

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

"Son of Classics We All Know and Love"

September, 2013



Sibelius + Barber: Violin Concertos
Ben-Haim: Three Songs without Words
Zina Schiff, violin; Avlana Eisenberg, conductor
MAV Symphony Orchestra
MSR Classics

Three composers who left the world of 20th century music more lyrically endowed than they found it, a violinist who was once a protégé of Jascha Heifetz, and an orchestra that had its origin on wheels, all combine to make the present MSR Classics release a richly rewarding experience.

Jean Sibelius. Samuel Barber. Paul Ben-Haim. What can they possibly have in common? The fact that all were notable song composers does not come immediately to the public mind. Barber, of course, was, and still is, famous for his operas and songs (*Vanessa*, Knoxville: Summer of 1915). But Sibelius' songs were dedicated to exploring the sounds of a language that is not spoken outside his native Finland. Ben-Haim's songs were set in Hebrew, the language of his adopted country Israel, and though it is inherently one of the most lyrically beautiful of all languages, it again presents a linguistic barrier for the outside world.

The Sibelius Violin Concerto opens quietly and subdued, as do all works of epic scope and soaring imagination, with the violin entering almost unobtrusively over a bed of softly pulsating pianissimo strings. Thereafter, the instrument is scarcely so discrete, as it engages in sensational arpeggios, double stops and runs while it states and develops the main theme. Schiff handles these sections of the opening movement brilliantly, so that the delayed entrance of the full body of strings makes the more striking an impression. In the slow movement, she is just as much at home with the song-like passages over pizzicato strings as she is the broken octaves over a flute accompaniment in the main section.

In the finale, the full force of the orchestra, which has been held in deliberate restraint heretofore, comes into



Mozart: Piano Concertos Nos. 12-14
Anne-Marie McDermott, piano
Calder String Quartet
Bridge Records

In a keenly anticipated event, these Bridge recordings were released on July 15th of this year, the night pianist Anne-Marie McDermott and the Calder Quartet performed this Mozart program at the Vail Valley Music Festival. You don't have to read the concert reviews to know that it was a sensation: you can gauge that by the present CD in which elegance, charm, and zestful spirits virtually ooze out of the aluminum disc's lacquer coating.

Mozart himself placed great hopes on the three piano concertos he wrote for public performance in Vienna in the autumn of 1782, describing them as "a happy medium between what is too easy and too difficult [for an audience to comprehend.]" Two of them, Nos. 12 in A, K414 and 13 in C, K415, are heard on this disc in their rarely played alternate form for piano and string quartet, instead of a larger orchestra. My impression is that nothing has been lost in the process of re-scoring the ensemble for quartet, as the quartet can easily replicate the brightness and the sonic range of the string orchestra (as the Calder demonstrate in these performances), while the feeling of intimacy and interplay with the piano are enhanced. We should be hearing more performances of these versions in the future, as they make for very attractive listening.

On this program, Concerto No. 13 is heard first, as it makes for a better curtain raiser than No. 12. It begins slowly and quietly at first, but soon changes character with a march-like (but scarcely martial) first theme, which in turn gives way to a more extensive central section. Technical display by the piano and its interplay with the quartet lend added sparkle to what critics have described as commonplace material. The melodious Andante in F is suffused with tonal warmth. The vivacious finale, a hybrid of sonata and rondo form, ends unexpectedly in a hushed pianissimo, one of Mozart's little jokes.

play for the first time in a maelstrom of activity, heralded by rhythmic percussion and growling figures in the lower strings. Eisenberg, one of today's brightest young conductors on her way up in the musical world, does a splendid job keeping the warlike intensity of the movement going through its various phases. The incredibly difficult violin part involves up-bow staccato double stops, string crossings, running octaves and harmonics in addition to the expected double-stops, all of which Zina Schiff accompanies with Heifetz-like mastery (and no wonder) plus a lyrical impulse that is all her own. As opposed to the earlier movements, the soloist and orchestra play against each other up until the very end, when the violin plunges downward into final oblivion over a sea of slurred sixteenth notes in the strings.

What can we say of the Barber concerto? It opens with one of the most astonishingly beautiful melodies ever composed for the violin, introduced by the instrument at the very opening. The rhapsodic melody of the Andante, played by the soloist after a glorious extended oboe solo, is hardly less memorable. Schiff, who has played a major role in getting this concerto established in the violinist's repertoire, continues her spectacular work in the perpetual motion finale.

Sandwiched between two major concertos, Ben-Haim's Three Songs without Words would be in danger of neglect were it not for Schiff's skill in molding and defining these brief character pieces, here recorded for the first time in their version for orchestra. They consist of an Arioso, Ballad, and Sephardic Melody, the last-named a love song. All are steeped in the composer's love for his country and its traditions.

P.S. For a fascinating documentary on the orchestra heard on this recording, just Google "The Rolling Orchestra: A History of the MAV Symphony Orchestra."



Schubert: Symphony No. 6 in C Major, D589
Rosamunde Incidental Music
 Thomas Dausgaard, Swedish Chamber Orchestra
 Bis Records

Thomas Dausgaard directs a finely-mettled Swedish Chamber Orchestra in performances of Franz Schubert's Symphony No. 6, often known as the "Little C Major," and his ever-popular Suite from *Rosamunde*. In the process, we learn a little bit more about both symphony

Concerto No. 12 has been described as the most "Mozartean" of all these works, and indeed it has all the formal features we might expect of a middle-period Mozart concerto. The rhythmically alert opening movement, prolific in melodic invention, is followed by an Andante whose majestic rising and falling theme was taken from an aria by the recently deceased Johann Christian Bach, and was intended as a handsome tribute to Mozart's mentor. The Rondo finale, as extroverted as its predecessor was moody, allows lots of opportunity for witty exchanges between soloist and ensemble.

In the last work on the program, Concerto No. 14 in E-flat, K449, bassist David J. Grossman joins the string quartet. The presence of the bass adds to the general harmonic richness and enhances the strong rhythmic profile of the outer movements. The opening movement in what is generally considered Mozart's first "mature" piano concerto is characterized by operatic-like changes in mood and atmosphere, while the Andantino slow movement charms with its delicacy of expression, another typical Mozart feature. The finale, with its playfully leaping theme and its light counterpoint, allows the performers ample opportunity for sophisticated play.



Dvořák: Cello Concerto in A; String Serenade in E
 Alexander Rudin, cellist and director
 Musica Viva – Moscow
 Fuga Libera

Alexander Rudin, cellist and artistic director of the Moscow-based chamber orchestra Musica Viva, leads his eager young cohorts through a convincing account of Dvořák's neglected Cello Concerto in A major of 1865. Did I say *neglected*? This is only the seventh currently available listing of this work, compared with no fewer than 127 of the much more familiar Cello Concerto in B minor, Op.104 of 30 years later. Thereby hangs a tail.

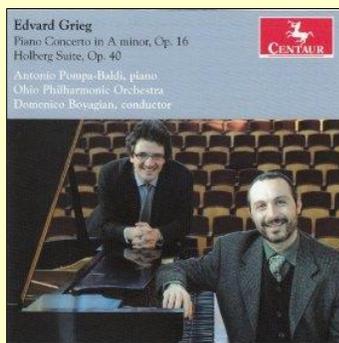
Dvořák didn't just neglect the work, he never even orchestrated it. He wrote it for a Czech patriot, cellist Ludevít Peer, but it never got past the cello and piano version as long as it remained in Dvořák's hands. His publisher had another composer orchestrate it, with less than satisfactory results, and the work rambled around the back-alleys of musical history until 1977, when Jarmil Burghauser published a freshly scored version. One lingering problem remained: the work's unconscionable

and incidental music than we might have realized.

The Sixth as often been described as Schubert's most "Rossiniesque" symphony, and criticized for the lightness of its material. And for sure, the music has many of the characteristics of a Rossini opera, including stretti in the opening Allegro, a Cavatina-like Andante (which is not a true slow movement for all that), and a spirited finale in ABAB form. Does all this add up to sub-symphonic material? Dausgaard and associates strive to convince us otherwise. With a permanent membership of 38 players, the orchestra is an ideal size to handle this symphony better than a smaller chamber group or a larger symphony orchestra might have done. Their wind players obviously delight in Schubert's many woodwind passages which often seem to relegate the strings to a subordinate role.

The Swedish Chamber Orchestra has its best success in the remarkable Scherzo, which was strikingly reminiscent of the similar movement in Beethoven's Seventh Symphony that had premiered in Vienna six years earlier. It qualified as the most mature symphonic movement to date from a composer who to the end of his life was still in search of a characteristic symphonic style of his own. A complete failure to find performances outside his circle was a major reason. Astonishing as it may seem, the Vienna premiere of the Sixth Symphony only weeks after Schubert's death in 1828 was the first public performance of any of his symphonies.

No such shadow looms over the *Rosamunde* Music, which has been in the orchestral repertoire ever since its rediscovery in 1867. Dausgaard uses the standard orchestral suite of five pieces, only re-arranging their order for better contrast: Entr'actes 1, 3, and 2, and then Ballet Music 2 and 1. The present performance is done with affection and style. Especially memorable are Ballet Music No. 2 with its buoyant, effervescent writing for the woodwinds, and Entr'acte No. 3, for the graceful, languid melody that Schubert later used in his String Quartet in A minor and his Impromptu in B-flat, Op. 142.

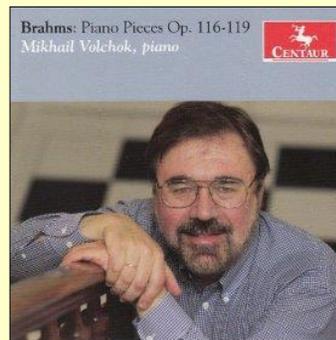


Grieg: Piano Concerto in A minor. Op. 16
Holberg Suite, Op. 40
Antonio Pompa-Baldi, piano
Domenico Boyagian, Ohio Philharmonic Orchestra
Centaur Records

length of some 50-55 minutes. That is all-too typical of young composers who pack a new work with as much material as possible in the desire to gain recognition, not realizing that "less is more" and too much can be boring. (Symphonies 1-2 from the same period suffer from a similar degree of excess.)

In the present recording, Rudin and Musica Viva have taken in account Burghauser's suggested cuts and added a few well considered ones of their own. The result is a very playable work that, at a timing of 36:35, seems just about right. We have here an immediately attractive work that provides enough virtuosic challenges to interest a master cellist such as Rudin, and enough lithe, transparent orchestration to consistently engage a chamber orchestra such as Musica Viva. The three movements are taken without breaks, per Dvořák's instructions. The resulting impression is that of a free-flowing narrative with outer movements in which soloist and orchestra must be alert to Dvořák's subtle changes, plus a beautiful slow movement, *Andante cantabile*, which breathes the air of the Czech countryside. With a high percentage of woodwinds to strings (12 to 27), Musica Viva's wind players are able to make some telling points to complement Rudin's artistry.

No such neglect has hounded Dvořák's Serenade for Strings, Op. 22. Appearing in 1875, it marked an advance in the composer's career, and it has been a mainstay in the standard repertoire for string orchestra ever since. From the languid, lyrical melody that starts off the opening movement and is repeated later on as an interlude in a rousing finale, this work is loaded with ravishingly beautiful material as it explores all the harmonic riches for strings that are inherent in the home key of E major. In between, we are given a lilting (and rather Tchaikovskyan) Waltz, a scintillating, hyperactive scherzo, and a wistfully sad Larghetto with a quotation from the third theme of the Waltz as a B section. Musica Viva takes it all with aplomb and affection.



Brahms: Piano Pieces, Opp. 116-119
Mikhail Volchok, piano
Centaur Records

Mikhail Volchok, much-traveled Russian pianist who is now on the Piano Faculty at the University of Maryland, gives a distinguished recital of Johannes Brahms' last piano pieces, encompassing Opus numbers 116 through

Amazing as it may seem, I've never covered Edvard Grieg's Piano concerto in A minor for the A-V Club of Atlanta, and in fact it's hard to remember the last time I reviewed *any* recording of this most beloved of concertos in more than 30 years as a critic. Was it Leif Ove Andsnes (1991) or Olli Mustonen (1996)? I really can't remember. Can I actually have taken Grieg for granted all these years?

Well, it's high time to make amends. And I can't think of a better way to do that than this new Centaur release with Antonio Pompa-Baldi on piano and Domenico Boyagian conducting the recently formed Ohio Philharmonic (2011). How does a native-born Italian know so much about Norway's national composer? Well, Pompa-Baldi has undertaken an extensive multi-year study of Grieg and has made no fewer than 11 recordings of the composer's Lyric Pieces and other solo piano works for release by Centaur. He obviously knows his Grieg. From the sensational opening flourish by the piano that follows right after the very dramatic tympani roll – actually a double-octave cadenza with a falling major second succeeded by a falling major third – Pompa-Baldi is clearly in control of the piano part of the score.

In a work that combines intense lyricism and emotion, with some finely honed virtuosity added in the mix, Pompa-Baldi impresses with his florid passagework, building up seamlessly to the major climaxes in the opening movement. In the Adagio, he expresses to a high degree the music's finely conceived warmth, exploring depths of sentiment without descending to sentimentality against a subtly unobtrusive, colorful harmonic backdrop created by the orchestra and the horn in particular. In the finale, which begins without a break, Pompa-Baldi's piano is joined in partnership by the full orchestra, whose full resources have been more or less held back by Boyagian's fine hand until this supreme moment.

The companion-piece, Holberg Suite, Op. 40 was conceived by Grieg as a 200th birthday tribute to his country's first important literary figure, Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754). It is a charming, spirited work for string orchestra that weaves its spell economically, in not more than 20 minutes. Grieg combined the French dances that were popular all over Europe in that era – a Praeludium followed by a Sarabande, Gavotte, Air, and Rigaudon – with the feeling and the orchestral technique of his own day to make a work that lingers in the mind long after one has heard it. Alternating quickly-paced vivacity and glowing tenderness, the work reaches its point of deepest emotion, marked by tasteful restraint and warm feeling, in the Air. Here, sadness and consolation seem to co-exist as one of Grieg's miracles, so that it achieves its effect without falling into excess.

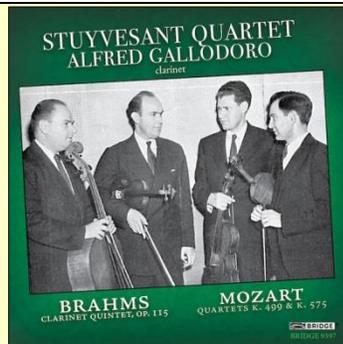
119. Taken as a group, these twenty piano pieces constitute probably our best insight into the heart and soul of Brahms as man and composer, not neglecting his sly sense of humor. In these brief pieces, most of them of 2 to 4 minutes' duration, sublime beauty meets musical truth and they end up being one and the same.

To play these miniature masterpieces as well as Volchok plays them here does not require re-thinking the piano as much as it does re-thinking one's purpose as a pianist. Brahms rejected the popular Lisztian showiness of his day. We have plenty of evidence of his approach to the piano from the recollections of his own students. One was Florence May, an English woman whose 2-volume *Life of Johannes Brahms* (1902) is still available in print and can be downloaded from several internet websites. May recalls that Brahms was a patient teacher (he reserved his biting scorn for his critics). He eschewed breaking or enlarging chords unless the composer called for such, and he would gently chide his student with "No arpège" (we're talking piano now, not perfume) whenever she wandered into florid arpeggios when they weren't called for (something a lot of 19th century pianists seemed to have done instinctively).

Another Brahms pupil, Carl Friedberg, recalled that Brahms "avoided all percussive tone. He would mold and knead phrases and the notes within them so that the music sounded as though invoked from within the instrument." The idea was to achieve a beautiful legato and complete clarity, even in the most intense passages.

Mikhail Volchok has taken all these admonitions, and many other things besides that Brahms strived for, and brought them together in a program in which the inner life of each piece comes instantly to light. His unerringly sensitive performances might even serve as a model for younger pianists to emulate.

There is a lot of variety in these twenty *klavierstücke*. Generally speaking, those labeled Intermezzi are quiet, intimate pieces that appeal to the inner man (or woman), while the Capriccios are more extroverted, but there are many exceptions where the distinction becomes less useful. The gently rocking Intermezzo in E-flat, Op. 117, has a folk quality and soft intimacy that has justified its nickname "Scotch Lullaby." This tenderness is found also in the Intermezzo in A, Op. 118, along with a love-like theme and a more discursive episode. But Intermezzo in F minor, Op. 118, an Allegretto marked *un poco agitato* (a little agitated), is more troubled until its unquiet mood is dispelled at the end. And the Intermezzo in E-flat minor, Op. 118 seems almost programmatic, like a desolate nocturnal procession swept over by wispy arpeggios ("Ja, arpège"). The twenty pieces begin and end ebulliently, with a Capriccio marked *Presto energico* at the head of Op. 116 and a Rhapsody marked *Allegro risoluto* (and how!), a five minutes' circumnavigation of the globe as the last piece of Op. 119, signifying the heroic summation of Brahms' keyboard art.



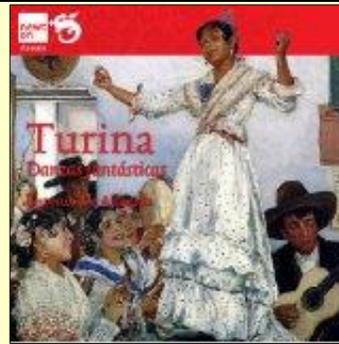
Brahms: Clarinet Quintet in B minor, Op. 115
 Mozart: String Quartets, K499 and K575
 Alfred Gallodoro, clarinet
 The Stuyvesant String Quartet
 Bridge Records

This project was obviously a labor of love. The subject was the long-vanished Stuyvesant Quartet that flourished between 1938 and 1954. It consisted of Sylvan Shulman, 1st violin; Bernard Robbins, 2nd violin; Ralph Hersh, viola; and Alan Shulman, cello. Jay Shulman, son of Alan, produced the present historical re-issues, with the assistance of Brian C. Peters in the transfers and audio restoration, which must have been no small task considering the age of the sources. Alan's daughter Laurie Shulman wrote the highly readable and informative booklet annotation. A number of Friends of the Stuyvesant Quartet contributed to the funding effort.

Flourishing when they did, the Stuyvesant Quartet gave a morale boost to newer foursomes that sprang up after the war, such as the Juilliard and the Fine Arts quartets. With their smooth phrasing, precise but completely no-fuss blending of timbres and the ideal spatial relationship they maintained (to say nothing of the really beautiful, glowing sound that characteristically resulted from it), they showed skeptics that an all-American string quartet could match the Europeans at their own game.

These qualities come to the fore with natural ease in the two Mozart works featured in the present offering of almost 80 minutes, the Quartets in D major, K499 and K575. Both are works in which contrapuntal complexities are trumped by natural-sounding spontaneity, so that the melodic beauty comes through unimpeded.

But the gem here is the Brahms Clarinet Quintet, which is graced by the presence of clarinetist Alfredo Gallodoro. This remarkable artist, who combined classical technique with the natural spontaneity of jazz and moved comfortably through both worlds during his very long lifetime (1913-2008), is heard to full advantage as his instrument navigates its way through the textures of Brahms' writing and the timbres of the string quartet, finally discovering its place in the sun in the sublimely beautiful Adagio. The moment near the middle of the movement when the clarinet rises on a bed of sensational tremolos from the strings is worth the price of



Turina: Danzas fantásticas, Sinfonia sevillana, other symphonic works
 Antonio de Almeida, Bamberg Symphony Orchestra
 Newton Classics

This is a Newton Classics reissue of the well-regarded 1991 BMG release of the recording by Antonio de Almeida and the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra. The performances that Almeida draws from that Bavarian orchestra are always warmly affectionate and sometimes astonishing, with a clarity that brings out choice details that make Joaquín Turina's music what it is: an experience to be savored.

The program embraces the four mature symphonic works of Spanish composer Joaquín Turina (1882-1949). They are *Danzas fantásticas*, *La procesión del Rocío*, *Sinfonia sevillana*, and *Ritmos*. The first, translated "Fantastic Dances," is a work of high imagination in three short, pithy movements: *Exaltación*, *Ensueño*, and *Orgía* (Ecstasy, Reverie, and Revels). Here we have Turina's typically colorful and luminously transparent scoring. The religious connotation of the word *exaltación* informs the background mood of the opening movement. The middle movement has a particularly lovely melody in 5/8 time amid gliding string harmonies that perfectly complements the notion of a beautiful daydream. And the *Orgía* has a deftly humorous sketch of a drunken reveler.

La procesión del Rocío is a colorful picture of Seville, Turina's birthplace, at the time of the annual religious celebration of that name. It is in two movements, *Triana en fiesta*, describing the bustle of gypsy quarter of the city, and *La procesión*, in which the solemnity of the occasion is heightened at the end by orchestration recalling pipes and drums, bells, and trumpet fanfares. *Sinfonia sevillana* begins with a panorama of the city of Seville from dawn to dusk, and then uses undulating bass and rippling figures in the strings to evoke the flowing of the Guadalquivir, the broad river that flows through the city. The enchantment of this movement is enhanced by memorable melodies for the English horn and the violin. And we are given another colorful picture of a festival in an old quarter of the city in *Fiesta en San Juan de Aznalfarache*.

Finally, *Ritmos* (the word signifies both "rhythm" and

the album, all by itself. At a playing time of 11:20, this movement may be long, but who's minding the clock? As you listen to the spell of the Adagio, and indeed the entire quintet, you wish it could just go on forever.

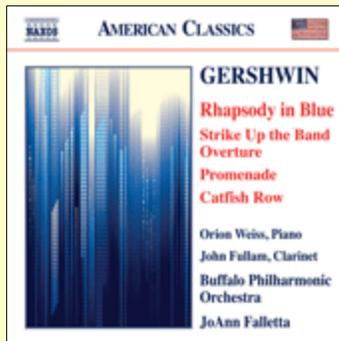
A note on the sources. The recording of the Brahms Quintet, made at the Majestic Theatre in New York in December, 1947, dates before the advent of the tape era. The annotation states that, "as the original 78 rpm shellac surfaces were too noisy, the present transfer was made from a 1950's LP release." For all that, I found it better-sounding than the Mozart recordings, which were originally released on the Stuyvesant Quartet's own Philharmonia label and were licensed for release in electronically processed stereo by Nonesuch Records in 1965. Most critics have concluded that the monophonic recordings were superior to the rather echoic Nonesuch reissues, but the original tapes have been lost, and so the Mozart quartets, too, have apparently been transferred from the 1952 Philharmonia LP.

Now, you *can* derive a satisfactory transfer from a vinyl record if you really know what you're doing, as Jay Shulman and Brian Peters obviously do. But you *are* limited to the imperfections of the source medium. This is most apparent in the Mozart works, where the sheen in the violins resulting from high bowings can have an unpleasant edge. I found that to be more evident when I listened through headphones rather than over my system's speakers. At any rate, the sound quality becomes less of an issue the deeper you go into the present program, as the superior performances by the Stuyvesant Quartet make their full impression. This, *this*, we feel, is what chamber music is all about!

"tempo") was described by Turina as a choreographic fantasy (*Fantasia coreográfica*). He wrote it for the dancer Antonia Mercé. As opposed to the other works on this program, this is more pure music than evocative description, and is in six movements, *Preludio, Danza lenta* (slow dance), *Valse trágico* (sorrowful waltz), *Garrotín, Intermedio, and Danza exótica*. The *Garrotín* is a flamenco traditionally danced by a young woman with graceful hand gestures. Under Almeida's direction, the excitement builds throughout this suite until it ends with a really sensational whack on the bass drum.

Since there is really little choice in the way of competing recordings for these four essential works of Turina, it is fortunate that the present performances are as good as they are. Recommended as a real treat that you might otherwise have overlooked.

N.B.: The name *La procesión del Rocío* is often translated literally as "Procession of the Dew," which makes no sense at all. The name actually refers to the Hermitage of El Rocío outside of Seville, from which a famous image of the Virgin is carried in a solemn procession through the streets of the city every year on the 2nd day of Pentecost, an event which draws upwards of a million pilgrims every year. I have been unable to identify the origin of "*El Rocío*." It may be figurative, referring to the striking appearance of the alabaster façade of the hermitage to an approaching pilgrim, like dew on a barren landscape.



Rhapsody in Blue, Promenade, Catfish Row, *Strike Up the Band Overture*
Orion Weiss, piano
JoAnn Falletta, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra
Naxos

JoAnn Falletta and the Buffalo Philharmonic once again display that well-honed jazz sensibility and bold rhythmic freedom that I noted earlier in my review of their Duke Ellington program "Black, Brown, And Beige" (May, 2013). This time, the subject is Gershwin, and if Falletta and company were right on in that earlier Naxos release,



Copland: Rodeo, Dance Panels, El Salón México, Danzón Cubano
Leonard Slatkin, Detroit Symphony Orchestra
Naxos

This is one of the most thrilling and engaging Copland albums I've heard in some time. Should I be surprised, considering that Leonard Slatkin, here at the podium with the Detroit Symphony, has long been renowned for his Copland? The all-newly recorded selections on this CD reveal the composer in his most popular and readily accessible vein: Rodeo, El Salón México, and Danzón

they are really cookin' in this one!

We kick off with the "Strike Up the Band" Overture, the melody of the song hit being delayed just long enough in the early proceedings that we are hungering for it by the time it finally makes its appearance – and we aren't disappointed. Promenade, based on music Gershwin wrote for the "Walking the Dog" sequence in the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers musical *Shall We Dance*, appeals with its cool flowing measures and classy chic.

Catfish Row is the title of Gershwin's suite from his opera *Porgy and Bess*, with its great mixture of folk and classical idioms and a superb admixture of blues. It's in five movements. "Catfish Row: sets the backdrop and moves with utter naturalness right into the lullaby "Summertime," with a dreamy violin solo taking the melody. "Porgy Sings" showcases the melodies of the two arias "Bess, you is my woman" and "I got plenty of nuthin'" with a sensational banjo accompanying the latter. "Fugue" depicts Porgy's emotions after he has killed his rival Crown in a fight and realizes he is fated to be a fugitive. "Hurricane" is the orchestral conjuring-up of the elemental force of nature of the title, prefaced by the strange, eerie calm that precedes it. Finally, "Good morning, sistuh" begins with the song from Act III and segues nicely into an upbeat finish with "Oh Lord, I'm on my way." Unlike a lot of suites from operas, this one really lets us sample the actual story with its range of conflicts and emotions.

From the glissando wail of John Fullam's clarinet on a rising 17-note diatonic scale at the very opening, we know we are in for a treat in *Rhapsody in Blue*, George Gershwin's unique combination of earthy jazz and blues sophistication. After a volcanic build-up by the orchestra, pianist Orion Weiss enters and spends most of the remaining 18 minutes alternately interacting with and against the orchestra and pensively exploring the depths of a seemingly bottomless ocean of blue notes. This is a true rhapsody, not a "jazz concerto," as it was originally billed, and it has all the earmarks of the genre in its sheer exuberance, its improvisatory feeling, and its outrageous contrasts of color, texture and mood. From rhythmically intense to slow, broadly stated, and controlled, this work demands the utmost from pianist, conductor, and orchestra. And it gets it. Weiss, Falletta, and the Buffalo Philharmonic are old hands at this sort of thing, having released a terrific Gershwin album of the Piano Concerto, 2nd Rhapsody, and "I Got Rhythm" Variations more than a year ago. They do not disappoint us here!

Cubano. Only Dance Panels has been under a cloud historically – and of that, we shall have more to say later.

The account of Rodeo highlights on this CD is absolutely scintillating. We have the Four Dance Episodes that are usually performed plus the Ranch House Party with its lively honky tonk piano that is usually left out but, as here, provides a tie-in to the sublimely beautiful mood of Saturday Night Waltz. Slatkin manages Copland's irresistible mix of lyrical melody (*Corral Nocturne*, Saturday Night Waltz) and high rhythmic excitement (*Buckaroo Holiday*, *Hoe Down*) to perfection.

Nor do this conductor and his orchestra allow the intensity to slacken in the two orchestral works inspired by Latin dance music. *El Salón México* captures the color and the spirit of the Mexican folk tunes that Copland incorporated into it, making it a stunning showpiece as well as a surprisingly sophisticated work of music. In *Danzón Cubano*, he paid tribute to the Cuban national dance, highly rhythmic but different in character from the Rhumba, Conga and Tango we usually associate with that country. In his own words, he "felt free to add my own touches of displaced accents and unexpected silent beats." As performed by Slatkin and the Detroit SO, you can really feel the presence of said accents and beats.

When I came to *Dance Panels* (195, rev. 1962), I had to get over my pre-conceptions about latter-day Copland. It is easy to subscribe to the notion that, like Stravinsky before him, Copland wrote three famous ballets that built up his audience and then left it behind by becoming progressively more outré and modernistic (including a flirtation with twelve-tone, which is always the kiss of death). Actually, there is a lot in *Dance Panels* that you can relate to his earlier work.

Without Copland's actually re-heating a single note, we hear stylistic resemblances of the build-up to the Shaker hymn in the finale to *Appalachian Spring* in the Scherzando, of the tender "Corral Nocturne" from *Rodeo* in the Pas de Trois, and the Gun Fight from *Billy the Kid* in the Con Brio with its sensational percussive bursts. Was this more than just unconscious? As Slatkin and the DSO show us in the present performance, this concert work really seems to cry out to be mounted as a ballet. (There have in fact, been several ill-starred attempts, as booklet annotator Charles Greenwell informs us.) Ballet as "pure music" seldom fares well. There's a real story in this neglected work, and someone needs to bring it out. Are there any takers out there?

Notion that