Bach: Partita No.2, Italian Concerto, Chaconne
Simone Leitão, piano (MSR Classics)

Brazilian pianist Simone Leitão shows her artistry in an all-Bach program that confirms what I said about her almost six years ago in my review of her Bach/ Mehmari/ Ginastera/ Rachmaninoff release on MSR. In addition to the flair she displayed in the earlier program, she shows a stunning sense of rhythm and a sensitivity to small increments of time that pay big dividends.

Emotion and technical prowess are in perfect accord in the present recital, beginning with the restlessly probing Sinfonia of Partita No. 2 in C minor, BWV 826. As elsewhere in this program, there are moments, in the Allemande and the Courante particularly, in which Bach's tricky fingerings, perhaps more difficult to realize on a modern piano than on Bach's harpsichord, can prove hazardous to a less wary performer than Leitão. The deeply moving Sarabande reveals what she means when she says, "My relationship with Bach's music is a very personal one." The way she takes *attacca* the stunning transition between the last two movements, Rondeaux and Capriccio, shows she isn't afraid of risks in the interest of bringing out the fire in this music.

She reveals the same risk-taking in a different way in the Italian Concerto in F, BWV 971 as she sets off the Lento, the dark pearl in the center of the work, by taking a calculated pause after the opening Allegro and an even longer one following the Lento itself, allowing time for one of Bach's great movemets to imprint itself in our memories before she plunges enthusiastically into the concluding Presto. In the Chaconne from Violin Partita No. 2, which she performs here in the Busoni transcription, the demon pacing and compelling rhythms she maintains throughout the 14-minute piece are interspersed with such moments of calm and reflection as the one that occurs in conjunction with a heart-stopping key change at about 7:30.

As she does throughout the recital, Leitão has no timidity in taking an attitude about the music (a trait of which Bach would doubtless have approved). She carries this over into the three selections from The Well-

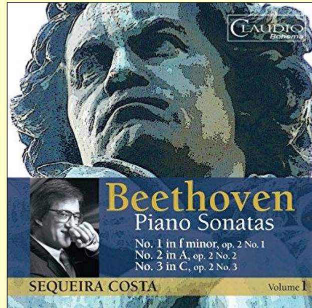
Dvořák: "American" Quartet , Op. 96 + String Quintet, Op. 97- Škampa String Quartet (Champs Hill)

Helena Jiřikovská and and Adela Štajnochrová, vioins; Radim Sedmidubsky, viola; and Lukáš Polák, cello, comprise the Škampa String Quartet. They have travelled far from their home in the Czech Republic, and spend a lot of time in London, where they are frequently heard at Wigmore Hall, St. John's Smith Square, LSO St. Luke's, and the Chamber Music Proms. That they are such welcome visitors is a reflection of their beautiful blend and mutual sympathy, as well as keen individual musicianship. They are ideally equipped to express the warmth and emotion of the two major works by Antonin Dvořák that we hear on this program.

I am indebted to booklet annotator Philip Borg-Wheeler for the observations that "Like Tchaikovsky, Dvořák possessed both a generous melodic gift and a facility for presenting his material in a captivating setting" and "His feeling for instrumental texture is often as striking as the melodic content itself." I'd often wondered why Dvořák's music affected me as deeply as it does, moving me to tears in the slow movements of his String Quartet in F, Op. 96 and his String Quintet in E-flat, Op. 97, both known by the sobriquet "The American." Certainly there were lots of prolific tunesmiths in the romantic era whose music is forgotten surprisingly quickly. The key is in Dvořák's settings, as a skilled jeweler knows how to set off the beauty of a diamond or string of pearls, and the Škampa Quartet show us how supreme that quality was in this composer.

Both works were contempory with the "New World Symphony," No. 9, Op. 95. Along with that enduring favorite, they were Dvořák's well-publicized calling card when he returned to his home in the Old World from his three-year's sojourn in the New. For the sensation value, he always liked to tout the influence of American music, from Indian drum beats to Negro spirituals. "However," the Škampas maintain in their Foreword to the booklet, "for us there is hardly a more Slavic-sounding piece of music than his 'American' Quartet." The key to this dilemma is probably an accidental, even unconscious, resemblance due to the similarity of authentic folk music

Tempered Clavier, concluding with a personal account of the Prelude and Fugue in D minor, BWV 875 that shows how today's young keyboard artists are disposed to take WTC as "real" music, not just academic theory.



Beethoven: Piano Sonatas, Op. 2, Nos 1-3
Sequeira Costa, piano (Claudio)

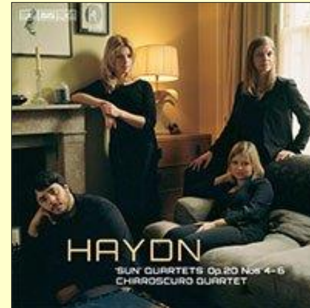
In this volume of his complete Beethoven sonatas, the great Portuguese pianist Sequeira Costa presents beautifully nuanced accounts of the first three Sonatas that were published in 1795 as the composer's Opus 2. Don't let the early opus number mislead you: these are not fledgling efforts, but rather fully realized sonatas in which all the elements we recognize and love in Beethoven – his drama, virtuosity, rhythmic impetuosity, tender feeling, and humor – are found in various degrees. In addition, all these sonatas are so well individualized that they could be presented separately or all together as an evening's entertainment.

Costa has his finger on the pulse and the specific gravity of every moment in each of the sonatas. No. 1 in F minor is the most concise and classically formed of the three, but the ardor of its Adagio movement and the changes Beethoven introduces upon each repetition of the theme in the Minuet would have indicated to the careful listener that something new had been added.

In No. 2 in A major, the most popular of the three, the extended opening movement, the moving character of the theme in the slow movement, *Largo appassionato*, and the steady beats in the left-hand accompaniment, all make a decided impression. The general feeling we are left with by this sonata is one of lightness and ease, as befits its home key. As opposed to the Minuet in the F minor sonata, which could actually be danceable (with slight modifications), the quick inner movement here is a real Scherzo, providing refreshment by its variety of incidents, and the finale is a true Rondo, marked *Grazioso*, and here taken very playfully.

Costa gives the *Allegro con brio* of No. 3 in C major all the brilliance and virtuosity it deserves. This opening movement, longest by far of the three sonatas, gives the impression, with its octaves, chordal passages and

in many parts of the world. The melodies in both works are strikingly beautiful, even by this composer's standard, and his accompaniments are masterfully varied, from the undulating rhythms underlying the nostalgic themes throughout the Lento of the Quartet to the stirring tremolando underscoring the fourth variation in the Larghetto of the Quintet[i]. In both works, the melodies are there in abundance, but, as we said earlier, don't neglect the importance of the settings!



Haydn:"Sun" Quartets, Op. 20, Nos. 4-6
Chiaroscuro String Quartet (Bis Records)

The Chiaroscuro String Quartet is a truly international ensemble consisting of violinists Alina Ibragimova (Russia) and Pablo Hernán Benedi (Spain), violist Emilie Hörnlund (Sweden), and cellist Claire Thirion (France). They return here on the Swedish label Bis to complete the set of Haydn's Opus 20 Quartets that I first reviewed last fall (See *Classical Reviews* for October, 2016), and is *it* a winner! Their nuanced approach brings out all the harmonic beauty and the strange, even quirky, elements one encounters in these quartets.

Franz Josef Haydn was not the first composer to write string quartets, and he had previously published several earlier sets as Opp. 2, 9 and 17. But Opus 20, known as the "Sun" Quartets, was the path breaker. It established the quartet as henceforth a genre of serious nature and broad dimensions and freed it from the domination of the first violin. One of the things you will notice about the works on this program, beginning with Quartet No. 4 in D major, is how often a new theme is introduced, or a new direction started, by the second quartet or even the cello. That must have opened the eyes and ears of Haydn's earliest audiences, but it was only the beginning.

One result of freeing the quartet from the tyranny of its first violin was that it necessitated the close mutual sympathy and independence of all four instruments. That greatly enriched the variety of harmonies and textures that could be produced. But there's another side to the picture: as booklet annotator Tom Service observes, Haydn "simultaneously consecrates the medium of the string quartet and subverts, undermines, and pushes in new directions the genres he employs in each movement." For instance, none of the minuets in Quartets 4-6 are conceivably danceable, but the one in the D minor quartet, marked *alla Zingarese* (in the gypsy style) has a manic quality in its frenetic off-beats that must have raised eyebrows. And the finales of Nos. 5 in

scales, of an actual concerto in all-but-the-orchestra, right down to its coda, ending in a sensational trill. Beethoven could not have pointed the way to the future more clearly than he does in this sonata, with the tender *lied*-like character of its slow movement and the virtuosity of its scherzo and finale. Costa takes all these signposts with the confident mastery of long experience.

F minor and 6 in A major are fugues in which the performers are asked to play *soto voce* until a forte exclamation at the very end.

The D minor Quartet, perhaps the most ambiguous of the three, is marked *Allegro di molto*, but that's not at all how it feels: subdued and slow, instead of skittish and fast. Has the movement even begun? After 30 seconds or so, the music picks up in the Allegro proper and we realize that the slow, murky music we've heard was really an introduction and not the theme. Thereafter, the music takes on the character of a conflict between the downward pull of said murk and an upward striving toward the sunlight, ending in A major. Things get stranger still along the way, including a pianissimo based on the darker harmonies available in a flattened seventh, an interval that would seldom be encountered again in classical music until the influence of jazz in the 20th century. Finally, all three quartets have affecting slow movements. The Poco Adagio of No. 4, a melancholy theme and variations marked *affettuoso*, is my personal favorite, but the gentle Siciliano in 6/8 in No. 5 in which the first violin plays a floating descant over a continually changing theme that serves to mitigate the dark climate of the work as a whole, comes a close second.

Mussorgsky/Ravel: Pictures at an Exhibition
Rachmaninov: Symphonic Dances – Predrag Gosta, London Symphony Orchestra (Edition Lilac)

From the Atlanta-based label Edition Lilac comes a real treat for the classical enthusiast: a pairing of two great symphonic blockbusters – Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition and Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances. Predrag Gosta, founder of New Trinity Baroque, shows us he is equally adept in his other capacity as guest conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra, which he directs in the present release. (Unusual to find someone at home in both genres.) The sound in these recordings, made in Abbey Road Studios, London with Michael Fine as producer and Wolf-Dieter Karwatky as recording engineer, is both stunnning and beautifully detailed, serving the needs of two richly scored masterworks in which deft point-scoring is a must.

At 34:46, Gosta's account of the Mussorgsky/Ravel Pictures is a trifle longer than most, but it is a product of his careful pacing of this score. There are no longeurs here. Gosta knows that a melancholy mood-piece such as The Old Castle, which plays like a lament for a time that has vanished forever, needs adequate breathing space to weave its spell upon us. His Bydlo (The Oxen) begins more quietly than many other interpretations, reflecting the fact that Mussorsky's comment on the blearing toil of life unfolds as a crescendo / decrescendo sprawled over a large canvas. The arguably superficial tableaux Tuileries and Limoges:The Marketplace (both of which famous conductors have omitted in the past) have their function: the former as a pause for reflection on the beauties of nature and man's creations, the latter as a comment on the mindlessness of frenzied activity (perhaps a rumor spreading like wild fire in the market?)

Gosta is right on the money in his superb *attacca* transitions in the two instances when they occur: first from the bustle of Limoges to the very sombre, sobering mood of Catacombs, as we are reminded of the one thing we know for sure about our earthly life. The next tableau, *Con Mortuis in Lingua Mortua*, "with the dead in a dead language," follows so softly and inobtrusively that we are at first unaware that the bass line under the chant is actually taken from the Promenade theme we have heard throughout the work! The second stunning *attacca* is the transition from Baba Yaga to the final tableau, The Great Gate of Kiev, which gives this work its overwhelming conclusion.

Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances was actually his Fourth Symphony in all but name. The composer was understandably "once bitten, twice shy" after his Third Symphony (1936) had been damned with faint praise by the critics, and probably wanted to deflect criticism of this remarkably fresh, engaging work that did not follow all the

"Mother, may I?" rules of classical form by giving it a title from which less would be expected.

It is a really gorgeous work, with an irresistible sweep all its own. It is cast in three movements: a *Non Allegro* that begins slowly and almost inaudibly and builds gradually in rhythmic power and expressiveness, an *Andante con moto* with the gloomy, spectral, atmosphere of a waltz danced slowly in the dark in a deserted ballroom, and a rousing finale, contrasting *Lento assai* and *Allegro vivace* sections. Changes in tempo place a premium on the careful attention to timing and pacing that Gosta gives them in this performance.

Precise cueing is also a must. Rachmaninov, who had spent much more time around orchestras as an in-demand soloist and conductor than is the case with most composers, knew the capabilities of every instrument in every family of the orchestra. Much has been written about his inclusion of the saxophone, which sings such a beautifully soulful melody in the opening movement. But the entire score is dotted with enchanting passages for many other instruments, including other reeds, flutes, brass, percussion, cellos and basses, making this a work that symphonic musicians ought to love to death.

Appearances of the "*Dies irae*" motto that obsessed Rachmaninov in both the slow *Lento assai* section of the finale and the *Allegro vivace,* as it builds in momentum and majesty towards its climax, make a decided impact. The work hurls toward crushing orchestral chords, with a stunning gong stroke and a soft sizzle from the percussion at the very end. It has always amazed me how slow Symphonic Dances has been in finding its rightful place in the orchestral repertoire, despite an auspicious 1941 debut by Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. More performances with the fire and conviction Gosta and the London Symphony give us here can only help.

Beethoven: Piano Sonatas, Opp. 78, 101, 111, Hungarian Rondo – Ingrid Marsoner, piano (Gramola)

What a fresh, zestful approach to Beethoven we are given in this new Gramola release by Austrian pianist Ingrid Marsoner. From the beguiling look she gives us, peering out from the booklet cover, we infer that there is delicious, high-grade mischief to be had in this recital. And we are not disappointed!

Actually, the "mischief" comment refers most accurately to Hungarian Rondo (*Rondo alla Ingharese, quasi un capriccio*), Op. 129, commonly known as Rage over a Lost Penny. In six and a half minutes' playing time, Beethoven places extreme demands on finger and wrist flexibility and the ability to maintain an incredibly fast pace throughout without obscuring its delicious humor. There's not much musical substance here, not even a real theme. But as a warm-up piece

Chopin + Franck: Cello Sonatas Benedikt Kloeckner, cello, and Anna Fedorova, piano (Piano Classics)

Two outstanding young European artists, cellist Benedikt Kloeckner and pianist Anna Fedorova, combine their astounding musical talents in distinguished performances of the cello sonatas of Frédéric Chopin and César Franck that emphasize the vivacious rhythms and rich variety of color in both works.

The first thing we notice about Chopin's Sonata in G minor, Op. 65 is its beautifully balanced theme that glides up and back gracefully, based on a semitone (half-step up and back down again), and a melody that offers endless possibilities. And *that*, mind you, is just the opening Allegro, one of four movements. All through the sonata, Chopin uses a masterful counterpoint to help create the sense of a continually unfolding work. The piano part often gives the impression of the chiming of little

Prokofiev: Violin Concertos 1 & 2 Matthew Trusler, violin; Grant Llewellyn, BBC Natl Orch Wales (Orchid Classics)

Matthew Trusler, who made his BBC Proms debut as recently as 2014, has already done a lot for one who appears from his photos to be still a young man. He has concertized widely in the UK and abroad, formed the Trio *Apaches* with pianist Ashley Wass and cellist Thomas Carroll, and (*oh, yes*) founded the Orchid Classics label on which the present recording appears.

At the outset, I seriously misread the violinist's name in the small type as "Tussler," possibly because so many artists have found plenty to wrestle with in the two Violin Concertos of Sergei Prokofiev. Concerto No.1 (1916-1917), for instance, reveals the audaciousness of its young composer and the period of turmoil in Russia in which it was written. Savagery and beauty, and even a

without equal, it benefits from the style and flair Marsoner invests in it. The title? I dunno, it sounds to me like some German expression for much ado about nothing!

We are on more familiar, if not exactly predictible, Beethoven ground in Sonata No. 28 in A major, Op. 101, a work that looks ahead to the "Hammerklavier." This beautiful work covers a lot of expressive territory in just 20 minutes. We are struck by the innocence and the simplicity of its opening theme, and also by the very fluid nature of its writing, its freedom of imagination and mastery of form, texture, and tonality. Beethoven termed it "a series of impressions and reveries," but, as Ingrid's account brings out, it has more structural coherence than we might believe from this rather ingenuous remark.

The movements are marked "rather lively and with innermost feeling," "lively, march-like," "slow and longingly," and "Swiftly, but not overly so, and with resolution." The German word *entschlossenheit* implies the strong sense of finality, as well as resolution, that this pianist gives it. Marsoner does a beautiful job characterizing all four of the movements, and she takes the *attacca* transition to a *very* playful finale with consummate skill.

No. 24 in F#, Op. 78, subtitled "*á Thérèse*," was dedicated to one of Beethoven's students and has for that reason acquired a misleading reputation as an "easy" sonata. It is in two movements, marked *Adagio cantabile - Allegro ma non troppo* and *Allegro vivace*, and it requires the pianist to adjust to frequent subtle changes in texture and mood. In terms of character, No. 24 is far from easy. Happily, the ability to characterize a piece is one of Ingrid Marsoner's strengths, making her account of "*á Thérèse*," much more memorable than most.

She concludes with No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111. An ominous note is struck At the very outset, followed thereafter by music of the greatest urgency. Relaxation is found in the long Arietta movement, an incredible bells or else the erudite voice of an inspired conversationalist.

Chopin was particularly fond of this sonata. It reflects his own prowess as one of the great masters of the piano, but does not slight the contribution of the cello with its rich color and its ability to sing a florid cantabile. He asked cellist Auguste Franchomme, who was present at his deathbed, to play from it before he died. It was the last piece of his own music he ever heard.

The sense of propulsiveness in the Sonata is also present in the Polonaise Brillante, Op. 3, a single-movement work with vibrant red corpuscles that transcends our usual notion of "salon music." As we hear in the present performance (at about 3:14), the moment when the music picks up from the quietly measured introduction to the Polonaise proper is absolutely stunning!

César Franck's Sonata in A major is better known in the version for violin and piano (and is in fact one of the greatest works in the repertoire). There is, however, some question as to whether or not it was intended for violin or for cello, or either. The cello version heard here sounds so idiomatic, one might never guess which version came first.

The A major Sonata is is a prime example of Franck's preoccupation with cyclic form: the reappearance of a theme from one movement to another, often altered in character. That requires the close partnership between performers that Kloeckner and Fedorova show us here. That Franck's own favorite instrument was the organ is reflected in the exceptionally rich contapuntal and harmonic elements in the music. From the gently rocking and warmly reflective opening Allegretto to the freely expressive, dramatic and improvisatory character of the Allegro that follows it, Franck has the cello and piano alternating in continual dialogue. The opening movement's second subject is heard again, very effectively, in a canon between the two instruments in the finale. The music alternates between quiet intensity and soaring majesty totally unexpected playfulness, co-exist somewhat uneasily in a work that explores the full range of violin techniques. They include such innovative effects as sudden shifts from pizzicati to arco, long-limbed shapely melodies juxtaposed with dizzy scalar passages, and even a bit of *sul ponicello* bowing below the bridge crossing of the instrument.

In this account of Concerto No. 1 the rhythms are ever alert. The sudden turns of phrase and changes in mood and texture have their desired impact, particularly in the perky scherzo, marked Vivacissimo, and the finale with its zestful pick-up in momentum between the Moderato and Allegro Moderato sections.

Concerto No. 2 (1935) is somewhat better-behaved than its predecessor, though the differences are not as great as we might expect given the 18-year gap between them. The tempi are frequently exhilarating. The lyricism, reflecting the fact that Prokofiev composed it almost contemporaneously with his Romeo and Juliet ballet, is rich and full, particularly in the Andante assai. Trusler takes the surprisingly innocent and achingly beautiful melody in this movement with all the eloquence it deserves. At the very end of this slow movement, violinist and orchestra exchange roles, the latter taking over the melody while the violinist plays a warm pizzicato accompaniment as the music fades into silence – a truly great moment.

mixture of aria, blissful chorale, counterpoint and fugue that is one of Beethoven's most remarkable creations. Syncopations, beginning around the 4:30 point and subsiding at about 8:15, include vigorous figures in the bass that a later age might have described as "boogie-woogie." This section is followed by tremolos, sensational trills and considerable use of counterpoint and fugue – all for very expressive reasons that Marsoner never fails to observe. Finally, she gives the Arietta room to breathe, allowing its expressive magic the space to work on us. With all its directness and absolute clarity, it seems to offer consolation to the listener, in a performance appealing persuasively to the inner man or woman.

in this finale which requires the distinguished interplay between the two partners that Kloeckner and Fedorova give it. There is even an extended passage in which the cello's melody line is submerged below that of the piano, smoldering for a time while the piano takes center stage, only to rise triumphant at the end.

[i] The Škampa Quartet are joined by the distinguished violist Krzystof Chorzelski in the Quintet.