

Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

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Brahms: Cello Sonatas, Opp. 38, 99
The Fischer Duo
(Centaur)

Norman Fischer, cellist, and Jeanne Kierman, pianist, constitute The Fischer Duo. Both of them faculty members of the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, they are currently closing in on their 50th anniversary as a performing duo. That is a high achievement in itself, but the distinguished performances of the cello sonatas of Johannes Brahms that they give here lend added luster to the occasion.

As these two works by Brahms are central to the repertoire for cello and piano, our artists must have been familiar with them from their very beginning as a duo. Fifty years is none too short a time to master such challenging music, especially with the high energy requirements in both works and also the need for the performers to be ever vigilant for sudden changes within the line.

Fischer and Kierman describe the two sonatas as resembling a Janus face, separated by more than twenty years. In the Sonata in E Minor, Op. 38 (1862-65), perhaps the better-loved and more accessible for the first-time listener, the cello writing is in a low to middle register that would be comfortable for an accomplished amateur. From its opening, as the cello melody meanders slowly but with deceptive purpose, supported by exceptionally firm lines in the piano, we are in for enchanted music making. The warm, brooding melody, intoned by the cello in its

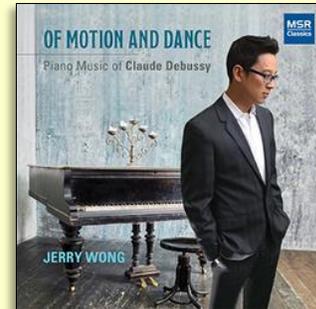


Mozart & Mysliveček: Flute Concertos – Ana de la Vega, flute
English Chamber Orchestra
(Pentatone)

Ana de la Vega, the daughter of Argentine and British parents, was born and lived on a farm in New South Wales, Australia. She fell in love with the flute at an early age, and eventually studied in Paris, where she was the last student of celebrated French teacher Raymon Guiot. In the present program, she has a splendid opportunity to show her dynamic skills as a flautiste in a program of gorgeous flute concertos by Mozart and Mysliveček. The perky young artist, who currently lives in Hanover with her husband and daughter, takes full advantage of the occasion.

With finely applied support from the English Chamber Orchestra under leader Stephanie Gonley, she delves with aplomb into Mozart's Concerto No. 2 in D, K314. As is well known, this was Mozart's re-writing of his earlier Oboe Concerto, for which he changed numerous phrase endings and dynamics in addition to a necessary key-change from C major to D major, making it more immediately attractive and sparkling than the original. Our artist relishes the conversational tone of the opening Allegro as much as she does the pure golden lyricism of the Adagio.

If Ana de la Vega shines in Concerto No. 2, she positively sparkles and shimmers in the radiant measures of Mozart's Concerto No. 1 in G, K313.



"Of Motion and Dance," Music of Claude Debussy – Jerry Wong, piano (MSR Classics)

The celebrated American pianist Jerry Wong doesn't come out with a new album every year, but when he does it's one to remember. His latest, *Of Motion and Dance*, celebrates these features in the music of Claude Debussy, the 100th anniversary of whose passing we observe this year. In a program selected from the Preludes, *The Children's Corner*, and character pieces, Wong has chosen the right pieces to exemplify music "in motion or dance," with all the unexpected twists and harmonic turns that make Debussy what he is.

That includes the slow evocation of ancient statues of dancers at the shrine of Apollo in *Danseuses de Delphes*, Greek maidens captured at a point of stasis as if they were just about to come to life and dance before our very eyes. Contrast that to the lively and quirky caricature in *La Danse de Puck* of the self-same mischievous fairy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A very different kind of dance occurs in *Danse – Tarantella Stryienne*, based on the frenzied dance in 6/8 time that was traditionally caused by the bite of the tarantula. In Wong's thoughtful interpretation, we are left with an unexpected sense of happiness and awe at the simple joy of being alive.

Lullabies are inescapably connected to Wong's guest for a sense of motion by their under-lying rhythm, which has a rocking and soothing

lowest register, is followed by a sensational outburst from both instruments and a recap of previous themes. This work wears its supple architecture unobtrusively so as not to distract from the composer's inventiveness. Its middle movement makes use of the Phrygian mode, imparting an archaic tone.

Notable also is Brahms' basing the main theme of the first movement, and also the fugue in the finale, on Contrapunctus 4 and 13 of The Art of Fugue as a nod to J.S. Bach. Also baroque are decorative notes known as *accacciaturas*, which bridge the 2-octave leap by the cello, set against fortissimo variants of the opening theme in the piano. All of this is so subtly incorporated by Brahms that it doesn't just rap the listener on the noggin and proclaim "Neo-Baroque."

The Sonata in F major, Op. 99 (1886) was written some 20 years later for a professional cellist, and it shows from the very outset in a dramatic sonata form movement requiring enormous energy from the cellist and dramatic tremolos from the pianist. The demanding writing covers the whole registers of both instruments. Displaced rhythms, harmonic adventures into unfamiliar territory, and orchestra-like features such as the stunning pizzicati in the cello set against large piano chords in the harmonically beautiful *Adagio affettuoso*, require the masterful artistry both members of the Fischer Duo bring to the task.

A manic, heaven-storming scherzo marked *Allegro passionato*, and a relaxed, joyous finale with just enough dissonant clashes and syncopations to let us know this is still Brahms, complete the picture of a work that compliments the earlier sonata in what the Duo describe as "a Brahmsian yin-yang experience."

A memorable program concludes with mezzo-soprano Abigail Fischer, accompanied by both her parents (surely, you've figured out for yourself how much of a family affair

Continued in the next column==>

The most remarkable movement here is an Adagio in which the warmth of her flute appears to good advantage against an orchestral backdrop that features muted strings and delicate support from the woodwinds, all helping to set a mood of nocturnal enchantment. The Rondo finale, marked Tempo di Menuetto, is filled with grace and humor. De la Vega has some of her finest moments in the imaginative cadenzas we find in the last two movements. The booklet annotation does not attribute these cadenzas. If they are previously existing, and indeed not her own, she makes more of them than any other artist that I can remember.

Josef Mysliveček (1737-1781) was a Bohemian who lived and composed operas in Naples, dying before his time, alone, poor, and forgotten. So was his Flute Concerto in D, which languished in total obscurity until Ana de la Vega gave this very attractive work its modern premiere in 2010 with the English Chamber Orchestra in a concert that was featured live on BBC Radio 3. Like his friend Mozart, Mysliveček seems to have spoken opera as his native tongue. A decidedly lyrical concerto with dialogues between soloist and tutti, touches of chromaticism, and misplaced accents that add to our interest, it concludes with a rondo-like Allegro molto that exudes the joy and ecstasy of life. Swiftly executed runs and wide interval leaps give our soloist plenty of opportunity to exult and shine in this sparkling finale.

Continued from previous column:

this album is) in beautifully nuanced renderings of the two songs in Brahms' Rhapsody for Alto, Viola (or Cello), and Piano, Op. 91. Her range and vocal warmth are ideally suited to the settings of Friedrich Rückert's poem *Gestillte Sehnsucht* (Longing Eased) and Emanuel Geibel's *Geistliches Wiegenlied* (Sacred Lullaby) after a 16th century Spanish poem by Lope de Vega. Both songs equate the elements and the sounds of nature (night breezes, twittering birds) with deep human emotions.

effect. His interpretation of "Jimbo's Lullaby" from The Children's Corner has all the warmth of feeling, plus the humor, in its subject, a lullaby for a stuffed toy elephant (note the ponderous low notes in the accompaniment). Berceuse héroïque, on the other hand, has all the ambiguity of its improbable name (heroic lullaby). Aren't heroes made rather than born, so in what sense could an *enfant* be considered "heroic?" This piece, ominous and disturbing like a nightmare, is only partially relieved by a peaceful but brief passage.

"The Snow is Dancing" (Children's Corner) makes the strongest possible contrast, in its liveliness, delicacy, and rapidly alternating hand passages, with *Des pas sur la neige* (Footsteps in the Snow) from Preludes, Book II, which evokes the sad image of a solitary figure plodding over a frozen snowscape.

Suite Bergamasque embraces a certain neo-baroque quality, though its named dance movements (*Prélude, Menuet, Passepied*) are scarcely danceable and relate but loosely to the baroque genres. *Menuet*, for instance, works up to an impassioned climax and ends with a sweeping glissando (!) The third movement, the enduringly popular *Clair de Lune* (Moonlight) comes across here in all its accustomed mysterious beauty.

An American dance, the Cakewalk, plays an important part in selections from the Preludes: *Minstrels* (Book I) and *Général Lavine – Eccentric* (Book II), the latter depicting both the studied awkwardness and the deliberate, calculated, risk-taking of a popular entertainer of the day who performed said dance on stilts!

Other dance pieces like *Valse romantique, Mazurka, and La plus que lente* (Debussy's sly dig at the current Parisian craze for the *Valse lent*, or slow waltz), help complete the concept of Wong's intelligently compiled album. An artist who can present with equal persuasiveness figures as diverse as Debussy and Prokofiev (as he did the latter in his earlier MSR release) must compel our admiration.



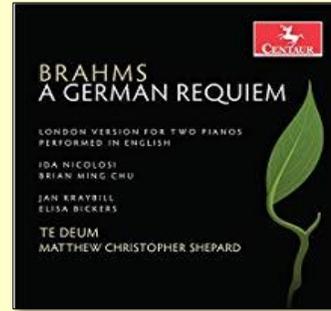
Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde*
 Sir Simon Rattle, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra
 (BR-Klassik)

There's so much to talk about concerning *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth) that one scarcely knows where to begin. Its significance in Mahler's life and work is one obvious place. Reeling from the events of the year 1907 in which he experienced the death of his elder daughter and received the diagnosis of his own ultimately fatal heart condition, he found solace in Hans Bethge's German translation of Tang Dynasty Chinese poems, the publication of which occurred during his own year of crisis.

What Mahler derived from these old Chinese poets, particularly Li T'ai Po, to western sensibilities the most "romantic" of them all, was a sense of the sadness and impermanence of life, the fleeting of youth and beauty as if they were illusions. Against this, we are given the consolation that something in us is not extinguished by death, which does not concern the real nature of things in an unchanging world that is itself imperishable. Dying, then, is, in the words of Schopenhauer, only "a return to the womb of nature."

Arriving at this timeless view of life is something that is worked out in the course of *Das Lied*, beginning with a bland denial of the importance of decay and sadness ("Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod, Dark is life, dark is death) in the two "drinking poems," *Das Trinklied von Jammer der Erde* (Drinking Song of the Earth's Sorrow) and *Der Trunkene im Frühling* (The Drunkard in Spring). It continues right through the poems citing the illusory claims of Youth (*Von der Jugend*) and Beauty (*Von der Schönheit*) as consolations for the impermanence of things. The solution is in the final poem, *Der Abschied* (The Farewell). Here, the speaker tells us he is returning to his homeland – a metaphor for death – and will become a part of the eternal greening and renewal of the earth. The final word is repeated almost as a mantra: *Ewig... ewig* (Forever... forever).

In a work such as this, a symphony with song texts and definitely *not* a lieder cycle, details are everything. Mahler employed a huge orchestra in *Das Lied*, but used it in a highly nuanced way to convey just the right meaning in a poetic text, and not solely for mass effects. Think of the dark sounds of the English horn and contrabassoon that underscore the image of an ape



Brahms: *A German Requiem*,
 Te Deum conducted by Matthew Christopher Shepard
 (Centaur)

From a fine vocal ensemble called Te Deum under the energetic and resourceful leadership of its artistic director Matthew Christopher Shepard, we have a Brahms German Requiem with a fresh new sound and concept. Recorded on April 16, 2016 at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas, where Shepard is associate music director, it presents Robert Shaw's 1998 English language version in a setting for two pianos and an appropriately scaled-down chorus by Brahms himself.

What we have here is not a mere reduction of the version for full symphony orchestra and up to 200 voices, but an intelligent way of getting one of music's masterworks out of the symphony hall and into the hinterlands for the sake of reaching a broader audience. That Brahms himself was aware of its possibilities was good enough for Shepard and Te Deum. As far as its performance in an English version was concerned, Brahms was quite definite that this Requiem was meant to speak to all mankind, and not solely to German-speaking people. (It is titled *Ein Deutsches Requiem* because its verses were drawn from the Lutheran Bible, to which the composer was used to turn for comfort and inspiration.)

At first hearing, I was a little startled by the sound of two pianos, played here by Jan Kraybill and Elisa Bickers, in place of a symphony orchestra. I needn't have been. Based on my previous experience of duo-piano recitals, I should have remembered the ability of these two instruments to replicate the depth, the range, and even some of the timbres we expect to hear in an orchestra. We have here a 2001 Yamaha C3 (primo) and a restored 1926 Steinway D (secondo). They combine to cover a wide spectrum and complement one another beautifully. On second audition, for example, I found, the presence of piano tones instead of tympani as a lead into the second chorus, "Behold, all flesh is as the grass," more acceptable than I had at first.

Under Shepard's inspired direction, vocalists Ida Nicolosi (soprano) and Brian Ming Chu (baritone) and a chorus of 28 voices achieve well-nigh ideal vocal blends of the greatest beauty and flexibility. These wonderful voices reach a peak of expressive power and sensual

howling on an open grave in the last stanza of “Drinking Song of the Earth’s Sorrow.” What sounds could be more desolate?

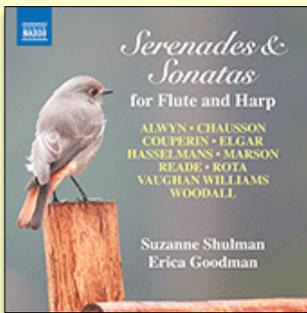
Or take the way the flutes help create the image of slender maidens washing clothes at the river’s edge in “Of Beauty,” and the way this idyllic scene is intruded upon by a company of gallant youths galloping on horseback, reinforced by all the sensationally clashing sounds that brass and percussion can produce. In “The Farewell,” the lower strings very effectively convey the darkness of the landscape in the speaker’s journey into the mountains, clearly intended as a metaphor for death.

The vocalists in this recording, mezzo-soprano Magdalena Kožená and tenor Stuart Skelton do an excellent job conveying the range of mood and nuance in the song texts. That is particularly true of Kožená, the voice we hear in “The Farewell.” In a very slow-moving scene more than 30 minutes in length, interrupted by a poignant orchestral interlude, she is largely responsible for maintaining tones, and the moods they convey, for long stretches without a drop in intensity.

Finally, credit Sir Simon Rattle, at the helm of the Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks (Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra to you!) for conducting what must qualify, even in as distinguished a career as his, as a defining moment. Superb sound engineering captures every last significant detail.

beauty where it is most required, first of all in the verses for soprano and chorus beginning “Ye now are sorrowful. Weep not, for I will see you again,” containing the message of comfort for sorrow and loss.

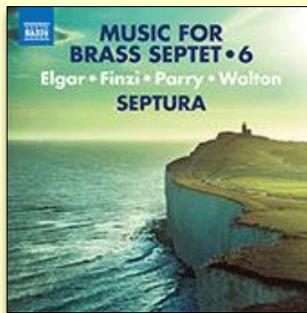
In the following section for baritone and chorus, beginning “Here on earth we have no continuing place,” and ending sensationally in a ringing note of triumph with the words from Revelation 14:13, “Lord, Thou are worthy of honor, praise, glory, and might,” we have the climax of this performance, which brings out ideally the elements of sorrow, consolation, and rapturous joy that we find in the texts. The Requiem ends as it began with the significant word “Blessed” (*Selig* in German) which tells us so much of what this work is all about.



Serenades & Sonatas for Flute and Harp – Suzanne Shulman, Erica Goodman (Naxos)

Flutist Suzanne Schulman and harpist Erica Goodman, Canadian artists who have done distinguished work as guest soloists, participants in various ensembles, and as a duo, show the reason for their acclaim by critics and audiences in “Serenades & Sonatas.” Exceptionally smooth execution, timing and mutual rapport between these artists help make this album a pleasure to review.

As Schulman explains, “The idea for this recording began several years ago with an invitation to participate



Music for Brass Septet Vol. 6: Elgar, Finzi, Parry, Walton, performed by Septura (Naxos)

Septura, a septet bringing together the talents of some of the best brass players in London, aims at exploring and transcribing exciting works that present the brass ensemble as a serious artistic medium. In their sixth release for Naxos, they go back to their English roots with music by Hubert Parry, Sir Edward Elgar, Gerald Finzi, and Sir William Walton. All these composers sought to make their works colorful and rhythmically compelling, making them a natural for the kind of transcriptions on which Septura thrives.



“Flute Passion Schubert,” Nadia Labrie, flute; Mathieu Gaudet, piano (Analekta)

Flutist Nadia Labrie has gotten around and done a lot in her career since completing a master’s degree at l’Université de Montréal and graduating with first-class honors and “great distinction” from the Québec Conservatory of Music. Best-known as a partner in the world-class flute and guitar duo Similia, she shows her range and versatility in collaboration with pianist Mathieu Gaudet in a beautiful program of transcriptions of works by Franz Schubert.

<p>in a summer festival concert of music for an English garden.” The task of selecting the music must not have been arduous, for the natural tendency of both instruments is toward the evocation of nature.</p> <p>How idiomatic all this is, we gather right from the beginning in Ralph Vaughan Williams’ <i>Fantasia on Greensleeves</i>, a much transcribed work that is remarkable even among VW’s canon for its heart-stopping beauty. The <i>Victorian Kitchen Garden</i> by Lancashire composer Paul Reade was written for a BBC2 television series, but proved to have enough substance to be cast into a fine suite in 5 movements: <i>Prelude, Spring</i> (with birdsong evoked in bars 8-17), <i>Mists, Exotica, and Summer</i>.</p> <p>Next, we have arrangements of two keyboard pieces by French baroque composer Francois Couperin: <i>Le Rossignol en amour</i> and <i>Le Rossignol vainqueur</i>, the former filled with the plaintive longing that is second nature to a Nightingale, and the latter a sprightly dance when our avian suitor has won his mate. Ernest Chausson, a Parisian who studied with Jules Massenet at the Conservatoire, wrote <i>The Birds</i> as a continuous suite based on interludes he had written for a staging of Aristophanes’ comedy. Alphonse Hasselmans’ <i>La Source</i>, true to its name, evokes the sparkling flow of a spring in its rapid arpeggios.</p> <p>Want more sheer delights? Okay. Italian composer Nino Rota’s <i>Sonata for Flute and Harp</i> is a masterpiece of concise form within which both instruments revel in dialogs involving octaves, flowing arpeggios, and neat modulations as the music alternates between festiveness and tranquility.</p> <p>A delightful program concludes with William Alwyn’s <i>Naiades</i>, inspired by the dark water and reeds like “a rustling sheet of gold,” as seen from the composer’s studio overlooking the River Blyth. We’re also given Arthur Woodall’s lyrical <i>Serenade</i> and Sir Edward Elgar’s exquisite <i>Chanson de Matin</i>. We finish appropriately with dessert: i.e., “Strawberries and Cream” from John Marson’s <i>Suite for Flute and Harp</i>.</p>	<p>Septura is here comprised of Huw Morgan, Trumpet in E-flat; Alan Thomas and Simon Cox, Trumpets in B-flat; Peter Moore and Matthew Knight, Trombones; Daniel West, Bass Trombone; and Peter Smith, Tuba. Splendid as an ensemble, they are all capable of negotiating smooth solo lines as required.</p> <p>Parry is represented by four of his <i>Songs of Farewell</i> to sacred texts, in superb transcriptions by Matthew Knight. Introspective and personal in tone, they range from four voices to eight, and from homophonic to truly and gloriously contrapuntal in such a song as “There is an old belief.”</p> <p>Elgar’s <i>Serenade</i> in E minor, Op. 20, originally for strings and written for his wife to mark their wedding anniversary, betrays its origin in its warm harmonies, with lilting rhythms that are particularly attractive in the opening Allegro, marked <i>piacevole</i> (peacefully). In the elegiac slow movement, rising and falling lines give way to a noble Elgarian melody of very broad compass.</p> <p>Finzi is heard from in the first of his <i>Three Anthems</i>, based on the hymn text “God is gone up with a triumphant shout” and reminiscent of an organ fanfare where Septura play both organ and choir roles. His <i>Prelude</i> in F minor, Op. 25, influenced by the First World War, is heavy-hearted, with a lighter texture in a more hopeful middle section, while his <i>Romance</i> in E-flat major, Op. 11, is, by contrast, gently nostalgic and rural in mood.</p> <p>Walton’s 1971 <i>Sonata</i> for String Orchestra, arranged here by Simon Cox, reveals a composer who was basically a modernist but with a yearning for sentimental expression. The former trait is represented by the aggressively rhythmical second theme in the opening Allegro and a bustling fugato in the development. The latter is characterized by the warm cantabile of the slow movement. Superb playing by all hands builds the intensity in the finale up to a keen point of release in a triumphant A major conclusion.</p>	<p>Schubert wrote his <i>Sonata</i> in A minor, D821 for the Arpeggione, a curious instrument that had been invented by a friend of his. A sort of fretted guitar played with a bow, it started to become obsolete shortly after its first public performance. (How typical of Schubert to have squandered some of his best music on such a wide throw!) The sonata is never performed today except in transcription, as it is here. Over the years it has become one of the most enduringly popular of all Schubert’s instrumental works.</p> <p>The “Arpeggione” is a true duo sonata, and not just accompanied melody. As such, it benefits from the mutual rapport Labrie and Gaudet display in this performance, as witness the 16th note figure that the partners toss around playfully in the opening movement. One thrilling moment in this same movement occurs when a wistfully melancholy flute melody gives way suddenly to a lively and sensational Hungarian dance with thumping piano chords in support. The Adagio, which plays like a meditation on a hymn-like subject, is followed by the finale, an Allegretto rich in rapturous and charming incidents.</p> <p>The rest of the program is mainly given to handsomely rendered transcriptions of such perennial song favorites of Schubert as <i>Ave Maria, Heidenröslein</i> (Little Rose on the Heath), and <i>Ständchen</i> (Serenade), plus a selection of five songs from the lieder cycle <i>Die Schöne Müllerin</i> (The Fair Maid of the Mill).</p> <p>The program concludes in fine style with <i>Introduction and Variations</i> in E minor on <i>Trockne Blumen</i>, D802. The song, whose title translates as “Broken Blossoms,” is also from <i>Die Schöne Müllerin</i>, where it occurs as the heartbroken miller’s apprentice, crushed by the indifference of his fickle beloved, confides his thoughts of suicide to the babbling brook. In the present context, the song loses its funereal associations right after the Introduction, and the ensuing variations lend themselves to the zestful virtuosity they receive here from Labrie and Gaudet.</p>
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“American Souvenirs,” Adams, Bolcom. Dello Joio, Schoenfeld
Blue Violet Duo (self-produced)

Violinist Kate Carter and pianist Louise Chan, natives of Los Alamitos, California and Ottawa, Ontario, respectively, founded the Blue Violet Duo in Chicago in 2013.¹ Their self-produced album “American Souvenirs” embodies their passion for performing “lesser-known works that are fun and playful yet virtuosic, and which don’t take themselves too seriously.” They are invariably delighted when live audiences totally unfamiliar with the music end up loving these saucy and irrepressible works as much as they themselves do.

We are treated here to works by four American composers, all of whom have something to say and the means to delight us while doing so: Norman Dello Joio, William Bolcom, John Adams, and Paul Schoenfeld. Dello Joio, whose dates are 1913-2008 (No typo, he had a very long, productive life), wrote *Variations and Capriccio* (1948) following a period of close collaborations with Martha Graham, and the dance influence shows. Based on a theme of his own devising, the six variations occur informally in the course of an ongoing dialogue between piano and violin that leads them into a variety of moods and conversations. The sprightly *Capriccio* has an infectious, waltz-like character.

Bolcom’s *Second Sonata for Violin and Piano* (1978) was written for jazz violinist Sergiu Luca and alternates jazz, blues, and a jagged, tonally ambivalent style that is



“Blues Dialogues.” Rachel Barton Pine, violin; Matthew Hagle, piano
(Cedille Records)

“Blues Dialogues: Music by Black Composers” was a long-cherished project for Rachel Barton Pine. The world-class violinist absorbed an immense variety of blues as a teenager growing up in Chicago, on LP’s, in sheet music, listening to WXRT’s *Blues Breakers*, going to the Chicago Blues Fest, or just “sneaking into Kingston Mines as an underage music enthusiast.”

Since 2001, her own Rachel Barton Pine Foundation has committed to a Music by Black Composers project that circulates materials to students and disseminates information about repertoire and history to musicians and educators. How worthy an effort that is may be judged by the rich trove of blues-influenced music by Black classical composers that we find in the present album.

What exactly is the blues? Actually, it’s so simple it’s beautiful. Blues originated as a vocal genre in which each stanza of the words has three lines. The second is a repetition of the first. Each line of words takes up four measures of music, so that the classic blues is 12 measures long. There is usually room at the end of each measure for the singer to stop for breath or think of the next line. Sometimes, he interjects a word or sigh. If there’s an instrument playing along with the singer, it fills in the time at the end of the line with a melodic phrase called a “break.”

On this album we hear the work of eleven 20th and 21st century Black composers inspired by the blues:



Mathieu: Piano Concerto No. 3; Gershwin: American in Paris – Alain Lefèvre, JoAnn Falletta, Buffalo Philharmonic (Analekta)

Gershwin and Mathieu: what a revelation this pairing of well-known and neglected works this is! André Mathieu (1929-1968) left Paris with his parents for a holiday in the New World in the summer of 1939, but their plans were altered dramatically in September by Hitler’s invasion of Poland and the German occupation of France. They eventually settled in Canada and André’s Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor was completed in June, 1943 when the precocious composer, who had already become known as “the Canadian Mozart,” was still just fourteen years old.

Imminent plans to have the work premiered by Artur Rodzinski and the New York Philharmonic came to naught, for reasons that are still unclear. The music was eventually heard, in an altered form that mainly utilized the theme from the second movement, in a 1947 Canadian film called *Whispering City*. This version was revised thirty years later as “Québec Concerto,” just in time for the Olympic Games in Montréal. The present version which we hear in this recording is the result of the restoration of the Concerto’s original score. Aided by the outstanding performances of pianist Alain Lefèvre, conductor JoAnn Falletta, and the Buffalo Philharmonic, it bids fair to find its rightful place in the repertoire at last.

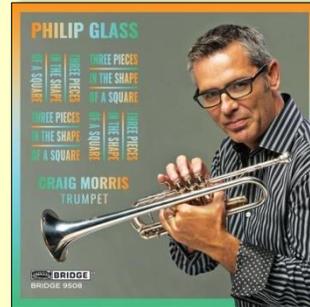
Filled with a youthful exuberance and a range of emotions, Mathieu’s Third Piano Concerto struck me

¹ Blue Violet is the state flower of Illinois. Just thought you’d like to know.

<p>nonetheless intriguing. The first movement, "Summer Dreams," opens with a slow, dreamy, 12-bar blues in the piano, overlaid by an unexpectedly atonal line in the violin. The second movement, "Brutal, Fast," consists of a lively argument between the instruments, not without a brusque sense of humor. An Adagio providing semi-improvisatory material for the violin is followed by the final movement, "In Memory of Joe Venuti," which uses and transforms earlier themes while it pays homage to the jazz & swing violinist in the form of his trademark slides, harmonics, and rhythmic upheavals.</p> <p>John Adams' Road Movies (1995) gave me a more favorable impression than I'd previously had of his idiosyncratic brand of minimalist music. It is in three movements:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Relaxed Groove, in a moderate pace, like a long trip on a highway, 2) Meditative, which is more expansive and arrhythmic and interestingly uses scordatura in the way the G string of the violin is tuned down to F to enhance the mood of an empty desert landscape, and 3) "40% Swing," filled with a rush of buzzing energy. <p>Schoenfeld's Four Souvenirs for Violin & Piano (1990) is a potpourri of popular music, served up with this composer's typical verve and stylishness. We have an energetic Samba with constantly competing lines from both instruments, a Tango with slow, languid measures in the violin set against the steady pulse of the piano, and an insouciant Tin Pan Alley that pays tribute to American popular song. We conclude with a raucous Square Dance, replete with violin slides and note clusters in the piano. There <i>has</i> to be something for every listener in this set!</p>	<p>David N. Baker, Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, William Grant Still, Noel da Costa, Clarence Cameron White, Duke Ellington, Dolores White, Errollyn Wallen, Billy Childs, Daniel Bernard Roumain, and Charles S. Brown. All of them classically trained composers or jazz artists, they found ways to infuse new and compelling ideas into the basic blues, with results that come up fresh as the morning news. There is little evidence of a period style in any of these works, the blues being essentially timeless.</p> <p>As the booklet notes tell us, there are a lot of varieties of blues, enough, in fact, to challenge the versatility of the performers, Rachel Barton Pine and pianist Matthew Hagle. To cite just one, take the way many blues pieces slide obliquely or morph into other keys without the proper modulations they teach in music school. We find a great deal of this in Perkinson's Blue/s Forms (1972), while his Louisiana Blues Strut pays its sassy respects to the old-time cakewalk in its ever-shifting metrical feet. Grant Still's Suite for Violin & Piano (1927) is a major work in four movements in which majestic chords and sad, languid moods alternate with irrepressible boogie-woogie rhythms and the sheer electricity of the finale.</p> <p>Levee Dance by Clarence Cameron White (1927) got to be famous as a favorite encore of Jascha Heifetz. It has a lot going for it in its blue-note chromaticism, lively major-minor alternations, and, in passing, a life-affirming quotation from the spiritual "Go Down, Moses." Noel da Costa's Set of Dances (1968) and Dolores White's Blues Dialogues (1988/2016), both for solo violin, give Rachel plenty of opportunity to show her stuff in the way of slurs, dynamics, and octave shifts, plus a percussive evocation of clogging in the former (How on earth does RBP accomplish <i>that?</i>). In the latter, she meets the challenge of fortissimo rapid-fire outbursts set against a sad blue haze, harmonic mutations, and swinging rhythms in jazzy triplets.</p> <p>Guess what? I haven't described half of the variety of wonderful ear-</p>	<p>immediately as so reminiscent of the style of Sergei Rachmaninov that the composer might have been his brother. We have the same chord-structures, widely spaced and massive, the same kind of BIG themes and lush melodies with the accompanying brass well-supported by the lower strings, and the same feckless range of emotion, as if the composer were unafraid that he might use up his life's quota of the same in this one work.</p> <p>The opening movement has a profusion of themes, each more striking than the last, ending with a cadenza by composer Jacques Marchand that serves to expand its emotional reach. An Andante middle movement is indescribably beautiful, and the finale, Allegro con brio, possesses an amazing wealth of incidents that somehow confirm its organic logic.</p> <p>George Gershwin's An American in Paris, in a voluptuous, full-bodied performance by Falletta and the Buffalo Philharmonic, makes an ideal album-mate for the Mathieu Concerto. This is the complete 18-minute score from which several minutes were tastefully excised for the 1951 MGM musical, directed by Vincente Minnelli and starring Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron, without interrupting its panorama of a busy day in the life of an American expatriate.</p> <p>Perky and pulse-quickening in the livelier sections, languid and slow in the blues interlude, the music conjures up the life of the Paris Boulevards, the distinct, never-to-be forgotten sound of the horns of the Parisian taxis, the sight of couples strolling along the booksellers' and the flower sellers' stalls, the exciting night life of the jazz clubs, and – most tellingly – the sadness of a very homesick Yank.</p> <p>The performance is so compelling, it rates as one of the very best by Falletta and the Buffalo – and that's saying a lot! Beautifully engineered sound completes the picture. If this album doesn't take one or more of Canada's Juno Awards, there is simply no justice.</p>
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opening music in this great album. As a Black friend of mine once observed to me, "How strange that something called 'the blues' can make you feel so good!"

Craig Morris' new album "Three Pieces in the Shape of a Square" offers pithy insights into the music of Philip Glass that would seem to transcend the "minimalist" tag people have frequently pinned on this composer. The opening piece, 13 Melodies (1995) gives us a good reason why the American composer should loathe that limiting description. Originally written for saxophone, these pieces take on a new life and character in Morris' engaging and intriguing arrangements for his own instrument, the trumpet.



"Three Pieces in the Shape of a Square," Music of Philip Glass – Craig Morris, solo trumpet (Bridge Records)

Taking his cue from the fact that Glass notated the melodies entirely in C, leaving it to the performer's discretion as to which saxophone (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) to use, Morris created a version using the trumpets best suited to the range and the characteristic timbre of each of each: flugelhorn for

Melodies 1, 3, 5, 8, 13; trumpet for Melodies 2, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12; and piccolo trumpet for 4 and 9. The artist, who first gained renown as principal trumpet of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, does an exceptionally smooth job characterizing each of these pieces, so that they come across as more captivating for the listener than we might have expected. Take Melodies 4-6, for instance. The piccolo trumpet in 4 is brassy, bright, insouciant and playful in its rhapsodizing. The flugelhorn in 5 strikes a deeply poignant tone, using utterly sensational vibrato in rising stages to create cavernous spaces. And the regular trumpet in 6 paints a broad, expansive cityscape. All three are used characteristically to do what they do best.

The other two items on the program are more or less experimental works from the Sixties. Both have been arranged for trumpet by Craig Morris. They may not possess the immediate appeal of Melodies, but both command attention for the breathtaking virtuosity Morris invests in his performances. As the artist puts it, *Gradus* (1968) "may require a change of perspective in the listener, as there isn't any harmony or true melody in the traditional sense." Instead, we are given a constantly evolving rhythmic and motivic flow in which two lines are laid out at intersecting angles. They do not touch or cross, but coexist in a work that proceeds by a process of expansion and reduction. It begins with a five-note ascending motif with eighth rests. By gradually adding notes one at a time, the composer reaches the complete set of 11 notes in Part II. Thereafter, a process of retraction takes place until we are left with the same rhythmic blocks with which the piece began. In Morris' words, it is "melody reduced to rhythm." He compares it to a gradually shifting black and white kaleidoscope, "eventually giving way to intricate shapes of whiteness."

In *Piece in the Shape of a Square* (1967), Glass envisioned his music set up in a 10-foot square, with two performers, one on the inside of the square moving clockwise and the other on the outside moving counterclockwise. Performer 1 starts off with a simple, yet rhythmically juxtaposed motif, and Performer 2 joins in on the third line, essentially at the unison but with one note displaced down an octave. As the performers move in different directions, the music becomes divergent, and at times rhythmically opposed. Along the way, the parts cross with Performer 2 now playing the higher voice, and Performer 1 the lower. Through the magic of recording both parts and overdubbing, Morris is able to interact with himself with demon precision and virtuosity.

All this sounds very theoretical, but in the actual hearing it's a lot more compelling than you might think. Morris envisions some gigantic dance being played in a dance club with a big kick drum thumping behind the music. Though complex and highly structured, the end result is that the music is perceived by the listener as simple and carefree. That is no mean achievement!

Note: I was struck by the resemblance of the titles of these 1967-1968 works to Claude Debussy's "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum" from the Children's Corner Suite and Erik Satie's *Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear*. There are no apparent relationships, thematic or otherwise, with these earlier works, which inclines me to speculate that Philip Glass may have simply been paying his respects to two predecessors who shared his own passion for making music simpler by getting back to the essentials.