

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

November, 2017



Vivaldi: Four Seasons + Mozart: Violin Concerto No. 5
Henryk Szeryng, Südwestdeutsches Kammerorchester
Pforzheim (SWR Music)

From the vaults of one of Germany's premiere broadcasting organizations comes a real historical treasure: Henryk Szeryng playing and conducting Vivaldi's Four Seasons and Mozart's Fifth Violin Concerto. The digital remasterings of the original analog tapes of the 07.12.1969 live performances are first-rate, as we should expect of one of Europe's best sound studios. They capture a great artist who was then still at the peak of his mastery of the bow.

As old-time record collectors know, Henryk Szeryng was one of a select number of the world's great violinists at a time when magnetic recording tape and vinyl LP processing had made it possible, for the first time, for home listeners to hear great music in sound that was something like the real thing. There were Milstein, Menuhin, Oistrakh, Kogan, Francescatti, and Stern – to use only the fingers of an audiophile's right hand. In addition, audiences expected every violinist in this class to have his own recognizable style, so that it was possible to distinguish one artist from another on an LP record, sight unseen.

That is certainly the case with Henryk Szeryng in these 1969 recordings. His over-the-top performance style marks his account of the Vivaldi Seasons as like none other. He takes this now-venerable but then hot-off-the-press classic that had only just been rediscovered and recorded since the Second War, with a verve that would doubtless have pleased Vivaldi, who was reputed to have been quite a risk-taker himself. His climaxes are really big, his staccato electrifying, his legato smooth and absolutely flawless. With his accomplished tenuto, he bridges over every obstacle in the way of abrupt contrasts and sudden bow changes.

In music as in war, when you go over the top you expect the other fellows to follow close behind you. The players in this orchestra must have been panting with exhaustion by the end of Winter! In fact, I found myself



Schumann: Fantasiestücke, Op. 12; Intermezzo, Op. 4;
Four Klavierstücke, Op. 32 - Irina Chukovskaya, piano
(Dux)

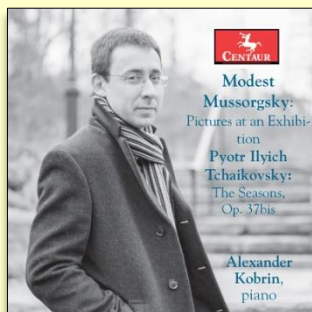
Russian pianist Irina Chukovskaya gives a terrific recital of pieces by Robert Schumann, combining warmth, passion, and an all-encompassing technique. More than in most Schumann recitals, Chukovskaya really puts herself imaginatively into the heart and mind of this composer, enabling us to gauge his importance, not only for the music of his day, but for all the future of the Romantic Era. Included are the 6 Intermezzi, Op. 4; the 8 Fantasiestücke, Op. 12; and 4 Klavierstücke, Op. 32.

First, the tantalizing question: just what exactly *is* an intermezzo (plural *intermezzi*)? Originally, it meant a musical interlude played between the acts of an opera to provide a pleasant backdrop while the audience milled about conversing with their fellow concertgoers. But that has no bearing on what we hear in intermezzi of Schumann, and Brahms after him, and so that association of the word is best forgotten. Essentially, the piano intermezzo is a short, pithy character piece with complex, often turbulent music requiring virtuosity of the performer, surrounding a quieter, softer center in which the emotion of the piece – yearning for love, solace for pain or loss, a desire for peace of mind, or whatever – comes to the fore. One unifying feature, especially prominent in the Fantasiestücke, is Schumann's frequent use of open pedal, creating a blurred backdrop in front of which the central musical image may emerge with greater clarity.

Though all of the pieces on this program can be described as intermezzi, the actual name is only used for the six pieces of Op. 4. All these are marked "Allegro" or "Presto," and correspond in mood and affect to a curious entry in Schumann's diary (July 22, 1832) that "a humorous intermezzo – actually a cry from the depths of the soul – follows me day and night." In the second intermezzo, marked *Presto e capriccioso*, the lyrical middle section recalls Gretchen's song from Goethe's *Faust*: "*Mein Ruh' ist hin*" (My peace is gone).

attending more to the sheer dynamism of the performances of these Four Seasons than I did Vivaldi's charming musical program (which the composer himself took pains to impress upon us by appending four sonnets, illustrating in words the pictures he strove to convey in music). In terms of point-making, these Stuttgart performances are not quite up to the beautifully nuanced recordings Szeryng made for Philips with the English Chamber Orchestra in January of the same year, which makes for some interesting comparison listening.

In his account of Violin Concerto No. 5 in A major, K219, heard on the present SWR release, the emphasis, by contrast, is on the careful weighing of opposing forces in a way that makes Mozart's *opera buffa* style so effective. In the balance of emotion and restraint, Mozart was the supreme master, and Szeryng was well aware of this. For me, the highlight in this performance, even more than the inspired cadenza (presumably Szeryng's own, as Mozart left none in writing) is the Adagio, in which the violin enters into an intimate and eloquent dialog with the orchestra. In this instance, the sheer beauty of Szeryng's account virtually left me in tears (a dangerous state of mind for a critic!) The finale, with its sudden time change from 3/4 to 2/4 and unison crescendos, shows his artistry as both soloist and conductor.



Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition + Tchaikovsky: The Seasons – Alexander Kobrin, piano (Centaur Records 2-CD slimline)

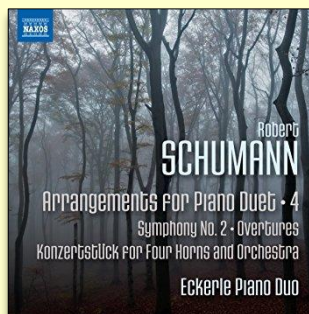
On a specially-priced 2-CD package, Alexander Kobrin gives us very memorable accounts of Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky's *The Seasons* and Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The Moscow native, who currently is on the faculty of the Eastman School of Music in addition to a busy international career, does a beautiful job of characterizing both albums of music, assigning each piece its proper weight and significance.

That's more important than you might think because *The Seasons* and *Pictures* are two different kinds of animals. Almost from the very beginning, other musicians have recognized the breadth and symphonic scope of Mussorgsky's masterpiece, and successful attempts to orchestrate them have been numerous. Tchaikovsky's *Seasons*, on the other hand, were character pieces, published in monthly installments in a

The fifth piece, *Allegro moderato*, seems to epitomize the entire set in its contrast between outer and inner worlds, the intrusive energy and rhythms of the outer world versus the yearning of the romantic dreamer.

Fantasiestücke (Fantasy Pieces) has always been among my favorite Schumann. It begins with *Des Abends* (Evenings) in which we can almost visualize the light of the softly gathering dusk in an interplay of melody and accompanying rhythm, sometimes called "sound flickering," that Chukovskaya reproduces to perfection. *Aufschwung* (Soaring) is a flight of the imagination with undertones of anxiety lest we should fall to earth. *Warum* (Why?) is filled with all the emotional conflict and sadness Schumann himself must have felt in the 1830's as he tried repeatedly and without success to obtain the permission of his future wife's father for her hand in marriage^{iv}. *Grillen* (Whims) are a playful mixture of the whimsical and grotesque. *In Der Nacht* (In the Night), on the other hand, plunges us into a virtual maelstrom of tempestuous rhythms and fragments, in the midst of which a comforting theme, perhaps the image of one's beloved, emerges. In *Traumes Wirren* (Tangled Dreams) the trick is to avoid tangled fingers as you encompass breathtakingly quick changes in tempo and mood, requiring the very quick and smooth adjustments in hand position that Irina applies here. As a compelling whole, this is as fine an account of these Fantasy Pieces as I've ever heard.

Finally, 4 Klavierstücke, Op. 32, pay homage to the baroque and Bach in particular^v. All of them except III: Romanze, a lovely Mendelssohnian song without words, are based on baroque forms, taken bigger than life. I: Scherzo contrasts impatient rhythms with dreamy nostalgic music. II: Gigue is a fugue based on the rhythms of a galumphing jig, which is not something a baroque composer would have attempted. IV: Fughetta is a limping fugue whose counterpoint is hidden in a mix of involved harmonies with sad implications. Chukovskaya plays these pieces for all they are worth.



Schumann: Arrangements for Piano Duo: Symphony No. 2, Overtures - The Eckerle Piano Duo (Naxos)

Mariko and Volker Eckerle, Japanese-German spouses who have been performing professionally as a duo since 2006, bring out their fourth installment of arrangements for piano four-hands of music by Robert Schumann. This handsome account of four symphonic

magazine addressed to accomplished amateur pianists and intended for home use, though professionals have increasingly taken them up in the past quarter-century. Not surprisingly, attempts to orchestrate them have generally been unsatisfactory.

The pieces in *The Seasons* require Kobrin's deft characterization to bring out their exquisite beauties. The titles themselves provide a clue, and Tchaikovsky took pains to append appropriate verses by well-known Russian poets to each title page. Each piece relates to a month of the year and typical images and activities associated with it. For example, February: *Carnival* bustles with the activity of a Shrovetide Far, while March: *Song of the Lark* recalls the chain of perfect musical tones in the bird's song. May: *Starlit Nights* is usually taken to refer to the enchantment of the "White Nights" phenomenon in the northern latitudes. June: *Barcarolle* evokes the song of a Venetian gondolier, the central episode of which is suffused with romantic love.

October: *Autumn Song*, perhaps the most difficult of all to characterize, is informed by a mood of gentle melancholy, which Tchaikovsky himself was known to experience. November: *Troika* evokes the joy of a ride in a three-horse sleigh down a snowy lane with one's sweetheart. Throughout *The Seasons*, we are reminded that Tchaikovsky was a master of the Russian art-song genre known as the "romance," and also master of the ballet. April: *Snowdrop* imagines the beautiful flower of the name swaying in time to the rhythm of a waltz, while December: *Christmas* depicts another waltz, tripping quietly offstage at the very end.

In *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Kobrin does a superb job with the rhythms and the timing of each tableau, and he manages the transitions between them to perfection. The Promenade theme which serves to connect up the groups of tableaux undergoes subtle changes in emphasis and weight as Mussorgsky's imaginary art gallery visitor moves from one picture to the next. It is quiet and subdued as a lead-in to *The Old Castle*, Mussorgsky's melancholy meditation on the faded beauty of a past that is gone forever. The tableau *Cattle* is given its proper weight for once: this is Mussorgsky's comment on the soul- and body-wearying impact of mindless toil, not the crushing inhumanity of war. The transition from the frenzied bustle of *The Market at Limoges* to the startling gloom of *Catacombs* is Mussorgsky's way of reminding us of our final destiny, beside which all worldly striving is meaningless.

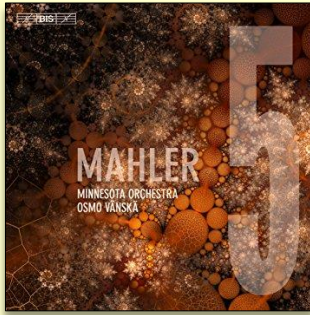
And so it goes, with the changes in tempo and the breathtaking transitions between the final tableaux *With the Dead in a Dead Language*, *The Hut on Fowl's Legs* (a.k.a. Baba Yaga the Witch) and *The Great Gate of Kiev*, increasing in suddenness and dramatic impact as Kobrin carries us through to the glorious climax. Even in this final apotheosis, a central lament for slain heroes reminds us of the impermanence of things, of which the short-lived Mussorgsky (1839-1881) was well aware.

works accomplishes two very important reasons for piano transcription: first, to add some attractive items to a growing repertoire; and second, to permit us to examine thematic and textural relationships in a work for symphony orchestra without being unduly influenced by the instrumental timbres. It is rather like taking a walk into the woods on an overcast day: you can look deeper and see more of the woods when you aren't distracted by the bright sunlight.

For the record, Robert Schumann is known to have been an enthusiastic performer of duets with his wife Clara, quite apart from their ready commercial value as domestic music for amateurs. Not only was he one of the most prolific composers of the Romantic era, but he was also married to one of the great pianists of his (or anyone else's) day. Robert and Clara themselves arranged his Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61 for duet, and the arrangement tells us a lot about the composer's intentions. Though it was completed after a period in which Schumann had been hospitalized for depression, its basic mood is positive, particularly in its aggressively affirmative finale, *Allegro molto vivace*. The presence in the opening movement of a Bachian chorale is a tip-off, casting its influence on the lively Scherzo that follows it. Schumann's later assertion that the Second Symphony reminded him of "dark days" probably relates mostly to the melancholy beauty of the slow movement, *Adagio espressivo*, but even this proves to be a prelude to the life-affirming finale, where the melody takes on a more buoyant character. The Eckerles keep this taut, smartly paced finale moving onward all the way to its triumphant conclusion.

Two Overtures follow. The first, salvaged from Schumann's failed opera *Genoveva*, is remarkable for its tragic mood, reflected in the way three conflicting themes are brought together, creating painful tension and excitement, though in the end a radiant C major stretta heralds a jubilant, happy ending. *Julius Caesar* (1851), first in an ambitious series of Shakespeare-inspired concert overtures that failed to materialize, is dense and ponderous in its texture, which the four-hand arrangement alleviates to some degree. It is filled with jostling incidents leading up to Caesar's assassination, ending at last in a sudden shift to the major in a brilliant coda that seems to refer to the victory of Octavian and Antony over the conspirators.

The Eckerles do some of their best work in the *Konzertstück* for Four Horns and Orchestra, Op. 86, a lushly scored work that was set several times by other hands for piano duo before it was finally arranged successfully (and anonymously) in 1861 and published as Grand Duo for Piano Four Hands. The lovely solo melody in the slow movement (*Romanze*) is the heart of the matter. It sounds quite charming here, and our artists do an excellent job of pacing a work that flows between movements without a break. The transition from the *Romanze* to the exuberant finale is particularly arresting in this performance.



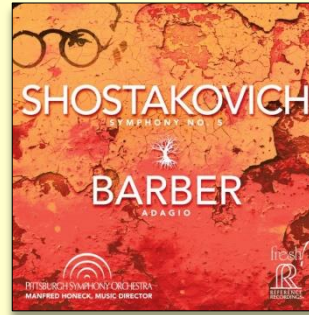
Mahler: Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor
Osmo Vänskä, Minnesota Orchestra
(Bis Records Hybrid SACD, Surround)

Is the Fifth Symphony the most completely satisfying of all Gustav Mahler's major works? It certainly seems so in the present account by the Minnesota Orchestra under its Finnish music director Osmo Vänskä. There are several longer Mahler symphonies than the Fifth, with a total duration of 75:30, but none more intricately scored and with so many cueing-points. Yet all the elements in this work fit into an intricate design and must follow one another with the inevitability and the spontaneity of the change of seasons. If you are its conductor, your cueing and point-making must be precise, but not excessive. Fussiness would be the kiss of death for *this* symphony.

Sound like a daunting task? Not for a maestro with Vänskä's long experience and fine discernment. Mahler calls for a large orchestra with quadruple winds, including 6 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, tympani, 3 other drums, metal and wood percussion, harp, and strings. Yet he scored this work with surprising economy, with the idea that he would always have the right instruments available for what he wanted to say. Nowhere in this symphony do we get the impression of gargantuan excess. In some moments, particularly in the spacious Adagietto, we even have the impression of a chamber music-like texture.

Mahler claimed to have written the first two movements backwards, with the *Trauermarsch*, a slow funeral march in carefully measured time, preceding the second movement, marked "*Stürmisch bewegt, mit größter Vehemenz*" (stormily moved, with the greatest vehemence). The first thing we hear at the very opening is a trumpet call that would have reminded Mahler's audiences of the familiar Austrian cavalry signal that alerted the troops to mount and be prepared to move on. The character of the ensuing funeral march is underscored by Mahler's marking *Streng. Wie ein Kondukt* (Stern, like a funeral procession). These two movements are related in that they share some common themes and follow without a break. Mahler designated them together as Part I of the symphony.

Part II, the key to the symphony, is the Scherzo, marked *Kräftig, nicht zu schnell* (Vigorously, not too fast). This 17-minute movement is no simple scherzo. It



Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5 + Barber: Adagio
Manfred Honeck, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
(Reference Recordings)

At the helm of the Pittsburgh Symphony, Manfred Honeck gives us a breathtaking, revelatory performance of the Fifth Symphony of Dmitri Shostakovich. He does so in spite of a comparatively long playing time (50:47), mainly the result of bearing down in his point making and of his using the same tempo for the finale that was taken at its premiere by conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky and is commonly used in Russia today. The excitement lies in the conflict between gloom, rage, and suffocating despair on one hand, and hope, love, and the triumph of the human spirit on the other.

For Shostakovich, as Honeck is at pains to observe in his excellent booklet notes, this was no hypothetical artistic stance. Survival, in the most repressive days of Stalinist Russia, meant not only finding and preserving one's own artistic identity: it meant survival in the literal sense (or as one of Greta Garbo's comrades puts it in the film *Ninotchka*: "I aspire to live happy and die natural, if you please"). Three of the composer's own friends and colleagues had been sent to Siberia, presumably to forgotten graves, and Honeck surmises that he may have memorialized them in the passages in the Lento movement in which oboe, clarinet, and flute step forth, "almost in the style of an operatic recitative."

I have sometimes been guilty of expressing scorn for those backward children who persist in attending a symphony concert with the orchestral score clutched tightly in their mitts. In the instance of Honeck's illuminating program notes, in which he takes the significant features in the music by bar and by track time, I take it all back. He is at his best in describing the afore-mentioned Lento. Contrary to the purpose of most slow movements, there is precious little warmth, solace, or gentle meditation here. Instead, we have a dire conflict between pain, emptiness, and despair as opposed to an aspiration towards the light, which will only be resolved by the very affirmative ending of the finale. In the course of the Lento, here is a great deal of threatening tremolo, a fate motif that is repeated over and over, shrieking cellos notated in the violin clef, basses throwing intense notes with the violence of hammer blows, dark voices in the lower woodwinds, and other brutal sounds. Only gradually does a glimmer of light appear in the way of harmonic changes and the

establishes D major as the focal key of a work that is ostensibly in C sharp minor. It also includes an immense variety of elements in an intricately plotted structure in which folk and high-art music seem to rub elbows and jostle each other. We hear a delicious Austrian folk dance, the Ländler, with the swaying motion characteristic of a waltz. Mahler subjects this dance, and also the eloquent horn solo suggestive of an alpenhorn that we hear at the opening, to various harmonic and developmental transformations that serve to make the opposing elements work out.

If the Scherzo is the cornerstone of this work, the Adagietto, scored for strings alone, is its emotional heart. The long, sad melody that many listeners identify with love, loss, and heartbreak is particularly moving in the present performance by Vänskä and the Minnesota. Listening to it, we may well believe the legend that Mahler wrote the Adagietto as a “love letter” to his estranged wife. (In the event, they *were* reconciled!)

The finale, a Rondo marked both “*giocoso*” (playful) and “*frisch*” (fresh), includes no fewer than four fugal episodes and a chorale. It concludes in a manic dash to the finish line that seems to proclaim to us, “Let joy be monumental!”



Beethoven: Diabelli Variations, Op. 120
Filippo Gorini, piano (Alpha Classics)

The impetus for Beethoven’s Op. 120 was a call the music publisher Anton Diabelli sent out to the leading Viennese composers of the day to submit one variation each on a waltz theme of his devising. It was clearly a publicity stunt for his publishing house. Beethoven at first showed no interest in the trivial theme, which he termed a “cobbler’s patch.” It was laid out in two four-bar phrases, beginning with a perky pick-up, which are then repeated. It was virtually without a melody, almost as if both hands were playing accompaniment. It was much too self-contained to interest a serious composer.

At some point, Beethoven relented. Maybe it was the quirky, off-beat accents that piqued his imagination. At any rate, he took time from the completion of a major commissioned work (*Missa Solemnis*, no less) to work on what turned out to be not just one variation, but a magnificent set of 33. Ranging from the sublime to the light and playful, his Diabelli Variations demand the utmost from the pianist in terms of rhythm, dynamics,

warmth of increased vibrato.

The finale, *Allegro non troppo*, comes storming in like a Last Judgment, but works its way to a glorious affirmation of the human spirit in the face of oppressive forces, a triumph all the more joyous for having been hard-won. A significant event is the very noticeable leap in the strings to a higher register at about 10:50. Significantly, the work ends in a D-major resolution that restores the sense of wholeness and fullness that has been sorely lacking in the preceding movements.^{vi}

Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* makes for an appropriate companion to the Shostakovich, as it too deals with the need for solace of the human spirit. In recent times this work, originally a movement of his String Quartet and later arranged for string orchestra, has had the words of the *Agnus Dei* of the Catholic Mass set to it. Taking justifiable artistic license in his account of the string orchestra version, Honeck directs the phrasing according to the nuance of the Latin text, “Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.” Again, as in the Shostakovich, we have the urgent need of a suffering humanity. In this case, however, the *Adagio*’s closing without the expected return to the home key tells us that peace is still something devoutly to be hoped for.

In parting, let me add that a program such as this, with so many beautifully realized details, deserves the kind of audiophile-class sound that Reference Recordings gives us here.



Rachmaninov: Piano Concerto No. 2, Paganini Rhapsody – Anna Vinnitskaya, piano; Krzysztof Urbanski, WDR Elbphilharmonie (Alpha Classics)

The wonderful Russian pianist Anna Vinnitskaya, a native of Novorossiysk on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, has made her home since 2002 in Hamburg, where she teaches at the Conservatory. So far, she has mostly concertized in the North German cities and cross-channel venues in London and Birmingham. If she ever decides to storm the musical capitals of the world, she could ask for no better calling-card than the present Alpha Classics CD of Rachmaninov favorites, made with the NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra under the sensitive leadership of Krzysztof Urbanski, who is well-regarded in the U.S. as the music director of the Indianapolis Symphony. Even if you have other fine

and, more than that, the knowing artistry to divine the emotional density and the amount of space and emphasis appropriate to each.

In Filippo Gorini, we find that artist. He has obviously made an exhaustive study of this work, and the result shows. As he describes it in his booklet essay "Beethoven's Sublime Comedy," the Diabelli Variations can be divided into four large arcs. The first of these (Nrs. 1-10) is "of a bright character that leaves little room for introverted thought." Nr. 1, a seemingly unpretentious little march, actually meets the theme head-on, disregarding completely its metre, tempo and temperament and thus setting up the basis for a large-scale work. Highlights include Nr. 7, in which Beethoven creates a comic effect with punch-like sforzandi in the bass against florid triplets in the treble, and Nr. 8, an intermezzo that breaks the tension with a soft melody over gently rocking arpeggios. The climax of the first arc occurs in Var. 10 with its spectacular parade of staccato chords and octaves over suspended tremolos.

The second arc (Nrs. 11-20) is characterized by bursts of energy interrupted by slower pieces, ending in mystery. Beethoven shows his penchant for zestful virtuosity in Nr. 11, an étude designed to explore rapid hand alternations, and Nrs. XVI-XVII, a pair of double variations in which a running note pattern is transferred from the left hand to the right. Nr. XIV, marked *Grave e maestoso* and a striking change in the direction and complexity of the work, is absolutely sublime, like a slow walk through a great cathedral. Nr. 20 has a sense of inner peace at its very center. Gorini describes it as "a slow piece made up of grave chords and impenetrable harmonies." It concludes the second arc in a shroud of mystery.

The third arc (Nrs. 21-28) is given over to Beethoven's well-known fondness for caprice, parody, and (very) broad humor. Nr. 21, alternating energetic outbursts with plaintive features, sets the mood. It is followed by a stunning surprise in Nr. 22 that must have made Beethoven's first audiences gasp when they realized its opening bars were virtually identical with Leporello's aria "*Notte e giorno faticar*" from Act I of *Don Giovanni*, ending, as Gorini puts it, in a sneeze.ⁱⁱ The frenetic Nrs. 27 and 28 conclude this arc with incredible energy.

What does Beethoven have in mind in the fourth arc to top everything we've heard up to this point? The variations here are slow, solemn and dignified, leading up to a conclusion that acts out the drama of the Variations on a higher, celestial sphere. At this point, passion has been spent. Gorini sees Nr. XXXI, *Largo molto espressivo*, as a desperate prayer, a cry of the soul from the depths. It sets up Nr. XXXII, a mighty double fugue that crashes abruptly on a dissonance. After a few suspended chords, a slender, graceful minuet emerges as the final transformation of the vulgar waltz theme, like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis. We are now in the realm of angels.

accounts in your listening library of the works included here, you will want to clear a space for *this* one.

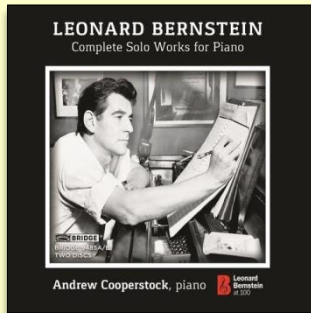
Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18, begins with hypnotically swaying bell-like chords by the piano at the very opening. The salient features of the present performance are careful pacing and a close partnership of pianist and conductor. In contrast to the more strident and gloomy performances we have often heard, the impression we have here is one of a bright, gentle work, instinctively songlike and with contrasting features and a noticeable yearning towards clarity and light. The contrasts are not sudden but gradual, as if we were travelling through a slowly changing landscape in a work that is in no hurry about creating its own space.

The opening movement, motivic rather than tuneful, is characterized by a close rapport of piano and orchestra and also by the remarkable fact that there is no solo cadenza. We finally get a cadenza in the second movement, *Adagio sostenuto*, but it is so subtly written that we might exclaim afterwards, "Oh, is *that* what it was?" That is not to disparage this work, but only to emphasize the fact that musical concerns are in the ascendency over the need for showy virtuosity that a cadenza normally implies. What we do get in this movement is the wonderful feeling of music that steals over us slowly and unobtrusively. I actually felt that my own respiration and pulse had unconsciously become sympathetic with the music – and I do not imagine I am unique among listeners in that respect. The present account of this movement may bring tears to your eyes (it did mine!)

The rhythmically energized finale, which lives up to its advance billing as an *Allegro scherzando*, provides the greatest possible contrast to the previous movement. Starting around the 10 minute mark, it builds through several stages to an impressive climax. Fast, ecstatic, and triumphant, it ends with the composer's four-note motto which scans with the name RACH-man-i-nov.

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43, makes for a dramatic contrast with the Second Concerto in terms of terseness, tension, and sheer excitement – the last of which it possesses abundantly in the present account. It begins, unusually, with the first variation, followed by the theme itself, and falls into three broadly defined sections. They are clearly defined here, with absolutely no fuzziness, as (1) Theme + Variations 1-10, all of which are taken without breaks; (2) Variations 11-18, which function as a de facto slow movement; and (3) a finale which builds up momentum through several stages to a really awesome climax in Variation 24.

The pacing here is quick and assured in the outer sections, slowing down naturally and with occasional pauses in the middle. An ear-catching feature of this work is Rachmaninov's inclusion of the *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath) theme from the Latin Mass, a motif that haunted the composer throughout his life. We hear it first in Variation 7, then several times in the third section, culminating in the final Variation 24, where it



Bernstein: Complete solo Works for Piano
Andrew Cooperstock, pianist
(Bridge Records)

Andrew Cooperstock knows his Bernstein. The much-travelled American pianist is currently professor of piano at the University of Colorado, where he is artistic director of the University's Leonard Bernstein at 100 celebration. In the Complete Solo Works for Piano, he gives us yet another side of this many-faceted figure.

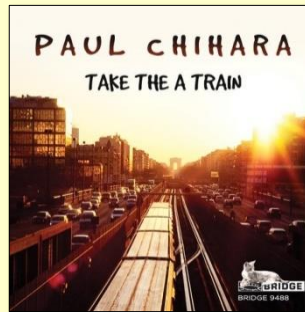
The music in this 2-CD soft pack release is mostly serious and dignified, as the various pieces in the four sets of "Anniversaries" on Disc A reveal. He gets to the point very quickly in these 29 pieces, most of them less than two minutes' duration and a few less than a minute. All seem to depict some essence or vital memory of men and women who meant a great deal to him. Three of them were his immediate family: his sister Shirley, captured in music of irrepressible vivacity; his daughter Nina, in music that reveals a quiet, inner beauty, almost sadness; and his wife Felicia, with a dedication "On Our 28th Birthday (& Her 52nd)" that seems to hint at all the vicissitudes of marriage in the steady, confident progress of its opening, set against less certain, start-and-stop material.

A good many of the other pieces celebrate musicians. William Schuman is encapsulated in music that appears to describe the bone-chisel precision of his musical intellect, Lukas Foss (known to his contemporaries more as a pianist than composer) in the gorgeous full tone of the opening and the sharply struck syncopated notes and chords that follow. The all-too brief "In Memoriam: William Kapell" gives a tantalizing glimpse at unfilled possibilities in its toccata-like brilliance. Leo Smit, longtime associate of both Bernstein and Aaron Copland, is captured in just 28 seconds of wicked musical quirkiness. Most of the names whose friendship Bernstein celebrates here are readily known only to his biographers, but all of them meant a lot to "Lenny." That's as it should be in one's book of memory.

Disc B reveals a more public side of the composer, including his intriguing Sonata for the Piano (1938). Aggressive, restlessly probing material in the brief, pithy opening movement is followed by a contemplative but anxious Largo, more than twice its length, which builds to a climax marked by anger and frustration in its striking forearm clusters. It then concludes (at least it

looms **very** large indeed.

Variation 11, ethereal and subdued, marks the beginning of the central section in which hauntingly elegiac melodies seem to pop up from nowhere like exquisite flowers. After Vars. 16-17 in which the tempo as written seems remarkably slow and subdued for pieces that are marked Allegretto, we are led attacca into the emotional heart of the work, the 18th Variation whose incredible beauty will haunt our dreams.



Paul Chihara: "Take the A Train," String Trio,
Bagatelles, The Girl from Yerevan, Ellington Fantasy
(Bridge Records)

The myriad sides of Paul Chihara are captured in a very attractive release in an ongoing celebration of him by Bridge Records. The American composer of Japanese ancestry is remarkable for his healthy range of interests, styles, and influences. His String Trio (1985), first up in the program, reveals a probing intellect in search of interesting ways to continuously vary and develop its opening material between the three movements, which are played without pause. This is a serious, but never depressing, work that reveals a passion for rhythmic variety and coruscating middle harmonies that range from dark umber to a radiant golden brown, much to the liking of a composer whose own instrument is the viola. The top-notch performers, billed here as the Gavin Trio, are Jesse Mills and Raman Ramakrishnan, violinist and cellist of the Horszowski Trio, and Masumi Rostad, violist of the Pacifica Quartet.

Famed American pianist Jerome Lowenthal obviously has a lot of fun with the fourteen Bagatelles (2010) which he commissioned from Chihara and first performed. The genre, whose name resonates with Beethoven and Bartok, are beguiling beginnings of things that might be developed further, if one desired, or simply cherished for their own insouciant charm and freshness. (Chihara terms them "Twice Seven Haiku.") Allusions range from Schumann's Happy Landsman (here titled "Hip hop farmer") to the popular song "Misty", Brahms' Clarinet Trio, and even a nod to Beethoven in a love lyric to Chihara's own wife (*Für Carol*). Chihara's inventiveness encompasses such whimsies as a "Misty fugue," "Fleeting fireflies," and "Waltz for Kittens" (though the last-named also contains poignant personal memories).

seems to me) with unresolved issues. The inclusion of a single movement marked *Non Troppo Presto* (1937), next on the program, seems to provide the necessary solace, though I haven't checked to see if it fits the key sequence necessary to complete a sonata (or as they say in modern music, "Oh, *that* old thing!") Music for the Dance, No. II (1938) shows the young Bernstein's fascination with rhythm, if little else. An alert and scintillating performance by Cooperstock of Bernstein's piano arrangement of Aaron Copland's *El Salon Mexico* (1936) seems to get to the essence of its wicked, pungent rhythms even better than the orchestrated version with which we've long been familiar.

In other respects, Disc B reveals Bernstein's well-known penchant for humor. *Touches: 8 Variations and Coda* (1980) contains both serious and jazzy elements. *Four Sabras*ⁱⁱⁱ (1950's) are his fond and piquant remembrances of friends he made during his visit to Tel Aviv as a conductor. *Bridal Suite* (1960, pub. 1989) is an absolute riot of disparate elements with titles like "Chaplinesque" and "Interlude: Bell, Book, and Rabbi." As a guy says somewhere in Shakespeare. "There was more foolishness yet, if I could remember it all."

The *Girl from Yerevan* (2014) meshes the talents of guitarist David Starobin, violinist Movses Pogossian, and violist Paul Coletti in a work that embraces the spirit of Armenian folk songs and the rhythms of the Bossa Nova (hence an allusion in the title to João Gilberto's "Girl from Ipanema"). This is an inspired performance that makes the greatest demands of all three artists in the present recording – and *do* they deliver!

Ellington Fantasy for String Quartet (1982) was the outcome of Chihara's working with the Mercer Ellington Band on orchestrations of Duke Ellington songs for the Broadway review *Sophisticated Ladies*, at which time he had the experience of reminiscing with old timers from the original Ellington Band. Mercer, the Duke's son, urged him to write the string quartet we hear in this 2013 recording, played with imagination and flair by the Lark String Quartet^{vii}. The three movements take their initial inspiration from "I'm Beginning to see the Light," "Sophisticated Lady" and "Take the A Train," but Chihara's inclusion of them goes far beyond simple song arrangements. This work has the heft, the rhythm, and the color of a real string quartet, which makes it a perfect item for the Larks to include in their repertoire.

Finally, this album is superbly engineered, edited, and mastered in a way that combines the presence and dynamism of the best of popular music in recordings of classical music. Unless I miss my guess, it should be a likely candidate for industry awards and honors, and is not to be missed.



Mozart: Piano Concertos 25, 26 Francesco Piedmontesi; Andrew Manze, Scottish CO (Linn Records)

Pianist Francesco Piedmontesi, with the superb backing of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra under Andrew Manze, gives an outstanding account of himself in two of Mozart's piano concertos that looked far into the future of music. His warm, beautifully centered tone, poise, and ability to sculpt a musical line and tastefully embellish the same, all contribute to the success of a very satisfying album.

"I had the pleasure of hearing so splendidly all the interplay of the instruments that tears filled my eyes from sheer delight." So wrote Leopold Mozart to his daughter Nannerl on his son's performance of one of his piano concertos on 13 February, 1785. The remark about the interplay of instruments is revealing in terms of one of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's innovations. No composer before Mozart had so successfully integrated the woodwinds into the fabric of a concerto and allowed them to converse with the soloist, as opposed to leaving the burden of the accompaniment almost entirely to the strings and merely relying on the winds to fill in the harmony with a little color here and there. Mozart was clearly pointing the way to the future, even as he was defining the opera buffa style that would soon come into play in the series of operas that absorbed so much of his energy in the last years of his life.

Due to its festive scoring and the fact that it was performed about the time of the crowning of Emperor Leopold II, Piano Concerto No. 26 in D Major, K537 acquired the nickname of "Coronation." It has sometimes been suggested that the piano writing of this work stresses the melody in the right hand at the expense of the accompaniment in the left, thus showing the way to the piano concerto of the romantic era. For instance, no music at all occurs for the left hand in the autograph score of the *Larghetto*, even as a forest of woodwinds rises up behind the piano at one sublime moment in this same slow movement. One logical reason, found in the present booklet notes, is that

Mozart was so pressed for time as composer and performer that he simply extemporized the left-hand part or played it from memory.

Concerto No. 25 in C major, K503, has sometimes been unfairly depicted as everybody's idea of what a Mozart piano concerto should be. Actually, it is a stately, powerfully scored work that allows the soloist a wealth of opportunities for exquisite point-making, and Piedmontesi makes the most of them in the present recording. The confident, often jubilant Allegro Maestoso is followed by an Andante in which the writing for the piano is like a serene operatic aria. The witty, highly rhythmic Allegretto finale, as majestic in its own way as the opening movement, allows the soloist considerable scope for virtuosic fireworks. Piedmontesi, a native of Locarno, Italy, relishes the opportunities for expressive phrasing and choice interaction with the woodwinds in its numerous episodes.

ⁱ Old-time connoisseurs of the art of the bow may want to include the likes of Erica Morini, Ruggiero Ricci, or Berl Senofsky. It was nonetheless a very select circle. (Readers are invited to communicate with the Audio Video Club of Atlanta via this website and submit their own personal favorites. – *Phil*)

ⁱⁱ Gorini takes the words of Leporello's aria, "working night and day for someone who appreciates nothing," to be Beethoven's sly dig at Diabelli, who was always pressuring him to complete the set.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Sabra* (Hebrew *tzabar*) is a colloquial expression that is current in Israel. In nature, the Sabra is a variety of cactus that is known in the U.S. as a "prickly pear." With a thick, spiny skin that conceals a sweeter, softer interior, it came to be an emblem of native-born Israeli Jews themselves, who are said to have the same characteristic personality.

^{iv} Schumann Biographers have often blithely accepted the composer's assessment of his future father-in-law Friedrich Wieck as an ogre. On the other hand, consider the bizarre character of so many of the pieces in *Fantasiestücke*: whatever they may say about the intemperate state of Schumann's mind, what father in 19th Century Germany (or most other times and places) would have wanted to entrust his daughter's happiness to one whose success in his chosen field was so uncertain?

^v From his study of Bach, Schumann took the idea that a bass line, in combination with a melody, could suggest unusually rich chords. That accounts in large measure for the fact that his music is not given to excessive chromaticism, a direction in which Liszt was the pathbreaker. Schumann's harmony was out of step with his time.

^{vi} That at least, is Honeck's assessment, which is borne out by his interpretation at the podium. Keep in mind that the ending of the Fifth has been open to debate. In the Soviet period, creative artists got into the habit of doublespeak for their own protection. Shostakovich certainly did not intend the ending to be a paean to the Soviet regime, as some people then claimed. His oft-quoted subscript "A Soviet artist's reply to just criticism" was, I feel, a sincere acknowledgement of the urgings of many critics that he write music more in tune to the needs of the common man. That he was able to do this, and at the same time manifest his own integrity and musical identity, makes the Fifth Symphony a particularly rich experience.

^{vii} The members of the Lark Quartet are Maria Bachmann, violin 1; Deborah Buck, violin 2; Kathryn Lockwood, viola; and Astrid Schween, cello.