

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

May, 2014



"Composing America," music by
Adams, Bolcom, Copland & Moravec
The Lark String Quartet
Bridge Records

The Lark Quartet, consisting of Deborah Buck, violin I; Basia Danilow, violin II; Kathryn Lockwood, viola; and Caroline Stinson, cello; follow up last year's great success "An Exaltation of Larks" (see this column for May 2013) with music that may be a trifle harder for listeners to cut their teeth on. "Composing America" may seem like an ambitious title, but it only reflects the bewildering diversity of musical trends and influences in present-day America. As in so many other aspects of our national life (partisan politics, for one rather obvious example) America seems to be up for grabs in classical music. No one has yet come up with a tag to describe our era. "Modern" and "contemporary" aren't really satisfactory, since every epoch in history can claim the same distinction.

The Lark Quartet make our task a little easier by focusing on four composers that have, in various ways, run around with their noses to the ground, sniffing the authentic spoor of folk, jazz, and popular music in America and incorporating it in their music. The thesis of this program is that one common thread can be found in the "blue note," which the booklet annotation defines as the downward parallel motion of two triads undercut by a flat third, a device that blurs the distinction between major and minor modes (*very expressively* too, as listeners who have fallen under the spell of the blues can testify). The Lark Quartet make their point in this album as they tackle music that brings out every type of string technique you can think of.

The stylistic variety is most bewildering in Adams' 5 Pages from John's Book of Alleged Dances. The "alleged" refers to the fact that, as Adams himself puts it, "the steps for them [haven't] been invented yet." Though it was originally performed with a beat box using real-time digital electronics, the present recording incorporates the many-faceted talents of percussionist Yousif Sheronick, giving the Larks the chance to interact with a live musician. That lends itself to the exciting sense of spontaneity that we experience in the 5 Pieces, whose titles – Judah to Ocean, Dogjam, Habanera, Toot Nipple, and Rag the Bone, point to a rich variety of influences. Bolcom's "Billy in the Darbies" refers to the poem by Herman



Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 23
"The Tempest," Symphonic Fantasy, Op. 18
Joyce Yang, piano; Alexander Lazarev, cond.
Bridge Records

With the assistance of the Odense, Denmark Symphony Orchestra under Alexander Lazarev, Joyce Yang comes across with a brilliant and finely detailed account of Tchaikovsky's famous Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor. To judge from this album, the Seoul, South Korea native who studied with Veda Kaplinsky at the Juilliard School, seems to be on the verge of big things.

"The" Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto (he actually penned three of them) is so familiar that many performers and listeners can recall it in their sleep. To make it sound fresh and new, Yang takes pains to bring out the fine details in the score, especially in the light-hearted, ruminative slow movement. She clearly goes for the lyricism in this work, and she takes her time bringing out its beauties.

Curiously, the concerto begins with four emphatic B-flat minor chords, leading to a *very* passionate theme in D-flat major. The music proves to be a mere prelude which disappears without a trace after only three minutes. But in that short span, Yang and Lazarev set the mood for all that is to follow. Their timing here and in the consoling theme that follows the introduction, is superb. The slow movement is beautifully detailed, as I've previously hinted, and the finale carries real power and conviction.

Compared with *Romeo and Juliet* and *Francesca da Rimini*, Tchaikovsky's other famous overtures, *The Tempest*, inspired by Shakespeare's fantasy comedy, has suffered unfair neglect. Lazarev and the Odense do their utmost to even the balance sheet with a living performance that clarifies all the elements in the story. The arched structure helps us follow the story: the calm sea, the storm conjured up by Prospero, Miranda and Ferdinand

Melville portraying the thoughts of the tragically fated midshipman whom he later made the central character in his novel *Billy Budd*. Here, a blue note morphs throughout the short drama in which baritone Stephen Salters portrays the bitter irony of Billy's situation, a young man condemned to die for a crime he did not commit. No poetic text is included in the booklet notes. If, like me, you experience difficulty following classically sung English, it's an easy task to do a search for it on your internet browser.

Aaron Copland (1900-1990), only deceased composer on the program, is represented by *Two Pieces for String Quartet*. This is not the Copland of the Three Famous Ballets We All Know and Love, but rather a composer in search of an authentic style in another genre. The result, cleanly stated and deeply expressive, is rendered by the Larks in all its elegiac beauty.

Finally, the Piano Quintet by Paul Moravec allows the Larks to respond to their stiffest challenge of all as they interact with pianist Jeremy Denk in a work that keeps all our artists constantly alert for the diverse ways its shape is constantly changing through morphing blue notes, stacked fifths in the piano, and textures that are variously terse and spikey, broadly stated, and luminous. This work will reveal more of its beauties to the listener upon repeated audition, something for which the artists share credit with the composer.

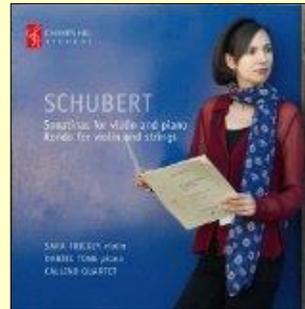


Ravel: Piano Trio
 Shostakovich: Piano Trios 1 & 2
 The Smetana Trio
 Supraphon

The Smetana trio, consisting of Jiri Vodicka, violin; Jan Palenicek, cello; and Jitka Cechova, piano, give deeply probing, incisive performances of the piano trios of Ravel and Shostakovich. Their performances cover the surface brilliance of these works as well as the deeper issues lying underneath. They show a willingness to "take it big" in the moments of high intensity, such as the Pantoum movement and the finale of the Ravel Trio in A minor and the torturous Allegretto finale of the Shostakovich Trio No. 2, but they can caress the quieter moments, too.

Piano Trio No. 1 in C minor, Op. 8 (1923) was the product of a lonely and lovesick 17 year old Dmitri Shostakovich. I'd heard it before in a less than satisfactory recording, and didn't think much of it then. The present account by the Smetana Trio let me hear it afresh, and what a difference there was *this* time! Typical of youthful efforts by other composers, the 13-minute work is loaded with many elements – chromatic, romantic, and

(love theme), the spirits of the isle, the love theme fulfilled, Prospero calms the storm, and the sea as before. Simple and satisfying.



Schubert: 3 Sonatinas, Rondo in A major
 Sara Trickey, violin; Daniel Tong, piano
 Champs Hill Records

London-based pianist Sara Trickey is a welcome visitor to this column by virtue of her very natural sounding technique and beautifully refined tone. Both are highly desirable when undertaking the gorgeous and still relatively unknown Schubert repertoire she perform on this program, with the capable assistance of her frequent concert partner, pianist Daniel Tong, and the Callino String Quartet.

It still astonishes me how little recognition Franz Schubert enjoyed in his own lifetime. The Violin Sonatas in A major, D384; A minor, D385, and G minor, D408 were published posthumously in 1836 by Anton Diabelli. He re-named them "Sonatinas," in the expectation that they would realize a better market among amateur enthusiasts than they would professionals. And certainly, they appeal less to the instincts of the virtuoso than they do to the intelligent listener and the consummately professional interpreter who can respond to their innate lyrical beauty for its own sake.

The three sonatinas, originally described by their composer as "sonatas for piano with violin accompaniment," contain some of his finest and most immediately appealing melodies. (If you know your Schubert, you realize what a recommendation *that* is!) The finale of the A major Sonata has more than a casual resemblance to the scherzo of Schubert's famous "Trout" Quintet, while the Andante of the A minor features a very lovely chorale-like theme that is positively Mozartean. The opening movement of the latter contrasts pounding chords in the piano with a gentler, songlike second subject, calling for close rapport between artists. The G minor Sonata also has its contrasts between the calm, reflective beauty of its Andante and the light-hearted gaiety of its finale. In all three works, secure technique and consummate musicianship pay the largest dividends.

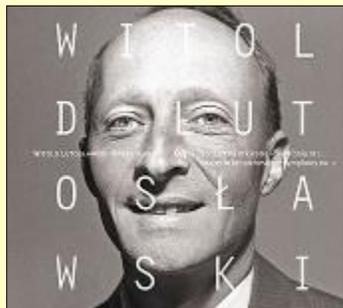
The Rondo in A major, D438, in which Trickey is

impressionistic. But the young composer had a secure sense of harmony and counterpoint and a well-crafted sense of form, so this student work comes across as more satisfying than we had a right to expect - at least when we have artists like the Smetana Trio performing it.

The Ravel Piano Trio is a mature, masterful work by any definition. The composer drew on his Basque heritage for much of his inspiration, especially in the unusual time signature of 8/8 he employed in the opening movement, marked *Modéré* (in moderate time) and the irregular 5/4 and 7/4 he used in the finale, marked *Animé* (animated, or lively). The second movement is a Pantoum, suggested by the Malaysian verse form in which the second and fourth lines of each four-line stanza become the first and third lines of the next. He cast the third movement in the form of a Passacaglia, based on the first theme of the Pantoum. And he frequently spaced the violin and the cello two octaves apart, with the piano as an intermediary.

The above may sound very cerebral, but the outcome of it all is chromatically rich and evocative music that can be very moving when the right artists are performing it. The texture is unusually rich, and the execution is very demanding on the artists in terms of trills, tremolos, harmonics, glissandos, and arpeggios. There are times when we seem overwhelmed with a wash of color seldom achieved in the chamber genre. The execution by the Smetana Trio is brilliant and also moving in its intimacy.

I've left scarcely enough column space to do credit to these Czech artists' stunning performance of Shostakovich's Trio No. 2 in E minor, Op. 67 (1944). For many listeners it will be the item of greatest interest on this CD. The Smetana Trio have their collective finger on the pulse of this deeply moving work, from the highly dissonant harmonics in the cello in the opening Andante to the incredibly demanding staccato measures that dominate the finale, an obsessive "dance of death," if ever there was. In between, we have the manic frenzy of the scherzo and the slow, dark and somber mood of the Largo that follows it. The finale ends almost inaudibly in an E major chord in the piano and a fade-out in the strings.



Lutoslawski: Symphony No. 1, Concerto for Orchestra
Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, Wroclaw Symphony Orchestra
CD Accord

Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (b.1923) must be made of iron. The Polish conductor, whom Americans will remember as the maestro of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra between 1960 and 1979, has still been going strong in the four decades since then, guest conducting major orchestras all over the world. In

joined by the members of the Callino Quartet, is the most virtuosic work on the program in the usual sense of the word. Graceful leaps in the opening section find their counterpart in the exuberant Mozartean rondo that concludes 14 minutes of pure musical delight.



Beethoven: Complete Piano Sonatas, Vol. VII
Timothy Ehlen, piano
Azica Records

Timothy Ehlen, currently associate professor of piano at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, closes in on the expected completion of his cycle of Beethoven piano sonatas. This volume is particularly commendable because it focuses on Beethoven as a restlessly innovative composer, experimenting with forms, textures and tones in quest of ever greater expression. Aided by his deep insight into the composer's mind and artistic purpose, and armed with a technique that surmounts Beethoven's stylistic difficulties with seeming ease, Ehlen takes us on a real adventure.

Two of the sonatas, No. 12 in A-flat major, Op. 26, and No. 18 in E-flat major, Op. 31/3, have acquired nicknames over the years: the "Funeral March" and the "Hunt," respectively, though these tags are not universally recognized and apply, in each case, to a single movement only. Ehlen wisely eschews them in his booklet annotation, lest they distort our perceptions as listeners. The A-flat Sonata begins, unconventionally, with a relatively slow theme-and-variations movement that Ehlen takes in moderate time, emphasizing its fine points. The other movements alternate in fast-slow-fast order, with the usual positions of slow movement and scherzo reversed. The third movement is titled "Funeral March for the Death of a Hero." Ehlen draws the maximum drama from this movement, which clearly served as a forerunner for the similar movement in his Third Symphony. The Allegro finale, which Ehlen accurately describes as "hypnotic, inquiet, hovering, and relentless," makes for a splendid contrast with its predecessor.

The E-flat sonata shows greater expressive harmonic color. Its sudden changes of tempi in the opening movement, persistent left-hand staccato accompaniment in the scherzo, and the non-stop

this latest installment in a series by the Polish label CD Accord, "Mr. S" (as newspaper typesetters in the Twin Cities area used to fondly refer to him) brings out all the lyrical beauty and luminous color in two remarkable scores by Witold Lutosławski (1913-1994). Both have so many discords, and so many conflicting elements before they are resolved, that the cueing problems faced by any conductor, let alone a 90 year old, must be immense. Skrowaczewski takes it all in stride in the process of leading the NFM Wroclaw Philharmonic Orchestra.

Lutosławski worked slowly and carefully on his Symphony No. 1 between 1941 and its premiere in 1947, including preliminary counterpoint studies. Most of the work was composed during the Second World War under the most difficult conditions. This was a trying time for the entire Polish nation which suffered greatly from both the Nazi invaders and the Russian "liberators." Much of the bitterness and uncertainty of the times finds its way into this symphony, but there are also elements of continual striving for artistic freedom. The influences on it include a constant Bartokian re-shifting of instrument groups and a movement away from initially static harmonies to a search for greater coloristic expression. Falling parallel tritones in several places reveal the influence of Roussel, and a section near the end of the scherzo in which there is a dialog between high and low voices that gradually come closer together may be an unconscious quote of the "*Belle et Bête*" tableau from Ravel's Mother Goose Suite. But Lutosławski's First symphony is more than just the sum of its influences. It reveals a definite musical mind and personality at work, seeking its own ends.

Concerto for Orchestra (premiered 1954) is Lutosławski's most popular work. Its vividness of expression, its handling of folk melodies and dances in harmonically different ways that take us a long way from their folk origins, and its pairing of unusual instrumental combinations as the composer morphs and develops his themes, are all very typical of Lutosławski. The range of this work is wide. From initial aggression in the opening movement, *Intrada*, to the utter serenity at its end is a journey of some light-years. The work is a study in contrasts: from darkness to light, from sardonic humor to enchanting beauty, and from one instrumental combination to another as the composer moves from fiendish rhetoric to ethereal beauty.



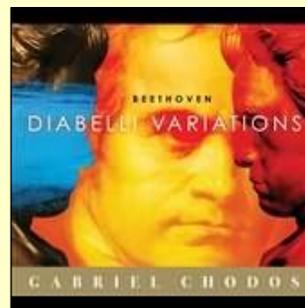
Brahms: Symphonies Nos 3 & 4
Vladimir Jurowski, London Philharmonic
LPO

Vladimir Jurowski conducts the London Philharmonic Orchestra in glowing performances of Brahms Symphonies that renew one's faith in the standard repertoire. These are live recordings

rollicking eighth notes in the bass in the finale (sounding more like the composer at play than any actual hunt) keep Ehlen continually on the alert.

Sonata No. 22 in F major, Op. 54, located between the "Appassionata" and "Waldstein" Sonatas, has understandably received less attention than its neighbors. It is a madcap work in only two vividly contrasted movements. The first, labeled *In tempo d'un menuetto* ("In the tempo of a minuet," but significantly, *not* a minuet) has fitful starts and stops, passages where the hands are playing staccato *and* legato, and *sforzandi* (notes to be played with sudden, strong emphasis) that interrupt the meter, potentially disconcerting a less capable artist than Timothy Ehlen. The second is an Allegretto with a melody in non-stop sixteenth notes that become even more agitated as we approach the finish line. Clearly, this is one of Beethoven's "experimental" sonatas!

No. 28 in A major, Op. 101, on the other hand, is a "Late Period" sonata in all that the term implies in the way of greater introspection, intimacy, and stylistic freedom. Beethoven now uses German for all his tempo marking, the one for the opening movement, *Etwas Lebhaft und mit innigsten Empfindung* (rather lively and with innermost feeling) being perhaps a looking-back tribute to C.P.E. Bach. Matters of tone color, form, and texture appear in perfect balance as the sonata moves from warmth of expression at the opening to a swift, resolute closing in its finale. Ehlen characterizes the work as "a musical enigma, sensitive and strange." That is because we must enter Beethoven's introspective world, to which Ehlen himself is our best possible guide.



Beethoven: Diabelli Variations, Op. 120
Gabriel Chodos, piano
Fleur de Son

Gabriel Chodos is phenomenal. I don't often wax this enthusiastic about any pianist, but he is the exception. The canvas spread out before this artist is none other than Beethoven's 33 Variations on a Theme by Diabelli. Chodos brings to this task all the discipline and artistic temperament he has acquired in his career in music. In the process, he lays bare the composer's vast intention. Not just

of the Third and Fourth, made 10/27/2010 and 5/28/2011, respectively, at the Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall and released on the LPO's own in-house label. I've had good experiences reviewing this label in the past, and the present offerings are no exception. There is spontaneity in these live performances that one does not often get in studio recording where the emphasis is on perfection, an elusive goal that doesn't always pay dividends. Under Jurowski's baton, the music moves right along at ideal choices of tempi and the orchestral sound is nice and full. Producer Andrew Walton and engineers Mike Clements (Symphony No. 3) and Andrew Lang (No. 4) have recorded both these familiar works in an optimal perspective that captures the full bloom of the orchestra as well as the fine details. They include the bass line that underlies the melody in the opening of No. 3 and the all-important role of the cellos and basses in keeping the onward flow of the music in the finale of No. 4 smooth, consistent and irresistible.

No. 3 in F major, Op. 90 has been termed the "happy" Brahms symphony, an assessment that should be taken with a grain of salt. Certainly, there is a grand sweep to the music of the opening Allegretto con brio, recalling a similar mood in Robert Schumann's own Third Symphony, the "Rhenish." (Brahms was in fact vacationing in the spa town of Wiesbaden, with its fine view of the Rhine valley, when he began work on this symphony.) He even briefly quotes a motif from the opening of Schumann's Third in the finale of his own F major Symphony. More important is Brahms' use of the F-A-F motto (for "*frei aber froh*," free but happy) which was associated with his friendship with Schumann, as an underlying motif that helps to unify the entire work. But the troubling second theme amid the otherwise happy sylvan mood of the Andante must qualify as a kind of "tragic relief" (Brahms *will* be Brahms). So does the melancholy theme heard first in the horn and then the oboe in the Poco Allegretto movement. The finale, passionate, lyrical and irresistible, even by the standards of this symphony, is performed and recorded here in all its glory.

Symphony No. 4 in e minor, Op. 98 is apt to evoke a wider variety of response from listeners, depending on their expectations. The diversity does not center as much on the first three movements as on the finale, for which Brahms reached way back to Bach and the Baroque era for inspiration. Prior to that, we have an opening movement with very tightly wound motifs that give the music a feeling of restless onward movement which the second theme, for cello with brass fanfares, does nothing to assuage. The second movement, a slow Andante moderato, is lyrical but sad, ending on a somber note. The third is a terse, vigorous Allegro giocoso, with enough symphonic muscle to qualify as a finale if Brahms had wanted to cast the symphony in three movements. But no, he includes a Baroque variation form known technically as a chaconne (or is it a *passacaglia*? Critical opinions differ so much that it will make your head swim reading them). At any rate, Brahms contrasts the 30 variations on the bass line so skillfully that you won't get bored listening to this movement. Certainly not the way Jurowski takes it, emphasizing its drama, majesty, and implacable movement. "Towards what?" you may ask. The listener's response to this finale depends largely on the individual, though most observers detect a note of tragedy, or at least resignation, at the end, rather than the triumphant note we usually expect in a romantic symphony. That is the

once, but 33 times.

The impetus for the Variations, as we know, was a scheme by Anton Diabelli, a composer of light music who was well known in the Vienna of Beethoven's day, as a way of promoting his own publishing house. All the famous composers of the day were solicited to provide a variation each on the waltz that Diabelli provided as their subject. The theme was a simple-minded little thing, laid out in two four-bar phrases, beginning with a perky pick-up and possessing quirky, off-beat accents. It was virtually without a melody, almost as if both hands were playing the accompaniment.

Sound like promising source material for a set of variations? Probably not. But Beethoven must have seen something in this trifling waltz tune that engaged all the resources he possessed. The 33 variations he finally presented to the flabbergasted Diabelli reveal all of the greatness and diversity we associate with Late Beethoven: the heavenly length, the kaleidoscopic variety, the penchant for polyphonic writing, the alternation of the strange and the familiar. With daring harmonic changes and the freedom he allowed himself to abbreviate the nominal eight-bar phrases to seven or five, but never losing sight of the original waltz theme, he created a whole world of musical experience in just under an hour (59:27 in the present instance). That timing reflects to some extent Chodos' expert use of pregnant pauses and "white" space between variations to enhance the desired effect. Alongside the pathos and the breathlessly serene spiritual beauty, we have variations that express Beethoven's broad earthy humor.

Did I say "humor"? In Variation 7, he creates a comic effect with punch-like sforzandi in the bass against florid triplets in the treble. And how Beethoven's early audiences must have gasped when they realized Variation 22 was identical with the melody of Leporello's aria "*Nott' e giorno faticar*" from Don Giovanni! Balanced against movements like these are the solemn Variation 14, marked *grave e maestoso* (grave and majestic), its proportions as spacious as a gothic cathedral, and the graceful innocence of Variation 14. The great sense of inner peace we feel at the very center of Variation 20 speaks for itself.

After Variation 31, with its ornaments and trills, amounting to "one of the most impassioned utterances in all of music" (Donald Francis Tovey) we are given a mighty triple fugue in Variation 32, ending *very* strangely in a complete halt, silence, and then a *real* surprise as Variation 44 concludes the set in a *Tempo di Menuetto* in unhurried moderate time. (Chodos manages this moment extremely well, by the way.) It is as if the vulgar, showy waltz we heard at the beginning has undergone a sort of purgatory in the course of the

mood I get from Jurowski's superb pacing and handling of the music's shapely contours. This movement, marked *Allegro energico e passionato*, lacks neither energy nor passion in the present performance. Its ending, with all passion spent, seems inevitable.



Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat, Op. 73, "Emperor"
 Mozart: Piano Concerto in D minor, K466
 Vera Gornostaeva, pianist
 LP Classics

Russian pianist Vera Gornostaeva (b. October 1, 1929) has never enjoyed the fame outside of Russia that her obvious skills as a keyboard artist would seem to have merited. During the heyday of her career, she was denied the right to travel and perform outside her country by Soviet officialdom, irked because she was outspoken on political issues and religious freedom. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, she has held many master classes in western Europe, Japan, and the U.S. and is currently president of the Moscow Association of Musicians. But her fame as a pianist has continued to linger.

Recordings such as those in the present release, her third on the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based LP Classics label, will surely help to set the ledger straight. These 1974 and 1987 recordings, made before live audiences in the Great Hall of the Conservatory, were provided to the U.S. label by Gostelradifond, Moscow. They reveal Gornostaeva at the peak of her keyboard prowess, communicating two great works of the human spirit to her audiences in a way that makes us feel we know intimately the heart and mind of both Beethoven and Mozart. In a sense, too, these CD releases are a just acknowledgement of gratitude since Vassily Primakov, co-founder (with Natalia Lavrova) of LP Classics, studied under Gornostaeva at the Moscow Central Special Music School from the age of 11.

We recognize the Gornostaeva magic very early in the "Emperor" Concerto. After we have been transfixed as listeners by the stirring introduction by the orchestra, with the piano following close at its heels and topping that stunning call to attention, we are won over completely by this pianist's brilliant passagework and her role in developing the movement. This includes quiet passages of indescribable beauty in which she shows the closest rapport imaginable with the Moscow Radio Symphony Radio under Vladimir Fedoseyev. She displays an uncanny ability to play *very* softly without losing one iota of dramatic tension. In the quietest moments, the piano keys sound like softly tinkling bells, creating a mood of great intimacy as she draws us into her confidence. But so secure is her tone that the effect never descends into mere "glass

33 Variations and emerged a slim, graceful Minuet.



"Play," 20th century guitar masters
 Jason Vieaux, guitar
 Azica Records

Jason Vieaux, Buffalo, N. Y. native who studied at the Cleveland Institute of Music, has finally gotten around to putting together the choice program of music that his audiences have long clamored for. The selections, many of which would serve as ideal encores as well as program material, are just the sort of thing to delight guitar aficionados as well as new listeners who may not realize how rich the guitar repertoire of the modern era has been in Spain and the Americas. Vieaux plays them all with the taste, style, and seemingly flawless technique that have deservedly attracted a large audience over the past several decades.

The selections range from Paulo Bellinati's *Jongo* with its fusion of African rhythms and Brazilian pop and jazz, plus an interlude for drums (Who plays them? Is it Vieaux himself, who admits to being a frustrated drummer?) to the sweep of *Danza característica* by Cuban composer Leo Brouwer, marked by heady Afro-Cuban rhythms under a veil of modern dissonance. There is room for the sentimental here, too, in such perennial favorites as the Mexican folk song "Por Ti Mi Corazon" (for you, my love) and Stanley Myers' simple but deeply affecting Cavatina, also known as the theme from the movie *The Deer Hunter* (Vieaux confesses to being moved every time the well-known melody changes suddenly from G major to C major!)

There's not enough space to describe all the gems in this particular setting. Antonio Carlos Jobim's *A Felicidade* (To Happiness) is one of the Brazilian composer's best known songs. The sounds of nature are strikingly captured in Julio Sagreras' *El Colibri* (The Hummingbird) and Agustin Barrios' *Las Abejas* (The Bees). Altogether fantastic music on the highest plane is to be found in Spanish composer Francisco Tarrega's *Requerdos de la Alhambra* (Recollections of the Alhambra), a hauntingly nostalgic evocation of vanished glory, and the solemn beauty plus harmonic richness of Andrés Segovia's *Etudio sin luz* (study without light), written by the great virtuoso/composer at a

chandelier” theatrics.

Both pianist and orchestra seem well aware that much of the “Emperor’s” appeal for an audience rests in its very simplicity and directness, and so they do not fool around with it. For instance, much of the opening movement is based on simple chords and notes in the tonic and dominant. Accordingly, this performance goes right to the heart of the listener and stays there through the calmly reflective slow movement and the really exciting moment when the bassoon, which has supported the piano’s theme with widely spaced chords of its own in this Adagio, drops a semitone from B to B-flat, and then soloist and orchestra take off immediately into the breathtaking finale.

Mozart’s Concerto in D minor, K466, in which Gornostaeva is supported by supported by the State Academic Symphony Orchestra under Saulis Sondeckis, is a perfect companion to the Beethoven. It begins without an introduction, *in medias res* (Latin for “in the soup”) with a restless, turbulent mood in the strings to which the piano attempts to add some solace, but in vain. Much of the music in this movement will remind listeners of similar moods in the opera Don Giovanni, which is also basically in Mozart’s “dark key” of D minor. The mood changes in the slow movement, *Romanza*, where Gornostaeva pays full tribute to the power of Mozart’s theme to touch us and move us to another realm. The ascending arpeggio at the end, finishing in a whisper, is perfectly executed. The rondo finale, featuring a rippling, ascending string of eighth notes followed by a quarter-note in the piano (known historically as a “Mannheim Rocket”) signals a final end to the dark, restless mood of the opening, as the work resolves properly in the very satisfying key of D major.



Beethoven: Piano Concertos Nos. 2 & 4
Leif Ove Andsnes, pianist and conductor
Mahler Chamber Orchestra
Sony Classical

This is the second installment in “The Beethoven Journey” with Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes as soloist and conductor of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra. These performances of Piano Concertos 2 and 4 are stylistically consistent with the earlier release of Concertos 1 and 3 (September 2012). They are restrained, sophisticated and lower-key than the Beethoven performances we are used to hearing. The approach favors Andsnes’ playing which is incredibly smooth, with quicksilver passagework and point-making that never belabors the point. Polite Beethoven. But are these the most salient qualities we look for in this composer? Or are we witnessing a reaction against more aggressive, “romanticized” interpretations?

time when he was temporarily blind following eye surgery. And I haven’t even mentioned the fantastic, sweeping exuberance of Antonio Lauro’s *Valse Venezolano* (Venezuelan Waltz) No. 3.

There are six others, including Regino Sainz de la Maza’s rousing Mexican dance *Zapateado* and the Duke Ellington favorite *In a Sentimental Mood*. All reflect the wide range of the 20th century guitar repertoire. I note that this Azica release has been garnering consistent 10’s from record critics. Don’t deprive yourself of the chance to hear it!



Mendelssohn: Quartets, Opp. 13, 44/1, 80
Artemis String Quartet
Erato

The classy sounding Artemis String Quartet, founded by four students at the Musikhochschule in Lübeck, Germany in 1989, celebrate what is apparently their first CD release with their new first violin, Vinetka Sareika. They do it in grand style, too, with Mendelssohn quartets that require the utmost in decisive attack, smooth execution, and an optimal blend for this particular composer. No wonder the members – violinist Gregor Sigl, violist Friedemann Weigel, cellist Eckart Runge, and Sareika – strike such a defiant pose on the booklet cover: they *know* their Mendelssohn!

Three nicely contrasted quartets are found in this 88 minute specially-priced 2-CD set. They are, in program order, Quartets No. 3 in D, Op. 44. No.1; No. 6 in F minor, Op. 80; and No. 2 in A minor, Op. 13. The Artemis Quartet characterize the three, respectively, as expressing mature joie-de-vivre, profound despair, and youthful audacity. But there is also a broad range of mood and expression within each of these works. Quartet No. 3 is the very model of a Mendelssohn quartet. As such, it was the most popular of all in the composer’s own lifetime. Quick, alert tempi predominate, even in the second movement, a Menuetto that is a little too restless to settle down and dance. The last of the Opus 44 Quartets to be written, it was placed first when published because it creates such a stunning impression. In the opening movement, *Molto vivace*, Mendelssohn instructs the performers to play *con forza* and *con fuoco* (“with force” and “with fire”, respectively) and the Artemis

The civilized effect is mainly felt in the orchestra. The Mahler CO is some 30 members strong. Is this too anemic for Ludvig van Beethoven? Music scholars like to talk about the “feminine” qualities in both these particular concertos, and certainly there is a striving for more delicacy of feeling, “romantic” in the usual modern sense of the word, than we experience in his other piano concertos. And Beethoven was certainly in love (with an unattainable lady far above his station in society) at the time he wrote the Fourth Concerto. But the overall emphasis on poise and refinement means that we don’t get the customary effect of the resounding response we expect from the orchestra at the end of the development in Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major.

The same effect is more sorely missed in the second movement, *Andante con moto*, of Concerto No. 4 in G major, right at the moment when the piano confronts the surging of passion in the unison strings which commentators, following a suggestion by Beethoven’s 1859 biographer Adolph Bernhard Max, have equated with Orpheus taming the Furies. In short, this is a civilized, “Mozartean” reading of Beethoven, filled with subtlety and nuance, particularly in the way Andsnes approaches the solo part in both concertos. Whether or not this is what one expects in Beethoven will depend on the individual listener.

Quartet members are not slow to pick up their cues. The afore-mentioned Menuetto is characterized by its subtle hues, while the slow movement, marked *Andante espressivo ma con moto*, conveys the gentle warmth of a serenade in its pizzicato accompaniments. The brusque finale in 12/8 time provides a dramatic contrast to its predecessor.

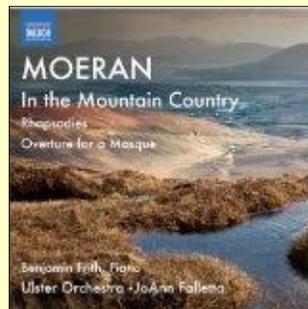
Quartet No. 6, Opus 80, has a special place in Mendelssohn’s oeuvre because it is so very personal: He wrote it in the early fall of 1847 to assuage his grief for his beloved sister, who had died in May of that year. That feeling is most apparent in the Adagio: slow, overcast, with tears in the harmony. Quartet No. 2, Op 13, on the other hand, shows a youthful exuberance allied with an astonishing competence in handling musical forms by the then 18-year-old composer. The Adagio combines warmth of feeling with frequent fugal episodes and a quote from the composer’s song “*Ist es wahr?*” (Is it true?) that echoes Beethoven’s motif “*Muss es sein?*” (Must it be?) from his late Quartet, Op. 135. The outer movements convey strength and power. The Intermezzo, which substitutes for the usual menuetto, conveys the feeling of an elfin scherzo by means of its smartly plucked pizzicati and pulse-quickenning pace.



Glière: “Ilya Muromets” Symphony
JoAnn Falletta, Buffalo Philharmonic
(Naxos)

Once again, we have the rare opportunity to enjoy the “Ilya Muromets” Symphony of Reinhold Glière (1875-1956). JoAnn Falletta and the Buffalo PO approach this monumental symphonic canvas with affection but no nonsense. Though listed as a symphony, it is best thought of as a series of four tone poems celebrating the legendary figure of early Russia whose name became synonymous with the spirit of resistance to foreign invaders.

The music is basically moody and evocative, rather than point-on



Moeran: In the Mountain Country,
Three Rhapsodies, Overture
JoAnn Falletta, Ulster Orchestra
(Naxos)

Ernest John Moeran (1894-1950) was an Anglo-Irish composer with an immediately recognizable style and sound. As the Ulster Orchestra under American conductor JoAnn Falletta show us in this handsome offering, he had more to offer than we might gauge from his comparative neglect. On the present program we have the composer’s tone poem In the Mountain Country, Overture for a Masque, and his three Rhapsodies. The dates range between 1921 and 1943, but the works reveal Moeran as one who developed his own



Korngold: Piano Trio No. 1
Schoenberg: Verklärte Nacht
The Fidelio Trio (Naxos)

The Fidelio Trio, composed of Darragh Morgan, violin; Robin Michael, cello; and Mary Dullea, piano, have been lighting up concert venues in the British Isles and elsewhere since they were founded in 1995. This new pairing of works by Korngold and Schoenberg is their 15th album and their first of non-contemporary music.

The Korngold Piano Trio was the work of a precocious composer who had not yet reached his 13th birthday. Though others such as Mozart, Rossini, Mendelssohn, and Britten

<p>pictorial, as Glière paints a broad canvas with all the resources of a large orchestra, calling for quadruple woodwinds (including 8 horns) and expanded brass and percussion (including 4 trumpets). He uses them sparingly for greater effect, so we remember the quiet sounds of solo bassoon and strings evoking a forest journey at night, the sound of wind on the steppes, and the solo violin and muted brass that signal the hero's final destiny.</p> <p>The story is that of Ilya Muromets, a peasant tall in stature whose legs have been paralyzed since birth. He is cured by holy pilgrims on their way to a shrine, and is counseled by them to visit the dying hero Svyatogor, who gives Ilya his blessing and passes his own soul on to him. From there, Ilya goes on to subdue Solovei the Brigand, a fantastic creature, half-man and half bird and beast (and <i>all</i> blowhard) who can fell tall trees and kill men by the sheer strength of the wind he generates by shrieking and whistling. he visits the court of Vladimir the Mighty Sun and is rewarded for his deeds of valor. In the last movement, Ilya and his fellow men of might, the <i>bogatyrs</i>, are overcome in battle by hordes of barbarians and are transformed into stone as the Ural mountains, to be forever guardians of their beloved homeland.</p> <p>We have here music of cinemascop dimensions in which Glière handles the resources of the orchestra with skill and discretion, allowing quieter reflective moments to intersperse those marked by grandeur and rising intensity. Sadly, his themes tend to be bland and unmemorable, so that it is difficult to recall them afterwards. The final impression is that of 71 minutes of vivid orchestration without much musical substance. Even the present performance by the Buffalo PO under the finely discerning direction of JoAnn Falletta cannot make it appear as more than it is.</p>	<p>characteristic style early and remained remarkably true to himself.</p> <p>The beauty of the landscapes in Norfolk and in County Kerry, Ireland influenced his musical utterance. So did the folk songs he heard in the pubs and elsewhere, to the degree that, with the exception of some of the tunes in Rhapsody No. 2, written to commemorate the 1941 Norfolk and Norwich Centenary, most of the "folk tunes" we hear in his music have been impossible to authenticate and are presumably his own. His music is highly evocative, seeming to spring out of the morning mist.</p> <p>It also tends to be highly rhapsodic, even in works that aren't designated as rhapsodies <i>per se</i>. In Moeran, taut formal structures contrast with exuberant melodic content, priming our interest as we wait in patient expectation of what he will do next. His scoring is inventive and colorful, adding to the appeal of his music.</p> <p>In this program, Falletta clearly enjoys the ear-pleasing elements in the composer's music and she takes his transitions with a smoothness of which Moeran would surely have approved. Note the seamless way the clarinet melody at the beginning of In the Mountain Country leads into the lilting theme for the strings and the way both are developed in the central section. Much of the music in Rhapsodies No. 2 and 3 lifts the listener's spirits, as befits works premiered during a time of war. The Third Rhapsody is distinguished here by the presence of pianist Benjamin Frith, whose playing is perfectly in accord with the introspective mood of the piece, rising to the occasion when more overt drama is required.</p> <p>Always in these performances, we have an impression of Moeran's subtle and highly effective tone palette, of which the very cover of the booklet will give you some idea.</p>	<p>penned important works while in their teens or earlier, Korngold's trio is astonishing in its full-blown maturity and advanced harmonic idiom. The opening Allegro lives up to its <i>con espressione</i> marking, providing the string players abundant opportunity to interact with the piano in a variety of expressive ways, wistful as well as fervent. The Scherzo is rhythmically alive, requiring our artists to be ever alert for its delicately wrought harmonies and delightful surprises.</p> <p>Korngold's slow movement, a Larghetto marked <i>sehr Langsam</i>, (very slow) calls for the Fidelio Trio's incisive exploration of details, as we move from rumination at the opening to a zestfully ecstatic feeling at the end when the initial theme is restated. The finale begins with a vaunting theme in the strings, which then settle down for an informed discourse with the piano before it ends decisively, even playfully.</p> <p>Schoenberg's Transfigured Night (<i>Verklärte Nacht</i>) needs no other introduction than to say this is the version for piano trio the composer authorized his former pupil Eduard Steuermann to make in 1932. It works out well in this version, where the strings have lots of opportunity to interact in meaningful and fascinating ways with each other and the piano. It is in one continuous movement, though scholars have identified five distinct sections, corresponding to the shifts in focus of the love-confessional poem by Richard Dehmel that inspired it.</p> <p>In this performance, you can really sense the broad movements in Schoenberg's masterwork, from fragmentation to cohesion, doubt to faith, and from tonal uncertainty to a major key affirmation of the home key of D minor (though Schoenberg wanders far from it at times). Richly chromatic, it ends gently, in dazzling, ecstatic radiance, before the slow, measured fade-out at the end.</p>
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