Smetana Má Vlast
Theodore Kuchar, Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra
(Brilliant Classics)

What a surprise this was! I hadn’t expected more of this Brilliant Classics release by a lesser-known conductor and orchestra than a pleasant, well-played account of familiar music by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana that would fill up column space and balance this month’s Classical Reviews. Instead, I got the most compelling account of the composer’s thrice-familiar Má Vlast (My Country) that I’ve heard in some time. Not only do Theodore Kuchar and the Janáček Philharmonic from the Czech Republic perform this music with spirit and conviction – as well they should, since this cycle of symphonic poems serves in effect as their national anthem – but it is the most coherent and best-unified account I have ever heard of a cycle that usually comes across as an amalgamation of six works that are loosely related at best. In these performances, the unity of Má Vlast shines forth with great clarity. I hear this richly conceived music in my mind as I sleep and upon waking in the morning.

Bedřich Smetana was a Czech patriot who had even participated briefly in the Prague Uprising of 1848. In his later years, he triumphed over increasing deafness to create his masterwork, six symphonic poems based on the colorful history and legends and the beautiful landscape of a land that was still a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From the arpeggios intoned by a duo of harps at the very opening of *Vyšehrad* (The High Castle), we are treated to a panoply of Czech history and a prophesy of the future greatness of the nation. Its memorable main theme proves significant, as Smetana uses it throughout the cycle as a unifying element.

Vltava (The Moldau) celebrates Prague’s river as it wanders picturesquely through the city. We first hear music suggesting the origin of the Moldau in the convergence of two sparkling forest streams. As it moves through the countryside we are treated to a variety of music suggesting a hunting party, a rustic wedding dance, the graceful sport of water nymphs in the pale moonlight, the river passing over turbulent

Shostakovich: Piano Concertos 1 & 2, Concertino
Anna Vinnitskaya, piano; Omer Meir Wellber, Kremerata Baltica (Alpha Classics)

Anna Vinnitskaya, a native of Novorossiysk, Russia on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, has attracted the keenest international attention ever since she won first prize in the 2007 Queen Elisabeth of Belgium Music Competition. She shows us what all the shouting has been about in this, her debut for the French label Alpha Classics. In the music of Dmitri Shostakovich, a composer for whom she has long held a special place in her heart and her repertoire, she displays an affinity for passages demanding a dazzling technique, secure tonal control, and the ability to turn on a dime into a section of totally different texture and character. All of which is accomplished with such apparent ease that it seems more than spontaneous – it is second nature.

Shostakovich, as you may have heard, was himself a pianist of some note (he won an "honorable mention" at the First International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw in 1927), before he eventually forsook a concert career for the demands of composition. He was noted (and sometimes criticized) for his dry manner of playing, his emotional restraint, and his absolutely riveting, uncompromising rhythmic drive. In the outer movements of his two concertos he favored tempi so fast they can still raise eyebrows today. Vinnitskaya pays tribute to the composer in most of these respects, but she endows his music with a beautiful tone all her own that really brings out the lyricism of the slow movements in both concertos.

Shostakovich claimed that he originally intended to compose a concerto for trumpet when he began work on his First Piano Concerto, Op. 35 (1933). As the work progressed, he added a piano role which gradually assumed primary importance, although the trumpet remains as an observer (and often a sardonic commentator) on what the piano is telling us. In the cadenza to the breakneck finale, *Allegro con brio*, it runs neck-and-neck with the piano in a madcap race to the finish line. The work itself is often described as a “Concerto for Piano, Trumpet, and Strings,” although the piano does take the lead in shaping the contours and predominant moods of the work as a whole, particularly in the slow movement, a Lento that comes across as a profound meditation. Vinnitskaya

rapids, and finally flowing majestically, purposefully, through Prague. The Moldau, with its enchanting pictorial images expressed in musical terms, has long been taken out of the context of the cycle and given by itself as an enduringly popular concert item.

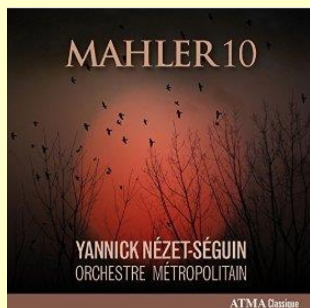
That's to be regretted to the extent that it has over-shadowed the other tone poems that make up Má Vlast. *Šárka* is a vividly pictorial retelling of the story of the legendary Amazon maiden of that name who, betrayed by her lover, vows dire vengeance not only on him but all the male sex (well, that *is* one way to make sure you get the right son-of-a-gun). With the intention of luring her would-be captor Ctirad to his death, she first beguiles him (to the strains of unforgettable love music that reminds us Smetana was an operatic composer). *From Bohemia's Meadows and Fields* is landscape-painting of the highest order, replete with the rustlings of leaves, the calls of birds, and the sounds of a noble hymn and peasant dances drifting across the fields.

Finally, we have two tone poems, *Tábor* and *Blanik*, recalling memories of the Hussites, pre-Reformation rebels against the authority of Rome whose spirit, the composer tells us, still informs the Czech people. The former is memorable for its stirring, martial music visualizing the Hussites preparing for battle, the latter for music in a pastoral vein, depicting the Hussites' final refuge in a mountain retreat that, in Smetana's day, had reverted to nature as verdant pasture land. With the quote of the main theme from The High Castle, we have come full cycle. Má Vlast, conceived to inspire Czech nationalism, has become music loved by people everywhere.

conducts this concerto from the bench, and she receives yeoman support from solo trumpeter Tobias Willner and the strings of the Kremerata Baltica.

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 102 (1957) begins where its predecessor left off, in a tumultuous mood with jumping octaves in the lower piano register, followed by a fugue, and then scales and tremolos. Frequent fortissimos from the orchestra (augmented here by the winds of the Staatskapelle Dresden) add to the general atmosphere of manic frenzy. Shostakovich affected to disparage this concerto, which he wrote as a nineteenth birthday present for his pianist son Maxim, as having "no redeeming artistic merits" (perhaps said tongue-in-cheek to deflect critics' barbs). His own affection for it is reflected by the fact that he frequently performed it himself. The slow movement, an Andante, is remarkable for its tender mood of gentle melancholy and deeply expressive feeling. The finale is a lively dance in 7/8 time, providing a zestful ending to a work that defies the listener not to love it.

Vinnitskaya is joined by second pianist Ivan Rudin in the Concertino for Two Pianos in A minor, Op. 94 (1953) and the obscure but very infectious Tarantella, an out-take from his film score The Gadfly (1955). Together, they provide a thrilling conclusion to a program which, at just shy of 50 minutes' playing time, might seem short measure for a CD. But in terms of vibrant musical substance . . . Brother, *is it loaded*!



Mahler: Symphony No. 10
Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Orchestre Métropolitain
(ATMA Classique)

Under its music director and chief conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the Orchestre Métropolitain gives us a performance of Gustav Mahler's final symphony that, despite its 79-minute length, does not seem long, but remains continually vital and engaging to the very end. There's a great deal of textural detail here, making the Mahler Tenth ideal for those tormented souls who like to follow a symphonic performance with printed score in hand. On the other hand, much of the success of this work resides in the fact that it is quite straight-

Respighi: il Tramonto; Gli Ucelli, Trittico Botticelliano, Antiche Arie e Danze, Suite I - Isabel Bayrakdarian, soprano; Alain Trudel, Orchestre Symphonique de Laval (ATMA Classique)

This is the premiere recording of the Symphonic Orchestra of Laval, Quebec, under its musical director Alain Trudel. They could not have submitted a more auspicious calling card. With a typically Canadian penchant for modesty, this orchestra's avowed mandate is "to offer audiences grand symphonic music and to provide a pleasant listening experience." What an understatement that is, you can judge for yourself in the present offering from ATMA Classique. The glorious sound of the music of Ottorino Respighi has

forward emotionally. Even in its most conflicted moments, Mahler seldom leaves us in doubt as to how we should feel about things. The clarity of Nézet-Séguin's conducting brings out this element in the music, too.

A word about the circumstances under which the Tenth Symphony came to be written is in order. Mahler had just finished a very successful 1909-1910 season with the New York Philharmonic, and was looking forward to touring with the orchestra in the fall. His success so buoyed him up that he was able to discard the hoary old superstition about a "fatal" tenth symphony. Writing fluently and at high speed between July and September, 1910, Mahler finished much more than just a basic sketch of the new symphony before he had to put it aside to prepare for the fall tour. Along the way, he experienced two personal blows: his doctor's diagnosis of a potentially fatal heart condition and the discovery that his wife was having a extramarital affair. Either, for one of Mahler's sensitivity, would have accounted for the dire element that occurs in this symphony, where it is continually at war with music reflecting the joy and fulness of life.

Though Mahler never returned to the Tenth Symphony before his death in May, 1911, he left behind 72 pages in full score, 50 pages in continuous short score, and 44 pages of preliminary drafts, sketches and inserts. It amounted to a tantalizingly rich trove with lots of clues as to how he intended to finish it – too many, in fact, so that conductors are faced with latter-day editions by Clinton Carpenter and Deryk Cooke as the leading contenders (among a host of others) for a "complete" performance version. To complicate matters, many maestros still opt to perform only the opening Adagio, the sole movement that exists entirely in full score. The present performance uses the revised version of 1976, known as "Cooke III."

Taken by itself, the Adagio comes across as a satisfying tone poem with a conflict between bleak and life-affirming moods. It works up to a massive climax that leaves a pall over the rest of the symphony that is not soon lifted. Two Scherzos follow, separated by a short movement entitled "Purgatorio." The first Scherzo employs constantly-changing metres that would pose a challenge to most conductors (though *not* Nézet-Séguin). Based on a folk dance, the Ländler, it coveys simple happiness, gaiety and exuberance. The second Scherzo is harried and sinister, with muffled drum beats. The Purgatorio (originally *Purgatorio oder Inferno*) is much conflicted, alternating bleak and carefree music in a manic way that defies description. Is it Purgatory, or is it Hell? A gong stroke and grim utterances from the double basses preclude any easy answer.

The finale, slow and severe (*Langsam, schwer*), takes time resolving the emotional weight of the symphony, and Nézet-Séguin takes it at its full significance. It all

Continued from previous column:

ends peacefully and, unexpectedly, in the same key in which it began, F-sharp major, the dissonant, disturbing dreams of the opening movement having now been dispersed.

seldom sounded better than in these performances by a small orchestra of 53 professional musicians.

One advantage that Trudel, formerly known as "the Jasha Heifetz of the trombone," has in conducting Respighi is that he really understands the capabilites of woodwinds and brass and how best to showcase and stream them through the symphonic fabric. We hear examples of this right at the start of the program with *Gli Ucelli* (The Birds) in which all the woodwinds, and in particular the bassoon, the flute, and the horns, make telling contributions to Respighi's brilliant musical depictions of dove, hen, nighingale, and cuckoo. The composer used melodies from 17th century composers as source material but went far beyond them in his sound imagery, capturing not only the distinctive songs of his avian subjects but also sounds of fluttering, preening, and scratching for food!

The performances by Trudel and the Laval have an attractive litheness that is shown to good advantage by the fine detail and lovely transparency of the recordings. They show these same qualities in the other purely symphonic works on the program: Suite I of Ancient Airs and Dances and the Botticellian Triptych. The former incorporates three sprightly dances and a very soulful *Villanella,* all making imaginative use of source material by 17th century composers. Respighi was inspired to compose the latter after he saw three paintings by Sandro Botticelli in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. In ingeniously seductive and enchanting ways, he uses the hymn tune *Veni Emmanuel* (O come, o come, Emmanuel) to weave subtle connections between the sacred and the profane in the three "panels" of the triptych depicting the Arrival of Spring (*La Primavera*), the Adoration of the Magi, and the Birth of Venus.

Il Tramonto (The Sunset), the sole work on the program that is not entirely symphonic, is Respighi's setting of Percy Bysshe Shelly's atmospheric tale of the clandestine meeting of two lovers, boldly capturing its twilight imagery of darkness enveloping woods, sky, and shadows, the man's untimely death, and the woman's vow to mourn him the rest of her life. Canadian soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian beautifully conveys the subtly hued layers of emotion in the poem, corresponding to the slowly descending curtain of night. If she characterizes her operatic roles *this* well, she must really be something on the stage!

Sibelius + Nielsen: Violin Concertos
Baiba Skride; Santtu-Matias Rouvali, Tampere PO
(Orfeo International)

Riga, Latvia native Baiba Skride continues her career progress with two more landmarks in the music of the 20th century. The tougher they come, the better this young artist likes them. Following an impressive Shostakovich/ Janacek release (Sony) and an equally inspiring Szymanowski CD (Orfeo), the present coupling of concertos by Sibelius and Nielsen is yet another item you will want to clear space for on your CD shelf. Both concertos, dating from 1903-1904 and 1912 respectively, are sufficiently steeped in a late romantic lyricism that they provide Skride plenty of opportunity to cultivate a beautiful singing tone in all the registers of her instrument, a 1734 Stradivarius on loan from Gidon Kremer.

She also receivess superb support from the excellent Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Santtu-Matias Rouvali. That is important, particularly in the Sibelius Concerto in D minor, Op. 47, where solo violin and orchestra work so closely together. The art of most composers consists of contrasts, and never more so than in the romantic violin concerto, which traditionally consisted of free virtuosity by the soloist over a light rhythmic accompaniment. The way Sibelius worked was diametrically opposite. His art was based on organic growth, with a continuous unbroken development of themes from small acorns to grand expansive melodies that carry us away.

In music like this, violin and orchestra not only make equal demands on our attention but are in fact very much on the same side, rather than opponents or rivals. The violin makes the more overt contribution because Sibelius' writing for this instrument is so manifestly virtuosic, alternating with the melodic element. In the opening movement alone, we have arpeggios and double stops amid a musical backdrop that is dark in timbre but definitely not pessimistic. In the Adagio,Skride has ample scope to show her sensitivity in moments of quiet tenderness.

The finale, beginning with running passages for the lower strings and highly rhythmic percussion (Sir Donald Tovey famously described it as a "polonaise for polar bears"), allows Skride to show virtuosity allied with real musical substance. Everything the violin can

Brahms: Complete Symphonies 1-4
Mariss Jansons, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra
(BR Klassik)

Don't let the "Radio" part of this orchestra's name fool you. The Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (*Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks*) is no mere studio ensemble, but one of the major European orchestras, a fully staffed professional orchestra under the auspices of a well-funded broadcasting organization. As such, it has enjoyed the greatest names among European maestros as its chief conductors, beginning with Eugen Jochum in 1949 and continuing with Rafael Kubelik, Sir Colin Davis, and Lorin Maazel, up through Mariss Jansons, who has been at the podium since 2003.

In live 2006-2010 recordings of Johannes Brahms' four symphonies, Jansons directs the orchestra in deliberate, well-paced performances that reveal the major strengths of both the BRSO and Brahms: the rich string sound, the mellifluous woodwinds, and the dark brass that has an incisive bite when required by the music. Jansons never rushes the tempi, but maintains a steady, deliberate pace, allowing incidents to accumulate and build toward a climax as he does very successfully in the opening movement of Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68. In the finale of the same work, evening seems to desced slowly on the listener, aided by the layered timbres of the strings, giving way to the wonderful melody in the horns that will haunt our dreams.

In Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 73, Jansons captures the relaxed, pastoral mood in the opening and slow movements of this work as well as the slow buildup of energy in the finale, "*Allegro con spirito*," which ends in a glorious blaze of brass. Needless to say, he does a good job of not "telegraphing" the surprises in this movement, so that they always sound fresh and spontaneous.

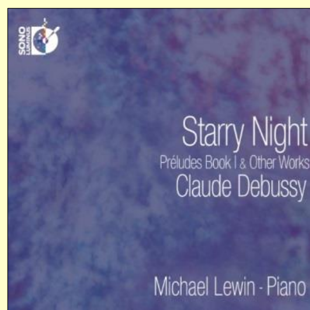
Jansons invests Symphony No. 3 in F, Op. 90 with the ceaseless flow and spontaneity that allow its ardent nature and abundant lyricism to come through with deceptive ease. Again, judicious choice of tempi and smart pacing are the keys to success. Also, he doesn't engage in too much "micro-managing," so that the points are there to be encountered *en passant* as long as everything else is right

Finally, Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98, has been described as Brahms' most powerfully organic symphony, beginning at the very outset with the astonishing simple

do seems to be on display here: arpeggios, octaves whole and broken, up-bow staccato double stops, harmonics, slurred double stops, and at the end, an ascending sequence of separate slurred 16th notes. With its exhilarating virtuosity combined with solid symphonic substance, it isn't hard to understand this concerto's enduring fame.

Violin Concerto,in D minor, Op. 33 by Danish composer Carl Nielsen is a different matter entirely. Despite its inherent attractiveness and the fact that it was championed in the 1950's by no less a figure than Yehudi Menuhin, few violinists have chosen to take up the challenge. There's a lot of rich ore to be mined here, as Skride and Rouvali show us. Inspired by a 1911 visit to Troldhaugen, the picturesque home of Edvard Grieg, Nielsen set out to compose, in his own words, a work that would be "rich in content, popular and dazzling without becoming superficial." That he succeeded is reflected in the atmosphere of contrasts, with gypsy flourishes and impassioned rhetoric in the violin alternating with more genial moods, such as we hear in the very broadly stated theme in the strings in the Praeludium. The succeeding main section, whimsically titled "*Allegro cavalleresco,*" affords the soloist such delicious opportunity to indulge a spirit of uninhibited play, at least in the present account by Baiba Skride, that the benign neglect of this work by other violinists remains a mystery.

motif "duh-DUM, da-DEE, duh-DUM, da-DEE" that serves as a unifying feature through the work. Jansons masters the tumbling syncopations and giocose mood that make the scherzo what it is. The finale is in a form known as a passacaglia (or is it a chaconne? Opinions differ about Brahms' superbly free use of this variation device from pre-classical times). Careful pacing by Jansons, plus a constant awareness of its harmonic goal, enables him to put this movement across to perfection.



Debussy: "Starry Night," includes Estampes, Preludes Book I, and other works – Michael Lewin, piano (Sono Luminus)

Michael Lewin, New York native who studied at Juilliard with Leon Fleischer and Yvonne Lefébure, among others, is usually cited by critics for the precision of his playing. Often, that is a nice way of saying that someone has a dry style, but in Lewin's case that impression would be completely misleading. His piano tone is full, his dynamic range is electrifying. His engagement with the music he plays and his ability to communicate its excitement to the listener is immediate and creates a lasting impression. Add to that his sensitivity to rhythms and polyrhythms and his cleanly defined textures, and you have a well-nigh ideal Debussy interpreter.

Claude Debussy must have seemed like an *enfant terrible* to his classically schooled contemporaries. In

Dvořák: Cello Concerto, Op. 104 + Lalo: Concerto in D minor – Johannes Moser,cello; Jakub Hrůša, Prague Philharmonia (PentaTone)

Munich-born cellist Johannes Moser, in superb collaboration with the Prague Philharmonia under Jakub Hrůša, gives a high-energy account of Antonin Dvořák's great Cello Concerto in B minor, plus Eduard Lalo's melodically rich Concerto in D minor. With a cello tone that is inclined to err on the "fat" side and a willingness to take musical challenges head-on, he would seem to be an ideal cellist for the full-bodied Dvořák concerto, but he also has the lightness and flexibility to score points in the Lalo, as well.

Moser makes his presence felt immediately in the quasi improvisatory section early in the opening Allegro of the Dvořák, and he handles the many double-stops, octaves and trills in this movement with aplomb. (The second theme, by the way, is stated initially by the horn, and is one

terms of harmony, his music did not follow the Mother-may-I rules of received tradition. Not only did he often use whole tone and pentatonic scales, but he often made unprepared modulations without an harmonic bridge and used parallel chords which were not harmonies at all but “chordal melodies or “enriched unisons.” All of which made his music more exotic-sounding than that of his older contemporaries. Since many of these traits looked back to earlier periods and non-western traditions, he was actually much less of a futurist than he might have seemed at the time.

A good example of the Debussy style is found in *La soirée dans Grenade* (Evening stroll in Grenada) in which he typically alternates and juxtaposes musical ideas, rather than developing them in the classical manner. As Lewin rightly observes, he creates thereby “an almost cinematic sense of splicing, fragments presented without transition, tied together with the Habañera dance rhythm made so famous in *Carmen*.”

The languorous atmosphere of *Soirée*, smoldering with the scents and sounds of a summer night in Spain, makes it the centerpiece of Debussy’s three Estampes (Woodblock Prints) for piano. The others, *Pagodes* (Pagodas) with its pentatonic scales and its evocations of bells and gongs, and *Jardins sous la pluie* (Gardens in the Rain) with its sensations of gusts of wind and rain (a rather French rain, observes Lewin, “sometimes gauzy, then coming down in horizontal sheets”) bring out the finest qualities in this artist, namely his virtuosity and his exquisite touch and sensitivity to feeling, which includes the kinesthetic..

Next on the program, we have the charming Arabesque No. 1 in E major with its hypnotic beauty, so apparently effortless and innocent, the delicious humor of “Golliwog’s Cake Walk” from the Children’s Corner Suite, and two obscure pieces that are making a welcome appearance here perhaps for the first time, *Les soirs illuminés par l’ardeur du charbon* (Evenings lit by burning coals) and *Nuit d’étoiles* (Starry Night).

That doesn’t leave room to say much about the major work on the program, Debussy’s Preludes, Book I. This remarkable tome is filled with all the sensations, textures, and moods of which music is capable, from the delicate, gauze-like evocation of the slow fluttering of sails in *Voiles* to the fierce gusts of wind and rain in *Le vent dans la plaine* (the wind on the plain), and from the slow, labored progress of *Des pas sur la neige* (footsteps in the snow) evoking sadness, loss, and despair, to the shocking savagery of *Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest* (what the west wind saw). From the disarming tenderness of *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair) to the sense of mystery in *La cathédrale engloutie* (The Sunken Cathedral) with its profoundly deep tones and pedal points, to say nothing of its impressive dynamic range and its parallel harmonies, the dozen Preludes of Book I are not for the faint of heart. They demand, and bring out, the best in Michael Lewin.

of the most beautiful moments in that instrument’s literature). In the Adagio, Moser scores good marks in the beautiful melodic passages, sometimes with double stops accompanied by left-hand pizzicati on the open strings. The finale – *Allegro moderato – Andante – allegro vivo* – is almost virtuosic beyond belief, calling upon the artist to display most of the fine tricks a cello can be made to do: crescendo, accelerando, decrescendo, fast 16th note triplets, and very loud and soft dynamics. We understand why Dvořák did not want the cellist who premiered this work in 1895 to play his own cadenza (as was then the accepted practice): there is so much material in the finale already. Besides, in the composer’s words, the final movement should end in a slow diminuendo, “like a breath ...then there is a crescendo, and the last measures are taken up by the orchestra, ending stormily.” Any cadenza would have been superfluous under those conditions.

Moser and Hrůša carry out Dvořák’s intentions to perfection. Of particular interest is the middle section of the Adagio, where Dvořák inserts the melody from his own song “Leave Me Alone,” which also occurs again in the finale. This beautiful melody is thought to have been inspired by the composer’s feeling for his sister-in-law, Josefina Kaunitzova, though any suggestion of a love affair is purely speculative. At any rate, it sounds very beautiful in the present performance.

Eduard Lalo’s Cello Concerto has much of the same effortless lyricism as his Symphonie Espagnole for violin and orchestra. There is even a hint of a Spanish flavor in some of the melodies, though not as much as in the more-famous work. Its colorful orchestration and immediately appealing meldies are very typical of this composer. Moser handles the fast arpeggios, relentless 16th notes, pizzicato chords, and scale passages with a deceptive, semi-improvisatory ease that makes the music sound more intuitive than it really is.

“Flourishes, Tales, and Symphonies”
Chicago Gargoyle Brass and Organ Ensemble
(MSR Classics)

In what has been described accurately as a demonstration-class CD, the Chicago Gargoyle Brass and Organ Ensemble under founder and artistic director Rodney Holmes gives us a very attractive program. Combining arrangements by Craig Garner of music from the operatic and symphonic repertoire with engaging new works by today’s composers, this is an offering that every audiophile owes it to himself to audition.

We open with two works by Carlyle Sharpe (b. 1965). The festive “Flourishes” makes spacious use of the basic resources of the ensemble, including trumpet, flugelhorn, French horn, trombone, tuba, timpani and organ. It is followed by a beautifully proportioned work in three parts, Prelude, Elegy, and Scherzo. Next, we have the ebullient toasting song “*Libiamo ne’lieti calici*” from Verdi’s La Traviata (You may remember it from Ray Milland’s flashback in the 1945 film The Lost weekend). The organ leads the way in this nicely paced rhythmical account by the Gargoyles.

The Dwarf Planets by William White (b. 1983) recognizes five celestial bodies that don’t qualify for full planetary honors but still revolve around the Sun. Haumea, Hawaiian goddess of fertility and childbirth, is portrayed by a melody evocative of primitive chant. Pluto is a quiet, slow, mysterious, rather than violent, evocation of the abduction of Persephone by the god of the underworld. Ceres uses a festive harvesters’ dance in its outer sections, flanking a tender lullaby, to celebrate the goddess of fruitfulness and motherhood. Eris is the goddess of discord, appropriately conveyed to us by dissonant foreign notes intruding on a series of consonant chords. Finally, Makemake, employs exciting music for the chief god of the bird-man cult of Easter Island. In his honor the island youths annually competed in a swimming race to an offshore reef in order to capture the eggs of the Sooty Tern (*Environmental Alert: Endangered Species*!) The ones who came back with the eggs, and were not devoured by sharks in the process, were considered gods for a year. Some fun!

Earthscape by David Marlatt (b. 1973) imagines in lyrical music the sight of our blue planet swimming in

Schubert: “Wanderer” Fantaie + Chopin: 4 Ballades
Sophia Agranovich, piano
(Centaur Records)

Sophia Agranovich, a Ukraine native, now lives and works in the NYC area, and is currently artistic director of the classical music series at the Watchung Arts Center in New Jersey. On this CD, she gives sizzling accounts, often of white-hot intensity, of some of the most challenging music in the piano repertoire. On the program: Franz Schubert’s “Wanderer” Fantasie and the Ballades of Frederic Chopin.

The “Wanderer” Fantasie is Schubert’s most virtuosic piano work, the only one he confessed himself incapable of playing. It is structured in four closely related sections that are meant to be played continuously without a definite ending cadence, and section 4 is even taken *attaca* at the end of 3. All begin with the opening phrase of Schubert’s song “The Wanderer,” hence the name of the work.

From the very outset, Agranovich pounces on Schubert’s pounding and turbulent rhythmic passages like a cat on a mouse, using the full range and depth of the Steinway keyboard to produce the striking tones and powerful effects Schubert calls for. My favorite section is the Adagio in which the heart-meltingly sad main theme of the song is quoted in its entirety and then embellished with magnificent scale passages, arpeggios and tremolandos. Agranovich handles all of the moods and changes in the Fantasie with consummate mastery, concluding with an Allegro finale that makes the greatest demands on the artist’s technique and interpretive powers.

Chopin’s four Ballades are, in the words of Sophia Agranovich, “profoundly expressive, lyrical, entrancing, dramatic, epic, heroic, mysterious, tragic, and nostalgic, with nationalistic overtones and inomparable beauty of melodic lines.” The name “ballade” itself harkens back to an earlier poetic form of troubador times, and all four are in the “ballade metre,” either 6/4 or 6/8. Chopin never wrote descriptive titles for any of these works, though they seem to appeal to the listener to supply his or her own pictures and stories.

Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23 opens quietly and insistently, as if asking an unspoken question, and in a gently rocking meter. The coda, marked “*Presto con fuoco”* (very fast with fire) crashes in upon this gentle piece like an unwelcome intruder, as if something tragic had occurred. (A pianist friend of mine once told me that it conjured up for

the dark, silent vacuum of space, along with the emotions of awe and nostagia that an astronaut might experience in viewing it.

Jaromir Weinberger's Polka and Fugue from the opera *Schwanda the Bagpiper* makes a welcome visit here, in a bright, fresh setting by Craig Garner that captures its infectious spirits. It's followed by Garner's arrangements of the Adagio and Maestoso from Camille Saint-Saens' great "Organ" Symphony. All the resources of the ensemble, including organ *and* piano, come into play here in the wonderful moment when the "Maestoso" bursts upon the listener – something that always gives me goose-bumps!

Velvet Blue for rock organ and brass by Peter Meechan (b. 1980), performed here on a pipe organ, combines blues and rock idioms in a high-energy piece that *really* rocks. The "Fighting Gargoyles" (my own pet name for this ensemble) give a first-rate account of themselves in music that ends the program on a decidedly high note.

"Songs from the Arc of Life"
Yo Yo May, cello; Kathryn Stott, piano
(Sony Classical)

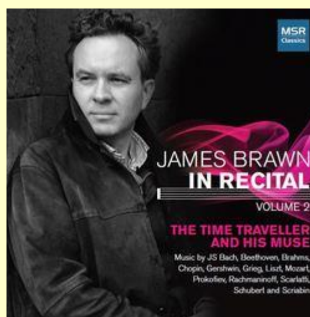
Yo Yo Ma needs no introduction. In the four decades since he finished his studies at Juilliard and received a bachelor's degree from Harvard, the Paris-born Chinese American cellist has been acclaimed all over the world. Now, some 90 recordings and 18 Grammy Awards later, this latest CD is *not* a retrospective. He has too much tread left on his tires for that. Nor is it in honor of his 60th birthday (coming up October 7th of this year). Rather, it is a celebration of life itself, as the title "Songs from the Arc of Life" tells us. As he and his recital partner, English pianist Kathryn Stott, express it: "For years [we] have talked about making an album

her the experience of a couple of her acquaintance who had lost their infant child to SIDS. It's *that* tragic.) It ends very dramatically in a double-octave scale keyboard run.

In Ballade No. 2 in F major / A minor, Op. 38, the first section is quiet and delicate, like the dance of sylvan nymphs in the moonlight to which it has sometimes been compared. The second is marked "*Presto con fuoco*," but its thrust is in zestful risk-taking rather than the menace contained in the similarly marked section in Ballade No. 1

Ballade No. 3 in A-flat major, op. 47 is sunny, warm and dancelike. There is a great variety of mood and technique in this ballade, from darkness and tumult in the middle section following a gracious waltz, and back again to what seems to be a happy ending. Agranovich has the secret to interpreting ths tightly-structured ballade in the way she heightens and releases the tensions of contrasting sections.

Finally, Ballade No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52 is intense, sublimely beautiful, nostalgic, hauntingly melancholy, and powerful in its modes of expression. Many pianists consider it the most challenging, technically and musically, of all the ballades, and Agranovich may be included in their number. It is marked by a rainbow of harmonies and emotions, of continuous changes in the way of modulations, contra-puntal complexities, and tensionsthat are heightened by thrilling arpeggious and chords. In the pianist's own words, the concluding coda "overwhelms like a tornado," ending in "cataclysmic chords." For music of such exalted character (John Ogdon once said, "it contains the experience of a lifetime"), Agranovich's approach is none too excessive.



James Brawn in Recital, Volume 2
Bach, Scarlatti, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms, Liszt, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, and Gershwin
(MSR Classics)

The present 2-CD set complements perfectly the previously-released Volume 1 of James Brawn in Recital. This one has an even wider scope than its predecessor. It plays like two old-fashioned "encore recitals," such as great pianists of the past used to give us occasionally. The qualities he showed in the earlier release –dynamic control, superb timing, high imagination, and the ability to get to the heart of the matter without seeming unduly fussy or cerebral – are found here as well, together with a limpid tonal quality that is very attractive in many of these pieces.

of pieces that we absolutely love, pieces that express the context of a life, of our lives." Keeping in mind that everyone's journey through life is slightly different, they have put together a program of pithy pieces that correspond to a great variety of life experiences.

In many ways, this album plays like an old-fashioned "encore" recital, composed as it is of pieces that are primarily lyrical or meditative, immediately appealing to the senses and the emotions without any ambiguity. Most of the items on the program correspond to that description in one way or another: the Bach/Gounod "*Ave Maria*," Brahms' "Lullaby," Dvořák's "Songs My Mother Taught Me," Fauré's "*Papillon*" (Butterfly), Jacob Gade's *Tango Jalousie*, Fauré's "*Après une rêve*" (After a Dream), Delius' Romance for Cello and Piano, Grieg's "The Wounded Heart," Elgar's "*Salut d'amour*" (Love's Greetings), Saint-Saëns' "The Swan," Tchaikovsky's '*Valse sentimentale*," and Schubert's "*Ave Maria*," to name the most familiar. In these pieces, Ma coaxes his favorite instrument, a 1733 Montagnana for which his pet name is "Petunia," to do what the cello does best, cultivating a beautiful dark, singing tone. And Stott performs hand in glove with him, as we might expect of artists who have been performance partners for some years [for more about that, see below].

There are two exceptions to the "encore"' description, being works that require more of the listener with less in the way of immediate pay-back. One is "*il bell'Antonio*, Tema III" by the modern Sicilian composer Giovanni Sollima, music taken from his soundtrack for a film of the same title. It plays like a lament, with florid melismas that increase to the point of almost unbearable intensity. The other is "*Louange a l'eternité de Jésus*" (Praise for the Eternity of Jesus) from Olivier Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time (1942), a profoundly religious, visionary work that the composer wrote while he was interned in a prison camp during World War II. In Messiaen's words, "Its slow ascent to the acutely extreme is the ascent of man to his god, the child of God to his Father, the being made divine towards Paradise."

Yo Yo Ma and Kathryn Stott are well aware of the role that fortuitous chance can play in our journey through life, having met quite accidentally in the summer of 1978. Ma and his wife Jill had just sublet a London flat and no one had bothered to inform Stott, their flat-mate. She returned in the evening to find Ma already practicing. What might have been an inter-personal disaster turned out to be the start of an artistic association that is still going strong. Such is life!

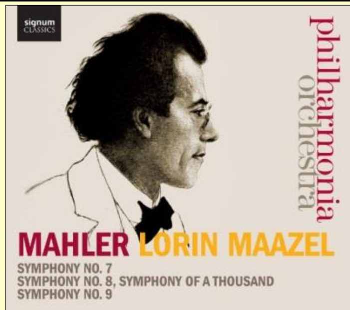
Only in the last two pieces on CD2 was I less than completely enchanted. They are a rather monotonous Prokofiev Toccata in D minor that makes us wonder what the composer meant (Does all rhythm and no melody make Sergei a dull boy?) and a low-energy account of Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm." I conclude that Brawn is no modernist, and his forte lies elsewhere. But a hundred minutes of other finely detailed performances more than compensate.

It all begins with two fine Scarlatti Sonatas, in E major, K380 and G major, K159, "La Caccia" (The Chase) that allow Brawn to demonstrate a sure, quicksilver touch in pieces that contain measures of mystery and adventure, respectively. There follow five Preludes from Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I that show abundant reason why this pianist considers the WTC his personal "Old Testament." There is an immense variety in these preludes and their accompanying fugues, variously recalling elements of such other genres as French ouverture, toccata, and passion chorale. The first, in C major, is good-natured and charming, with a light, airy texture. It wears its polyphony easily with a floating conclusion in the extreme high register – a perfect way to begin Book I. The Prelude in C minor is characterized by changing textures, plus hints of the melancholy and mystical. The D major has a surprisingly transparent texture for a prelude ending in a four-voice fugue. The E-flat minor has Passion-like gravity, ending in tranquility. The E major is very infectious with its chromatic cadences and daring parallel octaves.

Frederic Chopin used to say he worked on Bach's preludes from the WTC as a daily warm-up before he began the arduous work of composition. Brawn feels much the same sort of affection for Chopin's 24 Etudes, Op. 10 and Op. 25, which may very well constitute the "New Testament" of his own musical world: "Every day they remind me never to give up," he declares. "They are passionate, agitated, turbulent, tumultuous, demonic, triumphant, sublime." And he adds, "They inspire me to artistic brilliance as if my life depended on it." The four he has selected here are among the best-known: Études No.12 in C minor, Op.25, "Ocean," No. 3 in E major, Op.10, "Tristesse," No.1 in A-flat major, Op.25, "Aeolian Harp," and No.5 in G-flat major, Op.10, the "Black Key." Add the Prelude in E minor, Op. 28, with its slow melody in the right hand and descending block chords in the left (it was played at Chopin's funeral) and you have the full range of the composer's genius.

There's lots more besides in this CD: Mozart's stirring *Rondo alla Turca* and the operatic-like intrigue of his Fantasia in D minor, K.397, the effortlessly flowing lyricism of Schubert's Moment Musical No. 3 in F minor and his Impromptu in G-flat major, Op. 90, and five Rachmaninoff Preludes that allow Brawn to exhibit a virtual clinic in dynamic shadings, breath-taking tempo changes, and the way the pieces often sink into darkness or scamper away into nothingness at the end. Just add Liszt's wonderful Consolation No. 3 in D-flat major, Beethoven's ever-popular "*Für Elise*," Brahms' lilting Waltz in A-flat major, Op. 39 and his moving Intermezzo in A major, Op. 118, Grieg's innocent Arietta, and Scriabin's rich, poignant, gypsy-inflected Etude No. 2 in C-sharp minor (which is,

incidentally, fiendishly difficult to play well), and you have an exceptionally well-balanced recital program.



Mahler: Symphonies Nos 7-9
Lorin Maazel, Philharmonia Orchestra
(Signum Records) 3 double-CDs in slipcase

Coming late in his life, these recordings of Mahler's last three finished symphonies not only complete a Mahler cycle with the Philharmonia Orchestra by the late Lorin Maazel (d. 13 July 2014) but they also provide an eloquent testament to a conductor who was a notably rough rider in his earlier career but mellowed with age. Perhaps some of the aforesaid mellowing may have been through spiritual conduct with a composer who, like Maazel himself, had begun to envision his final end.

Maazel, born in France to Jewish American parents in 1930, received his earliest education in the United States and was highly honored on both continents during his long podium career (beginning as a prodigy at the age of 8 years!) He was noted for his precise attention to the details of a score, which was aided in no small measure by his photographic memory. The feeling came later, as is attested by these live recordings that were made in 2011 in the Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall, London.

Symphony No. 7 in E minor actually begins in B minor and the finale ends in C major, making it a prime example of Mahler's "progressive tonality" (for those who actually care about such matters). It was intended to be premiered at the Diamond Jubilee of the Emperor Franz Josef, though Mahler later tweaked it in matters of tempi, chromatics, and registration in a way that would seem to have made it inappropriate as a tribute for a beloved monarch. This is most evident in the opening movement, which combines the features of march and chorale as it opens slowly and builds in complexity and agitation. A dark melody is played on a baritone horn, one of several non-traditional instruments (cowbells, mandolin, guitar) that Mahler uses here. The general mood is one of uncertainty, with the exception of the religious ecstasy of the steadily-marching chorale.

The heart of the symphony is the middle section Nachtmusik I – Scherzo – Nachtmusik II. This constitutes a "Song of the Night" in all the connotations of the word from charming to sinister. Dances, mostly rustic in character, and evocations of birdsongs and cowbells in Nachtmusik I give way to the spooky Scherzo, marked *schattenhaft* (shadowy) that plays like a grotesque parody of a Viennese waltz (*That* would scarcely have pleased Franz Josef). A mocking demon at the heart of life, a nightmare: is this perhaps death? At one point, the strings are asked to play pizzicati plucked so hard that the strings hit the wood. The chamber music-like Nachtmusik II, in which a gentle horn solo is followed by sounds of guitar and mandolin, has the feeling of a serenade, restoring a human perspective to the nocturnal scene.

That prepares us for the Rondo finale with its acerbic brass chorales and cheeky parodies of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* and Lehar's *Merry Widow* providing relief from the darkness of the preceding movements. Changes in tempi, intrusions and interruptions in building climaxes, point up the manic element in a movement that makes us wonder momentarily if the composer hasn't changed his name to "Edward Elgar" (and incidentally keeping conductor and orchestra continually on their toes). The general direction of the symphony has been from dusk to sunrise, with dark midnight in the center, giving credence to the "Song of the Night" nickname (which was evidently not Mahler's).

Symphony No. 8 in E-flat major has long been called "The Symphony of a Thousand" because of the large forces required to realize it. In the bad old days before symphony musicians demanded union scale, it was sometimes performed at festivals with gargantuan forces actually approaching that number, with assistant conductors placed at strategic points to relay the instructors of the main maestro to singers and instrumental groups in the far reaches of the outfield. Modern-day performances usually content themselves with far fewer warm bodies than *that*, though the score does call for 8 SATB vocalists plus four choirs (here, the Philharmonia Chorus, Philharmonia Voices, BBC Symphony Chorus, and Boys of the Eton College Chapel Choir) and enlarged string and percussion sections plus quadruple woodwinds and brass and an organ, harmonium, piano, two harps, celesta, and mandolin.

Mahler often uses most of these forces sparingly, so that the textures frequently have an amazing clarity, as in chamber music. Needless to say, the great proliferation of cueing-points in this 98-minute score makes it convenient for the conductor to possess the amazing memory of a Gustav Mahler – or his latter-day apostle, Lorin Maazel. The latter takes his time here, preferring unhurried tempi that allow the symphony plenty of breathing room without seeming unduly slow.

The work falls into two main sections, a setting of the 9th century Latin hymn *Veni, Creator Spiritus* (Come, Creator

Spirit) and a re-creation of the Final Scene from Goethe's Faust. Always, the score reflects the composer's passion for greater clarity, bigger sound, and more dynamic contrast. In the first part, the music moves slowly, following the fortissimo invocation "*Veni, Creator Spiritus*" by the massed choirs. There is sublime beauty here, as befits the subject, a surprising amount of lyricism, and transparent textures that allow the low bells the chance to make their somber presence felt. A big surge in E-major accompanies the words "*Accende lumen sensibus*" (Illuminate our senses), and the pace picks up as the music moves swiftly to its climax.

The Final Scene from Faust, one of the great works of German literature, allowed Mahler the opportunity to give voice to one of his favorite themes: the redemption of man through the power of love. Vocalists representing two holy hermits, a Marian theologian, a Magna Peccatrix ("great female sinner," presumably the Woman Taken in Adultery), Maria Aegyptica, and a Samaritan Woman plead before the Queen of Heaven (Mater Gloriosa) for the redemption of Faust's soul. Their number is increased by a Penitent, who turns out to be Gretchen, the woman Faust had cast aside. The Chorus of Blessed Boys represents the need for a simple, childlike faith in salvation, another of Mahler's favorite themes. Considering the vastness of the vocal and instrumental forces and the multiplicity of texts, the music moves with surprising swiftness and sureness of purpose in the present performance toward its final goal, the redemption of Faust. In spite of the frequent demands for extended tessituras, the vocal performances are generally quite satisfactory. At the end of the present performance, we get a glimpse of what Mahler intended it to sound like: "Try to imagine the whole universe beginning to ring and resound. There are no longer human voices, but planets and suns revolving."

Mahler intended **Symphony No. 9 in D major** of 1908-1909 to be his final effort as a composer. In 1907, he had been saddened by the death of his beloved daughter Maria Anna and the subsequent medical diagnosis of his own, ultimately fatal, heart condition. There is a definite mood of sadness and resignation throughout this work, beginning with a slow, syncopated rhythmic motif like a heartbeat and a sighing figure in the strings in the opening movement, which, like the finale, is cast in a slow rather than lively tempo. There's no funny business in the way of cow bells or mandolins, this time around. The slow movement is in the time of a Ländler, but with a significant difference. The general mood of the symphony is that of a renunciation of life and a conscious farewell to the world.

Here, as Maazel shows us, timing is of the utmost importance. The afore-mentioned "heartbeat" motif in the opening movement, initially sounded "*mit höchster Gewalt*" (with the greatest force), is followed by a very slow, solemn march accompanied by the sound of low bells, "*wie ein Kondukt*" (like a funeral procession). In the second movement, a rustic Ländler morphs into a wicked whole-tone waltz in frantic rhythms. The third movement, Rondo-Burleske, a parody of the popular Viennese music of the day (not to say "kitsch"), is manic in mood and sarcastic in intent.

Maazel takes the finale, an Adagio marked "*Sehr Langsam und noch zurückhaltend*" (very slow and held back) just as Mahler intended, even as far as taking a full six minutes to encompass the last two pages of the score, an extraordinarily slow procedure but one which the composer endorsed. It plays as a slow relinquishing of the world, with all its beauty, joy, pain, and sorrow. The last passage is marked "*ersterbend*" (Dying away). In Maazel's hands, it does just that.