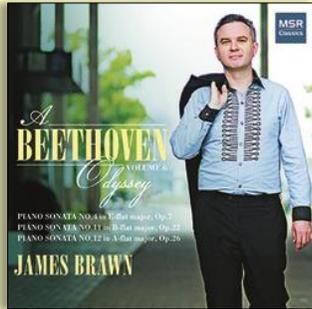


Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

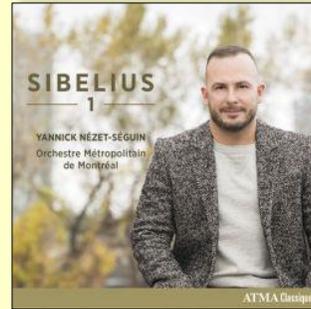
June, 2019



A Beethoven Odyssey: Vol. 6, Sonatas Opp. 7, 22, 26
James Brawn Pianist
(MSR Classics)

James Brawn's series "A Beethoven Odyssey" once again lives up to its name, with Volume 6 proving even more of an adventure than we've been accustomed to expect. That may be in part because of the unfamiliarity of the offerings. These are three prime examples of Early Period Beethoven, less popular in the concert hall and on recordings than Middle Period works such as the "Waldstein" and the "Appassionata," but brim-full of musical substance in their own right. They require an artist like Brawn, in whom technique and musicality are in equal balance, someone who is capable of taking the many surprises that must have made Beethoven's audiences gasp with delight (or dismay) at the composer's daring inventiveness taken *en passant*, as it were, instead of pausing to announce that something new is about to happen. Add in Brawn's innate sense of the poetry in the music and his insight as a scholar, and you have the ideal pianist to bring three neglected early masterworks to life, none of which had previously made anything like the impression on me that they do here.

The earliest and most troublesome of this trio of sonatas from the years 1796-1801 is No. 4 in E-flat Major, Op. 7. Beethoven dedicated it to his pupil, the Countess Babette von Keglevies. It must have raised eyebrows in its day, being the sort of robust, unruly thing one just didn't dedicate to a lady. It lasts almost thirty minutes (28:35 in the present account) and is chock full of more musical substance than the law customarily allowed, beginning early in the exposition with fast repeated notes in the left hand against a soaring melody in the right featuring ascending and descending scale figures. Then powerful fortissimo chords interrupt the musical flow and we move to a second group with legato and staccato right-hand octaves. And that, mind you, is only the opening of the first-movement exposition! The excitement continues unabated throughout the sonata, including an *Allegro & Minore* in which the usual expectations of energetic outer sections and a *dolce* trio marked by soft beauty and charm are turned on their heads. The middle section of the Rondo finale, according to Brawn, requires "strong hands to pull the *szforzando*



Sibelius: Symphony No. 1 in E minor, Op. 39 – Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Orchestre Métropolitain de Montréal
(ATMA Classique)

Montreal native Yannick Nézet-Séguin, who has garnered an impressive number of directorships and international honors, leads the Orchestre Métropolitain of his own home town in a truly distinguished performance of the First Symphony of Finnish composer Jean Sibelius (1865-1957). Nézet-Séguin correctly divines that the music of this composer bears such an imprint of its creator that it could not possibly be mistaken as that of any other. The reasons for this are various.

For one thing, the sound of Sibelius' orchestrations, as dark as they are poetic, is quite distinctive. The emphasis he places on the lowest registers of woodwinds, brass and strings underscores what he has to say in no uncertain terms. We hear this early in the opening movement when the orchestra comes up after the long, poignant clarinet solo that sets the mood for the entire work. It serves as the perfect foil for the wonderful lightening of texture and sound at 8:21 in this movement, a moment which strikes the listener with all the vividness of a Nordic sunrise.

Unlike most composers, Sibelius did not believe in blending the various instrumental timbres of the orchestra. The woodwinds and brass thus stand out in bold relief in the second movement as they prepare the stage for the first big climax. The inner voices of the reeds and the noble melody sung by the horns in the scherzo make a perfect contrast to the high rhythms driven by brass and percussion at the beginning and end of this movement.

Or consider the way the broad, expansive melody in the strings preceeds the long, slow buildup of excitement in the finale, marked *quasi una fantasia*, eventually giving way to a thrilling maelstrom of sounds and galloping rhythms before the symphony itself fades slowly into darkness, ending enigmatically with two simple chords dying away quietly on plucked strings. Sibelius' unmixed timbres reveal all of these features in the boldest relief.

A revealing anecdote about Sibelius concerns a

staccato chords from the keyboard,” and no fooling!

Sonata No. 12 in A-flat Major, Op. 26, like the others in this program, is a “grand sonata” in four movements, which in those days implied the formal layout, and even something of the sonority, of an actual symphony. This work has everything: a set of variations in which a lyrical *cantabile* melody in the opening is contrasted by restless humor in the second variation and a gloomy, doom-laden minor key variation for the third. The most memorable movement is the Funeral March for a Hero (*Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un Eroe*) with its muted drum rolls and evocations of musket fire in the middle section.

Beethoven considered No. 11 in B-flat Major, Op. 22 to have been his finest sonata to date, and James Brawn evidently seconds the motion. Once again, we have everything in this sonata, from Mannheim rocket effects in an impudent opening movement to orchestral-like colors in the development and a surprising use of tremolo and crescendo in the Minuet (where one doesn't expect it), creating the impression of the piano as a veritable orchestra in 88 keys. We also have two of Beethoven's most beautiful melodies in this work: a gently sighing aria over a throbbing heartbeat in the left hand in a slow movement, marked *Adagio con molta espressione* (and how!) and a lyrical *cantabile* that makes a surprise appearance in the Rondo finale.



“Fugato,” Sonatas for Cello & Piano by Beethoven, Brahms, Strauss – Estelle Revaz, François Killian (Solo Musica)

Estelle Revaz and François Killian, cellist and pianist respectively, met in Switzerland in 2011 and have been playing beautiful music together ever since. “Fugato,” the latest evidence of their close musical relationship, presents three sensational sonatas by German romantic composers that pushed the repertoire for the two instruments further along. In the process, Revaz and Killian show an ideal partnership, each contributing to the overall impression of the music without ignoring the character of his/her own instrument.

Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 102, No. 2, actually appears to have been the last of the five sonatas for cello and piano that he composed late in his career. Without assuming too much license, may we surmise that Beethoven's reason for composing these works may partly have been to explore the capacity of the cello as a distinctive

conversation he had with Gustav Mahler in which the Austrian composer expressed his view that the symphony must be like the world itself, “embracing everything,” and Sibelius retorted “No,” saying that he prized the severity and inner logic of the form. The principle of organic growth was his ideal.

In Sibelius, great musical structures grow from small kernels in a way that was uniquely his. Nézet-Seguin shows us that he is constantly aware of this fact in the patience with which he paces the symphony, slowly building its climaxes in a way that gives them all the greater impact. One especially fine moment, among many, occurs in the way he takes the *attaca* transition between the scherzo and finale, marked by trenchant brass with the lower strings creeping in.

Surprises in this finale include the glorious sunburst with the strings leading the way at 9:00 and also the sudden crescendo at 12:00 that precedes the slow fade to silence at the very end. All reveal this conductor's fine hand at work, pacing a challenging score.



“Bach & Beyond, Part 2” Jennifer Koh, violin (Cedille Records)

Chicago native Jennifer Koh, one of today's premier violinists when it comes to exploring new works of music and previously undiscovered ones, is at it again in Part 2 of “Bach & Beyond.” This series explores J. S. Bach's wonderfully inventive and ever onward probing sonatas and partitas for solo violin and their resonance down to composers of more recent times. As Bach biographer Martin Geck so aptly puts it, “Melody and harmony in one. That is the message of the six solos, which constitute as well an encyclopedia of the violin: prelude, fugue, concerto, aria, variation, dance – all are performable on it.”

We start off with Bach's Sonata No. 1 in G Minor, BWV 1001, in which Koh sets the tone for this recital with her superb pacing and choice of tempi in the Prelude, a slowly measured Adagio with a rather impassioned

singing voice of its own, with his Late Quartets already in the planning? Certainly, its mezza voice is given great liberty in the slow movement, an Adagio marked *con molto sentimento d'affetto* (you said it, Ludwig!) Here, various legati and *espressivo* passages are clearly indicated for the instrument. The finale is a venturesome double fugue inviting the close mutual rapport shown by Revaz and Killian.

Brahms' Sonata Op. 38 reveals his admiration for past masters, together with a sonority and lyricism that were all his own. As Revaz observes in her program notes, much of the success of its opening movement is due to its beautiful romantic phrases based on very simple intervals. In this movement, Revaz and Killian make much of the warm brooding melody, first intoned by the cello and later expressed in fortissimo variants by the piano. The slow movement, *quasi menuetto*, shows there is some life left in the old baroque / classical dance form. Its trio, with a rhythmic structure characterized by legato slurs and hemiolas, is truly inspired.

The finale, a fugue based on Contrapunctus 13 from Bach's Art of the Fugue and perhaps influenced as well by the finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, requires the close interaction it receives here by both partners to realize its syncopated rhythms and polyrhythms without losing an iota of Brahms' sweetness of expression.

The program concludes with Richard Strauss' Sonata, Op. 6, an altogether astonishing work by the then-19 year old composer. Despite the conservatism implied by its subtle use of fugato in all three movements, the work is suffused with romantic elements. These include vivid tone colour, surprising modulations, a dynamic range from *ppp* to *fff*, and a general feeling of romance and a "composer at play" that look far ahead to the future author of tone poems and operas. This particular work, by the way, seems to have undergone a rediscovery by musical artists in recent years, a process that is furthered with élan in this offering by Estelle Revaz and François Killian. Remember their names!



Stefan Wolpe: Music for Two Pianos
Performed by Quattro Maini (Bridge Records)

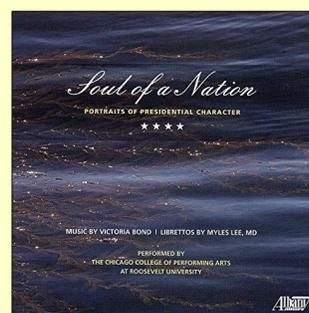
When I reviewed the engaging piano duo Quattro Mani consisting of Susan Grace and Stephen Beck, in their earlier Bridge Records release "Lounge Lizards" (July 2017), I was impressed by their handling of five different

second subject which helps prepare us for the incisive nature of the following fugue. A graceful Siciliana with a surprising, and welcome, touch of humor is succeeded by a Presto finale in perpetual motion.

Bela Bartok's Sonata for Solo Violin, Sz.117, up next, pays homage both to Bach and his frequent champion Yehudi Menuhin. An immediate sense of melody pervades this work, especially in the lyrically poignant third movement, Melodia, while the Presto finale utilizes quartertones for the extended passages. We normally wouldn't associate Bartok with Bach, but the inspiration of the older master is certainly there and he handled it with great freedom and individuality.

I am not as sanguine about *Frises* (2011) by the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, a work which takes the final D of Bach's famous Chaconne as its starting point. This is ostensibly Bach in a distinctly contemporary context, utilizing "an otherworldly soundscape of violin harmonics, electronic bells, and other aural fascinations" (to quote the booklet annotation by contemporary composer Patrick Castillo). I find the harmonies employed by Saariaho in this work rather unappealing, however, and the very personal titles of her four movements (*Frise Jaune, Frise de Fleur, Pavage, Frise Grise*) are far from transparent as guides for the listener.

The best is reserved for last: Bach's Partita No. 1 in B Minor, BWV 1002 with its infinite variety and its innovative use of variants known as "doubles" immediately following all four movements. (In Bach's day, the French term implied harmonic, rather than thematic variations.) We have here an uncommonly vigorous Allemanda with double-stops at its very outset, a typically lively Corrente, a slow, expressive Sarabande, and a devilish Tempo di Borea (in the time of a Bourée). The last-named is given an appropriate whirlwind intensity, as *Borea* can also be taken as a pun on the name of Boreas, the god of the winds in Grecian mythology. As always, Koh handles the musical material with style and dispatch, and no nonsense.



Soul of a Nation: Portraits of Presidential Character,
Music by Victoria Bond (Albany Records)

According to American composer Victoria Bond, *Soul of a Nation* derived its initial inspiration from Aaron Copland. "I've conducted A Lincoln Portrait numerous times," she recounts, "and am always moved by the way

composers, each with his/her own complexities of style and technique. It seemed to me that the more difficult the music, the better Quattro Mani liked it. Well, that goes double for their latest album of music by Stefan Wolpe, a composer who lived in tumultuous and dangerous times. He was a great admirer of Gustav Mahler, of whom he considered himself a disciple, because he saw in the older composer a great humanitarian and defender of justice whose music was "indispensable for human existence." Wolpe also studied for a time with Anton Webern, though in his grasp of 12-tone rows and his perception that the interval was the container of everything musical, he was very much his own man.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Wolpe found himself in danger of arrest for being a Communist, a modernist composer and a Jew. Much of his life in the following years was spent as a refugee, in Switzerland, Romania, and the British mandate of Palestine, where he married his longtime friend, colleague and ministering angel Irma Schoenberg. It must have been a bitter chagrin for Wolpe, an ardent Zionist, to be told bluntly by colleagues at the Palestine Conservatoire that 12-tone music "was "neither needed nor wanted." America was only slightly less cool to Wolpe's music, though Elliot Carter, in a 1940 concert review, found his *March and Variations for Two Pianos* (heard here) to be "the only work on the program with signs of real originality."

If you get the idea that the final judgment has yet to be made on Wolpe's music, you would be right. Much of it is emotionally intense, strident and conflict-laden. The real-life struggle for freedom and identity in a dynamic relationship between the individual and the collective finds its parallel in the struggle of variations to seek independence from a theme. Strife is of the essence in a work such as *March and Variations* (1932-1933), whereas *Two Studies on Basic Rows* (1935-1936) utilizes a 12-tone row on each interval from the minor second to the major seventh. The second study is a *Passacaglia*, an old baroque variation form brought up to date, its all-interval theme being informed by eleven basic tone rows.

Seem complicated? That's nothing to how it all sounds to the listener! I am filled with admiration for the unflagging diligence of Steven Beck and Susan Grace in continually keeping all the elements in Wolpe's music in a clear perspective and relationship to each other. Even in the densest passages, there is never any confusion of purpose to dismay either casual listener or scholar.

The most "accessible" work on the program is *The Man from Midian* (1942), a ballet suite in two movements dealing with the story of Moses as a man who grows to discover the special purpose of his life. He is outraged by the unjust treatment meted out to the enslaved people, and flees from Egypt to Midian after killing a taskmaster in a fit of anger. He then turns to God and is commanded to return and become the leader of his people. He parts the waters of the Red Sea and leads the Israelites to safety, goes up to the mountain to converse with God, and returns discover to his dismay

Copland's music intensifies Lincoln's words. I wanted to use this same format to highlight the visionary words of four more of our country's iconic leaders."

Bond, a human dynamo who is as much in demand as a conductor as she is a composer, does not actually conduct any of the four tributes, to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Theodore and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Those honors belong to Emanuele Andrizzi conducting the Roosevelt University Chamber Orchestra in the Jefferson tribute *Soul of a Nation*, and Stephen Squires at the podium with the Chicago College of Performing Arts Wind Ensemble in the other three.

With librettos which her collaborator, Dr. Myles Lee, thoughtfully compiled from speeches, other writings and accounts of their lives, Bond puts together compelling vignettes of four great American presidents, focusing on the significance of their contributions. It is not as terribly somber as you might imagine, for she enlivens these tableaux with music reminiscent of the eras in which her subjects lived and strived. For instance, she does a modern take on the pure music of Arcangelo Corelli, a composer for whom Thomas Jefferson, himself an amateur violinist, had great admiration. It helps paint the picture of Jefferson as the scholarly intellectual who was principal architect of the Declaration of Independence and also the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, watchwords of liberty that should be as relevant in our day as they were in his.

For Franklin Roosevelt, we have music reminiscent of the Big Band Era (with a stylish clarinet played by John Bruce Yeh that reminds me more than a little of Artie Shaw). Well, those were troubled times, marked by a great depression and a world war, and the jostling music fits in, together with excerpts from Roosevelt's New Deal and Four Freedoms Speeches. This particular portrait is entitled "The Indispensable Man," taking its cue from FDR's own statement that "There is no indispensable man" (for these times). But, of course, he was just that: he was absolutely the right leader for a crucial era.

For Theodore Roosevelt, the man of action, advocate of the strenuous life, whom a contemporary characterized as one who seemed to cause doors to fly open as by a great wind whenever he entered a room, Bond chooses her themes from popular songs of the era, making an audacious fugato out of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" and "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" (!) A deep note of sadness at the end depicts the downside of TR's exuberance and zest for conflict: the sadness he experienced when his son Quentin died in the Great War, a tragedy that he himself survived but six months.

Finally, the Washington portrait, *Pater Patriae*, uses fife and drum music reminiscent of the era to enliven Bond's depiction of another leader for perilous times in which the existence of the young America was constantly threatened by its enemies before it had even coalesced as a nation. Washington confronted adversity with equanimity and had the moral courage to resist coronation as a king, thereby setting the precedent for

that the people have turned to idolatry and bacchanalian orgies in his absence. Moses perceives that he has failed as a leader because he has ruled by decree instead of teaching the people self-government. He breaks the Tablets of the Law and condemns the rebel leaders to be killed, at last realizing that he himself is disgraced and that the final task of leading the people to their promised homeland must fall on other shoulders.

As this brief synopsis suggests, there is much conflict and even a carry-over of themes from one scene to another (for instance, Moses' breaking of the tablets in the second movement draws its powerful gestures from his earlier fight with the Taskmasters).

Continued below:

With no disrespect to the magnificent performance of Quattro Mani, I must say that Wolpe's honed-steel music with its strident intervals and sharply etched rhythms really seems to cry out for the warm, tempering influence of other instrumental timbres. What we have here is only a sepia sketch. We really need to hear the fully-scored ballet in order to fully judge the significance of The Man from Midian as a complete work of art.



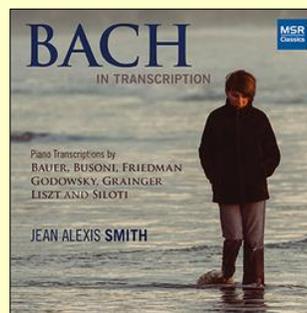
“Winged Creatures” and Other Works for Flute, Clarinet and Orchestra - Demarre and Anthony McGill with the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra under Allen Tinkham (Cedille)

Chicago-born brothers Demarre and Anthony McGill have come a long way since their early days playing with Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras (CYSO). Both are highly regarded among America's best orchestral musicians, Demarre as the principal flute of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and Anthony as principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic. The McGills celebrate their homecoming here with a program of works by old and new composers that bathe the listener with some of the sweetest flute and reed sounds this side of birdland.

Just as significant, the work of contemporary composers Michael Abels (b.1962) and Joel Puckett (b.1977), besides being attractive pieces in their own right, seem (to me, at least) to point the way toward the resolution of the greatest dilemma of our age for a composer, namely the absence, for the first time in centuries, of a clearly defined period style. The Sinfonia Concertante for Flute, Clarinet and Orchestra by Franz Danzi (1763-1826) shows the advantage for composers of an earlier age of having such a style to serve as a guide, setting them free to be creative, and quite often highly prolific, as opposed to the 20th/21st century composer who frequently seems compelled to re-invent the wheel, confused at every turn by competing schools of thought. There have simply

the first presidential succession.

In the last analysis, Victoria Bond's music is thrilling, moving, and provocative, as befits her subjects. The presence of four fine narrators, Adrian Dunn (Washington), Henry Fogel (Jefferson), Ray Frewen (Theodore Roosevelt), and David Holloway (Franklin Roosevelt), adds distinction to these four vivid portraits. The credos and issues they bring out are more important than ever, it seems to me, in our times in which democracy itself, beset by careerist politicians and a corrosive culture of scandal, often appears to be an endangered species in American life.



“Bach in Transcription,” piano transcriptions by Bauer, Busoni, Friedman, Godowsky, Grainger, Liszt, and Siloti
Jean Alexis Smith, piano
(MSR Classics)

American pianist Jean Alexis Smith, a native of California who has been internationally lauded during her career, here plays a program that is obviously close to her heart. These are Bach transcriptions that were made by seven of the great pianists of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Beginning with Franz Liszt, they include Ferruccio Busoni, Ignaz Friedman, Harold Bauer, Alexander Siloti, Leopold Godowsky, and Percy Grainger. In their piano illuminations of Bach pieces that were originally written for other instruments, mostly harpsichord and organ, they all had much to say in their own right. All cultivated a spirit of veneration for their great predecessor that was far from servile.

Busoni's transcriptions of the first two sections of the Toccata, Adagio and Fugue for Organ, BWV 564, capture the extroverted nature of the former and the wonderful depth of feeling in the latter. And his take on the Chorale Prelude “I Call unto Thee, O Lord,” BWV 639, preserves the earnestness and anguish of the original in a piano setting of considerable compass. Likewise, Friedman's transcription of “My Heart Ever Faithful” from Cantata BWV 68 emphasizes the joyous feeling of eternal fidelity in Bach's alert, upward-springing phrases, while Bauer's “My Soul Rests in

been too many “ism’s” floating about in our time. Danzi’s incorporating the Mannheim style with such innovations as the “rocket,” “crescendo,” and “sigh,” all evident in the present work, enabled him to transcend himself on occasion, as he did in the spirited Polonaise that serves as a finale. Ditto the Tarantelle, Op. 6, by Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921). Something of a signature piece for the McGills, who performed it as teenagers on the public television show *Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood*, the work breathes new excitement into an old folk dance that, legend has it, was originally intended as an antidote for the bite of the Tarantula!

Winged Creatures by Michael Abels celebrates the flight of butterflies and other aerial creatures, delicate, frenetic, soaring or powerful, depending on the species, being sometimes erratic and at other times swift and purposeful. It seemed so appropriate an analogy for the instinctive interaction of the soloists that Demarre and Anthony are not slow to take their cues in this, the title piece of the album.

Joel Puckett’s Concerto Duo (2017), like the Abels work, was written expressly for the brothers McGill and likewise receives its world premiere recording here on this album. Originally commissioned by the CYSO, it’s a work of contrasts and distances, from the first movement entitled “The Great American Scream Machine,” recalling the terrifying roller coaster that Puckett recalls vividly from his childhood excursions to the Six Flags amusement park in Chicago¹ to the quiet, serene beauty of “Mama Dee’s Song for Joel”, a lullaby-inspired personal memory of wonderful warmth with a feeling of drifting off into vast spaces.

The finale, “For Audrey,” is given to to the sense of musical play that Demarre and Anthony invest in their performances. Tossing arpeggios, follow-the-leader passages, and gorgeous contrapuntal phrases back and forth with instinctive deftness, they make you wonder if there isn’t really something to DNA, after all?

Jesus’ Hands” from Cantata BWV 127 reflects the mood of calm patience and certitude found in the original chorale.

In many ways, the best items of all in the program are Liszt’s surprisingly straightforward transcriptions of the Prelude and Fugue in A minor, BWV 543, in which he took the remarkable freedom of transferring the pedal part to the hands, thus preserving Bach’s rich sonority and vivid counterpoint while making the writing more accessible to the pianist. Jean Alexis Smith obviously relishes the amenities of transcriptions that celebrate the spirits of both Bach and Liszt.

Siloti’s transcription of the Prelude in E minor, BWV 855a from Book I of the Well-Tempered Clavier, transposed to B minor, opens with sounds reminiscent of distant church bells, a very Russian passion which he shared with his cousin Sergei Rachmaninov, while Grainger’s of “Sheep May Safely Graze” (here called “Blithe Bells”) suggests the English preoccupation with things pastoral, in this instance cow bells, ending with exuberant flourishes that our present artist obviously enjoys.

The soft beauty of Godowsky’s transcription of the Adagio from Violin Sonata No. 2, BWV 1003, takes nothing away from the complexity of the original, which featured strettos, inversions, and double counterpoint as well as a slow stacking-up of notes that had been previously considered to be impossible for a violinist to achieve. Zestfulness and deceptive ease characterize Smith’s present account.

This album parallels two other MSR releases of Bach transcriptions by Simone Leitão and Tanya Gabrielian, which I previously reviewed in 9/2017 and 10/2017. I am happy to report there is no bleed-through of program items among the three albums, so that each constitutes its own unique invitation to musical adventure!

¹ We have the same ultimate scream-provoking attraction here in Atlanta! (*Phil*)