

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

March, 2012

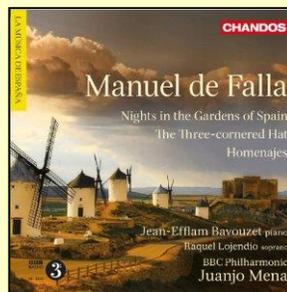


### Beethoven: The Complete Late Quartets Cypress String Quartet Cd Baby

This handsome 3-CD digipak contains the three single CDs of Beethoven's Late Quartets, Nos. 12-16 plus the *Große Fugue*, as were released earlier. Since I've already previously reviewed Volumes 1 and 2 in the series, I'd like to concentrate on the third in the series, comprising the Quartets in F Major, Op. 135 and C-sharp Minor, Op. 131. As I observed earlier, these performances by the San Francisco-based Cypress String Quartet are characterized by the same *joie de vivre* and the same lilt and swing I noted in their earlier releases, and they reveal the same profoundly human qualities in Beethoven, including a remarkable sense of humor as well as drama and pathos.

What, then, makes these two quartets special, even among the Late Beethovens? The C-sharp Minor Quartet is remarkable for its tightly unified structure and its range of mood and expression. This performance by the Cypresses makes clear, as many other versions do not, that this is really a 40-minute work in a single movement consisting of seven sections, rather than seven individual movements. Further, there is a strong sense of the end replicating the beginning, as the slow, melancholy theme in section 1 ("Surely the saddest thing ever said in notes," as Wagner put it) is speeded up and altered in contour to be the first theme of Section 7, taking on the character of both a cry of pain and an exultation of wild joy. Time Present is revealed as Time Past but with a difference. In between the two sections, Beethoven has circumnavigated the globe musically and emotionally, running a controlled riot that includes whimsy as well as pain, mystery as well as revelation. And as the Cypress Quartet often make apparent in their late Beethoven, the most sophisticated compositional devices often magically translate into music of the utmost clarity for the listener.

The Quartet in F Major was Beethoven's last completed work in any genre. As such, it is tempting to view it as his valedictory comment on life and a farewell to his art, as



### Falla: Three-Cornered Hat, Nights in the Gardens of Spain Homenajes Jean-Efflam Bavouzet, piano Juanjo Mena, BBC Philharmonic Chandos

This Chandos offering combines a respectable account of Spanish composer Manuel de Falla's complete ballet in two parts, *The Three-cornered Hat*, and a moody and a scintillating one of his *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*, with the composer's four *Homenajes* (Tributes) for extra measure. Juanjo Mena does a commendable job taking the BBC Philharmonic through Falla's most complex and beautiful scores.

That includes with special mention for the woodwinds in the many passages for flute, piccolo, clarinet, horns and bassoon that enliven the score of *The Three-Cornered Hat* and underscore its poignant, piquant, and sometimes impudent moods. The story, based on a novella by Pedro de Alarcón, is the tale of a lecherous old magistrate (old enough to know *better*, anyway) who attempts to seduce a miller's beautiful wife while he has her husband arrested on a trumped-up charge, only to have both *Moliner* and *Molinera* turn the tables on him. In the end, the village neighbors add to his fallen dignity by tossing him in a blanket! The work began as a pantomime for actor/dancers and small orchestra in 1917 and was later made into a fully danceable ballet with a large orchestra two years later. In the process, it still retained much of the flavor of the original pantomime in its transparent scoring and many instrumental solos, a quality which Mena's conducting brings out very successfully in the present recording. The big dance numbers (Miller's Dance, Neighbors' Dance) come across well. Soprano Raquel Lojendio splendidly interprets the impish song in Part II warning the Miller's Wife of the Magistrate's amorous intentions: "Keep your door latched, little wife, the Devil is abroad and no married woman is safe!"

*Nights in the Gardens of Spain* consists of atmospheric symphonic impressions of three representative Spanish settings at night: *In the Generalife*, the jasmine-perfumed gardens surrounding the Moorish kings' summer palace,

the Cypresses seem to do in this performance. It comes across here as a summation, “illuminating Beethoven’s lifelong heroic struggle with sound and silence,” as the booklet annotation puts it. Even the whimsicalities, such as the outburst from the lower instruments in the midst of an otherwise serenely untroubled Vivace movement, have a place here. (As Shakespeare would say, “the state of man, like to a little kingdom, suffers then the nature of an insurrection”) The mood continues in the finale where the querulous phrase that scans with the German words “Müß es sein?” is answered emphatically by “Es müß sein” (Must it be? It *must* be!). Beethoven’s response to fate is to step up and positively embrace it.



“Do You Dream in Color?”  
Songs of Adolphe, Rodrigo, Fauré, Sivam  
Laurie Rubin. Mezzo; Marija Stroke, piano  
Bridge Records

“Do You Dream in Color?”, the title of the present album by the talented mezzo-soprano Laurie Rubin, takes its cue from the second most popular question (after “Do you dream?”) that people generally ask this young blind artist once they have developed the confidence to broach it. Rubin is not unduly sensitive on the issue of her blindness, but the question does not lend itself to a simple explanation. It led to her personal memoir, due to be out in print in 2013, and her poem, also of the same title, that leads off this recital in a setting by composer Bruce Adolphe. The musical setting replicates the flow of the poet’s thoughts in a poem that is both personal and philosophical as it probes the nature of perception and the restlessness of the human spirit striving toward something ever larger and more glorious. In the end, she returns the question to her interrogator and by extension all of us: “Do you dream in color?”

In a way, these questions of perception and striving tie in with the ever-deepening mood of “In the Mountains of Jerusalem,” a setting made expressly for Ms. Rubin by contemporary Israeli composer Noam Sivan of three intriguing Hebrew poems by Leah Goldberg. In her poetry Goldberg continually opposes images of aridness, wastelands and stones, with the effort of the spirit to soar above it all with a lonely love song as an act of defiance: “How can a solitary bird carry the sky on limp wings above the wilderness?” The settings, in perfect accord with the poetry, stretch Rubin’s tessitura at both ends of her range. She responds to the challenges with admirable results, with the composer himself on piano.

the Alhambra; *Danza lejana* (Distant Dance), its mood deepened by far-away exotic drumming; and *In the Gardens of the Sierra de Córdoba*, which ends in a blaze of color and passionate exaltation. The piano part, played by French pianist Jean-Efflam Bavouzet, is marked by sensuous glissandi, scales, and voluptuous chords. It is, however, always an obbligato instrument, associated with the orchestra and enhancing brilliantly what it has to say, rather than a concerto soloist in the spotlight.



“Debut,” Works by Bach, Schumann, Ravel, Bartok  
Joseph Rackers, pianist  
MSR Classics

American keyboard artist Joseph Rackers has it all. Let this review put concertgoers and home listeners on the alert. In a demanding program of works by Bach, Schumann, Ravel and Bartok, he gets top points for compelling power, rhythmic persuasiveness, style, and a surprising amount of lyricism that takes you by surprise because you don’t always expect it.

He shows his immense prowess right from the beginning of the program with J. S. Bach’s Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, a work so far ahead of its time in terms of its dissonance and chromatic harmony, it seems more a part of our world than of Bach’s. From the swirling figurations at the opening of the Fantasy to the muscular fugue that concludes the work, Rackers shows himself to be in complete mastery of Bach’s high-profile counterpoint and his complex and often surprisingly subtle rhythms.

If anything, Rackers gives an even more impressive account of Robert Schumann’s Fantasy in C Major, Op. 17. This work has an opening movement marked by rhapsodic, passionate lyricism, a march in the middle movement that culminates with sensational back-rhythms and syncopations that still have the power to astonish no matter how often ones hears them, a rich harmonic structure that becomes as scintillating as a star-filled night in the finale movement, and dynamics that range from thumping fortes to the almost inaudible repeated notes that conclude the opening movement, leaving us in a mood of breathless expectation for what is yet to come.

Ever the rhythm king, Rackers scores yet more points with Maurice Ravel’s La Valse, the composer’s own transcription of his famous tone-poem. That the solo piano version of this work should be performed less often than the orchestral and piano four-hand versions should come

In the heart of the program are six songs by Spanish composer Joaquin Rodrigo and four by French composer Gabriel Fauré, all accompanied sympathetically by pianist Marija Stroke, who also does the honors in the Adolphe songs. Rubin does a splendid job interpreting the nuances of the songs of both these great masters, as well as giving us an authentic feeling for the subtleties of both languages. The Rodrigo songs, in particular, were inspired by the *cantigas* and *canciones* of the people of Spain, rather than by its courtly poetry, and the difference shows in the directness of mood and simplicity of imagery of most of the poems: the longing of a ship's cabin boy for his tawny-skinned sweetheart, for instance, or the natural grace of a rural girl herding cattle. The poems and their settings possess a strong visual sense, which must have endeared them to Ms. Rubin, for Rodrigo was likewise an artist who "saw" beyond the obvious limitation of physical blindness.

The Fauré songs are more voluptuous in setting, as befits the French tradition of La Mélodie. They are also highly visual in the way so much of a poem's emotion derives from its imagery: fountains seen in moonlight, great ships riding the swells at anchor, promising separation and heartache for the seafarer and his loved ones; crimson roses, "singing" seas, and the mood of vague disquiet that settles on us at dusk. Rubin's interpretive powers encompass all this and more.



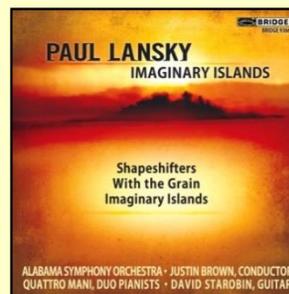
"Gershwin Plus,"  
Piano solos and Novelty Arrangements  
Geoffrey Haydon, piano  
Aca Digital

Geoffrey Haydon makes his mark in a really attractive program of George Gershwin preludes and the sort of hit song arrangements that they used to call "novelties" way back in the '20's. Did I say "mark"? He scores a bull's-eye! Haydon's painstaking research into the performance styles behind some of Gershwin's most attractive songs, including his study of such 78 electric recordings as Bix Beiderbecke's 1927 Okeh registration of "In a Mist" (here included as an encore) is backed up by solid pianistic prowess that brings to vibrant new life the lost music of a great era when the heart of American popular music beat as never before.

The program kicks off with Gershwin's own novelty arrangements of his own hit songs, including such

as no surprise, since its fatalistic, whirling rhythms in the base, high degree of harmonic dissonance, and frequent changes in meter and texture ought to discourage all but the hardiest of concert pianists. Rackers overcomes the work's technical difficulties with consummate style.

Finally, we come to Bela Bartok's Piano Sonata (1926), a seminal work of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. An often violently percussive work with tone clusters in the bass, powerful outbursts of octaves and chords, and relentless high-energy rhythms, it was Bartok's way of making known to the world the folk music of the Magyars, the authentic ethnic Hungarians, as opposed to the more colorful "Gypsy" music that had long passed as Hungarian. (To judge from the unrelenting rhythms of the opening movement, Bartok's earliest audiences must have responded with a request for "More Gypsy music, if you please"). Yet even in this work, there is an underlying lyricism in the central movement, *Sostenuto e pesante* (sustained and sad), if you care to blast for it, and Rackers takes pains to bring out this element, too.



Lansky: Shapeshifters (w. Susan Grace and Alice Rybak, duo pianists), With the Grain (w. David Starobin, guitar), Imaginary Islands  
Justin Brown, Alabama Symphony Orchestra  
Bridge Records

American composer Paul Lansky (b. New York, 1944) has been associated for so long with electronic and computer music, it may come as a surprise for many of his admirers that he is so remarkably gifted and imaginative when it comes to writing music for what he himself humorously terms "carbon-based life forms." In that case **Imaginary Islands** may prove a revelation, as one perceives, with a sense of growing excitement, that Lansky has created something of enduring value in the three voyages of discovery heard on this program.

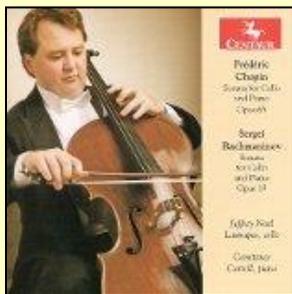
All are products of the past five years and reflect the composer's productive relationships with guitarist David Starobin, duo-pianists Susan Grace and Alice Rybak who concertize as "Quattro Mani," and the Alabama Symphony Orchestra under its current maestro, Justin Brown. They reveal a composer of real rhythmic and harmonic venturesomeness, which should not obscure the fact that his music possesses a remarkable economy, reflecting his passion for getting right to the heart of the matter.

First on the program, *Shapeshifters* (2007-2008), true to

enduring favorites as “The Man I Love,” “Swanee,” “I’ll Build a Stairway to Paradise,” “Fascinating Rhythm,” “Do Do Do,” “S Wonderful,” “I Got Rhythm,” and “Liza.” What are novelty arrangements? Gershwin explained in his preface to the printed edition that they were for good pianists who wanted more sophisticated arrangements than were available in simple sheet music targeted for the general public. Indeed, with their frequent use of cross-rhythms, syncopations, rippling arpeggios, whole note melodies, repeated notes, and “stride” patterns, both straight-up and backwards, not to mention an occasional detour into misty impressionism à la Debussy, there is enough vitality and rhythmic variety in these 18 arrangements to keep any keyboard artist on his toes.

A word about the “stride” piano style. It’s not easy to define, since there were as many types of stride as there were stylists who practiced it in its heyday. Typically, Stride involves having the left hand play a four-beat pulse with a single bass note, octave, seventh or tenth interval on the first and third beats, and a chord on the second and fourth beats. Occasionally, this is reversed (backwards stride) by placing chords on the beat and bass notes on the off-beats. However you play it, it imparts a terrific sense of movement to the music. Think of it in terms of a walking bass with an “oom-pah” (minus the cornfield connotation that unfortunate word implies) in a very active left hand. That’s the kind of left that Haydon employs so very effectively all through the present recital to add character and distinction to these pieces. Did I say “distinction”? For days I haven’t been able to get the stride pattern in “Oh, Lady Be Good” out of my mind, in my sleep or waking hours!

I can’t imagine getting more fun or pure enjoyment out of fifty minutes of music than Geoff Haydon lays out for us here. That includes such other song arrangements as “Someone to Watch Over Me” and “Embraceable You,” and the most satisfying accounts I’ve ever heard of Preludes I-III. Throw in Zez Confrey’s delectable “Kitten on the Keys” and the afore-mentioned “In a Mist” and you have a string of hits you will want to encore early and often with the Back button on your remote.



Chopin + Rachmaninoff: Sonatas for Cello & Piano  
Jeffrey Noel Lastrapes, Constance Carroll  
Centaur Records

Lesser-known masterworks by Chopin and Rachmaninoff are given spotlight treatment by the duo of cellist Jeffrey

its title, explores the myriad ways in which musical ideas morph and change into new things rare and strange. Like the way the ebullient mood of “At Any Given Moment” is transformed by a sudden b minor chord in the horns and strings. Initially, I misread the title of Movement 2, “Florida Counterpoint” as “Florida Counterpoint.” And indeed, it is possible to imagine an Everglades scene at sunset in Lansky’s iridescent harmonies and his contrapuntal lines, moving stealthily as alligators under a cover of lily pads. “Confused and Dazed” may describe the listener’s reaction to the myriad of stunning materials Lansky presents. “Topology,” like the branch of mathematics it refers to, revels in the continuous stretching and transformation of forms. *Shapeshifters* is a true symphonic suite for duo pianos and orchestra, in which Quattro Mani move back and forth between their roles as articulate soloists and members of the orchestra with a distinctly percussive bent. The combined sound of two pianists and orchestra is at times almost overwhelming.

As in the preceding work, *With the Grain* (2009) exhibits the vividly imaginative writing involving every family of the orchestra that must have made Lansky a great favorite with the members of the Alabama SO during his residency there. Surprisingly, he does not cut back on the orchestration when he brings in the solo guitar, but instead challenges soloist David Starobin to bring all his virtuosity to bear on the music. The title is explained by the fact that each of the four movements is named for a different wood grain and provides a descriptive key to its interpretation; for example, “Quilted Beach: *quiet with soft contours*,” or “Walnut Burl: *busy, with aggressive twists and turns*.” The guitar plays “with the grain,” as Starobin shows all the wonderfully expressive and exciting things a guitar can idiomatically do without resorting to the *outré*.

*Imaginary Islands* for orchestra (2010) creates three vivid island landscapes for the listener (example: “Rolling Hills, Calm Beaches, Something Brewing”). Though the music often bursts with sheer energy, as in “Busy, Bustling, With a Heartbeat,” Lansky shows us in “Cloud-shrouded, Mysterious, Nascent” that it can be subtly subversive, as well. There’s always more than meets the ear, something under the surface to reward repeated listening.



“Dancing on Ivory,” Piano Transcriptions  
Joe Wang, pianist  
MSR Classics

Joe Wang, the young Chinese pianist who was educated

Noel Lastrapes and pianist Constance Carroll. These are beautifully nuanced performances that get to the heart of the matter without undue fuss or delay, and they are supported by nicely detailed sound in recordings made at the studios of WFMT Chicago.

The piano, as we know, was Chopin's own instrument, and he played it with greater brilliance than any of his predecessors. But he was not as comfortable writing for other instruments. That fact shows in his Sonata in g minor for Cello and Piano, Op. 65, a work that caused him more difficulty than any other, if we are to judge from the voluminous sketches he made for it over a period of two years. In the end, his labors resulted in a tightly constructed duo sonata in four movements in which he toned down the surface virtuosity (though not the degree of difficulty) of the piano part after some preliminary flourishes at the beginning of the opening movement, making it more transparent and allowing the cello part to come through with greater presence. Chopin made much of a lovely rising and falling half-step, heard in the first entry of the cello, which serves as a motif uniting all four movements.

As performed by Lastrapes and Carroll, the heart of the work is clearly the slow movement, a Largo whose intimate confessional mood and warm melody for the cello remind us that this was to be the last work that Chopin ever premiered. Following this movement, there is a wonderful sense of joyous release in the finale, a scampering Allegro in which the cello shows remarkable nimbleness in matching the piano step for step. The composer, who never enjoyed robust health in his tragically shortened life (1810-1849), called for his friends to perform it when he was on his deathbed, an indication of the personal meaning it held for him.

Sergei Rachmaninoff's Sonata in g minor for Cello and Piano, Op. 19, by contrast with the Chopin, unfolds its four movements with a deceptive, seemingly intuitive ease, in which the cello is free to comment and expand on themes first stated by the piano. Rachmaninoff was at pains to make the two instrumental parts of equal importance, an aim that is borne out by the present performers. The expansive opening movement, an allegro moderato prefaced by a slow Largo opening, is pensive in mood, with some darker passages thrown in for tragic relief. The heart of the matter is clearly the slow movement, an Andante in which a beautiful songlike melody for the cello, trading on the common range it shares with the human voice, is highlighted and embellished by a piano accompaniment that recalls the sound of distant bells, always a nostalgic sound for this composer. In the present unhurried performance by Lastrapes and Carroll, we hear played it to perfection.

at the conservatory in his native Shanghai and at the Manhattan School of Music, shows himself to be a sensational colorist, and something more, in "Dancing on Ivory," a collection of virtuoso transcriptions constituting a veritable program of choice encores. I understand that his victory in the 2008 Santander International Piano competition in Spain carried with it the guarantee of 100 international concert bookings. From what I hear on this CD, Wang must have audiences eating from his hand around the globe by now.

Really, I haven't heard an encore program of such utter charm and delight since the heyday of the late Shura Cherkassky (1909-1995). The selections, definitely in the romantic tradition, begin with Percy Grainger's Ramble on the Last Love Duet in Richard Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier* and his equally luminous transcription of George Gershwin's "Love Walked In." Equally pensive and flowing is Earl Wild's transcription of Gershwin's "Embraceable You," which surprisingly eschews the pep and the striking rhythms inherent in the original song in favor of its deeply moving, flowing lyricism. This is just the sort of food that Jue Wang loves. The gently rippling arpeggios and the scintillating sounds of scales and keyboard runs are equally abundant in the remainder of the encores, which include the haunting Melody from Gluck's *Orpheus*, as transcribed by Abram Chasins, and the deeply pensive melancholy beauty of Rachmaninov's Vocalise (trans. Zoltan Kocsis).

Wang's evident delight in the color and beauty of music finds ample scope in Leopold Godowsky's concert arrangements of two moody and atmospheric favorites, Albeniz' Tango and Saint-Saëns' The Swan. Then he pulls a nifty change of pace with the lively Trish-Tratch Polka by Johann Strauss II (trans. Gyorgy Cziffra) before concluding the program with breathtaking Arabesques on The Beautiful Blue Danube (Adolf Schulz-Evler).

For the benefit of those who are inclined to dismiss a performer like Jue Wang as a mere colorist and do not realize the artistry needed to realize the sheer sensual beauty of music at its deepest level, we have Wang's stunning account of the major work on the program, Ferruccio Busoni's transcription of J. S. Bach's towering Chaconne from Partita No.2. This work shows how irresistibly moving and compelling "pure" music can be as the transcription gets to the heart of the Chaconne, and of its architecture in particular, even more surely, to my way of thinking, than Bach's original for solo violin. Wang shows himself to be continually on top of the work's high drama and its stunning changes and counter-currents, most remarkably about the 11:00 mark, when the music suddenly gets very quiet and intimate. The volume may drop here, but, as Wang shows us, the intensity of the music and the pianist's involvement with it, only deepen.