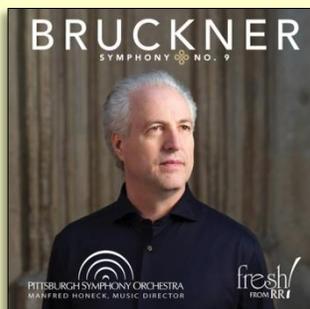


Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

October, 2019

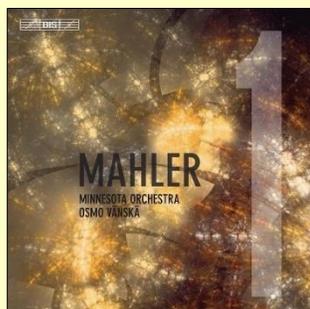


Bruckner: Symphony No. 9
Manfred Honeck, Pittsburgh
Symphony Orchestra
(Reference Recordings)

The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under the incisive and *decisive* leadership of music director Manfred Honeck, gives one of its very best performances to date in a stunning-sounding and beautifully nuanced account of Anton Bruckner's Ninth Symphony. Captured in SACD 5.0 and CD Stereo, it is likely to occupy a proud place on your CD shelf for years to come.

As you may possibly know, the Ninth Symphony is often described as "unfinished," and for sure Bruckner fully orchestrated only 172 measures of the fourth movement, not nearly enough for a satisfying conclusion. Nearing the end of his life in 1896, he authorized the insertion of his choral *Te Deum* (1884) for a finale, an option that would not have been satisfactory from either a musical or a theological point of view. For the Ninth Symphony is not just about glorifying God (*Te Deum laudamus*). It concerns man's redemption from sin and the peace that results from salvation. Of this, more later....

When you look at the score of the Ninth Symphony, you discover a bewildering number of themes, with accelerandos, diminuendos, sudden outbursts from the instruments of the orchestra, and long, impressively structured build-ups to the various climaxes. All these features in the score, and more, give rise to highly



Mahler: Symphony No. 1 – Osmo
Vänskä, Minnesota Orchestra
(Bis Records)

Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra continue their voyage of discovery of Gustav Mahler with Symphony No. 1 in D Major (1888). In many ways, it remains his most popular symphony for its abundant lyricism, but there are thorns as well as flowers, and Vänskä's carefully crafted account brings these out, too.

It begins, unusually for a classical symphony, with a slow movement, *Langsam schleppend – immer sehr gemächlich* (slow and somnolent, always very leisurely). It is an utterly charming picture of a world slowly coming to life in the early light of dawn. Mahler even includes a direct quotation of the melody from his *Wayfarer* song "*Ging heut Morgen übers Feld*" (I walked this morning through the field), reinforcing the idea of pristine innocence. Even here, he is preparing the way for further organic development by the inclusion of the interval of a fourth, which is found in many guises, rustic, enigmatic, sad, or triumphant, and in every movement. Here it is even heard in the imitation cuckoo-calls, raised from the interval of a third that we hear in nature but still exuding their usual woods charm.

It is something of a rude shock when the Scherzo breaks in *Kräftig bewegt* upon this idyllic scene, but it too is distinctly rural in feeling. It is in the tempo of an Austrian folk dance, the *Ländler*, with the rhythm of a gently



Mozart: Piano Concertos 17, 24
Orli Shaham, pianist
David Robertson, St. Louis SO
(Canary Classics)

I've always wondered what it was about Mozart's mature concertos for piano that made them so uniquely wonderful and beautiful. Was it their transparency, with absolutely no clutter or excess? Or was it the way the beauty and emotion in his music (which have a way of ultimately being one and the same) come across immediately to the listener? Mozart himself was accustomed to talk about his new style of composition as "a happy medium between what is too easy and too difficult" for performers to play or audiences to comprehend. But surely the magic of these works must consist of more than just that?

Well, it does. And we get a lot of clues from a three-way conversation in the booklet annotation involving pianist Orli Shaham, conductor David Robertson, and Mozart scholar Elaine Sisman. First and foremost, there is the way in which Mozart thought dramatically and theatrically, as if opera were his native language. It is revealed in part in the way a theme sounds different when played by a different instrument, or on a different starting note, or with a note changed up or down, or embellished with a trill. Not only do these changes help move things along, but they affect the way we feel about the theme.

The two concertos heard on this album are, in Orli's words, "the ones with variations," that is they are the

compelling moments, building to a cumulative effect that even the most naïve first-time listener can't help but experience. And needless to say, there are an immense number of cueings for the conductor to give the orchestra. To help us appreciate how Bruckner puts it all together, Honeck includes a detailed analysis, by bar number and track time, of the significant moments in the score.

Honeck also gives us occasional insights as to how he prefers to take certain passages. "I ask for clear phrasing from the violins and violas, while also immersing in a special vibrato sound," he says of a quiet section following the crescendo at 16:16 in the first movement. Of the disposition of the instruments in the Scherzo, characterized by shadowy dances, spooky and threatening scurrings, a childlike lamentation in the oboe, melancholy singing in the strings, and lively flute passages, he remarks "I aim to balance the layers of voices so as to allow these moments to come through."

The most significant movement is the third, which Bruckner marks "*Sehr langsam, feierlich*" (very slow and solemn). There are more incidents here than we might expect of an Adagio, which is usually simpler and more easily flowing. In his analysis, Honeck reminds us that Bruckner, by nature a simple, trusting man, was a devout Catholic all his life and was accustomed to include the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) in his daily devotions. Honeck perceptively focuses on the key words *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), *peccata* (sins), *miserere* (have mercy), and *pacem* (peace) as guides to understanding Bruckner's thematic scheme for developing and resolving the various conflicts in this movement. It's all there for the ear to hear, including themes that follow the natural cadence of the words.

That may also explain why Bruckner, with two years of life remaining after completing the Adagio, was unable to finish a fourth movement. The Adagio is, in effect, the finale, having said the very last word about sin, mercy, redemption and salvation. Thus the significance of the descending forte phrase (beginning bar 155 or 17:42)

swaying Waltz in the Trio section. This robust but somehow nostalgic movement is followed after a general pause by a decidedly strange, even slightly grotesque, slow movement that was initially inspired by a popular illustration, well-known to all Austrian children, of the funeral procession of a huntsman, his coffin borne in a torch-lit procession by the very forest animals he was accustomed to hunt. It is truly a world turned upside-down!

The tempo moves slowly and lugubriously over repeated fourths in the tympani. The melody, reminiscent of the nursery song "*Frere Jacques*," known in German speaking countries as "*Bruder Martin*," gradually morphs into an Hassidic dance with sounds of cymbals and exaggerated glissando leaps adding to the fun. The "*Frere Jacques*" theme elides into a soothing melody borrowed from another Wayfarer song, "*Die zwei blauen Augen*" (the two blue eyes) in which the persona in the song finds rest and comfort from the sadness of life and loss in the shade of a linden tree.

Then, the finale breaks in without a pause, building up to a maelstrom of feverish activity. Booklet annotator Jeremy Barham rightly terms this energy-driven movement "a hot-blooded cocktail of Lisztian and Grand Operatic gestures," "as if the very gates of hell have been opened." Even as superb a technician of the podium as Osmo Vänskä has his hands full anticipating and cueing the bewildering number of incidents in the first half of this 21-minute explosion marked *Stürmisch bewegt* (stormily moved – and *how!*) About 11:35 into this finale, we are given a surprise just when it appears the movement and the symphony itself have ended quietly. There is a pause for breath (*Luftpause*) and then the music resumes, building to an even more impressive climax featuring distant trumpets and a rising brass chorale. Mahler (and Vänskä) build an even more impressive structure, bringing back themes from as early as the "*Ging heut Morgen übers Feld*" theme from the opening movement and reconciling unfinished business. All this just as we'd thought it was safe to applaud and make for the cloakroom and the exits!

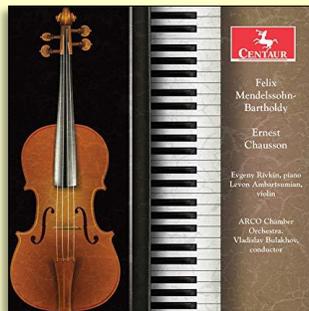
only two that conclude with strict variations on a single theme, which is played at the beginning of the final movement and then changed with each repetition. And to show how much a composer can get out of an idea, he was also pushing the envelope of what pianists could do technically. Besides the trills and other embellishments, which were common practice in the 18th Century, there are the matter of accidentals. Orli describes these as "[indications] in a score where the composer is departing from what you might call standard harmonic operating procedure." Because they mark changes from an established pattern, they require "a good deal more mental effort and alacrity of the fingers to pull off."

What Orli Shaham says about the requirements Mozart makes of the pianist, she more than makes good in her performances, which are ably seconded by the St. Louis Symphony under Robertson's direction. For its sheer poetic lyricism, the interplay between soloist and orchestra has long made Concerto No. 17 in G Major, K453 an audience favorite. Its rhapsodic slow movement, a really wonderful *Andante*, is particularly notable for its subtle interplay, veering into high drama, among piano, strings and woodwinds.

Concerto No. 24 in C minor, K491, is distinguished by the grandeur of its conception as well as by the fact that it is one of only two Mozart piano concertos in a minor key (the other is No. 20 in D Minor, K466). That fact has much to do with the prevailing mood of the slow movement, a somber *Larghetto*. The echoes of operatic dialogue and aria that we encounter in the beautifully sad aria-like section the soloist plays following the first-movement cadenza are particularly moving. K491 is the most completely scored of any of the Mozart concertos, having a full complement of pairs of woodwinds. That fact adds immensely to the lushness of sound and the noticeable byplay between an inspired soloist and orchestra that we find in this performance. Superior recorded sound allows us to hear all the enchanting details.

in response to a four-fold request from the flute, hinting that the door of heaven is opening. "I therefore do not let this forte (marked by Bruckner as 'broad') simply sound loudly," says Honeck, "but aim to develop and open the sound in expectation of the forthcoming peace (*Dona nobis pacem*)."

So, what would you do for an encore: have the redeemed sinner, newly arrived in heaven, put in a call for room service?



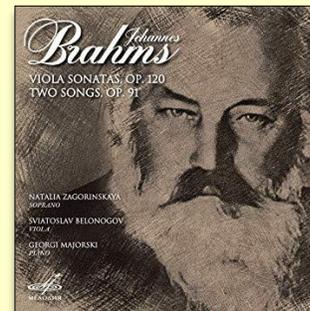
Mendelssohn + Chausson – Evgeny Rivkin, piano; Levon Ambartsumian, violin; ARCO Chamber Orchestra (Centaur)

There is a distinctly Russo-American flavor at work here, in performances recorded in Moscow at the House of Radio and Recordings (Mendelssohn) and the University of Georgia Performing Arts Center (Chausson). The featured artists have roots in Russia and Armenia in the former Soviet Union and have taught at the University of Georgia, among their other distinctions.

More to the point, the recording environment, whether in Moscow or in Athens, GA, is strikingly similar. At first hearing, I was virtually shell-shocked by the prevailing acoustic, which is very bold and bright, almost like the wall of sound we encounter in some varieties of pop music. Upon repeated listenings, however, the choice details in the music and the sheer beauty of the playing came to the fore. In the Mendelssohn Concerto in D minor for Violin, Piano, and Chamber Orchestra, those details include the extraordinarily beautiful sounds that Levon Ambartsumian coaxes from his violin, especially in the Adagio movement, plus some lively interplay with pianist Evgeny Rivkin and the ARCO Chamber Orchestra.

On a purely musical level, Mendelssohn's writing is distinguished by his skillful use of baroque counterpoint, so subtle it doesn't call undue attention to itself and can function all the more successfully. We are reminded that Mendelssohn was ahead of his time in the as-yet still underrated 19th century baroque revival. Add in the composer's characteristic verve in the outer movements, and we have a remarkable work for a 17-year old!

The companion work, Concert in D Major for Violin, Piano,



Brahms: Sonatas (2) for Viola & Piano. Op. 120; Two Lieder - Zagorinskaya, Belonogov, Majorski (Melodiya)

From the Russian label Melodiya come illuminating 1993 recordings of the two Sonatas, Op. 120, plus the Two Lieder, Op. 91, for Voice, Viola and Piano. People often describe these works as "autumnal" in mood, as if the facile tag explained everything. These recordings, superbly engineered by the late Pyotr Kondrashin (1945-2010), son of revered conductor Kirill Kondrashin, make the case that there's more to it than that.

Brahms being what he was, the Sonatas in F minor and E-flat major, Op. 120, originally written for clarinet and piano and heard here in the alternate versions for viola and piano, have their moments, along with the lyricism that one, perhaps unwisely, takes for granted in Brahms. Sonata No. 1, as the performances of violist Sviatoslav Belonogov and pianist Georgi Majorski bear out, is intimate and personal, having been dedicated to Clara Schumann and performed on the occasion of her birthday in 1894. The opening movement, *Allegro appassionato*, is characterized by a wide emotional range from passionate declamation based on wide leaps in the viola part to quiet resignation at the end of the movement, The abundant lyricism of the second movement, *Andante un poco Adagio*, is countered by ebullience resulting from tricky syncopations between the two instruments. An unexpected dance-like quality in the scherzo, *Allegretto grazioso*, gives this movement a deceptive artlessness. The finale, *Vivace*, is lively and virtuosic.

Sonata No. 2, despite its major key signature, is on the whole more restrained and introverted, in spite of the octaves in the piano part that occur in all its movements. It

and String Quartet by French composer Ernest Chausson, 1855-1899 (his life was cut short by a fall from a bicycle), is heard here in an orchestral arrangement by Ambartsumian. Even at 40 minutes' playing time, there is a lot of musical substance packed into this work. Chausson operates on a principle of cyclic integration in which the music works its way slowly toward the final return to the home key in modal shifts and half-steps, rather than the usual process of key modulations. One result of Chausson's cyclic approach to this work is that its themes seem to be endlessly self-generating. The most memorable movements here are the second, a Sicilienne notable for its swaying pastoral rhythm in 6/8 and its curiously melancholy mood, and the third, *Grave*, desolate in mood but gradually increasing in concentrated power, leading into the finale.

That lively movement, marked *Très animé*, brings back themes from the previous movements, particularly the impetuous first. That gives conductor Vladislav Bulakhov and the orchestra the opportunity to really make their presence felt, and provides Ambartsumian the chance to revel in the virtuoso writing for his instrument that reminds us that the violin part was played at the work's premiere by no less a master than Eugène Ysaÿe

is also filled with a world of diverse images. Warmth, gentle affection and graciousness are the hallmarks of the opening movement, *Allegro amabile*, which the booklet annotation likens in feeling to a conversation between friends after a long separation. The *Allegro appassionato* has a wider emotional range and a more rebellious spirit than we might expect in a scherzo, a type of movement usually played for fun. The finale, *Andante con moto*, begins with variations on a lovely, lilting theme in 6/8 and ends on a suspension, just before we are plunged into a stormy finish for both players in which Brahms seems to "rage against the dying of the light."

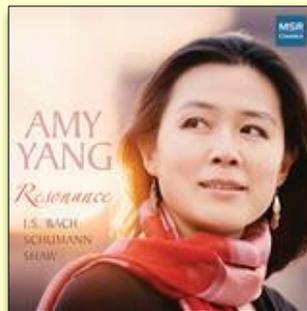
Soprano Natalia Zagorinskaya adds her distinctive vocal coloring to the Two Lieder, Op. 91, where she is partnered by Belonogov and Majorski. First, the hushed beauty of *Gestillte Sehnsucht* (Stilled Longing) to a poem by Friedrich Rückert provides abundant opportunity for her superbly nuanced interpretation of lyrics such as "When no more on the eternally distant stars / Does my longing linger; / Then the wind and the little birds / Whisper away my life and my longing." The other song, a setting of Emanuel Geibel's *Geistliches Wiegenlied* (Sacred Lullaby) after a 16th century Spanish poem by Lope de Vega, has a gently rocking lilt and delicate feeling appropriate to the Nativity subject, preserving the folksy quality of the original song, which is still heard throughout the German-speaking world at Christmas time.



"Souvenirs of Spain & Italy"
Sharon Isbin, guitar
Pacifica String Quartet
(Cedille)

"Souvenirs of Spain & Italy" features American guitarist Sharon Isbin displaying her customary verve and her love of pulse-quickening rhythms and searing melodies in music that provides plenty of opportunity to do just that. She joins forces here with the Pacifica String Quartet, four like-minded spirits who are disposed to take the music for all it's worth. The result is a program of really glorious music-making.

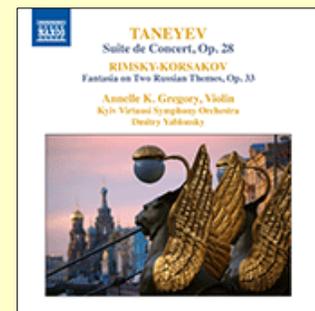
First up, we have Quintet for Guitar and String Quartet, Op. 143 by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1895-1968),



Bach: Partita No. 4, BWV 828
Schumann: Davidsbündlertänze
Amy Yang, piano
(MSR Classics)

Pianist Amy Yang, currently on the chamber music faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music, gives revealing performances of three composers, Bach, Schumann, and our American contemporary Caroline Shaw, that at first glance might seem to have little in common. But true to the album title *Resonance*, Yang makes her points in no uncertain terms in works that are "close to my heart."

First up in the program is Partita No. 4 in D minor by J. S. Bach, a work that joyously veers from the buoyant to the pensive. Yang describes Bach



Taneyev: Suite de Concert for Violin & Orchestra + Rimsky-Korsakov: Fantasia - Annelle Gregory, violin; Dmitry Yablonsky, conductor (Naxos)

American violinist Annelle Gregory attracted attention several years ago with an album of original works and transcriptions for violin and piano by Sergei Rachmaninov (see *Classical Reviews* 4/2017). Now the L.A. native expresses her ongoing love of repertoire that is Russian, rare, and rediscovered with a couple of attractive works by Sergei Taneyev and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Both provide plenty of opportunity for an ambitious young mistress of the violin to savor a lot of delicious virtuosity.

written expressly for the great Spanish artist Andres Segovia in order to enrich the repertoire of chamber music with guitar. It begins with the Schubertian lyricism of the Allegro, marked *vivo e schietto* (lively and sincere), which the composer described as “one of the most concise and stringent movements I have ever written.” The Andante, marked *mesto* (sad), is characterized by long melodic phrasings from which melismas arise as the guitar spins a delicate tracery over muted strings, a true “souvenir of Spain.” The third movement, Scherzo alla Marcia, is a spirited march with infectious dance tempi. A fiery Finale in 6/8 has a languid Fandango in the middle, one more “souvenir of Spain” before sighing “Adiós!”

The Concerto in D Major, RV 93, by baroque composer Antonio Vivaldi was originally written for lute with basso continuo. Here it is heard in an up-to-date transcription for guitar and quartet by Emilio Pujol with the second violin part transferred to the viola for a more evenly-balanced ensemble. However one hears it performed, it is one of Vivaldi’s “greatest hits,” with its scintillating rhythms and ritornellos in the opening allegro and its brisk finale in 12/8 time in the character of an Italian dance. Both movements frame a central Largo which has a melody to die for, even by Vivaldi’s standard.

Next, we are served up *Oración del torero* (Prayer of the Bullfighter) by Spanish composer Joaquin Turina (1882-1949), unforgettable music expressing the anxious feelings and final acceptance of fate of a young man praying in the deep solitude of a chapel before going forth to confront the bull. Turina reworked the piece in various settings for greater audience exposure and acceptance. It sounds absolutely right here in the string quartet version that utilizes the range of the Pacifica Quartet, consisting of Simin Ganatra and Austin Hartman, violins; Mark Holloway, viola; and Brandon Vamos, cello.

Finally, we have Guitar Quintet No. 4 in D Major by Luigi Boccherini (1743-

as “an artful dodger a whimsical dancer – able to slip, leap and ricochet in mischievous repeats, only to pause, as if in thought, while he ponders the universe in slow movements.” Booklet annotator Curt Cacioppo talks of the “movement and fusion of multiple lines,” something that also fits in well with Yang’s artistic temperament.

She makes it all plausible in her performance on a remarkably lithe and light-sounding Steinway Model D, recapturing the wonderful clarity of texture which Bach had originally envisioned for the harpsichord.¹

Caroline Shaw (b.1982) creates a strikingly original work in *Gustave le Gray*, which is her own multi-layered comment on Chopin’s exquisitely poetic and moody Mazurka in A minor, Op. 17, No. 4 (which itself transcends the notion of a dance and creates its own soundscape much like a tone poem). Shaw describes the Chopin original as “a potent poetic balance between the viscosity and density of the descending harmonic progression and the floating onion skin of the loose, chromatic melody above.” The album title refers to a 19th century French photographer who pioneered the merging of images to create a composite. Shaw does something like that in a work that isn’t exactly a paraphrase in the Lisztian sense, but an original work hinging together Chopin’s ingredients with comments of her own that emphasize their darker implications.

Finally, we have Yang’s insightful account of Robert Schumann’s *Davidsbündlertänze* (Dances of the League of David), Op. 6. Despite its earlier opus number, it was written at a later date than the composer’s more frequently performed Carnival, Op. 9, with which it bears a close relationship. Yang’s performance emphasizes the ways in which this work takes up where Carnival left off. Sometimes we are even given quotations from the earlier work, such as the reference of V: *Einfach* in Part I to the Eusebius motto in Carnival.

What we *do not* have in the

Taneyev (1856-1915) wrote Suite de Concert, Op. 28, as long ago as 1909. Even though it was later championed by no less an artist than David Oistrakh, it has never gained the popularity it might reasonably have deserved. Its unusual length (45 minutes) has probably worked against it, but there is more to it than that. It is in five movements, the fourth of which, a Theme and Variations, arguably distorts the symmetry of the work. We open with a noble prelude, marked *Grave* and filled with enough grandiose display passages to engage the imagination of an artist like Annelle Gregory. It is followed by a wide-ranging *Gavotte* with a contrasting *Musette* in the baroque style. The third movement, *Märchen* (Fairy Tale) might suggest a story from Robert Schumann or the Brothers Grimm, but its mood – ominous and eerie – is very Russian indeed.

The fourth movement is the aforementioned Theme and Variations. There are seven variations in all, plus a coda. They include, among others, a lithe, slender-limbed Waltz with a warm middle section, a beautifully conceived and executed double fugue, and a spirited Mazurka in the Russian style. The last movement is a rousing Tarantella ending with a cadence before Taneyev takes the dance up to a higher, more frenzied level.

Despite occasional longeurs, the music is highly effective taken movement by movement. I do feel, however, that Taneyev might have done better to have extracted the Theme and Variations (15:30 in the present account) as a separate work in its own right and allowed the other four movements to exist on their own as a better-proportioned suite. That might have ensured it more playing time in our concert halls. The music is certainly attractive, and Annelle Gregory does much to bring out both its abundant charm and its fire.

Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Fantasia on Two Russian Themes* is a concerto-like work with cadences and double-stopping aplenty to satisfy any

¹ Perhaps we can also credit piano technician Jon Guenther with an assist?

1805), an Italian composer who spent some of his most productive years in Spain. It opens, curiously, with a Pastorale built on a gently rocking rhythm, with the guitar part gracefully harmonized with the strings.

It is followed by an *Allegro maestoso* in which the guitar usually (though not *always!*) strums a full-bodied accompaniment while the others, notably the cello, step up to take the lead. The final movement is a *Grave* in which a melancholy opening gives way to the main business of the music which includes a thrilling Fandango as its center-piece. In this performance it is augmented by castenets, emphasizing the dance's folk origin.

Davidsbündlertänze are descriptive names such as Schumann had used in Carnival as guides for the both the interpreter and the listener. Instead, the individual pieces have only tempo markings and keys, plus Schumann's idiomatic ascriptions to his alter-egos Florestan and Eusebius, as guides to whether the intended affect should be forceful and dramatic, or else thoughtful and expressive. That, and the thornier nature of the analytical issues that Schumann addresses, probably accounts for the fact that it is less popular than its predecessor.

That isn't to say *Davidsbündlertänze* lacks its points of interest, which include Schumann's markings such as *Lebhaft* (lively), *Innig* (heartfelt), *Ungeduldig* (impatient), *Einfach* (easy or simply), *Frisch* (fresh), and *Zart und singend* (tender and singing) as useful guides.

virtuoso of the bow. Its melodies celebrate the Russian folk ethos, and they even invoke (unless my ears deceive me) echoes of the music of the Caucasus that so intrigued composers of the nationalist school.

Continued Below

Even more telling is the next-to-last piece in B major, "*Wie aus der Ferne*" (as from a distance) which harmonically transcends anything in Carnival by the way in which overlapping chords, based on harmonies of six or seven chromatic notes, instead of creating dissonance as we might expect, magically evoke the sweetness of first love. Yang obviously relishes this wonderful musical moment that looks far into the future, as she also does the final piece, *Nicht schnell* (not fast), which ends slowly and unhurriedly with the striking of twelve low C's to signify the coming of midnight