

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

June, 2020



Mozart: Piano Concertos, K451, K450, K175 – Anne-Marie McDermott, piano. Odense Symphony Orchestra (Bridge Records)

Anne-Marie McDermott continues to impress this reviewer with her nuanced and infectious accounts of Mozart piano concertos in this second volume in what promises to be a complete series. Her sense of taste and proportion is apparent in her performances with the Odense Symphony Orchestra of Denmark of three highly significant concertos under the batons of conductors Kenneth Montgomery (K451), Gilbert Varga (K450) and Andreas Delfs (K175).

We begin with K451 in D Major, a work in which Mozart's harmony, already considerably advanced for its day, is apparent in the way the woodwinds interact and converse with the piano soloist. No one prior to Mozart had integrated the woodwinds into the fabric of a concerto, as opposed to leaving the burden of the accompaniment almost entirely to the strings and merely relying on the winds to fill in the harmony with a little color here and there. You can taste the flavor of these woodwinds along with the striking turns of phrase, subtle dynamics, and a fine distribution of light and shade.

Mozart's "modern" harmony already marks this work, as it does the Concerto in B-flat Major, K450, as an example of the new type of piano concerto, one that could not be satisfactorily realized on the harpsichord or any of its sister instruments. K451 also impresses by the scoring for trumpets and kettledrums in the *Allegro assai*, imparting a jaunty martial character to this opening movement, while the slow movement, an *Andante* unfolding as a simple rondo, makes for a welcome contrast by its touching elegance and its basic mood, pensive but for no means sad. In the coda, the melodic idea gets reduced into ever smaller fragments until there is nothing left at the end, a striking inspiration of Mozart. The finale is a bustling *Allegro di molto* in 2/4 time that, following the cadenza, veers into 3/8, a change that turns up the momentum and introduces a playful mood that is certain to please an audience.



Beethoven: Piano Sonatas, "Moonlight," "Pathétique," No. 13 Leslie Tung, fortepiano (MSR Classics)

St. Louis native Leslie Tung has been for years a man of many interests both in and outside the world of music. He has concertized at numerous festivals as a soloist and as a duo-pianist with his wife Silvia Roederer, and is a Professor Emeritus of Music at Kalamazoo (MI) College, as well as a member of Photographers Without Borders.

The present MSR release shows Tung to be a keen student of early music in general and the fortepiano in particular. The program he has chosen brings out the cutting edge qualities in three sonatas of Beethoven's Early Period: No. 8 in C Minor, Op. 13, the "Pathétique," and Nos. 13 in E-flat Major and 14 in C-sharp Minor, the "Moonlight," Op. 27. Performing on a 5-octave fortepiano built by Janine Johnson and Paul Poletti (1983) after a 1795 original by Johan Lodewijk Dulcken, Munich. Tung utilizes well its quick action and warm middle range in order to bring out the essential genius of a young composer who was to revolutionize the keyboard music of his day. In Tung's hands the performances sound like compelling "real" music, and not just informed scholarship.

One quality shared by all three works heard here was Beethoven's fusion of the formal structure of the sonata with the immense freedom provided by the fantasy. In Op. 13, described as a *Grande Sonata Pathétique*, Beethoven's themes seem deceptively to flow in free association, although their thematic interconnectedness is clear in a thoughtful reading such as Tung gives us here. The Adagio, filled as it is with elegiac poetry, seems to flit by all too soon, and is succeeded by a rambunctious finale that picks up in kinetic drive and propulsion as it nears the finish line.

Both the Op. 27 sonatas are labelled *Quasi una fantasia*, emphasizing their revolutionary character. No. 2 in C-sharp Minor is the more famous for the insistent purling triplet rhythm in the opening Adagio sostenuto that has

K450, by contrast, opens with pairs of oboes and bassoons playing a little hiccupping theme in alternation with the violins before the music settles down to the business of introducing and revisiting principal themes. In the languid, contemplative *Andante*, the progression of ideas, untypically for Mozart, seems a trifle labored despite McDermott's best efforts. However, a jovial, galloping *Allegro* finale ends things on a really high note.

Mozart composed Concerto No. 5, K175 in D Major at home in Salzburg when he was still a few months shy of his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was more of an epoch-making achievement than you might think, as it was his first authentic piano concerto, Nos. 1-4 having been re-arrangements of existing compositions by J. C. Bach and others. It should logically be considered his "Piano Concerto No. 1." However, there seems to be little enthusiasm at this late date for confusing the public by re-numbering Mozart's 27 concertos.<sup>1</sup>

K175 is an irresistible work, filled with vitality and high spirits in the outer movements with a dreamy, expansive *Andante* for contrast. A finale bristling with brass and tympani makes use of such learned techniques as canon and counterpoint to ratchet up the excitement, while the catchy theme itself will stay with you for some time. (I find myself whistling or humming it at odd moments all through the day!)



*l'Unique*, harpsichord music of François Couperin – Jory Vinikour (Cedille)

Jory Vinikour, native Chicagoan and master harpsichordist, once again displays his consummate technique and deep insight into the music of the Baroque era. This time, it's French composer François Couperin (1668-1733), heard to best advantage in his ripest *Ordres* (i.e, suites) Nos. 6, 7, and 8. These performances reveal Couperin to be very much engaged with the world of his time, and not just the idealized images of beguiling nymphs and shepherds as promulgated in the court of Louis XIV.

We sense this in Couperin's 6<sup>th</sup> *Ordre* in B-flat, in his

given its famous nickname, the "Moonlight." Of interest is the fact that Tung respectfully adheres to the composer's admonition that the entire movement be played *Sempre pianissimo e senza sordino*, "always very softly and without dampers." And what a dramatic effect is achieved at the end of the second movement when the music plunges *attacca* from the pleasant *Allegretto* into the prevailing fury of a *Presto* finale that is punctuated by sharply struck *sforzandi*: always a marvelous moment!

No. 1 in E-flat Major is the much lesser-known of the Op. 27 sonatas, though it exhibits more the form of a free fantasy than does its better-known companion. For one thing, all the movements are to be played continuously without pause. A remarkable moment, which Tung handles with the greatest assurance, occurs in the *Allegro vivace* finale when the music pauses dramatically at about 4:38 in order to recall the tenderly expressive *Adagio* and its cadenza before moving on to a really stunning conclusion.



J. S. Bach: Italian Concerto  
Sonatas & Polonaises by CPE, WF, and JCF Bach  
Charlotte Mattax Moersch, harpsichord (Centaur)

In *The Bach Legacy*, harpsichordist Charlotte Mattax Moersch presents a provocative, ear-opening program of pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach and three of his sons that helps us understand their importance in the developing music world of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As a bonus, it's also great listening!

We begin with papa Bach's well-loved Italian Concerto in F, a work that helped infuse the mainstream music of his day with a healthy dose of Vivaldi-style *ritornello*, a technique whereby a musical phrase keeps coming back at us in different keys and guises until it is re-established

<sup>1</sup> And a good thing that is, too. We've already experienced enough trauma to last a lifetime from the misguided attempts of scholars in recent decades to re-number Franz Schubert's nine symphonies. For details, see my review of the "Great C Major" Symphony in these *Classical Reviews*, February 2014.

down-to-earth musical sketches of peasants at work and at play. *Les Bergeries* depicts the country life, *Les Moissonneurs* the harvesters. We hear warbling of birds (*Le Gazouillement*), chattering of gossips (*La Commère*), and even the insistent presence of a gnat (*Le Moucheron*), which is as great a pest in France as it is everywhere else. Couperin, whose forebears came from Brie, a region still noted for its cheeses, knew his country life first-hand.

That this particular ordre is in the key of B-flat marked it as *avante-garde*. There are two flats in the key signature of B-flat major, and five in the minor key. As the French harpsichords were customarily tuned in mean temperament in Couperin's day, the more flats the more the instrument tended to sound piercing and out of tune. He was ahead of his time in showing how the riches inherent in B-flat could be obtained without that undesirable drawback.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Ordre is perhaps the most gracious and immediately appealing of all, with a warm, sunny tonality in G that alternates between major and minor. One section of this ordre, *Les Petites Ages*, is given to deft sketches of the various stages of childhood and youth: The Nascent Muse, The Infant, The Adolescent (depicted by rhythmic equality opposed to offbeats), and finally The Delights (*Les Délices*), presumably amorous? The happy release of energy in this suite continues in *La Basque*, which replicates the sounds of the little cymbals imbedded in the drums of that region.

Opposed to the noticeable pictorial element in Orders 6 and 7, the 8<sup>th</sup> Ordre is purely a suite of dances. That, plus the fact that Couperin casts the entire work in B minor, the dominant of which, F-sharp minor, he was apparently the first composer in France to use, places this work more in line with the keyboard suites we are used to hearing in the works of J. S. Bach (a composer who greatly admired Couperin, by the way). Jory Vinikour has some of his best moments in the various dance movements, some light and vivacious with dotted and arpeggiated rhythms. Even the Sarabande, normally a very slow dance, quite serious in character, here contains livelier measures marked *vitément*, inserted in several places as a real surprise. Couperin in fact subtitled it *l'Unique* (the Unique). Concluding with a *Passacaille* that is one of the high points in French harpsichord literature, it makes a fitting end to an intriguing program that Vinikour takes for all it is worth.

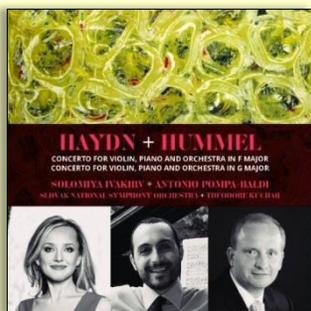
in its original form at the end. It is one of the few works (the French Overture and Goldberg Variations are others) in which Bach specified a two-manual harpsichord as needed to emphasize the contrast of "solo" instrument and "orchestra" and to realize such dynamics as were then made possible between the two keyboards. While the quieter left hand modulates to various keys, the right is free to play an ornate solo, the expressive means of which Charlotte Mattax Moersch is not slow to take advantage.

This is a true harpsichord account of the Italian Concerto, as opposed to the piano arrangements that many listeners have been accustomed to hearing over the years. The difference is immediately apparent in the decisive way the artist variously breaks the thick chord at the end of the opening phrase into either a suspended cadence or several individual notes, in keeping with what sounds more intuitive and decorative on a harpsichord.

Bach's second son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, is represented by his Württemberg Sonata No. 3 in E Minor. The opening begins with a majestic four-bar flourish that is followed, surprisingly, by an unaccompanied theme consisting of a falling octave succeeded by hammering repetitions of the lower note. Forte interjections, terse phrases, heated climaxes, and completely unexpected poetry and color, all occur in a work in which listeners and performers alike must have been taken off-balance.

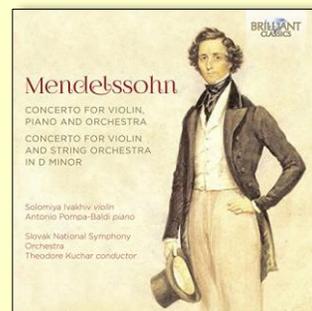
The composer was not "nuts," as we might say today. This was really CPE's characteristic style known as *empfindsamkeit*, for which the usual English translation of "sensitive" or "feeling" style is quite unsatisfactory. It was actually an exercise in subjective emotional realism that was a precursor of European romanticism and had its greatest influence with the later generation of Haydn and Beethoven's day. Charlotte's sensitive performance shows it off to good advantage.

There remain: Wilhelm Friedemann Bach's Polonaise in E Minor, a charmer that refreshes us while preserving the characteristic rhythm of the Polish dance. Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach's classical-sounding Sonata in F Major, the slow movement of which, *Andante innocentemente*, lives up to its description (innocently). And a less satisfactory account of JS Bach's own arrangement, BWV 968, of the Adagio in G Major, from his Solo Violin Sonata BWV 1005, a movement that has elsewhere been described as "a heartbeat embarking on a journey of the soul." In this re-imagining, it generates an element of drama with running sixteenth notes and an expressive bass line in the harpsichord's lowest register.



Haydn + Hummel: Concertos for Violin & Piano – Solomiya Ivakhiv, Antonio Pompa-Baldi Theodore Kuchar, Slovak NSO (Centaur)

Mendelssohn: Concerto for Violin & String Orchestra; Concerto for Violin, Piano & Orchestra Solomiya Ivakhiv, Antonio Pompa-Baldi; Theodore Kuchar, Slovak NSO (Brilliant Classics)



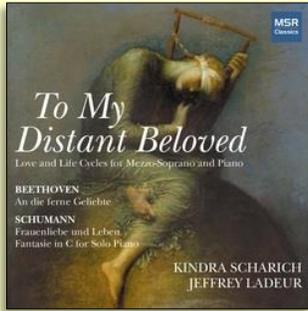
The two works on the Centaur offering, by Franz Joseph Haydn and Johann Nepomuk Hummel, respectively, offer different solutions to the problem of how to compose a double concerto for two dissimilar instruments. Haydn, who was for many years the director of a court orchestra, knew the capabilities of both violin and piano. Though the violin was his own instrument, he knew enough about the piano to write some 50-60 piano sonatas and a half-dozen concertos that are still relevant enough to be performed in today's much different world. At a duration of 21:00, his Concerto in F for Violin, Piano and Orchestra, Hob. XVIII: 6, is superbly economical in its contours and overall structure. It is in three movements. First, a spirited Allegro moderato, then a pensive but not-too melancholy Largo, and finally a quick, tautly constructed Presto. The Largo, in which the timbres of the two solo instruments are melded sufficiently to give the impression of a touching love duet, is the most memorable movement in this work.

Hummel's Concerto in G Major for Violin, Piano, and Orchestra, Op. 17, takes a different approach in that the composer is careful to keep the solo voices separate. The piano was Hummel's own instrument, his writings for which constitute a vital link between the sons of J.S. Bach and the young Beethoven. Typically, the violin steps in to finish a phrase begun by the piano, or else offers its own take on material the piano has just introduced. Significantly, its very center is not a slow movement as in the Haydn, but a handsome Theme with Variations that follows the classical conventions. The closest thing to an actual duet occurs between violin and French horn in one of the inner variations. The jaunty Allegro con brio that opens the work, and the infectious Rondo that closes it, both betray the fact that, at a totally unhurried playing time of 35:19, this is more in the style of a popular entertainment known as a *sinfonia concertante* than it is the more tightly constructed double concerto.

Our artists in the Centaur album, Ukrainian violinist Solomiya Ivakhiv and Italian pianist Antonio Pompa-Baldi are also heard to advantage in the 2019 Brilliant Classics release, again with the Slovak National Symphony Orchestra under Theodore Kuchar, of two stunning early works by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847). They are his Concerto for Violin and String Orchestra in D Minor (1822) and Concerto for Violin, Piano and Orchestra (1823). Readers who are good at doing the math in their heads will have noted how incredibly precocious Mendelssohn was at this stage in his career!

Solomiya makes much of Mendelssohn's distinguished use of baroque counterpoint and contemporary French violin technique in the charming Violin Concerto, a work which already breathes the atmosphere of 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism. The composer reserves a lyrical second theme for the soloist in the opening movement, plus some extraordinarily beautiful melodic material in the slow movement, an Andante. At the end of this movement, he calls for the third movement, a dazzling finale with more than a hint of gypsy-inflected wildness, to spring *attacca* from the second, a procedure he would later employ in his mature Violin Concerto in E Minor. The present performance substitutes a 7-second break at this point, which I feel to be a legitimate exercise in artistic license. We need a break here to savor the wealth of melodic beauty we've just heard.

Together with Pompa-Baldi, Solomiya scores some delicious points in the Concerto for Violin, Piano and Orchestra. In particular, there are surprisingly many passages for the two soloists alone without the presence of the orchestra in the opening Allegro and the second movement, an Andante. In a distinctive voice beyond his years, Mendelssohn showed he had the confidence needed to blend the sounds of the two instruments. In the central section of the Andante, the violin soars above continuously flowing arpeggios in the piano part in an inspired meditation that seems as if it could go on forever – a truly magic moment. The finale, Allegro molto, has a fiery main theme that seems tinged with a Slavic accent, at least as our performing artists take it.



Beethoven: *An die ferne Geliebte* Schumann: *Frauenliebe und Leben*; *Fantasie in C for Piano*  
Kindra Scharich, Jeffrey LaDeur (MSR Classics)

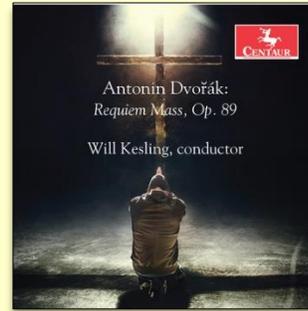
“To My Distant Beloved” is the title, translated, of a program featuring the exceptional talents of mezzo-soprano Kindra Scharich and pianist Jeffrey LaDeur. Together they make the necessary connections to enable us to understand the relationships among the three major works heard in this program: Beethoven’s *An die ferne Geliebte*, Robert Schumann’s song cycle *Frauenliebe und Leben* and his piano *Fantasie in C Major*.

Beethoven kicked off first with his *An die ferne Geliebte* (To My Distant Beloved, 1816). As the embodiment of deep longing for an unattainable love, it set a precedent for a major theme of the romantic era. But the echoes of this song cycle in the Schumann works go even deeper.

Most explicit is Schumann’s direct quotation of Beethoven’s song *Nimm sie him denn, diese Lieder* (Take then these songs, / The songs I sang to you) in the sixth song of his own *Frauenliebe und Leben* cycle. This was Schumann’s love-letter to his own “distant beloved” Clara Wieck to keep up their spirits in the trying period of more than a decade when her tyrannical father adamantly opposed their proposed marriage.

Then, too, both song cycles possess remarkable unity, the Beethoven in the fact that the songs are performed without a break, deftly employing instrumental bridges and a reprise of the melody of the opening song by the piano to provide a sense of unity. The images of blue mountains, mist-filled valleys, a primrose growing on a rock, soaring clouds, meadows in bloom – all contribute to the general feeling of distance and a deep sense of *sehnsucht*, longing.

Schumann uses more everyday imagery in *A Woman’s Life and Love* to evoke her feeling of exaltation that she has been chosen by the man she reveres to be his betrothed: “I cannot grasp it, nor believe it, / I must be dreaming; / How has he picked me, among all others, / To exalt and make happy?” The final poem in the cycle, *Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan* (Now you have hurt me for the first time, / But oh how deep you sleep, you hard, merciless man, / The sleep of death) sounds a tone of resentment, even anger, by the bereaved widow. Then the veil falls and she withdraws



Dvořák: *Requiem Mass, Op. 89*  
Will Kesling, conducts  
(Centaur)

Much-travelled maestro Will Kesling conducts the Philharmonic Orchestra of Bacău, Romania and Academic Chorus of Philharmonicii Moldova in a performance of the Requiem Mass by legendary Czech composer Antonin Dvořák. Assisted by chorus master Doru Morariu, Kesling, an American who has conducted hundreds of choral ensembles and some fifty orchestras worldwide, is well-equipped to understand both the choral and the symphonic issues in a work that personally meant a great deal to its composer.

That balanced emphasis is important as there is no standard template for a Requiem Mass. In the section known as the “Sequence,” for instance, composers have been traditionally free to select verses that have mostly evoked the fear of death and retribution for a misspent life, texts such as the *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath), *Confutatis maledictis* (When the damned are confounded), and *Lacrimosa dies illa* (Lamentable is that day on which the guilty man shall arise from the ashes to be judged). Composers from Mozart to Verdi have vied in scoring trenchant points in such verses as these.

Dvořák was nothing loath to extolling the pity and terror in these verses. And also in the text calling on the Lord to deliver the souls of the departed from the mouth of the lion and the dark pit of Tartarus in the otherwise affirmative *Domine Jesu Christe* (Lord Jesus Christ) in the Offertorium, in which, soloists and chorus join in reaffirming, in calm marching tempo, the promise of salvation that God made to Abraham and his seed (*Quam olim Abrahae promisisti*).

The darker verses notwithstanding, the greater impression we take away from the Dvořák Requiem is that of joy and calm assurance of God’s mercy, which is what a Requiem Mass should be about. We hear this most affirmatively in the *Hostias* section of the Offertorium (We render our offerings and prayers to Thee), where soloists and chorus come forth once more in a gloriously wrought fugue on the verse *Quam olim Abrahae promisisti*, reminding us again of God’s promise to us.

This mood of affirmation and comfort is heard in various ways in the Sanctus, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei.

silently into herself. The cycle concludes with a postlude by the piano based on a reprise of the first song. Beautifully realized in the present performance, it adds to a very noticeable feeling of unity.

The connections don't end here. LaDeur's account of Schumann's *Fantasie* helps complete a sense of unity in a work that at first blush seems nothing more than the yoking-together of three unruly children. But now the poetic rationale comes through with striking clarity as the music quotes Beethoven's *Nimm sie him denn, diese Lieder from the Distant Beloved* cycle. The energy Schumann derives from this poetic morale-raiser casts light on an otherwise incomprehensible, manic burst of exuberance in the second movement.

Now the music ranges all over the keyboard, ending in syncopations that still have the power to astonish listeners today. Seen in this context, the sublime final movement, animated by what the program annotation terms "Schumann's harmony [of] transfiguration, as a single common tone bridges otherwise distant keys," makes sense. It is the final confirmation of what Kindra Scharich and Jeffrey LaDeur have been at pains to convey to us, simply and eloquently.

Significantly, Dvořák also included the verse *Pie Jesu* (Merciful Jesus) which is seldom heard in settings of the Requiem other than by those composers (Fauré comes immediately to mind) whose purpose first and foremost is to stress the healing mercy of God.

That quality is vital in encouraging our acceptance of a work that, at a hundred minutes' duration (101:54 in the present 2-CD slimline), is really too long to ensure its acceptance in the concert hall or on recordings. That may explain why we so seldom have the opportunity to hear a major work that has so much musical substance going for it.

There's no problem with the chorus in this recording, nor with the four vocalists who are heard individually, in duets, and in lively counterpoint with the chorus: soprano Mariana Panova, mezzo-soprano Florentina Onic, tenor Mihail Mihaylov, and bass Plamen Kumpikov, all of whom are in superb voice.