

Phil's Classical Reviews

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“Anmut: My Favorite Arias” – Marija Vidovic, soprano
Philharmonie Baden-Baden under Francisco Araiza
(Solo Musica)

Marija Vidovic is quite a pleasant discovery if you're encountering her for the first time. The young Croatian soprano is described by Francisco Araiza, who conducts the orchestra in the present recital of her favorite arias, in positively glowing terms. Citing her spontaneity, he lists charm, tenderness, naturalness, winning charisma, and gracefulness as her special qualities. The great Mexican tenor who has taught Vidovic at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart might be suspected of being prejudiced in favor of his prize pupil. But even the most cursory listening to this recital will convince you that such praise is no mere hyperbole. Araiza is right on the money: this young lady has it!

That feeling is definitely present in these choice arias that go right to the heart, communicated by Vidovic with incredible smoothness plus feeling. The 11 selections include two arias by Vincenzo Bellini that effortlessly soar to stratospheric heights, as in Julietta's “*Eccomi, in lieta vesta*” (Behold me, decked out like a victim on the altar) from *The Capulets and the Montagues*. Three Mozart arias feature Susannah's teasing “*Deh vieni, non tardar*” as the centerpiece in a jewel setting that includes Konstanze's “*Ach, ich liebte*” (How I loved him) from *Abduction from the Seraglio* and Pamina's “*Ach, ich fühl's*” (Ah, I feel it) from *The Magic Flute*.

And so it continues, this string of brilliants that allow us to savor such gems as Juliette's Poison Aria “*Dieu! Quel frisson*” from Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet* and Michaela's aria “*C'est des contrebandiers*” from Bizet's *Carmen*. She captures the range of emotion in Violetta's “*E Strano ... Sempre libera*” in which the courtesan realizes, in a key moment when she hears the offstage serenade by Alfredo (undoubtedly the voice of Araiza) that it is madness to think she can escape her destiny. She expands her tessitura, at both extremes, in the haunting “*Song to the Moon*” from Dvorak's *Rusalka*. Surely, *Anmut* (Gracefulness) is a recital not to be missed.



“Rossini!” - Olga Peretyatko, soprano
Orchestra del Teatro Comunale di Bologna under
Alberto Zedda (Sony Classical)

St. Petersburg, Russia native Olga Peretyatko has all the equipment to make herself, among other things, an ideal Rossini soprano. That fits right in with the current rage for Bel Canto and Rossini in particular. As she shows us in “*All'ombra amena*” (In the pleasant shade) from *Il viaggio a Reims*, her voice in its highest register is capable of soaring to the vault of heaven and circling gracefully like a swallow with the apparent effortlessness that is, of course, the product of thousands of hours of vocal training and practice. Not only does she possess a breathtaking coloratura, but she can adapt it with the greatest skill to the particular role she is playing.

The afore-mentioned aria in *Il viaggio a Reims* (The Journey to Reims) happens to be a spoof of grand opera excesses. But Peretyatko, a consummate actress as well as singer, knows how to address the needs of any role in a way that comes across as unpretentious and credible. “*Di mia vita infelice . . . No, che il morir*” (At the close of my unhappy life . . . death for me will not be unkind) from *Tancredi* is as tragic a declaration of the desire to end one's misery as you will find in Rossini. By contrast, “*Bel reggio lusinghier*” (A fair and beguiling ray) from *Semiramide* expresses radiant happiness. Fiorilla's aria, from *Il Turco in Italia*, “*I vostri cenci I mano*” (I return your rags to you) plunges the depths of the heroine's wretchedness at her abandonment by her spouse. And Rosina's “*Una voca poco fa*” (A song at break of day) from *The Barber of Seville* reveals yet another side of this soprano's art as the heroine vows her intention to make Lindoro her own and foil the scheming Dr. Bartolo.

The last-named aria shows us something else about Olga Peretyatko; namely, her wide range that embraces lyric soprano as well as coloratura. Rossini originally conceived Rosina as an alto role, but women's parts in the 19th century were not as exclusively defined as they are today. Peretyatko clearly puts her stamp on this role.



“Lang Lang in Paris,” Chopin Scherzos + Tchaikovsky
The Seasons
(Sony Classical)

It's been a few years since the 17-year old Lang Lang burst upon the international concert scene with the charisma of a rock star in 1999. In the intervening time, the thing that happens to most musicians to some degree or other has taken place in this eternally youthful Chinese artist as well – namely, a surer grasp of the poetry and the purely musical values in the works he plays. And the good news is that it has happened without any decline in his demon technique. That makes him more formidable than ever.

We hear the fusion of technical prowess and sheer musicality most clearly in the Chopin part of the program, where Lang plays the four Scherzi. Ironically, since the Italian word “*scherzo*” signifies a jest or joke, there is much darkness and pain in these works, and Lang really nails down that element in the furious conclusion of Scherzo No. 1, a mood which also infects No. 2 with its startlingly modern harmony and Byronic passion. No. 3 contrasts chorale-like solemnity with a fierce main section in fast running octaves that are no problem for this artist. In spite of its passionate moments, more genial moods prevail in No. 4, and Lang gives us a very satisfying account of these, as well. This is compelling Chopin the like of which we have seldom heard since the heyday of Artur Schnabel.

The Tchaikovsky half of the program may seem to be an odd pairing with the Chopin, as the Russian composer was not known to be a great pianist. In fact, the twelve character pieces that constitute his Seasons, Op. 37a, languished for many years in the hands of amateurs and received scant attention from major concert artists. But, as Lang observes in the booklet notes, “Even though there are not so many notes compared to more virtuosic pieces, the harmony Tchaikovsky creates within these notes is incredible. His timeless melodies have a kind of pain that he always turns into beauty, whether the music is peaceful or energetic.” Though charming associations predominate in these musical evocations of the months (*not* seasons) of the year, there are still enough stirring moments in August (*Harvest*), September (*The Hunt*) and November (*Troika*) to satisfy the itching fingers of the most restless pianist. But the deep beauty and sense of peace that suffuses May (*White Nights*), the innocent loveliness of April (*Snowdrop*), and the deeply flowing



“Nessun Dorma,” The Puccini Album
Jonas Kaufmann, tenor; Antonio Pappano, conductor
(Sony Classical)

Munich, Germany native Jonas Kaufmann has certainly made his mark on the international operatic scene. With his expanded tessitura, he would seem to be an ideal tenor for spinto roles and for Puccini in particular. We hear his over-the-top vocal range in the present all-Puccini album in such arias as “*Recondita armonia*” from *Tosca*, in which the artist Cavaradossi is stunned by the resemblance of his model to a painting of the Madonna (Kaufmann calls this aria “the tenor’s calling card”) and “*Risparmiate lo scherno*” from *La Fanciulla del West* (*The Girl of the Golden West*), in which Dick Johnson, the condemned outlaw, beseeches the assembled onlookers to slack off on his necktie-party for a spell while he sings about his beloved.

The present album, recorded with Antonio Pappano and the Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia – Roma (I love the way these Italian names fill up the column, a veritable boon for the desperate reviewer) has the distinction of featuring tenor arias from *all* of Puccini’s operas. That includes such early efforts as *Le Villi* and *Edgar*, as well as the latter-day triptych *La Rondine*, *il Tabarro*, and *Gianni Schichi*. From *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini’s first major triumph, we have three arias of the *Chevalier des Grieux*, including the exuberant love duet, “*O, saro, la piu bella*,” in which Kaufmann is partnered by the lovely voice of soprano Kristine Opolais. Curiously, we are not given the tenor’s heartrending lament over Manon’s death in the final scene.

We have Kaufmann and Opolais again in even finer form in the duet “*O soave fanciulla*” from *La Bohème*, in which Rodolpho warms Mimi’s cold hands in his as they gaze over the cityscape of Paris in the early morning mist – a moment of supreme tenderness. From *Madama Butterfly*, we are given Pinkerton’s overly-passionate love confession “*Addio, fiorito asil*.” But the actual high points of the program, as Kaufmann observes in his performance notes, are Calaf’s two arias in *Turandot*.

The tenor, again with Opolais as his partner, gives a fine account of “*Non piangere, Liu*,” in which Prince Calaf comforts the sorrowing slave girl Liu, asking her to take care of his father, no matter what is the outcome of his suit to the man-hating empress Turandot. Kaufmann scores even higher marks in “*Nessun dorma*” (No one

compass of June (*Barcarolle*) make their own irresistible claims on our attention.

The 85-minute program is contained in a slimline case on 2 CDs priced as one. It is also available in 180-gram vinyl LP format, for which you will have to put down your first-born child as a deposit.



"Emigrantes, Tango Music from Argentina
Elena Yarritu, flute; Exequiel Mantega, piano
(MSR Classics)

The title work, "*Emigrantes*," was inspired by American flutist Elena Yarritu's discovery, during a family visit to Israel, of the history of members of her own family who had disappeared during World War Two. The thought of the many people of that era, and still today, who have been dislocated from their homeland by oppression and war struck her so deeply that she later approached the popular young Argentine composer Exequiel Mantega with the idea of composing a suite for flute and guitar commemorating their painful experiences and triumphs.

A foremost figure in the vibrant present-day revival of music inspired by the Tango, Mantega immediately set to work. "*Emigrantes*" reflects both the spirit of the Tango and the seemingly endless imagination of its composer. It is in three movements. *El Día Después* (The Day After) captures the sadness of people forced to emigrate from their homes to new, unfamiliar lands. *Litoral* may refer to their arrival on a foreign shore, but the name also resonates in Argentina as that of a region famous for its many spectacular waterfalls and rivers. The mood, with the solo line of the flute in unison with the piano, is one of a calm gathering of resources, in expectation of the third movement, *Celebración!* The music here is energetic and very fast-paced, as the title suggests.

Two other Mantega pieces follow. *Avestruz*, for alto flute and piano, evokes the dreamlike, walking gait of the large flightless bird known as the Rhea. *El Soplete* (The Torch) is a stylish quartet with a conversational tone and pungent rhythms for two flutes, alto flute, and bass flute. Yarritu is joined here by flutist Paulina Fain. As no other collaborators are credited, we may assume these two ladies play all the instruments, thanks to the magic of the recording studio.

Fain, a composer as well as performer, revised Mantega's arrangement of six Tango Etudes for Two

shall sleep tonight), an aria that he admits to keeping his distance from for a number of years in respect for its "magic and incredible magnetism" – to say nothing of its supreme vocal demands. He pulls it off in fine form here, including Calaf's bold resolution at the end: "At dawn I shall win!"



Franck: Violin Sonata + Bloch: Poème Mystique; Krein: Berceuse - Zina Schiff, violin; Cameron Grant, piano
(MSR Classics)

MSR's promotional blurb for this ravishingly beautiful new recital by Zina Schiff and Cameron Grant begins with a quotation from Albert Einstein. It concerns the profound emotion we feel in the presence of the mystical. As related to the music on the present disc, that may be slightly misleading. Certainly, much of the appeal of the sonatas by Cesar Franck and Ernest Bloch derives from the expressive qualities in the music itself. But if you're expecting mist and essences as a substitute for solid musical values, look elsewhere.

Fiery imagination and consummate design inform Franck's great Sonata in A for Violin and Piano (and we *do* mean the "and piano" part, since both instruments take turns introducing melodic material). Rich harmonic language, conceived in a classical tradition and bound together in cyclic form, accounts for much of the success of this ever-popular work. Sensitivity to nuances in tempo and expression and the rhapsodic quality that Schiff and her partner invest in their performances account for the rest. From the gently rocking theme introduced by the violin at the beginning of the opening Allegretto to the soaring rondo-like conclusion of the work, with sounds that recall the exultant tinkling of small bells, this is a performance as charming as it is perfectly proportioned. In between, Schiff and Grant bring out all the drama that lies waiting to be discovered in the Allegro and all the improvisatory qualities inherent in the Recitativo-Fantasia.

Ernest Bloch's Violin Sonata No. 2, subtitled "*Poème Mystique*," is a real treasure, all the more welcome to me for its being totally unfamiliar. A glance at the available listings of this sonata reveals only eight other recordings. By present-day industry standards, that constitutes benign neglect for a work of such immediate appeal and sensual beauty. (The oldest of these, significantly, was recorded by Schiff's mentor, Jascha Heifetz, and his recital partner Brooks Smith in 1955.) Commentators

Flutes by Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla. As the Spanish expressive titles suggest, the music ranges from decisive to meditative, and is characterized by much energy and use of rubato. Piazzolla's *Concierto para Quinteto* is heard in Mantega's arrangement for flute and piano in which the partners manage to incorporate lines originally intended for instruments as diverse as the bandoneon, double bass, guitar, and clarinet. How they do *that* is a miracle of their incredible artistry. Mantega's piano assays slaps and beats evocative of a percussive instrument. Yarritu shows us the versatility of the flute, an instrument usually associated with seamless legato melodies. But, as she demonstrates most persuasively, it can also encompass highly rhythmical passages infused with the vibrant spirit of the Tango.

usually cite this sonata as one of Bloch's "Jewish" works, an impression the composer himself encouraged by including the Latin texts for "I believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty" and "Glory to God in the Highest," sentiments as meaningful to Jews as to Christians, alongside the musical notation.

But the basic impression I got from the Debussy-like impressionism of the music itself, infused with sunlight and fresh air, was that of Bloch as a well-known lover of nature. It seemed reminiscent of the wonderful natural beauty of Agate Beach, Oregon, where Bloch spent the final years of his life. (Were it not for the fact that he wrote this work in Cleveland in the 20's, I might have sworn there was a direct connection!) But there need be no contradiction in the inspiration behind the music, as both Judaism and Christianity have long-standing traditions regarding the evidence of God in nature.

The final work on the program, *Berceuse* (Lullaby) by the Moscow-born Jewish composer Julien Krein (1913-1996) amounts to a small measure of justice for a figure whose music was deliberately undervalued by the Soviet establishment. The gently rocking, quietly mystical quality in this breathless musical gem comes across beautifully in the hands of Zina Schiff and Cameron Grant, making it a fitting conclusion to the program.

"My Christmas"

Plácido Domingo with assisting artists
(Sony Classical)

What is Christmas without Plácido Domingo? For the record, he has recorded at least a half-dozen Christmas albums prior to the present offering. The Madrid-born, Mexico-nurtured singer has included an impressive 147 roles in six languages his operatic repertoire. He has gone on to make his mark in a number of fields, being active as a humanitarian ("Music is the voice of hope!" he famously proclaimed at a gala to benefit Hurricane Katrina recovery), director of programs in Mexico and

the U.S. to encourage the development of young singers, and even as an environmentalist and a member of a special council to clean up bribery in FIFA, the international governing body of soccer. Seemingly indestructible, Plácido has survived life-threatening encounters with colon cancer (2010) and a pulmonary embolism (2013), making complete recoveries from both. He has been married to his wife, soprano Marta Ornelas, since 1962 and has brought up three children with her, one of whom, Plácido Domingo, Jr., has been active as a singer, songwriter, and record producer, and is heard here as a second voice with his father on Track 11, Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" in a rendition that includes the seldom-heard preface to the traditional holiday favorite.

So, how is Plácido's voice faring these days, as he prepares to celebrate his 75th birthday this coming January 21? From what we hear on this album, surprisingly well. It may be slightly frayed at the upper limit, but it is still powerful enough to rise above the extensive and varied orchestration in recordings made this past May at the CNSO Studios in Prague. Many of the arrangements have a decidedly pop-music flavor, a fact that holds no problem for this tenor whose earliest roles were with his parents in a family-run zarzuela company. (*Zarzuela* is a field in which you really get to know what audiences like – and like to sing along with!) The present program has three classical selections, the *Pie Jesu* from Faure's Requiem, in which Plácido is assisted by a rising star, child soprano Jackie Evancho; *Astro del cielo* by Puccini; and *Ave verum Corpus* by Mozart. The rest is decidedly popular and holiday-traditional, incorporating the talents of supporting artists as varied as The Piano Guys and singers from the Los Angeles Opera's Young Artist Program. The very end of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" (Track 5) allows us to hear Plácido's remarkably smooth legato in his middle range, amazingly still intact after all these years.



And does it really matter, anything that I might say about Plácido Domingo's present-day vocal artistry? He is not just a tenor, he is an institution, and his many fans will avidly embrace this new Christmas album. It includes "Have Yourself a Merry little Christmas," "Silent Night," and "What Child is This" (assisted by German country music singer Helene Fischer, with the requisite throb in her voice that should be right at home with the country & western crowd here in the U.S.). We also have "Hark! The Herald Angels sing," "Loving Christmas with You," "It Came upon a Midnight Clear," and a charming rarity, "Guardian Angels" by Harpo Marx (!) The program concludes with a rousing rendition of José Feliciano's ever-popular "*Feliz Navidad*." Enjoy!