

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

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Tchaikovsky + Smetana: Piano Trios
Trio con Brio Copenhagen (Orchid Classics)

Trio con Brio, an engaging and *very* exciting trio of young artists with a home base in Copenhagen, consists of two Korean sisters, Soo-Jin Hong, violin; and Soo-Kyung Hong, cello, and a Danish pianist, Jens Elvekjaer. That Jens is married to Soo-Kyung makes this something of a family trio. From what I hear of their deeply committed performances of Tchaikovsky and Smetana, they would seem to have a not-too slick blend, allowing plenty of elbow room for individual personalities to emerge and make telling contributions to the total effect. (I'd give something to listen in on their rehearsals!)

Both works benefit immensely from the con Brio approach beginning with Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio in A minor, Op. 50. The composer at first demurred at the suggestion of his patroness that he compose a trio, remarking that the sound of violin, cello, and piano made him ill. He overcame his prejudice when the sudden death in 1881 of his friend and mentor Nicholas Rubinstein provided the catalyst he needed. The result was a trio of monumental length and scope, dedicated "In Memory of a Great Artist." That Rubinstein was a famous pianist is reflected in the music by the virtuosic role of the piano, particularly in the opening movement, where its contributions to the symphonic breadth, deep sonorities and athletic rhythms in the work tend to dominate the violin and cello, though these "oppressed" strings will come into their own as the work unfolds.

There is a reason for this initial bias in favor the piano. The great theme of the Tchaikovsky trio is an apotheosis of pain and loss, with triumph at the end. In the beginning the sense of loss is keen and bottomless, without consolation. The brooding opening movement, *Pezzo elegiaco*, actually begins with a beautiful melody in the cello that will later return as a funeral march. The second movement is an altogether brilliant set of variations on a folk-like theme. In a movement that has all the variety of a human life, Tchaikovsky gave full rein to his fertile imagination. The variations include a waltz, a fugue that follows the formal rules (including a fine discretion of just



Dvořák: "Dumky" Trio + Shostakovich: Piano Trio 2;
Tower: Big Sky – The Oberlin Trio (Oberlin Music)

The members of the Oberlin Trio are pictured on the cover: David Bowlin, violin; Amir Eldan, cello; and Haewon Song, piano. In performance they fit together like fingers in a glove, with a close blend when desired but with considerable scope for expression as individuals. Add in their feeling for the drama in the music they play, and you have ideal interpreters for the trio of works heard in this, one of the best chamber music releases I've reviewed in several years.

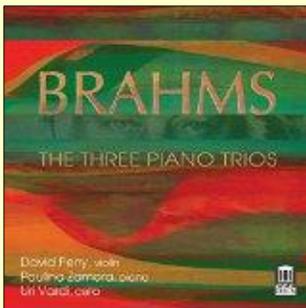
These qualities are put to the test immediately in Trio No. 2 in E minor (1944) by Dmitri Shostakovich. This work reflects the urgency of the war years, and was dedicated to his closest friend Ivan Sollertinsky, who had recently died of a heart attack in his prime of life. In addition, his favorite composition student, Veniamin Fleischman, a Jew, was killed in 1941 at the siege of Leningrad, and it is generally supposed that he was commemorated in the composer's use of *klezmer* music (an act of defiance in Stalinist Russia) in the Trio's finale. This work was a very personal one.

The tension begins early in the opening movement with a quietly brooding, incredibly difficult passage, all in eerie harmonics, for the cello. It builds as the other instruments join in, expressing itself in the form of angry and powerful outbursts. The brief scherzo, *Allegro con brio*, is surprisingly humorous, though (Shostakovich being what he was) it is not without an edge in its frenzied dance measures. In the Largo, one of those yawning stretches of bottomless sorrow for which this composer is famous, violin and cello exchange somber thoughts in what amounts to a passacaglia, a set of variations over a background of slow piano chords as a bass line. The finale, a dance of death if ever there was, becomes more frenzied before it finally subsides almost inaudibly on a tortured E major chord. The expected key resolution has taken place, but at what a cost!

American composer Joan Tower (b.1938) began her career under the spell of serialism, but later came into

how and where to bend them), a mazurka, and a sumptuous final variation of true symphonic scope. The music modulates to the original minor key, and another death march ensues. But Tchaikovsky does not leave us in limbo. The breathtaking lyricism of this last variation and the irresistible sweep of its coda, beautifully realized by the Trio con Brio, leave the lasting impression.

The dominant features of the Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 33 by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana are its sudden mood swings and the overall impression of sadness that it conveys. As did Tchaikovsky, Smetana wrote his sole piano trio in memory of someone he had lost, in this case his daughter and namesake Bedřiška, who died at an early age of scarlet fever. The movements are all in the elegiac key of G minor. The opening has a glowing intensity, for which the overall darkened mood serves as a foil. The booklet notes to the present CD express it accurately as “inconsolable grief illuminated within by nostalgia.” The scherzo is notable for a duet between violin and cello, unmistakably depicting father and daughter, and for the growing intensity of the dotted rhythms in the outer sections. The agitated finale opens with a gallop, reminiscent of Schubert’s “*Erlkönig*” (which also deals with the death of a child) that is halted dramatically by a funeral march. Only a brief episode in which cello and piano suggest a hymn of love from father to daughter offers any respite from the prevailing melancholy, which the Trio con Brio capture so well.



Brahms: The Three Piano Trios
Perry, Vardi, Zamora Trio
(Delos Productions)

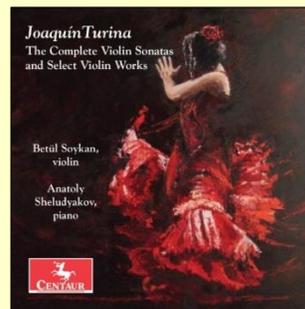
David Perry, violin; Uri Vardi, cello; and Paulina Zamora, piano, representing outstanding talents of the U.S., Israel, and Chile, respectively, comprise the top-notch trio heard in these recordings. Technically and musically, they blend impressive individual skills into a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. That’s important because Johannes Brahms’ three Piano Trios represent some of his most intimate musical thoughts and pose technical challenges that are not for the faint-hearted – though they can result, as here, in very handsome dividends.

The three Trios, Nos. 1 in B major, Op. 8; 2 in C major, Op. 87; and 3 in C minor, Op. 101, are all products of Brahms’ full maturity. That assessment includes Op. 8 (1854), a product of Brahms’ 21st year that he revised extensively more than three decades later (his modest

a more harmonically rich, “accessible” style under the influence of Olivier Messiaen and George Crumb. This short work (7:00) is said by its composer to have been inspired by her early experiences riding horseback in the deep valley of La Paz, Bolivia, and gazing at the vast expanse of sky. Accordingly, the work increases in density and chromatic intensity as it progresses.

The quality of Antonin Dvořák’s Trio No. 4 in E minor, Op. 90 has fascinated audiences and frustrated scholars for decades since its premiere in 1891. Its non-traditional form and manic-depressive swing from deeply brooding to vigorously active moods did not reflect the composer’s state of mind at the time. Actually, the manic element is inherent in the musical form itself. The *Dumka* (plural, “Dumky”) was an elegiac lament, of Ukrainian origin, often associated with oppressed peoples. It allowed plenty of room for variety of tempo and mood, a characteristic of which Dvořák took full advantage.

All of the six movements are *dumky*, and function more or less as independent pieces without the usual regard for thematic variations and key resolutions that classical scholarship usually requires. All could be performed as separate short pieces if desired, but there is a common thread among them in their brooding nostalgia and the mood of magnificent pathos with which they typically open, to be followed by livelier Bohemian dance episodes. The pattern is set in Dumka 1, opening with a lament by the cello to which violin and piano gradually join in. Then, at the 1:48 mark in the present recording, and again at 3:48, we are startled (to put it mildly) by an extroverted dance that seems to materialize out of thin air. Dvořák varies the expected pattern by dispensing with the slow opening section in Dumka 5, which is highly rhythmical throughout. The finale, Dumka 6, begins Lento maestoso, but ends exuberantly in a vigorous dance in which the Oberlin Trio members give their all (and for *this* ensemble, that’s saying something!)



Turina: Complete Violin Sonatas
Betül Soykan, violin; Anatoly Sheludyakov, piano
(Centaur Records)

Violinist Betül Soykan represents the ongoing globalization of classical music. She studied at Izmir Conservatory in her native Turkey and the Hochschule der Kunst in Bern, Switzerland. But the international

disclaimer that “I just combed and arranged its hair a little” notwithstanding). The result was a combination of youthful feeling and lyricism with the tightly controlled unfolding of events typical of the later Brahms. Beginning with a long-limbed and radiant melody in the cello that opens the Allegro con brio, the movement builds in intensity as the other instruments join in. The Scherzo is driven by a powerful, Beethoven-like momentum in its outer sections, with a softer center containing more filigree passagework to keep the listener contented.

The Adagio, spacious, chromatic, mysterious and poignant, is followed by an Allegro finale marked by minor scales and downward arpeggios, ending unusually in the minor mode, which was almost unprecedented for a four-movement work that begins in the major. As Robert Schumann, Brahms’ mentor, had been admitted to an asylum, from whence he was never released, in 1854, the year Brahms composed the B major Trio, quite a few biographers have seen a tribute to him in this work. Despite its sad ending, there is abundant evidence, as we hear in the present performance, of the unforced lyricism and full-blooded feeling that have made it the favorite for the three trios for many listeners.

Trio No. 2 (1882), with its broad opening melody and counterweighted double exposition, reflects Brahms’ mature values. The Andante, marked *con moto* (“with movement,” or flowing), is a beautifully colored theme and variations with a Hungarian flavor. The Scherzo is a frenetic spinning song with a lyrical interlude. The finale, an Allegro marked *giocoso*, is as playful as that marking would suggest. Its rising arpeggio figures create a sharp pull like a riptide toward the end of each measure. Together with the quick-moving accompaniment, this gives a symphonic sweep to the movement.

Trio No. 3 (1886), which like its predecessor preceded Brahms’ extensive revision of his Opus 8, combines the sweeping lyricism, emotional depth, and thematic complexity that have made it a challenge for performers and audiences alike ever since. Significantly, Brahms’ partners for the Vienna premiere were incredibly virtuosic artists, violinist Jenő Hubay and cellist David Popper. In the course of this work, we have spacious chords, all with their own individual character, gossamer textures that contrast with full-blooded ones, and alternating time signatures in the slow movement – 3/4 and 2/4, 9/8 and 6/8 – that reach the ultimate in unfamiliarity with 15/8 in the finale before it sweeps out in 6/8. Complexities notwithstanding, and although I find this work easier to admire than love, it has its adherents. Perry, Vardi, and Zamora show us why in a performance that keeps us continually engaged as listeners.

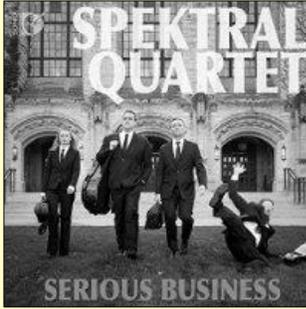
connection doesn’t end there. She received a Ph.D. from the University of Georgia (USA, that is, and *not* where you think) and her dissertation addressed the “Complete Violin Sonatas and Selected Violin Works of Joaquin Turina.” In Atlanta, she is CEO and founder of the not-for-profit Atlanta Strings Conservatory. The present CD, in collaboration with Moscow native Anatoly Sheludyakov, reflects her passionate advocacy of under-represented violin works.

Spanish composer Joaquin Turina (1882-1949) is a name you need to know. He came of age at a crucial time in the history of his country that is known as “The Generation of 1898.” It was the name of the movement that voiced the need for national rejuvenation following the stinging defeat of Spain and the loss of her foreign possessions at the hands of the United States. Though it was primarily a literary and philosophical movement, it would be surprising if the new generation of Spanish composers had not been influenced by it. (They were also no doubt chagrined by the fact that foreign composers, most Russian and French, had been ransacking the attractive and vibrant folk music of the Spanish people for more than half a century!)

For Turina, who lived in Paris between 1905 and 1914 and studied composition under Vincent d’Indy at the Schola Cantorum, the problem was how to utilize his French musical sophistication in order to raise the native music of Spain considerably above the simple folkloric level, so that he might be recognized as a serious composer, and not merely an arranger.

How well Turina succeeded is reflected in the three sonatas for violin and piano that we have here. Sonata No. 1 features dramatic *farruca* rhythms plus an evocation of the *saeta*, the emotional declaration of faith heard as a set piece during religious processions such as the Corpus Christi in Turina’s Seville. In the Lento opening of No. 2 the composer exploits the ability of the violin to sound like a throbbing voice. We are also given fine performances of the famous Jascha Heifetz transcription of Turina’s *Oración del torero* (The Bullfighter’s Prayer) and *Homenaje a Navarra* (Tribute to Navarra) which includes actual paraphrases of melodies from the music of its dedicatee, the great Spanish gypsy virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate.

For me, the most welcome inclusion is that of Turina’s Sonata Española (1908) which was not published by its composer, who in fact shelved it for the rest of his life. It was never performed again until 1981, just before the Turina centennial. He was probably unsure of how its uneasy mixture of Franck, Impressionism, and Andalusian folk ethos would be received by a hyper-critical public. Actually, that is an issue only in the final movement. This is my personal favorite of the three sonatas heard here because of its vibrant folk qualities that are vividly realized by Soykan and Sheludyakov. With only two previous recorded listings of this work, this performance is more than welcome.



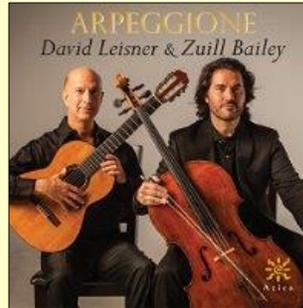
“Serious Business,” Music of Macklay, Reminick, Haydn, and Fisher-Lochhead – The Spektral Quartet (Sono Luminus DVD, Blu-Ray)

“Serious Business is not a funny album. More accurately, playing this album will not induce the brand of gut-busting, teary-eyed revelry that an episode of Chappelle’s Show or a YouTube clip of Anna Karkowska’s vibrato will. It is funny like the idea of a Rothko turning the stomachs of well-heeled gluttons at the Four Seasons is funny, or how anything Andy Kaufman ever suited up for is funny.”

This snippet from the booklet notes to the Spektral Quartet’s “Serious Business” points up my limitations as a reviewer of the new music. None of the allusions in the above quotation is exactly a household name, at least in my house. More than that, the new works by current composers Sky Macklay, David Reminick, and Chris Fisher-Lochhead reflect a noticeable malaise among young Americans with which I personally sympathize, though I often find the means of expressing it on this album to be strange, spooky, and downright nihilistic. Despite the above disclaimer, “Serious Business” really *is* meant to be funny, though in ways that sometimes seem like a modern-day Dadaism.

Macklay’s *Many, Many Cadences*, for example, makes much of a mass of twitchy cadences piled up on top of one another. Its ultimate inspiration may go as far back as Franz Josef Haydn’s “Joke” Quartet (included on Tracks 7-10 of the present CD), though it may also be taken as a metaphor for an overloaded, over-stimulated 24/7 culture. The *Ancestral Mousetrap*, Reminick’s decidedly bad-mannered setting of absurdist poems by Russell Edson, calls on the members of the Spektral Quartet to sing in deliberately discordant four-part harmony while playing their instruments. The texts are often macabre, as in “Bringing a Dead Man Back to Life.” Would you ever think of dressing up a corpse and taking him out for a night on the town? (The wicked point, of course, is that there are a lot of dead heads walking around these days, some of them even actively running for President.)

Fisher-Lochhead’s *Hack* is an imaginary “hacking” into the routines of a number of well-known stand-up comics, from Lenny Bruce to Tig Notaro. Its 22 short tracks, many less than a minute, all deal with the distinctive cadence and style of delivery of a particular comedian. (Since Rodney Dangerfield is the subject of more of



“Arpeggione,” transcriptions and an original work for cello and guitar – Zuill Bailey, David Leisner (Azica Records)

What a splendid idea this is, a virtuoso recital for guitar and cello! Most of the items on the program have been transcribed for the self-same genre by David Leisner, and are heard in their première recordings. Leisner, one of the finest guitarists of our time, has made intelligent transcriptions that allow both instruments to be heard to best advantage. At the same time, he knows when to step out of the spotlight in favor of the rich eloquent sound of Zuill Bailey’s cello as it soars to expressive heights that other cellists can only dream of matching. Zuill obviously loves playing his instrument as few people enjoy doing anything else, and the results are abundantly evident in a very attractive program that melds the sounds of two dissimilar string instruments, bowed and strummed, to utter perfection.

The title of the album is taken from Franz Schubert’s Sonata in A minor, D821, known as the “Arpeggione” after a very short-lived instrument of that name that was basically a guitar that was fretted to permit it to be bowed. Schubert knew the inventor and obligingly composed the only masterwork for that decidedly odd instrument that it was ever to enjoy. Today, it is always played in transcription for other instruments, usually for cello but also for viola, clarinet, harp, double bass, and even tuba and euphonium.

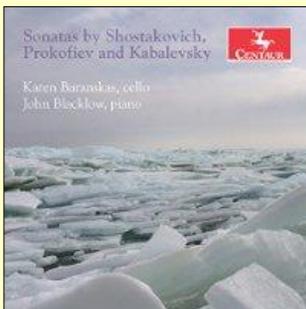
The present recording is the 121st in the current catalog, and may be the most satisfying yet in terms of the fine blend and mutual rapport Leisner and Bailey display here. One thrilling moment occurs in the opening movement when the wistfully melancholy cello melody gives way suddenly to a lively and sensational Hungarian dance with thumping chords from the guitar in support. The Adagio, a meditation on a hymn-like subject, is followed by the finale, an allegretto rich in rapturous and charming incidents.

Manuel de Falla’s *Seven Spanish Popular Songs* is another work that has enriched multiple repertoires besides the original version for soprano voice and piano. The transcription heard here was not solely Leisner’s but is based on the guitar arrangement by Falla’s friend Miguel Llobet and a cello version by Maurice Maréchal. Leisner adapted the melody of the Song *Seguidilla murciana* from the original vocal line to

Fisher-Lochhead's nuanced graphs than any of the other comedians – six, no less – he can't call out from his grave with his famous tag line, "I don't get no respect.") Other subjects include such luminaries as Dick Gregory, Robin Williams, Sarah Silverman, and Richard Pryor. A neat idea, this little gag fest in nuanced rhythms and subtle inflections, though I am tempted to ask "Why?"

The one item on the program that unquestionably stacks up as music is the granddaddy of all humor in classical music, Franz Josef Haydn's famous "Joke" Quartet in E-flat, Op. 33, No. 2. Although light-hearted touches are not absent from its other movements, the epithet refers most directly to its finale, a Presto with a slower section in the middle. The "joke" is that you never know quite when the movement is over because of its numerous premature cadences that leave an audience wondering whether or not it is safe to applaud. After a startling 16th note forte, the first violin plays the A theme of the opening phrase with rests interrupting the music, at first every two bars and then becoming increasingly longer. Amused giggling and laughter are the usual audience responses.

Haydn requires smart pacing, a nice sense of rhythm, and an optimal blend, especially in the beautiful Largo in 3/4 time. The Spektral Quartet, consisting of Clara Lyon and Austin Wulliman, violins; Doyle Armbrust, viola; and Russell Rolen, cello, possess these qualities and more, giving this ensemble a special character all its own. Add in the numerous, and often spooky, special effects they cultivate in the contemporary part of the program, and you get the impression that they are capable of pulling off anything.



Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Kabalevsky: Cello Sonatas
Karen Buranskas, cello; John Blacklow, piano
(Centaur Records)

Karen Buranskas and John Blacklow, both on the faculty of the Department of Music at the University of Notre Dame, give eloquent and deeply moving performances of three Soviet-era Russian sonatas for cello and piano. You don't get to hear these works by Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Kabalevsky every day, and you might have been tempted to pass them by, released as they are on a small independent label. If so, the loss would have been yours, and it would have been immense.

that of the cello by discretely changing octaves in order to avoid repeated notes. This is one type of Flamenco. *Jota* (#4) is another. *Asturiana* (#3) is said to have been sung by miners, grateful at seeing the beauty of the starlit sky after a long underground shift. *Nana* is a tender lullaby, and *Polo* a song expressing the anger of a jilted lover. *Canción* (Song) perhaps lends itself best of all to Bailey's exalted lyricism.

Next up is the world premiere recording of Leisner's *Twilight Streams*, a new work written expressly for himself and Zuill Bailey. The titles show the influence of Chinese philosophy and painting: *empty dark, full dark, empty light, full light* and *adrift at twilight*. "Empty" in the oriental sense is not the same as in ours, for it implies a place where all things go to be reborn. As the work progresses, we get a wonderful lift from these artists, as well as a growing sense of freedom.

There follow no fewer than four encores, beginning with Gluck's *Dance of the Blessed Spirits*, Saint-Saëns' *The Swan*, and the "Aria" from Villa-Lobos' *Bachianas Brasileiras* # 5. All are justly famed for their exalted beauty. At the end, we have the ultimate encore: Niccolò Paganini's *Variations* for the fourth string on the aria "*Dal tuo stellato soglio*" from *Mosè in Egitto* by Rossini. How the devil you can play this piece, as memorable in musical terms as it is virtuosic, on a single violin or cello string is better seen than described (fortunately, there are several YouTube videos that you can easily access). Finger work, particularly the swooping glides involving widely spaced fingers, is the key to success, more so than bowing. This altogether sensational encore will have you on the edge of your seat!



"Four Centuries," Music for Violin & Piano by Mozart, Schubert, Bloch, and Levinson – David Yonan, violin; Susan Merdinger piano (Sheridan Music Studio)

"Four Centuries" is a voyage of discovery in a small package of just over 60 minutes. David Yonan's ultra-refined violin tone and Susan Merdinger's down-to-earth, firmly centered piano tone complement each other perfectly in a program that ranges from Mozart and Schumann to Ernest Bloch and a thrilling world premiere by Chicago-based composer Ilya Levinson.

The Mozart offering, *Sonata in B-flat major, K. 454*, is one of the composer's most gracious and spontaneous

Cello Sonata in D minor, Op. 40 by Dmitri Shostakovich got a decidedly frosty reception when he premiered it in Leningrad on Christmas Day, 1934. Perhaps listeners were confused by its affective range, from romantic warmth to icy wit and finally, broadly stated humor in its rambunctious finale. Its wit, especially, would have been anathema to the Stalinist regime. Authoritarian minds generally lack all sense of humor and are especially suspicious of wit, the barbs of which might be turned against *them*. The other thing one notices about this work is its strictly classical form, in which the reverse recapitulation, by means of which the second theme of the opening movement appears first, stands out as a departure from the unexpected. That movement, in which introspection, warmth, and dire foreboding seem to strive for pride of place, is particularly well done here, thanks to the dark tone of Buranskas' cello and the firm, decisive piano accompaniment by Blacklow. The short scherzo is positively vitriolic, while the slow movement, a Largo, lingers in the mind as a dark, brooding meditation. The finale manages to be impudent, caustic, ebullient, and manic all at the same time, rather like a circus!

Sergei Prokofiev's Sonata in C major, Op. 119 occurs late in the composer's career and was written in regard to the virtuosic talents of Mstislav Rostropovich and Sviatoslav Richter, the artists who premiered it in 1950. This is a work of great emotional depth as well as technical challenges. The steady rhythmic pulse of the piano adds immensely to the effectiveness of the florid cello melody in the opening movement, which is sufficiently varied in scope to virtually stand by itself as a complete work. In the slow movement, marked Moderato – Andante dolce, the timing of both the artists in the present recording is absolutely superb, and helps bring out the surprising lyrical breadth in the music. And they swing very nicely and naturally into the bracing finale, whose jaunty rhythms often remind us of the banquet and masquerade music in *Romeo and Juliet*.

In contrast to Shostakovich, who often had trouble with the Soviet music establishment, Dmitry Kabalevsky was usually able to set his sails for the prevailing winds of officialdom. That fact has probably blinded us to a full appreciation of his music. Sonata in B-flat major, Op. 71 which he himself premiered in 1962 with Rostropovich, compares in excellence with the other master works on this CD. The opening Andante, marked *molto sostenuto* (very sustained) starts slowly and quietly but gains momentum as it progresses through a number of key changes, arriving at a hard-driving Allegro *molto energico* (very energetic) before subsiding to a slower tempo. The scherzo employs chromaticism and rhythmic changes to create tension.

The opening of the finale, in perpetual motion that recalls the demon technique and velocity of the cellist who premiered it, gives way to a lovely cantabile melody before finally returning to the mood of the very opening of the work. Here, Buranskas encompasses the brilliant changes in bowing and technique, while Blacklow's steady pace and trenchant precision give conviction to a

works in the genre. The melodies, and the manner in which they are passed between the partners as they trade melody and accompaniment, have a feeling of utter naturalness. The pacing by both our artists is alert throughout a work in which the piano's regularity keeps the violin's Alberti basses in the left hand from falling into predictable patterns.

Did I say "spontaneous"? According to an old story related by his widow, Mozart, pressed as usual for time, "winged it" at the sonata's premiere, improvising the piano part at the keyboard while he substituted a blank sheet of manuscript paper to preserve the illusion of a finished work. (He would have gotten away with it, too, had not the Emperor Joseph II, who was in the audience, spotted the deception through his opera glasses – and no doubt had a pleasant laugh with the composer afterwards!)

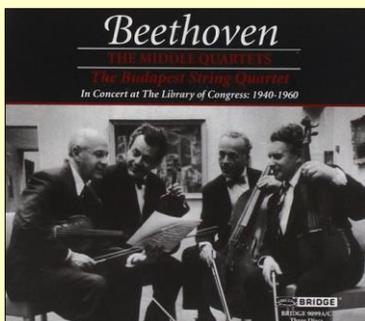
Robert Schumann's Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano, Op. 105, begins with an opening movement marked "*Mit leidenschaftlichem Ausdruck*" (with passionate expression). The composer's extensive use of canonic form to create the tension in this movement requires (and here receives) an exceptionally close partnership between the two players. A brisk Allegretto that falls somewhere between a slow movement and a scherzo follows next, adding to the expressive beauty of the work. The finale, marked "*Lebhaft*" (Lively) uses a theme similar to the opening of Mendelssohn's second piano trio. The music, with its tremolos and scurrying 16th notes, tests the mettle of both performers as it rushes toward the finish.

Ernest Bloch's Suite Hébraïque (1923) is generally considered one of the composer's works inspired by the vivid pages of Jewish history and scripture. It is not, however, as darkly passionate as his Schelomo for Cello and Orchestra or as rhapsodic as his Baal Shem Suite, celebrating the founder of Hassidism. Nevertheless, it has a special beauty all its own, as Yonan and Merdinger are adept at revealing. An opening "Rhapsody" with Hebraic inflections is followed by a "Processional" that is both passionate and optimistic, and a finale titled "Affirmation." Throughout Suite Hébraïque, our artists are keenly attuned to the dynamic contours of a surprisingly attractive work.

Finally, the single-movement "Elegy: Crossing the Bridge" by Ilya Levinson (b.1958) undergoes a sea-change in just nine minutes. As the composer explains it, the title "Crossing the Bridge" has both physical and metaphysical connotations. The music describes the process of going through pain and tragedy to a state of awareness in which one has crossed to the other side of the Great Beyond and the perception of reality becomes more holistic and transcendental. In that sense, we have "crossed the bridge." But the title also alludes to the crucial moment when, over widely spaced chords in the piano, the violinist plays *col legno* (with the wood of the bow) on the lower side of the

work of considerable substance. It ends, in no uncertain terms, with four sharply-struck pizzicati in the cello.

violin bridge, between the bridge and the tailpiece – a very unusual sound that makes a striking effect in this world premiere performance.



Beethoven: The Middle Quartets
Library of Congress Recordings
Budapest String Quartet (Bridge)

This set of Beethoven's five "Middle Quartets" was culled from no fewer than four complete cycles, plus individual performances, that the legendary Budapest String Quartet made on a matched set of Stradivari instruments at the Library of Congress during their 22-year residency there. By means of their weekly broadcasts from the LOC between 1941 and 1960, they reached more listeners through the medium of radio than any other string quartet had ever hoped to do, and their influence on later generations was immense. More than that, they were pretty damned good. In these recordings, they do not approach Beethoven as sacred writ, but hurl themselves into the fray with abandon and a sense of total commitment. More than just high voltage, the Budapest members revel in the joy of surprise and discovery, even at the occasional expense of a little tasteful vulgarity (of which Beethoven would doubtless have approved). Their long-drawn unisons are full-bodied, their feeling for Beethoven's rhythms are enthusiastic and unflinching. They tend to play fast but never glibly, uncovering an astonishing number of nuances along the way. There are no "throw-away lines" here: every note fits purposefully into a larger conception.

Beethoven composed the three so-called "Razoumovsky" Quartets, Op. 59, expressly for the Russian count of that name who was a diplomat at the court of Vienna. One of the stipulations the count made was that Beethoven include authentic Russian themes in his music. The composer was happy to oblige. A rousing "Thème russe" is heard right off in the finale of Razoumovsky No. 1. The B section of the Allegretto in No. 2 is based on "Slava" (Glory), a very famous folksong that was later used by Mussorgsky in the Coronation Scene of Boris Godunov. And while there is no "Thème russe" so marked, there is one of quasi-Russian character in the Andante of No. 3. Some critics have suggested that Beethoven was snubbing his nose at his patron for providing him with the galumphing theme in No. 2 and he exposed it to pile-driving treatment in revenge. You can hear some of this quality in the BSQ performance of April 1, 1960, the only one in the present 3-CD set that was not made in 1940-41 (though it is not of superior sound quality for its late date and does not sound like stereo to my ears). The BSQ were not above a little rough-and-tumble at this time, though the result seems a full-blooded enjoyment of the happiness of life rather than a vulgar excrement. I'm sure Beethoven's Russian patron would have liked it!

That above-mentioned Allegretto, with its smashing harmonic clashes that our performers enjoy to the fullest, is the most striking movement in Razoumovsky No. 2. In No. 3, a fugal theme in the finale grabs our attention. First heard in Boris Kroyt's eloquently phrased viola, it is joined in by the other instruments, with Mischa Schneider's cello holding back deliberately in order to build up the tension. But my personal favorite of the Razoumovskys is the first, Quartet No. 7 in F major, Op. 59, No. 1. The staccatos are absolutely brilliant here, and the pacing is nothing less than inspired. The slow movement, *Adagio molto e mesto*, is as beautiful, eloquent and touching (the Italian *mesto* means sad) as you are ever likely to hear it. The moment when the BSQ take leave of this movement and spring *attacca* into the rousing finale is something you will want to cheer for.

Quartet No. 10 in E-flat, Op. 74, takes its name from the pizzicati in the Allegro section of the opening movement, in which a pair of strings alternate notes over a backdrop of eighth-notes, creating the effect of an arpeggio, which is often thought of as a harp's most characteristic mode of expression. This September 1941 performance is notable for Joseph Roisman's aristocratic eloquence, which is called-for in a first violin-dominated quartet (unusual for Beethoven), and for the genial spirit of the opening movement. The sad, beautiful Adagio *ma non troppo* makes the best impression of all. It is followed by a frenetic scherzo in which Mischa Schneider's cello provides a very effective underpinning. Scholars are often at pains to compare this work with the Fifth Symphony, although the relaxed pacing and broad tempi favored by the Budapest (not qualities they are best remembered for) and the classical tone of the finale, an Allegretto with variations, give such speculation the lie.

Quartet No. 11 in F minor, Op. 95 is called the "Serioso" (grave or serious) for a good reason. Beethoven resisted his publisher's entreaties for several years before consenting to have it published, claiming it was intended for a circle of connoisseurs rather than the music public. Certainly, it contains experiments in shortened developments, seemingly unrelated outbursts, strangely affective silences, metrical ambiguity, and greater tonal freedom that point ahead to the composer's Late Period. All of which can be pretty grim listening for long stretches, although the

overall duration (19:58 in this March 1940 performance) makes it easily the shortest of the Middle Quartets. This account by the Budapest Quartet encompasses all the above features plus an intensity that is often downright feverish, a feeling of improvisation, and, in the Allegretto that takes the place of a slow movement, a surprising lyricism, dark though it may be.

It should be stressed that none of these performances was originally intended for commercial release. The purpose was to preserve a record for posterity. In digging these recordings out of the Library's archives, with the assistance of Anne McLean of the Music Division and with first-rate restoration and mastering by Adam Abeshouse for Bridge Records, great care was exerted not to bleed the originals white in the process. The very lively interplay of the musicians is still quite evident, especially when reaching for the inner voices. The aging acetate masters inevitably reveal their age, so if you are looking for clean recordings that stretch the stereo soundstage, then go for the BSQ's Columbia studio recordings of the 1960's. But the LOC recordings have their joys, too, for reasons I've labored to stress here, and they should not be missed by lovers of quartet music.