

Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

October, 2018



Chopin: Preludes, Op. 28
Diana Jaworska, piano
(Centaur)



Bach: Six Partitas for Keyboard, BWV 825-830
Shoshana Telner, piano
(Centaur Records)

What I said about Diana Jaworska in my September column goes double for the present all-Chopin release. Her qualities as an artist of the keyboard serve Chopin well in a program that shows us how Jaworska's fellow countryman composed music with real strength and fiber, and not merely sensual beauty – although there's plenty of that, too in the feast she has chosen to spread for us.

The 24 Preludes, Op. 28 come first in the program. Taken as a whole as well as individually, these pieces are among the most difficult to perform well in all of music. There are reasons for that. To begin with, Chopin's contemporaries, and quite a few critics and performing artists, were often confused by their form and purpose. Robert Schumann's perplexity was typical: "They are sketches, beginnings of études, or, so to speak, ruins, individual eagle pinions, all in disorder and wild confusion."

To Chopin's era, the solution of what to make of these brief pieces, many of which are less than a minute's duration and seem to break off disconcertingly before we get to the "finish," was to interpret them as character pieces. Chopin himself did not attach descriptive titles to any of these pieces, but George Sand did. Although the copy of the score with her descriptions was lost, her daughter Solange recalled many of the titles from memory. Others have been suggested by Chopin scholars.

Though these preludes may not all be self-standing pieces with a beginning middle, and end, they can be taken individually or as encores. While not "character pieces" in the true sense, they are not lacking in character. If you are going to perform or record the complete set of 28, you *must* have a concept in mind or else you have confusion. Jaworska scores high marks in this regard, making her account of the Preludes so very satisfying.

Say, I really like this new recording by Toronto native Shoshana Telner. As many times as I've reviewed Bach's Partitas, it's always possible to learn something more in a collection of such variety, and she showed it to me. There is drama, charm, joy, lyricism, pensiveness, and even a little sorrow in her interpretations of six masterfully wrought works that Bach published at his own expense as his "Opus 1."

You get the feeling of a voyage of exploration as Telner navigates her way through these works in which Bach discovered new combinations and possibilities for the time-honoured genre of the keyboard partita (a.k.a. overture, or suite). One obvious way was in beginning each of the 6 Partitas with a different kind of opening. In apple-pie order, we have a Praeludium, Sinfonia, Fantasia, Ouverture, Praeambulum and Toccata. More to the point, the specific character and mood of each of these curtain-raisers influences the movements that follow in the rest of the suite.

The Sinfonia that opens No. 2 in C minor, for instance, is in three parts, beginning with a stately French Ouverture in dotted-note rhythms, then a brief, lovely lyrical interlude, and a really thrilling, muscular fugue in two voices. Telner's nimble fingers and firm, sure articulation serve her well in this particular work where others might experience awkwardness when adding the embellishments to Bach's florid lines. And, when moving between the sections of the Courante, one may encounter rhythmic peril that is easier to negotiate on the two-manual harpsichord than on the modern piano.

That element of rhythm, which Telner possesses to an admirable degree, is so important when you interpret the partitas. Bach stressed it, in ways that have a lot to do with the individual character of each, by employing a stunning variety of different dance forms in the various *galentéries*, or optional movements, that usually followed the Sarabande. We have here

We know that Chopin was extraordinarily fond of The Well-Tempered Clavier of Johann Sebastian Bach, and habitually began a day's activity by playing through selected preludes on the piano. He did, in fact, have a copy of this monumental work that opened so many doors to the future in terms of harmony and keyboard practice (and incidentally presented a plausible theory of how to tune the piano that was a great leap forward in its future history). At some point, Chopin conceived the idea of replicating Bach's achievement in the light of the developing harmonic theory of his own day. Significantly, he did not follow Bach's practice of composing preludes in every major and minor key, separated by rising semitones.

Bach's preludes are encyclopedic, in ascending chromatic order, always ending in a fugue. Chopin's great achievement was in basing his preludes on a circle of fifths with each major key followed by its relative minor (i.e., C major, A minor, G major, E minor, etc), and he eschewed fugues. The most important difference you notice, even in a cursory listening, is that Chopin's preludes, freed from the basic theoretical purpose, are self-standing pieces that can be taken individually.

It should be noted that many of these preludes are very difficult to play. Think of the pianistic demands in maintaining the steady melodic line in the hauntingly beautiful F-sharp minor Prelude in the face of the departures from it in the way of arabesques, chromatic progressions, and other flights of the imagination.

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Or consider the repeated bass note in the songlike A-flat Prelude that must be struck with great strength while the melody itself undergoes a diminuendo. Maintaining the necessary focus requires mental discipline, stamina, and a strong left hand, all of which Jaworska possesses.

Chopin completed the Preludes during his ill-fated holiday with George Sand in Majorca the winter of 1838-1839 when he contracted a strain of Tuberculosis that brought him close to death on several occasions. Not surprisingly, life-affirming lyricism often seems to contend with the tidal pull of death. We hear it in the "Raindrop" Prelude, No.15 in D-flat major, where a single note from the steady accompaniment to what has been a tender melody suggestive of softly falling rain suddenly takes on a maleficent life of its own as a chain of sullen, repeated notes, like a harbinger of impending tragedy.

Or take No. 24 in D minor. Its formidable technical demands include a restlessly thundering five-note pattern in the left hand as the right plays trills, arpeggios, and rapidly descending chromatic scales, closing with three booming single notes in the lowest D on the piano. And this occurs right after No. 23 in F major, so light-hearted, almost trivial, that it makes the strongest possible contrast. And so it goes. One could imagine a bell tolling in No. 6 in B minor. And No.19 in E-flat Major, with its gently lilting melody offset by a stern bass accompaniment, might invite any number of character descriptions for those who are so inclined.

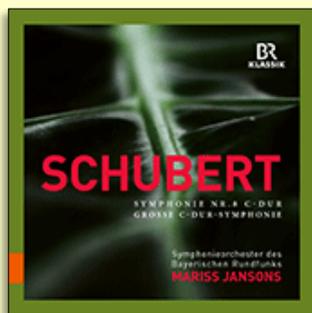
I haven't said anything about the Fantasie in F minor, Op. 49, one of Chopin's greatest challenges for the interpreter. It begins with a steady march-like tread in the accompaniment and wanders into distant keys as it veers between hope and despair. The radiant middle section, an oasis of calm and serenity that ultimately proves illusory, is beautifully rendered here by Jaworska. The Berceuse, Op. 57, poses problems of a different order. It is actually a more difficult piece to interpret than you might have guessed because of its unchanging, gently rocking rhythm and naïve melody. As she does so often in this program, Jaworska does a beautiful job defining its emotional center.

examples of Minuet, Rondeau, Passepied, and Gavotte, each with its own distinctive footfall and rhythmic profile. In place of the customary perpetual-motion Gigue in No. 2, Bach treats our ears to a lively Capriccio in duple time in which the melody passes rapidly between the hands.

Nor is the Sarabande, typically the deep-water mark of any partita, always a darkly solemn affair, reminiscent of a Passion chorale. Following the mood of the Fantasia and Allemande in 3, the Sarabande we have here may be serious, but with a decidedly lighter and steadier tread than we might have expected.

Partita No. 6 in E minor is arguably the most artistically demanding of the set. It begins with one of Bach's finest, most expressive Toccatas in any genre, concluded by a three-voice fugue of great intensity. We then have an Allemande with rising chromatic bass and arpeggiated figures, a Corrente with syncopations over a walking bass, an innocent, carefree Air with wide leaps, a Sarabande that looks back to the mood of the Toccata, and a *Tempo di Gavotta* in a galante style. It concludes with a Gigue in a galloping meter in triplets.

Bach calls for an immense variety of rhythm in the six partitas, of which Telner, with her sure touch and flawless articulation, is more than capable. In Bach's day an artist who could play these works well was considered to be equal to anything in music. The saying still goes!



Schubert: "Great" Symphony in C Major
Mariss Jansons, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra
(BR-Klassik)

Riga, Latvia native Mariss Jansons has been Chief Conductor of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra since 2003. In this recording of Franz Schubert's "Great C Major" Symphony, the former assistant to Yevgeny Mravinsky at the Leningrad Philharmonic shows a masterful hand in every aspect of leading a symphony orchestra through a long and difficult score.

In the final analysis, the "difficulty" to which I alluded may be more a matter of expectations than reality. Naturally, it is difficult to keep a large orchestra on task through a long-limbed symphony that is over an hour's duration (60:22 in the present performance). But Schubert has made things surprisingly easy by his spacious layout of a work that is rigorously true to itself and develops like an organic process of nature. When you understand the "Great C Major" as Jansons does, it begins to live down its bad reputation in some circles as a symphony one doesn't get to be famous for conducting.

Crucially, it was only with the advent of the compact disc that home listeners had the opportunity to experience this work as Schubert intended. In the old days when vinyl records were all we had, you couldn't record a symphony with this broad a landscape on a single LP without making cuts in the score. Those cuts destroyed the proportions of the work more than we might have imagined. It was much worse in the 78-rpm era, when it would have required at least eight records to present the whole "Great C Major," with awkward losses of continuity as you waited for each new platter to drop on your record changer and an even greater interruption when you re-stacked the platters to play the rest of the symphony.

The many repetitions in the score made for problems with musicians and audiences alike. When Felix Mendelssohn premiered the symphony in Leipzig in March, 1839, it was a great triumph. Its success was not repeated in London, however, when rehearsals were interrupted on a number of occasions by derisive laughter among the musicians at the ways Schubert's melodies kept coming back, seemingly without purpose. (Sensitive soul that he was, Mendelssohn withdrew the work before its London premiere.) That



Organ Favourites: Bach, Mendelssohn, Schumann
Miklós Teleki, organist
(Hungaroton)

I was impressed by Miklós Teleki when I reviewed his earlier CD of Bach organ works on the Aquincum Organ of the Lutheran Church of Siófok, Hungary (see my Baroque Special, 2017). He follows it up in grand style with a wide-ranging program that tests the mettle of the BKM Organ of the St. Michael Church in Dunakeszi. Built as recently as 2010, this is a medium-size organ with a unique design concept that makes it sound mightier than we should have imagined. For one thing, the Great Organ is in the Swell Box, and the selection of stops belonging to the two manuals is unusual. The variety of tone colors and the dynamic capabilities of the instrument are claimed by Teleki to "open up even more and completely new possibilities in performing practice."

The proof, as always, is in the hearing. Teleki opens audaciously with the great Prelude & Fugue in D, BWV 532 by J. S. Bach. Like Teleki, his modern-day spiritual successor, Bach specialized in testing the new and exciting organs of his time, putting them through their entire registration and not neglecting the pedals. He also performed the dedication concert, typically with a new composition of his own as the highlight of the occasion. Unless I miss my guess, BWV 532 would have been ideal for this purpose. The way the Prelude rushes forth, sweeping out the cobwebs and grasping the listener by the ears in a flourish of eighth and sixteenth notes, is nothing short of sensational. A distinctive feature of this work is the role of minor tonalities in both movements. The Fugue surges irresistibly through the lower registration of the organ like a tornado, ending in a spirit of jubilation.

Felix Mendelssohn's Sonata No. 4 in B-flat Major makes for a nice change of pace after the Bach with its grasp of baroque counterpoint re-thought in terms of the composer's own recognizable style. The middle movements, particularly the Andante religioso, are quite lovely, making a nice contrast with the outer movements, an Allegro con brio and Allegro maestoso. Robert Schumann's Fugue Op. 60, No. 2 in B-flat Major on B-A-C-H, was one of six he composed from 1845 in a rush of enthusiasm resulting from his study of baroque counterpoint. It is imaginative and even quirky with its unexpected chromatic turns and a coda

problem is only apparent to people who habitually look to melodies as the main purpose of a work and do not see it in the larger perspective of developing themes and working out the harmonic design through a series of key modulations.

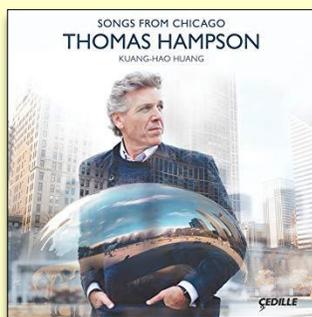
To see it in these terms requires the sort of broad perspective that Mariss Jansons applies in the present performance. He is supremely aware of where he is and where he is going at every point in the score. One needs to be aware of the way Schubert used the brass and woodwinds: not merely to punctuate and brighten the score and provide added character to what the strings are saying, but as equal partners with the strings in the business of creating the rhythmic profile of the work and moving it along smartly. No one before Schubert had used them in this way. The recorded sonics capture this beautifully, as they do the way Jansons keeps his cellos and basses moving steadily along, providing the foundation for the symphony's irresistible flow.

In this work, the characteristically bright key of C Major has a tinge of melancholy mixed into it by the parallel minor, so that moods of hopeful aspiration and despair, soft beauty and tenderness, dark shadows and light, radiant hymn-like melodies, marches with fateful, steady tread, cheerful waltz-like rhythms, and moments of euphoria and exultation succeed one another with the plausibility, and uncertainty, of life itself. And, yes, in spite of what I said about melodies earlier, there are plenty of them in the "Great C Major" Symphony – some of Schubert's best, the hauntingly lovely march theme sung by the oboe in the slow movement being only one among many.

section that begins unusually with the head of the subject in the pedal voice, which probably would have delighted old Bach. (The motto B-A-C-H, by the way, is standard German notation for B flat-A-C-B natural.

César Franck, up next, was a major figure in both the Bach revival and the creation of the French symphonic organ style. Both are represented in his Prelude, Fugue and Variation in B Minor. The 9/8 meter that characterizes both the opening and closing sections creates the impression of a sonata-form movement, as does the opening of the Prelude in B Minor and its closing in F-sharp Minor, leaving the key resolution to the fugue. Typically of this composer, the flow of the prelude is even and rhythmically confident. A diapason leads immediately into the fugue, which is both complex and imaginative in both its main sections.

Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937) did a lot for music as composer, organist, teacher, scholar and co-founder of The Conservatoire Américain (see *Classical Reviews* for December, 2017). We have here the opening and closing movements of his Symphony No. 5 in F minor. In the spirit of César Franck, his opening movement is virtually monothematic, with fascinating modulations and chromatic turns of phrase serving to offset any impression of a monolith. Movement V is the sensational Widor Toccata in F, a constantly surprising and exhilarating piece that has come to take on a life of its own as a favourite encore. In this performance, we hear the spirited rhythmic ostinato that really catches the listener's attention, contrasted by a gaily flowing theme that seems to breathe the spirit of the Paris boulevards.



Thomas Hampson: "Songs from Chicago"
with Kuang-Hao Huang, piano
(Cedille)



"Alla Zingarese"
Civitas & Gipsy Way Ensembles
(Cedille)

"Songs from Chicago" takes its title from the fact that all of its settings of poetry were composed by Americans with roots, native born or adopted, in Chicago. They are as follows: Ernst Bacon, Florence Price, John Alden Carpenter, Margaret Bonds, and Louis Campbell-Tipton. "All of them," says Thomas Hampson, the man of the hour in this recording project, "have distinguished themselves in history as great voices of the artistic American narrative."

Alla Zingarese, as the title implies, refers to music conceived and executed "in the Gypsy Style. It is also the title of an intriguing and thoroughly entertaining new release by Cedille Records featuring electrifying ensembles from Chicago and the Czech Republic. Civitas, the Chicago entry, is comprised of violinist Yuan-Qing Yu, clarinetist J. Lawrie Bloom, cellist Kenneth Olsen, and pianist Winston Choi. Gipsy Way, the Czech ensemble, was founded by violinist Pavel

That includes Hampson himself, whose true, flawless and honest baritone, plus a deep interpretive insight, gives distinction to the 25 songs on this CD program. In addition, his well-known love of American art song made him a natural for this long-cherished project of Cedille Records founder James Ginsburg, the album's producer. Aided by collaborative pianist Kuang-Hao Huang (yet another Chicagoan), he shows obvious relish in exploring the wide range of moods and themes in the matchless poetry of three figures who at first glance might seem to have little in common: Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes and Rabindranath Tagore. A preoccupation with the ultimate meaning and destiny of life would seem to unite Whitman and Tagore despite the differences in time and nationality. But where does Hughes fit into the picture?

Seven poems by Whitman are up first, in provocative settings by Ernst Bacon. They typically concern the frontier land between life and death and subsequent voyages into eternity. "At last, tenderly, from the walls of the powerful fortress'd house, from the clasp of the knitted locks, from the keep of the well-closed doors," implores Whitman rapturously, "Let me be wafted" (*The Last Invocation*). His assurance? "When at times a half-dimm'd sadden'd far off star, appearing and disappearing, some parturition rather, some solemn immortal birth; on the frontiers to eyes impenetrable, some soul is passing over" (from *Whispers of Heavenly Death*). In "the Unknown Region, where neither ground is for the feet, nor any path to follow" (*The Divine Ship*), we know that we are not lost, but are "wafted at last, and are now here, to make the passing shower's concluding drops."

Tagore's India is half a world distant from Whitman's vigorously rhetorical, and yet curiously transcendental, American view. Not surprisingly he deals differently with the issues of life, love, and eternity in John Alden Carpenter's settings of eight *Gitanjali*, Poems by Rabindranath Tagore. There is much tenderess in the lines "When I kiss your face to make you smile, my darling, I surely understand what pleasure streams from the sky in the morning light, and what delight that is that which the summer breeze brings to my body – when I kiss you to make you smile." "I am a remnant of a cloud of autumn," says the poet in one of his most memorable lyrics, "uselessly roaming in the sky, O my sun ever glorious! Thy touch has not yet melted my vapour, making me one with thy light." Love, and the eagerness for life experience that we have in childhood, are Tagore's answers to the imponderables of suffering and death: "On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. Tempests roam in the pathless sky, ships get wrecked in the trackless waters, death is abroad, and children play."

The poems of Langston Hughes, as beautifully illuminated in song settings by Carpenter, Florence

Šporcl. Both groups aim to introduce audiences to the sounds of new and neglected music.

The *Alla Zingarese* project was a natural, as both Civitas and Gypsy Way have a decided interest in authentic Gypsy-style music. Fortuitously, both Pavel and Yuan-Qing met in the 1990's when they were music students at Southern Methodist University, and had kept in touch over the years. The first meeting between the two ensembles occurred in Prague early in 2017. In spite of the language barrier of people variously speaking Czech, Hungarian, Slovakian, and English, the rapport in musical terms was immediate.

The 88-minute program is spread over two Cd's, possibly as a caution against heart attack for listeners who might be tempted to take in the whole program of **very** intense selections without a break. Both ensembles are heard from together on CD1 in music steeped in the authentic Gypsy style, and Civitas takes the stage alone on CD2 in Gypsy-flavored arrangements that are usually more in keeping with the general expectations of western classical music – *but not always!* CD1 begins with Czech composer Lukáš Sommer's pulse-quickening arrangement of Brahms' ever-popular Hungarian Dance No. 1 in G minor and concludes with his arrangement of Brahms' Rondo alla Zingarese (Gypsy Rondo) from his Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor with its piano pyrotechnics, marked rhythms, and a well-paced accelerando at the end.

Other highlights on CD1 include Georges Boulanger's Sérénade Tzigane (Gypsy Serenade), Jenő Hubay's Scène de la Csárda, and Zigeunerweisen (Gypsy Airs) by the great Spanish Gypsy violinist Pablo de Sarasate, all in arrangements by Sommer. The two last-named are further enhanced by the presence of the cimbalon, a soundbox with strings that are struck by two 8-inch mallets. Its gloriously layered sounds add to the rich harmonies in these pieces as well as the distinctly exhilarating rhythm that proclaims "Gypsy" to all within hearing. On this disc, we are also treated to the sheer verve of Gypsy Fire by violinist Pavel Šporcl, and Sommer's own Gypsy Odyssey, a virtuoso work that inspired audiences to merry laughter, incredulity, and impromptu dancing in their seats when it premiered in the 2017 Chicago concerts.

CD2 continues the unbridled felicity of this album with performances by Civitas alone. We are treated to the moody *Dza More* for solo violin by Sylvie Bodorová, Liszt's ever-popular Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12 in C-sharp minor for solo piano (in an uncommonly fine performance), Leo Weiner's *Peregi Verbunk* for clarinet and piano, and David Popper's deeply moving Hungarian Rhapsody, Op. 68 for cello and piano, all showcasing the four members of Civitas in virtuosic roles. Lukáš Sommer's *Cigi-Civi*,¹ here given its world premiere, celebrates the heady fusion of Gypsy and western –specifically American – musical styles.

¹ *Cigi* from "Cigane," meaning Gypsy, and *Civi* from Civitas, the ensemble for whom this spirited work was created.

Price, and Margaret Bonds, contrast with those of Whitman and Tagore that we experience in this album. Hughes is concerned with the here and now, with longing and crying for love, with the solace provided by the blues and the playing and singing of the minstrel man. We also have the longing for racial justice in the lyrics "I am the darker brother, / They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes, / But I laugh / And eat well, / And grow strong, / Tomorrow, / I'll be at the table" (from *I, Too*, set by Margaret Bonds). In another Bonds setting of *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, we are given words of quiet and enduring courage: "I've known rivers: ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

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Thomas Hampson gives the very best of himself in Louis Campbell-Tipton's setting of Walt Whitman's "Elegy" from *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*. The description of the unseen singer, the Hermit Thrush, is rendered in words must resonate with every musical artist: "Song of the bleeding throat, Death's outlet song of life, (for well, dear brother, I know, if thou wast not granted to sing thou wouldst surely die)"

Finally, Chicago-based composer Cliff Colnot presents Civitas with a new arrangement of George Enescu's enduringly popular Roumanian Rhapsody No. 1. It breathes the heady spirit of the Gypsy influence in its swirling rhythms and its raucous tempos that start slowly and become gradually faster and faster, thrilling the listener with utter delight.

The recordings, made August 15-17 and September 25, 2017 at the Center for the Arts, University of Chicago, capture the sonic range of classical music that steps over to partake of the vibrant sound world of popular music. Great work by producers Steve Rody and James Ginsburg and engineer Bill Maylone, fine old hands at this business, captures the performances in all their fire, sparkle, and alluring beauty.



Mendelssohn: String Quartets, Op. 12, 44/3, 80
Doric String Quartet
(Chandos)



"Into the Light", Works by Webern, Kirchner, Britten
The Telegraph Quartet
(Centaur)

The Doric String Quartet, consisting of Alex Redington and Jonathan Stone, violins; Hélène Clément, viola; and John Myerscough, cello, give breathtaking performances of three string quartets by Felix Mendelssohn. In Volume 1 of what is to be the complete six quartets, they present darker and more obsessively driven readings of Nos. 1, 5, and 6 than we've been used to hearing. Considering the smooth finish and masterful style of the writing in these works, you could emphasize whichever features you chose. In focusing as often as they do on the darkness and agitation, I am satisfied that the Doric Quartet have not exaggerated these features or focused on elements that weren't already there. This is a legitimate approach to a composer who led an overworked life marked by a measure of personal tragedy. It would be surprising if it had not influenced the music we experience on this CD album.

Mendelssohn composed Quartet in E-flat, Op. 12 shortly before he embarked on a momentous tour of Scotland that ultimately provided inspiration for his Hebrides Overture and "Scottish" Symphony. Not surprisingly, there is youthful ardor and a call to

"Into the Light" is the debut album by the Telegraph Quartet. These four young artists, based in the San Francisco Bay area, are Joseph Maile and Eric Chin, violins; Pei-Ling Lin, viola; and Jeremiah Shaw, cello. Founded as recently as 2013, they have already been honored as the quartet-in-residence of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. With their unique blend and the feeling they show in this album for deep string tones, beats, dissonant sounds, rhythmic complexities, and unconventional bowings, they already have a very definite profile as a quartet. We shall certainly be hearing more of them in the future.

All these traits, and more, come into play in a program that explores musical landscapes not often visited by other performing quartets. In particular, the examples by American composer Leon Kirchner (1919-2009) and Austrian Anton Webern (1883-1945) have never quite been accepted into the standard repertoire and seem destined to hover on the outskirts indefinitely.

Kirchner's String Quartet No. 1 (1949) was hailed as "Bartók's Seventh" at its premiere, and for sure the influence of the Hungarian is evident in this work that

adventure in this quartet. But already, other features begin to appear. The melody of the work's Adagio introduction bears a resemblance to the sad, beautiful heartbreaker in Beethoven's "Harp" Quartet. The main theme of the opening movement has a flowing energy that is all Mendelssohn. It veers off from the customary exposition repeat, and we hear the second violin introduce a new melody which will be heard from again in the finale. The composer substitutes a Canzonetta in tripping measures in a flurry of semiquavers in the middle section, with slower moving harmonies above and below, for the usual scherzo. The slow movement, *Andante espressivo*, is warmly harmonized but becomes more volatile, leading into an unorthodox finale that bursts in peremptorily with galloping figures in 12/8 time. There is a striking unison G, and then the second violin melody from the opening movement makes an unexpected appearance. A declamatory climax leads eventually to yet another appearance of the second violin melody. This is perhaps the first instance of cyclic form in all quartet literature, in a work that is more unusual and more of a pathbreaker than is commonly credited.

The Quartet in E-flat, Op. 44, No. 3, opens in bold dotted rhythms and a tiny four-note figure that runs under the tautly constructed opening movement, driving it ever onward. Flickering triplets in the Scherzo may recall the elfin-like trio in the earlier Octet, Op. 20, but the effect is quite different. The Adagio opens with a songlike melody in a gently swinging mood that is undercut by a rising semitone dissonance and then a restless central section of some intensity, before the initial serenity is restored. The finale opens with bustling arpeggios before it settles down to the business of variations and developments.

There is more angst than usual in the Quartet in F minor, Op. 80, a reflection of Mendelssohn's sorrow on the death in May, 1847 of his beloved sister Fanny and his subsequent month-long depression. It was finally relieved by his recuperative stay in Switzerland and his resolve to write to write this quartet as a memorial to her. It bursts forth in a mood of nervous agitation with frantic tremolos and downward-leaping figures that seem like cries of distress. A sunnier second subject would seem to recall happier times, but it too is dogged by nagging cross-rhythms. At the end of this movement, the tempo speeds up, ending in a unison phrase of shocking intensity.

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Driving rhythms, limping cadences, and a sinuously uncoiling trio characterize a Scherzo that is scarcely the sort of jolly business the Italian word (meaning "joke") would imply. The Adagio is beautiful enough, but is betrayed by tears in the harmony and dark chromatic shadows. In the finale, Allegro molto, restlessly syncopated phrases ride on a bed of flaming tremolandos to a cheerless closing. This may not be the Mendelssohn we know and love from the Midsummer Night's Dream Music, but it is authentic Mendelssohn nonetheless, and the Doric Quartet makes the most of it.

recalls memories of Bartók's "night music," particularly in the slow movement. Here, an Adagio that starts off seeking warmth and delicacy is soon overcome by its own creepy tonalities. Kirchner's personal expressive style is quite apparent in a major work in four movements in which the first three are taken attacca. The fourth commences after a pause, working its way back to the bold rhetoric of the opening movement with its dynamically changing rhythms and contrapuntal density. It employs something in the manner of a palindrome (you can look *that* up for yourself) as it recalls moods and materials from earlier movements.

Ultimately, the Kirchner is a work I can admire without loving, a feeling I also have for Webern's collection of micro-miniatures entitled Five Movements for String Quartet. All are atonal and reflect Webern's obsession for extremely concise statement and eerie, inward-tending landscapes. We hear some strange sounds in these pieces, the result of unconventional bowings on parts of the bridge where a self-respecting bow was traditionally never expected to venture, resulting in sussurations and scrapings that many listeners may find difficult to relate to. Nuance is everything in a work of Webern, and the Telegraph Quartet bring out a mind-boggling variety of the same in their dedicated performance.

Lastly, we have Benjamin Britten's Three Divertimenti (1933, rev.1936). While he matched Kirchner and Webern in expression, sonic imagination and rhythmic complexities, Britten shows a wit and sophistication that these other composers apparently lacked. He also realized that it was easier for listeners to relate to the "out there" in his music if they had some familiar "in here" to tie in to (melody, for instance, which is something many modernists seem to shun like a spotted dog). The familiar forms Britten employs in Three Divertimenti – an outrageous March, a wickedly playful Waltz, and a Burlesque² that seems to lose steam in a languid, drooping moment towards the end – all help make his sonic adventuresomeness more palatable.

The total track time on this album is just 40:15, but in terms of the amount of vivid, emotionally charged music we are given and the sensational performances by a totally committed Telegraph Quartet, no one needs to feel short-changed.

² The word implies broad humour or caricature, and *not* what you think!

Yo-Yo Ma is perhaps the most instantly recognized name among classical musicians in the world today. He may also be the best-loved, for reasons which the present album will make clear. Over the years, he has proven to be as distinguished a collaborative artist as he is a headliner in the spotlight. In a curious kind of way, the Chinese-American cellist has been both star and collaborator in the long run-up to the present recording project.

As the artist recounts in his notes to this new release, the Bach Cello Suites have been “my constant musical companions” for almost six decades, giving him “sustenance, comfort, and joy during times of stress, celebration, and loss.” To someone like Yo-Yo Ma, it is not enough to simply discover the creative force and all-embracing imagination that Bach unleashed in all of

these six suites. One must communicate it to other people. Overcoming the technical difficulties involved in making a single-line instrument speak in multiple voices, thereby unleashing a world of sonic and architectural richness, is only the beginning. Says Ma, “I am a human being first, a musician second, and a cellist third.”

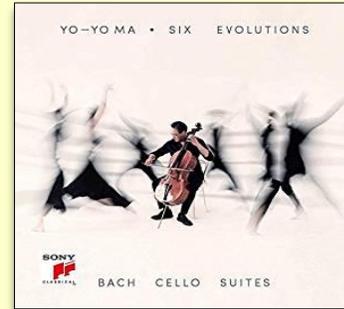
This is the third time Yo-Yo Ma has chosen to record these six unaccompanied suites. On the second occasion, as he was entering his forties, the desire to communicate with his listeners reached a peak, fueled by the many letters he had received from children and adults attesting to how this music had inspired them. He then took the unusual approach of gathering together creative people – choreographers, film makers, and a garden designer – and assigned a different suite to each in which to immerse themselves. The result was *Inspired by Bach*, a series of six short films documenting the process of immersion and creation.

At a superficial glance, the Bach suites look much the same. They even have an identical layout: first, a prelude, and then a suite of dances consisting of an Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, a pair of “galanteries” (Menuets in Suites 1 & 2, Bourées in 3 & 4; Gavottes in 5 & 6), and finally a Gigue (“jig” to you). Don’t let the formal design fool you. These six suites are not “cookie-cutters” in any sense of the word. Each has its own strong individual character, and Ma is at pains to bring this essential nature out. Having reached his sixties, he explains, “I realize that my sense of time has changed, both in life and in music, at once expanded and compressed.” Recent events have also encouraged him to explore the role of culture in overcoming the divisions between people and in ourselves, turning “them” into “us” and helping us to imagine a better world.

To say one’s sense of time has changed is not unusual. That is a common experience as we age, provided we have acquired some wisdom in the process. Ma’s sense of time in music results in expansions and contractions, giving greater breadth to some phrases and greater rigor to others. As booklet commentator Michael Stern observes, this reflects what he has observed in Ma over the past 55 years of their acquaintance: namely, a passionate search for “the music that happens between the notes,” along with a deeper, more informed insight into the music and more disciplined freedom in re-creating it as the years have passed. This artist’s perceptions of musical time are imaginative, not kinky. J. S. Bach, himself a man with a passionate nature and a faith-based, world-encompassing outlook, would have been pleased with the results we hear in this album.

“I remember as a child,” says Yo-Yo Ma, “the aesthetic pleasure of finding just the right space and timing between the gentle landing of the last note of the Sarabande [in Suite No. 1] and the slight increase in energy in the Menuet’s initial lilt.” He was then four years old, mind you, and the sense of delight he derives from exploring the Cello Suites has not diminished over the years, but grown ever keener. Seen in the broad view, the six suites seem to follow a pattern. In the film series *Inspired by Bach* it was postulated something like this: 1) Nature at Play, 2) Journey to Light, 3) Celebration, 4) Building, 5) Struggle for Hope, 6) Epiphany.

Certainly, the graceful arpeggiated chords that flow forth in semi-improvisatory manner in the Prelude of **Suite No. 1** mark it as the most straightforward and innocent of the suites. In **Suite No. 2** the somber Allemande strays a long way from the notion of the comfortable old German dance of that name. The strikingly subdued, even tragic, mood of the Sarabande in this suite casts a pall over all the remaining dance movements. As contrasted with the simple happiness of Menuets 1 & 2 in Suite No. 1, the first Minuet in Suite 2 seems dispirited, which is certainly *not* a characteristic of this dance. The decidedly up-beat, extroverted Allemande in **Suite No. 3**, with its quick little runs and jumps across the strings, seems to ratify the notion of a Celebration in **Suite No. 4**, corresponding to the fourth of the “Six Evolutions” implied in the scheme of *Inspired by Bach*, and its dance movements are marked by a steady, confident, purposeful progress. We march on in a general mood that may not be elation exactly, but it is certainly not despair.



“Six Evolutions” The Suites for Unaccompanied Cello by J. S. Bach
Yo-Yo Ma, cellist (Sony Classical)

Suite No. 5 is the deep water mark, the darkest and most emotionally charged of all the suites. We sense this right from the Prelude, which concludes with a fast, powerful fugue. Curiously, this movement actually seems more like a dance than the rather constrained Allemande that follows it. After a strangely subdued Courante that is not the quick, spirited dance in triple time of tradition, we come to the Sarabande with its Passion-like gravity. You may recall that this was the movement Yo-Yo Ma played in New York on the first anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks as part of a televised tribute to the bombing victims. In its context in the suite, it casts its shadow on Bourées I and II, normally upbeat dances in quick duple time. The lift-offs at the beginning of the measures in Bourée I are decidedly labored. Bourée II is livelier, but in a dispirited way, its frantic activity conveying a feeling of desperation. That mood is dispelled somewhat by the alacrity of the concluding Gigue, though the overall impression of this dance, traditionally a favorite of seafaring men, is that we are still sailing in the doldrums. The German adjective *beklemmt* (oppressed) would seem appropriate.

Suite No. 6 is the “Epiphany” in the scheme of *Inspired by Bach*, the happy ending we have a right to expect. We feel this from the beginning, in a Prelude that seems more like a light-hearted, tripping dance than the usual grave utterance that a prelude pre-supposes (I envisioned a “change partners” scenario similar to the alternate-hands-crossing “Allemain” in a square dance.) The Courante is what it should be: lively and vivacious. The Sarabande in two clearly defined voices is nostalgically sad. The dance is over, but the memory remains. Bourees I and II are quick and alert, with a wonderful drone in Bouree II. Great encore material! The uplifting mood continues all the way through to the light-hearted Gigue in dotted notes: jolly, extroverted, and in perpetual motion. At last, the Suites return to the simple happiness and joy with which they began.