

Phil's Classical Reviews

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Verdi: Songs
Ramon Vargas, tenor; with Charles Spencer, piano, and Joanna Parisi, soprano (Capriccio)

Mexican tenor Ramon Vargas impresses with his power and emotional range in a recital of rarely-heard songs by Giuseppe Verdi. He is more than capably aided by pianist Charles Spencer, with soprano Joanna Parisi in the duet "Stornello" and in several of the lighter songs in 6 Romances (1845). But mostly, it is Vargas who commands our attention by the sheer authority of his voice, which includes a surprising legato in the quiet moments amidst the stirring songs. We can understand why he is much in demand in the world's opera houses.

Reviewers and scholars have often been unkind to Verdi's songs, admittedly a rare genre for this composer, comparing them to sketches as contrasted to fully realized paintings. That is to damn them with faint praise. It ignores the unerring instinct with which Verdi cuts to the chase, getting directly to the heart of the matter as he uses music and words to characterize both the individual and the emotional experience he wishes to portray. And one advantage the Verdi tenor has in collaborating with a pianist instead of a conductor and orchestra is that he doesn't have to bellow to be heard above the din.

The sixteen songs in this program deal with the usual concerns of



Shostakovich: Symphony No 5
Andrey Boreyko, RSO-Stuttgart (Haenssler Classic)

It's wonderful what a bit of sunlight will do to elucidate a controversial work of music. In the case of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op. 47, a lot of nonsense has been written over the years concerning the composer's intentions. In the present account by St. Petersburg native Andrey Boreyko, at the helm of a very fine Radio Symphony Orchestra of the SWR-Stuttgart, a no-nonsense approach helps clear the air.

My personal take on Shostakovich is that, counter to the impression given by Solomon's Volkov's book *Testimony* (1979), allegedly and perhaps spuriously the memoirs of the composer, Dmitry Shostakovich was a devout believer in the ideals of the Revolution, as espoused by V. I. Lenin. After a very auspicious debut in his 1st Symphony, he lost his way in Nos. 2-4 in an obsessive attempt to write a stirring paean to Lenin and the Revolution. He did not realize at this time that music and propaganda always make uneasy bedfellows, especially when the music is couched in a modernist idiom. The Fifth Symphony was his personal breakthrough, a triumph epitomized at its November 1937 premiere in Leningrad when the conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky raised the score above his head to the delight of the audience during an outbreak of applause that lasted well over half an hour. There was no



Italian Soprano Arias
Maria Luigia Borsi, soprano
Yves Abel, London Symphony Orchestra (Naxos)

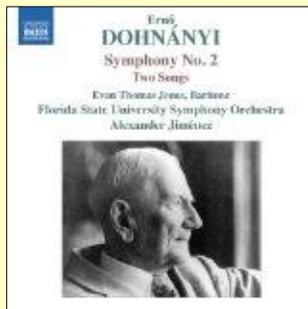
Maria Luigia Borsi, a soprano whose operatic career is still on the ascendancy, shows us why she is considered ideal for the touchingly pathetic heroines of Verdi and Puccini in "Italian soprano Arias." The choice selection allows ample scope for her to display her exquisite phrasing and breath control, and particularly her beautiful tone. She is a very intelligent interpreter of the roles she sings. Though we obviously can't attest, through the limited medium of a CD, to her acting ability, for which she has often been cited, we can well believe such praise from the moving portrayals of heroines in joy, sorrow, and regret that she gives us here.

The recital begins with the first truly convincing account I have heard of Ottorino Respighi's cantata *Il Tramonto* (The Sunset) to an Italian translation of the narrative poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley recounting the sad, patient life endured by a woman who had suffered the early death of her lover as he slept in her arms. Not an easy text to put across, but Borsi does it well.

She likewise presents a range of Puccini tragic heroines. First, Cio-Cio San in "*Un bel di vedremo*" (Madama Butterfly), waiting on a lonely hillside overlooking the sea, for a callous lover we know will never return as her husband. Next,

Verdi and his librettists: love (often despised or betrayed), injustice, and love of country. (In connection with the last-named, "Viva Verdi!" was the rallying cry of Italian nationalists during the Risorgimento, the acronym VERDI standing for "Vittorio Emanuele, Re d'Italia.") "*Non l'accostare all'urna*" is the accusation of a dead man against the lover who betrayed him. "*Nell'orror di notte oscura*" captures the changing emotions of a jealous lover as it alternates between B minor and B major. "*Il Tramonto*" and "*Ad una stella*" are contemplations of sunset and a star, respectively, the last with the sadness of an observer trapped by the weight of earthly cares. "*Il mistero*" contrasts the calm of a misty lake with the seething emotions of a jilted lover. "*L'esule*" is the lament of a patriot who has been exiled from his homeland. All of these songs get right to the point.

Beside these gloomy songs, the afore-mentioned "*Stornello*" duet seems almost frivolous in its implied message: "If you don't care for me, I won't care for you." And "*Brindisi*" is a drinking song, with clear pre-echoes of the famous "*Libiamo*" in La Traviata. Settings of two Latin religious texts, "*Tantum ergo*" and the ever-popular "*Ave Maria*," conclude the program.



Dohnányi: Symphony No. 2, Two Songs, Op. 22 – Evan Thomas Jones, baritone; FSU Symphony conducted by Alexander Jiménez (Naxos)

Hungarian composer Ernő Dohnányi (1877-1960) continues to be somewhat under-represented in the catalog of recorded music, in part because of the sophistication of

doubt among those present that the composer had found his way!

Under Boreyko's baton, the Fifth reveals itself to be a somber work with periods of deep meditation, drawing within itself for reserves of strength that it will tap for the overwhelming 4th movement climax that will ultimately sweep all the cobwebs away with its irresistible energy. Its opening movement is characterized by tentative lyricism played against harsher dissonant rhythms in long-short-long patterns, and tonal ambiguity at the end. We sense this is not the time for the symphony to open up and blossom.

The scherzo movement is in the form of a waltz, nervous, satirical, with a noticeable edginess. The German booklet notes actually refer to it as a *Ländler*, the Austrian cousin of the waltz, and its sweeping motion points in that direction. The elegiac Largo is taken slowly and pensively, with harp, celesta, and various woodwinds making telling points against a spare string backdrop, like voices heard in the silence of a desolate landscape.

Snare drum and tympani, heard sensationally here, help pick up the tempo in a rousing finale that ends on an unmistakable note of triumph.

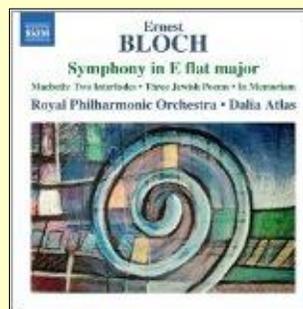


Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade Peter Oundjian, Toronto Symphony (Chandos hybrid SACD)

Toronto native Peter Oundjian, for fourteen years the first violin and only non-Japanese member of the famed Tokyo String Quartet, shows his ability in his second career as conductor and musical director of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra.

Liu, the servant girl who will die rather than reveal, under threat of torture by the cruel empress Turandot, the identity of Prince Calaf in "*Signore, ascolta*." Mimi, the slandered heroine of La Bohème, bids a sad farewell to the happy home she has shared with Rodolfo in the touching "*Donde lieta uscì*" (without regret, she says), and the heroine of Suor Angelica laments the death of the infant son whom she has never known because he was taken from her at birth in the tear-compelling "*Senza mamma*." Borsi has the clue to all these Puccini heroines, as she does the role of Magda in La Rondine (The Swallow), with its sensational upsurge of emotion at the end of her dream memory "*Chi il bel sogno*".

That leaves Desdemona's moving aria "*O Salce! Salce!*" (The Willow Song) as she anticipates her death at the hands of her insanely jealous husband in Verdi's Otello, followed by the hushed beauty of the "Ave Maria." The program also includes the very demanding "*Ebben? Ne andro lontana*" from Catalani's La Wally as the heroine goes out to die in an avalanche (I'm not kidding, folks!) and Lauretta's "*O mio babbino caro*" from Puccini's Gianni Schicchi, an aria so beautiful in its pathos that those unfamiliar with the opera might imagine her serious in her threat to drown herself, and not just wheedling her skinflint father!



Bloch: Symphony in E-flat major Two Symphonic Interludes, In Memoriam, Three Jewish Poems Dalia Atlas, Royal Philharmonic (Naxos)

Israeli conductor Dalia Atlas continues a passionate exploration of the still-underrepresented

his compositional style, which was basically Euro-Germanic rather than specifically Hungarian. (Unlike Bartok and Kodaly, he did not collect the folk songs and dances of the Magyars, or ethnic Hungarians, and showed little influence of their distinctive rhythms and cadences.

Dohnányi's Symphony No. 2 in E major, Op 40, begun in Hungary and revised in 1957 for a successful premiere by the Minneapolis Symphony under his nephew, Antal Dorati, must have taken a lot out of him. Dohnányi himself referred to it as "the last symphony," implying not only that it was to be his last but also the last specimen of the classical-romantic tradition in the western world. The work begins with a musically dense *Allegro con brio*, marked *energico e appassionato* and filled with dynamic contrasts and sudden outbursts from the brass. A shimmering undercurrent in the violins underscores the recap.

The mood is generally uneasy with a strong suggestion of struggle that reflects the romantic ethos rather than a specific reaction to World War II. The slow movement, *Adagio pastorale*, is by contrast lyrical, softly restrained, suffused with a glow that seems to reflect the gently melancholy mood many of us feel as the shades of evening are falling.

The third movement, *Burla*, is rapid and dissonant, with a marching rhythm and a disturbing undertone, punctuated by blaring brass that sound for all the world like someone sticking his tongue out—more like Shostakovich than we think of Dohnányi. All this in just 4 ½ minutes. The 22-minute finale, an Introduction and Variations on a Fugue by J.S. Bach, answers and resolves the conflicts heard earlier in the work, ending with a triumphant affirmation of life. At almost 55 minutes, the Second Symphony will demand a lot of the listener, but it is worth the hearing.

The present performance by the Florida State University Symphony Orchestra under Alexander Jiménez has only one previous entry in the catalog with which one might compare it, making this beautifully

As a bit of a surprise here, the chosen showpiece is Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's venerable symphonic suite *Scheherazade*. Oundjian shows us there's life left in the old warhorse yet.

Aided by the warmly affectionate playing of the TSO and the telling participation of concertmaster Jonathan Crow as the solo violin that is the voice of Sheherazade, narrator of the Thousand and One Nights, Oundjian serves up a sumptuous feast that stresses the sensual beauty and overall effect of Rimsky's kaleidoscopic structure. The timing is a trifle on the slow side at 45:20, mostly because Oundjian is tempted to linger awhile on the opulent beauties that include gorgeous obbligati from horn, flute, bassoon, and harp plus fanfares from trombones and muted trumpet, in addition to the afore-mentioned violin.

The present recording captures the main features of *Scheherazade* that include its ever-fresh scoring and the way musical ideas emerge from enfolding melodies in the most natural way, unencumbered by real symphonic textures and structures. That's important because, as a symphonic suite (definitely *not* a symphony), *Scheherazade* is short on thinks and long on beguiling beauty. Oundjian accordingly does not waste his time on point-making, but takes each fresh new feature *en passant* as it were, the way Rimsky intended.

A final observation: *Scheherazade*: is neither a programme symphony, in the usual sense, nor is it "Mickey Mouse music," in the jargon of Hollywood film scores. It is music for listeners to lie back and enjoy, unbothered by the need to track this or that incident in the "story." The overall impact is everything, as Oundjian's unhurried approach reassures us.

symphonic works of Ernest Bloch (1880-1959). In this effort, she conducts the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in a program whose centerpiece is the *Symphony in E-flat major* (1954-1955). Like so much of his symphonic music, it reflects the immense beauty and might that he derived from nature, whether in Switzerland where he was born or Agate Beach, Oregon where he spent the last years of his life. It is both a vividly colored, emotional work and an exercise in economy, deriving the greatest musical substance from its four movements and 25 minutes' duration. Under Atlas' baton, these opposed elements make for an exciting listening experience.

From the beginning, Bloch uses a pedal point to establish the home key of E-flat firmly in our minds. The music alternates between *Tranquillo* and *Allegro deciso* episodes in this movement, with a naturalness that is the final attainment of a skilled symphonist. The second movement, *Allegro*, is a scherzo characterized by offbeat accents and a rocking motif, while the slow movement, *Andante*, is lyrical and nostalgic, even in its intense moments, with solo flute and viola heard over muted strings. The finale, another *Allegro deciso*, is vigorously conceived, ending in a coda suffused by a tranquil mood.

Atlas shows us another aspect of Bloch's ability to use the resources of the orchestra to stirring effect in the Two Symphonic Interludes salvaged in 1939 from the failure of his early opera *Macbeth* (1903-1910). *In Memoriam* (1952) is an eloquent tribute to pianist Ada Clement. Using Renaissance polyphony and archaic modes, it effectively conveys its emotion with brevity and dignity.

Three Jewish Poems (1913), part of Bloch's self-designated "Jewish Cycle," ranges from vivid animation to restrained grief (occasioned by the death of his father) in its three movements: *Danse*, *Rite*, and *Funeral Cortège*.

nuanced and textured account all the more treasurable. They sound very well in this recording, more than one might expect of a college orchestra, as they pay an elegant tribute to the memory of the composer, who taught at FSU during the last decade of his life. Two Songs, here receiving its world premiere recording, deepens our appreciation of Dohnányi's romantic ethos. Evan Thomas Jones does a commendable job interpreting *Gott* (God) and *Sonnensehnsucht* (Longing for the Sun), settings of lyrics by Wilhelm Conrad Gomoll, a poet inclined to see the hand of God in all of nature.



Bach & Beethoven: "Mostly Transcriptions 2"
- Tien Hsieh, piano
(MSR Classics)

Taiwan native Tien Hsieh moved to the U.S. with her parents at the age of nine and studied piano at the University of Houston with Abbey Simon and Ruth Tomfohrde and at the Manhattan School of Music. Her performance style, combining directness with winning warmth, helps put the music she plays on "Mostly Transcriptions 2" across to the listener with irresistible charm.

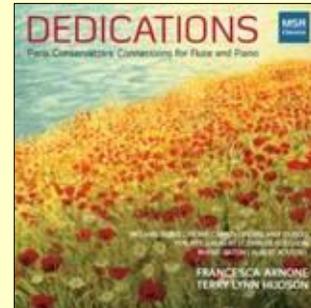
We sense these qualities right from the start of her recital in Ferruccio Busoni's transcription of Bach's Prelude & Fugue in D major, BWV 532. The music sallies forth boldly, grasping the listener by the ears and not relinquishing its hold until the very end of 12^{1/2} minutes of glorious sublimity. From the opening flourish of eighth and sixteenth notes in the Prelude to the jubilant conclusion of the Fugue, Hsieh's exhilarating performance exudes a spirit of confidence and a joyous



Canciones españolas
Danielle Talamantes, soprano;
Henry Dehlinger, piano
(MSR Classics)

Canciones españolas (Spanish songs) marks the recording debut of rising soprano Danielle Talamantes. More than a little mystery surrounds this attractive new voice, as there is a lack of vital information on all the internet websites concerning her nationality or birthplace (you can forget about birth *date*: for singers, that is more jealously guarded than State Department secrets). We don't know who she studied under or where she completed her education. The earliest fact we are given about her is that she made her Carnegie Hall debut in 2007. Presumably, she appeared in this world, like Venus or Minerva, fully grown.

All kidding aside, Talamantes has the perfect voice for this recital – intelligent, well-modulated, and sensitive to all the emotions in a program of highly nuanced songs by three of Spain's greatest composers: Enrique Granados, Manuel de Falla, and Joaquín Turina. From the very beginning of the program, *La Maja y el Ruiseñor* (The Maiden and the Nightingale) from Granados' opera *Goyescas*, with the brief but eerily effective piano introduction by accompanist Henry Dehlinger setting the nocturnal scene, we know we are in for a rare experience in lyrics that speak eloquently, as only Spanish songs can, of the amorous longing, joy and despair of those who fall in love. "O, love is like a flower," Granados tells us in the aria at the head of the program, "A flower at the mercy of the sea," and we hear this message in various guises in



"Dedications: Paris Conservatoire Connections for Flute and Piano"
Francesca Arnone, flute; Terry Lynn Hudson, piano
(MSR Classics)

Francesca Arnone, internationally famed flutist who studied at the Oberlin and San Francisco Conservatories and the University of Miami and is now professor at Baylor University, presents a very provocative and sensuously lovely recital focused on flute music written by, influenced by, and intended for figures associated with the Paris Conservatory. These are not competition pieces, as we might have imagined, but real flute and piano repertoire that brings out the finest qualities of the instrument. As such, they deserve to be heard more often than they currently are.

I wasn't kidding when I implied the rarity of the music heard here. Without exception, I'd heard not one of the items on this program in my 30 years as a reviewer. Only Charles Koechlin, Albert Roussel, and Philippe Gaubert were at all familiar, whereas the other composers – Pierre Camus, René-Emmanuel Baton, Mélanie Bonis, and Pierre Max Dubois – were not even known to me, much less names to conjure with. Yet all wrote works to glorify the instrument that Koechlin described as "the light of the orchestra." My personal favorite in the present recital? It typically depends on which piece I've heard most recently. The abilities of the flute to produce subtle over- and undertones of color, breathlessly flowing melodies, rich and exotic chromatic passages, arpeggios, and degrees of light and shade are explored in a program that, at 70 minutes, actually seems too short

exploration of Bach's contrapuntal writing that is never dry but always filled with fresh life and meaning.

I liked her account of Franz Liszt's transcription of Bach's Prelude & Fugue in A minor, BWV 543 almost as much as I did the Bach-Busoni. More straightforward and less virtuosic than Busoni, Liszt still realized remarkable character and accessibility by transferring the pedal part to the hands and preserving Bach's rich sonority and strong counterpoint. From the flamboyant opening of the Prelude to the electrifying conclusion of the Fugue, Hsieh captures the spirits of both Bach and Liszt.

Hsieh does this so well, in fact, that she made a believer of me where the art of Bach transcriptions is concerned. It was a genre to which I'd paid scant attention in the past. But she made me realize what a masterful transcription, and the intelligence to realize it in actual performance, can do to bring out the unsuspected beauties in the original.

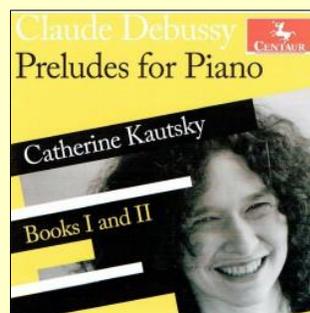
These beauties abound in the rest of a treasurable program that includes Liszt's transcription of Beethoven's pathbreaking song cycle *An de ferne Geliebte* (To the Distant Beloved), Busoni's of Bach's chorale prelude "I cry to Thee, Lord Jesus Christ," and Alexander Siloti's of Bach's Adagio from Violin Sonata No. 5, BWV 1018, with its rich harmonies and arabesques.

The program concludes with an indescribably beautiful account of Beethoven's Sonata No. 32, in which Hsieh has uproarious fun with the stomping syncopations that erupt suddenly in the last movement – a moment which must have utterly flabbergasted Beethoven's original audiences. (My pet name for it is "Ludwig's boogie-woogie.") Hsieh's chosen instrument, a Fazioli Concert Grand with an impressively deep and wide compass in the bass, fits her artistic profile well.

his seven *Canciones amatorias* that follow it.

Falla comes next, with 7 Popular Spanish songs (*Siete Canciones Populares Españolas*) that are, typically, as much dances as they are songs, ranging in tone from the playfulness of a woman chiding her fickle lover in *Seguidilla murciana* ("I compare you to money / that passes / from hand to hand, / which in the end is wiped out, / and, believing it to be fake, / no one takes it!") to the anguished lover's complaint in *Polo*: "Love be damned, damned, / and damn him who made me understand it! / ¡Ay!"

Last, we have *Tres Arias* by Turina, three songs in which Talamantes' sensitivity to mood and nuance is put to maximum advantage. These songs, works of the same exalted high imagination as the composer's Fantastic Dances, also contain such moments of irresistible charm as the fisherman's song to his sweetheart (*El Pescador*): "Get into my little boat, / my sweet beloved beauty, / let the shadowy night / be brightened by your face."

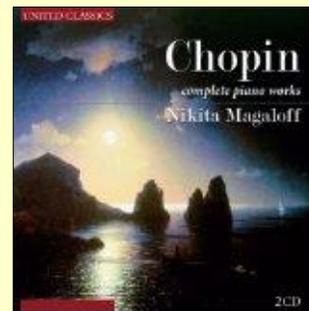


Debussy: Preludes, Books I, II
Catherine Kautsky, piano
(Centaur Records)

American pianist Catherine Kautsky expresses her love of things French, and the impressionistic music of Claude Debussy in particular, in a provocative new Centaur release of the complete Preludes, Books I and II. She shows a nice feeling for rhythm, timing, and dynamics in general, and especially for Debussy's fascination with chromatic scales and tone colors.

and you will soon want to encore it.

It is easy to point out Arnone's contribution to the success of this recital because of the sheer beauty of her instrument. But listen a little closer and you will hear the vital role Hudson plays in a piano role that is never "mere" accompaniment. That is especially true of the Gaubert *Deuxième Sonate*, where the piano is given numerous opportunities to sing the melody while the flute joins it in gorgeous Puccini-like octaves.



Chopin: Complete Nocturnes 1-21
Nikita Magaloff, piano
(United Classics)

These are the classic recordings of Chopin's luminous Nocturnes, made by the late St. Petersburg, Russia-born pianist Nikita Magaloff (1912-1992) in the sonically gracious acoustical setting of Amsterdam's Concertgebouw in September, 1974. They are notable for having been the first complete recording of the 21 Nocturnes. Even more, they are overwhelmingly beautiful accounts of these works in a genre in which Chopin's poetic genius appears in its purest form. Magaloff approached Chopin without a trace of cheap sentimentalism or late-romantic preconceptions. These are recorded testaments of an artist who has been described, not without reason, as a true "apostle" of Chopin.

More than in any other genre, Chopin "owns" the nocturne. His secret, like that of all geniuses, was simplicity itself. He kept a steady accompaniment, often in arpeggios or broken chords, in the left hand while gradually unfurling an unforgettable songlike melody in the right. These gorgeous melodies,



Tchaikovsky: Romances
 Natalia Petrozhitskaya, soprano;
 Dmitri Zuev, baritone; Antonina
 Kadobnova, piano (Melodiya)

Melodiya, the once almost moribund Russian label that had not released new recordings in almost 20 years, has taken on a new look and a new purpose as it celebrates its 50th year. Typical of the encouraging trend at Melodiya is this great new CD of Tchaikovsky romances (songs) by Moscow Conservatory graduates Natalia Petrozhitskaya, soprano; and Dmitri Zuev, baritone. Given the revival of interest in the composer's songs, it couldn't have come at a better time.

Russians themselves will tell you that song is the glory of their nation. For their emotional expression, color and sheer beauty, the best Russian songs transcend the obvious language barrier and reach out to the world. That is particularly true of Tchaikovsky, whose sensitivity to the poetic text, as shown in these performances, was unerring. A song such as *Wait!* will serve to make the point about the way the songs get right to the heart of the matter: "Wait! Why must you hasten? Life is speeding like an arrow. You will have time for saying good-bye when the rays of the east are fiery red, but will we ever see another night like this?"

Again, As Before, Alone captures another aspect of love, the sadness of separation, as pictured by the nocturnal setting: "A poplar reflects in the window, lit up by the moon. It seems to gaze at the panes of the window. It whispers to the leaves. The stars are bright in the heavens. Where are you now, sweet one?"

As is well known, Debussy premiered the two books of Preludes in 1910 and 1913 as a manifestation of the French *élan* in music. Unlike the Preludes of Chopin, there is no sequence of keys informing the organization of these 24 pieces, and consequently no compelling reason to play them in order. Most pianists typically perform a choice selection of 3 or 4 in a given recital, depending usually on one's personal affinity or interpretive gifts. As a broad generalization, the Preludes in Book I are more sensually descriptive, while those of Book II, in which Debussy was more avant-garde in his exploration of dissonant harmonies and tonal vagaries, can make them more difficult to grasp.

The other thing a performer needs to be aware of is the tendency of so many pianists to view Debussy's piano music as just so many charming pastel sketches, without troubling to delve into the deeper, sadder implications beneath the surface. Granted, the absence of physical activity plus the tonal ambiguities in pieces with such descriptions as *Voiles* (Sails, or Veils) *Brouillards* (mists) and *Feuilles mortes* (Dead Leaves) doesn't help an interpreter much, though Kautsky does an excellent job with *Des pas sur la neige* (Footsteps in the Snow), in which the drear harmonies and slow progress led me to picture someone returning sadly from a rendezvous in which he (or she) had been "stood up."

Other Preludes lend themselves more readily to colorful, vigorous interpretations: *Les collines d'Anacapri* (The Hills of Anacapri), for example, evoking someone tramping happily across the same little hills on a fine day, or "General Lavine," the whimsical portrait of a circus entertainer doing a cakewalk. I'd never liked "Homage to S. Pickwick" before hearing Kautsky's performance, in which you can experience the implied gentle irony in the bombastic quotation of "God Save the King" with its occasional wrong notes as Debussy's affectionate depiction of the famous

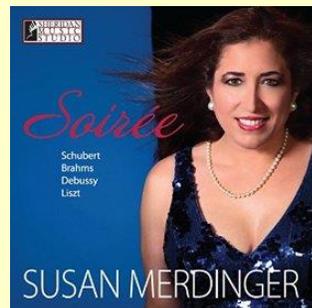
typically as unhurried as Magaloff takes them here, are vocal in nature, showing the influence of the bel canto arias of Vincenzo Bellini, an Italian operatic composer whom Chopin greatly admired. They are in ternary (i.e., three-part) form, with a contrasted middle section, sometimes moody or turbulent in character as are the Nocturnes in C-sharp minor, Op 27 No. 1 and D-flat major, Op. 27, No. 2.

As did other Chopin interpreters, Magaloff never presented a genre in its entirety in any recital, usually playing a choice selection of three nocturnes or waltzes in a given evening to avoid saturating his audiences with pieces in three-part form. That is not to imply that the Chopin Nocturnes are formulaic in any way, or that Nikita Magaloff's interpretations are "off the shelf."

Quite the contrary. There is great variety in these pieces. Magaloff was particularly well attuned to the various ways in which the composer used counterpoint to create tensions that are dispelled by moments of relaxation, the contrast that gives rise to Chopin's unique magic. His pedaling, particularly in the bass, is just the right amount Chopin requires, lending an aura of drama to the increased emotional density of the melody. These performances have not dated in the least in the 40 years since Magaloff recorded them. They remain, for all time, an inspiration for other pianists to aspire to.

Included here are seventeen songs with eight each distributed to Zuev and Petrozhitskaya and a duet, *Tears*, in the center of the program. Petrozhitskaya's voice is radiantly beautiful, capably of soaring to exalted heights with apparently seamless ease in such songs as *If Only I Had Known* and *Was I Not a Little Blade of Grass in the Meadow?* Zuev's solid, honest baritone compels respect in *Why?* set to a Russian translation of the lyric by Heinrich Heine, and *Don Juan's Serenade* (Aleksey Tolstoy).

And let's not forget the contribution of pianist Antonina Kadobnova, as Tchaikovsky's piano parts are seldom "mere" accompaniment. In a song such as *The Love of a Dead Man*, the setting of a remarkable poem by Mikhail Lermontov, the piano carries on for a number of measures amounting to more than half a minute's duration with an answer for the mood of anguish and desire for oblivion in the baritone's song. A wonderful moment!



character of Dickens. And her account of *La Cathédrale engloutie* (The Sunken Cathedral), its deep sonorities reaching down below the lowest C on the keyboard, brings out all the power, majesty, and mystery of Debussy's conception.

"Soirée," Music of Schubert, Brahms, Debussy, Liszt
Susan Merdinger, piano
Sheridan Music

American pianist Susan Merdinger reveals her love of color and palpable musical substance in a program that includes the music of four composers with very different artistic aims. Performing on a Steinway D, she throws herself into the music of Schubert, Brahms, Debussy and Liszt with her customary abandon, not neglecting the qualities of form, style, and nuance that make these composers what they are. It has always puzzled me why this artist has not become a household name in America by now – a mystery the present recital only deepens.

The recital begins with the Sonata in B major, D575 by the 20-year old Franz Schubert. This 20-minute work plays much like a classical era sonata, but with differences that would soon become major landmarks as Schubert's career progressed. In Merdinger's hands, the lyricism has a wonderfully natural bloom in all the movements, revealing an easy spontaneity and innocence we do not find as readily in the composer's later works. It is genial without lapsing into sentimentality. One would have to look hard for any passages that probe the darker side of life in this music that continually expresses a feeling of *gemütlichkeit*, a German word that conveys cheerfulness, peace of mind, and a sense of belonging and unhurriedness, qualities that would become rarer in Schubert's later music.

Brahms shows himself less at peace with the world in the first of his Two Rhapsodies, Op. 79. With the heightened intensity of its very opening, Rhapsody No. 1 in B minor makes a nice contrast to the more genial reflectiveness of No. 2 in G minor. Both possess abundant lyricism and reflect the vivid beauties of nature and the seething emotions of middle life (Brahms was 46, and was vacationing at the lakeside resort of Pörtlach when he composed them). Filled as it is with big chords, leaping arpeggios, parallel thirds and sixths, and rich harmonies, this is very romantic music indeed. Merdinger captures its glowing beauty, power, and vitality without letting the emotional content run away with her.

Debussy's three Estampes (block prints) reveal the impressionists composer at his most quintessential. In their delicate play of sound, color and reflections of light, the outer pieces *Pagodes* (Pagodas) and *Jardins sous la Pluie* (Gardens in the Rain) are filled with sensual beguilement and pleasant illusion as they create images of a temple reflected in water and the impetuous falling of a sudden, brief thundershower. The middle movement, *La Soirée dans Grenade* (Evening in Grenada), with the insistent pulsing of its habanera rhythms, is the high point of the program, to which it lends its title.

Finally, the two Liszt selections provide Merdinger the opportunity to really "take it big," something for which she is temperamentally inclined. The composer's Concert Paraphrase of *Rigoletto* captures all the excitement of Verdi's opera in just 8^{1/2} minutes, including the elements of love, callous flirtation and anguish in the famous vocal quartet from Act IV. Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12 in C-sharp minor, with its alternation of deeply passionate slow moods and pulse-quickening fast dance music, has always been one of the world's favorite Liszt showpieces. Susan Merdinger shows us *why*.