

Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

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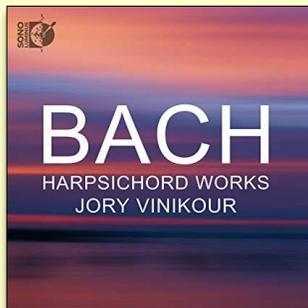


Strauss: Also Sprach Zarathustra
Mariss Jansons, Bavarian RSO
(BR Klassik)

Once more, Mariss Jansons leads the Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks (Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra to you!) in illuminating accounts of works that utilize all the resources of a great orchestra. In the process, he attempts to define the place Richard Strauss occupies in the pantheon of music. At issue here are the composer's famous tone poem Thus Spake Zarathustra (*Also Sprach Zarathustra*) and his *Burleske* for piano and orchestra.

In *Zarathustra* we are treated to a sensational opening evoking a sunrise, starting with a long-held C on the organ (a sound so low it cannot be played on a piano keyboard and is almost felt through kinesthesia more than heard by the ear). The music continues on from the murk of primordial nature upward to a realm of magnificent splendor as the risen sun fills the sky with light. This may be the most famous minute-and-a-half in all of music.

Things can't be maintained at this high level forever, and we are exposed to an inevitable succession of high moments and troughs as the visionary figure of Zarathustra arises and descends to the valley to preach to the people. The course of Strauss' tone poem in eight neatly segued movements follows the general outline of said tome by Friedrich



Bach: Harpsichord Works
Jory Vinikour
(Sono Luminus)

Jory Vinikour, Chicago native and one of the most highly regarded masters of the harpsichord in North America, makes his way through a daunting program of works by J. S. Bach with his usual zest for challenges. In addition to the Italian Concerto in F, BWV 971 and the Overture in the French Style, BWV 831, which were published together by Bach as Part II of his *Clavierübung* (Keyboard Practice), we are also given the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, BWV 903 and a fine account of the Prelude and Fugue, BWV 894, with the Andante from the Sonata for Solo Violin, BWV 1003 added as a middle movement.

Vinikour plays a double-manual instrument made by Thomas and Barbara Wolf in The Plains, Virginia, based on a single-manual German harpsichord by Christian Vater of Hannover (1738). A second manual was most essential here in the case of the French Overture, which has many passages that could not be realized to full satisfaction on a single keyboard. Bach even included a zestful extra movement, "Echo," to demonstrate the advantages of the double-manual instrument.

Vinikour is at the peak of his art in these performances, and this is a well-nigh ideal program to introduce first-time listeners to the greatness of Bach's mature writing for keyboard.



Brahms: String Sextets, Opp. 18, 36
WDR Chamber Players
(Pentatone)

The Chamber Players of the WDR Symphony Orchestra of Cologne, here comprised of Cristian Suvaiala and Carola Nasdala, violins; Laura Escanilla and Mircea Mocanita, violas; and Susanne Eyckmüller and Johannes Wohlmacher, cellos, give fetching performances of Johannes Brahms' two string sextets that play up their individual characters and the wealth of melodic imagination that went into them. The rigor the Players invest in these performances brings out many of Brahms' best qualities, including a noticeable element of joy.

As in other instances when Brahms wrote pairs of works in the same genre, the first is often relatively straightforward and innocent in its appeal, and the second rather more complex but possessing rewarding features of its own. As a broad generalization, the first sextet plays like a serenade in four charming movements with no sense of an unfolding narrative. By contrast, the second is a unified emotional narrative in the best tradition of chamber music, though it too has its joyous and sensual features.

The first cello, freed from its bass role, is allowed to take the lead in the first theme of the opening Allegro of Sextet No. 1 in B-flat, Op. 18. This movement has a noticeably jaunty, adventuresome mood, reflecting the optimism of youth. The Andante is in

Nietzsche. Man, a part of nature but uncomfortably alienated from it, constantly searches for meaning through various avenues: outmoded religion, pleasure-seeking, the love of woman, contemplation of his final end (*Das Grablied*, Song of the Grave), the pursuit of knowledge (*Von der Wissenschaft*), and even dancing, something that would have been second nature to a Viennese.

All of these pursuits are treated by Strauss with appropriately evocative and descriptive music, including a brief flash of brilliant illumination in *Von der Wissenschaft*, beginning about 2:20, that contrasts with the prevailing mood of skepticism in this movement. In the epilog, man plods on in his quest for meaning (*Das Nachtwandlerlied*). Whether it is hopeful or disillusioned, pessimistic or affirmative, depends on the observer. That is in keeping with the literary work that inspired this tone poem. Nietzsche was more of a philosophic poet than he was a true philosopher, and his concepts of the self-determination of man and the eternal recurrence of all things are tantalizingly at odds: is man the master of his fate, or is it that "Everything goeth, / Everything returneth. / So rolls the Wheel of Existence"? The music, conveyed to us in all its beauty and intrigue by Jansons and the BRSO, ultimately raises more questions than it provides answers.

Burleske, a single 26-minute movement for piano and orchestra, is certainly not a concerto. It comes across here as rather like a tone poem in cunningly segued sections. With its vibrancy, dazzling tone color, and excitement, capitalized in a performance in which Russian pianist Daniil Trifonov joins forces with Jansons and the orchestra, it seems to be more sensation than substance. After hearing this work I couldn't recall a single melody or any other salient detail half an hour later, once again raising questions about its composer. Richard Strauss was clearly able to use all the resources of a large orchestra to optimum effect, but what does Burleske itself mean, other than its title, which implies a broadly satiric pleasantry?

Unfortunately, the recorded sound lets him down. Most likely because of too-close miking, the interplay of voices often comes across as dissonant and jangling. That is particularly the case with the suite of quick dances (Courante, Gavottes, Passepieds, Bourées, and Gigue) in the French Overture.

Granted, the harpsichord may be the most difficult of all instruments to record satisfactorily. A certain amount of ambience is unavoidable, and even desirable for the sake of the period sound. Harpsichord fans may take it all in stride. With first-time listeners, however, one may not have a second chance to make a first impression. I myself only began to adjust my ears to the dissonance of these moments upon the third or fourth audition, and even then found the effort taxing where it should have been refreshing.

Not surprisingly, I found I had fewer problems of this sort with the slow movements, beginning with the Adagio of the Italian Concerto, with its florid cantlena in the right hand, accompanied by steady eighth notes in the left. (This movement, by the way, is often listed as an Andante or even a Lento. Bach left no descriptive title, only a quarter-note signature.) The reflective Sarabande in the French Overture, set off as the jewel that it is by virtue of being nested among so many quick duple- and triple-time dances, comes across here as a moment of deep spiritual beauty, opening up vistas of a better world.

The extended Fantasy section of the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue allows Vinikour the opportunity to explore some of Bach's most imaginative writing, including brilliant passagework, arpeggiated episodes, and, on the final page, the use of descending chromatic harmony. And the less often-heard Prelude, Andante & Fuge, BWV 894/1003, comes across as engaging in terms of its opportunities for virtuosity.

So please, folks, don't shoot the harpsichord player. He's doing the best he can!

the form of variations. The theme, first stated by the viola supported by chords in the bass voices, is taken from the famous bass line from the Baroque era known as "*La Folia*." The variations follow one another with increasing rapidity, becoming almost manic in mood before finally subsiding into a lovely cantabile. Brahms' subtle writing for the two violas in Variation 6 is but one highlight here. An energetic Scherzo with the exuberance of its dance-like Trio are succeeded after a very effective coda by a slower Rondo finale that plays like a re-imagining of the first movement.

As engaging as the B-flat Sextet is, No. 2 in G major, Op. 36 is more unified and compelling. It also plays a lot more like chamber music: for instance, there are few passages in which several instruments are heard in unison or octaves. Of interest is the fact that Brahms used a musical code to assuage his feelings after his broken engagement with a lady named Agathe von Siebold. In the opening the notes spell out her name A-G-A-H-E (where H is the standard German notation for the key of B natural, and a suspended D beneath the melody stands for the missing T). A final three-note motto A-D-E (*ade*, "farewell") writes *finis* to the story. There is a certain confessional mood at work in this movement, with shifting tonalities, caused by the viola striking up changing notes between open and stopped strings, thus helping to keep things harmonically off-balance. This is succeeded by a second subject of remarkable beauty.

The next movement, Allegro non troppo, is a Scherzo with a vigorous Trio. It is succeeded by the slow movement, a Poco Adagio with stacked fourths that possesses an unusual emotional range. It takes the form of a set of variations in the relative key of E minor, sometimes keening, at other times almost bleak, before a mood of gentle wistfulness, warmth, and beauty asserts itself at the end. A coda in a very positive vein leads naturally into the Poco Allegro finale, songlike and joyful.



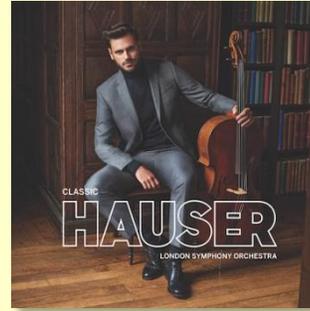
“*Inferno e Paradiso*” – Simone Kermes, soprano
Amici Veneziani
(Sony Classical)

Leipzig, Germany native Simone Kermes once again scores high marks in *Inferno e Paradiso*, a program of baroque and “neo-baroque” arias that employ her impressive vocal attributes to the fullest. More than just an ample tessitura, these include a smooth legato, the ability to extend the vocal line with well-executed decorations, and the ability to create and project a mood of gentle melancholy as appropriate. With the assistance of her own orchestra, the Amici Veneziani, she puts over a program of arias from opera and oratorio ranging from the Italian baroque to some well-chosen moderns who get the baroque “treatment” (of which, more later!) And, of course, she does not neglect two of her own personal faves, Handel and Bach.

An interesting feature of this album is its selection of program items along lines laid down by Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. In particular, Kermes has been at pains to select arias whose texts exemplify the Seven Deadly Sins and their corresponding opposite numbers, the Seven Cardinal Virtues. You might have heard of them: Pride-Humility, Greed-Charity, Gluttony-Temperance, Lust-Chastity, Wrath-Patience, Envy-Kindness, Sloth-Diligence. It’s not popular in modern times to think of our everyday motivations in those terms, with the result that the Seven Deadlies have gone underground where they have the power to cause us all the greater harm for being undetected. (If Kermes thinks things are bad in present-day Europe, she should try America!)

Wrath, for example, is portrayed vividly in the aria *In braccio a mille furie* (Beset by a thousand furies) by Leonardo Vinci, with its outbursts of volcanic intensity. Its counterpart, Patience, is exemplified by Tomaso Albinoni’s *Doppo i nembi e leprocelle* (After storms and rainclouds have passed) in which the sound of the mandolin supports the text describing the moment when the stars appear again after the storm. Which is a metaphor for patience itself, waiting until the time is right.

Pride is a word that has changed in significance in modern times. Far from being a virtue, it was formerly conceived as a state of moral blindness in which one comes to consider himself and his wants as the measure of all things. Ultimately, it is the inability to love others or recognize their needs. Kermes takes the ironically titled



“Classic Hauser,” Hauser, cello, with the London Symphony Orchestra
(Sony Classical)

Hauser is an intriguing phenomenon. In all his press build-up, including the cover of the present album booklet, he is listed only by his last name, always set in capital letters. No one seems to know his given name, although the sender information on the mailing label of the package I was sent, HAUSER.VAS, may provide a clue. (Of course, if you are a celebrity like Hauser, you need have only one name.)

As you’ve probably guessed from the tone of the above, this is the sort of artist-driven album I usually don’t review. Hauser is more of a classical pop artist than he is part of the classical mainstream. His fans (“audiences” is too tame a word) are the sort who really groove on the sensuous sound emanating from his cello, which comes across here as the most romantic of instruments. That fits the proclivities of a child who grew up in the town of Pula, Croatia, where he fell in love with the tone of his cello to the extent that he carried it with him everywhere in the childish belief that he himself would become one with his instrument.

The funny thing is, his childhood dream came to pass, as we can witness from the sound of his cello, now full and fat (no disrespect intended), now lean and sensual, as befits the piece he is playing. His concerts seem to build around the “heart,” usually the slow movement, of larger works of music, or else operatic arias that can stand by themselves as show-stoppers. Further, Hauser views himself as a man on a mission: “What the world needs now are these melodies, this music with heart and soul, performed on the cello . . . because this world has gone crazy in so many ways.” Strange as it may seem, I agree with him in his belief that the classics have the power to reach and move people at a time in history when we really need it!

The present program bears out what Hauser is talking about. It benefits from very intelligent arrangements by Robin Smith that do just what they need to do, holding back on the sound of the London Symphony Orchestra in moments when the softer voice of the cello needs to be heard, or else building it up in magnificent climaxes that amplify the eloquent statements Hauser has taken the greatest care to make.

"Stairway to Heaven" by Led Zeppelin, a song whose central figure is an arrogant old woman who believes she can buy anything with money, as a modern exemplar of Pride. With the assistance of some superb "re-composing" by Finnish composer Jarkko Riihimäki, Kermes transforms a contemporary hit song into a handsome baroque aria

Likewise, Lady Gaga's sexy hit "Poker Face" has never sounded so utterly baroque as in the setting and rendition Kermes employs. The baroque era, of course, knew all about the excess of sexual desire (then termed "Lust") which played well in baroque operas with their many, many heroines who are distracted by love-passion. (As Lady Gaga could tell you, it still makes news!)

Chastity, the virtue exemplified by waiting as opposed to yielding to every desire, is exemplified in this program by George Frideric Handel's *Tu del ciel ministro eletto* (Chosen minister of Heaven) from his Italian oratorio *The Triumph of Time and Disillusion*: (translated) "Though I have lived without regard for God, you who keep watch over my heart bear it now, reborn, to him."

And so it goes, in a program of choice Italian baroque arias by the likes of Giovanni Bononcini, Johann Adolph Hasse, Antonio Caldara, and Riccardo Broschi, names you've probably never heard of but whose arias have the fluidity of feeling and emotional extravagance of the era in these accounts by Kermes and the Amici. And we feel the intensely chilling emotion in Antonio Vivaldi's *Gelido in ogni vena*, the aria sung by a father who has been visited by the ghost of his dead son: "I feel ice-cold blood flowing in every vein. The shade of my lifeless son fills me with horror."

Simone Kermes gives one of her best performances in the aria *Erbarme dich, mein Gott* (Have mercy on me, my God) from the *Matthew Passion* by J. S. Bach, bringing out the simple dignity and the earnest spirit of regret we find in the text. And her florid account of the modern hit "Fields of Gold" by Sting, given a baroque arrangement with vocal decorations and a delicate mandolin accompaniment, is utterly charming.

This is an intriguing album, with surprises, conflicting emotions, ambivalent feelings, and unexpected delights in every track. One never knows what to expect from this artist who is becoming something of a Lady Gaga herself in classical circles! (As a caution, remember the adage: "All that glitters is not bling.")

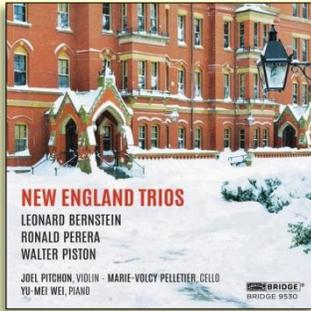
We open with "Swan Lake," which is actually the dramatic music from the end of Scene I and the beginning of Scene II of Tchaikovsky's ballet, as heard in the solo dances of Prince Siegfried and Rothbart, the evil sorcerer. Another Tchaikovsky fave, misnamed here, is "Nutcracker Suite," which is actually not part of the *Nutcracker Suite No. 1* that we all know and love, but occurs in the exalted *Pas de Deux* of the Prince and his betrothed, the Sugar Plum Fairy, at the end of the ballet. In both instances, the music is particularly well chosen and superbly arranged in terms of the rich sound of Hauser's cello and the supporting sound of the orchestra as the music swells to magnificent climaxes.

The program of 26 selections includes such ever-popular gems as Bach's *Air on a G String*, Handel's gracious and touching *Lascio ch'io pianga* (Allow me to weep) from *Rinaldo*, the *Intermezzo* from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Chopin's *Nocturne in C-sharp Minor*, and Borodin's magically lilting *Nocturne*. The arrangements of the slow movements from Mozart's 21st and Rachmaninoff's 2nd piano concertos are particularly effective in adapting music that is not perfectly intuitive for transcription to the cello, bringing out the heart and soul of the music in a way that seems natural for an artist such as Hauser.

There are contemporary pieces, too. Including "Caruso" by Dalla, an affectionate tribute to the memory of the legendary tenor (You will hear it all over Italy these days), plus James Last's "The Lonely Shepherd" and "A River Flows in You" by Korean pianist and composer Yiruma, a piece that was found ideal to accompany a music video of Hauser drifting along the Adriatic, playing his cello

Two vocally-derived numbers, the touching "*Nessum dorma*" from Puccini's *Turandot*, in which Prince Calaf endeavors to calm the fears of the slave girl Liu as he prepares to face almost certain death, and the *Lacrimosa* from Mozart's *Requiem*, both have superb settings in which the LSO Chorus are used to enrich the harmonies. This is the sort of arrangement that puts Hauser's cello in the spotlight without sacrificing the musical values in the original music.

The program concludes in fine style with Samuel Barber's well-loved *Adagio for Strings*. For people who respond primarily to beautifully accomplished, well-supported virtuosity and gorgeous sound, this album is the thing.

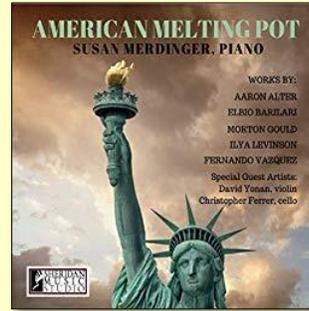


“New England Trios” by Bernstein, Perera, Piston
Joel Pitchon, violin; Marie-Volcy Pelletier, cello; Yu-Mei Wei, piano (Bridge Records)

“New England Trios” contains four rare and delectable works for a trio of violin, cello, and piano by three composers all associated with New England, and specifically Harvard. Three of these trios are said to receive their recording premieres here, which makes this album all the more welcome. Another reason is the evident joy the present artists derive from performing them, which they really succeed in communicating to us.

Walter Piston (1894-1976), the longest-lived of our three composers (*so far!*) wrote his First Piano Trio in 1935, and it proves a heady mixture of 20th century dynamism and baroque counterpoint that earned him the reputation of a conservative modernist. A darkly propulsive, churning figure in the piano drives the first movement, while the second theme draws the violin and cello together into rhythmic unison and a playful dance commences. The second movement has an extended arch structure with a rich, plaintive line given to the cello. The third, *Allegro con brio*, contrasts high, almost maniacal spirits in the outer sections with a gentle interlude in the middle. The fourth movement, described as a “bold, baroque romp,” uses fugal techniques to help insure a powerful finish.

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), one of the most charismatic of 20th century musicians, was a student of Piston’s during the latter’s 43-year tenure at Harvard. His own 1937 Piano Trio received only one performance before the composer shelved it, not to be heard again until it was rediscovered after his death. The neglect is all the more puzzling as it contains a lot of the traits we have come to associate with “Lenny.” It begins with a probing, harmonically ambiguous duet between violin and cello and a rising scale in the piano. A madcap dance of chasing sixteenth notes for the two strings crashes comically and is succeeded by a fugue that has the same fate. Then the piano reenters with a statement of the original material, leading to a peaceful resolution in A. The second movement is charming and bluesy. Its second section has a noticeable Eastern European folk flavor. The finale opens in a questioning mood before the second section intrudes with a bass ostinato somewhere between jazz and klezmer. The music breaks into an ever-quickenning romp, ending in a flourish that presages the future composer of hit shows on



“American Melting Pot”
Susan Merdinger, piano
(Sheridan Music Studio)

“American Melting Pot” is pianist Susan Merdinger’s tribute to both the native and the foreign-born composers and musicians who have made our music culture what it is. That phenomenon is particularly evident in Merdinger’s own Chicago with its rich cultural diversity. In this program, we hear the influence of musical styles from China, Eastern and Western Europe, and Latin America, performed with feeling allied with diligence. Several of these works were premiered by Susan Merdinger herself.

We begin with Pieces of China by the late and much-honored composer Morton Gould (1913-1996). It is in six movements: The Great Wall, Fable, China Blue, Puppets, Slow Dance, and China Chips. From the evidence of these pieces, Gould was not an in-depth scholar of Chinese culture. Instead, they reflect a popular image of China, served up with Gould’s unflinching good taste and style. “China Blue,” for instance, exhibits some influence of a distinctly American idiom, the blues. Never mind: affection is often more important here than scholarly acumen, in music as elsewhere.

Fernando Vazquez (b.1962, Argentina) is heard from next in his Ballade in F-sharp minor, which was premiered in October, 2013 at the Chicago Latin Music Festival. Here, a deliberately light musical texture allows ample opportunity for the composer’s language, both surreal and eclectic, to make its desired effect. The rich mixture of influences provides a venue in which “glimpses of ancient musical prose meet modern chromaticism” (Vazquez).

Piano Sonata (2011), by Aaron Alter (b. Illinois, 1955), subtitled “My New Beginning,” trades on musical styles ranging from the first movement of Beethoven’s “Waldstein” Sonata (where the influence is so subtle one has to listen for it deliberately) to modern genres such as jazz and rock. Alter serves it up in “a big orchestral style [that] projects the full range and sound of the piano.” This is the sort of thing Susan Merdinger loves, so that it is no coincidence the work was dedicated to her following its world premiere in November, 2018.

Elbio Barilari (b.1953, Montevideo, Uruguay) celebrates the passionate spirit of the cowboy of the Pampas region

Broadway.

Ronald Perera (b.1941) follows next with his 2002 Piano Trio that exemplifies his harmonic daring. Writes Perera, who opted to pen his own pithy program notes for the present CD release, "I have employed what is often referred to as 'extended tonality,' including bi-tonality and added-note chords. Sections within a movement may often be distinguished by having their own key center without, for the most part, the use of traditional functional harmony." The rhythmic patterns in the outer movements are incisive and challenging. Short-short-short-long and long-long-long-short-long patterns are divided and re-combined, in the first movement, creating an off-kilter dance rhythm, while in the third the driving impulse is derived from a succession of four quick stepwise descending notes, followed by a short rest and a leap in the opposite direction. (Sound like fun?)

Strongly contrasted to these two formal movements, and indeed everything else in this album, is Perera's second movement, called "the Symphony" and marked *Adagio cantabile e sostenuto*. This, the only vocally inspired music on the present program, was derived from Perera's earlier scene for baritone and orchestra, *The White Whale*, whose text was drawn from Chapter 132 of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. This is the crucial scene in which Captain Ahab unburdens his tortured soul to his first mate Starbuck. It contains a profound longing for peace and the consummation of his weary, obsessive quest for the White Whale, beginning with the line "And the air smells now as if it blew from a far-away meadow," and ending with "Aye, toil how we may, we all sleep at last on the field." The transparency of the musical structure Perera employs helps us understand this mood as immediately as if actual words were present.

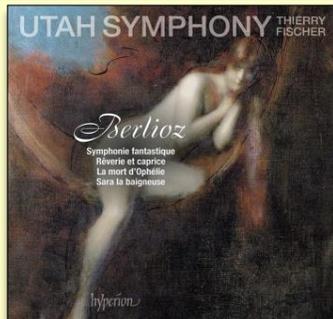
Finally, Walter Piston is represented again by his Piano Trio No. 2 (1966), which is stylistically even more removed from his first trio than we might imagine from the passage of thirty years. The use of color is entirely different. So are the often-shifting meters (5/8, 6/8, 3/4) in the first movement, where the beat is displaced, along with a bitterweat air of seriousness that never quite lifts from this work. The feeling of angst in the second movement is accentuated by yearning chromatic half-steps that leave the harmony nowhere to settle. The harmonic instability persists into the third movement, where the contrapuntal writing evokes a bizarre and disturbing dance.

That may seem like a downer of an ending for the present program, but we should never discount the total commitment our artists, Joel Pitchon (violin), Marie-Volcy Pelletier (cello), and Yu-Mei Wei (piano) invest in their performances of all these works, even, or perhaps especially, the ones with saddest moods. Classical musicians never seem to enjoy themselves and have more fun than when they are able to sink their teeth into a really sad work of music!

of Uruguay and Argentina in his *Toccata Gaucha* (2009), which also received its world premiere by Susan Merdinger. This work shows the influence of such dances as the pericon and the milonga, the last-named a precursor of the tango with its curiously stressed pulses and irregular rhythms offsetting a steady beat. In two parts, the *Toccata* begins in a mood of quiet intensity, as befits its subject and the formality of the genre, but the suppressed fire flares up in the second part.

Ilya Levinson (b. Russia, 1951) honors his Jewish heritage in *Shtetl Scenes* (2005), commemorating a village culture in Eastern Europe that was extinguished by brutal oppression in World War II. It is in five movements. *Forgotten dreams* ("I used to dream about shtetl, but now I am forgetting even the dreams") is sad and nostalgic. *Freylakh* is a lively dance, filled with joy, that starts slowly and accelerates to a high tempo. *Lullaby and Nigun* (Prayer) are heard as counterpoints that sometimes clash and at other times seem to want to answer each other: the first tender and the latter a fervent prayer. *Introspection* is an intensification of the prayer: "Is God listening to me? What is in my soul? Am I a righteous person, or am I lost?" *Chosidl* is a slow dance that builds in energy and tempo, just the right thing to end a diverse and well-balanced suite in which Susan is joined by violinist David Yonan and cellist Christopher Ferrer. All contribute to the color and diversity of timbre needed to bring this suite to life.

In the last analysis, *American Melting Pot* is eloquent tribute to the ethnic diversity that is vital to a country such as ours. A country in which newcomers from other lands have traditionally brought new perspectives and ways of doing things that have enriched us all. The mix may be a trifle yeasty at times, but the end result is a stronger and more vibrant America. It is to our shame that so many of the political figures we have sent up to the highest offices in the land in recent times have been blindly dismissive of this fact of American life. *Phil*



Berlioz: Symphonie Fantastique, Réverie et Caprice – Thierry Fischer, Utah Symphony Orchestra (Hyperion)

Thierry Fischer conducts the Utah Symphony in a well-paced and exquisitely nuanced account of the ever-popular *Symphonie Fantastique* by Hector Berlioz. As familiar as it is to present-day audiences, Berlioz' masterwork was epoch-making when he premiered it in Paris in December of 1830.

For one thing, there was the then-extreme length of the work itself. The present account runs 54:50, which is about par for the course in the digital era. When vinyl records still walked the earth, it was customary to trim a few incidents from the total playing time in order to permit it to fit comfortably on the two sides of an LP.

The problem, you see, is that this was something new: a “programme” symphony, one that tells a story. In casting off the received sonata-allegro form of the classical era with its pattern of theme-development-recapitulation, Berlioz took upon himself the necessity to be continually inventive, with new, contagious material, vibrant themes, and colorful changes in orchestration popping up all over the place. It took a composer of fertile imagination and daring to rise to the occasion, and Berlioz was just that man. He employed a giant orchestra for his day, about ninety pieces, in order to encompass everything he wanted to say, and he used it with amazing economy and resourcefulness.

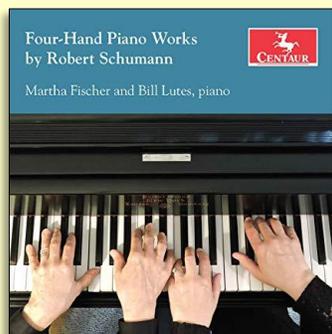
The “programme,” or story, concerns a young artist of morbid imagination who was been betrayed in his love life. In despair, he attempts to take his life with a dose of opium. In the event, it does not prove lethal, but while he is under its influence our hero is subject to a series of vivid dreams, some beautiful but filled with painful longings, and others nothing short of nightmares. The first movement, *Réveries – Passions*, creates the image of the artist's ideal woman in a very long theme some forty bars in length that will recur in various guises all throughout the *Symphonie*.

This was Berlioz' famous *idée fixe* (a term he apparently coined himself) and its occurrences serve to take the place of sonata form as the unifying principal of this work. We hear it again, briefly, in the succeeding movement, *Un Bal*, where it is sublimated in the rhythms of a waltz, and then at greater length in *Scène aux champs* (Scene in the Fields) in a poignant exchange, suffused with longing, between an English horn and a distant oboe. The oboe drops out after a while, and there is a moment of panic: has something happened to change the hero's vision of ideal love and bliss? The landscape, never innocently bucolic, now seems to undergo a change in lighting and we hear the threatening sound of distant thunder in the tympani, foreboding ill.

The ill news occurs with breathtaking suddenness in *Marche au supplice*, March to the Scaffold. In between movements, Berlioz' hero has murdered his beloved in a fit of jealousy, and now he must pay the penalty at the guillotine. To a vivid (and surprisingly economically scored) succession of sensational trumpet calls and drum rolls, the awesome blade falls.

Then, silence and visible darkness. The artist awakens from his previous dream to one even more terrifying: a Witches' Sabbath (*Songe d'une nuit de sabbat*). Berlioz pulls out all the stops in the way of instrumentation, including tubular bells tuned in C and G, a parody of the beloved's theme as a vulgar dance tune by the C-clarinet, and eerie *col legno* scrapings by the the back of the bow on the strings that are calculated to give the listener shivers. A parody of the *Dies irae*, the traditional chant for the dead, sounded in flatulent tones by the tuba, completes the sonic picture of a revel by servants of the Evil One for whom nothing in heaven or earth is sacred.

In the last analysis, Thierry does a commendable job pacing this very diversified work, deftly making his points without losing sight of the overall scope and design. The “extras” in an exceptionally well-filled program (TT=80:33) include *Réverie et Caprice* for violin and orchestra that allows St. Petersburg native Philippe Quint abundant opportunity to display his wam, well-placed violin tone, and two neglected works for chorus (here, a fine University of Utah Chamber Choir). First, we have *La mort d'Ophélie* (The Death of Ophelia from Shakespeare's Hamlet), heard over muted strings and other soft sonorities in a small ensemble. Then, *Sara la baigneuse* (Sara the bather) after a poem by Victor Hugo, a rare example of mirth by Hector Berlioz. An insouciant country girl falls from her hammock into a stream, discards her wet clothes for the sake of bathing, and then gets chided by her companions, not for her shameless display (this was *2me République* France, after all) but for being too lazy to help with the harvest!

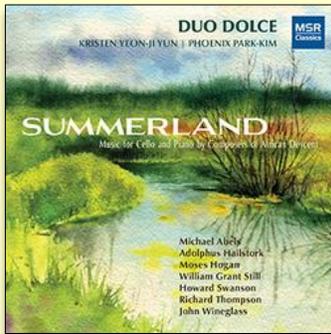


Schumann: Four-hand piano works
Martha Fischer and Bill Lutes,
pianists (Centaur Records)

Martha Fischer and Bill Lutes, Professor of Piano and Emeritus Artist in Residence, respectively, of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and duo-piano partners since 1983, add more lustre to their long careers as performers and educators in this 2-CD album of rare four-hand piano works by Robert Schumann. Did I say “rare”? That’s an understatement. In my own experience as a music reviewer over almost four decades, I have never encountered a single one of the 33 polished gems in this recital, either in the concert hall or on recordings!

All the more credit is due Fischer and Lutes for making the public aware of pieces that, besides having considerable musical substance in their own right, also meet a real need as learning pieces for children, both accomplished beginners and advanced students. Their neglect up to the present time is a mystery that this album only deepens.

The 97-minute program begins with 6 Impromptus, Op. 66, titled *Bilder aus Osten* (Pictures from the East). The descriptive title was perhaps intended by the publisher as a come-on, for these pieces have little if any thematic relation to “oriental,” or Arabic music. One is reminded instead of the musical ethos that inspired Schumann’s alter-egos Florestan and Eusebius, extrovert and introvert, revolutionary and poetic dreamer, in his masterwork *Carnaval*. These six pieces, which Schumann dedicated as a birthday gift to his beloved wife (and world-class pianist) Clara, are definitely *not*



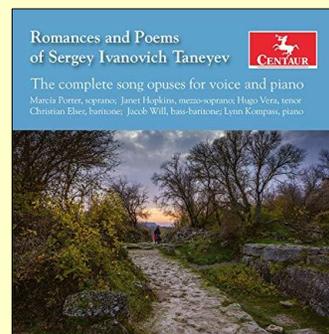
“Summerland,” Works for cello &
piano by composers of African
descent (MSR Classics)

“Summerland,” an album by Duo Dolce, two young women with Korean roots who have experience teaching and performing in America, is a wonderful program of works by African-American composers past and present. It demonstrates (as if proof were needed at this late date) that greatness in classical music is not the sole possession of people of one race or color, but is the heritage of us all. Cellist Kristen Yeon-Ji Yun and pianist Phoenix Park-Kim have the tools and the artistic sensitivity to put over a program that you won’t want to miss!

One of the few names you might recognize in this program is that of William Grant Still (1895-1978), hailed as the Dean of African-American Composers. The warmth of feeling in “Summerland,” Still’s down-to-earth evocation of heaven, is beautifully conveyed to us here, as are the simple dignity and warm sepia tones of “Mother and Child.”

Suite for Cello and Piano by Howard Swanson (1907-1998) presents a fascinating range of forms, textures, and colors in its four movements: a Prelude that explores the cello’s high register, a lively Pantomime with fast interchanges between the players, a Dirge with polytonality and deep brooding ostinatos, and a delightful, highly rhythmic Recessional.

Richard Thompson (b.1960) is represented here by two virtuosic Preludes from a set of six for piano. Infused with jazz harmonies, they prove that “pure” music need not be lacking in warmth and audience



Taneyev: Romances and Poems for
soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, bass
vocalists & piano (Centaur Records)

Recorded at various times between December 2016 and January 2018 at the Recital hall of the University of South Carolina School of Music, these performances comprise an eloquent tribute to the lyrical genius of the great and under-sung Russian composer Sergei Ivanovich Taneyev.

The solo vocalists are Marcia Porter (soprano), Janet Hopkins (mezzo-soprano), Hugo Vera (tenor), Christian Elser (baritone), and Jacob Will (bass-baritone). With the possible exception of the last-named all would seem to be Americans, and they all have long experience as recitalists and opera singers. None would seem to be a native Russian speaker, a fact which makes all the more commendable their grasp of Russia’s art-song genre, known as the romance. Collaborative pianist Lynn Kompass is a vocal coach at the University of South Carolina, where Hopkins and Will are currently on the voice faculty, and Elser is an associate professor of music at Presbyterian College in Clinton, S.C., a proximity that doubtless made it convenient for sharing ideas about the current project.

Taneyev is still surprisingly little-known for a figure of his importance. His interest in counterpoint and polyphony, a product of his extensive studies of old masters from Josquin and Palestrina to Bach, sets him aside from the Russian nationalist current of his day, and his numerous works of chamber music would seem to place him more in the sphere of Schumann, Brahms, and Beethoven. Perhaps only in the three dozen

for beginning students.

We are in more familiar territory, as far as the musical education of young people is concerned, in *Kinderball* (Children's Ballroom), where we find a Polonaise, Waltz, Minuet, Ecosaise (Scottish Dance) Francaise (French Dance), and *Ringelreihe* (Round Dance). All are intended to help children gain an understanding of the importance of rhythm, counterpoint, and color in music, and they make for attractive listening as well.

Zwölf vierhändige Klavierstücke für Kleine und große Kinder (12 Piano Pieces for Small and Big Children), Op. 85, lives up to its name, as it often includes passages with trickier phrasings and more contention between the partners for keys and pedals than we have in Children's Ballroom, inviting the intervention of a "big child" (a more advanced student or an adult) to serve as a guide. Many of these pieces are far from easy to play, being denser in musical substance than the other collections in this program. They include a Bear Dance with a lively drone, a scene by a bubbling fountain (*Am Springbrunnen*), a Croatian March with syncopated measures and imitation drumming, a Ghost Story (*Gespenstermärchen*) and a vivacious game of Hide-and-Seek (*Versteckens*) that were all calculated to appeal to a child's imagination. Two more pieces, Sorrow (*Trauer*) and Evening Song (*Abendlied*) require sensitivity in phrasing to bring out the eloquence of their unadorned simplicity.

Ball Scenes (*Ball-Scenen*), Op. 109 has a similar premise to Children's Ballroom but for a more advanced level of student. Beside the dance genres we found in the other set, they also include an *Ungarisch* (Hungarian Dance), a *Mazurka*, and a concluding Promenade that will recall for listeners, once again, the ebullience of Carnival. As with the other sets, Fischer and Lutes serve this collection up with irresistible heartfelt warmth.

appeal, No. 1 with its yearning melodic motif, and No. 5 a whimsical scherzo that requires a light touch of the pianist.

Theme and Variations on "Draw the Sacred Circle Closer" from *Earthrise* by Adolphus Hailstork (b.1941) combines a polyphonic approach with a simple, spiritual-influenced theme and left-hand pizzicati from the cellist. This creates a panoply of surprisingly engaging moods in a formal work consisting of a theme and five variations.

John Wineglass (b.1972) upholds the Romantic tradition, specifically the influence of Chopin, in his Piano Suite No. 2. "Midsummer Waltz" and "The Journey" are inspired by Biblical stories: God searching for Adam in the cool of the evening (Genesis 3:8) and the return of the prodigal son (Luke 15:8), while "Distant Memories" is a reflection on his own life, conveying a sense of solitude and yearning in its cool harmonies.

Moses Hogan (1957-2003) is here represented by some of his best work in Four Spirituals: "Deep River," "Let us Break Bread Together," "Give Me Jesus," and "Were You There." They reveal the depth of feeling in a composer whose arrangements of well-known spirituals still inspire choral groups and move their audiences.

Finally, "Chris and Rose," by Michael Abels (b.1962) from his soundtrack for the 2017 film *Get Out*, has it all: smoky blues harmonies based on lowered third and seventh notes of the scale, a mood of mournful sadness in the cello, and wind-chime effects in the piano, all creating lasting effects.

Antonin Dvořák, in his sojourn in the United States, was of the outspoken opinion that the music of African-Americans could provide a basis for an authentic American music culture. The present album by the Duo Dolce would really seem to bear this out.

Romances and Poems in the present program, comprising his complete songs for solo voice and piano, is Taneyev's distinctly Russian voice most apparent.

As Taneyev was widely read in the work of non-Russian poets, it is no surprise that the first four songs in this program are based on Russian translations of the great English poet Shelley, made by Konstantin Balmont. Their very titles "The Isle," "Dreams wither in solitude," "Music, when soft voices die," and "The blessed star has gone," embody a longing for a receding past that has vanished forever. That is very much in keeping with the spirit of the Russian romance. Likewise, Canzona XXXII from Dante's *La Vita Nuova* (The New Life) celebrating the life of his ideal woman, the departed Beatrice, embodies an aspect of love that is very much in keeping with the Russian genre.

Most of the verses are by native Russian poets such as Polonsky, Nekrasov, Fet, and Aleksei Tolstoy. A powerful element of longing for a lost love or for escape from haunting dreams is present in most of them, even when expressed in terms of the elemental forces of nature, as with "In the Invisible Mist," "The Dense Woods," and "Not the wind, blowing from the heights." Nostalgia and regret are eloquently expressed in such a poem as Lev Kobylinsky's "When, whirling, the autumn leaves scatter over our poor cemetery, There, where flowers cover everything, You will find my final abode! Then adorn my face with a garland of fresh flowers, which will have grown out from my heart, having been warmed by it. Those flowers are the sounds of my unfinished songs. They are words of love, unspoken."

Finally, there are softer evocations of love and beauty, as recalled in reveries or daydreams (Minuet, As I was enjoying the soft fields of wheat, Night in Crimea) revealing yet another aspect of Taneyev's art.