

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

May, 2012

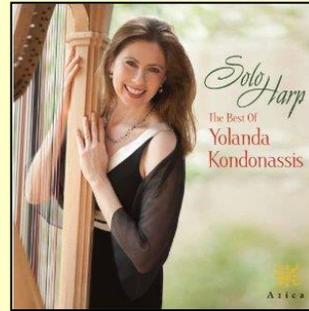


Mendelssohn / Bruch / Beethoven
Philippe Quint, violin
Carlos Prieto, Orquesta Sinfónica de Minería
Avanti Classic (Hybrid SACD + DVD)

Violinist Philippe Quint, native of St. Petersburg, Russia, gives intriguing accounts of Felix Mendelssohn's Concerto in E minor and Max Bruch's Concerto No. 1 in G minor, with Beethoven's two deeply lyrical Romances thrown in for extra measure, all with the capable support of Mexican conductor Carlos Miguel Prieto and the Orquesta Sinfónica de Minería. What struck me, from the opening entry of the violin in the Bruch and even more in the Mendelssohn, was Quint's "back to the future" approach to the music. These were real old-school performances of two concertos that had become all-too familiar in our concert halls and on recordings. For a while, in fact, the obligatory Bruch-Mendelssohn pairing had fallen into benign neglect after having been unfairly used as a yardstick to judge every young hot-shot who came down the pike (and who promptly wilted in the hot light of comparison with past masters of the bow). My ears, at least, have gotten needed rest by the scarcity of new B-M pairings in recent years, so I was better able to appreciate what Philippe Quint gives us.

And what does he *not* give us? In the opening movement of the Bruch, unusual in itself in that it is actually a prelude to the second, the flow of the music is steady, slow, and secure, with barely audible sighs in the cadenza that signals the arrival of the violin. The solo playing becomes ever more flowing, rich, and expansive in the Adagio, giving way to exuberant double stops and high-energy rhythmical playing in the finale.

The Mendelssohn Concerto benefits from Quint's unabashedly old-fashioned virtuosity, from the rapidly descending opening passage right through to the highly expressive melody in the middle section and the bravura ricochet bowing in the fiery cadenza. Quint takes the darkly lyrical Andante, where the soloist is at times obliged to play both melody and accompaniment, with as much expressive beauty as the law allows. There was a time, in the not-so-distant past, when violinists held back



"Solo Harp: The Best of Yolanda Kondonassis"
Azica Records

"Solo Harp" is a compilation of favorite selections by American harpist Yolanda Kondonassis, drawn from six of her earlier albums for Telarc and freshly remastered for release by Azica Records, together with the artist's written observations on herself and her style of artistry, then versus now. The program shows continuity in what was traditionally expected of the harp, which is usually what it does idiomatically in terms of rippling arpeggios, glistening glissandi, and so forth. It also reveals the spirit of restless experimental that entered the harp literature with the advent of Carlos Salzedo, of whom more will be said later.

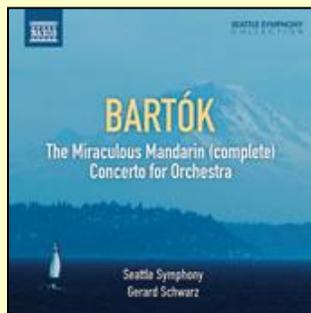
Selections include pieces by Gabriel Pierné (*Impromptu-Caprice*), Marcel Grandjany (*Rhapsodie*), Camille Saint-Saëns (*Fantaisie*), Erik Satie (*Gnossienne No. 3*), Alphonse Hasselmans (*La Source*), and Salzedo, plus transcriptions of keyboard preludes by J.S. Bach and George Gershwin. The Hasselmans piece perhaps best epitomizes the French composers, with its irresistibly flowing arpeggios that carry things to an ecstatic climax worthy of its title (in English, "The Stream"). Kondonassis admits to feeling "an adrenaline rush when playing *La Source* that feels a lot like flying, high and fast with the wind at your back." Though originally written for piano, Gershwin's quiet, blues-y Prelude No. 2 for piano, "so ripe with potential for shaping and nuance," is another self-confessed sinful pleasure of the artist known to her legion of admirers as. "YK."

But it is the four pieces by Carlos Salzedo (1885-1961) that command the most attention from the listener. Salzedo was born in France, the product of an old family of Sephardic ancestry. He possessed a lifelong fascination with the music of the Basque country which he derived from the housekeeper-governess who brought him up after the death of his mother, and he revolutionized the sound of the modern harp in his tireless experiments with new sounds and textures and revolutionary designs. On display here are Yolanda Kondonassis' accounts of the aptly named "Scintillation" from her eponymously named Telarc album of that title,

on the emotion at one point in this movement because it was considered “schmaltzy.” Quint, correctly realizing that the expression can’t be trimmed without doing harm to the character of the music, has no such inhibitions. The style with which he manages the violin’s unbroken transition to the finale, and the white hot energy with which he invests the rapidly ascending and descending arpeggios in this movement, are music to my ears.

A welcome bonus here is the inclusion of a half-hour DVD *Philippe Quint: for the Record*. With considerable charm and with breathtaking economy, Quint explains why the Mendelssohn, Bruch, and Beethoven works heard on this program occupy a special place in his repertoire. “It may be my idea, it may be my imagination,” he says, “that I feel there is something so fresh and unique about these pieces for me, that I am ready to put it on the record.” He goes on; “I’ve got to experiment with these works, I’ve got to live with them, and they have become part of my soul, who I am. And this is the time in my life when I finally feel I have something to say.”

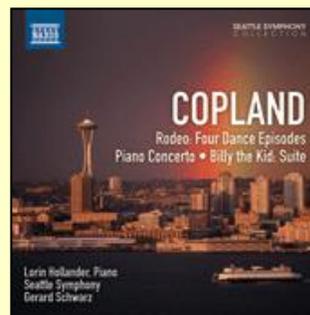
In between interview segments, the documentary gives us tantalizing glimpses of Mexico City and of La Sala Nezahualcoyotl, the beautiful and acoustically perfect concert hall where the recordings were made. We hear commentary (in Spanish with good subtitles) by the music director of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Minería, Carlos Miguel Prieto. But the final word is left to Philippe Quint: “The beauty of music is that it is unpredictable, that it always lives in the moment, and this moment is priceless. I am trying to recreate this moment during the recording, which is a particular challenge.”



Bartók: The Miraculous Mandarin, Concerto for Orchestra
Gerard Schwarz, Seattle Symphony Orchestra
Naxos

Prior to auditioning this Naxos remastering of the original 1988 Delos recording, I hadn’t listened to *The Miraculous Mandarin* for about two decades. I soon discovered why. A sordid tale of moral degeneracy, crime and violence with Freudian overtones, the ballet does not tell a very pretty story, and Bartók’s music follows suit. The tale concerns three thugs who use a female accomplice as bait to lure men into a dangerous setting where they can rob and murder them. Their latest victim, the Mandarin of the title, simply refuses to die, whether by smothering, stabbing or hanging, until the foxy lady yields to his

plus three selections from her Telarc album Salzedo’s Harp: *Chanson dans la nuit* (Song in the Night), *Rumba*, and *Bolero*. The two-last named pieces, which the artist describes as “terrifically fun to play . . . The harp literally dances in Salzedo’s hands,” are wonderfully idiomatic and colorful and would make great encores for any harp program, as they do here. *Chanson* is altogether remarkable in the kaleidoscope of coruscating coloristic effects that the harpist calls forth from the instrument as the music moves slowly through a Sarabande-like progression of sonorities. Salzedo’s special effects in this piece, so evocative of the mystery of the night include at one point a stunning percussive sound, as of a hand knocking against the resonant soundboard of the instrument, which is guaranteed to haunt your memory of this piece.



Copland: Rodeo, Piano Concerto, Billy the Kid
Lorin Hollander, piano
Gerard Schwarz, Seattle Symphony Orchestra
Naxos

Stunning accounts of Aaron Copland favorites by Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, recorded in optimal sound by producer Adam Stern and engineer John Eargle, originally released by Delos, come up fresh as paint in remasterings on the Naxos label. The 1990-1993 performances capture the excitement Copland’s original audiences must have felt when the long-since venerable composer was still something of a “bad boy.”

The Four Dance Episodes from *Rodeo* epitomize the earlier Copland, particularly in their literal quotations of American folk melodies (much of this was due to the choreographer, Agnes de Mille, who loved the earthiness of the originals because they fit her concept of the ballet, and who exercised veto power over Copland). There is an undeniable raw energy driving the outer movements of the suite, *Buckaroo Holiday* and *Hoe-Down*, particularly the latter with its use of the tune “Bonaparte’s Retreat,” and this verve is further emphasized by the committed playing of the Seattle musicians. But Schwarz and company may have their finest moment in the wistfully tender *Saturday Night Waltz*, with its reprise of a similar mood and music from *Corral Nocturne* and its slow, sad inclusion of the cowboy song “Old Paint.” The musicianship of the various Seattle SO first chairs is evident in the scoring for this movement, as Copland uses solos in lieu of entire sections.

entreaties for gratification, after which his wounds open and he dies in a series of jerky spasms. The booklet annotation describes the theme as “the irreconcilability of intuitive nature and corrupt civilization,” and I guess that will do for our purposes. Certainly, there’s no “joy of sex” in this story, just blind, destructive compulsion.

The music is accordingly chaotic, with its lurid trombone glissandos, strained string textures, and obsessive rhythms, not to mention the eerie voiceless choir in the macabre scene when the Mandarin’s corpse, suspended from a light fixture, is bathed in strange light. Graphic as the story may be, it is not easy to visualize without a detailed scenario (no “Mickey Mouse” music, this), so that Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle SO have their job cut out for them making things as plausible and compelling as they do here.

I’ve no similar reservations about the Concerto for Orchestra (1944), which justly remains Bartok’s best loved purely orchestral work. That goes for musicians, as well as audiences, because its zestful scoring calls for the sections of the orchestra to be deployed in virtuosic and soloistic ways. That’s particularly the case in the second movement, *Giuoco della Coppie* (Game of Pairs), in which pairs of bassoons, oboes, clarinets, flutes and muted trumpets, occurring at different intervals, have their moments in the spotlight, introduced each time by the tap-tap of the side drum. There’s committed playing by the Seattle Symphony in the *Allegro vivace* opening movement and the *Presto* finale, a whirlwind in perpetual motion. My favorite moment, which comes across beautifully in this recording, is the sunny outburst of warm lyricism that emerges suddenly and unexpectedly in the Intermezzo, right after Bartok has had his little joke sending up a jaunty march theme Shostakovich had used in his “Leningrad” Symphony, thereby giving the Russian the musical equivalent of the “razzberries.”

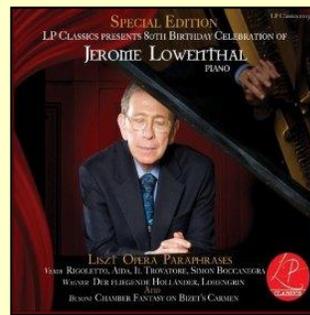


Dvorak: Symphony No. 8 + Schumann: Piano Concerto
Gerald Robbins, piano
Kenneth Klein, Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra
MSR Classics

If “Two Americans in Moscow” doesn’t have quite the same zing as “An American in Paris,” don’t blame Gerald Robbins and Kenneth Klein. Robbins, the soloist, plays his heart out in Robert Schumann’s Piano concerto in A

Copland scored his Piano Concerto (1926) for a large orchestra including alto and tenor saxophones and extra percussion, and the jazzy scoring makes a terrific impact in the present performance when combined with the committed playing Schwarz draws from his cohorts. Copland himself described its two sections as the two faces of jazz itself, “the slow blues and the snappy number.” The presence of the pianist, Lorin Hollander, is felt in both sections, the former with its notable rhythmic license and improvisatory, spontaneous quality, and the latter with the wicked explosiveness of the reprise in the coda. It’s a shame we don’t hear this work more often.

Finally, the *Billy the Kid* Suite is stunningly graphic in its symphonic writing as well as in the present performance, as befits the story of violence and sudden death in a raw frontier setting. It is in seven sections: The Open Prairie, Street in a Frontier Town, Prairie Night, Gun Battle and Celebration after Billy's Capture, Billy's Death, and The Open Prairie Again. The booming, rasping, staccato deployment of the percussion on several different levels in “Gun Battle” is nothing short of sensational.



Liszt: Opera Paraphrases + Busoni: Carmen Fantasy
Jerome Lowenthal, piano
LP Classics

In a special 80th birthday celebration of Jerome Lowenthal, LP Classics has wisely chosen to present the distinguished American pianist and teacher feasting on viands that are his kind of meat: virtuoso paraphrases by Franz Liszt of themes from operas by Verdi and Wagner, plus Ferruccio Busoni’s Chamber Fantasy on Bizet’s *Carmen*. Where others fear to treat, in repertoire sometimes considered unplayable, Lowenthal steps up boldly like the true Lisztian he is. The result, derived from 1981 recordings licensed from Sony Music Entertainment on Tracks 1-6 (Liszt) and a 1994 New York recital on Track 7 (Busoni), is music making of an exalted nature.

To Johannes Brahms, admittedly no friend of Franz Liszt, the composer’s piano transcriptions were the surest key to understanding him. “Whoever really wants to know what Liszt has done for the piano,” said Brahms, “should study his old operatic paraphrases. They contain the true classicism of the piano.” *Classicism*? That seems an odd term to use in the context of Liszt. But if what Brahms meant was to describe Liszt’s penchant for distilling an

minor. And Klein conducts the Moscow Philharmonic with a sense of verve and confidence in the companion-piece in this pairing of masterworks from the romantic era, Antonin Dvořák's Symphony No. 8 in G major. As familiar as both works are in the concert hall and on recordings ("The Muze" currently has 212 listings for the Schumann, 107 for the Dvořák), I've seldom heard better accounts, and many worse ones, by more celebrated artists.

From the fierce descending attack in the opening bars, the total commitment of both these artists is evident in the Schumann concerto. There is a noticeable flow and sweep to the music, as soloist and orchestra delight in molding the contours of the work's bold, and sometimes surprisingly delicate, themes. From the striking oboe melody that introduces the first theme in the opening movement, we are treated to excellent participation from all sections of the orchestra. The exciting end to the opening *Allegro affettuoso* is paralleled by the stunning rush to the finish line by the pianist in the Vivace finale, culminating in the long tympani roll and huge final chord. The slow movement, *Andante grazioso*, is taken with all available grace and charm without sacrificing a bit of the movement's tautness and economy. Both Robbins and Klein demonstrate noticeable points of view, and the latter is particularly cognizant of Schumann's chamber music-like scoring in the slow movement.

The playing of the MPO is particularly strong in the Dvořák symphony, where even the noticeably up-front participation by the brass does not go amiss in the mid-movement climax to the opening *Allegro con brio* and the exciting, turbulent finale. Elsewhere, they punctuate the music with telling insight. Kudos also for the solid presence of the MPO's string sound, the flute solos in the opening and closing movements, and the quiet, haunting beauty of the clarinet duet in the Adagio. Klein does a commendable job with the melancholy waltz in the scherzo movement and with the transition to the stirring fanfare that opens the finale.

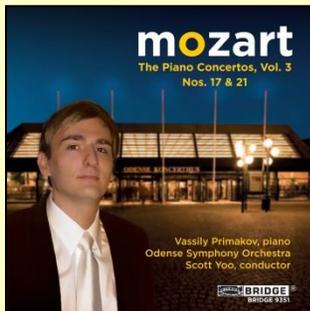
The sound of the recordings, produced and engineered in Moscow by Tatiana Vinnetskaya, is sufficiently robust to allow us to gauge the participation of all sections of the orchestra in a way that we often miss in U.S. recordings with our vogue for minimal microphone placements. Post-session mastering by Adam Abeshouse is tops, as always.

opera by Verdi or Wagner into its very essence, expressing it with economy, and then holding back on the full import of what he had to say until the optimal psychological moment, then he hit the proverbial nail on the head. In Sacred Dance and Final duet from *Aida*, for example, the emotions and their dynamic expression range from the barely audible exotic melody that seems to waft in from the desert, perfuming the night air with its fragrance, to the powerful climax near the end that requires Lowenthal to summon up all the sonorous resources of the grand piano.

Another example of the Lisztian magic is Reminiscences of *Simon Boccanegra*. I had no prior acquaintance with Verdi's opera of treachery, betrayal, abandonment, murder, forgiveness, final reconciliation and death, but Liszt's masterful 10-minute distillation and Lowenthal's skilled account of the same allowed me to follow its essential points like a road map. And Liszt cuts to the heart of the opera in a more or less straightforward transcription of "Spinning Song" from Wagner's *Flying Dutchman*, in which Senta's longing for her departed lover as she gazes at his portrait is captured in its purest essence amid the whirling of the spinning wheels.

Besides the technical skills needed to realize the Lisztian paraphrases on this program, which include the Final Quartet from *Rigoletto*, the Miserere from *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) and the Prelude to Act III and Wedding March from *Lohengrin* (Wagner), Lowenthal possesses the dramatic insight into the heart of music and the sense of proportion, and even humor, that keeps him from going out of control when the emotions are over the top. These qualities are vitally effective in his account of Busoni's Carmen Fantasy, in which the composer turns Bizet's themes inside-out, reconstitutes them amid a flurry of deliberately "wrong notes," casting thrice-familiar themes in a strange new light, and propounds a powerful essay on earthly passion and death. Let the timid beware: this is no trifling matter to undertake, unless you have the tools and the insight Lowenthal brings to the task.

Happily, the booklet that accompanies this CD is light on annotation and rich in rare photographs from the life and career of Jerome Lowenthal. That's to the good, since it's possible to be put-off by the endless career details and critical acclaim one reads about the typical classical artist, so that it's easy to imagine "everyone has gone everywhere and played everything under the baton of everyone else." In the case of globe traveller Jerry Lowenthal, who really *has* done it all in the course of a fabulous career, beginning with his debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra at age 13 in 1945, it's better to hush all the mush and just enjoy the gallery of pictures. They show Lowenthal in formal and informal photos with great conductors the likes of Monteux, Stokowski, Abravanel, Steinberg, Mehta and Comissiona, and fellow artists (Phyllis Curtin, Maxim Shostakovich, and Florence Quivar), beside intimate portraits of the artist out of the spotlight with his late wife and his two daughters. As often happens, the pictures say more than words.



Mozart: Piano Concertos 17 & 22
Vassily Primakov, piano
Scott Yoo, Odense Symphony Orchestra
Bridge Records

Volume 3 in Vassily Primakov's ongoing series of Mozart piano concertos with the Odense (Denmark) Symphony Orchestra under Scott Yoo may be the best installment yet. Certainly, the pairing of Concertos Nos. 22 in E-flat major, K482 and 17 in G major, K453 is as intriguing as the performances are assured, insightful, and gorgeous-sounding.

You couldn't have asked for a greater contrast between the two concertos. K482 was obviously calculated to draw "wow's" from its audience. It is big and bold in scope in its outer movements, beginning with an opening fanfare that makes good use of trumpets, clarinets, and drums, instruments new to the Mozart orchestra, at least in his piano concertos. In fact, the orchestration has more than a little in common with the composer's great Symphony No. 39 in the same key. There's such an embarrassment of material in this movement that Mozart drops the theme with which the piano makes its entrance, and on which any other composer would have been proud to base his development, in his eagerness to get on to even choicer melodies. The finale, in which Mozart keeps the listener tantalized in the expectation of what's coming next with his unusual combination of theme-and-variations and rondo form, has a slow, dreamy minuet as its center piece. It is surrounded by a jaunty rondo in 6/8, a metre reminiscent of the hunt, though the genial high spirit in which it is cast assures us that no animal more ferocious than a Teddy bear is likely to be the hunters' quarry.

The heart of the concerto, as is usual in Mozart, is the far-ranging slow movement, elegant melody over muted strings, offering Primakov plenty of opportunities to display his best qualities as a pianist. These include his brilliantly accomplished passagework, his wonderful *fiorture* (from *fiore*=flower), tasteful embellishments to a beautifully supported vocal-like melody, and the superb feeling of touch and sense of proportion with which he shapes and characterizes the melodies themselves. The woodwind writing in this movement is worthy of any of Mozart's symphonies or wind serenades. That includes a choice duet between flute and bassoon with string accompaniment, just before the movement ends quietly with a gentle coda for the piano.

By contrast, the companion work on this disc, Concerto No. 17 in G major is more modestly scored, with no trumpets, clarinets or drums. Yet the overall impression of the outer movements is one of brilliance and festivity, further proof that the largeness of Mozart's music resides in its grandness of conception. There are no fewer than six distinct musical themes in the opening movement and five in the slow one, but the wonderful sense of transparency in Mozart's writing ensures that there is no feeling of clutter whatsoever. The slow movement is, as always, the heart of the matter. This one is unusually melancholy in mood, particularly considering that its dominant key is C major, generally considered the key of sunlight and simple happiness by 18th century music theorists. On the contrary, there is a distinctly minor-key mood in this Andante, as the orchestra seems to pose an increasingly earnest series of questions for the piano to answer, with the music becoming imperceptibly denser and more chromatic. That places the major emphasis on the pianist, and Primakov responds like a champion. His characteristic unerring sense of timing and proportion, to say nothing of that famous Primakov "touch," serve him well throughout the movement, but are particularly crucial in several moments in which the music modulates unexpectedly, with stunning impact, into the major, signalling an upsurge of pent-up feeling. Passionate melancholy, expressed with assuredness and style.

The finale has an extremely lyrical main theme, recalling birdsong, and an extended coda bristling with plenty of opportunities for virtuosic brilliance for both pianist and orchestra. In fact, it has a comic opera type of gaiety (think of the overtures to *The Marriage of Figaro* or *Così fan Tutti*) that is hard to resist, entirely dispelling the clouds that the slow movements cast over the proceedings. This is Mozart playing at its best.



Rachmaninoff: Corelli Variations, Etudes-Tableaux, Fantasy Pieces
Nareh Arghamanyan, piano
PentaTone (Hybrid SACD + DVD)

Nareh Arghamanyan, whose given name means something beautiful in her native Armenian, is an extraordinary young artist. The chestnut red-haired 20-something with the remarkable poise and sensitivity when the subject is Rachmaninoff and the venue is the piano, can also be very articulate when describing herself and her artistic aims, as she does in the interview with Dutch concert moderator Hans Visser on the bonus DVD.

Normally, I'd incline to suspicion when listening to a young artist talking about her sacred duty to herself, the music, and God whenever she shares the emanations of a composer's soul with her audience. But you get the feeling that the candid Ms. Arghamanyan is on the level when she talks about it. And also when she talks about the need for an artist to be humble: "Too much 'show' and the inner feeling is lost." Well, the inner feeling that she strives to express through her playing comes through all right, in her debut album for PentaTone Music of opus numbers from three different stages of the career of the career of Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninoff.

Rachmaninoff the ardent young romantic is represented by his Fantasy Pieces (*Morceaux de Fantaisie*), Op. 3, of 1892. While the set of five character pieces is comparatively neglected today, one of these, the Prelude in C-sharp minor, actually became *over-exposed* to the extent of becoming Rachmaninoff's "signature" encore for many concert listeners (to say nothing of orchestral transcriptions by Stokowski and others). Arghamanyan plays this piece, so famous for its successively contrasted moods of flickering hope, melancholy, dark despair and resignation, with all the requisite feeling it deserves, on both the CD program and the DVD. But it assumes new significance when heard in its original context as part of an opus that also features the mingled sorrow and warmth of *Élégie*, the notably confessional mood of *Melodie*, like a meeting of two sweethearts; the impudence hiding a disappointed lover in the person of the humpbacked commedia clown *Polichinelle*, and the lively *serenade* with its surprising Spanish rhythms.

The eight *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33 (1911), products of Rachmaninoff's maturity and his growing fame, are, as the title implies, picture studies, although the composer chose to identify them only by number and key signature, and refrained from assigning descriptive names to them. As Arghamanyan rightly observes, Rachmaninoff shows his respect for the powers of the performing artist, inviting anyone who plays these pieces to participate in the music by coming up with his or her own mental visions. The music is also of concerto-class complexity, requiring and receiving every bit of the dedication Nareh brings to the task. No. 1 in F minor, for instance, is built on the persistent repetitions of an ominous-sounding figure combined with a sorrowful melody. No. 2 in C major has a melody flowing over an unusual rhythm, giving the decided impression of an intimate conversation. No. 8 in G minor is a song without words in sixteenth notes with a swaying rhythm, interrupted by a passionate outburst in the middle section. The fact that No. 6 in E-flat minor, mostly in 12/8 time, has sometimes been nicknamed "The Blizzard" shows the fallacy of trying to pin down these pieces with descriptive names. As I hear Nareh's interpretation of this piece, the sense of ceaseless flow is there, but for me it conjures up the charm of an autumn breeze, not a maleficent winter storm.

Finally, *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, Op. 42 (1931) gives the listener the most insightful glimpse possible into the heart of Rachmaninoff, the world-weary exile who must have known at that point that he would never see his beloved Russia again. The variety of moods the artist conjures forth from the 20 variations on the timeless *La Folia* theme that has inspired so many composers over the past three centuries range from gentle nostalgia for an ever-receding past to darkest despair and farewell, with a flirtation with madness as a side-excursion. It all ends in the coda on a note of resignation, though not before several insurgent protests in the final section, comprising Variations XIV-XX. As a aid to the home listener, the companion booklet to this CD groups the variations by sections on separate tracks, so that one can follow the progress of the music and, particularly, the importance the remarkable Intermezzo (Tr. 18) plays as the crucial turning point in the transition to the to the final section.

The name Nareh? Oh, yes. It means "pomegranate flower." Just thought you'd like to know!