

Phil's Classical Reviews

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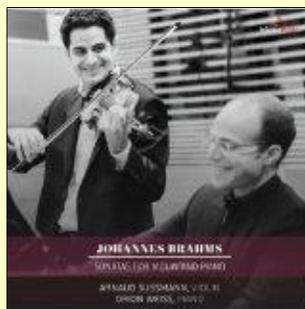
March, 2015



Shostakovich: Violin Concertos 1 & 2
Christian Tetzlaff, violin
John Storgårds, Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra
Ondine

Christian Tetzlaff, native of Hamburg, Germany, began his studies in his own country and later studied in the U.S. under Walter Levin at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. By temperament, he has a distinctive sound that is very much his own. He avoids the full, lyrical sound cultivated by many of his contemporaries, reasoning that, as he told *The New Yorker*, "The listener loses his ear for the most beautiful sounds if they've been used for arbitrary, non-important things." He is not the sort of violinist you'd want to hear playing the usual Bruch/ Mendelssohn pairing. On the other hand, with his sense of total commitment to the music and a sound that is not lacking in either body or bite, he would seem the ideal interpreter for the two violin concertos by Shostakovich that we hear on the present release by Ondine of Finland.

Both these concertos were dedicated to no less a figure than Russian violinist David Oistrakh, who cautioned listeners about the difference between the two works: "I would be hard put to find anything that they have musically in common." The key to a family resemblance would seem to lie in the matter of mood, rather than style or technique. Shostakovich wrote Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 77 in 1947-1948, but, alluding to the hostility of the Soviet music establishment, he advised Oistrakh that "It's not a good idea to play this now!" In the event, the composer himself held it back until 1955 (presumably to be sure that Stalin was really, most sincerely dead) and released it again as his Op. 99. The new version was essentially the same as the original with one major exception. At Oistrakh's request, Shostakovich rescored the opening statement of the fourth movement's main theme for the orchestra alone, so that the violin could take a rest following a very demanding cadenza to the previous movement. Oistrakh's request was undoubtedly for reasons of best musical impact rather than simply to spare himself (he was, after all, noted for his frequent feat of performing three concertos on the same evening's program).



Brahms: Sonatas for Violin and Piano - Arnaud Sussmann, violin; Orion Weiss, piano
Telos Music

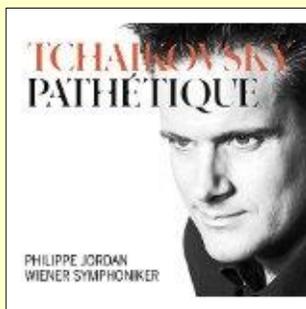
Arnaud Sussmann, native of Strasbourg, France who now makes his home in New York, gives a remarkable account of Brahms' Sonatas for Violin and Piano. Along with all the other impressive tools this artist brings to bear on three of the great works in the repertoire, the first you will notice is his old-school violin sound, reminiscent of the era of Heifetz and Milstein. It is a warm, smooth sound that can be wonderfully sweet and spellbinding without sinking into sentimentality.

In his efforts, he is aided by pianist Orion Weiss, a native of Los Angeles who completed his studies at Juilliard and is, as is Sussmann, the winner of an Avery Fisher Career Grant. With his beautifully detailed pianism, both firm and supple at the same time, he is the ideal recital partner for Sussmann. That's important because the piano part in all of these three works is no "mere" accompaniment, but shares equal partnership with the violin, a fact Brahms stressed in the formal title of Sonata No. 2, which is described as "Sonata for Piano and Violin," instead of the other way around, as was customary.

These are works in which the piano and violin parts are often interleaved as the instruments take turns running with the melody. They are also highly vocally-inspired, a quality of writing that obviously affords Sussmann and Weiss a keen source of delight. Sonata No. 1 in G major, Op. 78, for instance, incorporates the head motifs of two of Brahms' most beautiful songs from Op. 59, *Nachklang* (Remembrance) and *Regenlied* (Rain Song), the latter lending the sonata its famous nickname. Dotted rhythms in the slow movement evoke traditional associations of sorrow and nostalgia, while the reappearance of the main theme on double stops in the violin at the climax of the movement brings a feeling of peace and solace, appropriate to the mood of the lyric in Rain Song: "Pour rain, pour down / Awaken again in me those dreams / That I dreamt in childhood." In the finale, a steady stream of sixteenth notes in the

It does point out the extraordinary role of the solo violin in defining the contour of the music and leading the orchestra into sudden changes of mood and character. Few concertos require the soloist to be playing as virtually non-stop as does this one. It also requires the violin to pay many roles (Oistrakh described it as “Shakespearean”) in its demand for complete emotional and intellectual involvement. In four movements like a symphony, it opens with a somber Nocturne characterized by troubled rather than peaceful dreams, with a soaring violin melody that breaks up into tragic triplets and dissonant chords. The Scherzo is swirling, tense, and sarcastic. It is followed by a Passacaglia with a long and devastating crescendo right after its opening before we are given a slow procession of grief-laden variations. A long cadenza of almost 5 minutes’ duration provides Christian Tetzlaff with the opportunity to reflect eloquently on the music we have heard before. It leads right into the finale, a Burlesca that explodes like a carnival scene. But its merry-making is underscored by a manic quality that leaves us wondering if the “happy” ending wasn’t just a wee bit disingenuous? (For the record, Tetzlaff performs the original Op. 77 version in which the soloist leads the orchestra right into the finale.)

Concerto No. 2, Op. 129, is cast in C-sharp minor, a rather uncongenial key for the violin. As opposed to the immense variety of its predecessor, this concerto has a stern consistency of mood and form (for example, both of the movements flanking the central Adagio are essentially monothematic). Even that Adagio is sadder and more somber than we usually expect in a concerto, in keeping with the prevailing sadness and tension of the work as a whole. The solo horn has a key role to play as both foil and accomplice for the violin. The overall texture is leaner and more austere than in the First Concerto, and the tuba, xylophone, celesta and harp are all significantly missing here. The overall thrust of this concerto is direct, honest, and unmistakably personal, thanks in great measure to the outstanding performances of Tetzlaff and an excellent Helsinki Philharmonic under John Storgårds. Beautifully detailed sound recording enhances the whole package.



Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6 in B minor, “Pathétique”
Philippe Jordan, Vienna Symphony Orchestra
Wiener Symphoniker label

piano, like raindrops, provide a firm foundation for the theme in the violin. The deeply emotionally moving work ends in calm, noble resignation.

Brahms wrote Sonata No. 2 in A major, Op. 100, in the summer of 1886 while on vacation in the Swiss resort of Thun, hence its nickname. Like its predecessor, the “Thun” Sonata is highly vocal in inspiration and feeling. Brahms himself remarked that this area of Switzerland was “so full of melodies that one has to be careful not to step on any.” In the end, he employed melodies from four of his own songs: *Wie Melodien zieht es mir leise durch den Sinn* (Like melodies, it steals softly through my mind), *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer* (Ever gentle were my slumbers), *Auf dem Kirchhofe* (In the Churchyard), and *Komm bald* (Come soon). He also paid a handsome tribute to Wagner by quoting the first three notes of the Prize Song from *Die Meistersinger*. All of which helps make Op. 100 the most gracious and radiantly lovely of sonatas. In the present performance, it maintains that happy quality right through to the end.

Brahms wrote Sonata No. 3 in D minor, Op. 108, in the same year as No. 2, but delayed its Vienna premiere until February, 1889, perhaps because he wanted to perform it himself with Josef Joachim as violinist. And certainly, the great emotional and dynamic range of this work requires the efforts of master artists. It is in four movements, like a symphony, and one is aware of its symphonic breadth from the very opening, where a veil of eighth notes in the violin descends over persistent quarter notes in the piano. The middle movements are studies in emotional contrasts. The Adagio is by turns brilliant and bitter, while the scherzo movement is marked “*Un poco presto e con sentimento*” (rather fast and with sentiment), seemingly contradictory directions that Brahms leaves to artists such as Sussmann and Weiss to work out. The finale has a powerful drive, high drama, and even a briefly confessional moment, all in the course of a movement that tears along in 6/8 time in the manner of a Tarantella. Sussmann and Weiss take this movement big, as is appropriate



Haydn: Piano Sonatas and Concertos
Anne-Marie McDermott, piano
Scott Yoo, Odense Symphony Orchestra
Bridge Records

American pianist Anne-Marie McDermott scores high marks once again in an outstanding program of sonatas

The young Swiss conductor Philippe Jordan, since the beginning of the 2014-2015 season the chief conductor of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, gives an earnest of things to come in this performance of Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" Symphony, recorded live 14/15 December 2013 in the Musikverein, Vienna. Jordan shows himself in confident control of his future orchestra in an account of the familiar warhorse that emphasizes its slowly forming contours as well as the sudden emotional transitions that flare up in the course of the work. At a total duration of 46:28, Jordan takes his time getting the emphasis just right.

That "rightness" is important in a symphony that relies on a variety of highly contrasted moods to make its impact, rather than on traditional sonata form (Tchaikovsky, like many Russians of his day, abhorred development, preferring to follow the exposition directly with a reprise). The Russian word *Patetičeskaja*, for which the French equivalent is *Pathétique*, suggests "passionate," "emotional," or "enthusiastic," sometimes even "bombastic," but never "pitiful" or "evoking pity" as the English word "pathetic" would imply. For all that, the symphony begins quietly and murkily on a note of sadness and despondency, as if to say man is helpless in the face of inevitable fate, a mood that is emphasized by a noticeably sighing figure in the strings. It moves full circle to end on the same note of despair with which it began, without hope of solace or blessing.

In between, Tchaikovsky gives us a lot of variety. A crashing orchestral tutti in the opening movement sets up a very agitated section before the famous Pathétique melody that the world knows and loves suddenly springs up, miraculously full-blown. In place of a slow movement, which would have been a bad idea following the predominately pensive mood of the opening, we have a little hump-backed waltz that trips merrily along in 5/4 time. The brassy scherzo movement, *Allegro molto vivace*, is a fast, high-stepping, spirited march, ending explosively. The finale moves slowly and inexorably, the predominant mood emphasized by a haunting bassoon solo, toward its forlorn conclusion.

Throughout, Philippe Jordan's pacing and emotional emphasis is just what Tchaikovsky called for, making this account of a much-performed work a good place to start for the first-time listener.

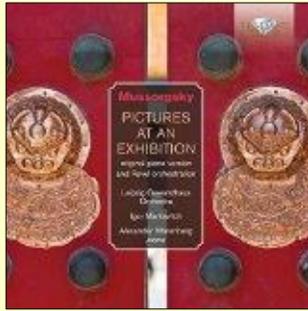
and concertos by Franz Joseph Haydn. Her approach to the music, combining precision and feeling with a well-defined staccato and legato, proves to be just what the doctor ordered when the subject is Haydn. In these recordings, she captures the composer's classical balance and, on occasion, his outrageous wit.

The ample program covers two 70-minute discs. CD1 begins with Sonata No. 23 in F major. Decorous and high-spirited movements flank a surprisingly gloomy Adagio filled with a lot of romantic feeling. Sonata No.40 in G major, on the other hand, is monothematic in the first of its two movements, with variety provided by changes in phrasing and tempo. Written for the wife of Haydn's princely patron, it is clearly within the capabilities of a talented home pianist, which also accounts for its evident charm.

Sonata No. 50 in C major is highly inventive, intended clearly for the professional. Its finale is a hoot. Three "wrong note" disasters in the opening moments would have kept Haydn's listeners on the alert for the fourth, a late occurrence in which the performer appears to have fallen off the end of the keyboard (if not indeed the piano stool). It's all a case of Haydn's celebrated joking, of course, and not a real "flub" at all. CD1 concludes with the ever-popular Concerto No. 11 in D major. A smartly paced Vivace opening movement and an infectious Hungarian Rondo (*Rondo all'Ungherese*) surround a central Adagio that has the lyrical feeling of the operatic stage.

CD2 contains the two most popular of Haydn's sonatas. No. 20 in C minor, with its exalted emotion and even a sense of tragic foreboding, seems imbued with the "*Strum und Drang*" (Storm and Stress) ethos of C.P.E. Bach. In the finale, virtuosic hand-crossings spanning the keyboard help the music heat up in terms of both difficulty and intensity. Sonata No. 52 in E-flat major is generally considered to be Haydn's greatest. With its sonority, rhythmic impulse, bold harmonic range, and mixture of playful and profound elements, it makes quite an impression in the hands of the right pianist, as it does here.

Finally, Concerto No. 4 in G major, which Haydn apparently wrote for the remarkable blind virtuoso pianist Maria Theresia von Paradis, has an abundance of lyrical expression and challenges for the artist involving scalar figurations and orchestral-like flourishes. All it has hitherto lacked have been cadenzas, as the originals have not survived. Modern-day composer Charles Wuorinen, who has been associated with McDermott in the past (he wrote his Fourth Piano Sonata for her), was pleased to accept her invitation to compose idiomatic cadenzas for the present concerto. How well he realized his purpose is measured by the difficulty the listener has in telling where Haydn leaves off and Wuorinen begins.



Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition + Night on Bare Mountain – Markevitch, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra
 Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition (piano version) + Tchaikovsky: The Seasons – Alexander Wareberg Brilliant Classics (2-CD)

What a terrific package this is – *and at budget price, too!* CD1 is devoted to the orchestral version of Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition in the Ravel orchestration, recorded in 1973 by Russian-born conductor Igor Markevitch with the Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig and originally released on the Berlin Classics label. This is as scintillating a performance of Pictures as I’ve ever heard on record, and that’s taking in a lot of territory. At 32:20, the timing is right on the money in a smartly-paced account of the venerable classic. The emphasis is just where it should be: on Mussorgsky’s pungent rhythms and unusual harmonies that were decades before their time.

The “Promenade” theme that unites the vivid collection of tableaux is varied just enough upon each occurrence to lead naturally from one picture to the next. The noble melody sung by the saxophone in The Old Castle is a nostalgic meditation on the vanished glory of the past. In the tableau Cattle, the slow progress of the oxen straining under a heavy load becomes a metaphor for the condition of toil-weary humanity. Catacombs is appropriately gloomy for the subject, and then the listener is given a wonderful spiritual lift when the key change occurs and the texture lightens on the entrance of the serene chant-like melody in the section “With the Dead in a Dead Language.”

The Hut of Fowl’s Legs (a.k.a. Baba Yaga) is appropriately terrifying in its depiction of the cannibalistic witch of Russian folklore, with its wildly disjunctive “bumps” underscoring her nocturnal flight. Markevitch handles the build-up to the final awe-inspiring climax of The Great Gate of Kiev with the hand of a master who knew and understood Mussorgsky’s masterpiece through many years of familiarity with it. Under his baton, even the pastel colors and quick, light rhythms of the two supposedly lightweight “French” tableaux, Tuileries and The Market at Limoges, find appropriate places in an exquisite jewel-setting.

As great as Markevitch’s account of Pictures is, his rendering of Night on Bare Mountain in the Rimsky-Korsakov edition is, if anything, even better. From the



Dukas: Sorcerer’s Apprentice, La Péri, Symphony in C
 Jean-Luc Tingaud, RTE National Symphony Orchestra
 Naxos

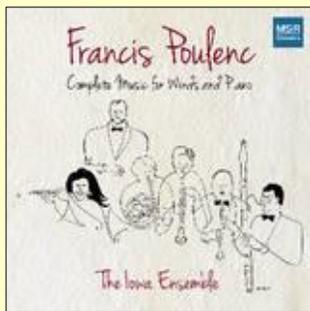
French conductor Jean-Luc Tingaud, at the helm of the RTE National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, directs the orchestra in lucid and colorful accounts of the only three works of Paul Dukas (1865-1935) that you are ever likely to encounter in years of concert-going. The reason is that Dukas was so intensely self-critical that he published only some 13-14 works during his lifetime, discarding and destroying all of his other manuscripts. They are, in order of popularity from most to least, The Sorcerer’s Apprentice, La Péri, and Symphony in C.

The Sorcerer’s Apprentice needs no introduction. Even if Walt Disney had not showcased this programmatic tone poem in the animated classic *Fantasia* (1940), it would long have enjoyed fame in the symphony hall. A marvel of scintillatingly precise orchestration, it features much expanded wind and brass sections including three bassoons and, most crucially in the slow section before the build-up to the final climax, a contrabassoon, an instrument that has its greatest moment in this work. There is also some incredible writing for glockenspiel, a percussion instrument that doesn’t often have an opportunity to appear in the credits. Without being at all fussy, Tingaud is aware of every nuance in a finely-crafted account that allows all sections of the orchestra, and especially the lower strings, to really shine.

As opposed to the other works on this program, La Péri uses delicate scoring for an even larger orchestra than was employed in Sorcerer’s Apprentice to make its points. It is an interesting combination of romantic harmony and orchestration in an impressionist context, making it a rather unique work of its kind. The story of this *poème dansé* deals with the Persian legend of the hero Iskander Khan (Alexander the Great to western readers) who searches for the Flower of Immortality, a radiantly glowing lotus that he finally discovers in the bosom of a sleeping female spirit, the Péri. Upon awakening to discover its theft, the Péri proceeds to weave a spell over Iskander with her sensual dance, drawing ever closer until her cheek caresses his and she is able to retrieve the immortal flower. She disappears into a pure white light as she returns to Paradise, leaving the hero a sadder and wiser man, aware of his own mortality.

evocation of subterranean voices of the unquiet dead at the very opening to the increasingly frenzied fury of the witches' sabbath at the climax and the wonderful sense of peace that descends softly on the landscape after the distant tolling of a bell from a village church disperses the revelers, this is a gripping account of Mussorgsky's breathtaking tone poem. Though we are offered only 43 minutes of music on CD1, in terms of vivid musical substance, if not recorded time, this disc is packed!

And it doesn't end here. CD2 contains two wonderful performances by Kharkov, Russia native Alexander Warenberg. First, we have a compelling account of the original piano version of Pictures at an Exhibition, tidied up to be sure by Rimsky-Korsakov who smoothed over some of the crudities in the Mussorgsky score, but still possessing more than enough rugged vitality of its own to mark it as years ahead of its time. The companion work on this disc is Tchaikovsky's collection of character pieces, *The Seasons* (1875-1876). Once enormously popular, this work fell into decline in the latter 20th century but has experienced renewed popularity in recent years. And little wonder, for Tchaikovsky's twelve pieces celebrating the months of the year have all the lyrical qualities that have made his opera, ballets, and vocal romances so popular. Every listener will have his own favorites, which will usually include "Song of the Lark" (March). "Starlit Nights" (May), a lilting "Barcarolle" (Gondolier's song, June), the spirited "Song of the Reaper" (July), a rousing "Troika" ride (November), and a joyous "Christmas" (December) that will recall the ballet music of *Swan Lake*, on which Tchaikovsky was at work at the time. Warenberg's performance of this delightful album of piano pieces stands out from the available competition, making the 2-CD package an even greater bargain.

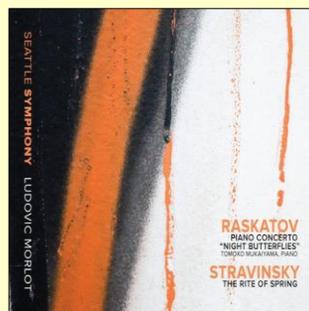


Poulenc: Complete Music for Winds and Piano
The Iowa Ensemble
MSR Classics

The Iowa Ensemble, faculty members of the University of Iowa, really show their stuff in a well-packed program (TT=78:14) comprising the complete music for winds and piano of Francis Poulenc. The players in these 2006 performances are Alan Huckleberry, piano; Nicole Esposito, flute and piccolo; Mark Weiger, oboe; Maurita Murphy Marx, clarinet; Benjamin Coelho, bassoon; and Kristin Thelander, horn. A wealth of melodic and highly idiomatic music on this CD brilliantly displays what each

Tingaud handles the large forces and precisely detailed score with distinction, and the orchestra responds to his direction. *La Péri* is prefaced here with its brilliant and brassy Fanfare, an utterly stunning 2-minute piece that is often performed by itself in the concert hall.

We finally come to Dukas' 40-minute Symphony in C (1895-1896), a work that will recall Cesar Franck's Symphony in D minor in its general outlines, even to the extent of including a near-quotation of the lilting second theme heard in the opening movement as the heart of a spirited finale. In between, we have an expressive Andante that Tingaud allows plenty of elbow room. This symphony uses more of a standard orchestra than the other works on this program, its bigness the result of its musical ideas rather than the sheer forces needed to realize it. Perhaps the present account by Tingaud and the RTE National Symphony will win some friends for this vibrant but comparatively neglected work.



Raskatov: Piano concerto, "Night Butterflies" (with Tomoko Mukaiyama, piano) + Stravinsky: Rite of Spring
Ludovic Morlot, Seattle Symphony Orchestra
Seattle Symphony Media

Once again, Ludovic Morlot and the Seattle Symphony Orchestra give us give us beautiful and provocative performances on the Symphony's in-house label. This time, it's the grandfather of all avant-garde works of music, paired with a modern-day work that shows, in part, its influence.

The "grandfather," of course, is Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, which is revealed in the present performance to be just as vital and outrageous as it was when it was premiered in Paris at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 29 May 1913 (Has a century really passed since then? *Impossible!*) With its extremely bold innovations in tonality, metre, emphasis, dissonance and rhythm – to say nothing of the big disjunctive thumps and bumps in moments just as "Dance of the Young Girls" and "Sacrificial Dance," it requires an orchestra with the resources of the Seattle. That goes for their solid musicianship from every chair as well as Morlot's superb pacing of a work that builds naturally and inexorably to its several climaxes.

"I saw in my imagination," Stravinsky recalled in later years, "a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dance herself to death.

of the wind instruments can do, individually with piano and as an ensemble. The timbres are so flavorful you can virtually taste them, and the recorded sound has such an immediate, full-bodied presence, it can be positively startling until your ears get adjusted to it.

The woodwind music of Poulenc (1899-1963) is basically homophonic and easy to grasp and remember. With his very personal use of traditional harmony and his penchant for writing fresh, expressive melodies, his style is immediately recognizable. He was also a painstaking craftsman. The legend of easy facility that grew up surrounding so much of his music is, as he himself observed, "excusable, since I do everything to conceal my efforts."

The other myth concerning Poulenc is that he was a dual personality, the naughty boy and the austere, cloistered monk. Ignoring for the moment the fact that writing light-hearted, zestful music can be serious business for the composer, we have echoes of Poulenc's religious music in the final movement, *Déploration*, of the Sonata for Oboe and Piano and also imitations of bugle-calls in *Elegy for French Horn and Piano*, written as a memorial to the great English hornist Dennis Brain. The Sonata for Flute and Piano contains numerous unmistakable references to Poulenc's opera *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, an impression of seriousness that is offset by the lively conversation between flute and piano in the bouncy finale. Poulenc recaptured that feel of "bounce" in the spirited finale, *Allegro con fuoco*, of his Sonata for Clarinet, written in memory of fellow-composer Arthur Honegger. Trio for Oboe, Bassoon, and Piano was likewise dedicated to a composer, the Spaniard Manuel de Falla, and one feels upon hearing its archaic tone and dotted rhythms, reminiscent of an earlier age, that its dedicatee must have enjoyed it. The lilting, folk-like Villanelle for Piccolo and Piano creates a memorable impression in just a minute and a half.

That leaves the great Sextet for woodwind quintet and piano, in which all the members of the Iowa Ensemble get together for the only time on this program, reveling in music that ranges manically from choppy disjunction to civilized conversation and joviality as the winds interact charmingly with each other and with the piano.

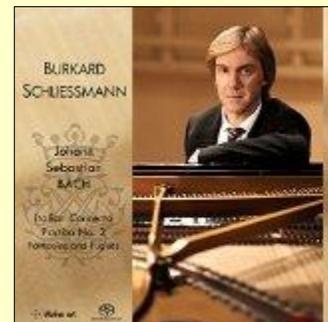
They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of Spring." There's not a dull moment in this account. That includes the slow introduction to Part II, the point where Stravinsky fretted that his audience would fall asleep. There's no chance of that happening here, as Morlot delineates the tension underscoring the idyllic music. This performance takes its place with the best accounts of Stravinsky's eternally avant-garde masterwork.

Night Butterflies by Russian composer Alexander Raskatov, was commissioned in 2012 by Japanese pianist Tomoko Mukaiyama, and was inspired by a visit to a butterfly greenhouse, filled with the presence of hundreds of beautiful Wood Nymphs, flitting about in their distinctive, graceful patterns. It is in twelve brief movements, the piano interwoven into a kaleidoscopic orchestral texture. Raskatov's textures are extremely diverse, from tiny pointillistic ones to others that seem laid on with a heavy palette knife. The dynamics rage from almost inaudible sounds to fortissimo tone-clusters for the full orchestra. The piano part features chromatic figurations, tritonic triplets, staccato leaps, furiously repeated notes, and, in the final movement, a moment when the pianist is instructed to hum along in an untrained voice, softly at first and then louder.

Apart from the technique required to realize Raskatov's Night Butterflies, of which the above is just a sampling, is the matter of mood and affect. Despite the title, not all these brief movements are contemplations of beauty. The fourth is overcast by a figure that hovers like a phantom from a haunted world, and more disturbing images arise in 6 and 7, the latter actually titled "*Quasi spettrio*" (like a specter). Though there is no professed intention by the composer to evoke the visual arts, these images conjured up for me the more sinister aspects of the "floating world," the Japanese school of Ukiyo-e. Continuity is also a problem: the twelve movements seem more like a cycle of miniatures than a true concerto, and their unity is something one only senses upon repeated auditions. Unfortunately, as we often observe about the new music, one seldom has a second chance to make a first impression.

J. S. Bach: Partita No. 2, BWV 826; Italian Concerto, BWV 971; Fantasies & Fugues, BWV 904, 906; Chromatic Fantasy & Fugue, BWV 903 - Burkard Schliessmann, piano
(Divine Art hybrid SACD in 5.0 Surround)

German pianist Burkard Schliessmann is a many-sided individual. The native of Aschaffenburg, Bavaria is highly intuitive in his approach to the music he plays. A graduate of the Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts, he is also a keen student of philosophy and photography. Further, he is a professional scuba diver and is an ambassador for the Protecting of Our Ocean Planet program of Project AWARE. He is said to experience the phenomenon of Synesthesia, allowing him to incorporate the colors of the underwater world into his musical interpretations.



“Synesthesia”? It *could* be. Certainly, occasional exposure to “rapture of the deep,” which produces a feeling of tranquility and mastery of the environment, can’t hurt where the music of J.S. Bach is concerned. (Scuba divers, please, I’m just kidding!) Bach united the formal, expressive and spiritual elements of keyboard music as no one had done before his time (or maybe since, though we mustn’t forget Chopin!) A spontaneous artist, Schliessmann always invites a few friends to his recording sessions to provide an audience with whom he can communicate. “Giving back” to his audience is something he finds very stimulating. “I don’t want to be conceited,” he has repeatedly said, “but it’s a fact that piano and player have to blend into one.”

All of these things inform Schliessmann’s Bach interpretations, as heard on the present program. His Partita No. 2 in C minor is as florid and poetic as it is colorful. The awkward moments when voicing embellishments that I noticed in his earlier account of this same work on MSR Classics in 2008 have been smoothed over here and are better incorporated into the flow of the music without interrupting the rhythm. No easy task, that! This particular partita is the most popular of the set of six with performers and audiences alike, thanks to its attractive mix of light and learned elements. It begins with a Sinfonia marked by a depth of expression, which is tempered by a soothing theme in the second section. Deftly applied counterpoint and rhythmic subtlety help create a lighter mood in the third. A rather more serious than customary Allemande and a graceful Courante are followed by a slow Sarabande, solemn but with a balm of soothing consolation. In place of the expected Menuetto and Gigue, Bach substitutes a spirited Rondeau and a playful Capriccio. Both have tricky rhythms that are challenging for the performer. Schliessmann surmounts all difficulties with zestful virtuosity.

The Italian Concerto was Bach’s nod to Italy and the ritornello style of Vivaldi. It is in three movements, the lively outer ones framing the Andante, a meltingly florid arioso-like movement whose concurrent mood of pathos and florid embellishments make a definite impression on the listener. Schliessmann handles the textures of this work, in which Bach imitates the roles of different groups of instruments, to perfection. (This effect, it should be noted, is easier to execute on the two-manual harpsichord that Bach had in mind than on a modern piano such as Schliessmann’s Steinway D, a fact that has not deterred pianists from being utterly fascinated with the Italian Concerto.)

Two Fantasias and Fugues, in A minor, BWV 904 and C minor, BWV 906, follow next in the program. Both are given performances here that manifest their improvisatory nature. The latter features an Adagio originally written for violin and harpsichord and skillfully interpolated by Bach to add to the expressive beauty of the piece and whet the listener’s interest by delaying the expected fugal resolution.

In the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, Schliessmann relishes the abundant chromaticism resulting from Bach’s demand for wildly flowing arpeggiations and recitative-like passagework in the first part, followed by the relatively lean counterpoint of the fugue for a contrast. The fugue in particular requires this performer’s strong, supple fingers to articulate it as cleanly as he does here. Schliessmann injects a healthy amount of exuberance into the music, which makes this ever-popular work ideal for closing the program.