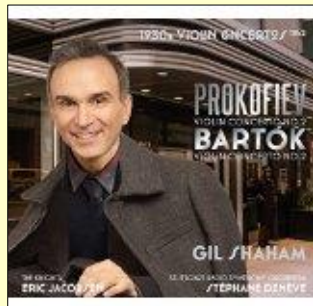


Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

May, 2016



Prokofiev: Violin Concerto No. 2 + Bartok: Violin Concerto No. 2 – Gil Shaham, violin; with The Knights (Eric Jacobsen) and the Stuttgart RSO (Stephane Denève) (Canary Classics)

The irrepressible Gil Shaham emerges again, with another pairing of stunning violin concertos on his own Canary Classics label. If his trademark smile seems more impish than usual, you can attribute it to the music he performs here, concertos of Sergei Prokofiev and Bela Bartok. Both contain a sufficient wealth of sharply (not to say, rudely) contrasted elements to keep even the nimble mind and fingers of a Gil Shaham busily engaged from beginning to end.

Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 63 is actually the better-behaved of the two. Not only was Prokofiev interested (partly for political reasons) in writing music in a more popular vein than he had previously essayed. He was hitting the stride of his career in 1935, following the great success of his *Romeo and Juliet* ballet, echoes of which are to be heard in the *Andante assai* in the unpretentious melody that Shaham plays with the supreme eloquence it deserves. The opening *Allegro moderato* and the concluding *Allegro ben marcato* both allow the violinist plenty of opportunity for interaction with the orchestra, in this instance the NYC-based ensemble of free spirits known as The Knights under founder and artistic director Eric Jacobsen.

Aided in part by the solid underpinning provided by snare drum and bass drum, The Knights are the perfect foil for Shaham's probing exploration of all the popular elements (including occasional dark comedy and grotesquerie) in the outer movements, where the tempi are often exhilarating. And even in the *Andante*, the lovely beauty of the violin's songlike melody never sinks into mere sentimentality thanks to Prokofiev's driving rhythms and Shaham's incisive point-making. At the very end of this slow movement, soloist and orchestra exchange roles, with the latter taking over the melody while the violinist plays a warm pizzicato accompaniment as the music fades into silence. Wonderful!



Dvořák: Violin Concerto, Romance + Suk: Fantasy Christian Tetzlaff, violin; John Storgårds, Helsinki PO (Ondine) Hybrid SACD, DSD

Here we have Antonin Dvořák's Violin Concerto in A minor, Op 53 and his Romance in F minor, Op 11, plus the Fantasy in G minor, Op. 24 by Dvořák's son-in-law Josef Suk. By all rights, this should be a more attractive offering than it is, considering that it possesses a super-abundance of very appealing melodies, even by the usual standards of 19th century Czech nationalism. Further, all these works for violin and orchestra are performed by Hamburg native Christian Tetzlaff, a violinist I usually hold in the highest regard, with the support of a major orchestra, the Helsinki, under the baton of Sweden's most currently in-demand conductor, John Storgårds.

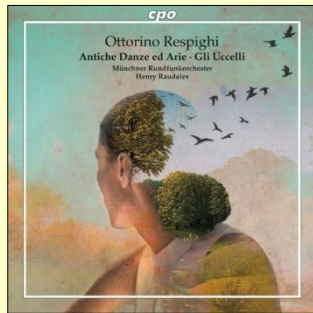
So what's wrong? The Suk Fantasy and the Dvořák Romance, examples of freer forms than the concerto, are both loaded with fresh melodies but don't seem to add up to something greater than the sum of their parts, so that at the end of both works we are not quite sure of the significance of what we've heard.

In the case of the Dvořák concerto, the problems are more basic. Dvořák wrote this work between 1879 and 1882 for the celebrated violinist Joseph Joachim, and he was in a lively correspondence with him over most of this period. He incorporated many of Joachim's suggestions for the violin. For his part Joachim allowed, as well he might, that he was "pleased with the many true beauties of your work." No problem there: Dvořák possessed a gift for melody that other composers might only envy. But problems of form still remained. Joachim was dissatisfied with the excessive repetitions in the final movement as well as Dvořák's heavy orchestration that tends to overwhelm the soloist at a number of points. And ... (*horrors!*) the work was completely innocent of cadenzas. In the end, he declined to premiere it and never included it in his repertoire.

Still, there are a lot of beauties that have been sufficient to attract many violinists over the year and keep the A-

Bartok's Violin Concerto No. 2 (1938) used to be known simply as *the* Bartok violin concerto until a few years ago when someone dug up a concerto of 30 years earlier, which still occasionally appears on concert programs. The 1938 model remains the one to drive. For all its almost manic gear-shifts, strange harmonies and even stranger details, it still qualifies as one of the great 20th century violin concertos, though it isn't exactly the most euphonious. Compared with the Prokofiev, the Bartok concerto has a large orchestra, scored with fiendish precision for maximum effect. Besides the usual strings, it consists of pairs of woodwinds, four horns, three trombones, and a large percussion section that includes tympani, bass drum, side drum, cymbals, triangle, gong, celesta and harp. The music makes use of a 12-tone row (though not in the serial manner of Schoenberg) that enriches the harmony, often in strange ways. That, and the disjunctive way in which sudden fortes leap out at us unawares from the orchestra, make the dominant impression on a first hearing.

Happily, that is not the end of the matter. There's also a surprising amount of lyricism in this concerto, particularly in the slow, quiet measures that open the first movement and the serene melody that Bartok uses for his theme in the variations movement, marked *Andante tranquillo* and usually (though not always) living up to the qualifying adjective. The finale has its share of brusque and rousing moments, also. Throughout this work, Shaham, in close collaboration with conductor Stephane Denève who has often been his partner in crime, is careful to purge the music of any acquired slickness, revealing the concerto in all its barbaric splendor. To do that, and still retain the violinist's high virtuosity, requires the fine discretion we sense at work here.



Respighi: Ancient Airs and Dances, Gli Ucelli
Henry Raudales, Munich Radio Orchestra
(CPO) Hybrid multichannel SACD, Surround

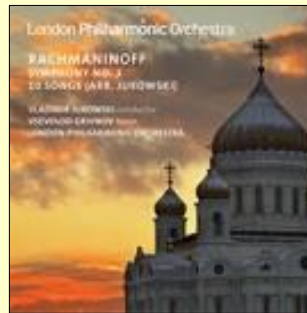
Henry Raudales was born in Guatemala. He began studying violin with his father at age 4, and made his debut at 7. He later won a scholarship to study at Sir Yehudi Menuhin's London school, and completed advanced studies in London and Antwerp. Since 2001 he has been concert master of the Munich Radio Orchestra, which he conducts on the present program.

Thus early in his recording career as a conductor (this is apparently only his second CD release), Raudales has

minor Concerto securely in the repertoire for violin and orchestra. It dispenses with an orchestral introduction. Instead, a stirring melody gets our attention at the very beginning of the Allegro. At the end of the movement, we have a 13-bar transition (shades of Mendelssohn) connecting it with the sweetly reflective Adagio. The finish is a highly nationalist Czech finale in a hybrid sonata-rondo form with no fewer than four folk tunes of the *Furiant* and *Dumka* varieties included in the mix.

With all these elements going for it, the present recording should be more recommendable than it is. Christian Tetzlaff gives us a secure performance, and he shows a good grasp of the overall form that still allows plenty of room for point-making. His lithe, slender tone is good for the lighter and more sentimental moments, though I could wish it were a trifle more robust and full-bodied in the extroverted, passionate ones. The greater problem is, as Joseph Joachim observed long ago, the difficulty of making the soloist stand out from Dvořák's heavy orchestration, particularly in the outer movements.

It should be observed that orchestration overwhelming soloist is not the problem for the live concertgoer that it is for the home listener. I could almost wish the recording had employed "spotlighting" or "backlighting" to make the soloist stand out more distinctly from the backdrop. In the present-day classical recording industry such antiquated engineering techniques are pretty much *verboten*. Too bad! It remains an interesting phenomenon that the Dvořák Violin Concerto, with no fewer than 65 current listings in Arkivmusic.com, has a secure place in the repertoire of most top international violinists, but no one ever seems to become famous for playing it.



Rachmaninoff: Symphony No. 3, Op. 44; Ten Songs
Vladimir Jurowski, London Philharmonic Orchestra
(LPO)

Don't look for audiophile-class sonics here, although the sound of these recordings, made live on 29 April, 2015 in the Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre, London, isn't bad. Very critically, it allows us to hear the best things about these recorded works, namely the warmth and the telling details the composer invested in them.

The present performances by Jurowski and the London Philharmonic optimally bring these qualities out in a way that I have seldom heard in other recordings of the Third

come up with a winner in this program of Ottorino Respighi's major works based on Renaissance dance forms: his three suites of Ancient Airs and Dances for Lute and his suite *Gli Ucelli* (The Birds). This is Respighi at his endearing best, with the sprightly dance rhythms and soulful melodies of the lutenists and madrigal composers of the 16th and 17th centuries, a particularly rich era in Italian music. (Funny thing, but we've gotten so accustomed to calling these suites "Ancient Airs and Dances" that we never seem to notice that it really should be the other way around, as the Italian title tells us: *Antiche danze et arie per liuto*.)

Having such attractive source material to work with was a distinct advantage to Respighi, for then he was free to concentrate on the vivid harmonic transformations that he employed in much the same way other composers used thematic developments, to give form to these pieces and invest them with luminous colors. In the present recordings, Raudales and The Munich Radio bring out all Respighi's intended richness, and they put it over in a way that makes Respighi's colors even more transparent.

Every listener has his own favorites among the airs and dances. The dances in Suite 1 – *Balletto*, *Gagliarda*, *Villanella*, and *Passo mezzo e mascherada* – are distinguished by their deliberate restraint, with the emotion overridden by the formality of the very social, formalized dances until it breaks out gloriously at the end. Suite 2 contains my favorite dance of all, the rousing *Danza rustica* (Rustic Dance) in which you can hear the vigorous foot-falls of the dancers, spaced by the gentle sway of the interludes. *Bergamasque* is another solid audience-pleaser from the same suite. Suite 3 differs from the others in that the pieces are arranged for strings only and tend to be melancholy in mood. Raudales and the Munich Radio capture these moods very well, particularly in the pensive *Italiana* and the gently lilting *Siciliana*, wordless songs as much as they are dances.

The Birds (*Gli Ucelli*) is truly a marvel in the way that Respighi has characterized the distinctive sounds of dove, hen, nightingale, and cucu, ways that go beyond mere song imitation. The song of the Nightingale calling from the depths of a darkened wood is particularly haunting in its incredible beauty that is captured so well by the recorded sound we are given here.

Symphony. This work, which was premiered in 1936, was written long after the Russian Revolution and the civil war that followed it. It was, in fact, Rachmaninoff's first purely symphonic work since *Isle of the Dead* (1908). That more than a quarter-century had transpired between these works says something about his reticence to evoke the past, at least in the symphonic medium. To be sure, his energies were largely consumed by his incredibly busy schedule as a pianist in constant demand around the world. But a deeper reason lies in his profound regret and deep sense of nostalgia at the disappearance of the Russia he had known and loved, coupled with the galling fact that the new regime had banned all performances of his music.

This nostalgia reveals itself perhaps more than anywhere else in the Third Symphony. We have evocations of Russian folk song, liturgy, and the pealing of bells in a work that is typically in no hurry to make its way through our consciousness. It is lyrical to its core, beginning with the cantabile melody in the clarinet, heard early in the Lento section of the opening movement, which has possibilities that are not neglected later on. When we hear this lovely melody again after the development, it sounds even sweeter and more nostalgic.

The second movement combines the functions of slow movement and scherzo, beginning with an achingly beautiful melody by the solo violin that is later developed beautifully by the other instruments, including the oboe and the strings, with a rushing middle section that would have been worthy of Tchaikovsky or Mussorgsky. The finale is confident and energetic with alternately fantastic, nostalgic, and grotesque episodes along the way as it sweeps irresistibly to its conclusion.

I wish I could be as sanguine about the companion work, 10 Songs, sung by tenor Vladimir Grivnov with orchestral settings by Vladimir Jurowski, grandfather of the present conductor. I do feel the senior Jurowski's orchestrations add more warmth and character to the original versions for voice and piano, especially in such items as "Before my window," "All things pass away," and "We shall rest." Grivnov's interpretation of "Christ is risen," with its condemnation of human divisiveness and bloodshed that have made a mockery of the venerable Easter hymn, carries real conviction. The love lyrics "What happiness" and "It cannot be," however, are over the top, as only a Russian tenor can take it, and suffer by comparison with those suffused with peace and consolation.



Mahler: Symphony No. 3 in D minor
Jaap Van Zweden, DallasSymphony Orchestra
(DSO Live)

As you may possibly know, Gustav Mahler's Third Symphony is the longest in duration of all the standard repertoire. The amazing thing is that it doesn't seem either long or tedious in the present performance by the Dallas Symphony under Dutch musical director Jaap Van Zweden. Here, 96 minutes transpire almost before we are aware so much time has passed, thanks in large part to the care with which Van Zweden has laid out the performance score and the intelligent pacing he applies to this performance. With the possible exception of the emphasis he gives to some of the *generalpausen* (long pauses) in the opening movement, his tempi are secure, allowing plenty of space for the incidents in Mahler's symphony to develop without undue haste or longeurs.

Mahler took a long time writing the Third Symphony – some 2-3 years – because he wanted to get everything just right. The unwritten theme is *Pantheism*, the idea that all things aspire towards love, and that God can be understood only in terms of love. "And so," wrote Mahler, "my work is a musical poem embracing all the stages of development in a stepwise ascent. It begins with inanimate nature and ascends to the love of God." All well and good, you may say, but where's the drama, the struggle which is normally at the heart of a romantic symphony? Actually, it resides in the details, and not in the overall design. As an aid in developing this work, Mahler set up the following outline in six movements:

1. Pan awakes. Summer marches in
2. What the Flowers in the Meadow tell me
3. What the Animals in the Forest tell me
4. What Man tells me
5. What the Angels tell me
6. What Love tells me

Though Mahler dropped the program titles when he published his work, the general feeling of ascending motion in the outline remains for the listener. It falls naturally into two parts. The first, marked "strong, decisive" (*Kräftig. Entschieden*) opens with a call to attention that could not be more stirring. It develops into a rousing orchestral march, the entrance of Pan, god of nature, quickening the world into new life. It evolves in stages from two theme groups, with transitions often preceded by a solo for the tenor trombone or a rhythmic



Schubert: Death and the Maiden (arr. Gustav Mahler) +
Shostakovich: Chamber Symphony in C minor, Op. 110a
Roman Simovic, London Symphony Orchestra String
Ensemble (LSO Live) SACD, Multichannel Stereo, DSD

Not for nothing has Franz Schubert's String Quartet in D minor, D810 been termed "Death and the Maiden." The composer was hospitalized in May 1823 for what is generally thought to have been syphilis, a disease that took a grim toll in the 19th century. He was released after a course of treatment (which at the time would have included doses of arsenic). His condition stabilized, but the side-effects from his medication, including severe depression, remained. The prospect of declining health over the rest of his life could not have been clearer.

Small wonder, then, that Schubert's Quartet is so death-obsessed. The nickname derives from Schubert's 1817 song "Death and the Maiden" in which the singer has to develop deft portrayals of two distinct voices: a love-sick maiden in failing health and a spectral figure that she encounters who turns out to be Death personified. "Leave me, thou grisly man of bone!" she cries. She is answered by Death in soothing lover's terms: "Take courage now, and very soon / within my arms shall you safely rest!" The melody of the song forms the basis for a set of five extremely wide-ranging variations with a galloping figure running through them that constitutes the second movement, a not-so-slow *Andante con moto*.

The obsession with death doesn't end there. The opening *Allegro* movement starts off with a *fortissimo* unison in D minor (which, appropriately, inspires mortal terror in the present recording) followed by alternations between two themes, one gentle and pleading, the other stern, driven, and insistent. The Scherzo movement veers demonically in mood, with dramatic leaps from *fortissimo* to *pianissimo* that create a vivid impression in a short span of time. The finale is basically a Tarantella, an Italian dance originally supposed to have been a charm against the Black Death. With its frenzied movement, abrupt transitions, and swelling tones over patterns of galloping triplets that remind us of Schubert's other famous song about death, "*Der Erlkönig*" (The Elf King), the music grips the listener relentlessly and doesn't let go until the very end.

The haunted quality of this quartet was undoubtedly the thing that appealed most to Gustav Mahler when he endeavored to arrange it for string orchestra in 1896.

passage for the snare drums. With its ample playing time (33:36 in the present performance, and van Zweden is no sluggard) this movement could stand alone by itself as a satisfying symphonic poem in its own right. In the present package, CD1 ends at this point, with movements 2-6 on CD2, allowing the home listener time for reflection before plunging into the second part.

In this part of the symphony, Mahler was at pains to develop incidents that would add variety to the otherwise *un*-dramatic program of divine love as the inspiration for all of creation. (That idea sounds O.K., but we know instinctively that "It won't play in Canarsie," or anywhere else. Not *that* kind of love, anyway!). To prevent any likelihood of blandness, Mahler introduced touches such as the surprisingly stormy episodes in the "Flowers in the Meadow" movement, as contrast to an otherwise graceful and untroubled minuet. In like wise the "Animals in the Forest" movement is a frolicsome scherzo punctuated with posthorn calls and, at one point, a trumpet fanfare whose theme corresponds to an Austrian army signal. There is even a Spanish tune, the *Jota aragonesa* that inspired both Glinka and Liszt.

The only thing that is at all amiss with this performance is the fourth movement, marked "Very slow, Mysterious" (*Langsam. Misterioso*). Here the "Midnight Song," a setting for alto voice of the verse from Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, "O Mensch! Gib acht!" (O Man, take heed) lacks the haunted quality that makes the point of the entire work: "What says the deep midnight? "I slept, I slept . . . Pain says: Pass away! But all joy seeks eternity – seeks deep, deep eternity." Such a consumation is not to be slept through!

The fifth movement, a cheerful setting for mixed chorus and children's choir of "*Es sungen drei Engel*" (Three Angels were singing) from *Des Kaben Wunderhorn*, is short and appropriately bright. Van Zweden does some of his best work of all in the finale, an Adagio that has numerous incidents in its 23 minutes' duration, with occasional passages of burning pain more than offset by moments of consolation and heartfelt exultation. The slow chorale melody builds impressively to the climax, with tympany-whacks at the very end to let us know that we have arrived at the source of divine love! It is far from easy for any conductor to build up to this climax over so long a span, but Van Zweden does this thoughtfully and carefully, as he has done throughout the work, savoring the abundance of choice points to be made along the way. The clarity of the rather low-key recorded sonics is a help in this respect.

Though he completed only the second movement, his thorough notations enabled the version we have here to be completed in recent times by English composer David Matthews. The resources available to an outstanding string orchestra such as the LSO String Ensemble heard here (six 1st violins, six 2nd violins, five violas, four cellos, and three double basses) allow it to exploit every nuance in a very fine adaptation, with enough driving power to carry through to the stunning climax at the very end.

Chamber Symphony in C minor, Op. 110a by Dmitri Shostakovich began life as String Quartet No. 8. With the composer's permission, violist and conductor Rudolf Barshai arranged it for string orchestra in order to give it broader public exposure. As "Death and the Maiden" was very personal for Schubert, so was this quartet for Shostakovich. He was inspired to write it in 1960 during a visit to Dresden for the premiere of a film about the fire-bombing of that city by the Allies, some of the ruins of which were still visible long after the war. He dedicated his quartet to "the victims of fascism and war" (which, for Shostakovich, resonated far beyond the Nazis). He had also been recently diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a neuromuscular condition that forebode years of declining health (he died in 1975). When the Borodin String Quartet played the work in a private recital at his home, Shostakovich is reported to have held his face in his hands and wept.

As in a war, slow tempos predominate for long stretches of prolonged anxiety and sorrow in the course of five movements: Largo /Allegro molto /Allegretto /Largo/ Largo. To underscore his involvement, the composer inserted his personal motto DSCH (D-E flat-C-B in German notation) for "Dmitri SCHostakovich" in every movement, as well as quotations from his earlier works. There is violence in this music, notably in the second movement where the theme is interrupted occasionally by a three-note staccato that seems to evoke the sound of anti-aircraft fire. In the fourth movement, a slow, ironic waltz leaves a lingering impact. In interpreting this work the problem is *Focus* with a capital letter, as extreme tensions can make its 23-minute duration seem like hours. That problem is somewhat ameliorated by the string orchestra setting. In the present performance, the ensemble remains focused and the music compelling from beginning to end. That is no small achievement.

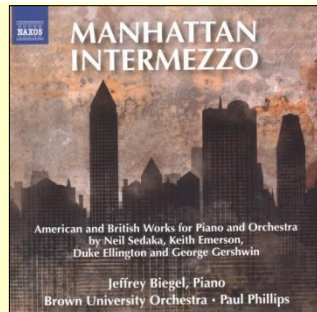


Sibelius: Symphonies 5, 7; En Saga
 Sir Mark Elder, Hallé Orchestra
 (Hallé Concerts Society)

Sir Mark Elder conducts the Hallé Orchestra on their own self-produced label in an arresting program of works by Jean Sibelius. More than that, these performances give us the opportunity to sit back and take a fresh look at a familiar composer (one who, incidentally, has been something of a Hallé specialty since the Barbirolli years).

Elder and the Hallé open with No. 5 in E-flat, Sibelius' second-most popular Symphony. I do not recollect any other versions taking as brisk a choice of tempi as Elder does in the outer movements of this symphony. At first, I was rather taken aback by the way the scherzo section of the opening movement seemed to be rushed into existence from the Allegro moderato, but on repeated hearings the heightened impetus seems warranted and is not as bizarre as it first appeared. (Booklet annotator Stephen Johnson terms it "one of the most awe-inspiring transitions in all music," as indeed it is.) Despite the spacious impression, nothing is wasted or superfluous in this movement. From the horn call at the very opening, containing much of the musical material of the entire work, the principal of growth of the Fifth Symphony is clearly organic, "like watching a speeded-up film of a plant growing from seed to full flower" (Johnson).

The Andante molto is often described by commentators as a relaxed, sunny respite between two tumultuous movements. That view blithely ignores the underlying tension of tympany rolls and the subdued but menacing brass near the end. Actually it is expressively marked *quasi Allegretto*, and Elder wisely takes his cue from this marking, which makes the transition to the finale more natural. That finale, marked Allegro molto, may not be as bumpy a river-rafting as the electrifying end of the opening movement, but it is even more powerful in its inexorable build-up to the final crescendo (which Elder handles magnificently). Sibelius was a lover of nature, and he incorporated the three-note calls of a flock of wild swans he had observed on a walk in 1915 into the swinging motif in the horns that plays so important a part in the build-up of the finale. Like the inexorable swaying of some gigantic pendulum, it leads to a very dramatic pause and then six sledgehammer chords separated by silence. The effect in the present performance is absolutely stunning. Throughout this interpretation, Sir Mark has known where he was going to end up, so that



"Manhattan Intermezzo," works for piano and orchestra by Neil Sedaka, Keith Emerson, Duke Ellington, George Gershwin – Jeffrey Biegel, piano; Paul Phillips, Brown University Orchestra (Naxos)

This program brings together four composers who were best known for their contributions to the pop song, jazz, and rock music scene. George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue you already know about. But did you know that Duke Ellington, Neil Sedaka and Keith Emerson wrote significant works for piano and orchestra? It all helps answer the question about just *where* the raw material for classical music comes from. From the bubbling magma of popular culture, of course. Where else could it arise?

It is to the credit of Steinway artist Jeffrey Biegel and his collaborator Paul Phillips, at the podium of the Brown University Orchestra, that they approach this program with the excitement of having discovered something vital and unsuspected rather than just a collection of scholarly exercises. Their enthusiasm carries over to the listener in no uncertain terms. Biegel's demon technique and Phillips' wicked point-making help make this CD one of the undiscovered gems of the year.

It all begins with the title work of the album, Manhattan Intermezzo by Neil Sedaka. The composer, best-known for the hundreds of songs he wrote for Connie Francis, Natalie Cole and many other vocal artists, rode the waves and troughs of the pop music business for more than 50 years, surviving even the British Invasion and Beatlemania to mount several comebacks. (His survival skills don't end with his musical career: he has been married to his wife Leba since 1962).

Born in 1939 in Brooklyn, Sedaka celebrates the bustling, enduring city of his youth in Manhattan Intermezzo (2008). Despite its title, the work is a very carefully crafted piano concerto in a single movement whose individual sections you could discern if you wanted to get analytical already instead of simply being carried away by its beautiful, shapely melodies. They are *vocal* melodies, too, reminiscent of those in Sedaka's hit songs (the workman knows his tools) and he segues them with consummate skill. "Writing pop songs is one thing," says Sedaka. "But writing a serious piece gave me much more creative freedom. I am very proud of this work."

English composer Keith Emerson, who died just recently on March 9 of this year, was the fabulous keyboardist

the conclusion is inevitable as fate.

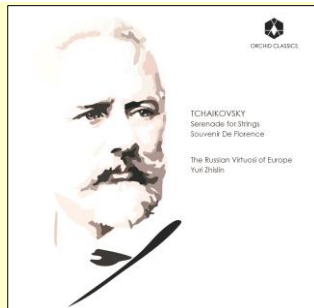
There remain Symphony No. 7 in C major and the tone poem *En Saga*, two often misunderstood works. The Seventh initially inspires questions about its form. When Sibelius finished it in 1924, he described it as a "symphonic fantasia." When he published it the following year, however, it was as "Symphony No. 7 in one movement." Actually, it contains the identifiable sections of a standard symphony within its single movement. The other thing you notice about it is its principle of organic growth, which if anything is even more pronounced than it was in the Fifth. Sibelius himself seems to have been proudest of its harmonic beauty and tone color, which he handled very subtly. Time and pacing, again, are of the utmost importance, as the momentum increases almost imperceptibly from the slow trombone theme that opens the Adagio section to the *Vivacissimo* section that functions as a scherzo in all but name. The entire 22-minute work builds through stages to a final rock-solid crescendo underscored by brass and tympany, ending, after all this, in C major, the most consonant of all keys. Many commentators totally misunderstand the Seventh as a blandly undistinguished work in which nothing much happens. That's because they aren't as attuned to its subtle changes in tempo as is Elder. He is such a time-master they should set all the clocks in Manchester by his baton!

That brings us to *En Saga*, which might be translated as "a saga," or "a folk legend." At a timing of 17:40 in the present account (and Sir Mark is no slow poke), it has considerable substance beyond the usual expectations of the genre. The title, tantalizingly, may be a smoke screen, as Sibelius later confided to a friend that the work reflected a state of mind, based on painful personal experiences, and that "in no other work have I revealed myself so completely." Indeed, find it satisfying to view *En Saga* as the tortured landscape of a soul, rather than the musical equivalent of any Nordic saga or Icelandic edda. Edgy, broody, passionate, and sometimes violently rhythmical, *En Saga* goes through many moods. This account by Elder and the Hallé is better characterized and more plausible than any I have yet heard.

and arranger of Emerson, Lake & Palmer. Justly famous as perhaps the fastest and most sensational of rock artists on instruments ranging from a 9-foot Steinway to a Hammond organ and a Moog synthesizer, he composed his Piano Concerto (1977) in three movements, beginning with an Allegro gioioso (and very playful it is too, especially with Emerson's use of a rather skittish 12-tone row that he takes pains to harmonize and tame). The Andante molto cantabile is an all-too short miniature in two parts, in the second of which the tempo slows and the piano is accompanied only by a contrabassoon and double bass. The finale, *Toccata con fuoco* (with fire), really lives up to its marking as the piano stalks forth like a panther, accompanied by a forest of jagged rhythms and spiky percussive accents. It all ends, unmistakably, with a powerful cadence. (The present pianist, Jeffrey Biegel, is a staunch advocate of this work and has often toured with it.)

Edward "Duke" Ellington (1899-1974) was famed for the stylish elegance he showed in such songs as *Mood Indigo* and *Sophisticated Lady*. He wrote "New World a-Comin'" in 1943, after the title of a book by African-American Journalist Vincent Ottley that propounded the idea that the postwar era would be a period of unprecedented advancement for black Americans, though Ellington's work for piano and band (later with orchestra) does not seem to be overtly propagandistic. The smooth coolness with which Duke integrates his melodies takes place against a backdrop in which the occasional growling trumpet or wailing reed reminds us of the Harlem of the '20s when his band was a long staple at the Cotton Club. Ellington never wrote down the piano part he played at the 1943 premiere of "New World," and the orchestral parts were lost in the '60s. The score was reconstructed in recent times by Maurice Peress and performed in 1988 with an improvised cadenza by Sir Roland Hanna. Biegel plays that brilliant cadenza by permission, doggedly transcribing it from the recording.

Finally, what can I say about George Gershwin's 1924 Rhapsody in Blue that you can't find abundantly written-up elsewhere? In all its versions, it quickly gained fame as *the* Jazz concerto. From its long opening wail on the clarinet (a glissando that had previously been considered unplayable on that instrument), Rhapsody keeps us mesmerized by its steely, changing rhythms, its brilliant colors for both piano and orchestra, and its sudden cadences that have us on the edge of our seats. What is different about the present performance is that Biegel and Phillips use the changes to the score that have been made by pianist and scholar Alicia Zizzo, who in 1996 restored more than 50 deleted measures in the piano part and several bars of orchestration. The re-insertions, as Biegel demonstrates so convincingly, give the piano more room to ruminate and breathe, particularly in the last section when the tempo broadens and the "stride" effect begins to make its presence felt. The final bars are simply smashing.



Tchaikovsky: Serenade for Strings, Souvenir de Florence – Yuri Zhislin. Russian Virtuosi of Europe (Orchid Classics)

Under violinist and founder Yuri Zhislin, a 1993 BBC Radio 2 Young Musician, the Russian Virtuosi of Europe concertize in various locations in London and regularly travel to such foreign cities as Paris, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Montevideo, and Buenos Aires. This album is their recording debut, and the guys and gals who make up the Russian Virtuosi seem delighted and eager at the prospect, to judge from their faces on the group photo in the booklet. A comparatively new string ensemble of some 18 players, they couldn't have chosen two likelier works with which to make a good first impression than the Tchaikovsky items on this program.

Serenade for Strings in C major, Op. 48 is one of Tchaikovsky's best known works, especially the Waltz movement which is often performed by itself as a concert favorite. From the intonation by the full ensemble that opens the first movement, *Pezzo in forma di sonatina* (piece in the manner of a sonatina, intended as a tribute to Mozart) the Virtuosi throw themselves into the Serenade with the greatest gusto. The continuous presence of the three cellos and the double bass adds the firm, steady pulse and movement needed to make this movement work. Tchaikovsky himself wrote on the second page of the score: "The larger the number of players in the string orchestra, the more this shall be in accordance with the composer's wishes." The robust performance by the Virtuosi on this CD make their numbers sound far greater than they actually are.

The Waltz movement makes its accustomed splash here, but the deep water mark is clearly the Elegie, autumnal and contemplative rather than melancholy (Russians know how to discern the difference). It is steeped in Russian material in the form of a Volga "hauling" song, a livelier folk dance, and a folk-like theme Tchaikovsky wrote himself (you wouldn't know the difference if I hadn't told you). The stirring Finale quotes the lyrical theme from the opening movement, giving the serenade the strongest possible sense of unity.

Souvenir of Florence in D major, Op. 70, was originally commissioned as a string sextet by the St. Petersburg Chamber Music Society. Tchaikovsky felt uneasy with the requirement of the form, involving six independent yet compatible voices, and he procrastinated working on the



Bach, Haydn, Mendelssohn: Piano Concertos
Joshua Pierce, piano; Kirk Trevor, Slovak National SO (MSR Classics)

I admire New York City native Joshua Pierce because (a) he's so very talented at communicating the essence of a work of music to us with boldness and conviction, and (b) he's a supreme example of a top-flight concert pianist who's chosen to take "the road less traveled," and he's done well with it. The breadth of his repertoire over the past several decades has been immense, and he has more than 60 albums to his credit. For whatever reason, he has preferred a life as a world traveler instead of just hitting the double-handful of big time concert halls in North America and Western Europe. Maybe he has chosen worldwide mobility over instant acclaim because he acquired, earlier in his career, the reputation of being a "John Cage specialist" (and Cage, as we know, can be a hard rap to beat!)

At any rate, Pierce, with the collaboration of longtime partner-in-crime Kirk Trevor at the podium of the Slovak National Symphony Orchestra, further enhances his reputation as an artist of the broadest sympathies. I'd mostly thought of him as an explorer in search of the red meat of the romantic and modern repertoire, so it's refreshing to discover how scintillatingly precise, how right-on-the-money he can be in such 18th century items as Bach's Concerto in F minor, BWV1056 and Haydn's Concerto No. 11 in D major. Pierce's fresh new accounts of these familiar standards are the bookends to a program that includes Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto in A minor (1822), a somewhat neglected work that is certain to acquire new friends with this performance.

The Haydn is taken with bracing but not breakneck tempi, allowing the galante elements in the music and the delicious interplay between soloist and orchestra plenty of opportunity to be enjoyed. The noble arioso in the Adagio is particularly notable for its gracious expression. That makes the strongest contrast imaginable with the spirited finale, billed as *Rondo all'Ungarese* (Hungarian Rondo) but actually based on an authentic Bosnian / Dalmatian folk dance. This rousing finale builds to an exciting climax with antiphonal effects between soloist and orchestra. At one point, the pianist makes a stunning shift in registration that is somewhat harder to do on the piano than when this concerto is played in the alternate version for a two-manual harpsichord.

project, missing the proposed debut by about two years. The difficulty, significantly, was one of form rather than inspiration, as there is an unusual wealth of melody, even for *this* composer. It is usually performed, as it is here, by a string orchestra, although the original sextet version needs to be heard in its own right.

Not surprisingly, there aren't many famous string sextets in existence. The models most accessible to Tchaikovsky were by Brahms, Opp. 18 and 36, and he pursued his task with a Brahmsian rigor that creates a certain amount of tension with the unmistakably Russian material, particularly in the final two movements. The most remarkable moment is the slow one, marked *Adagio cantabile e con moto* and just as lyrical as the description would indicate. This is a virtual "love duet" (a form in which Tchaikovsky excelled as much as he did the waltz) between violin and cello over a luxurious foundation of pizzicato strings. It is interrupted by a lighter interlude, and then it resumes with the roles of violin and cello reversed – a master stroke! Like the Elegy in the Serenade, this is one of Tchaikovsky's most memorable melodies. The finale is filled with sunshine, dancing, and (yes!) even an evocation of Florence.



Stravinsky: Rite of Spring, Firebird Suite (1919)
Andrés Orozco-Estrada, Frankfurt Radio Symphony
(Pentatone) Hybrid SACD, DSD

Andrés Orozco-Estrada has really gotten around in comparatively few years. Born in Colombia and trained in Vienna, he took over as music director of the Houston Symphony in September 2014. He also holds the positions of chief conductor of the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra (heard to optimum effect on the present recording) and principal guest conductor with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Not only that, but he's very good, too!

One thing I really like about this guy is the way he lets you hear all the vital elements in a score, so there's no slackening of interest for the listener during the quiet moments. That's important for the introductions to Parts I and II of Rite of Spring, where it is vital to hear the bassoon solo in the former and the muted brass that punctuate the latter, keeping the concert hall listener alert for further developments. I really think there's a basic problem with this work, which has always seemed more

The Bach has long been a concert favorite, whether played by piano or in the original version for harpsichord. The opening movement makes the most of simple, sturdy patterns, contrasts and variants over steady rhythmic patterns that sound rock-solid in the accompaniment by Trevor and the Slovak. The most famous movement is the Largo, a tastefully decorated, tender arioso played by the soloist over deft orchestral pizzicati. It leads directly into a vigorous Presto finale in flowing triple time, in which the impression of perpetual motion is undercut by two-note falling cadences. An awful lot happens in this movement in just over three minutes!

The centerpiece of the program is the Piano Concerto in A minor by Felix Mendelssohn, then just thirteen years of age but marvelously self-assured for his age. The work is suffused with lovely tone color and an instinctive sense of movement. Its overall style may be somewhat derivative (naturally enough for a 13 year old) but Mendelssohn had good antecedents. He shows his emerging personality as a composer in natural-sounding melodies and a frequent use of triplet arpeggios and 16th note runs. As we hear in the present performance, the attractive melodies are always well-supported. The soloist is almost constantly employed from beginning to end, another Mendelssohn trait that Pierce obviously finds congenial.



Dvořák: Symphonies Nos 7 and 8
Andrés Orozco-Estrada, Houston Symphony Orchestra
(Pentatone) Hybrid SACD, DSD

Andrés Orozco-Estrada makes an appropriately big splash in what is apparently his debut recording as music director of the Houston Symphony. This Pentatone offering is loaded with two of Antonin Dvořák's best-loved Symphonies, Nos. 7 in D minor, Op. 70, and 8 in G major, Op. 88. The conductor expresses his admiration for Dvořák in his preface to the booklet notes: "There is a remarkable honesty to his music and a reverence for the great traditions of symphonic music...you can also hear Dvořák's quest to find a voice in his music that embodied the love of his homeland and cultural roots."

In approaching Dvořák, Orozco-Estrada does not make the mistake of getting too cute with his point making, nor of telegraphing the appearance of each new enchanting melody or dance tune that emerges from the composer's seamless fabric like a fresh bud to a flowering tree in spring. He has the grasp of movement and pacing that are so vital to this composer. Under his baton, Dvořák's

satisfying to me in concert and recordings than it does as a ballet. Namely, the music is not always intuitive in terms of what's supposedly happening onstage.

Danses des adolescents, for instance, seems awfully stomping and ponderous for dances of young girls, while *Jeux des cités rivales* (games of the rival tribes) sounds like warfare rather than sport. *Glorification de l'élue* (Glorification of the Chosen One) is more heavy and doom-laden than we might have expected from the subject, though we come to realize that the lucky girl has in fact been chosen to dance herself to death to appease the gods of spring. And so it goes. Rather than having a unified plot, Rite of Spring often seems to be a loose series of episodes

Examples could be multiplied, but what I've just said applies only to the work as an actual *staged ballet*, and not to our experience of it as concertgoers or home listeners. In the present recording, Orozco-Estrada shows an admirable sense of timing and spatial elements and a real feeling for rhythms, both subtle and written large. He makes his points without seeming at all fussy, letting us hear the musical elements as part of a larger concept. The impression of cacaphony that infuriated Stravinsky's early critics and audiences now seems to belong to a comprehensible, albeit an impressionist, design, and even its controlled violence becomes plausible under the baton of a maestro such as Andrés.

The Firebird, heard here in the 1919 suite that gives the best impression of the score's impact, begins as did Rite of Spring, in deep quiet, with "queep-queeping" sounds heard at intervals over a foundation of slowly moving basses. In all-too many recordings, conductors and producers seem intent on producing real *pianissimos* in this introduction, which invariably drives home listeners into a frenzy to check their settings and playback levels. Orozco-Estrada and the PentaTone engineers are not such fools as *that*, with the result that you can actually hear all the vital details in Stravinsky's evocation of an enchanted garden at night.

Firebird requires a very large orchestra, but its resources are seldom massed together in one episode as they are in the Infernal Dance of Kastchei and his demonic followers, or in the rousing finale with all the brass giving out in joyous celebration as Prince Ivan, with the aid of the supernatural creature of the title, destroys the spell of the evil sorcerer and releases the Princess and her companions from captivity. The justly famous orchestral color and utter brilliance of Stravinsky's score are beautifully realized in this performance by Orozco-Estrada and the Frankfurt RSO, and that includes the sensational sound of the Firebird's shimmering wings when she makes her first entrance. Even the full, effusive sound of the Russian musical idiom does not seem out of place here, considering the fairy-tale subject.

melodies sing out with a freshness and a spontaneity that are distinctively their own.

It is a commonplace of musical publicists to characterize Dvořák's Seventh Symphony as a strident expression of Czech nationalism that exudes rebelliousness at every pore, while the Eighth is generally cited for its amiability and expression of sunshine and cheer in a rural setting. Actually, there are quite a few places in both works where you shift these descriptions from the one to the other and no one would be any the wiser. In the Seventh, for instance, the wistful, lyrical theme in the violins and cellos that opens the symphony could not be more innocent, nor could it contrast more with the way it is converted at the end from its languid affect to a more electrifying treatment that many have taken as the stirring of repressed Czech nationalism.

The slow movement, poco Adagio, makes much of an immediately attractive main tune that drifts insouciantly between B-flat and F major before its strata of underlying passion rises dramatically to the surface. In the vivacious scherzo, infectious rhythm and melancholy go together with a naturalness that only a Dvořák could achieve. In the pungent finale storm and sunshine compete for pride of place, with the D-minor clouds finally parting to permit the awaited D major resolution to break through in the final bars, and we end in a veritable blaze of glory.

Dvořák's Eighth is among the most amiable of symphonies. Indeed, it almost defies you not to like it. The abundance of Czech folk dances we encounter in this work reminds us of the composer of the ever-popular Slavonic Dances. Cheerfulness and optimism are the prevailing impression we get from this work, in spite of the slightly melancholy tinge to the waltz in the scherzo, or the sudden welling-up of emotion in an orchestral forte that interrupts the gentle, wistful reverie of bucolic charm that is the Adagio. The effect of this moment is rather like a summer thunderstorm occurring suddenly in the course of a carefree stroll in the country.

For all its easy accessibility and mostly untroubled good spirits, the Eighth is actually a rather sophisticated work with a lot of structural symmetry and subtleties. As did Tchaikovsky in his fifth Symphony a year earlier, Dvořák stymied the tradition-bound critics by introducing a swiftly flowing waltz (Slavonic in character) in place of the expected scherzo. Like the Tchaikovsky, this movement, marked Allegretto grazioso, leads us into a finale of controlled turbulence. In this case, the meter changes to 2/4 in a coda marked Molto vivace, and we plunge right into a set of variations in which fast, lively ones are contrasted with slower, lyrical ones. Orozco-Estrada handles the transitions in this movement as he does throughout the symphony, with grace and style. First-rate support from the engineers allows us to hear all the details of a fine performance by the Houston SO in a straightforward, natural perspective.