls the simple joy of popular Russian entertainments (listening to it, I get getting images of the Moscow Circus!)

As in *Fantasie*, the solo clarinet part in *Etude Caprice* (1997) requires a fantastic amount of artistry from the soloist in just two minutes in the way of scale patterns, intervals, and variations. Yeh displays remarkable breath control in a piece in which Stephenson cautions, "The performer must take a good breath at the beginning of the work, because that is his last chance!"

Finally, we have *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* (2015), in which Yeh is ably partnered, as he is in the two preceding works, by pianist Patrick Godon. The music rages from jazz-influenced harmonies in the opening movement to an

and social upheaval, unsettling change, alienation, and anomie. Much of this comes through clearly enough in exchanges between the characters, but at other times Muldoon's rhetoric and metaphor are all too personal. The poem is in *macaronic* verse with Celtic, serving as both commentary and refrain, alternating with English, particularly in the sobbing lament *ochón agus ochón ó*. "Doublespeak" thus refers both to the bi-lingual nature of the poem and to the theme of duplicity and betrayal in the story itself.

In the end, Medhbh comes a cropper to an all-too familiar modern malady: drug addiction. The final section, "The Book of Lamentations," enhanced as is the rest of the poem by the impressive flexibility of the vocalist, Iarla Ó Lionaird, recounts her demise in terms that are both poignant and ironic:

*In the carpark of the Roxy
on account of that omnium-gatherum
of Methadone and Oxy
Her body set off by two traffic cones
Ochón agus ochón ó
Her high heels the only pair of heels
she's shown
Ochón agus ochón ó*

At the very end, even as Medhbh is laid to rest, Muldoon does not let up on his trenchant social commentary:

*The coffin-lid was screwed down
tight
And our semi-professional mourners
Struck up their semi-professional
moan
Ochón agus ochón ó
For grieving's a skill we can all learn
to hone
Ochón agus ochón ó*

inspired him musically at the time: Red, Blue, Green, and White. For all that, it is not so much musical impressionism as it is a series of deft characterizations of the four colors. In *Red*, he imagines a spirited, witty argument among three instruments, clarinet, oboe, and cello; they get together briefly to witness the serene beauty of a sunset, and then fall out again. *Blue* connotes both a blue mood and also a lazy afternoon on the front porch with a glass of cold lemonade. *Green*, as we might expect, conjures up nature: a dark forest or a green summer meadow. The rhythms of an Irish jig are deftly suggested here. *White* is the color of bright sunlight. It is written in C Major, representing all the white keys of the piano. The Chicago Pro Musica, with the artistry of oboist Alex Klein, lend ample support here.

Last Chants (2015) finds Jim Stephenson at this wittiest and most inventive, the title being both wordplay (*chants* and *chance*) and a metaphor for the calculated risk-taking that is at work here. A chant-like melody, a genre that has always intrigued this composer by its open intervals and pitch blends, provides the impetus for lively, dance-like material that is still based on the chant sonorities. As we approach the end, after an exhaustive excursion of pitch-blending and high rhythms, the musicians seem to be "simply too tired to attempt anything further," giving another meaning to the wordplay of the title.

Fantasie (2005) was originally written for trumpet as a tribute to the recently-deceased Russian artist Timofei Dokshizer, one of the greats on that instrument. Adapting the solo

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introspective mood where lyricism and hazy beauty prevail over mixed meters in the second, simply titled *Lazily*. More of the composer's love of word-play is event in the third movement, *Jam-Bourrée*, which delightfully mixes baroque counterpoint with bi-tonal relationships. The final movement, *Spike*, involves a frenzy of spikey rhythms and mixed-metre grooves that show us Yeh's clarinet is capable of more than just the sort of mellow reverie we usually associate with the instrument. It ends in a sensationally high-pitched resolution in G Major.

Jim Stephenson writes in an idiom that is very attractive and immediately accessible (no disparagement intended). He combines the adventuresome spirit of contemporary music with a reverence for tradition that I find very refreshing. This composer is clearly on his way up, and the present album makes us want to hear more of his music.

ⁱ That Mendelssohn's cello writing was ahead of his time is demonstrated by the fact that the instrument itself was not commonly fitted with its familiar tail-pin until around 1860. That innovation allowed the cellist to maintain an erect posture, giving him (or her) greater flexibility of movement, even as it permitted the cello a greater degree of resonance as its body no longer rested on the floor.

ⁱⁱ Unless I miss my guess, it is the very mountain depicted on the booklet cover.