

Phil's Classical Reviews

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Higdon: An Exaltation of Larks Lark String Quartet Bridge Records

It would be poetically appropriate to think that Jennifer Higdon wrote *An Exaltation of Larks* (2005) expressly for the Lark Quartet, but alas, such was not the case (It was in fact commissioned for the Tokyo), Nevertheless, her preoccupation with an elaborate tapestry of string textures, replicating the sounds of the natural world, fits in nicely with the proclivities of the Lark players, who consist of Deborah Buck, violin 1; Basia Danilow, violin 2; Kathryn Lockwood, viola; and Caroline Stinson, cello. "What a sound an exaltation of larks must make!" Higdon remembers thinking when she first heard the expression, and it began stimulating her compositional juices. The lark has the unusual trait of singing while on the wing, and Higdon imagined thousands of the little creatures filling the heavens with wild, rapturous song. The finely crafted performance by the Lark Quartet aims to replicate that sensation.

"An Exaltation of Larks" seems an appropriate metaphor for Higdon herself, as a composer bent on utilizing all the sonorous means of her craft, including elaborate scales (such as octatonic), layered instrumental textures, sensational dynamic changes, and chaste atonality, to make her music more colorful and immediately appealing to the listener. Her seeming freedom of form is actually far from formless intuition: though the sections of the single-movement "Exaltation" are not numbered or described, they are clearly discerned by the listener.

The Higdon magic works! Today, she is one of the very few American composers who are able to live on the income from her music, as major symphony orchestras and music endowments across the country have kept up a steady stream of commissions for her very accessible music that strikes a chord with many listeners. A good example of her variety and her immediate appeal is *Scenes from the Poet's Dreams* (1999), in which The Lark Quartet are joined by the great American pianist



"American Classics," piano music by Copland, Barber, Griffes, Weber - Lori Sims, pianist TwoPianists:

American pianist Lori Sims was Gold Medalist at the 1998 Gina Bachauer International Piano Competition, and has since performed with distinction in the U.S. and abroad. She brings all her expertise to bear on the present program of "American Classics." That includes her feeling for the style, rhythm, and contour of the music she plays, and especially the utter precision with which she sounds each note cleanly and with the utmost clarity.

That last-named quality is important because three of the four composers heard on this program – Aaron Copland, Ben Weber, and Samuel Barber – are revealed here as exponents of serialism (12-tone or otherwise). "What difference does that make to me?" the average listener may ask. "How would I know if the pianist dropped an occasional note here or there?" Believe me, pal, you'd know! This type of music is so tightly structured that it is highly *unforgiving* of error by the executant.

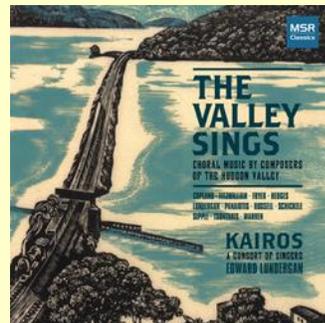
Copland's *Piano Variations* (1930) uses the tone row E, C, D-sharp, C-sharp as the basis from which the entire composition derives. Since it may also be interpreted tonally as a statement in C-sharp minor, there is an ambiguity here, which Copland explores through the length of a very intense 11-minute work. Sims is highly cognizant of its generally somber mood, as well as the way in which individual variations flow into one another without clearly demarcated lines between them.

Weber, like Copland, shows both American and European influences in his music. In his 1946 *Fantasia*, Op. 25, he uses serialism for expressive purposes. As annotator Barry Ross explains it, "Weber employed as far as possible the language of Romanticism, dispensing with the angular melodic motion of European serial music." [*Aside*: I'm always amused at the way annotators will go out of their way to assure the nervous listener that "After all, it isn't as bad as Schoenberg."] Bringing out the

Gary Graffman. In five movements, *Scenes* explores a series of dream landscapes that allow the composer and the Lark Quartet to apply a variety of choice string techniques and sounds, in the interest of making the music more luminous. "Racing through Stars" evokes a thrilling celestial journey, in the course of which Higdon has the music race through all twelve major keys.

By contrast, "Summer Shimmers across the Glass of Green Ponds" is slow, eloquent and impressionistic. "I Saw the Electric Insects Coming" is a nightmare, with breathtaking economy, in which the omnipresent insects of the title (who are, to quote Higdon, "both small and the size of buildings, and are, regrettably, electric") are evoked with all the scraping and pointillistic sounds of which string instruments are capable. "In the Blue Fields They Sing" conjures up a sky-blue (and blues-y) heaven, while the concluding movement, "The Fast Dancers Dance Faster" allows Graffman's vigorous left-hand piano to "dance" in turn with each of the strings, in the course of a splendid frenzied romp.

Light Refracted (2003), in which Danilow sits out and the remaining string trio are joined by clarinetist Todd Palmer and pianist Blair McMillen, is a two-movement design of the utmost simplicity, replicating the process by which we take in our "inner Light" from our influences, and then project it out to the world. A slow drawing-inward that gradually gains momentum, then a fast-moving, energetic ending. Could anything be simpler?



"The Valley Sings," Choral Music by composers of the Hudson Valley - Edward Lundergan, Kairos MSR Classics

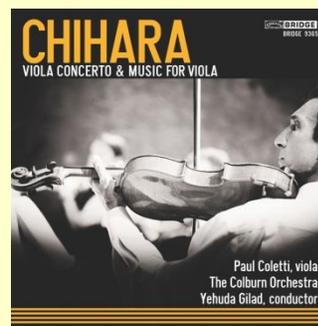
Kairos is an ancient Greek word meaning "the opportune or supreme moment" (as we would say, "It's high time"). It lends its name to *Kairos: A Consort of Singers*, based in West Park, New York, about 75 miles north of NYC. *Kairos*, now in their 20th year of existence, see their role in music as promoting a state of mind in which past and future merge with the present for the listener.

Under its current artistic director, Dr. Edward Lundergan, the present is definitely the sphere of activity in their recent CD "The Valley Sings." In particular, they have been very active promoting the music of composers associated with the Hudson Valley, hence the title of their recent release on MSR: *The Valley Sings*. And damned well, I might add. The 18 singers who comprise *Kairos* (5

unique character of Weber's music isn't easy, but Lori Sims does it with economy and style.

Samuel Barber's Piano Sonata in E-flat minor (Op. 26, 1949) is one of the most difficult works in the modern American canon to perform. Serial melodic fragments are expressed within the context of traditional sonata form. Shifting rhythmic patterns and highly dissonant chord progressions, contrapuntal technique that is not just restricted to the final movement (which is a fugue in four voices, and a strongly accented one at that) combine with the overall dark, serious mood of the work to demand the utmost concentration from Sims and the application of every aspect of her technical skill.

Contrasted to the rigors of the other works heard on this program, we have *Roman Sketches* by the short-lived Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920). Griffes remains the principal (almost the *only*) American proponent of Impressionism. Consisting of four pieces in the style of tone poems (several have, in fact, been successfully orchestrated and performed as such), the *Sketches* have a breadth that extends beyond the keyboard, as their titles indicate: *The White Peacock*, *Nightfall*, *The Fountain of the Acqua Paola*, and *Clouds*. Sims takes pains to express the character of each of these pieces: the languid movement of the peacock and its distinctive chain of notes, the clouds slowly drifting to a point of disappearance in the gradually deepening blue of the sky at dusk. As opposed to the high energy of most of the music on this CD, the Griffes pieces are slow, unhurried, and listeners are given plenty of white space between tracks to meditate on the beauties they've just heard.



Chihara: Viola concerto; Works for Viola
Paul Coletti, viola
Yehuda Gilad, The Colburn Orchestra
Bridge Records

American composer Paul Chihara (b. Seattle, 1938) has been absolutely amazing in the scope and range of his musical activities. He has composed music in virtually every available genre, including symphonies, concertos, chamber music, choral compositions, and ballets. He has written more than 100 scores for film and television, plus the occasional Broadway musical (James Clavell's *Shogun*, 1990). For a time he even played viola, his own favorite instrument, in the New Japan Philharmonic under Seiji Ozawa, who later commissioned several

sopranos, 5 altos, 4 tenors, 4 basses) have a range of big, emotive sounds and dynamic shadings. Not only are they keen in their intonations and spotlessly clean in their diction and phrasings, but they are expert in handling the many polyphonic passages found throughout these works and used for highly expressive purposes.

Of the eleven composers covered in this program, only one – Aaron Copland (1900-1990), whose stirring and majestic “Thou, O Jehovah, Abideth Forever” is found on track 4 – is deceased. All of the others are very much among the living, and active collaborators with Kairos. In fact, 13 of the 24 selections are world-premiere recordings commissioned by or composed for this consort of singers. In this program we are treated to music by George Tsontakis, Panaiotis, James Fitzwilliam, Craig Fryer, Peter W. Sipple, John B. Hedges, Jonathan Russell, Shirley Hoffman Warren, Peter Schickele, and Edward Lundergan himself. If their names aren't household words, their music ought at least to be heard more often. (If it isn't, don't blame Kairos!)

The selections heard here, euphoniously rendered by Kairos, have unusually high literary merit, and represent names found in every wide-ranging poetry anthology. They include Tsontakis' charming setting of Three Nursery Rhymes by Christina Rossetti (“I dreamt I saw a little owl,” “Dead in the cold, a song-singing thrush,” and “Love me, I love you”), passionate settings by Panaiotis and Fitzwilliam of verses from The Song of Solomon (“Arise, My Love” and “A Rose of Sharon,” respectively), Three Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins (“Pied Beauty,” “Thou are indeed just, Lord,” and “God's Grandeur” in settings by Peter Sipple that emphasize the rugged beauty and sprung rhythms of the original poems, Russell's restrained settings of two poems by James Joyce (“Rain is Fallen,” “O cool is the valley now”), and Warren's pithy one of David Appelbaum's delightfully observant “Purpose of a Cat.”

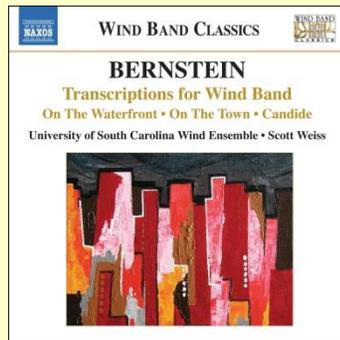
We are also given five selections from the Exeter Book of Riddles (In Old English, yet! Luckily, translations are provided.), as set by Hedges, Lundergan settings of poems by Walt Whitman (“A noiseless, patient spider” and “When I heard the learned astronomer”) and Edward Arlington Robinson (“The Dark Hills) in which sound and description correlate beautifully, Fryer's “Kyrie” from his *Missa Brevis* and two his setting of seasonal favorites “The time draws near” (after Lord Tennyson) and “Coventry Carol,” and Schickele's After Spring Sunset, a Cantata on Japanese Poems. After auditioning all the tracks on this program, the home listener should qualify for a degree in English Lit.

works of him for the Boston Symphony. Understandably, he is well loved by both the public and his colleagues in music and film.

Chihara's music, at the risk of inserting a much abused word, is very “accessible.” Around 2000, he moved away from his experiments with 12-tone music and a freely chromatic style in favor of a more tonal approach, though he still retained his fondness for the sort of luminous color that is a personal trademark. The influences in his music are many and include Debussy, Berg, and the music of his Japanese heritage, to which he pays homage from time to time, as in his quotation of the folksong “Red Dragonfly” in the finale of his Concerto Piccolo for Four Violas, heard on the present program. His background is basically Western, the Japanese connection being most evident in the economy of his less-is-more approach to his music. That is not to term him a minimalist, which he certainly is *not*: rather, the lushness in his writing emanates from the music itself, not the forces required to produce it.

The performances by violist Paul Coletti, his students, former students and colleagues at the Colburn School in Los Angeles do full honor to Chihara. The major work on the program is the Viola Concerto, which had a long gestation, having been begun in 1990, abandoned during a time when Chihara found himself so overextended by his work (and hey, who wouldn't be?), and finally completed in its present form in 2010. Notwithstanding the difficulties attending its composition, this remarkable work (easily a modern classic) has a pronounced unity of style and mood. It may be viewed as either a single-movement work in four sections – Beginning, Waltz, *Calmo*, and Finale – or a concerto in four movements played without break. Paul Coletti's luminous presence and his close empathy with the members of the Colburn Orchestra under Yehuda Gilad are felt throughout the concerto, but especially in the slow movement, in which halos of various musical colors surround the soloist and place him securely at the center of our consciousness.

Others works are more experimental. Concerto Piccolo (2007-2011) consists of four miniatures, written on different occasions, which coalesce nicely in their present setting for four violas. Redwood for Viola and Percussion (1969), to my mind a less attractive work, begins with such a quiet, scraping susurration from the percussion that I actually checked my stereo connections to make sure nothing was wrong. It reverses the normal identities of viola (melody) and drum (percussion). I can't say that I “dig” this work or the significance of its title. The zestful Sonata for Viola and Piano (1991, rev. 2011) I found more satisfying. It consists of a central *Tempo di menuetto*, surrounded by outer movements both labeled *Allegro amabile*. This very attractive (and very Chiharian) work is obviously much to the liking of Coletti and his partner, pianist Vivian Fan.



Leonard Bernstein Transcriptions for Wind Band, "West Side Story," etc
 Scott Weiss, University of South Carolina Wind Ensemble
 (Naxos)

Stereophiles in general and fans of wind band music in particular should really love this one. Scott Weiss leads the University of South Carolina Wind Ensemble in really scintillating performances of transcriptions of choice music from stage, ballet, and film by Leonard Bernstein. This is a symphonic-scale ensemble consisting of 48 woodwind musicians (with doubles on contrabassoon, E-flat clarinet, and English horn, plus a full percussion section, harp, string bass and piano – 59 players in all. The sound is big, bold, and capable of infinite dynamic shadings. These people are also *very* good.

The program showcases the many facets of Leonard Bernstein, a figure who was berated in his lifetime by the avant-garde establishment for being both tonal and eclectic in his approach to his music but shrugged it off because he knew very well what his listeners wanted (and needed) to hear. With the passing of time, the music heard on the present program – Overture and Suite from *Candide*, Symphonic Suite from *On the Waterfront*, Three Dance Episodes from *On The Town*, and the festive Divertimento – sounds better and better.

The *On the Waterfront* Suite is my favorite. The music ranges from quiet moments filled with plaintive sadness and longing to climaxes filled with sharp dissonance and violent action of a truly visceral nature. (You could make out a good case that the music

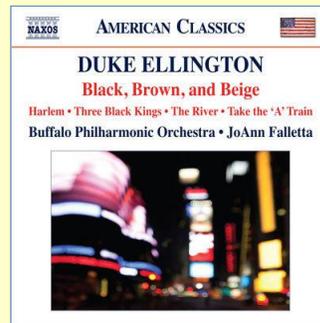


"Night," exploring new musical Landscapes
 Simone Dinnerstein, Tift Merritt
 Sony Masterworks

"*Night*" is promoted by its artists as an exciting new concept. Tift Merritt, folk-rock-alternative country singer and songwriter, terms it a "True collaboration...the willingness to extend yourself to a new place but in a way that does not feel like anything has been given up." Classical pianist Simone Dinnerstein views it in terms of cross-fertilization; "the idea that a song by Billie Holiday can speak to a song by Purcell and that each can influence the way we hear the other."

Being a reviewer of some 30 years' experience, you will excuse me for seeming a trifle hollow-eyed. I've heard it all before, so a new "cross-over" album isn't likely to leave me breathless. Granted, we're better equipped to make a case for the exchange of ideas than we were 40 years ago, when so many folk-rock artists were viewed as wide-eyed radicals who thought they were instant messiahs because they'd been electrified, and many classical composers persisted in a touching belief in the salvation of music through 12-tone serialism.

Actually, the concept of this new album isn't bad. There is something to be said about the way the Merritt-Dinnerstein collaboration brings out the beauty and the pathos in Franz Schubert's "Night and Dreams" (sung in English). But "Dido's Lament" by Henry Purcell, shorn of its period embellishments, seems short and sparsely furnished in two stanzas. Merritt's rendition of the Billie Holiday standard "Don't Explain" tries hard but lacks a certain



Duke Ellington: "Black, Brown, and Beige," Other Suites
 JoAnn Falletta, Buffalo Philharmonic
 (Naxos)

JoAnn Falletta directs the Buffalo Philharmonic in a Duke Ellington program that pays eloquent tribute to the composer without sounding either like Preservation Hall jazz or else a classical orchestra trying hopelessly to "get that swing." That's not easy to do. To get it right, the Buffalo musicians have gone beyond historical research to the point where they've assimilated the classic Ellington style and made it their own.

We hear this distinctive sound early-on in "Harlem," the 1950 Maurice Peress orchestration of an earlier Ellington composition that captures the ethos of the Cotton Club and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's. Emotive effects like the earthy growling brass and the insistent beat of the drums create lots of color and excitement at the close.

"Black, Brown, and Beige" reveals Ellington's classical proclivities in a suite celebrating America's African-American heritage and the rise of the Negro's awareness in the seminal period between the World Wars. In the process, the music integrates such familiar songs as the spiritual "Come Sunday" and a variety of patriotic melodies in the "Brown" tableau, honoring Negroes who gave their lives for their country in the Civil War. It does it so smoothly that we aren't aware of the songs' identity because they've been subsumed in the flow and the symphonic fabric.

"The Three Kings: is the score of the Duke's 1943 ballet, as completed by his son Mercer Ellington, who has

played a major role in the success of Elia Kazan's film.)

The music from *Candide*, on the other hand, is flashy and bubbly – deceptively so, since many listeners (and even some critics, too) have failed to catch the irony underlying it. To me, that's appropriate to the intent of both the original writer Voltaire and Bernstein's librettist Lillian Hellman in using trenchant satire to expose the really inhuman atrocities in the story.

Three Dance Episodes from the 1945 Jerome Robbins ballet *On The Town* capture the story's essence, from the heady expectations of three sailors on shore leave to the blue mood that settles in later, and then the sheer exuberance of the Times Square episode with its signature theme "New York, New York!"

Divertimento, composed for the hundredth anniversary of the Boston symphony, allowed the eclectic urge in Bernstein to run riot. The music deliciously includes an incongruous mix of all the styles and genres an orchestra might have to encompass: from Fanfare to Blues, from Waltz to Samba to Turkey Trot (*I kid you not!*) Prepare to be entertained.

authenticity of emotion that we knew in the original. Dinnerstein is superb in her accompaniments, bridges, and postludes to Merritt's songs, as well as the "Cohen Variations" on Tr. 11, in which Leonard's signature-song "Suzanne" weaves enchantment throughout the piece.

The problem for me is in the singing. Tift Merritt, from the samples we have here of her original songs "Only in Songs," "Still Not Home," "Colors," and "Feel of the world," would seem to be a songwriter of uncommon ability. Many of her lyrics, taken by themselves, really strike home, as in "Where money has nothing so loud to say, / Where power is something you just give away, / Where God is nobody a few people own / To fill you with shame when you're feeling alone // Only in songs / Is that only in songs? / I guess the blues is where I belong / If that's only in songs."

I just have a hard time getting past her voice: dry, almost unintelligible, with too little resonance, delivered in a mannered style that seems like dirt-poor Appalachia strained through too many nights in smoky Manhattan coffee houses. It recalled the four decades-ago vocal limitations of Bob Dylan, whose peevish, strangulated-sparrow voice impeded the impact of his lyrics, most of which meant nothing to me until a great vocalist, Joan Baez, sang them.

described the third portrait as a "dirge" for Martin Luther King, Jr. Though Mercer is obviously closer to the source, I beg to differ with his choice of word: instead of a dirge, I hear a lot of upward-lifting, hopeful music. Even the blues element heard just before the end is not depressive, but affirmative: blues, as we know, is solace to the African-American soul.

"The River" (1970), by contrast, is as much tone poem as it is ballet, even though Duke wrote it on commission for Alvin Ailey. The present suite comprises five of nine scenes from the ballet and includes a lot of the composer's sly wit in its picture of the bubbling, gurgling spring that grows into a stream, passes into a placid lake, and then becomes a mighty, broad-flowing river – an implied metaphor for the Black American's growing awareness of his destiny.

Finally, we have Duke Ellington's famous arrangement of Billy Strayhorn's "Take the A train," a jazz standard that will never grow old. It's a great way to end an enjoyable CD.