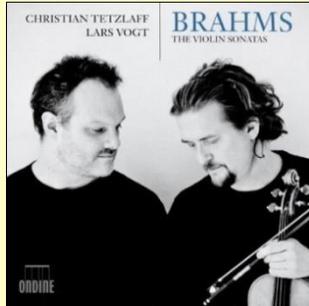


Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

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Brahms: the Three Sonatas for Violin and Piano
Christian Tetzlaff, violin; Lars Vogt, piano
(Ondine)

Hamburg native Christian Tetzlaff has sometimes been twitted by critics for lacking a more sensual tone, as cultivated by some other violinists. His reasoning is that, as he told *The New Yorker*, "The listener loses his ear for the most beautiful sounds if they've been used for arbitrary, non-important things." It is also true that critics who have found Tetzlaff's playing lacking in feeling simply haven't paid attention to his Brahms. In these performances with his concert partner of the past 14 years, pianist Lars Vogt, the three Brahms sonatas for violin and piano comes across as a revelation, especially for listeners long acquainted with other accounts of these works.

Fourteen years is a long time to play music together. In the process, if you are Christian Tetzlaff and Lars Vogt, you get a lot of issues resolved in the performance of the music you play. In the case of Brahms, so many years' acquaintance with this composer can give you what we hear in these performances: his deep love of nature, the seeming paradoxes in his moods of "melancholy happiness and cheerful sadness" (as Vogt puts it in the booklet interview), and an habitual reserve which was his way of guarding the very intimate feelings in his music and not wearing them on his sleeve.

Technically, Brahms' personality is revealed in the "minor key" impression you get from the three sonatas in spite of the fact that only one, the third and last, is actually in a minor key. The subtle alternation between modes, as between G minor and G major in Sonata No. 1, Op. 78, helps create that impression. Also, there's a conversational tone, an dialogue of confidants, that Tetzlaff and Vogt are keen in capturing whenever it occurs. We find these elements most abundantly in this same sonata, in which our performers show the greatest sensitivity to Brahms' intimate moods, as in the Adagio-Piu andante, where the limpid clarity of Vogt's playing is matched by Tetzlaff's cultivation of a *soto voce* tone that



"Re-Imagined: Schumann & Beethoven"
Ying Quartet, with Zuill Bailer, cello
(Sono Luminus)

The premise for this unusual program sounded so strange that I was at first dubious: why take two perfectly good staples of the concerto and chamber music repertoires by Schumann and Beethoven and re-cast them for a string quartet plus an extra cello? Actually, as Zuill Bailey and the Ying String Quartet show us convincingly, the idea wasn't so far-fetched after all.

Schumann's Cello Concerto in A minor, Op. 129 languished in popularity in his own day and never found its niche in the repertoire until Pablo Casals, Mstislav Rostropovich and others championed it in more recent times. The trouble was, the cello part was not overtly brilliant or virtuosic enough to satisfy Schumann's contemporaries. The composer himself even proposed to re-write it for cello plus string quartet, though the idea was nixed by his publisher.

Fortunately, Zuill Bailey and the quartet members (Janet Ying and Robin Scott, violins; Philip Ying, viola; and David Ying, cello) took Schumann seriously. They engaged composer Philip Lasser and consulted with him throughout the project, incorporating ideas and revisions based on their rehearsals and performances, until they got the balance just right between Bailey's solo cello and the rest of the ensemble. The new look proved to be refreshing. What Schumann's contemporaries rejected as not virtuosic enough proved to have an irresistible amount of musical substance in its new guise.

Beethoven's Sonata No. 9 for Violin and Piano, Op. 47, the well-known "Kreutzer," was another matter. It made quite an impression at its premiere and has always been in the repertoire of every famous violinist because of its challenging virtuosity. Yet somehow, possibly because the harmony resulting from the interaction between the two instruments seemed a little thin, it inspired the anonymous arrangement, probably by either Carl Czerny or Ferdinand Ries, both students of Beethoven,

can be delicate without losing any of its tensile strength, with sentiment that never lapses into mere sentimentality.

In this particular sonata we discover a wealth of tender lyricism, much of it derived from Brahms' use of one of his most intimate songs, *Regenlied* (Rain Song): "Pour rain, pour down / Awaken again in me those dreams / That I dreamt in childhood." In Sonata No. 2 in A major, Op. 100, he outdid himself, quoting from no fewer than four of his own songs, including *Wie Melodien* ("Like melodies, they steal softly through my mind"). Consequently, the lyrical impulse in the present performances is as vibrant as it is intuitive.

We might cite other elements that Tetzlaff and Vogt bring out to complete satisfaction, including a mastery of Brahms' tricky rhythms or the frequency with which the performers are required to change roles. In the finale of No. 3 in D minor, Op. 108, they have some of their finest moments contending with the high drama, the driving energy, and even a brief confessional moment, all in the course of a movement that tears along in the style of a Hungarian dance, something that Tetzlaff cites as unleashing "an inner wild streak" in this composer.



Tchaikovsky: Complete works for Violin & Orchestra
Jennifer Koh, violin; Alexander Vedernikov, Odense Symphony Orchestra (Cedille Records)

Jennifer Koh, born in Chicago to Korean parents, has been known for some time as a violinist of considerable prowess, recording exclusively for Cedille Records. This all-Tchaikovsky release marks her first recording venture into the basic Romantic and 20th century repertoire for violin and orchestra (you know, the stuff most listeners *really* want to hear). Even in a field crowded with stunning achievements by other artists, the lithe, slender tone and incredible beauty she sustains throughout the Violin Concerto in D major and other Tchaikovsky works makes this CD a "keeper" for yours truly. It is well worth hearing no matter what your listening preferences are.

The Violin Concerto actually occurs in the third spot on this CD after *Sérénade mélancolique* and *Valse-Scherzo*, but I'm covering it first because the qualities Ms. Koh shows in this work are displayed throughout the program. In a work that pays tribute to both the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto and Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole*, Tchaikovsky placed ravishing melodic beauty ahead of adherence to established traditions.

that we hear in the present program. (That Beethoven himself had any part in this effort is purely speculative.) At any rate, the process of expanding the number of voices from two to five makes for increased contrapuntal complexity and utterly fascinating levels of conversation. In the present performance all hands get to make delicious, telling points, especially in the central theme-and-variations movement, *Andante con variazione*. Bailey's cello makes a fine impression in the gorgeous cadenza, then drops back into the ensemble for the thrilling push to the finish In the Presto finale.



Prokofiev: Symphonies Nos. 4, Op. 112 and 7, Op. 131
– Andrew Litton, Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra
(Bis Records) Hybrid SACD and Surround

American conductor Andrew Litton, at the helm of the Bergen Philharmonic, guides that orchestra through dynamic performances of two of Sergei Prokofiev's undeniably rich, but problematic, symphonies. We are given Symphony No. 4 in C major in its revised version (1947) and No. 7 in C-sharp minor (1952) with two alternative endings.

Prokofiev originally wrote his Fourth Symphony on the occasion of the 50th anniversary celebration of the Boston Symphony, largely from material taken from his Paris ballet *L'Enfant prodigue* (The Prodigal Son). By 1947, long after he had returned to Russia and immersed himself in the artistic and political culture, he came to realize that the work, the product of a different milieu and era, was no longer viable in its original form. Additionally, it did not meet the requirements of what was termed "Soviet Realism," which was a matter of state policy as well as artistic taste. Feeling that the Fourth had too much good material to shelve, and to meet the needs of a different kind of audience, he

The violinist is playing almost continually in this work, spinning more glorious, well-supported and harmonized melodies here than most famous composers ever tap into in an entire lifetime. Despite a cool reception at its premiere in Vienna and a notoriously venomous critique by the influential critic Eduard Hanslick, the work quickly gained popularity with the public and with the great violinists of the day, including Adolph Brodsky who premiered it, Pablo de Sarasate, and Leopold Auer.

And little wonder, for, as we hear abundantly in the present recording by Jennifer Koh with Alexander Vedernikov conducting the Odense Symphony of Denmark, lightness, freshness, and a joyous feeling of sheer beauty trumping profundity are clearly the forces at work here. The world famous melody for the violin follows very soon after the orchestral introduction in the opening Allegro, unhurriedly weaving its charm through a number of virtuosic permutations in an utterly natural way. At about the 10:15 point in the present recording, Tchaikovsky, following Mendelssohn, inserted an incredibly beautiful cadenza in place of the expected recapitulation, a golden moment to which Koh does full justice. Compared with other versions, this movement (at 19:54) and the concerto itself (at 38:06) are on the long side, but with sublime violin playing of the caliber we have here, who's watching the clock?

The magic continues through the Canzonetta with its initially poignant mood that is nevertheless relieved by a lighter, more hopeful theme, and then the rollicking rondo finale. In style, it is basically a Trepak, a Cossack dance, and it tears along with a fine frenzy of violin pyrotechnics, interrupted briefly by a "love duet" (another Tchaikovsky specialty) between oboe and clarinet before racing on to a smashing conclusion.

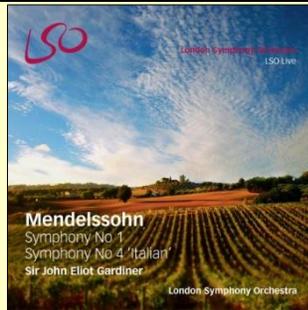
The other works on the program have the same qualities in briefer forms. Sérénade mélancolique opens with a poignant melody that any violinist would gladly kill for. The Valse-Scherzo contrasts salon elegance with mischievous repeated notes and double stops which Koh, needless to say, accomplishes in passing with complete and utter stylishness and confidence. Finally, Souvenir d'un lieu cher is in three movements (Méditation, Scherzo, and Melodie), the first and last of which are often encoed. It was the composer's tribute to his patroness, Mme. Von Meck, in gratitude for the happy hours he had spent in retreat at her country estate. There is a lot of imaginative writing here, especially in the opening movement with its fanciful triplets and trills offsetting the initial melancholy impression given by sighing appoggiaturas, all of which our soloist takes with the zestful virtuosity it deserves.

revised it extensively in 1947, lengthening the development section and adding new instruments to the score: E-flat clarinet, trumpet, piano, and harp. He also expanded the percussion section, adding triangle, tambourine, and wood blocks, the last of which are used sparingly but to good effect in the opening and closing movements. While still retaining much of the "Prodigal Son" music from the original, he altered the character of the music so much that it is customary to consider the 1930 and 1947 versions as two separate works, Opp. 47 and 112. The latter is heard in the present program.

A lot had happened in Prokofiev's life and those of millions of Russians in the intervening years, much of it tragic. It should be no surprise that the motor rhythms in the opening and closing movements, the strident and fast-moving themes, reflect similar moments in the morale-raisers Prokofiev penned during the war. There is also balm, unexpected and therefore all the more welcome, in such moments such as the gently lyrical second subject in the opening movement and the theme in the Andante featuring flute, piano and harp. In this account by Litton and the Bergen PO, we can taste Prokofiev's quirky orchestration and savor his boundless melodic invention.

Symphony No. 7 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131 is, to my mind, one of the undiscovered treasures of the modern era, and Litton and company make a really compelling case for it. There's a rich variety of elements here including a warm, expansive theme that (for me at least) conjures up a vision of a voyage of discovery, a ship's prow cutting through the foam of uncharted seas. One of Prokofiev's best melodies, it's heard memorably in the opening movement and again in the finale. The vital element in this symphony is Prokofiev's endless melodic imagination. That, together with a relative simplicity and spontaneity, is the hallmark of this work. We hear these qualities again in the second movement, a waltz filled with irrepressible energy and even impudence, all of which is handled with considerable freedom in the present recording. The slow movement, *Andante espressivo*, is the emotional center of the work, though, as others have observed, the melodic lines seem a little tentative, even constricted.

The finale, with its repeat of the glorious theme from the opening movement, makes a fine impression here. The original closing, on a bass chord with the tones of piano, xylophone and glockenspiel suspended in the air, was not well received at its premiere, and Prokofiev wrote an alternative ending, bringing back propulsive material from the opening movement. Both versions of the finale are found on separate tracks in the present CD, allowing listeners to decide which they prefer. From the zeal the Bergen musicians invest in it, I'd bet on the revised version!



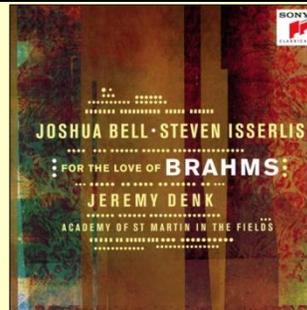
Mendelssohn: Symphonies Nos. 1 and 4, "Italian"
John Eliot Gardiner, London Symphony Orchestra
(LSO Live) 2-CD slimline Hybrid SACD, DSD, Blu-ray

Sir John Eliot Gardiner takes us through a tour of the young and inventive spirit of Felix Mendelssohn, with the help of gracious and spirited playing by the London Symphony Orchestra. The performances, recorded live at the Barbican in London, are released in two formats. Disc 1 is on Pure Audio Blu-ray, and Disc 2 is a hybrid SACD in DSD. The listener also has more choices in the program itself, as you shall learn presently.

It opens with Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 11, which Mendelssohn wrote in 1824 at the age of not-yet-fifteen (!) and then revised for its London premiere in 1829, when he had just turned twenty. We hear the latter version which he presented in an autograph to the Philharmonic Society. Gardiner's recording is easily the best of those I have heard. It captures a budding romantic spirit and confidence in handling its materials that marks it as a natural progression from the 12 string symphonies Mendelssohn had written in his childhood and youth. Though often described as "Mozartean," this symphony is hardly servile. It opens with an Allegro di molto whose urgency is underscored by a well-supported bass line. It is followed by a warm, idyllic Andante with syncopated murmurings in the lower strings. The concluding Allegro con fuoco lives up to its name in fire and imagination, including not one, but two smart fugues that add to the excitement.

But the interesting thing about Mendelssohn's first symphony is the third movement. We have two versions presented here in Tracks 3-4 for comparison. The teenaged composer first wrote a Minuetto in 6/4 that has more drive and vital energy than any minuet has a right to have. Then, when he was preparing the work for his first London visit in 1829, he substituted the Scherzo from his Octet, Op. 20, adding "a few airy trumpets" and enlarging the movement with gorgeous writing for the woodwinds. The resulting sound, reminiscent of the elfin quality in a similar movement of the Midsummer Night's Dream Music, made a hit with his London audiences, but it changed the character of the entire work. You can decide for yourself which of the two versions you prefer. (My personal favorite is the original.)

When we come to a symphony as often-performed and recorded as No. 4 in A major, Op. 90, the "Italian," there



Brahms: Double Concerto for Violin & Cello; Piano Trio, Op. 8 + Schumann: *Langsam* from Violin Concerto – Joshua Bell, Steven Isserlis, Jeremy Denk, Academy of St. Martin's (Sony Classical)

Joshua Bell (violin) and Steven Isserlis (cello), two artists at the peak of their careers, give stunning and deeply insightful performances of "music with a history" by Johannes Brahms and Robert Schumann. Backed by the always reliable Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, they obviously enjoy exploring some of the most romantic music in the oeuvre of either composer. As for the autobiographical element in the music, Isserlis' own perceptive booklet notes are an informative guide.

The Double Concerto for Violin and Cello in A minor, Op. 102 was Brahms' last symphonic work in any genre, and arguably his most romantic. As Isserlis observes in his program notes, this work takes time to work its magic, and Brahms gives it ample breadth to do so. Subtle rhythms plus a technique of continuous variation give the concerto the feeling of an improvisation. The first sound we hear after a brief orchestral Introduction is that of the cello discoursing eloquently in a cadenza that ends with the instrument dropping its voice in a succession of dramatic chords. When the violin finally enters, there are many fine moments in which the two solo instruments blend their voices as one, like a single string instrument with an enormous range of five octaves.

The slow movement, one of Brahms' finest, gives Bell and Isserlis plenty of opportunity to explore its unique combination of strength and tenderness, with fine support by the lower orchestral strings underneath the melody. That it seems to play like a discourse between lovers, with the cello taking the masculine part and the violin the feminine, and that Brahms diplomatically inserted the FAE motif that was the personal motto of violinist Joseph Joachim, would seem to corroborate Isserlis' emphasis on the autobiographical element in this work. Brahms wrote it as a peace offering to Joachim, from whom he had been estranged for seven years following his supportive testimony on behalf of Joachim's wife Amalie in a publicized divorce action. (That Joachim later reconciled his differences with his wife did not improve his relations with Brahms, but the double concerto proved just the ticket!)

The rousing finale, Allegro non troppo, finds Bell and

isn't much more for an interpreter to add that hasn't been said before. The beauty of this version by Gardiner and the LSO lies in its litheness, vitality, and utter clarity of details. The opening Allegro vivace springs instantly to life, its leaping melody and contrasting mellower second subject being well-supported by the cellos and basses. (Knowing how to employ the lower strings is one mark of the master symphonist.) The very visual slow movement, Andante con moto, presents a procession of pilgrims interspersed at several places by views of a beautiful landscape before it fades into the distance.

A Menuetto in moderate time follows next, with horn calls in a central section reminding us, once again, of the sheer enchantment of A Midsummer Night's Dream. The finale is based on the Saltarello, a lively, leaping Neapolitan dance, with some discrete German counterpoint mid-way through to remind us that this is Mendelssohn calling.

Isserlis in top form. Our performers, given yeoman support by the members of the ASMF, seem to lose sight of the qualifying *non troppo* in their avid pursuit of Brahms' exciting Hungarian dance-inflected measures, interrupted briefly by a slower autumnal episode that reminds us that Brahms *will* be Brahms.

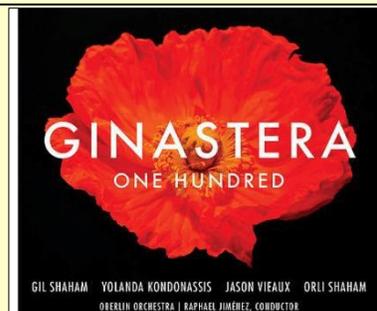
Next on the program is the second movement from Robert Schumann's Violin Concerto in D minor. Marked *Langsam* (slowly), it was evidently too personal in its mixture of drama, tenderness, aching poignancy, and even a confessional mood, so that Brahms and Schumann's widow Clara decided not to have it published until a century after the composer's death. Joshua Bell renders full justice to some of the most moving passages in all of Schumann's music. This work has a fascinating history, hinted at in Isserlis' program notes but too detailed to relate here. (That, of course, is what the internet is for. Happy browsing!)

The program concludes with a memorable account of another work with a story to tell, Brahms' Trio No. 1 in B-flat major, Op. 8. Isserlis and Bell are joined by Jeremy Denk, a pianist with a rising star of his own, in a full-bodied, affectionate performance of the original 1854 version of a work by the 21-year old composer that he revised so extensively 35 years later that one might consider both versions as separate works, each with its own character. The 1854 version strikes me as more overtly romantic than the later revision, which has a noticeable breadth and easy interplay between the performers and a real symphonic sweep. The earlier version is more blatantly virtuosic, at the expense of some unevenness. Brahms' suggestion that he merely "combed the hair" of the earlier version is somewhat ingenuous: Isserlis implies that the revision was more in the nature of "drawing a beard" over his youthful raw emotions, adding that "I find the earlier one the more moving, despite (or even because of) its occasional weaknesses." See what you think!



"CME Presents: Piano Celebration" Min Kwon and friends (MSR Classics)

In a provocative program, pianist Min Kwon and five of her student associates from the Center for Musical Excellence present selections uniting pianists and composers of 17 countries. Kwon, founder and director of the CME, has worked extensively with these young artists who, she proclaims, "work tirelessly to continue a



"Ginastera: One Hundred" 100th Anniversary Tribute to Alberto Ginastera. Gil Shaham, Yolanda Kondonassis, Jason Vieaux, Ori Shaham (Oberlin)

Oberlin Music, a label that showcases performances by faculty members and former students of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, has come up with a real winner in this hundredth anniversary tribute to Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983). He is not the

time-honored tradition of musical excellence.” Their names may not be household words yet, but you are certainly going to hear from them in the future: Carl Patrick Bolleia, Soyeon Park, Erikson Rojas, Ming Xie, and Reed Tetzloff. On this program, each plays a selection of favorite pieces and then engages in a duet with Ms. Kwon. There’s a lot of variety here, plus a feeling for the vastness of the piano literature.

It opens with Ming Xie playing Clement Doucet’s brash and jazzy Chopinata, an irreverent serving of some of Chopin’s best-known melodies that ends up paying him reverence after all. Xie follows it with Wim Stenius Muller’s moving little waltz “Nostalgia” and Vladimir Horowitz’ bracingly virtuosic Variations on a Theme from Carmen (the Gypsy dance from Act II). He then partners with Kwon in a splendid account of Hesitation Tango from Samuel Barber’s Souvenirs, a tribute to the great era of the ballroom dance in America.

Reed Tetzloff is heard from next in a heady account of the challenging, popular music-influenced Variations, Op. 41 by Russian composer Nikolai Kapustin (b.1936). He then joins Kwan in Rchmaninoff’s Polka Italienne, a four-hand work that fairly crackles with excitement. Kwon herself takes the stage next with Francis Poulenc’s “Homage a Edith Piaf,” a tribute to “The Little Sparrow” that takes a melody similar to a favorite song of the chanteuse (*Autumn Leaves*) and washes it in color and insistent rhythms.

Soyeon Park is up next in a superb account of two of Earl Wild’s Virtuosos Etudes on Gershwin Songs, “Embraceable You” and “Fascinating Rhythm,” pieces involving such challenges as cascading arpeggios between both hands in the former, and stride bass and right hand leaps in the latter. She and Kwon switch primo and secundo roles in the course of bracing accounts of Brahms’ gypsy-inflected Hungarian Dances Nos. 1 and 4, the first soulful and the latter exhilarating.

Carl Patrick Bolleia is heard from in Frederick Rzewski’s “Down by the Riverside,” a virtuosic work with so many diverse tonal and stylistic elements that any description would fill the rest of this column – and he makes it all accessible, too! He and Kwon then play an 8-minute version of Darius Milhaud’s audaciously rhythmical *Le boeuf sur le toit* (The Bull on the Roof). Kwon herself then plays Alberto Ginastera’s haunting Argentine Dance No.2, *Danza de la moza donosa* (Dance of the Beautiful Maiden).

Up next are fine accounts by Erikson Rojas of three pieces by Ernesto Lecuona, a solemn Ante el Escorial, a scintillating Mazurka en Glissando, and in between, the ever-popular Malaguéna in a performance that shows us that the old popular favorite still has something new to say after all. Kwan and Rojas then play an arrangement of Astor Piazzolla’s flashy, driving and sensual *Libertango*.

Kwan herself has the last word, in piano settings of two popular songs: Harold Arlen’s “Over the Rainbow” and

easiest composer for previously unacquainted listeners to grasp, nor was that the case for his fellow countrymen. But great performances on this album by the likes of Gil and Orli Shaham, Yolanda Kondonassis and Jason Vieux help put his moody and electrically-charged music in perspective. This album is, in fact, the best way I know to get to meet this composer on his own terms.

The trouble with Ginastera in his time was that he was both national and universal in his outlook, a composer whose music was steeped in the culture and the vast landscape of his country, but who was not content to be just a local colorist. There is a dark quality to his music that takes us into places hand-tinted postcards would never dare to venture. For certain, he celebrated the rugged machismo of the Argentine cowboys, the *gauchos*. But he was also a modernist who chose what he needed from his older contemporaries Stravinsky and Schoenberg and his friend Aaron Copland.

For that reason, Ginastera didn’t fit comfortably into the populist culture that Juan Peron was attempting to impose. He was dismissed from his post at the Liceo and forced to go into exile in the U.S. from 1945 to 1947. (When the people in charge of the government in those days told you that you needed to leave he country, you didn’t question them. You went home and packed!) Unfortunately for Ginastera, he lived in a time and place when attempts to define what was essentially “Argentine” did not bring people together, but only led to bitter divisiveness.

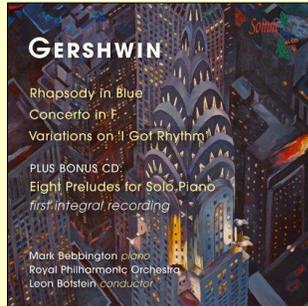
One of the striking features of Ginastera’s music is a strange, haunting chord based on superimposed fourths, as opposed to traditional harmonies based on major and minor thirds. Ironically, this very feature is found in the open strummed guitar music of the *gauchos* themselves. In fact, it is often referred to as the “gaucho chord.” We find it in all four works in the present program, beginning with the Harp Concerto, Op. 25 (1956, rev. 1968). As presented here by Yolanda Kondonassis and the Oberlin Orchestra under Rafael Jimenez, it demolishes any impression we may have had of the harp as a drawing-room instrument conversing in graceful, airy glissandos. Here, the artist is asked to explore a wide range of harp techniques which include occasional rappings on the soundboard. When glissandos occur in an electrifying performance that also includes widely spaced chords, harmonics, scalar motives and dazzling and subtle orchestral colors, they are transformed into something so high-voltage we hardly recognize them.

The same sort of ethos applies to the Sonata for Guitar, Op. 47 (1976), performed by Jason Vieux. Here, the gaucho chord appears on almost every page, plucked, strummed, slid, and tapped on the body of the instrument. Is this musical style ultra-modern, folk, or both? Gil and Orli Shaham, violin and piano, have a great time with Pampeana No. 1, Op. 16 (1947), a work whose title is evocative of the Pampas, the Argentine grasslands whose sea-like vastness tends to inspire a sense of melancholy in the observer. (Nothing makes

Henry Mancini's "Moon River." This touch of whimsy makes for the perfect encore to an enjoyable program.

classical musicians happier than the chance to dig into really sad music.) We hear the gaucho chord at the very opening, in a work that seems close to the harmonies Copland employed in roughly the same period.

Orli Shaham concludes the program with three Danzas Argentinas, Op. 2 (1937) an early work that shows basic proclivities in the emerging composer. The second dance is a haunting *Danza de la moza donosa* (Dance of the Beautiful Maiden). The bookends are livelier, folk-inspired dances that feature bitonal writing and – yes, once again – our old friend, the gaucho chord!



Gershwin: Piano Concerto in F, Rhapsody in Blue, "I Got Rhythm" Variations, 8 Preludes for Piano – Mark Bebbington, piano; Leon Botstein, Royal Philharmonic (Somm Recordings)

Why do I never tire of hearing Gershwin? It's not just the syncopations in his music or the "pep" (to use a word that's gone missing from today's American idiom). It's more than jazzy syncopations and the "blue" notes. Even more than the wonderful melodies that go right to your heart with the unerring instinct of a great writer of popular songs (has any other classical composer had a background like *that?*) It's all that and more.

Some of the mystique Gershwin has for present-day listeners derives from elements that have disappeared from the classical scene. Like the distinctive flattened intervals in the "blues" that end up making us feel good in spite of ourselves. Or the way Gershwin hops up the opening movement of the Piano Concerto in F with the Charleston rhythm plus an attached triplet: who else but George Gershwin would have tapped into such a decidedly vulgar pop idiom, given it a swing, and made it a thing of beauty?

In this particular work, one of the most noticeable features is the way the solo piano interacts with the other instruments, right from the moment it makes its auspicious entrance after the opening tympani thumps. As the music progresses, the piano can be gentle and low-key, or else deeply expressive when set against the lush backdrop of the strings. There are many changes in mood and tempo throughout this work, reflected in the presence of no less than 16 marked sections in the opening movement and another eleven in the second. In the later, the gloriously sad, bluesy theme in E marked *Largamente* is the high point of the entire work. We hear



Shostakovich: Symphony No. 11, "The Year 1905" Emil Tabakov, Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra (Gega New)

Dmitri Shostakovich wrote his Eleventh Symphony in G minor, Op. 103, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, but the events it describes actually took place on Bloody Sunday, January 9th, 1905 when an assembly of peaceful demonstrators bent of presenting a respectful petition to their monarch were brutally massacred in front of the Winter Palace by order of Tsar Nicholas II. Hence the Eleventh Symphony came to be called "The Year 1905." This is Vol. 4 in a cycle of the Shostakovich symphonies by veteran conductor Emil Tabakov and the Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra. The incredible conviction and searing intensity they invest in what is a truly great performance made me regret I had never heard volumes 1 through 3.

One of the things you notice first about this symphony is its highly "visual" quality. Just as Prokofiev's Russian contemporary Sergei Eisenstein was skilled at staging visual images in a cinematic montage, so Prokofiev was adept at streaming musical images throughout a work of music. He had done this memorably in his symphonic cantata Alexander Nevsky (1939), and he does it again in the Eleventh Symphony. Highly imaginative orchestration plays a major role here, helping define the contour of the work and even the nature of the themes as they change on each new appearance.

A good example of this is the use of the 19th century song "Listen." It is first heard in the opening movement, The Palace Square, in counterpoint with another well-known song, "The Convict." The tentative nature of its hopeful message is scored for two flutes with ominous triplets in the tympani betraying an edgy sense of

it again in a finale which ends with the piano playing its heart out against colossal orchestral trills. The ending is "simply swell," as they would have said in Gershwin's day.

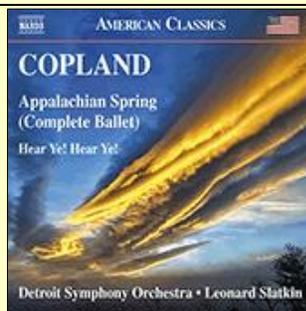
Listening to this music, you get the feeling that a lot of the idiom that was well-known in those days needs to be intelligently re-created by today's performing artists. From the long opening wail on the clarinet in Rhapsody in Blue (a glissando which had been considered technically impossible for that instrument before the premiere of this work) to the way the tempo broadens and the piano goes into its "stride" just before the smashing final bars, there is a whole lot going on here that they don't routinely teach in conservatories. Ditto the insertion of biting mechanical rhythms into music that is essentially light-hearted, off-the-beat, and bouncy in the "I Got Rhythm" Variations, one of the easiest works in the whole repertoire for audiences to fall in love with at first hearing.

All that, and more, requires the dedication of the artists in the present recording for whom scholarship and research do not stultify an expressive performance but serve to enhance it. English pianist Mark Bebbington impresses with his ability to shift from jazz-inflected passages to deeply expressive, sad but not depressing moods in moments such as the "Blues Lullaby" in No. 6 of the eight Preludes for Solo Piano, included here as a bonus on CD2. He is a thinking man's pianist with a feeling man's touch on the keys. American conductor Leon Botstein, conducting the Royal Philharmonic, proves Bebbington's ideal partner in a program in which the low-key quality of the recordings helps us focus on the choice details that make Gershwin what he was.

unease. Another is the hymn "O Thou, Our Tsar, Our Little Father," which is heard first in a soft, glorious version for a very eloquent bassoon. In the movement January 9th, the accompanying strings add increased tension by playing the melody three times as quickly. It undergoes a frightful change in the final movement, Tocsin (The Alarm Signal) where the bass clarinet plays it in a rhythm marked by quick, jerky triplets.

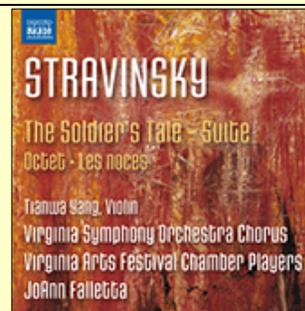
The orchestration is equally important, and here the members of the Bulgarian NRSO really bring out its character by their distinguished performances. The sounds of whistles and trumpet calls separated by eerie silences create an ominous mood in the opening movement. When things really heat up in the January 9th movement, the strings take on a fast driving, percussive quality, reinforcing the propulsive energy of the brass and the actual percussion. At the end, a strange silence descends, punctuated by soft, widely spaced taps in the tympani, and we are easily able to imagine the aftermath of the massacre, with the bodies of the dead and dying lying in the snow, blanketed by the mist. As the composer typically does here, the last soft drum taps lead immediately into Eternal Memory, a movement marked at first by scarcely audible pizzicati, representing the dashed hopes of the people above quiet, insistent heartbeats that show us the human spirit is still indestructible.

The final movement, Tocsin, begins *attacca* and gains momentum as the collective will to prevail over evil increases. Among the song melodies heard here is that of the revolutionary anthem "Go boldly, comrades, to the battle." At the 9:02 point we hear a moving solo for the cor anglais, dark-voiced cousin of the oboe that sings a deeply eloquent cadenza-like aria for several minutes before the orchestra moves on to a triumphant close. To quote what are allegedly the composer's own words, "It's about the people, who have stopped believing because the cup of evil has run over." The persuasive power of the present performance and recording makes this clear. Shostakovich wrote this Symphony in the year of the Hungarian Uprising (1957) but it holds a message for oppressed people in all times and all places.



Copland: Appalachian Spring, "Hear Ye, Hear Ye"
Leonard Slatkin, Detroit Symphony Orchestra (Naxos)

Leonard Slatkin and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra present a pairing of Aaron Copland's best-loved ballet



Stravinsky: The Soldier's Tale, Octet, Les Noces
Joann Falletta, Virginia Arts Festival CO (Naxos)

In pungent performances that carry conviction, Joann Falletta conducts the Virginia Arts Festival Chamber

with one that has been virtually unknown for many years and is much in need of friends. Both are given dynamic performances that emphasize the vivid colors, the strong contrasts of themes and timbres, and the undeniable appeal to the emotions that represent Copland at his very best.

First, the unknown. Copland composed *Hear Ye! Hear Ye!* in 1934 at the request of American choreographer Ruth Page. A very fast-moving ballet in 18 scenes, it was based on an actual murder trial in Chicago in which witnesses gave three different and conflicting accounts of the sensational onstage shooting of a male dancer. Was it his partner, a girl from the chorus, or a deranged member of the audience who did the deed? Copland's music for this story is extremely colorful and vivid, even to the extent of simulated pistol shots at the end of each of the witnesses' testimony in Scenes 8, 12, and 16. (I have no idea what instrument was used; since this is America where gun control laws are a farce, they might have used the real thing!)

For this ballet, Copland employed a mélange of dances to lighten the serious subject, including tango, blues, and *danses Apaches*. The story reflects contemporary American cynicism about the criminal justice system, which is reflected in Copland's satirical use of the opening bars of the National Anthem at several points. It is full-blown and brassy at first and, at the end, dispirited and impotent. (Happily for Copland, the ballet was soon forgotten: had it re-surfaced during the McCarthy Era, he might have faced a real grilling from HUAC). By 1969, Page herself was unable to recall any of her lost choreography. Today, some skilled choreographer might do well to come up with a new scenario for music that still has a lot of "sock" and wow," as they would have put it in the 'Thirties.

Appalachian Spring, perhaps Copland's best-known work ever, is given a performance that really brings out its color palette, from brilliant hues in the electrifying moments of exultation and rapture, right down to what might be termed a "brown study" for the subdued passages when we reflect on the sorrows of life. This is the complete ballet instead of the Appalachian Spring suite we are accustomed to hearing in the symphony hall and recordings. At just under 38 minutes' duration, as opposed to the 25-26 minute version we are used to hearing, the main elements that have been restored here concern the episodes when the revival preacher warns the young homesteaders of the awesome trials and dangers that they face in settling the land and wresting a living from it.

I personally like the inclusion of these episodes because it makes for a sense of balance: somehow, the dire forebodings make the moments of quiet ecstasy and joyous exultation all the more real and vivid. The moment just before dawn when the neighbors will assemble for the house-raising is beautifully realized here: slow tempo, the light gradually becoming stronger, so quiet that we can almost hear the sounds of crickets

Players and the Virginia Symphony Orchestra and Chorus in performances of three signal works that reflect Igor Stravinsky's new look for the immediate post-WWI era. They are the suite from *The Soldier's Tale* (1920), *Octet* (1923, rev. 1952), and *Les Noces* (1923). These works share in various ways an impudent style, a preoccupation with rhythm amounting to obsession, and a penchant for odd ensembles in a quest for a distinct, even strange, interplay of timbres.

The Soldier's Tale was an early use of what has been called a "Pierrot ensemble" (after Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*), namely one deliberately composed of instruments that do not blend well harmonically. The object is to emphasize non-traditional intervals and dis-chords. Here, we have a septet composed of violin, double bass, clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, trombone, and percussion. The style is jerky, with asymmetrical rhythms creating a feeling of unease.

The story itself evokes the milieu of the folk tale and the open-air *commedia*. A discharged Soldier, returning from the war, encounters the devil, in disguise, who trades a magic book that will enable the Soldier to acquire riches in exchange for his violin. The Soldier in time becomes disenchanting with his empty pursuit of wealth and re-acquires his violin from the Devil in a card game in which he trumps the Ace of Spades with the Queen of Hearts. Later he rescues a captive Princess, who celebrates her freedom with a trio of hopped-up versions of dances – Tango, Valse, and Ragtime – that would hardly be suitable for a real princess but are somehow plausible in folk tale terms.

The end of the tale, when the Soldier attempts to re-visit the village of his birth (despite a warning of danger by the Narrator) and is led away meekly by the Devil in a Triumphant March, is not satisfying to my mind. What danger was that? The urge to recapture the memories of one's youth is universally human. It may be fraught with frustration and disappointment, but is it necessarily damnable?

Octet, scored for flute, clarinet, 2 bassoons, 2 trumpets, and 2 trombones, sits more or less uncomfortably between chamber music for woodwinds and for brass. Its form is more classical than we had earlier in the program, even to the extent that its middle movement is a theme and variations. The variations include a march, a waltz, a cancan, and a fugue. This pungent little work makes a good impression in its fifteen minutes.

I am not as taken with *Les Noces* (*The Wedding*), for soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, bass and mixed chorus. The ensemble consists of pitched and unpitched percussion instruments and four pianos that are always used percussively. Hard-driving motor rhythms are not restricted to the percussion but are found in the vocal music as well, where the insistent staccato phrasing becomes noisome very quickly. The music is said to include the texts of actual folk songs nostalgic of the old Russia. I cannot attest to the fact, as I understand no

in Copland's orchestration. When the tempo increases and things really heat up in the stunning interaction of the hymn tunes "Simple Gifts" and "Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones," Slatkin's direction shows the confident hand of a master.

Russian, but *that* may even be a blessing as Stravinsky appears to distort the folk melodies beyond recognition. To quote an old adage, listeners who like this sort of thing will find it the sort of thing they like.



Wieniawski: Works for Piano and Violin – Liv Migdal, violin; Marian Migdal, piano (Naxos)

This remarkable recital by the father and daughter duo of Marian and Liv Migdal, piano and violin respectively, helps put the music of Polish composer Jozef Wieniawski (1837-1912) in its proper perspective. The younger brother of the more famous violinist and composer Henryk Wieniawski



(1835-1880), he had a lot to say in his own right, as we hear abundantly in Sonata for Violin and Piano in D minor, Op. 24. Right from the opening bars, we hear Jozef Wieniawski exploring the heights of the violin and the depths of the piano in music in which the virtuosity of both instruments is clearly used to enhance the harmony and emotional appeal of the work as a whole, and not just for its own sake. One thing we notice right way is this composer's penchant for simple, easily grasped melodies that helps our recognition of them when they return in one form or another later in this opening movement, so aptly titled *Allegro con anima* (with spirit). The slow movement, *Andante religioso*, has the gentle warmth of its hymn-like theme as the dominant feature. A very playful Scherzo marked *Allegro molto vivace e gioioso* (very lively and jocund) is followed by a highly rhythmical *Allegro appassionata* that bursts with excitement and includes reminiscences of themes from earlier movements.

The Wieniawski brothers, then only thirteen and eleven, collaborated in an amazingly precocious *Allegro de sonate* (1848) with a cadenza marked *Maestoso* in the opening section and sensational triple- and quadruple-stopping in the violin part. The program concludes with a very attractive *Grand Duo Polonaise* in G major (1853), a further collaboration between the brothers that features more virtuosic writing for the piano, which stands virtually on a par with the violin in this regard. The sources of its engaging thematic material include two Polish songs by Stanislaw Moniuszko and a Polonaise by Aleks Nikoljewicz. Numerous passages of multiple stopping in the violin, typically occurring within the line (where they are more difficult to negotiate than they would be in a cadenza) and executed to perfection by Liv Migdal in the present performance, add to the excitement. In the *Andante*, both instruments are treated to handsome cadenzas. One of the most interesting moments occurs in the opening *Allegro moderato* between 2:12 and 2:37 in the present performance, when we hear what appears to be a warm, sad Hebraic melody in the violin, ending in vocal-like melismas. A real heart-stopper, it is followed by the Polish music (described above) proclaiming the beauty and the happiness of life.

I note with sadness the passing of Marian Migdal in the spring of last year. We may be certain that Liv Migdal will carry on the legacy of her father and mentor as the finest possible tribute to his memory.

A Personal Note of Thanks



At this time, I'd like to thank the officers and members of the Audio Video Club of Atlanta for the wonderful gift of a special audio system to replace the aging equipment on which I'd been listening. My "Fellow Wizards in the Upper Stratosphere" (to paraphrase Frank Morgan in a movie that we all know and love) really did a great job researching, assembling, and testing the components of a system that was put together with a real-world situation in mind.

As some of you may know, I have no "ivory tower" listening area, or even a den or finished basement in which to audition new recordings, but a 950 sq. ft. apartment that I share with the three other members of my family. Additionally, the only available location for the setup was the top surface of a low bookshelf, 40" x 11" so the system had to be *very* compact.

The result was so good I could hardly believe my ears. An Oppo DV-970HD DVD layer sits atop a Sony STR-DH130 FM Stereo, flanked by a pair of Elac Center Channel Speakers that put out a truly impressive sound for such stubby little fellows (they must be made of solid lead, to judge by their weight!) It was a simple solution that proved highly effective. That it was also apparently very cost-effective for the Club makes it seem all the more wonderful.

You may be interested to know that the first CD I played on this system after assembling it was a Sony Classical release, "Blessings, Peace, and Harmony," a program of Gregorian vespers sung by the Benedictine Monks of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico. (See *Classical Reviews* for December, 2012). It proved ideal test listening as the voices of the monks moved effortlessly through every hallway and room of the apartment, filling it everywhere with undiminished softness, beauty and persuasiveness. What a wonderful blessing music is, I thought - and also the sound equipment that serves it so well!

So thank you all from the bottom of my heart, fellow Audio Club members. I'm not going to name names for fear of embarrassing or slighting anyone who participated in the researching, acquisition, and testing of this wonderful new system - but *you know* who you are!

Phil Muse