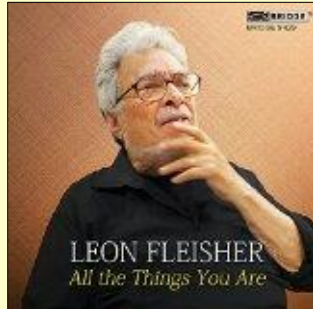


## Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

October, 2014



"All the Things You Are," music for piano left hand  
Leon Fleisher, pianist  
(Bridge Records)

American pianist Leon Fleisher, besides being a musician and teacher of considerable stature, is a hero to many people because of the way he faced adversity and didn't let it get him down. Briefly, in case you didn't know his story, Fleisher was one of this country's most gifted and promising keyboard artists, being the first American to win the Queen Elizabeth of Belgium competition in 1952. When he finally realized the crippling effects of focal dystonia on his right hand in 1965, his career as a concert pianist seemed at an end. (Curiously, Gary Graffman and Byron Janis, two other brilliant artists of his own generation, suffered the same affliction.)

The encouraging part of the story is that Fleisher took stock of himself and ended up with a long and satisfying career as a conductor, an inspiring educator, and a founder and artistic director of several music festivals. *And...* even after he recovered the use of his right hand to some degree following more recent advances in medicine, he has continued to champion the beauties of the rare but significant repertoire for piano music, left hand. The present CD program reflects that abiding interest.

I find that I like J. S. Bach's wonderful violin Chaconne, arranged for left hand by Johannes Brahms as his



Copland: Piano Works, incl. Sonata, Piano Blues, El Salon Mexico, Dance Episodes from Rodeo  
Eugenie Russo, piano (Paladino)

Eugenie Russo, where have you been all my life? The New York City native who attended conservatory at Oberlin and furthered her piano studies in Vienna and Salzburg is heard from memorably in a welcome reissue on Paladino Music of an original 1995 release on the obscure Champion Records label. If it reaches a wider audience, that's to the good, as these Aaron Copland treasures need to be heard by the whole world.

In Russo's hands, Copland's music comes immediately to vibrant, stirring life in performances that put the focus on the composer's high-profile rhythmic chords, sometimes spikey and impudent, at other times full-bodied, and his really sensational ostinatos. That's important because Copland, a Brooklyn native educated in Europe in the latest musical *-isms* of the 1930's, soon realized, upon his return to America, the need to temper his own brand of modernism with more popular elements if he hoped to win an audience.

That wasn't too hard a self-sell for Copland, since he already had an affinity for blues and jazz, and he acquired a love for old American folk tunes through his work with dancer and choreographer Agnes de Mille. The rest, as they say, was history. The Piano Sonata (1941), heard first on the program, is quintessence of Copland. Unusually, its three



"Virtuoso Rossini Arias"  
Lawrence Brownlee, tenor  
Constantine Orbelian, Kaunas SO  
(Delos)

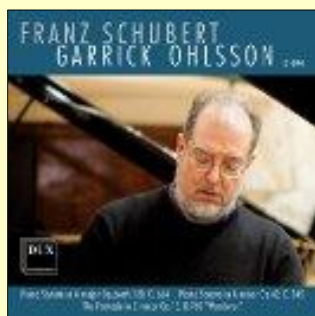
In a choice program of eight arias from as many Rossini operas, American tenor Lawrence Brownlee shows us that his brilliant reputation is completely justified. A composer often noted for the virtuoso demands he places on singers in general, and tenors in particular, Rossini seems almost like child's play the way Brownlee handles him. This artist has a voice as liquid as golden honey but capable of rising to the peak of his range and intensity on the shortest notice. His High D seems deceptively effortless, while his High F (which some critics seem to think exists solely in the minds of sadistic composers) takes a little more effort to achieve, but is still within his capability.

Unlike most operatic stars, Lawrence Brownlee did not grow up with a background in opera or classical music. The product of a blue collar family in Youngstown, Ohio, he did not discover the classics until he was a student at Anderson (SC) University and the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University. He cut his teeth, vocally speaking, singing gospel music in church, and credits the flexibility needed for gospel, with its improvisational style, soaring riffs and runs, and dead-on natural sounding vocal production, for preparing him for his future career in bel canto. An artist constantly in demand in opera houses and recital halls on more continents than one,

own Etude No. 5 (1879) more satisfying than the familiar Busoni transcription. Fleisher's account stresses the romantic sonorities and the deep sense of joy and peace in this work which reveals as much of Brahms as it does Bach while still keeping faith with the original.

Leon Kirchner's L.H., written for Fleischer, was inspired by Emily Dickinson's "Wild Nights" and Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Renascence," and captures the mood of both poems. Earl Wild's arrangement of George Gershwin's "The Man I Love" and Stephen Prutsman's of Jerome Kern's "All the Things You Are" both receive a touch of the Fleisher magic that show us why these timeless American standards will never die. Musical Offerings (1998), written by George Perle to celebrate Fleisher's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, has its composer's trademark eloquent phrases effectively spaced by marked pauses.

Prelude No. 6 by the Catalan composer Federico Mompou, combines dreamlike beauty with the deceptive air of a flowing conversation. And the present performance of Thoughts of Evelyn, written by longtime Fleisher collaborator Dina Kostin in memory of the late concert pianist Evelyn Swarthout Hayes (1913-2000) pays eloquent tribute to her memory.



Schubert: Piano Sonatas, D664, 845 "Wanderer" Fantasia, D760 Garrick Ohlsson (Dux)

This marks American pianist Garrick Ohlsson's first release on the classy Polish label Dux. Why Dux? Why not? The White Plains, N. Y. native took a major stride in his career when he won the Gold Medal at the

movements are in slow-fast-slow order, reversing the usual "Oreo" structure of a sonata that would place the creamy filling inside. But there's no shortage of expressive lyricism or dramatic tension in this work! Copland wrote the Four Piano Blues at various times between 1928 and 1948, dedicating each to a different pianist and friend. As a set, they hold together very well.

That leaves the atmospheric El Salon Mexico, with its potpourri of delightfully lively Mexican folk tunes, heard here in the piano arrangement by Leonard Bernstein, and the composer's own piano version of the ballet Rodeo. The familiar suite is all here: *Buckaroo Holiday*, *Corral Nocturne*, *Ranch House Party* (complete with honky-tonk piano), *Saturday Night Waltz*, and the stunning show-stopper, *Hoe-Down*. Russo's equally sensational playing gets right to the heart of it all.



Enescu, Fauré: Piano Trios The Trio Enescu (Genuin)

The Trio Enescu, consisting of Alina Armonas-Tambrea, violin; Edvardas Armonas, cello; and Gabriele Gylte-Hein, piano; was founded in 2011, the 130th year of the birth of the Romanian violinist and composer George Enescu. The former students at the Cologne College for Music and Dance have come a long way in a very short time, developing an ideal blend and perfect mutual sympathy for the repertoire they perform. They also have the necessary discipline to convincingly put across two works whose rhapsodic moments seem deceptively to go beyond the bar lines, whereas both composers actually adhere to the formal constraints that make good chamber

he currently makes his home in Atlanta with his wife and two children. (Why Atlanta? Check the airline schedules.)

The arias in this program are taken from both comic and serious operas: *La Gazza Ladra* (The Thieving Magpie), *Le Comte Ory*, *L'Occasione fa il Ladro* (Opportunity makes the Thief), *Otello*, *Semiramide*, *Il Turco in Italia*, *La Donna del Lago* (The Lady of the Lake), and *Zelmira*.



Prokofiev: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cinderella Suites* – Berlinskaya-Ancelle piano duo (Melodiya)

The Russian label Melodiya, moribund in recent years, has released its first new recordings in several decades. Typical of the new spirit that is stirring at Melodiya, formerly the state record label of the USSR, is this release of duo-piano arrangements of Prokofiev's suites from the ballets *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella* by the team of Ludmila Berlinskaya and Arthur Ancelle.

These performances are given on a pair of Yamaha grand pianos, made by the famous Japanese company with offices in 42 countries around the world (though, curiously, in Russia only since the Moscow office was established in 2008). It is an ideal choice of instrument for the music in the present recital, as the light, quick, secure action serves the needs of Prokofiev's ballet music to perfection. That includes the suite of ten pieces from *Romeo and Juliet* that Ancelle, a native of France, made for the Berlinskaya-Ancelle team. One thinks of the story as a tragedy, for so it is listed in the Shakespeare canon, but in fact the drama plays as a comedy until the

Chopin International Piano Competition in Warsaw in 1970, and this formidable artist still has many loyal fans in Poland. For the present recital, he has chosen three of Franz Schubert's most beautiful works for piano. Beauty comes with a price in this case, for all three have elements of pleasant peril for the executant.

Sonata in A major, D664 is arguably as beautiful a work as there is in the repertoire. It is almost too lovely for its own good, as the performer is tempted to dwell exclusively on its buoyant lyricism and neglect the poignant elements which are usually associated with excursions to minor keys. The dramatic moment that occurs in the opening development is one; another is the downturn to the minor in the Andante. Ohlsson does not miss his mark in either.

This pianist's powerful technique gets a nice workout in the great "Wanderer" Fantasy in C major, D760. It is not just the symphonic breadth of the fantasia and the strident declamations in its very opening that stretch the pianist's technique, but the musical demands as well. Schubert unifies its four contrasted movements by transitions from one to the next instead of ending on a definitive cadence. Amazingly, the entire work is based on a single motif from Schubert's song "The Wanderer," and the second movement is an imaginative theme and variations based on it. In this performance, Ohlsson's pacing and subtle use of rubato are superb, all the way to the thunderous finale.

The program concludes with Sonata in A minor, D845, one of Schubert's comparatively underperformed works in the genre. Big chords and syncopations vie with abundant melody that is given added bite by hammering declamatory rhythms. This sonata shows the composer had come a long way from the simple, innocent lyricism of D664. Ohlsson makes the most of its power and the sophisticated harmonies that accompany the *pp* chords at a key moment in the Andante movement, itself a short set of variations.

music what it is.

George Enescu premiered his Piano Trio in A minor in 1916. It is tempting for that reason to view its occasional poignant moods as a response to the Great War, although such sadness is readily to be found in the Romanian folk idiom that inspired him as much in this work as it did his famous Romanian Rhapsodies. There's a lot of variety to be found here, including the freshly radiant melody that opens it, the flowing phrases of the middle movement, and the rousing folk dance rhythms of the finale.

Piano Trio in D minor, Op. 120, was the valedictory work of French composer Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924). Amazingly for a work written by a composer who was almost totally deaf from a disease of the inner ear and had but a year to live, the Trio is surprisingly fresh and filled with invigorating elements, much as were the final chamber works of Johannes Brahms, whose career Fauré paralleled in this regard. Bass-less filigree elements in the piano contrast with writing for the violin and cello that give the work added depth and compass. There is a feeling of boundless freedom to Fauré's melodies that provides another similarity to the late chamber music of Brahms.

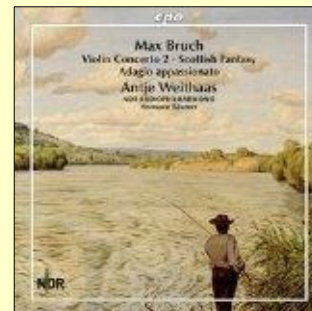
A charming extra here is the inclusion of Enescu's *Sérénade lontaine* (1903), dedicated to the Romanian royal couple. Short and pithy, it combines all the various elements of a serenade in a work of only five minutes' duration.



Zeisl, Copland: Violin Sonatas; pieces by Bloch, Dauber, and Zeisl - Zina Schiff, violin; Cameron Grant, piano (MSR Classics)

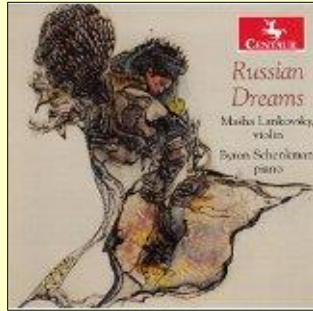
deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt in Act III (Nos. 34-35 of 52 in the ballet), and Prokofiev's score is filled with many lighter moments that put the tragic, ominous ones in bolder relief. The skittish movements that epitomize Juliet the Young Girl, a picture of the heroine on the verge of a pitifully short maturity where love will end in death, are beautifully described here by the present artists. Only in The Death of Tybalt, where Romeo's enemy dies in a sequence of almost viscerally felt spasms, do I miss the presence of a symphony orchestra.

Berlinskaya and Ancelle give an equally inspired account of the suite from Cinderella, as transcribed by Mikhail Pletnev. Most memorable moments here include the visits of the Winter Fairy and the Spring Fairy, the latter with a curious "blue" mood near the end, Prince Charming's Galop with its buoyant athleticism, and the highlight of the ball, Cinderella's resplendent Waltz. We conclude with the glorious finale in an enchanted garden, where the lovers exchange their vows. There is even comedy, as Cindy's ugly stepsisters try to master the steps of a Gavotte – not a dance for the balletically challenged!



Bruch: Violin Concerto No. 2 Scottish Fantasy - Antje Weithaas. Hermann Bäumer conducts the NDR Radio Philharmonic (CPO)

German violinist Antje Weithaas, a native of Cottbus, Brandenburg, has come a long way in a career that has made her, to quote a European review journal, "one of the great violinists of our time." Known as a distinguished teacher, ensemble leader, and chamber musician, she shows herself in this program of



“Russian Dreams,” music for violin and piano – Masha Lankovskaya, violin; Byron Schenkman, piano (Centaur)

A fresh take on highly evocative and not overly familiar Russian music makes for a memorable recital by violinist Masha Lankovskaya and her partner, pianist Byron Schenkman. Born to musical parents in Moscow, Lankovskaya grew up in Australia and began her musical studies there, completing them in the U.S. She is very much the heir of a rich Russian tradition in her instrument. That accounts in large measure for the repertoire she has chosen for the present program, most of which could be described as “hauntingly beautiful.”

Pieces from *Cinderella*, Op. 87, as arranged by Mikhail Fichtengolz, was an ear opener for me because I’d paid scant attention in the past to Sergei Prokofiev’s second-best classical ballet. The present account by Lankovskaya and Schenkman makes me wish I’d gotten better acquainted with it. The opening “Waltz” is glorious enough for a curtain raiser, though tinged with an edginess that is very much in Prokofiev’s grotesque style. That mood of grotesquerie is deepened by the “Gavotte,” in which Cindy’s ugly sisters are, by tradition, played by male dancers in drag. How weird is *that*? The last piece, “Winter Fairy” is enchanting in its writing for the muted violin.

More evocative delights are in store in Nikolai Medtner’s 3 Nocturnes, Op. 16, inspired by Goethe’s poem *Nachtgesang* (Night Song) and three pieces by the much-neglected Nikolai Roslavetz (1881-1944): Adagio, Nocturne, and *Poème*

What a heart-melting album *this* is! American violinist Zina Schiff has selected a program of works by 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish composers that have enough deep feeling and passionate lyricism to move any number of large stones – or stony hearts. This is no conventional “Jewish soul” survey. Indeed, most of the works heard in this program were as totally unfamiliar to me as they were ear-stretching revelations. Zina Schiff apparently chose music that held a treasure of personal memories and associations. And it shows.

Aaron Copland’s 1943 Sonata for Violin and Piano was the only work on this program of treasurable rarities with which I was previously familiar. It is an easy work to love, being written in the composer’s most accessible idiom in a period between his ballets *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*, and possessing many of the features listeners will recognize as quintessential Copland. Contrasting expressive austerity with the leaping exuberance of its outer movements and the deep feeling of its central Lento movement, it offers the listener much to enjoy. Understandably, it is Copland’s most frequently performed chamber work.

Formal restraint and rhapsodic emotion play against each other very effectively in Ernest Bloch’s *Abodah* (1928), his setting of the solemn prayer that opens the Yom Kippur service. The soaring lyricism of this piece will strike a universal chord with the listener that goes well beyond its liturgical origin.

The 1949-1950 “Brandeis” Sonata by Erich Zeisl, a Vienna-born Jew who fled the Holocaust to establish a successful career as a composer of Hollywood film scores, is every bit as impressive a work as the Copland. The contrast between haunting spiritual beauty and unrestrained joy is the most remarkable feature of a work that has been shamefully neglected. In her booklet notes, Schiff recounts how she received a middle-of-the-night call from her former violin teacher, Israel Baker (1919-2011) asking “Do you know Zeisl?” (In his enthusiasm, he was

choice works by Max Bruch, to be pretty damned good when she is in the center of the spotlight. And the music itself is easy to fall in love with.

Though Bruch’s Violin Concerto No. 2, Op. 44 has long been obscured by the greater fame of his Concerto No. 1, it has a lot to say for itself, too. The main problem is that it says things with which audiences were already familiar from its predecessor, which include its narrative character and the way its themes rise from virtual inaudibility to a point where they appear absolutely brilliant.

The more familiar Scottish Fantasy, Op. 46 has a symphonic breadth that is further emphasized by its four-movement structure: Adagio, Allegro, Andante, and Finale. On the present CD, the introduction (*Einleitung*) to the opening movement occupies a track of its own. Bruch loaded the work with actual highly evocative folk tunes, increasing its definite Scottish character. The Adagio cantabile, based on “Auld Robin Morris,” has a harp that recalls bardic times while it gracefully decorates what the violin is saying. The Allegro uses the lively tune “Hey, the Dusty Miller,” with drone basses imitating the sound of bagpipes and the violinist engaged in sensational double-stopping. The Andante effectively uses the soulful tune “I’m down for lack of Johnnie.”

But the greatest surprise occurs in the finale, unusually marked Allegro *guerriero* (i.e., “warlike”). Here, the rousing patriotic tune “Scots wha hae” (Scots who have with Wallace bled) that resonated through Scottish history really gets the music moving in fine kilter. The violin part, which Weithaas handles masterfully, calls for incredible dexterity, playing on three and even four strings simultaneously and alternating bowing with strumming effects. Throughout this work, Weithaas shows herself in full command of Bruch’s dynamics, which typically arise and recede magically from vanishing points. And the orchestra, under Bäumer’s highly nuanced leadership, lends Weithaas yeoman support.

*Romantique*. The last-named, with its upsurge of emotion midway through, is the most remarkable of three haunting beauties by a figure whose works were suppressed by the Soviets.

Alexander Scriabin's *Reverie*, Op. 24 is next. Its mood, evocative of a daydream or a vague desire, is very much in the composer's earlier romantic style.

Finally, "Fairy Tale" (*Skazka*) by Sergei Tanayev (1856-1915), the middle movement from his Concert Suite, Op. 28, comes across as mysterious and charming in this fine account by Lankovsky and Schenkman, two artists having the necessary mutual rapport to put over a spell-binding program. This piece was one of the very few in the present recital with which I was familiar, having long admired David Oistrakh's 1956 account of it in the orchestral version with Nikolai Malko conducting the Philharmonia. (Recorded in Abbey Road Studio No. 1, it was, I believe, EMI's very first commercial recording in stereo.) The present artists brought back some fond memories.



Fibich: *Symphonic Poems* Marek Štílec, Czech National Symphony Orchestra (Naxos)

Energetic young conductor Marek Štílec and the Czech National Symphony Orchestra bring vibrant new life to the music of the little known 19<sup>th</sup> century composer Zdeněk Fibich (1850-1900). There is surprisingly little information on this contemporary of Dvořák and Smetana, two compatriots whom he influenced and encouraged by his forays into the spirit of Czech

unaware of the three-hour time difference between L.A. and Boston!) A request from a mentor is virtually a command. In the end, Schiff gave him her solemn promise to learn and record this forgotten work, a promise she makes good here (and *how!*)

The last figure in the program is the most shadowy, the tragically short-lived Robert Dauber (1922-1945) whose life was cut short, as were so many others, at Dachau. The bittersweet beauty of *Serenata* (1942), Dauber's only known surviving work, gives a glimpse of what we might have expected of him.



Hindemith: *Nobilissima Visione* (Complete Ballet), *Five Pieces* Gerard Schwarz, Seattle Symphony (Naxos)

This May 2011 recording by Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle Symphony Orchestra is said to be the first of the complete 44-minute *Nobilissima Visione* (Noblest Vision), though Arkivmusic.com has no fewer than 24 listings of the 20-minute suite Paul Hindemith culled from his ballet. That is a tribute to the increasing popularity of a modern masterwork when you consider that the fine 1992 Delos release of the suite by James DePreist and the Oregon Symphony was then the only one available! It's all part of a latter-day Hindemith revival that has been going on very quietly in recent years.

That's rather as it should be for Hindemith, a self-effacing composer who sublimated his craft to serving the greater ends of the music. Though usually described as a modernist, he had no qualms about going back to the past for inspiration. Nowhere in modern music are you likelier to hear strict fugue and

I'm running out of space and haven't said anything about the 11-minute *Adagio sostenuto*, Op. 57 on Track 9. So I will leave it to you to discover for yourself this obscure gem that concludes a very satisfying program.



Berlioz: *Harold in Italy*; *Overtures* Lise Berthaud, viola Leonard Slatkin, Orch. National Lyon (Naxos)

Leonard Slatkin, at the podium of the Orchestre National de Lyon, delivers alert and affectionate accounts of favorites by the French romantic composer Hector Berlioz. The orchestra responds in ways that help bring new life to old warhorses. For a chaser, we have a fine account of *Reverie et Caprice*, a favorite encore piece, in its alternative version for violin and orchestra.

The major work, of course, is *Harold in Italy* (1834), in which the viola solo is more than adequately performed by French violist Lise Berthaud. Many listeners, going back to the dedicatee Nicolo Paganini, have wrongly assumed that the work must be in the nature of a concerto, whereas it is actually a full-blown programmatic symphony in four movements, with the viola adding character and commentary as an observer rather than standing in the spotlight. Slatkin gets the emphasis right in this performance.

He also chooses the optimal tempi to keep things moving along so there are no *longeurs* in any of its four movements, whose descriptions say it all: (1) *Harold in the Mountains: Scenes of Sadness, of Happiness and Joy*, (2) *March of Pilgrims chanting the Evening Prayer*, (3) *Serenade of a Mountaineer of the Abruzzi to his Sweetheart*, and (4)

nationalism. I am not even sure of the cause of his somewhat premature death, several months short of his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. Fortunately, his colorful music speaks for itself.

Fibich wrote in the same genres as did Dvořák and Smetana, namely operas, symphonic poems, symphonies, and chamber works. Like Dvořák, he wrote a symphonic poem on the subject of Othello (heard in the present program). And like Smetana, he was inspired by the lurid tale of Šárka, the amazon warrior princess who kills her male lover, composing an opera on the subject. There is even a strong suggestion that Smetana was emboldened to proceed with his plans for *Ma Vlast*, his famous cycle of symphonic poems, by Fibich's success with his own essays in Czech nationalism, of which the symphonic poems *Záboj*, *Slavoj*, and *Luděk*, steeped in the pageantry of the middle ages, and *Toman and the Wood Nymph* bear evident witness in the present CD.

The afore-mentioned Othello is a minor masterpiece, capturing the changing moods of Shakespeare's story and giving deft portraits of the principal characters in its tale of sexual jealousy and death. The *Tempest*, also on a Shakespearian subject, is a wonderful depiction of all the elements in the story: storm, shipwreck, the enchantment of young love, and the reconciliation of sworn enemies. Finally, *Vesna* (Spring) evokes the season in all its moods, plaintively expressive as well as boisterous. Fibich uses deft touches and an unerring feeling for the right instruments to create effects other composers would have been tempted to belabor.

counterpoint, canonic imitation and brass chorales used as expertly or as effectively as they are here. Rather than cast an academic pall over the music, these tools of the composer's craft lend a character and a deep, indescribable beauty to the music.

Hindemith was inspired to write this work based on the life of St. Francis of Assisi in May, 1937 when he first viewed the famous frescoes in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence. He communicated his enthusiasm to his travelling companion, the dancer and choreographer Leonid Massine, and the two soon began laying the groundwork for a ballet. Massine, however, always had reservations about whether the story was really danceable and later voiced the opinion that it was a symphonic work intended to "create and sustain throughout a mood of mystic exaltation." In the end, Massine choreographed the ballet and played the demanding role of St. Francis himself. No doubt he did it very well, although the 6-minute Meditation in which Francis vows to devote his life to Humility, Chastity, and Poverty, which is the core of the story, is inherently un-dramatic and must have presented obvious problems.

At any rate, you are much likelier to hear this exalted music today in the symphony hall than in the ballet theatre. And nowhere will you find it performed more convincingly than in this beautifully detailed recording by Schwarz and the Seattle. Schwarz handles the cool lyricism and the glowing harmonies of Hindemith's score with the greatest assurance, and he receives a superb response from every desk of the orchestra. Of particular notice are the contributions of Ko-ichiro Yamamoto, whose gorgeous trombone artistry informs so much of the score of *Nobilissima Visione*, and the violin of Emma McGrath, whose playing serves a similar purpose in illuminating the companion work on this CD, *Five Pieces for String Orchestra*.

*Orgy of the Brigands*.

We also have fine accounts of two overtures, *Benvenuto Cellini* and *The Roman Carnival*, both based on Berlioz' opera after the sensational autobiography of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian sculptor and goldsmith who just managed to squeeze in enough time between episodes of abducting women, swashbuckling swordplay, and conjuring up demons in the ruins of the Coliseum at midnight to fulfill a few important Papal commissions. The encore here, *Reverie et Caprice*, is a work of rare charm and beauty, with Italian violinist Giovanni Radivo doing the honors.