

Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

November, 2020



"Amour éternel" – Ekaterina Siurina, soprano; Constantine Orbelian, conductor, Kaunas City Symphony (Delos)



Scriabin: Piano Sonata No. 5
Irina Feoktistova, pianist
(MSR Classics)



Shostakovich: Songs and Romances
Margarita Gritskova, mezzo-soprano;
Maria Prinz, pianist
(Naxos)

Ekaterina Siurina, born (coincidentally) in Ekaterinburg, Russia, completed her studies at the Russian Academy of Dramatic Arts in Moscow. I won't bore you with a list of the competition honours she has won, but instead will content myself with saying that, while still a student in 1999, she made her professional role debut as Gilda in *Rigoletto* opposite the celebrated baritone Dimitri Hvorostovsky

In addition to some of the usual suspects in an aria recital of the sort we have in the present release by Delos Productions, we are also given two great arias from operas that you won't get to hear very often for various reasons. First, **Louise** by Gustave Charpentier (1860-1956) is seldom staged because of scenic difficulties, so that we are much more likely to hear the aria *Depuis le Jour* in recitals. Because of the richness and density of Charpentier's orchestration, it requires the range and depth of tone Siurina is capable of bringing to it. In this aria, the heroine reminisces, "Since the day I gave myself to you, / My destiny seems strewn with flowers/ I tremble deliciously / At the tender memory of our first day of love." The sentiment may sound sappy, but the richness of expression of a Siurina can really put this aria across!

Hampered by a libretto that is unbelievably melodramatic and by emotions that are excessive even by

This review is something new for me in that I am listening to postings on the MSR Classics website instead of either a physical CD or a download. They are the result of an extraordinary collaboration of two Russian émigrées who now reside in the wild frontier of Chicagoland, pianist Irina Feoktistova and mezzo-soprano Evgenia Pirshina, who here utilizes the skills she has developed in her other career as photographer and creator of stunning color realizations. The natives of St. Petersburg and Moscow, respectively, combine their talents in a program of sound and imagery that will really blow you away!

In that context, it seems fitting that the subject should be two works by the altogether extraordinary Alexander Scriabin. Was he a visionary or merely a madman and an incredible egotist? We get numerous clues to the Scriabin paradox in the two works presented here, Piano Sonata No. 5 and *Vers la flamme*. Both reveal aspects of his artistic goals and tortured strivings.

One of the things that gets tortured in Scriabin's Sonata No. 5 in F-sharp Major is tonality itself. At a time when he was getting disenchanted with any theory of tonality as a limiting concept, this sonata in a single movement makes an honest though decidedly eccentric attempt at key resolution, working through extended episodes in B major with sustaining pressure from

What I said about Margarita Gritskova in my "Russian Tribute" column (Summer, 2019) goes double in this new release of Songs and Romances by Dmitri Shostakovich, especially that her interpretive skills revealed "a keen intelligence at work engaging with poetry of real literary substance [and] making full use of the wonderfully expressive quality of her voice." As opposed to the songs of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Rachmaninoff that we heard in the earlier album, these romances by Shostakovich are often grim, satirical, darkly emotional and sombre, requiring the utmost of Gritskova and her recital partner, pianist Maria Prinz.

In contrast to the earlier CD program, the poetic texts that inspired Dmitri Shostakovich are all over the board, in quality as well as mood. We begin with *The Dragonfly* and *the Ant* from *3 Fables* by Ivan Krylov, a retelling of Aesop's tale of the grasshopper and the ant with a distinctly Russian piquancy. "So then you," rebukes the Ant, "Without a thought sang away the entire summer. That's fine business. Go on then – dance now!"

There follow 2 romances by Japanese poets in Russian translation: *Before the Suicide*, the song of a heart heavy laden, and *For the First and Last Time*, a song of sorrowful regret for a lost love in which Gritskova uses her expressive voice to good effect.

the usual operatic standards, Georges Bizet's **Les Pêcheurs de perles** (The Pearl Fishers) is another opera that doesn't get presented very often these days. That's a pity, judging from the rich lyrical quality of the aria Siurina sings here, *Me voila seule dans la nuit* (Here I am, alone in the night).

In this aria the Priestess Leila, in solitude, reflects on her clandestine meetings with the fisherman Nadir. It is preceded by a breathless rush in the string section, reflecting the powerful emotions that are surging in her breast. In an aria so richly and imaginately scored in the woodwinds, especially in the horns, Siurina's voice rises to the occasion, shaping the bold contours in the music as the warmth of Leila's reminiscences allows her to subdue her inner turmoil (for the moment at least).

Other favorite arias among the 14 selections on this program include Juliet's quietly passionate *Je veux vivre* (I want to live) from Charles Gounod's **Romeo et Juliette** and Marguerite's "jewel aria" *O Dieu! Que de bijoux* from Gounod's **Faust**, where a demand for high, bell-like tones will pose a real challenge for any soprano. *Signore, ascolta!* (My Lord, listen) from Giacomo Puccini's **Turandot**, the urgent plea of the slave girl Liu to Prince Calaf for whose life she fears in his coming encounter with the cruel Turandot, also rates high marks for the gracious tenderness and flexibility of Siurina's voice. So does Micaela's aria *je sais que rien ne m'épouvante* (I know that nothing frightens me) from Georges Bizet's **Carmen**, in which she is building up her courage for her coming meeting with the woman she fears and hates.

Siurina's account of the heroine's heart-melting aria *Si, Mi chiamano Mimi* (Yes my name is Mimi) from Puccini's **La Bohème** is followed by the tender duet *O soave fanciulla* (O gentle maiden), one of several fine moments in the program in which the soprano is joined by her real-life tenor husband Charles Castronovo.

E-flat before finally arriving in the neighborhood of F-sharp. We should note, by the way, that F-sharp major is a particularly rich, if difficult, key with six sharps in its signature, something which no doubt appealed strongly to Scriabin.

After a deep rumbling from the depths of the instrument, we are plunged into what seems absolute quiet, like the vast stillness of the universe, for which Pirshina finds a visual correlative in a planetarium show where the restless movement of the heavenly bodies underlies the initial impression of stillness. The excitement picks up in stages, and the music now becomes increasingly urgent, with bullets of light streaming from a source as the visual component for what is happening in Feoktistova's compelling performance. Then, just as we are expecting a well-deserved climax of virtuosity, Scriabin pulls the rug from under us, and the music vanishes without a trace!

Vers la Flamme (Toward the Flame) was one of Scriabin's last works before his untimely death in 1915. Its simple melody consists of descending half steps, with unusual harmonies and tremolos serving to create an intense, fiery luminescence. The central image in Pirshina's visual realization seems to be the sun itself, which provides the clue as to Scriabin's unusual title. The composer believed that a continuous accumulation of heat would lead to the fiery destruction of the earth and all its creatures, an event which he eagerly anticipated. The sonic equivalent of this inexorable movement "towards the flame" is the constant buildup and crescendo we experience throughout the piece. At a playing time of 5:37, this super-charged fusion of romantic and modern technique does not overstay its welcome. Stunning flare-ups of flame in Pirshina's animation enhance Feoktistova's playing of the powerful, sudden chords within the melody line and the echo-effect created by repeated notes in the piano's upper register.

Note: These performances, recorded at the Levin Performance Studio of WFMT Chicago, are available to the public on all digital platforms, including iTunes, Amazon Music, and Spotify.

Two Romances on verses by Mikhail Lermontov are *Ballad*, in which a maiden cajoles her naive lover into diving into the depths of the sea to recover her lost necklace—with a musical depiction of the restlessness and turmoil of the sea as a correlative for the human passions—and *Morning in the Caucasus*, with its evocation of a break of dawn setting where a young man encounters maidens bathing in the shadows. What will follow next? The poet asks, "how can they flee if the sweet thief is so very near?"

The expressive ranges Gritskova and Prinz encompass so well in the Lermontov poems continue in two poems by Marina Tsvetayeva. In "*Whence comes such tenderness?*" we hear the thoughts of a woman who is uncertain as to whether to trust a new love: "These are not the first curls that I have caressed, and I have known lips darker than thine." And "*No, the drum was beating*" captures ambivalence in a young soldier as to whether to hurl himself into the fray, in words that conceal Shostakovich's own feelings at being rejected by Soviet officialdom. *Rebirth*, after Alexander Pushkin, provides the consoling thought that even the thickest coat of black paint will not hide forever the beauty of an underlying painting.

There follow two Romances on Verses by British Poets, including William Shakespeare's lesser-known *Sonnet 66*, "Tired with all these, for restless death I cry," with its unmistakable note of bitterness and world-weariness that must have meant something to Shostakovich to have even chosen to set it. Two Verses from Jewish folk Poetry include a tender *Lullaby* and a *Warning* to young girls not to go strolling before dawn. Then we have 2 Greek Songs, including *Pentosalis*, the bitter reflection of a youth disappointed in love, and *Zolongo*, the defiant song of women who are determined to kill themselves rather than accept slavery.

Following two traditional Spanish folk songs, *Farewell Granada* and *Little Stars*, we conclude with a pair of bitter, wickedly satirical verses by Sascha Tschorny, which I will leave you to discover for yourselves.



Schumann: The Three Quartets
Emerson String Quartet
(Pentatone)

I'll say this for the Emerson String Quartet: these guys have really been around the block! The basic foursome started off playing together when they were students in the early 'seventies at Juillard, where both violinists studied under Oscar Shumsky (they couldn't have chosen better!) The original quartet incorporated professionally and began touring in 1976. They now consist of Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer, who trade off playing first and second violins; Lawrence Dutton, viola; and Paul Watkins, who replaced longtime member David Finckel at cello after the 2012-2013 season.

The Emersons will be celebrating their 50th Anniversary in the coming years, the exact date depending on where you start counting. That longevity has been matched or exceeded, as far as I know, only by the original Quartetto Italiano and the Borodin Quartet from Russia. It's long enough time for them to have developed a distinctive performance style, with an attention to detail that serves well the classics that they perform without turning into mere fussiness. They are past masters at shaping the contours of the musical lines, expressing the emotion inherent in the music itself effectively and not making the mistake of taking it over the top. And a lot else besides.

To my knowledge, this is the first time they've recorded Robert Schumann's three String Quartets, Op. 41, though they recorded his Piano Quintet, Op. 44 and Piano Quartet, Op. 47 with pianist Menahem Pressler in 1996 for Deutsche Grammophon, a label for which they were the "flagship" quartet for many years and for whom they

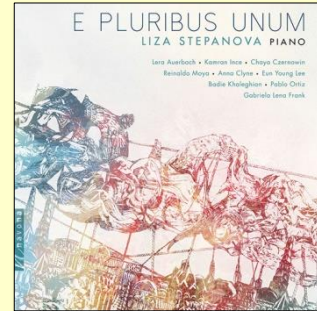


Beethoven: Quartet in C# Minor, Op. 131 + Ligeti: Metamorphoses
Jupiter String Quartet
(Marquis)

The Jupiter String Quartet, consisting of Nelson Lee and Meg Freivogel, violins; Liz Freivogel, viola; and Daniel McDonough, cello, are no strangers to this column, having appeared in my Classical Reviews for 02/2014 and 09/2019. Their penchant for works of rare and unusual beauty is just as pronounced as ever in the present pairing of quartets by Beethoven and Ligeti, both of whom pushed the boundaries of the chamber genre in their own ways.

The first thing you notice about Beethoven's "Late" Quartet, Op. 131, is its unusual structure. It is in seven movements, the third of which, at only 44 seconds' duration, actually serves as a brief interlude before the fourth and longest (13:31). That movement, *Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile*, is at the very heart of the matter in which an ongoing narrative seems to be present, giving unity to a work that, at first encounter, might bewilder us with its apparent sprawl.

Actually, Beethoven cunningly crafted a surprisingly well-integrated quartet in seven movements. Rather than being a mere miscellany, it is better thought-of as a wide-ranging work in a single 38-minute movement unfolding in seven sections, a fact the Jupiter Quartet are quick to grasp. The aforementioned slow movement is at the heart of the matter. Listening to it, I imagined an ongoing dialog between the cello, a searcher in quest of an ideal love or an enduring beauty as a means of discovering both truth and wisdom, and the higher strings. That, at least, is my take on it, based on what I hear in this performance.



"E Pluribus Unum," works by contemporary composers
Liza Stepanova, piano
(Navona)

The interesting thing about "e Pluribus Unum" is that it is a collection of piano pieces that have all been written by American composers with immigrant backgrounds, and is in fact a silent protest to the benighted immigration policy current in these United States. That policy blindly refuses to recognize the multifold ways in which immigrants have participated in and enriched the culture of our country, in effect nullifying the spirit of our own motto, which translates "Out of Many One."

The work of nine different immigrant composers is represented here: Lera Auerbach (Russia), Kamran Ince (Turkey), Chaya Czernowin (Israel), Reinaldo Moya (Venezuela), Anna Clyne (England), Eun Young Lee (Korea), Badie Khaleghian (Iran), Pablo Ortiz (Argentina), and Gabriela Lena Frank (born in Berkeley, CA to a mother of mixed Peruvian/Chinese ancestry and a father of Lithuanian/Jewish descent). Stepanova herself, born in Belarus, holds degrees from the Hanns Eisler Akademie, Berlin and the Juilliard School, New York, and is currently associate professor of piano at the University of Georgia,

Well, that covers most of the United Nations! Now let's see what the composers have to say to us.

Lera Auerbach's An Old Photograph from the Grandparents' Childhood, with its lithe textures and quicksilver movement punctuated by delicate beats, reminds me of the opening scene, "The Street Awakens," from Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet. The resemblance may be unconscious, as Auerbach has done a lot of work with

recorded no fewer than 52 albums.

It's good that the Emersons have had so much experience playing together because the Schumann Quartets, while paying tribute to the great classical tradition that informs the genre, have some striking innovations of Schumann's own devising that place them in the spirit of 19th Century romanticism. He wrote all three in a white heat of inspiration in six weeks in June and July of 1841, yet amazingly they show no sign whatsoever of undue haste. They are filled with lyrical poetry, unflinching inventiveness, and expressions of love sentiment that reflected his deep and ardent feelings for his bride Clara Wieck. (In the *Andante espressivo*, of Quartet No. 3, we even hear numerous instances of a falling two-note phrase that scans with her name and seems to say "Clara.")

Beautiful melodies and beguiling harmonies abound in these quartets, particularly in the slow movements: the Adagio of No.1 in A minor, the Andante of No. 2 in F major, where it serves to temper the unsettled mood created by a noticeable rhythmic uneasiness, and the Adagio Molto of No. 3 in A major, where it assumes the character of a full-blown expression of romantic love. And let's not forget the slow introduction, *Andante espressivo*, of No. 1, which charms us and engages our attention before things get bouncy in the Allegro section.

One other thing we notice about Schumann's writing in these quartets is his penchant for what might be called either "melodic rhythms" or "rhythmic melody," which reaches its fullest fruition in the finale of No. 3, a rondo in all but name marked *Allegro molto vivace*. These rhythms add character and vivacity to the strong musical lines. The forcefulness and harmonic richness of this work have long led observers to term it an exercise in "pocket-sized orchestral music," an observation we might also apply, in a slightly lesser degree, to Quartets 1 and 2.

That brings us to the end of an outstanding set of the three Schumann quartets that the Emerson String Quartet have apparently recorded for the very first time. These handsome

The ongoing narrative in this work begins with a melancholy-sounding *Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo* (and whenever Beethoven describes any movement in such detail, you you'd better believe him!). Following a brief (1:58) but stirring sixth movement that comes across like a glimpse into the eye of a storm, the work ends resolutely in an Allegro with a jaunty theme in march time in which pain and exultation are mingled.

The harmonies in this work, which is cast in the key of C-sharp minor (usually considered uncongenial for a body of strings), are remarkably rich – yet another unorthodox procedure that gives rise to imaginative interplay between the quartet members. One other observation by Liz Freivogel who writes in the booklet annotation: "One never reaches a truly conclusive interpretation. The journey will always continue, revealing new layers of depth and complexity that we could not possibly comprehend at the start of our exploration."

In a strange kind of way, String Quartet No. 1 by the late Hungarian composer György Ligeti (1923-2006) has some interesting parallels with the Beethoven. Subtitled "*Metamorphoses nocturnes*," it too unfolds in a single 22-minute movement. In it a motivic kernel returns in many guises, melancholy, austere, and frightening, hence the idea of "metamorphoses." One particularly fine moment, among many, occurs about 9:10 when almost subliminal oscillating figures in the violins, like the nocturnal sounds of insects, serve as a counterpoint, enabling the lower strings to evolve dark, rich harmonies.

These changes involve, as Freivogel describes it, "immediate demands, involving fast-twitch muscles and split-second timing." It all pays off well in capturing the essence of a work that, like the Beethoven, casts a long trajectory and is not easily forgotten.

choreographers in her career.

Kamran Ince describes his musical aim as creating "the feeling of being in one dimension as we are simultaneously in another." Reasoning that we do not view a painting sequentially from left to right but in all dimensions, he argues why should music not exist in this way as well? His Symphony in Blue does just that, utilizing both pedals and the full range of the keyboard, even including the rattling of untuned keys.

Chaya Czernowin's fardanceClose is described by her as "remnants (of a dance) too entangled to decipher, one which was brought by a gust of wind, as you stand alone and listen to a far-away party in the night." It is a dance for the imagination, not the legs.

Reinaldo Moya's *The Way North* describes the imaginary journey of a Central American migrant, first across Mexico's southern border and then across the northern border into the United States. The journey is fraught with hardship and peril that are implied in the music, with a gentle final section describing a stop at a sanctuary church.

Anna Clyne's *On Track* features a virtuoso piano part contrasted by a voice track that is taken from a Commonwealth Speech by HRH Queen Elizabeth II: "I have lived long enough to know that things never remain quite the same for very long." The music amplifies the thought.

Eun Young Lee's *Mool* (the word means water in her native Korean) is intended as a celebration of water in nature, something that never stays in just one form or color, continually giving life and sustenance as it changes. Lee uses changing sound colors to describe this phenomenon.

Badie Khaleghian's *Tahirih the Pure* celebrates a woman of the Baha'i faith who was murdered for being an early advocate of women's equal rights. A fine coda, depicting Tahirih peacefully chanting and praying before her death, ends a suite in three movements that cries out to be orchestrated,

Dreamy impressionism drifts effortlessly into the pattern of a Milonga, precursor of the Tango, in Pablo Ortiz' *Piglia*, a tribute to Argentine poet Ricardo Piglia

performances should make more friends for three beautiful works that have somehow not quite gotten the attention they have deserved.

who “has had an enormous influence on my thinking.”

Finally, Karnavalito No. 1 by Gabriela Lena Frank celebrates the concept of *mestizaje*, whereby different cultures can coexist without one subjugating the other. Frank alludes to the rhythms and harmonies of her mother’s homeland of Peru in a stylistic work with nods to Hungarian composer Bela Bartok, a personal favorite of hers.



“Fermi’s Paradox”

Carolyn Surrick, viola da gamba; Ronn McFarlane, Lute (Sono Luminus)



“Bach & Beyond, Part 3”

Jennifer Koh, solo violin (Cedille)

“Fermi’s Paradox,” the title of the present album, refers to a conundrum famously posed by the great Italian physicist Enrico Fermi (1901-1954), who reasoned that, given the fact there are billions of stars similar to our own sun in the Milky Way galaxy, with potentially billions of planets, and also that the conditions for the origin of life that obtain on our own Earth cannot be unique, there must be intelligent life on other planets. Further, some of these civilizations are probably older than ours and, by sheer mathematical probability, must have developed the means for interstellar travel. So, why aren’t we aware of them? So far, there is no convincing proof this has happened.

That brings us to present-day America, a nation locked down by the Covid-19 pandemic and torn apart by the sheering force of blind political strife. So what are we to do? The cabin fever we all feel to some degree or other is felt by musicians, too, given the many cancellations that have kept them from enjoying the normal happy encounters with audiences and other musicians that mean so much to a musical career. Like a lot of us, they can get to feeling positively existential. “Why us, why now?” asks Carolyn Surrick, featured artist along with Ronn McFarlane on the present album. “As concert after concert is cancelled, as rehearsals become unnecessary, as the future of live music performance becomes uncertain, we have to wonder, ‘Is anyone out there?’ “

A creative response to all of this is found in the present album, in which Surrick’s viola da gamba with its beautiful, well-centered tone, plays beautifully set against the silvery

Jennifer Koh does it again! Once more, in an album slated to be the last in the series, she again places the artistry of J. S. Bach’s epoch-making works for solo violin against those of 20th/21st century composers, tracking the influence of an inspired concept down through the stream of music history. This time, our contemporaries are Italian composer Luciano Berio (1925-2003) and American John Harbison (b.1938) and Koh has carefully programmed the pairings on the present 2-CD offering in the interest of discovering some congenial and unexpected likenesses.

On CD1 we find Bach’s fanciful and far-ranging Sonata No. 2 in A minor, BWV 1003, paired with Berio’s Sequenza VIII for solo violin, one of a series of 14 similarly named works for various solo instruments, including voice. Berio conceived them as studies that explore their distinctive characters and capabilities to the max. In this instance, Sequenza VIII is built around two notes (A and B) that serve as sea-anchors to keep the chaconne-like work on a steady course of exploration. Almost the last things we expect in a work of this sort are charm and wit, two affective qualities that correlate with traits we also find in the Bach sonata.

Counter to any reasonable expectation, Bach opens this sonata with a movement marked *Grave* (serious), whose slow tempo allows a highly ornamented melody to meander at will, following a course of contrasting rhythms and decorative flourishes that serve to release the melodic potential of the minor mode. This movement may, or may not, be taken as a prelude to the second, a *Fuga* (fugue) daunting in complexity and compelling in its forward thrust.

precision of McFarlane's 10-course lute, in a program ranging from John Dowland, Marin Marais and Georg Philipp Telemann in the 17th-18th centuries right down to "Little Martha" (1971) by Duane Allman, with lots of Irish and Scottish traditionalists that have re-emerged in the Celtic revival of more recent times, plus McFarlane's own graceful and hauntingly beautiful compositions "Daniel's Chaconne" and "Trinity Grove." "O Sacred Head" by Hans Leo Hassler (1564-1612) is heard here in J. S. Bach's striking harmonization. Ditto the "Ave Maria" set to a melody by Charles Gounod based on Bach's Prelude, BWV 946. This well-loved charmer concludes the program in a deeply satisfying setting that gives considerable scope to the extraordinarily rich resonance of Surrick's gamba.

I have been familiar for some time with the distinguished work of Ronn McFarlane, who has recorded more than forty albums over the past four decades for Sono Luminus and its predecessor, Dorian Recordings. Carolyn Surrick, a new discovery for me personally, spent some eight years sharing the healing warmth of her instrument with wounded veterans and their families on Friday visits to the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. A third artist heard on his album is drummer Jackie Moran, Tipperary born and Chicago nurtured, whose artistry on the *bodhrán* has long been in demand with Irish traditional bands everywhere. His influence in this album is as pervasive as it is inobtrusive, adding a rhythmical presence to pieces that would not have been the same without it.

Bach uses the third movement, a calmer, homophonic Andante, as an effective contrast to the harsh energy and contrapuntal density of its predecessor. A lighthearted Allegro, characterized by highly rhythmic and melodic variations, ends the sonata in a very satisfying manner.

Harbison's *For Violin Alone* ostensibly bears more of a resemblance to Bach's style than does the Berio, at least in its formal layout, consisting of Ground, Dance, Air, March, Dance, Duet, and Epilogue. When contrasted with Bach's Sonata No. 3 in C major, BWV 1005, the differences appear more striking, especially considering Harbison's more severe, austere manner of writing. It is most effective in the brash-sounding March movement and an Air that manages to be both sinewy and featherweight. The two Dance movements, however, seem lacking in an essential sense of rhythm that might have made them more attractive.

Koh gives it her best shot in the world premiere recording of this work that was written expressly for her, but I find *For Violin Alone* less charming than it might have been, especially set on CD2 together with the Bach sonata. Epic in scale with a playing time of ten and a half minutes, Bach's *Fuga* movement tends to dominate matters, though the gorgeous Adagio that opens the work and the warm Largo and fetching Allegro assai that conclude it all serve to soften any impression of rough edges, at least in Koh's performance.



Fauré: The 13 Barcarolles
Namji Kim, flutist
(Centaur)

Korea-born pianist Namji Kim holds degrees from the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique (Paris) and the Juilliard School and the Manhattan School of Music (New York). A competition prizewinner and a sought-after concert soloist, she is currently Professor of Piano at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Kim brings all her experiences into play in her accounts of the 13 Barcarolles of Gabriel Fauré. That's important because these works must be performed with the naturalness that is the last fine accomplishment of the true keyboard artist. They exemplify the paradox we often find in great music in that the simplest-sounding music is often the most difficult to play and to perform with conviction.

Fauré composed his 13 Barcarolles over a period from 1880 to 1921. There is little information to suggest they enjoyed any great popularity or that the composer ever played them in public. They are still under-performed today. That's a pity because there are so many utterly delightful moments in these pieces, as Kim reveals for us.

They tend to fall into two groups. Numbers 1-6 were composed in the main part of Fauré's career, and one finds numerous passing nods in tribute to his predecessors such as Brahms, Schumann, Liszt, and especially Felix Mendelssohn, in various pieces that play like songs without words. 7-13 were products of his later period and exhibit greater dissonances, frequent use of chromaticism, and whole-tone scales, in part a response to what was then happening in French music.



"A Musical Bouquet," Shannon Lowe,
bassoon, and friends
(MSR Classics)

Shannon Lowe, currently Assistant Professor of Bassoon and Aural Skills at the University of Florida, is really a dynamite performer on her chosen instrument, as we find abundantly on display in "A Musical Bouquet," together with a little help from her friends. The program ranges from the 17th century to the present era and allows her to display the bassoon's best assets: its hauntingly rich, deep voice and its ability to scamper up and down scale passages with an alacrity you might not have guessed in so large an instrument.

All the resources of the double reed come into play in a contemporary work, *Dança de Lisboa* (Dances of Lisbon) for bassoon and string quintet by French composer Alexis Ciesla (b.1967). Coruscating dark raw umber colors in the opening give way to brighter hues and scintillating rhythms, with even some *Fado* influence, never failing to explore the expressive voice of Shannon's instrument.

Playful call-and-response between the bassoon and the two violins is only one intriguing feature in *La Vendetta* by 17th century Venetian composer Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677). Together with the beautiful use of cantilena by the composer, who was also a celebrated singer, we are given a lot of musical pleasure in the space of only two and a half minutes.

Two French contemporaries, François Devienne (1759-1803) and Edouard Du Puy (1770-1822) are represented, respectively, by a Quartet in G minor and a Quintet in A minor, both of which show how the bassoon, thanks in part



"Humanity is an Ocean," flute
soundscapes – Yael Acher "Kat"
Modiano, flute (Centaur)

Yael Acher, a.k.a. "KAT" Modiano is a unique phenomenon on a number of counts. The flutist is equally fluent in jazz and classical music, as the present album bears witness. She began learning the flute at the age of 9, and went on to study in Israel and Denmark before moving to New York to study composition at NYU and receive a Master of Arts degree in Liberal Studies from Empire State College in 2018, specializing in Music for Social Change. She is involved in acoustic and electro-acoustic music in all sorts of idioms: contemporary, classical, improvisatory, progressive jazz, electronic-acoustic, and tango, in settings ranging from live music for silent films to music for choreography.

"KAT" starts off the program with an inspired arrangement of J.S. Bach's Suite No. 1 in G major, BWV 1007, originally for solo cello, that preserves the semi-improvisational character of the original while realizing it in terms of what the flute does best. In a work in which the solo instrument has to assume the roles of both melody and accompaniment, the greater flexibility and fluency of Kat's flute makes a very favorable impression. In particular, the movements evocative of the dance (*Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande*, *Menuet*, and *Gigue*) seem lithic, more dancelike, in the arrangements we are given here.

Humanity is an Ocean, Kat's own composition in three variations on an original motif, is based on a saying of Mahatma Gandhi that counsels us to trust in humanity: "If a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty." Kat puts a lot of herself

What is a barcarolle? Essentially, it is a music genre inspired by the romantic songs of the Venetian gondoliers, almost invariably set in a swaying 6/8 metre in moderate time that suggests the oar-strokes of the singer. Do not expect any of Fauré's barcarolles to resemble the most famous example of the genre, that of Chopin in F-sharp major with a passionate upsurge of emotion in the second half. Fauré was not that kind of composer. Mostly, his barcarolles win us over with their soft caresses in the way of dreamy melodies, liquid tonalities, and a kaleidoscope of subtly changing colors.

A good example is No. 6 in E-flat major with its sunny mood, its perky melody in start-and-stop phrases, and its demure second theme, leading to passages in quirky dynamics in which quiet, gracefully phrased statements are answered by loud outbursts before the return of the sunny main theme. As do so many of the 13 Barcarolles, this one seems to have been born for a popularity that has somehow managed to elude it. That is an omission that performances like those we are given here by Namji Kim may help to rectify.

to its distinctive penetrating tone, can stand out amidst an ensemble of strings. The former is an example of Devienne's mature galante style, with the violin competing with the bassoon for pride of place in the graceful, handsome soloistic sections that offer the listener much pure delight. The Du Puy, product of a composer who was also a violinist and singer, combines virtuosic writing for the bassoon with intriguing thematic developments in a well-crafted work that never fails to charm the listener.

Potpourri on *Zampa* by Carl Jacobi (1791-1852) recalls themes from Louis Hérold's once-celebrated opera that is remembered today mostly for its absolutely delightful overture. The carefree rhythms, musical hijinks, and technical fireworks of the original, superbly recalled by Jacobi, still make news in a sparkling account by Lowe and her friends.

Finally, *Die gute nacht, die ich dir sage* (The good night which I say to you), a token of endearment by Clara Schumann to her husband Robert, benefits from Shannon Lowe's own intelligent and expressive setting, making a satisfying conclusion to the present program.

Let's not forget to credit Shannon's friends, whose contributions add so much to a thoroughly enjoyable album: Kristin Pfeiffer Yu and Ken Davis, violins; Laurel Yu, viola; Steven Taylor, cello; and Maurice Belle, double bass.

into her performance, visualizing "a time when nonviolence, inclusiveness, selflessness, and unconditional love for all nature and all beings are fundamental values in our cultures." (How timely *that* message is for present-day America!)

The latter half of the program is devoted to Kat's compositions based on poetic texts by her contemporary Ilya Bernstein. The poems themselves are cryptic enough, in a pithy style that may strike the reader as having something of the nature of Haiku in an American setting. The spareness and the focus on the individual image are certainly there in such a lyric as "A pigeon glides so slowly to the top of a streetlight that you could almost think it was a red-tailed hawk," an observation that recalls the often-paradoxical manner of Haiku.

Another memorable Bernstein line from *The White Sail of Solitude* captures the awareness that "Focusing on the pavement with my footsteps I feel awake so deeply I might as well be asleep," the paradox being, I suppose, that our minds are never so active as when we are sleeping. Of a desire for permanence, Bernstein counsels the reader, "If you want to walk far along the ocean, I can tell you you must walk the narrow way on hard sand. Walking on that sand, right after water drains from it, you leave behind the clearer footprints."

The best tribute I can think of in regard to Kat's solo flute pieces inspired by Bernstein's poetry is that they track the poet's thoughts as perfect correlatives, in beautiful sine curves of sound that enrapture and illuminate our minds.