

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

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Brahms: Symphony No. 2, Haydn Variations, Academic Fest. Overture
Thomas Dausgaard, Swedish CO
(Bis Records SACD, Surround)

Thomas Dausgaard, of whom we've had occasion to speak glowingly in the past, has surpassed himself with an outstanding Brahms program on the Swedish label Bis. Here the Copenhagen native conducts the Swedish Chamber Orchestra, which surely must have been augmented beyond the three dozen musicians we see in the group portrait in the booklet in order to accommodate Symphony No. 2 in D major. Either that, or they are simply playing their hearts out in this performance, which may very well be the case. At any rate, the big sound the conductor and orchestra cultivate is appropriate to the great ideas in this particular Brahms symphony.

That this symphony has often been cited by observers as gentle and serenely beautiful and untroubled only attests to the human trait of ignoring its darker implications, which are present even in the slow movement in the colour palette Brahms has chosen, and also in the urgency with which the music unfolds from the beginning of the opening movement. In a work as large in scope as Brahms' Second you have a lot of variety of mood and discourse, and conductors as well as listeners can choose what elements they want to emphasize. The performance we have here is often stirring and profoundly moving,

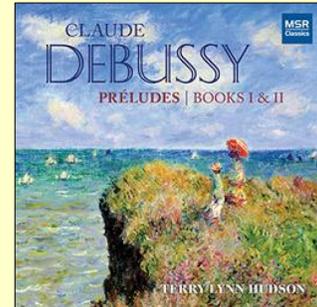


Elgar + Bruch: Violin Concertos
Rachel Barton Pine, violin
Andrew Litton, BBC Symphony
Orchestra (Avie)

Rachel Barton Pine, a Chicago native on whom I've been very high over the years, shows once again why she is among the world's premiere violinists in a pairing of concertos by Sir Edward Elgar and Max Bruch that have more in common than you might at first have imagined.

The Elgar Concerto in B minor, Op. 61 has the breadth and feeling of a symphony or symphonic rhapsody, justifying its unusual length (at 51 minutes, it is the longest violin concerto in my experience). But there are no tedious moments in this work. The long-breathed, flowing melodies in both solo instrument and orchestra require the ample room that Pine and conductor Andrew Litton and the BBC Symphony Orchestra give them.

The difficulties in the violin part are more extensive than listeners may realize. In her preparation, Rachel identified no fewer than 89 highly technical spots that she needed to isolate and practice separately. Timing is everything here. The opening movement is three minutes old before the violin makes its first appearance in the middle of a phrase, commenting eloquently and deliberately on the six main themes the orchestra has stated. We will hear a reprise of these melodies again in the finale, making this work



Debussy: Complete Préludes,
Books I and II
Terry Lynn Hudson, piano
(MSR Classics)

Terry Lynn Hudson, a Maryland native with a Doctorate from the University of Texas, is currently an Associate Professor of Piano at Baylor University besides pursuing an ongoing career as a performer. She has a special affinity for the piano music of Claude Debussy, whom she reveres as one who constantly endeavored to expand the capabilities of the instrument. Seen in this light, the two books of Préludes (1910 and 1913) were a "natural" for this artist.

As Hudson observes in her booklet notes, Debussy was not regarded in his day as an exceptional pianist, though contemporaries did remark on the beauty of his touch and tone. To Hudson, Debussy's great contribution to music was in his unique, vivid sense of orchestral color and his penchant for displaying dissimilar textures and patterns as fluid contrapuntal layers. Add to this his fascination with symbolist poets and their aesthetic that embraced suggestion and understatement, and you have a figure whose work is immediately recognizable as that of no other.

As we know, Debussy (unlike Chopin in *his* Préludes) did not imply a key sequence in the 24 Préludes, Books I and II, so there is no compelling need to play or record all of them in any program. Most

making the moments of lightness and lyricism all the more welcome. The blaze of glory for the full orchestra and brass in the coda marks the ending of this work as unmistakably triumphant. 24-bit sonics capture all the wealth of detail in a very thoughtfully scored symphony that allows ample scope for brass and woodwinds, especially the horns that sound so beautiful in the Adagio, and also the cello that opens this same movement with a warmly expressive cantilena.

The second half of the generous 76-minute program begins with the Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56a. By turns urgent, grandiose, stirring, relaxed, and pastoral, the variations were among Brahms' favorites of all his works. Dausgaard and the Swedish CO do this work full justice.

There follow three of the Hungarian Dances for Orchestra, Nos. 6, 7, and 5 in that order. Deliciously inventive and chock full of sudden surprises, these three in particular are among the most enduringly popular. Dausgaard presents his own arrangements, which are quite different from those that we have been used to hearing by Dvořák and others in their scoring and especially Dausgaard's choices of rubato that make the quirky rhythms in these dances seem even quirrier.

Finally we have the ever-popular Academic Festival Overture, Op. 80 which Brahms wrote in 1880 in gratitude for an honorary doctorate that had been conferred upon him by the University of Breslau. Dausgaard takes this delicious potpourri of old German university songs for all it is worth, culminating with the jubilant coda in C major based on the best-loved student song of all "*Gaudeamus igitur*" (Let us therefore all rejoice). It concludes a thoroughly satisfying program on a resoundingly positive note.

a notable instance of cyclic form.

Elgar characterized two gentle themes in the opening movement as "Windflower themes," and many observers have detected in them an intimate conversation between two voices, masculine and feminine (Sir Edward and Lady Elgar, perhaps?) The second movement, profoundly moving, tender and passionate, takes us into a realm where the violin, rather than the orchestra, is our best guide. Rachel is in her element here, drawing incredible warmth from her instrument, a 1742 Guarnerius del Gesu. Elgar knew how to be emotional without excess, and to wax sentimental without lapsing into sentimentality. He (and Rachel, and Litton) take their time in giving voice to an unusual wealth of expressive beauty that will at times moisten the listener's eyes.

The finale, Allegro molto, has a very striking moment in which, just as the work seems to be approaching its end, we are treated to a cadenza of some breadth, more thoughtful and poignant than showy, in which the violin commets on themes from the opening movement accompanied by a *pizzicato tremolando* in the strings, an invention of Elgar's which he termed "thrumming." All the more reason for the close rapport we have here between soloist and conductor.

Max Bruch's ever-youthful Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 26, is a favorite of Rachel's ("never far from my fingers"), and she often plays the entire second movement in her educational outreach concerts for youth. Though only half the duration of the Elgar, the Bruch rivals it in its many technical challenges. For instance, it opens with a cadenza possessing endless options for spontaneous choices of rubato (with no helpful backbeat from the orchestra). This opening movement is actually an extended introduction to the second, a fact that only gradually dawns on us. All three movements are taken without breaks, the first leading right into the second, much as happens in the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, which served as Bruch's more or less conscious model.

pianists typically perform a selection of three or four in a given recital, depending usually on their personal affinities or interpretive gifts. As a broad generalization, the Preludes in Book I are more sensually descriptive, while those of Book II, in which Debussy was more avidly avant-garde in his exploration of dissonant harmonies and tonal vagaries, can make them more difficult to grasp. The composer appended descriptive titles for every Prelude except one, always at the very end of the piece (No fair peeking, you first-time students!) The exception was Book II, No. 11, "Alternate Thirds" (*Les Tierces alternées*), though one might easily venture a description of one's own.¹

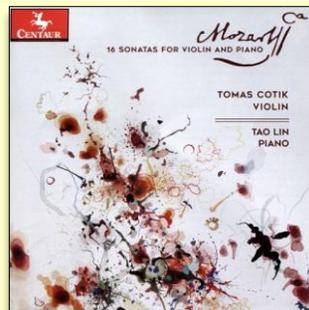
Armed with a very impressive arsenal of technical skills, including an exceptional left hand, Terry Lynn Hudson obviously relishes her exploration of both the tonal and the descriptive riches of the Preludes. There are thematic parallels between the books: an American music hall number (*Minstrels and General Lavine – Eccentric*, the latter the portrait of an entertainer who did a teetering dance on stilts), sunny landscapes (*Les Collines d'Anacapri*, the Little Hills of Anacapri, and *Bruyères*, Heather), bleak nature scenes (*Des pas sur la neige*, Footsteps in the Snow, and *Feuilles mortes*, Dead Leaves), and evocations of antiquity (*Danseuses de Delphes*, Temple Dancers of Delphi, and *Canope*, an Egyptian funerary urn). In the last-named, Debussy shows his genius for giving an inanimate object a "life" of its own, as there is an implied sadness in the depiction of an urn filled with scented oils for use in an afterlife that, one infers, will not be as the ancients envisioned.

Water, in all its natural forms, tends to inspire music of pronounced sadness in Debussy: *Brouillards* (Fog or Mists), the afore-mentioned sad progress of Footsteps in the Snow, or the power of the tides to submerge an edifice of mankind in *La Cathédrale engloutie*. In the last-named (The sunken Cathedral) Terry Lynn's strong left hand technique, of which we remarked

A lot of pulse-quickenings things happen in the twinkling of an eye in this work, making it one of the all-time favorite violin concertos. The soaring feelings in the second movement, simply titled *Adagio*, make it the emotional high point of the work. The finale, marked *Allegro energico* and extremely exuberant, is described by the artist as “one of the best examples of anticipation in the repertoire.” In this movement bold leaps, syncopations, and a plethora of double-stops in a dance tempo that gets faster as we approach the finish, add to the technical difficulties that Rachel surmounts with masterful poise.

earlier, comes to the fore in the parallel chords reminiscent of medieval *organum*, the rising motifs, the shifting textures, and the subtle dynamics Debussy uses to create the image of a legendary cathedral of medieval times that rises from the sea once a year to the ghostly pealing of bells and chanting of monks before sinking once more into its watery grave on the very lowest C of the keyboard. By contrast, *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (the girl with the flaxen hair) is as simple and straightforward as Debussy can be in its depiction of a beautiful young woman on a hillside in Scotland.

Tomas Cotik, violinist from Argentina who received a Doctor of Musical Arts from the University of Miami and has taught and performed widely in the U.S., joins forces once more with his favorite concert partner, Chinese-American pianist Tao Lin, in superior performances of Mozart's mature sonatas for violin and piano. I was high on these guys in their earlier accounts of similar sonatas by Franz Schubert (see my *Classical Reviews*, 01/13 and 05/15), but I must say they have really surpassed themselves in their present efforts on behalf of Mozart.



Mozart: 16 Sonatas for Violin and Piano – Tomas Cotik, Tao Lin (Centaur Records 4-Cds)

These are the 16 sonatas from the years 1778-1788, and they reveal Mozart at a time in his life when his uniquely personal style as composer and performing artist crystallized. As booklet annotator Dr. Frank Cooper observes, these were years of intense struggle in which Mozart finally abandoned his hope of landing a secure position in a musical establishment of the nobility after several unsuccessful attempts (the last of which, in the residence of the Prince Archbishop of Salzburg, ended when he was ignominiously given the boot – literally – by a very large doorman). He then decided to make his fortune in the exciting but uncertain world of the independent musician. One consequence of this was that he needed to consciously strive to make his music as daring and original as possible, with major implications for the future of music.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to place ourselves in the society of the 1780's and to hear Mozart's striking innovations the way they did. As Mozart himself said of his piano concertos from the same period, “They contain passages from which connoisseurs alone can derive satisfaction, but are written in such a way that the less learned cannot fail to be pleased without knowing why.” His contemporaries were astonished at how often he changed tonality in the course of a movement such as the indescribably beautiful *Adagio* of K481, but they were also quick to recognize the aria-like languishing expression of love emotion that such a “Mozart moment” embodied.

It was the genius of Mozart that his mature sonatas for violin and piano plumbed depths of expression hitherto unknown to the genre. Previously, it had been a matter of

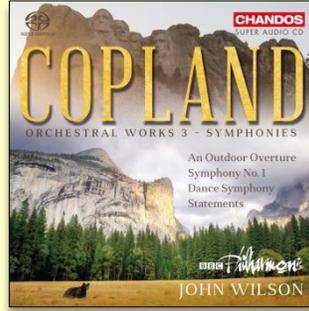
the piano accompanied by the violin, brightening the harmony here and there. That had basically been the case in the two dozen or so sonatas he had penned in his boyhood years. Increasingly over time, the two instruments moved towards an equal partnership in the 16 sonatas of 1778-1788, with richer, more persuasive, and subtler expression. Typically for a young man (and as we know, he never lived to reach middle age), Mozart tended to prefer quicker *Andantes* and *Andantinos* to *Adagios*, and there is no *Largo* in any of these sonatas.

There are quite a few moments that play like love duets, particularly in the sonatas K296 and K376-K380, which Mozart dedicated to his pupil Josepha Barbara Auernhammer, with whom he was in love. You can hear this emotion in the *Andante sostenuto* of K296 and even more the *Andantino sostenuto e cantabile* of K378, in addition to the elegant flow and effortless display of the themes. The *Andantino cantabile* of K379 is really complex in its range of emotions: tenderness, urgency, drama, longing and mystery.

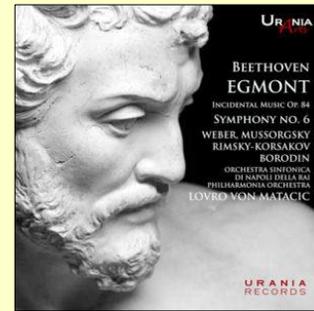
I concur with Frank Cooper in finding the comparative neglect of the previously-mentioned K481 incomprehensible: “so conspicuous are this sonata's charms that it beggars belief how neglected it is.” The inspired performances of Tomas Cotik and Tao Lin make our amazement all the greater.ⁱⁱ



Liszt: Consolations, Selected Hungarian Rhapsodies, Suite from Années de pèlerinage, Mazeppa, Piano Concerto No. 1 – Sergio Fiorentino (2-Urania slimline)



Copland: Orchestral Works Vol. 3: Symphonies
John Wilson, BBC Philharmonic
(Chandos SACD, Surround)



Beethoven: "Pastoral" Symphony, Egmont Music + Weber, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Mussorgsky
Lovro von Matačić conductor
(Urania 2-CD slimline)

What an unexpected thrill *this* CD was! These remasterings of 1950's-60's recordings by Sergio Fiorentino call for special notice even in an unusually good year for the piano music of Franz Liszt. The Naples-born master of the keyboard made his Carnegie Hall Debut as early as 1953, but a near-fatal plane accident caused him to cut back on concert performances until the end of the decade. As many of the 1958-1965 performances heard on the present program will testify, he rebounded strongly from adversity.

Many pianists' recordings of Liszt's solo piano music have left me disenchanted in the past because they concentrated on the flashy aspects of the music and did not get to the heart of the matter as surely as Fiorentino does time and again. And he does it without sacrificing a single iota of the "trancendental" virtuosity for which Liszt was justly famed.

"Suisse" (Switzerland), Part I of Années de pèlerinage (Years of Pilgrimage), was conceived in the time Liszt spent in that country with runaway Countess Marie d'Agout. The inspirations for the nine pieces have as much to do with literary sources, particularly *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* by Lord Byron, as they do the magnificent Swiss scenery. The more visual pieces, with such titles as "At Lake Wallenstadt," "Beside a Spring," and "Pastorale," have almost unbelievably innocent melodies; however, the underlying accompaniments have a deceptive,

John Wilson, at this writing still a very youthful-looking man, founded his own orchestra, dedicated to the music of the golden age of Broadway and Hollywood, as early as 1994, and hasn't forsaken his first love ever since. How a British subject and a fellow of the Royal College of Music should know so darned much about quintessentially American music may seem a paradox. But then, how did Aaron Copland, the Brooklyn-born son of Jewish immigrants, come to embody the spirit of the great American West in so much of his music? However he acquired the knack, Wilson is well attuned to the vital rhythms, the wide range of brilliant colors and blue harmonies, and the irresistible drive of Copland's symphonic music at a time when so many American conductors seem to miss it.

First on the program is An Outdoor Overture (1938) which was once unfairly scorned as "kid stuff" because Copland wrote it on a commission from a high school that specialized in preparing students for careers in music. You can call it that if you mean to cite its resemblance to the music he was writing at the time for his ballet Billy the Kid, which it resembles in its cheerful, breezy airs and pungent rhythms.

Next, we have Symphony No. 1 for Large Orchestra (1926-1928), which was Copland's re-working of his Organ Symphony of 1924. The re-scoring for a sizeable orchestra gave more prominence to the winds and avoided the inherent difficulty of

Many of you out there have probably never even *heard* of Lovro von Matačić who was in fact one of the great conductors of the 20th Century. The long-lived maestro (1899-1985) was not actually unknown in the U.S., having conducted the Chicago Opera plus a number of American symphony orchestras after 1958, but his reputation remained mostly European, in Germany, Central Europe, Italy, his native Yugoslavia and Croatia. Matačić was a man of broad sympathies, best-known for preserving the authentic spirit of the Romantic Era. Arkivmusic.com still has 53 listings under his name, though you may have to search diligently to find them.

All the more reason why the present compilation by the Italian label Urania is such welcome news. The remastering engineers did a super job of equalizing the levels of recordings made at different times in Naples, London, and Berlin. These are all monaural recordings (which should endear them to old-time vinyl collectors). The fact that they were recorded at a time when stereophonic sound had become the standard for LPs tells us the original purpose was undoubtedly archival, rather than commercial release.

The noisiest, in terms of extraneous sounds, is the 1961 recording of Beethoven's Overture and Incidental Music for Egmont made with the Orchestra "Alessandro Scarlatti" di Napoli della RAI (Radio Italiana). A little patience on the part of the home listener will pay dividends

irresistible flow that will challenge any pianist's technique. Heroic-sounding music emanating from the tomb of the hero in The Chapel of William Tell sounds an eternal call to the ongoing struggle for freedom. *Orage* (Storm) strikes profound notes and chords in the bass, reinforcing the fearful subject, while such pieces as *Le mal du pays* (Homesickness) and *Les cloches de Genève* (The Bells of Geneva), capturing the overlapping sounds of church bells on a quiet evening, require the gentler, more delicate response this artist bestows on them.

The 6 Consolations are unified by a predominant E major tonality and a search for peace and the soul's comfort. The best-known, No. 3, *Lento placido*, has the mood of a Chopin nocturne in its right-hand cantilena over a flowing, broken-chord accompaniment in the bass. Fiorentino expresses the simple, undulating melody, ending in a magical chord change at the end, with the greatest sensitivity.

In the past, I'd usually preferred the orchestral versions of the Hungarian Rhapsodies to the original piano versions, performances of which I often found showy and superficial. For me, Sergio Fiorentino reversed the equation. We have six of them here, Nos. 2, 6, 7, 10, 11 and 13. No. 2 in C-sharp minor has always been the world's favorite, but I prefer No. 6 in D-flat major (corresponding to No. 3 in D major for orchestra) for its broad canvas and breathtaking changes of mood, tempi, and figuration, demanding and receiving from Fiorentino the full-bodied expression it deserves.

Mazeppa, from the Transcendental Etudes, is a tone poem in all but name honoring another historical figure who faced death for the cause of freedom. Fiorentino exerts a masterful control over its range of moods: resolute, stirring, sad, tender, and tragic, with its hero's last heartbeats captured in soft chords.

The program concludes with Fiorentino's 1958 account of Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major with

synchronizing the organ with the orchestra in the original work due to inevitable time delays in response, which caused the organist to have to anticipate the conductor's beat. For whatever reasons, this dynamic work revealing influences as diverse as Stravinsky and jazz comes across beautifully in the present performance.ⁱⁱⁱ

Statements (1932-1935), which the composer himself termed one of his "gritty" works, is more problematical because of its dissonant, pithy, and sometimes sarcastic contrasts in mood, as reflected in its titles: *Militant*, *Cryptic*, *Dogmatic*, *Subjective*, *Jingo*, and *Prophetic*. Copland was aiming at a new lean, austere style that would in time constitute a bold contrast with the populist style of the three famous ballets and other works drawing on American folk traditions. Still, as Wilson shows us, there is room for both deeply felt seriousness in the elegiac-sounding *Subjective* and the levity-inspite-of-itself way in which the melody of the popular song "Sidewalks of New York" keeps intruding impishly in the course of *Jingo*.

Finally, Dance Symphony was Copland's reincarnation of music he wrote for a never-staged ballet on a vampire story with the incredibly unappealing title of *Grogg*. The idea had been to capitalize on the vogue for the uncanny that was occasioned by the success of F.W. Murnau's 1922 expressionist film *Nosferatu* (The Vampire). In the course of time, Copland came to feel that the taste for *Grand Guignol* ghastliness had waned, and he recast his material for concert use as the Dance Symphony. Though some of the mockery and eeriness inevitably remained, we are also given a considerable amount of pure cool lyricism in the revised score, constituting a rich vein which Wilson and the members of the BBC Philharmonic are keen to explore.

With all its pithiness, its variety of expression and glowing harmonies and dissonances, the music in this program cries out for audiophile-class support from the producer and

from a compelling performance that reveals Beethoven's admiration for Count Egmont, a hero who died in the Netherlands' fight for freedom. The impassioned tone of the speaker, Romano Costamagna, helps put this emotion across.

The environmental sound is kept well under control in the 1962 account of Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony with the same orchestra. The audience participation is evident only where it should be, in the warm applause at the end by Neapolitans who knew a great performance when they heard it. Superb timing, so good that it was second nature, comes to the fore in Matačić's account of this work in which he knows instinctively when to keep the music taut and when to expand it to fill the available space with glorious sound. He is at his very best in the final three movements: Merry Gathering of Country Folk, Thunder Storm, and Shepherd's Song of Thanksgiving), which he takes attacca with consummate mastery.

Carl Maria von Weber's Overture to *Der Freischütz*, with the Deutsche-Oper Berlin, sounds full-bodied in a 1967 recording. The best moment is when we hear the music from the Wolf's Glen Scene, which comes over in all its spine-chilling eeriness.

Three enduring Russian favorites, recorded in London in 1959 with the Philharmonia, add to our perception of Matačić's prowess as a past master of the baton: Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's Russian Easter Festival Overture, Modest Mussorgsky's A Night on Bare Mountain, and Alexander Borodin's Polovtsian dances from *Prince Igor*.

For lack of space, I will concentrate on the Mussorgsky, which to me epitomizes the full-bodied orchestral sound and the superb pacing and timing that this maestro lavishes on all three Russian rousers. He establishes a powerful underpinning of running cellos and basses underscoring the very opening of the music, and then brings up the brass and percussion with stunning effect. The element of the macabre comes across optimally in Mussorgsky's

the NDR Symphony Orchestra under Erich Riede. This remarkable work includes all the elements of a concerto in one seamless, sweeping movement: a portentous opening, soulful slow movement, invigorating cadenza, and rousing finale. Liszt's use of cyclic sonata form, with variations on the main theme and all the movements taken without a break, gives us the feeling of non-slackening excitement. Fiorentino shows off all of his prowess in the heart-melting loveliness of the Quasi Adagio, the blistering passagework in the Allegretto, and a powerful Allegro finale featuring sensational polyrhythms that brings matters to a stunning conclusion.

engineers. Happily, it receives it in a hybrid SACD with 24-bit, 96 kHz recording technology and 5.0 channel Surround sound.

depiction of a witches' sabbath, as well as the mood of deep peace that descends on the listener at the end when the revels are finished and the dead return to their place of rest,

ⁱ My own impression is that of a lover hastening to a rendezvous or a traveller wending homeward after a long absence, his heart high but his mind filled with anticipation, his pulse beating faster as he approaches his destination. At the end, he does not find what he expects – witness the tantalizing open cadence. Of course, the listener may apply his/her own description to a piece whose simple thirds, as Hudson observes, are colored and contextualized, allowing this prelude to fit in with its descriptively titled companions. It *does* seem to imply more than just a simple technical exercise.

ⁱⁱ Listening to the present performance of K481 in E-flat major, I was able to recall note-for-note the 1960 Decca LP account of this sonata by Erica Morini and Rudolf Firkusny, even though I had not heard it in the past three or four decades. I attribute that amazing recall to Mozart's genius for proportioning and displaying his material, rather than my own powers of memory. Credit also Messers Cotik and Tao for the fact that I can speak of their performance in the same breath as that of two great names from music's past.

ⁱⁱⁱ Home listeners will find instructive comparison listening between this work and Wilson's own account of the original Organ Symphony, with Jonathan Scott as organist, presented in Vol. 2 of the ongoing series of Copland's Orchestral Works (Chandos CHSA5171).