

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

March, 2013

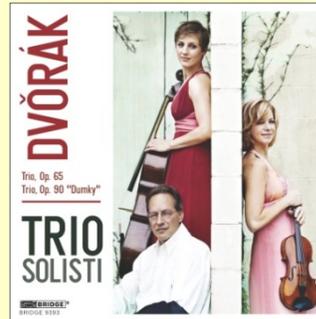


Haydn: String Quartets, including Op. 64/5, "Lark"
Endellion String Quartet
Warner Classics

The Endellion String Quartet has been a great favorite of mine ever since I reviewed their early recordings for Virgin Classics in 1990-1991. Since then, I'd lost contact with them, mostly because I'd gone with other publicists and labels in the intervening years. That doesn't mean they'd dropped out of sight in the meantime – *Oh, no!* These British artists who have been in existence more than 30 years, concertized widely in the United Kingdom, and been Quartet in Residence at Cambridge University since 1992, still play with a distinctive flair, zest, and passion for delicious point-making. Added to that is a greater appreciation of the warm harmonies and depths of feeling in the slow movements, of which we have four excellent examples in this all-Haydn program.

This is not to slight Opus 20, No. 4 in D major with its solemn hymn-like theme in the opening, followed by a sensational burst of arpeggio by the first violin, its poignant slow movement, and the unexpected outbreak of pizzicati in the last two movements, an *Allegretto alla zingarese* and a *Menuet alla zingarese* (who but Haydn would have given his listeners a minuet with gypsy accents?) Nor do I mean to ignore Op. 64, No. 5 in D major, the "Lark Quartet" with the soaring melody in the first violin that gives the work its famous nickname. But, for brevity, I'd like to focus on Op. 76, No. 1 in G major, which has so many of the elements of Haydn's style and is given a particularly distinguished performance here.

From the orchestral-like call to attention by three stunning chords sounded in unison at the very opening of the Allegro, we know we are in for some-red blooded music making, and we are not disappointed. The Adagio with its broadly stated hymn-like melody that has been compared with that of Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony, is clearly the deep-water mark of the entire work. After that, the fun begins. The third movement, ostensibly a Minuet but marked *Presto*, features joyful lyricism against pizzicato accompaniment in the Trio section. The



Dvořák: Piano Trios, Opp. 65, 90, "Dumky"
Trio soloisti
Bridge Records

Sensational accounts of Antonin Dvořák's two best-loved piano trios indicate how far the Trio Soloisti have risen towards the top of their profession. In performances of Trios No. 3 in F minor, Op. 65 and No. 4 in E minor, Op. 90, the "Dumky," these musicians – violinist Maria Bachmann, cellist Alexis Pia Gerlach, and pianist Jon Klibonoff - show a fantastic rapport that makes them more than simply the sum of their prowess as individuals. Of course, that is the aim in all chamber music, but the Soloisti do it a little differently than most. Whereas most trios sublimate their individual artistic profiles for the sake of the common good, these musicians trade on them, impelling each other to ever greater heights.

They do this in the very opening movement of Op. 65, where Klibonoff's pronounced rhythmic impetus and the large, bold pace he sets encourage a similar response from Gerlach's cello when she explores the rhapsodic second subject. As the music moves into quieter, more mysterious and deeply atmospheric channels, Bachmann rises to the occasion with her violin. The expressiveness and the superb dynamic shadings of all three artists come into play in a movement that veers, with the greatest mastery, between fortissimo declaration and quiet lyricism. The scherzo movement, *Allegretto grazioso*, contrasts dry staccato in the strings with the piano's florid legato. More exalted musicianship is evident in the Adagio, where the long, deeply felt melody, first announced by the cello and developed in intimate dialog with the violin, evolves into a mood of profound contemplation, tender melancholy that goes beyond sadness and provides its own consolation. The verve of the exchanges between the three performers, superbly timed and executed in this movement as it draws to a peaceful close, are carried on amid the excitement of the finale, titled *Allegro con brio* and based on the pulse-quickening rhythms and quick, unexpected changes of Dvořák's favorite Czech folk dance, the *Furiant*.

pizzicati are even more sensational in the finale, where they underlie a jaunty dance tune that seems to dissolve in an evanescent spray of sheer jollity at the very end. The Endellion Quartet always seem to be smiling in all their publicity photos. I can imagine them absolutely beaming at the end of this lively performance.

Haydn wrote the middle movements of his Quartet in D minor, Opus 103, in 1802-1803, and then left the work unfinished due to his waning energy. As the present account by the Endellion reveals, it was not for lack of fresh new ideas. Haydn's setting of 12 notes that scan with the German "*Hin ist alle meine Kraft: alt und schwach bin ich*" (Gone is all my strength; old and weak am I") makes a poignant postscript to the program.

In case you wondered, the quartet takes its name from the picturesque village of St. Endellion in Cornwall, a designated Area of Outstanding Natural beauty (AONB) for that region and doubtless a spot with a special significance for our artists.



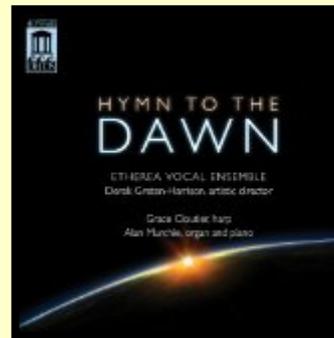
Dvořák: Symphony No. 6 + Janáček: Idyll
Gerard Schwarz, Seattle Symphony Orchestra
Naxos

I don't often review an orchestral recording in which I can wax as sanguine about the beauties of the music, the performance, and the recorded sonics, but this is surely one. These newly released jewels from the Seattle Symphony Collection pair engaging works by Dvořák and Janáček in pulse quickening 2009 and 2011 performances by the Symphony under its (*now*) Conductor Laureate Gerard Schwarz. The recordings, made at Seattle's Benaroya Hall in the Mark Taper Foundation Auditorium (Dvořák) and the Ball Nordstrom Recital Hall and produced by Dmitriy Lipay and Eric Garcia, respectively, have a nice feeling of depth and spaciousness and are detailed without being fussy, so that the natural warmth of both works comes through.

Dvořák's Symphony No. 6 in D major, Op. 60 (1880) was a breakthrough work for the composer in which he made good on the promise given by his Third Symphony of seven years earlier. The exceptional beauty of Dvořák's melodies and his preponderance of rhythms inspired by the folk dances of his native Bohemia (right from the opening movement that dances in upon the listener in 3/4 time) give the music a verve and an irresistible onward-surging momentum that sweep us along with it.

Opus 90, the ever-popular "Dumky" Trio, may not be as emotional and symphonic in character as its predecessor (how many works of chamber music are?), but it compensates by its endless variety and flow of pure, uninhibited lyricism in an unconventional form. Dvořák structured the work as a series of six *dumky* (singular, *dumka*) a uniquely Slavonic form that was originally a folk lament, but later settled down to a long life as a meditation suffused with gentle melancholy. The typical dumka is in A-B-A form, beginning with a slow section followed by a contrasting fast one. Within this framework, Dvořák develops a dark, free fantasia of seemingly endless variety and lyrical persuasiveness in which individual dumky, while being fully realized on their own, still seem to bear a family resemblance.

The second dumka will serve as an example. Here the brooding melody in the opening section, first heard in the cello, is succeeded by a livelier, folk-like dance in which all three instrumentalists take the music to dizzy heights. A brief cadenza by the cello brings the music back to the quiet, mysterious mood of the opening. Then, the various melodies are heard again before the musicians drive on to a fiery and highly affirmative conclusion.



"Hymn to the Dawn," Choral music of Holst, Beach, Mendelssohn, Rheinberger – Etherea Ensemble
Delos Records

"Hymn to the Dawn" features the seven superbly tuned women's voices that are known collectively as the Etherea Vocal Ensemble. These young women – by name, Arianne Abela, Esteli Gomez, Allison Holst-Grubbe, Heather Petrie, Jessica Petrus, Amanda Sidebottom, and Rebekah Westphal – impress with their wide dynamic range and flexible technique in a program of works by 19th and 20th century composers that often stretch tessituras to the living end.

Good examples of the last are the Hindu-inspired Choral Hymns from the Riga Veda by English composer Gustav Holst. "Hymn to the Dawn," the first of the Vedic Hymns gives the program its title: "Wak'ner of the songbirds, / Ensign of th'Eternal, / draw thou near, O Fair One, / In thy radiant Chariot." Like its companion hymns, it calls for voices drawn to airy thinness without failing in tone or pitch. The sensual element in Sanskrit verse is reflected in "Summer" from Two Eastern pictures: "The moon shineth on yon roof. / Here lie maidens, crowned with

His orchestration includes ample brass – 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones and a tuba – but used to accent the dance rhythms rather than to make the music more portentous, as a German romantic might have done. Gerard Schwarz keeps the tempo of the music moving rapidly along in the outer movements without getting ahead of himself in a headlong rush, leaving plenty of breathing room for the enchanting oboe solo in the opening and the woodwind interlude in the rousing finale.

The Adagio is relaxed and filled with good feeling in its many woodwind solos and its passing of material between instruments. Schwarz does a fine job with the pacing here, as he does also in the Scherzo, which marks Dvořák's first symphonic use of the *Furiant*, a national dance with its characteristic alternation of steady 3/4 and fast 3/4 time, imparting a real zip to the music.

Janáček was a native of the province of Moravia, a region with its own distinctive speech, music, and folklore. Early on, he developed a friendship with Dvořák, and was pleased to include a selection of the older composer's Slavonic Dances at the 1888 premiere of his own *Idyll*. Janáček was then 34, but his career developed slowly, so that listeners familiar with his later music may be pleasantly surprised with what they hear in this charming work. It is reminiscent of Dvořák but with a harmonic language and frequent shifts all Janáček's own. He was still very much a 19th century romantic at this time, more sentimental than he would be later on.

The music is in seven movements, three of them slow in keeping with the pastoral associations in the name *Idyll*. The opening Andante, in particular, is suffused with a mood of deep, restful quiet and peace, a mood echoed in various ways in the Moderato and the Adagio. It's a mood we don't often get in the later Janáček, as the composer's career and personal life became increasingly turbulent. This is music that seems to flow naturally between lyrical and dance-inspired measures. The folk-style Scherzo and Trio seem to me to resemble the old Irish ditty "Lilibulero" in the catchy melody of its outer sections, though this is no doubt accidental and reflects a common thread uniting folk music of all nations.



Janáček: String Quartets 1 & 2
Arianna String Quartet
Centaur

In these two incredible quartets we clearly perceive the

jasmine, clad in silk raiment, / on their ankles are rings that tinkle sweetly as they move.”

Harpist Grace Cloutier, whose distinguished presence is felt in every work on the program, has the stage all to herself in a scintillating account of Sergei Prokofiev's Prelude, Op. 12, No. 7. There follow Three Shakespeare Songs in spirited settings by Amy Beach ("Over hill, over dale," "Come unto these yellow sands," and "Through the house give glimmering light") in which Etherea artistic director Derek Greten-Harrison adds his countertenor to fill out the harmony. The program concludes with Three Religious Chorales by Gioachino Rossini, in which the composer charms us by his typical penchant for praising God in his own way, through the sweet, breezy and dancelike sweep of the operatic music he knew so well.

Many of my favorite moments in the program occur in the selections by German composers Josef Rheinberger and Felix Mendelssohn. In the former's "*Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen*" (How lovely are thy dwelling places) Cloutier's harp lends eloquent support to the pervasive lyricism. In *Sechs Gesänge* (Six songs), the composer set verses proclaiming the joys of a simple, trusting, childlike faith as delectable part songs for treble voices. Mendelssohn's Three Motets (*Drei Motetten*) take Etherea's voices, supported by organist Alan Murchie, into the realm of the sublime, especially in the second motet, *Laudate, Pueri* (Praise the lord, children). More felicity yet, in a program of rare vocal treasures.



Poulenc: Organ Concerto + Boulanger: Pie Jesu;
Vitali: Chaconne; Widor: Organ Symphony No. 6
William Neil, organist
MSR Classics

"When you play it, turn it up!" That was the advice Robert LaPorta of MSR Classics sent me along with my review copy of this new release featuring William Neil on the John Jay Hopkins Memorial Organ of the National Presbyterian Church of Washington, DC. Actually, the caution wasn't necessary. Since the organ was a Aeolian-Skinner of true symphonic breadth and stature, it proved as adept in the quiet moments in a far-ranging program of palpable delights as it did in the sort of atom-smashing that people always seem to associate, rightly or wrongly, with the instrument. With Neil at the console, the Skinner shows that it can speak with a soft voice and still make its authority felt in the farthest corner of a (very)

Twentieth Century arriving, Leoš Janáček speaking. It was a strident voice that was hard to ignore. In part, it reflected the personality of Janáček himself, who was by all reports imperious, highly opinionated and emotionally volatile to an extreme, and was given to expressing himself verbally in a characteristic staccato voice.

He was also, in his later years, in love with a woman thirty-eight years his junior, one Kamila Stösslová, a fact that he never kept secret and which is well documented by a correspondence of some 700 letters over the last decade of his life. It helps to account for much of the intensely passionate character of both quartets, the first of which he himself subtitled "Kreutzer Sonata," a reference to Tolstoy's story about a man driven by insane jealousy to murder his wife; and the second "Intimate Letters," referring to his secret correspondence with Kamila. Of the latter, he wrote to her "You stand behind every note, you, living, forceful, loving. The fragrance of your body, the glow of your kisses – no, really of mine. Those notes of mine kiss all of you. They call for you passionately..."

Of course, one can easily pay too much attention to the biographical element, to the exclusion of Janáček's startling innovations in the quartet medium itself. He virtually dispensed with traditional form altogether in favor of a more capricious, instinctive approach in which everything is sublimated to the emotional purpose of the music. It becomes difficult to talk in such terms as "scherzo" or "slow movement," since the mood and character of any given movement are likely to change in an instant. The third movement of the "Kreutzer Sonata," for example, has some of the composer's most tender music in the Andante section, following a Vivace of some dissonance and agitation. The contrast between warmth and dissonance is even more startling in the "Intimate Letters," which begins with an unsettling high trill in the cello, followed by a rhapsodic theme in the violins and then the eerie sound of the viola being bowed high on the bridge of the instrument.

All of which and much more makes the realization of these works by the Arianna String Quartet all the more stunning an achievement. Because Janáček's textures, rhythms, tonal centers, and the resulting moods can change without notice in music driven by psychological necessity rather than conventional form, the quartet members – violinists John McGrosso and David Gillham, violist Johanna Mendoza, and cellist Kurt Baldwin – cultivate an adeptness in picking up cues from each other that borders on the phenomenal. There is no arpeggio too jagged or rhythmic heart-beat too soft for this finely mettled ensemble. Solid recorded sonics do credit to the robust persuasiveness of the performances. At 44:12, this CD might ordinarily seem short measure, but, believe me, you wouldn't want to take in any more of such highly charged music in a given listening session!

large recording venue.

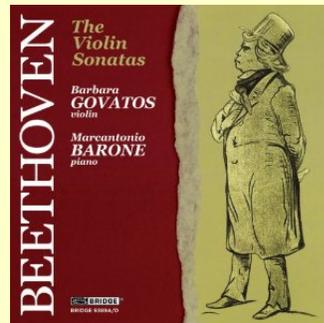
The program begins with the opening Allegro from Charles-Marie Widor's Organ Symphony No. 6. This is a great curtain-raiser for a program, as it encompasses a variety of registration, texture, and mood in the course of easily discernable sections that give it the appearance of a small symphony in a single movement. Neil follows it with an account of Tomaso Vitali's beloved Chaconne in G minor, with violinist Heather LeDoux Green as his more than capable partner in realizing one of music's most sublime experiences. (Believe me, you will lose all track of time when listening to it!)

Haunting beauty follows in the form of the *Pie Jesu* (Merciful Jesus, grant them rest) for soprano, string quartet, harp and organ, literally a deathbed testament by the short-lived French composer Lili Boulanger (1893-1918). With Jane-Anne Tucker as soprano vocalist, and with the soft timbres of the organ complimenting the sound of the strings to perfection, this work creates an indelible presence as it moves from gloom and mystery toward the light of eternal peace.

Francis Poulenc's Concerto in G Minor for Organ, Strings and Timpani, the major work on the program, allows Neil to show us everything the Skinner can do. In seven sections, it begins with two marked *Andante* and *Allegro giocoso*, then concludes with two sections that harken back to the spirit of the opening in reverse order, giving the work a fine sense of symmetry. In between, we have music that is by succession vigorous, calmly centered, and agitated. As scholar Roger Nichols observed in the New Grove, the music ranges "from Bach's G minor Fantasia to the fairground and back again." When Neil and the Eclipse Chamber Orchestra under conductor Sylvia Alimena lead us back safely home from our Poulenc excursion, we feel that we have indeed *been somewhere*.

The program concludes with what, for me, was a trip down memory lane in the form of Winter's Dream for Soprano Saxophone and Organ (1983) by Paul Halley. The composer wrote it during his period of collaboration with Paul Winter, the daddy of what has since come to be termed "world music." Winter himself graces the present recording with his mellifluous sax, although Halley insists the title of the beautiful snowbound reverie refers to the season, and not the artist.

Praise also for the lovely recorded sound, which captures the full range of timbres and tones in true perspective. It is not for nothing that MSR lists this release as a "Demonstration-Class Recording."



Beethoven: Complete Violin Sonatas
 Barbara Govatos, violin
 Marcantonio Barone, piano
 Bridge Records

Barbara Govatos and Marcantonio Barone have been performing chamber music and sonata recitals together since 1985, and made their New York recital debut in 2000 at Weil Recital Hall. Fifteen years is hardly too long an aging period for the fine vintage these artists serve up for the home listener in the present complete cycle of Beethoven's ten sonatas for violin and piano. The 4-CD Bridge release comes right on the heels of their recent award as Samuel Sanders Collaborative Artists by the Classical Recording Foundation.

Being successful collaborative artists takes a special sensibility and a set of skills that are honed over the years in the process of striving for perfection as a duo. It involves sublimating strong profiles as individual artists for the sake of the team, except for those delicious moments when the composer indicates that one may feel free to "let her rip" (and Beethoven is never shy when it comes to *that!*) Natives of Wilmington DE and Bryn Mawr PA, respectively, Govatos and Barone show their best Mid-Atlantic manners in performances of some of Beethoven's most sophisticated and erudite music.

Listeners whose acquaintance with Beethoven has mostly been gathered through the big major works we all know and love may be surprised to discover that the composer wasn't always a Greek army of one, bent on storming Mount Olympus and overthrowing the resident deities. On the contrary, most of the music we hear in the first eight sonatas, comprising the three of Op. 12, the sonatas in A minor, Op. 23 and F major, Op. 24, the so-called "Spring," and the three of Op. 30, were dedicated to crowned heads and high nobility and reflect the virtues of perfect form, balance, and sublime expression that would be most appreciated by a circle of musical connoisseurs. There are, of course, exceptions to this generality, such as the deep, understated emotion of the slow movement, *Adagio cantabile*, in Opus 30, No. 2, or the diminished arpeggiated chords in the Rondo finale of Op. 23, both of which are beautifully accomplished in the present performances. But the best-known movement in all these early sonatas remains the opening of Op. 24, a perfect song without words that has given this work the



Mozart: Piano Concertos 25, K503; and 23, K488
 Rudolf Buchbinder, piano
 Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Concentus Musicus Wien
 Sony Classical

Rudolf Buchbinder, that happy, tireless pianist who has concertized in some 40 cities around the world and made almost 100 recordings since his first tour in 1965, would seem to have done it all. But, until just recently, he had never recorded any Mozart concertos with Nikolaus Harnoncourt and his Concentus Musicus of Vienna. The reason: CM is a period ensemble, and they really needed to find just the right pianist and right instrument to make glorious-sounding Mozart *their* way. As Harnoncourt puts it honestly, if bluntly, most of the specialists he'd encountered early-on in the period instrument revival were really not great artists, and "in the case of Mozart, just playing well isn't enough."

Enter Buchbinder. "Rudi," as his friends call him, was known to have once had fortepianos of 18th century design in his impressive collection of instruments and to have played them for his own pleasure though not for the public. With some friendly urging by Harnoncourt, he was persuaded to get up to speed on a copy of an Anton Walter fortepiano by Paul McNulty. The result was the present recording, made in recital in the Musikverein, in which period sound and top-class musicianship come together as they seldom do in this imperfect world.

From the monumental *Allegro maestoso* opening of Concert No. 25 in C major, K503, with the sounds of trumpets and timpani added to the body of strings, Harnoncourt is on top of his game. His concentrated oversight of this work, which has frequently been compared to Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony, is a little rough at first. He mellows just enough upon the entrance of the soloist, as Buchbinder's fortepiano, with its warm timbres and well-defined registration, engages in exalted music making with the orchestra. Buchbinder's passagework is as virtuosic as it is seemingly effortless. The pacing is alert and pulse-quickening without being excessively so, with the result that the work clocks in at 30:25, as opposed to its usual 33 minutes' duration.

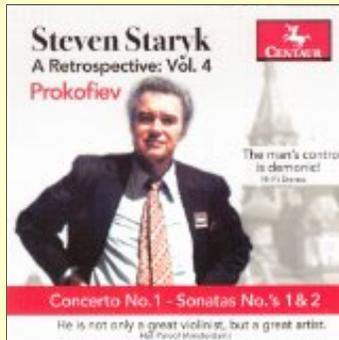
Concerto No. 23, K488 makes for a nice balance and contrast with its album mate. Warm, sunny, and gracious in mood, it exemplifies what the 18th century considered

moniker of "Spring Sonata."

Sonata No. 9 in A major, Op. 47, the "Kreutzer," allows both artists to "take it big" in the opening movement, a Presto with a slow Adagio introduction, as well as in the brilliant set of variations, each unfolding as naturally as new green leaves in spring, that constitute the Andante. Despite the fact that the "Kreutzer" gets the most attention from performers and the general public by virtue of its grand gestures and symphonic breadth, it is, as Barone confides to us in the course of his booklet annotation, "not necessarily the most difficult to play." That distinction may, in fact, belong to Beethoven's last duo sonata, No. 10 in G major, Op. 96. There, the premium is on the utter perfection in timing, phrasing and articulation that Govatos and Barone demonstrate so well. It is a work of calm, ethereal beauty, in which everything must be right from the opening trill, which is not a mere decoration but an integral part of the theme. Our artists do a wonderful job of capturing the work's serenely happy mood, occasionally breaking out into moments of pure joy.

to be the character of A major as the key emblematic of innocent love, youthful cheerfulness, and trust in God. That's not to ignore some disquieting sounds from the ensemble that are heard underneath the gracious Adagio with its glorious leaps in the piano part. But the overriding impression is that of gentle melancholy rather than tragedy, and the dynamics are generally soft throughout this remarkably beautiful movement. Elsewhere. Harnoncourt and Buchbinder interpret the slow movement and the finale as a true Adagio in 6/8 time and an Allegro assai in *alla breve* (cut time), respectively, just as Mozart indicated, rather than the Andante and Presto of later additions. And that suits this harmonically rich and cheerful work to perfection.

Correction: Too late for inclusion in our February issue of Classical Reviews, Michael Bishop, owner/partner and engineer for Five/Four Productions, informed us that his company had produced, recorded, edited and mastered the Zuill Bailey / Indianapolis recording of the Elgar Cello Concerto, and that the project was licensed to Telarc by Mr. Bailey. Because of Mr. Bishop's former distinguished association as head engineer with Telarc Records, the mistake was a natural one. We're glad to correct the impression. And what we said about that recording being "an early top contender for industry honors" still goes!



Steven Staryk Retrospective, Vol. 4
Prokofiev: Violin Concerto No. 1; Sonatas 1 & 2
Centaur Records

It gets better and better. Volume 4 in the Steven Staryk Retrospective reveals the master violinist showing all this formidable arsenal of skills in the context of a very demanding all-Prokofiev program. Staryk's demonic control of dynamics, his spot-on phrasing, and his uncanny ability to always employ the right degree of tonal color for what he wants to say with the music at any given moment in the score, all receive ample play in a program that begins with the Violin Concerto No. 1 in D major, Op. 19, recorded live in October 1961 in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw with Bernard Haitink at the podium.

This account of the Prokofiev First Concerto reveals the violin in its proper role (for Prokofiev) as first among equals, rather the virtuoso in the spotlight and playing against the orchestra, as it was typically cast in the Romantic era. Hardly anywhere, except briefly during the lead-back to the opening movement recapitulation, does the violin play by itself. That doesn't mean there is no scope for virtuosity in this work. Quite the contrary. The violin pulls the orchestra up to its own level of virtuosity, so that the music making is all the more zestful. Here we have on display the bite and brilliance we expect from Prokofiev, but there is *more*. In Staryk's hands, we have wonderful, abundant lyricism all through this work. It is not the deeply sentimental lyricism that pervaded the romantic concerto, but a cool lyricism that is all the more welcome because it occurs in the context of a thoroughly modern work. A work that could only have been written by a Russian.

We hear it from the high, ethereal melody with a strangely calming effect in the very opening that builds in its cumulated effect and serves to define the opening movement, and in fact the entire concerto. A fantastic pianissimo passage, with the violin playing against shimmering textures in the orchestral strings and harp, stays in the memory for a long time. There is no actual slow movement, but moderato episodes in the finale serve to satisfy our need for one. This same finale is marked by a neat dovetailing of the violin soloist's 3/4 time and the orchestra's 4/4 accompaniment, bringing us back to the compound time of the first movement.

The two Sonatas for Violin and Piano, No. 1 in F, Op. 80 and No. 2 in D, Op. 94bis, impress by their concerto-class complexity in the writing for the violin, the second no less so for the fact that it was re-arranged, at the behest of no

less a figure than David Oistrakh, from the original version for flute. Sonata No. 1, begun in 1938 and finally published in 1946, is very moody, one of the darkest and most brooding of the composer's works. The aptly named scherzo movement, *Allegro brusco*, is sensationally "brusque" and biting in its phrasing. The slithering scales heard at the end of the first and fourth movements were described by Prokofiev as "wind passing through a graveyard," though the image of the composer whistling to keep up his spirits as he passes the graveyard might be a better metaphor for conditions during the Stalinist era.

The Second Sonata, which Oistrakh premiered together with pianist Lev Oborin in Moscow in June 1944, is on the whole a more optimistic, cheerful work, though its Andante was sufficiently full of deep feeling to have been played at Prokofiev's funeral in 1953. The finale, with a terrific forte passage designed to lift listeners from their seats, has a joyous sweep and optimism that must have sounded just the right note for wartime audiences.

Both sonatas receive optimal performances from Steven Staryk and his partner, pianist Mario Bernardi in these 1966 recordings. The long experience of both artists, as concertmaster and conductor, respectively, give these accounts a real authority and a feeling of absolute "rightness."