

Phil's Classical Reviews

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"Bright New Faces"

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Brahms: Piano Concertos 1-2
Adam Laloum, piano
(Sony)

Adam Laloum isn't kidding when he says "Brahms is never comfortable." The young French pianist knows whereof he speaks when Brahms is the subject. He means to imply that you can never let yourself become too complaisant, particularly when playing the piano concertos heard on the present program. Your tone has to be absolutely secure because the phrasing can change from legato to staccato without warning. And you must be able to handle Brahms' high-energy rhythms without losing sight of the abundant lyricism that pervades both these works.

You can, of course, opt for a safer, less confrontational approach to this music. But there is a danger: "you must be careful not to lose the heart beating and end up making only comfortable music." We should remember that these are truly "symphonic" concertos, longer and more massively scored than any of the actual symphonies that were then being written by Brahms' contemporaries.

Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15, was, in fact, originally intended as a symphony before it was reconfigured as a piano concerto. The orchestral writing is still quite demanding, especially the parts for horn and tympani. Laloum prizes this concerto because it is largely a direct homage to Robert Schumann (another of the

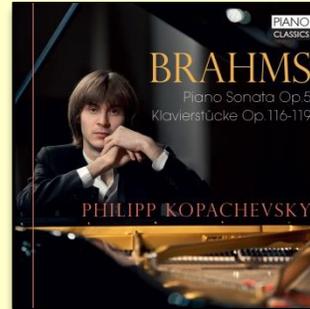


Arias - Anita Rachvelishvili, soprano;
Giacomo Sagripanti, Orchestra
Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI (Sony)

This is the debut album of mezzo-soprano Anita Rachvelishvili, and is it a wow! This young singer first attracted international attention in 2009 when she sang the role of Carmen opposite Jonas Kaufman's Don José at La Scala in Milan under the baton of Daniel Barenboim, who was very much a booster of the young singer at the start of her career. Since then, she has sung Carmen some 300 times, and she is much in demand everywhere for the great mezzo roles, which probably accounts for the fact that her debut album has been ten years in coming.

The Tbilisi, Georgia native grew up in a musical family. Her mother was a ballerina, her father a bass player in a rock band. From her earliest years she was "singing all the time – but jazz, soul, and blues." Not opera, which she discovered at 17 when her singing teacher sent her to see and hear an opera for the first time, and she was hooked. [In that way, she parallels American *bel canto* tenor Lawrence Brownlee, who grew up singing gospel in Youngstown, Ohio and didn't discover opera until his college years. In both instances, those weren't bad early experiences for a future opera star!]

And Anita Rachvelishvili is a star, in every sense of the word. Her voice ranges from soft velvet to the heights of inflamed passion in some of the



Brahms: Piano Sonata No. 3;
Klavierstücke, Op. 116-119 – Philipp
Kopachevsky (Piano Classics 2-CD)

Russian pianist Philipp Kopachevsky (b. Moscow 1990) has acquired a tremendous reputation in recent years, not just in his native country but in the UK, Germany, the USA, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, Greece, Spain, and Japan. His mastery of the lyrical and spiritual elements and the vivid emotion in the music he plays speaks for itself. More than a mere technician, he has the instinct of a born interpreter, which is required in the Brahms he performs here. In addition, he brings out a singing quality that is essential in these specimens of exalted piano music from the extreme ends of the composer's career.

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 is the richest of Johannes Brahms' three sonatas. All were composed in 1852-1854, just as the young lion (b.1833) was set to emerge, in the words of Robert Schumann, as one who "will throw the musical world into a state of agitation." All three deserve more exposure than they usually receive in our concert halls today. Schumann perceptively saw them as "symphonies in disguise." In retrospect they seem to have more in common with Brahms' future symphonies, what with his use of cyclic form and what Schoenberg was to term his principle of "developmental variation" than they do the miniature masterworks, Opus

pianist's favorites), particularly in the beautiful descending melody of the slow movement, which he describes as very similar to the "Clara" theme that Schumann used to represent his beloved wife in so many of his piano pieces. Brahms' personality is never the less clearly discernible in this concerto. Says Laloum, "we can feel that this music is his alone."

While the outer movements are decidedly on the heroic scale, the slow movement, an incredibly tender Adagio, allows the pianist the opportunity to score quiet, delicate, but decisively stated points. Laloum does this as well as I have ever heard on record. Both he and the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Berlin under the baton of Kazuki Yamada distinguish themselves in the Rondo finale, where the piano part is fully integrated with the orchestra. (This is no movement for the faint of heart!)

Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 83, was a much later work that Brahms premiered in 1881, after he had already completed his first two symphonies. For my money, it is more emotionally circumspect and introspective than the first concerto, reflecting the personality of its composer at this stage in his life. On the other hand, Laloum describes it as a work that has a special light of its own from within. "The music is more grandioso, with majestic themes spun out at length." The harmony is also exceptionally rich. He finds the opening movement in particular "very dark," but with "many different colours and feelings."

Like a symphony, this concerto has four movements. The wild card is a scherzo, titled *Allegro appassionato*, played here with such fire and resolution that listeners who haven't bothered to look at the booklet notes might well mistake this movement for the finale. The slow movement, *Andante – Piu Adagio*, is warmer and more generous. It is an altogether remarkable movement in which an incredibly beautiful melody which Brahms later used for his song "*Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*" (Ever softer were my slumbers) is first stated by a solo cello. Then we have the color slowly deepened by

most emotional roles in the operatic repertoire. It is no surprise that *Carmen* should be a feature of Anita's debut album. We hear both the Seguedilla "By the ramparts of Seville" where Carmen expresses her delight in preening for her admirers, and the sensual Habanera, "L'amour est un oiseau rebel" (Love is a rebellious bird that no one can tame) with the heroine's ecstatic cries of "L'amour! L'amour! L'amour! L'amour!" played against the stern warning by the chrous "Prends garde à toi!" (Beware). The seamless fabric of her voice and the darkness of her lower register fit the role perfectly.

She is also admirably suited to the title role in Camille Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* where she invests Dalila's two great arias "Printemps, qui commence" (Spring, that returns, bringing hope to loving hearts) and "Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix" (My heart unfolds at thy sweet voice) with all the loveliness and feeling one could possibly desire. Her rendering of another Saint-Saëns aria, "Où suis-je O ma lyre immortelle" (Where am I? O, my immortal lyre) makes us long to hear his neglected opera, *Sapho*.

Other selections include Charlotte's Letter Aria from Massenet's *Werther*, Lyubasha's Song from Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tsar's Bride*, and Santuzza's "Voi, lo sapete" from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

Rachvelishvili gives some of her best performances in the three selections from Verdi. In her interpretation of the conflicted character of Princess Eboli in *Don Carlo*, she aims at striking a fine balance between the discrete wandering of desire in the Veil Song, "Nel giardino del bello" (In the garden of the Moorish palace) and the more dramatic "O don fatale" (O fatal gift of beauty).

The role of the gypsy woman Azucena in *Il Trovatore* is even more difficult to portray effectively. In her aria "Condotta ell'era in ceppi" (They dragged her in bonds to her terrible fate) we have a woman driven to the brink of insanity by her lust for blood vengeance against the Count for having her daughter burned as a

116-119, he wrote at the end of his career. Sonata No. 3 is a perfect example of Brahms' preoccupation with small motifs and four-note models, similar to what we find in folk songs, as he builds large, roomy habitations out of small kernels. The fourth movement, *Intermezzo*, is subtitled "*Rückblick*" (Remembrance) as it recalls the mood of the second, *Andante espressivo*, which Brahms prefaces with a quote from a poem by Sternau: "Dusk falls and the moon shines down / Two hearts are united in love." It is now veiled by a heightened emotion and a very deliberately paced accompaniment in the left hand that has the character of a slow march. Kopachevsky deftly captures the subtle mood and harmonic richness in this moment where a sense of melancholy leads into a love duet.

We are in a different world in the 20 piano pieces that make up Opus numbers 116-119, in which, to quote a famous observation by Clara Schumann, the composer "combines passion and tenderness in the smallest of spaces." These are character pieces in which, by their very nature, the composer must cut to the chase and express a whole musical experience in the space of only 3-5 minutes, which is what most of these pieces run. The 20 pieces begin and end ebulliently, with a *Capriccio* marked *Presto energico* at the head of Op. 116 and a *Rhapsody* marked *Allegro risoluto* the very last piece of Op. 119. Underlying the emotion in these pieces, Brahms' accompaniments can be calm, introspective, and gently rocking, or pulsating, brusque and impassioned, as the piece requires.

For brevity, I'll focus on the three *Intermezzi* of Opus 117. All are intensely lyrical and personal. They begin with No. 1 in E-flat, a gently rocking piece with a folk quality and an intimacy that have earned it the name "Scotch Lullaby." While this *Intermezzo* with its gently lilting melody within an octave span is the best-loved of the three, No. 2 in B-flat minor, with its spiraling filigrees of arpeggio figurations, creates its own world of eerie twilight glints and half-lights. And the third in C-sharp

the lower strings and brightened by the distinctive coloration of a reed, all before the piano makes its well-prepared entrance. This is one of the great moments in the literature for piano and orchestra, and Laloum and his collaborators make the most of it. Tenderness is even mingled with a little humor in this movement.

The unusual marking of the finale, *Allegretto grazioso*, reflects the diversity of elements in the work as a whole, in which the pianist is often called upon to match the power of the orchestra, and at other times to cultivate a more lyrical mood. Laloum describes this other mood as if one were playing chamber music together with the various solo instruments of the orchestra. These moments he finds very congenial.

witch. Her revenge takes the form of kidnapping the Count's young son with the intent of throwing him into a bonfire. In the frenzy of the moment, she mistakenly casts her own son into the fire instead. This is easily one of the most emotionally extreme arias in the whole repertoire. "People imagine the crazy Azucena screaming, going around doing crazy stuff, ... but she's not like that," Anita opines. "She's a very troubled, very fragile woman." How well she succeeds in her attempt to humanize the role, you may hear for yourself in her marvelously controlled aria in which passion, ferocity, horror, and sadness are mingled.

minor is perhaps the darkest and most personal of all.

With their immense variety of moods and textures, these three pieces require a lot more than just technical skill. They cry out for the unerring touch of the true interpreter. Kopachevsky, one of the lights of his generation, gives them all of that, and more.



"Portraits," Works for flute, clarinet, piano
McGill / McHale Trio (Cedille)

Demarre and Anthony McGill, flutist and clarinetist respectively, met Belfast native Michael McHale when the brothers were artists in residence at Bowling Green University. In September, 2014 they decided they had enough in common in terms of personality, artistic temperament and musical interests to form a successful trio ("successful" in this case being spelled d-y-n-a-m-i-t-e). How fortuitous that decision was, you may gather from the present release in luminous sonics produced by James Ginsburg and engineered by Bill Maylone, long the mainstays of Cedille Records.

This is truly music for trio, in which ideas are shared and developed by all three participants, and not just a matter of woodwinds accompanied by the piano. The luminous colors and the sinuous manner in which the various skiens are interwoven in ways that reflect the elements of impressionism and jazz speak for themselves.

First, we have *A Fish Will Rise* by American composer Chris Rogerson (b.1988) with a fluid ostinato by the piano drawing us into a watery world of shimmering light, enhanced by the gliding momentum and cool energy of clarinet and flute. Sounds of the natural world are conjured up in ways that intimate Rogerson's preoccupation with spirituality in music.

After this auspicious beginning, we plunge into *Portraits of Langston* by the multi-talented composer and performing artist Valerie Coleman (b.1970). Her evocations of six poems are tributes to the well-loved American poet Langston Hughes: "Helen Keller," "Danse Africaine," "Le Grand Duc Mambo," "In Time of Silver Rain," "Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret," and "Harlem Summer Night." Impressions of jazz, both hot and cool varieties, infuse Hughes' poetry, together with his own pithy expressiveness and his penchant for getting right to the heart of the matter. The "silver rain" may refresh and renew the earth, but, as Hughes was keenly aware, being an African-American coming of age in the 1920's, the world of men seems as rent by impassioned divisiveness as ever. That is reflected in the touches of sad irony in "Le Grand Duc Mambo," depicting a riot in a Paris café. The first-rate talents that went into the present performance include the distinguished voice of Academy Award-winning actor Mahershala Ali reading each of the poems as prefaces to their musical incarnations.

Techno-Parade by French composer Guillaume Connesson (b.1970) captures the driving rhythms and virtuosic riffs of Techno music in unsettling 7/4 time, alternating with passages lacking the comfort of any recognizable downbeat. Fierce, wailing, and disquieting, it moves with continuous pulsations from start to finish. At a timing of 4:23, it couldn't have lasted much longer.

The well-loved Vocalise by Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943), arranged here by Michael McHale, provides the strongest possible contrast with the previous track by its slow, highly expressive unfolding of a wordless song. As with the original vocal exercise, the trio arrangement requires exquisite tone shadings and melodic phrasings, as well as fantastic breath control. The winds soar together gloriously at the climax of the present account.

Sonatina for Flute, Clarinet and Piano by Paul Schoenfeld (b.1947) takes us back in time to the syncopated rhythms and lively dance tempos of an earlier era (Charleston, Hunter Rag), and concludes with a spirited Jig. All are realized with wickedly deconstructed dance patterns and abrupt shifts in register that keep our expectations tantalizingly off-balance. Next we have The Lamentation of Owen O'Neil, a rumination by Philip Hammond (b.1951) on a work with deliciously shifting time signatures by the legendary Irish harpist and bard Turlough O'Carolan. Finally, The Lark in the Clear Air, a traditional song with rising feeling celebrating springtime and the renewal of love, in a fine arrangement by Michael McHale, concludes the program in splendid fashion.



"Warsaw on Warsaw": Preludes for Solo Piano Benjamin Warsaw, pianist and composer

American pianist Benjamin Warsaw studied piano with Rebecca Penneys at the Eastman School of Music. Doctor Warsaw currently lives in Savannah, where he is on the faculty of Georgia Southern University's Armstrong Campus. He manages simultaneous careers as pianist, teacher, and composer. Preludes for Solo Piano is his first recorded composition, and is it an ear-opener!

Ben's contribution to a genre visited by Chopin, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, and Debussy (to say nothing of Schumann's Carnival), all of them among his personal favorites, is no shabby entry in a distinguished field. As he himself explains, "Several [of these pieces] are direct quotations, others have elements of form, melody, and harmony used by other composers that I incorporate into the preludes." His homage to his predecessors is never servile. On the contrary, elements in their styles can serve as springboards to his own imagination as he explores a myriad of tonalities, textures, moods, and characterizations. His own far-ranging technique as pianist serves as the best guide to his music.

I've only space enough for a few descriptions. The middle section of Prelude No. 2 in A minor was inspired by Chopin's prelude in the same key, with a bit of Stravinsky thrown in. Dark, open chords hint of tragedy. No. 3 in G major is said to have been "probably inspired by Debussy on some level," though the rhythmic motion and the sounds evoking the pealing of little bells make Rachmaninoff a more likely allusion. No. 4 in E minor is said to have been influenced by the way Brahms goes



"Serenata Española"
Javier de Maistre, harp
(Sony Classical)

Spanish harp virtuoso Xavier de Maistre recounts that he had long envisioned a program such as this, devoted to the exceptionally rich and varied music of his native country. This was the folk heritage that composers of the literary and artistic movement known as the Generation of 1898 began to explore assiduously as a positive response to the national disgrace their country had experienced in the Spanish-American War. Composers such as Isaac Albéniz, Enrique Granados, Manuel de Falla, Francisco Tárrega, Jesus Guridi, Gerónimo Giménez, Joaquin Malats and Eduardo López-Chávarri, all represented in this album, tapped into a musical tradition representing the many cultures and turbulent history of their country, with happy results.

The final stimulus for this recording project arose from de Maistre's chance meeting in 2014 with the legendary flamenco dancer Lucero Tena, some years removed from the height of her career as a dancer but still very active as a castanet player and a cultural ambassador of her country. She is heard in seven of the tracks, where the incisive commentary of her playing adds perceptively to the character of the pieces de Maistre plays on a richly resonant harp provided by Salvi / Lyon & Healy, France.

One of the nice things about this particular repertoire is that it is so varied and extensive that you are not likely to get much "bleed-through" from one album to another. There are, of course, some ever-popular favorites to be heard from here, such as Granados' mysterious and rhythmically charged *Anadaluza* from Danzas españolas and Falla's lively Spanish Dance No. 1 from the two-act

between E minor and the parallel major in his Op. 119, No. 2, setting the melody in a different harmony, though the mood of Warsaw's terse, scintillating prelude could not be more different than the gently swaying barcarolle at the heart of the Brahms.

No. 7 in A major is a splendid blues progression ("I kept hearing the song *Bad to the Bone* when I was writing it," recounts Ben.) This composer isn't afraid of the numerous sharps in the Preludes in B major and G-sharp minor which share Track 11 on this CD, the latter emerging from the dying embers of the former. Prelude No. 15 in B-flat minor has a savage character, reminiscent of some of the late piano works of Schumann, and also "a melody (in diminution) of a folk song my dad sang to us, *Mooji Moccasin*."

Prelude No. 19 in C minor takes inspiration from Chopin's prelude in the same key and identical ABB form, except that the repetition of the B section is like a tango of Astor Piazzolla. No. 20, Poem in B-flat major, is quirky, rather dissonant, and blues-y. No. 21, a Fantasy in G minor, quotes Chopin's Ballade in the same key, but with a very different harmonization. No. 22 in F major, a Canon, is a bit of whimsy with finger-twisting syncopations. No. 24, Toccata in D minor, was inspired by Prokofiev's Toccata and has similarly gripping motor rhythms.

Warsaw's performances, recorded and produced by Silvije Vidovic at the Phoenix and the Dove for the Mythic Imagination Institute, do the music full justice. For more information, visit the pianist and composer at benjaminwarsaw.com

opera *La Vida Breve*, which breathes the air of the popular form of musical entertainment known as *zarzuela*. And Tárrega's haunting *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* (Memories of the Alhambra), is notable for its sensational employment of a tremolo with a long-sustained tone and a gently nostalgic mood that will recur in your dreams.

The oldest piece by far on the program is a Sonata in D major by Padre Antonio Soler (1729-1783), a gracious, delightful work that feels as much like a dance as it does a purely instrumental composition.

The five Albéniz selections unfold like a colorful and sentimental travelogue of Spain itself: Asturias, Torre Bermeja, Granada, Zaragoza, and Mallorca, the last-named a gently swaying *barcarola*. Malats' *Serenata Española* is suffused with the richness and variety of the old Moorish region of Andalusia. Guridi's *Viejo Zortzico*, in common with most of his music, evokes the Basque region, his beloved homeland. Giménez' passionate *Intermedio* ends the program on a high note.