

Phil's Classical Reviews

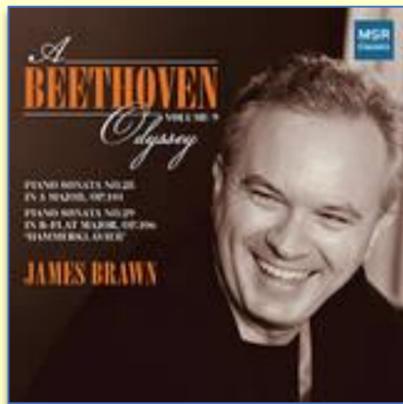
Atlanta Audio Club

Summer, 2024

James Brawn, born in England in 1971 and very much a world traveler in pursuit of his career in music, has just completed a multi-year project of which most pianists can only dream. Namely, he has put the finishing touches to a survey of all 32 Piano Sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven.¹ No wonder he has such a big smile on his face! More to the point, his performances in the multi-year series (2013-2024) have really given inspiration to younger up-and-coming artists of the keyboard!

This ninth and last installment in Brawn's "Beethoven Odyssey" starts off with Sonata No. 28 in A Major, Op. 101. Though not as awesomely proportioned as its album mate, it too has a lot to say to us. It is in four movements, all of them with expressive descriptions in which Beethoven left little doubt of his intentions.

The opening movement, *Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung* (rather lively and with innermost feeling) opens with soft, purling tones, gradually becoming more urgent as it progresses. The second, marked *Lebhaft. Marschmässig* (Lively, in march tempo) employs lots of repetition within the marching rhythm. The third, *Langsam und sehnsuchtvoll* (slow and full of sentiment) is handled by Brawn like a slow, tender, mysterious meditation. And the finale, which follows without a break, *Geschwinde, doch nicht zu*



"A Beethoven Odyssey, Vol 9,
Piano Sonatas Nos. 38, 29,
"Hammerklavier"
James Brawn, pianist
MSR Classics

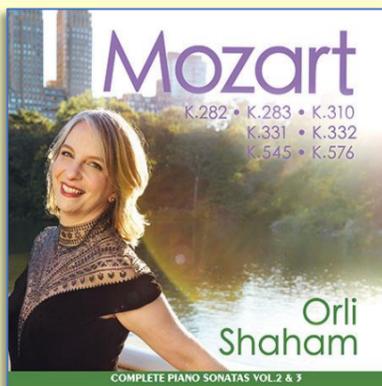
sehr, und mit Entschlossenheit (Swiftly, but not overly so, and with determination) is taken just as the doctor ordered, including the real sense of finality implied by *Entschlossenheit*.

The major work here is No. 29 in B-flat Major Op. 106, the so-called "Hammerklavier" Sonata. That's a misnomer, as the word *hammerklavier* was somewhat of an archaic name for piano. Its full subtitle *Große Sonate*

für das Hammerklavier, would make it appropriate to term it the "Great" Sonata, a name Brawn's interpretation would seem to justify in every way.

No. 29 is in four movements. The first, *Allegro*, has a stentorian opening, followed by brilliant passagework, which really captures the listener's attention. Significantly, subsidiary passages in this movement all have meaning. A very brief, dance-like *Scherzo* (duration: 2:39) serves as a bridge between the opening movement and (3) an Adagio that is the heart of the matter. That movement, marked *Adagio sostenuto*, is the longest of all (19:04) and the true heart of the sonata. It comes across as a slow, quiet, prayer-like meditation, enlivened by small increments and a beautifully compelling secondary theme. Flowing passages near the end make it seem deceptively as if Beethoven were starting a new development.

Wrong again! The finale, uncharacteristically, opens with a Largo section before breaking into an Allegro and an Allegro *risoluto*, once again keeping the listener off-balance. What does Beethoven have in mind? We soon find out, as he begins a slow build-up to a climax that seems as irresistible in its momentum as an express train. In this finale, polyphonic voices and quasi-fugal passages create an impressive effect, while posing hazards for an artist less capable than John Brawn!



Mozart: Piano Sonatas, Vols 2-3: K282,
283, 310, 331, 332, 545, 576
Orli Shaham, piano
(Canary Classics)

Orli Shaham makes further progress in her cycle of the complete Mozart Piano Sonatas in Volumes 2 and 3, containing some of the composer's most engaging work for the instrument in terms of style, expressiveness, and a never-ending source of delight for artist and listener. Which makes it all the more amazing that Orli has few if any predecessors in her project to record them all.

In her performances, Orli has realized something that may have escaped many critics, performers, and music aficionados up to our own day, namely the key role Mozart's sonatas played in the further development of classical music. Like everyone else in his generation, Mozart started off learning music on the harpsichord. But he must have realized quite early that the future lay instead in the piano, an instrument still under development. In its potential to harmonize music, add increased tone color, sustain notes, and move swiftly and surely between tone centers, the piano had it all over previous keyboard instruments, and it was Mozart (not Beethoven) who first divined its potential. Once he made the switch he never looked back. The age of powdered wigs and snuffboxes was over: a new era had begun!

Orli leads off the program with Sonata in A minor, K310, starting with a dazzling display of brilliance and velocity in an Allegro maestoso. The following movement, Andante cantabile, follows up a languid, limpid opening with a contrasted contrapuntal section containing a real sense of urgency before the initial mood



Brahms: Sonatas (2) for Clarinet & Piano, Op.
120 + Weber: Grand Duo Concertante
Anthony McGill, clarinet; Gloria Chien, piano
(Cedille Records)
Reprinted from January, 2022

Two of the most respected classical artists in America give a new and refreshing take on a pair of very familiar works by Johannes Brahms, plus an under-rated one by Karl Maria von Weber.

Our artists are Anthony McGill, currently first-chair clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic, and Gloria Chien, Taiwan-born U.S. pianist who has been lauded for the color, precision and bravura of her playing. These two celebrated musicians have often performed together in the past, and it shows in their rapport and flawless timing. That is particularly important in Brahms' two Sonatas for Clarinet & Piano, Op. 120, where a softer than usual approach pays frequent dividends for them in terms of immense beauty of expression.

In Sonata No. 1 in F Minor they strike the right interpretive note at the very beginning of the opening movement, which is marked *Allegro appassionato* and characterized by a range of emotions from passionate declamation to a mood of quiet resignation and a welcome tenderness of expression at the end. You don't want to go over the top right away in terms of the dramatic in this movement. That's because you have a long way yet to go in a deeply expressive work. that includes a slow movement characterized by its gentle warmth and graciousness. It is marked *Allegro amabile* and is as "amiable" as advertised. Then we have a dance-like Allegretto with a sway that reminds us of the Liebeslieder Waltzes, and a spirited *Vivace* for a spanking finale.



"Virtuosi," guitar music by Giuliani,
Matiegka, L'Hoyer, Coste, Regondi, Sor,
and Segovia - David Starobin, guitar
(Bridge Records)

Guitarist David Starobin founded Bridge Records, of which his wife Becky is currently president, in 1981, citing "the need to create a wide-ranging forum for performer and composer alike." His own career as concert and recording artist provides ample proof of the wisdom of that approach. "Virtuosi," the current Bridge release, is a retrospective drawn from the many recordings he has made over the years, plus a few welcome premiere releases.

Grand Overture by Mauro Giuliani (1781-1829) leads off the program in fine style with cascading measures and zestful virtuoso passages for their own sake. It is followed by the premiere release of three pieces by Wenzel Thomas Matiegka (1773-1830) who appears to be very much a Starobin "discovery." We have here a very quick and jaunty Presto; a slow, meditative Sicilienne with livelier, urgent interjections; and a Rondo (Prestissimo) with a stunning pickup in tempo that creates a lot of energy and pure fun.

Antoine L'Hoyer (1768-1852) gives us a lot to enjoy in his Exercise, Op. 27, No. 2, with the bracing effect of its rapidly strummed chords. Napoléon Coste (1805-1883) is up next with his Caprice sur l'air "La Cachucha," which is a Spanish solo dance in 3/4 or 3/8 time, similar to a bolero. It opens on a pattern of ascending notes, giving way to a pulse-quickening main section where the tempo broadens graciously, and then a "wow" of a grand, rousing finish. This is followed in the program by Etude No. 5 in A major of Giulio Regondi (1822-1872), a

returns. The sonata concludes with a pulse-quickenng Presto. Sonata in F major, K332, commences in a lively, "operatic" manner and with some splendid incidents. A poignant Adagio is followed by an Allegro assai that bursts forth upon the unwary listener.

Sonata in D major, K576 opens BIG, in a quest for adventure. A slow, contemplative Adagio follows, and then an Allegretto opens *in medias res* (Latin for "in the soup") and with a pulse, while the sonata itself ends in a noticeable mood of rumination.

Disc 2 commences with Sonata in C major, K545, which Mozart subtitled *für Anfänger* (for beginners). Mozart may have been having his little joke, as there are passages here that are quite difficult to negotiate if you aren't an Orli Shaham! The Allegro has an opening like a Minuet, but meter and tempo quickly expand. The Andante, a famous movement, sounds something like a minuet but with lots of forward impetus. The Rondo-Allegro finale is short (0:56), quick and up-tempo. Sonata K282 in E-flat major opens with a slow, sad Adagio that nonetheless possesses some motion. A playful Minuet and its double are followed by a lively, sporty Allegro for a conclusion.

K283 in G major commences with a lively, spirited Allegro. The nicely nuanced Andante that follows it commences very quietly before moving on to a fuller sound, to be succeeded by a high-spirited Presto. Finally, K331 in A major starts off with an andante grazioso that plays like a set of rhythmic variations. It is followed by a Menuetto that opens formally and then broadens noticeably in tempo. The finale is one of Mozart's best-known movements, an Allegretto that concludes with the famous "Rondo alla Turca," or Turkish march, that audiences everywhere know and love. Orli puts across this movement as splendidly as she does everything else in the program.

Sonata No. 2 in E-flat Major follows No. 1 with a wealth of long-limbed melodies predicated on the breathing of the clarinetist. The main difference between the two works lies in the omission of a slow movement. Brahms goes directly into a scherzo-like movement marked *Allegro-appassionato sostenuto* that has a central trio section marked *ma dolce e ben cantando* (but sweet and completely songlike), a direction McGill and Chien are careful to observe. They also exhibit the good timing that is needed to keep a sense of proportion in a work that has no slow movement as such, but, as we have heard, a trio that fills the gap nicely. The finale is in the form of a theme and variations in which silken phrases from both instruments overlap to perfection. In the last analysis, as our artists show us, Sonatas 1 and 2 complement each other to perfection without being cut from the same pattern, like siblings but certainly not twins.

Peace, by our American contemporary Jessie Montgomery (b.1981) is a pithy work that, at a timing of just 4:38, manages to provide much solace and consolation for the sufferings people have experienced in the global-wide pandemic. In the hands of Anthony McGill and Gloria Chien, it emerges as a work of dignity, restraint, and deep feeling.

One couldn't ask for a more complete contrast in mood from the preceding than we find in the Grand Duo Concertante of Karl Maria von Weber (1786-1826) which one British critic has described as like a double concerto. The hijinks in this work would seem to stress showy virtuosity by both instruments over more substantive concerns. Then, just as we would seem to have Weber "pegged," he surprises us in the slow movement, an Andante mysterious and melancholy in mood. A movement that Brahms himself would have been happy to have written, it gives both partners the opportunity to shine individually before coming together once again as a duo at the very end.

brief 2-minute work distinguished by its need for exceptionally nimble fingering. The *7me Fantaisie* by Fernando Sor (1778-1839) is one of the big highlights of the program. A far-ranging work as befits a fantasy, it spreads out a broad canvas (TT=13:02), with mysteriously tripping passages and lively progressions in the course of what sounds like a rondo, plus a lively dance for a finale.

Last, but not least, we have a premiere performance of Five Anecdotes by Andrés Segovia (1893-1987). A portentous opening, promising delectable music to come, leads into a surprisingly meditative Allegretto, a quick and lively Allegro moderato, and a quietly contemplative Lento *malinconico* that is just as slow and melancholy as advertised. Segovia concludes with a ovely Molto tranquillo, and then a jaunty, carefree Allegretto vivo.



Schubert: Piano Sonatas in A Minor, D537; A-flat Major, D557; E Minor, D566; and B Major, D575
Sookkyung Cho, pianist
(Centaur)

Korea-born pianist Sookkyung Cho has accomplished quite a lot in her still-young life, having received a Bachelor of Music and a Doctor of Musical Arts from the Juilliard School in New York and a Master of Music from the Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University. She has also taught piano and chamber music at the NEC Preparatory School in Boston and music theory at Peabody. Her doctoral dissertation was entitled "Schubert's Sonata in B Major, D575, Reimagined." I briefly mention Cho's academic experience because it corresponds with the fluid ease and musical insight with which she negotiates Franz Schubert's four 1817 sonatas heard on this album. Her predilection for taking Schubert's florid lines of music as written, and not making of them than she finds there, also serves her purpose admirably.

1817 was a breakthrough year for the twenty-year-old Schubert. Some of the important happenings include his introduction to the famous baritone Johann Michael Vogl, who championed his songs and, with the composer as accompanist, helped make them the rage of Viennese drawing rooms, and his friendship with the Hüttenbrenner brothers, Anselm, a composer, and Josef, an amateur musician, and Josef von Gahy, with whom he played piano duets. Schubert's sudden celebrity in Vienna did not last, and by the end of the year

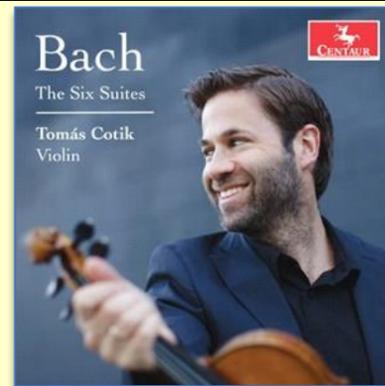


Prokofiev: 10 Pieces from Romeo & Juliet, Op. 75 + Sibelius: 5 Pieces, Op. 75, "Trees"
Tatiana Shustova, pianist
(Centaur)

Russian-born pianist Tatiana Shustova, a native of St. Petersburg, studied at the Rimsky-Korsakov State Conservatory. After coming to the United States in 2005, she received a Master of Music degree at Bowling Green (Ohio) State University. She later studied under Ian Hobson at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, eventually receiving a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in performance in 2013. Both as a soloist and a collaborative artist, she has worked extensively in the U.S. at summer camps for youth, music festivals and chamber music competitions.

For all these credentials (and more), Shustova does not come across as dryly academic in her performance style. On the contrary, she plays with a wonderful freedom and feeling for nuance that can really get to the heart of a great work of music, as she does most decidedly in her account of Ten Pieces from Romeo and Juliet, Op. 75 by Sergei Prokofiev.

The suite follows the sequence of events in Prokofiev's ballet, beginning with Folk Dance, rippling with color and verve, closely followed by a flavorfully nuanced account of Scene: The Street Awakens. Minuet (Arrival of the Guests) depicts the feast at the House of the Capulets by means of a powerful forward drive, its impulse being contrasted by the poignant middle section of the Minuet itself. Juliet as a Young Girl comes across as an indelible



Bach: The Six Cello Suites, BWV 1007-1012, arranged for violin
Tomás Cotik, violin solo
(Centaur)

Argentine native Tomás Cotik adds to his reputation as one of the supreme masters of the bow in this new release of J. S. Bach's Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello senza Basso, which he himself has transcribed for violin with great success. With no disrespect to the original version which many generations of cellists have explored with greatest reverence and devotion, Cotik's violin arrangements may well add further insight into the heart and mind of their creator.

As an aid in further understanding Bach's artistic and expressive purpose in the suites, Cotik employs the use of a Baroque bow, which he finds essential in revealing the transparent textures in the music through the effortless with which it changes strings and direction. "It also enhances the ability to differentiate subtle nuances at the beginning and end of each stroke," says Cotik, in addition to "the numerous possibilities of connection between those notes." Furthermore, it allows for a lighter sound and quicker, more flowing tempi.

A note about the movements Bach employs in the Cello Suites. Each of the six suites opens with a Prelude, followed by a suite of dances consisting of an Allemande in gracefully, flowing 2/2 or 4/4 time, a Courante in "running" 3/4 time whose six counts could be subdivided into 3 sets of 2/4; the Sarabande, a slow dance of spanish origin in 3/2 whose six counts can

he was back at home in the sticks, but with the consolation of knowing that he had achieved real mastery in composing sonatas for the piano.

Sonata in A Minor, D.537, opens in an Allegro ma non troppo with rippling accents, a thoughtful melody in the middle section, and a pronounced reprise. The second movement, Allegretto quasi-Andantino, has a lightly lyrical melody that allows Schubert to experiment with dynamics. The third, Allegro vivace has a dramatic call to attention at the opening, followed by widely contrasted subjects and a sense of drama.

The Sonata in A-flat Major, D557, opens in a happy, jaunty mood with much rhythmic variety. The second movement, Andante, unfolds in short, measured steps with a fast middle section for contrast, creating a feeling of both charm and intrigue. The third, Allegro, has a rippling opening with an associated refrain under the melody, Challenging hand repositionings for the performer help release music of much engaging charm for the listener.

Sonata in E Minor, D566, begins Moderato: quiet, reflective, and delicately phrased, before the music at length becomes livelier and fuller-bodied. The following allegretto is quick and onward-moving, with contrasted phrases, while the finale, a Scherzo and Trio marked Allegro Vivace, opens with catchy, upward-tending inflections.

1817, a year that was marked by adventure and discovery for Franz Schubert, ended with the best of the four completed sonatas (two remained unfinished, a frequent happening for a composer who often wrote at a feverish pace as his creative mind ventured ever forward). This was the afore-mentioned Sonata in B Major, D575, a key that can be a tricky proposition for composer and performer because of the five sharps (C #, D #, F #, G #, and A #) in its rich key signature. Opening with an Allegro ma non troppo filled with youthful ardor and requiring a real two-handed technique, Schubert follows with the softly stated warmth of the Andante, and then a Scherzo: Allegretto that sounds like an opening call to the dance, with perky cadences in the treble. The finale, an Allegro giusto in a rousing galop-like tempo and playful accents in the bass, unfolds superbly under the hands of our artist, Sookkyung Cho. (Remember her name!)

portrayal of the young heroine, with a frisky opening that is later contrasted by a quiet interlude of great delicacy, depicting the inner thoughts of the young heroine whose premature entrée into adult life by way of an enforced marriage is fated to have tragic consequences.

Masks, with its upward-inflected steps, gives life to the formal dance interlude, while the heavy footfalls of the Montagues and Capulets tableau give credibility to the arrogant pride of both families that will serve to hasten the tragedy.

Friar Lawrence serves as a point of repose in the story, its quietly contemplative character being beautifully realized in Shustova's well-paced account. Mercutio depicts Juliet's kinsman, the hot-tempered firebrand whose exhibition of bravura swordplay with Romeo has unforeseen consequences leading to his own death and the banishing of Romeo from Verona. This is the turning point, in both Shakespeare and Prokofiev versions, at which a story that has played more or less like a comedy up to this point, takes a tragic, fatal turn, and Shustova's performance realizes its unmistakable significance.

Dance of the Girls with Lilies, another change of pace for the pianist, depicts the maidens who are strewing lilies for Juliet's funeral cortège, a piece that Shustova executes with great delicacy, while Romeo and Juliet before Parting is slowly and exquisitely paced, with an inexorable mood of tragedy underneath the melody, finishing with the rattling of dry, untuned keys symbolic of death.

One thinks of Finland's national composer Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) almost exclusively in terms of his Violin Concerto and his symphonies and tone poems, but he could also be adept in the smaller forms, as he showed in the five piano pieces that constitute The Trees, Op. 75. As Shustova shows us, these pieces are best approached as quietly evocative rather than boldly expressive. "Where the Rowan Blossoms," the first, is gently impressionist and murmuring in its appeal to the listener. "The Solitary Pine" conveys images of sternness and isolation, with rippling accents, ending in three solitary chords. "The Aspen" may not exactly be "quaking," as we might expect, but makes its presence known in quiet, trembling measures.

be divided into three sets of 2/4, and a Gigue (Jig) in lively 3/8 time or a compound measure.

Between the Srabande and Gigue, Bach variously inserted a pair of galanteries, as they were so-called: Minuets in 3/4 or 3/8 time in Suites I-II, Bourées in double time with a customary anacrusis, or "pick-up," at the start of the measure in Suites III-IV, and Gavottes, originally of French folk derivation and in moderate time, usually 4/4 or 2/2.

The great deal of variety Bach employs in his choice of dances, which will be seen as a prelude to the more modern use of tempo indications, admirably suited his purposes. In any insightful modern performance, the artist should be keenly aware of their implications for mood and nuance as well as tempo, as Tomás Cotik clearly is in his accounts of all these suites. Cotik realizes that Bach's six suites are not cut from the same piece of cloth and are not cookie-cutters in any sense of the word. There is immense variety here, as he is well aware.

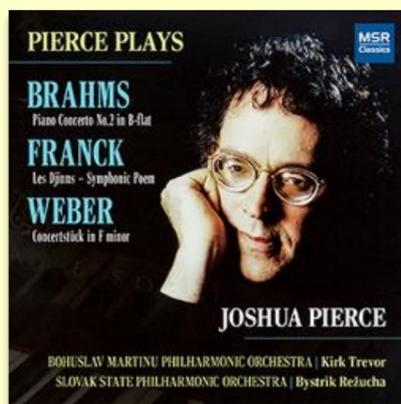
The Allemande in Suite 4 is quick for a dance of social origin, and searching in mood and character, an unusual combination. The Allemande in Suite 5 is slow, initially hesitant in its reserve, and deeply reflective. And the corresponding Allemande in 6 opens on a decidedly yearning note, more hesitant and poignant than one might have expected of a social dance. Bach's Sarabandes can be yearning, sad, or deeply reflective in mood, depending on his purpose, while his Preludes can be serious, vivacious, slow and reflective, quick, or dissonant (and sometimes in combination).

Considering these facts, Cotik's wizzardy of the bow is essential to the success of his Bach performances. It is just as evident in his articulations, choice of dynamics, and use of ornamentation – all essential elements of Bach interpretation – as they were in his earlier exploration of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Unaccompanied Violin, which I discussed with great pleasure in my March 2020 Reviews.

The recordings made in 2021 at Portland State University in Oregon, where Cotik is currently Associate Professor of Violin, are first-rate, adding to the appeal of an album that sounds great upon repeated auditions and is hard to resist.

Joshua Pierce, New York City native and one of the most uniquely gifted keyboard artists of our time, shows his prowess once again in an imaginative program of works by 19th Century composers that scan the expressive and imaginative range of the piano itself. With the help of the Bohuslav Martinu Philharmonic under Kirk Trevor (Brahms, Franck) and the Slovak State Philharmonic under Bystrik Režucha (Weber), Pierce obviously delights in exploring the wild possibilities inherent in some very rich scores.

More than many works of this kind, the Brahms Second is a concerto for piano *and* orchestra, with all that description entails. It is a powerful, far-ranging work that can often sound more like a symphony in scope (Its 47-minute length in this performance, plus the fact that it has a scherzo, reinforce that impression.) It is therefore essential to maintain the desired balance between soloist and orchestra in matters of pacing and dynamics that we find in this performance, so they don't crowd each other. The slow movement, Andante – Piu Adagio, is especially warm and generous, an altogether remarkable movement in which an incredibly beautiful melody, which Brahms later used for his song "Immer leiser wird mein



Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 2, Op.83 + Franck: Les Djinns; Weber Konzertstück
Joshua Pierce, piano
(MSR Classics)

Schlummer" (Ever softer were my slumbers). is first stated by a solo cello. The color is slowly deepened by the lower strings and brightened by coloration from a reed, all before the piano makes its well-prepared entrance in one of the great moments in all the literature for piano and orchestra, one in which tenderness is even mingled with a little Brahmsian humor.

Belgium-born French composer César Franck (1822-1890) is heard from next in Les Djinns, a symphonic poem for piano and orchestra that evokes mysterious forces of the night sky, falling into silence at the end after inviting memories of Aladdin's awesome playmate who would appear whenever he rubbed his magic lamp. Harmonies, evoking darkness of night and the supernatural, clash with a brilliant piano score, leading ultimately to peace

Konzertstück in F minor, Op. 79 remains the only frequently performed piano work by Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826) other than his well-known Invitation to the Dance which was orchestrated by Hector Berlioz. That Weber was mostly known in his lifetime as a composer of German operas with an element of fantasy and the supernatural is reflected somewhat in the music we hear in this 15-minute piece. Joshua Pierce shows a definite affinity for a work which has an abundance of waltz melodies. After what appears to be a rousing conclusion, which Pierce renders very well, we pause briefly for a quiet coda. Historically, audiences have been known to applaud prematurely at this point, believing the work to be over: one final musical jest for a composer whose oeuvre was full of the same!



"Libertad," The Will to Freedom,"
 Maria Cecilia Muñoz, flutist
 Tiffany Butt, pianist
 Music of Mel Bonis, David Braid, Clara Schumann, Sofia Gudaidulina, Amy Beach, Ilse Weber (Ars Produktion)

I can't believe it's already been some eight years since I first became acquainted with Maria Cecilia Muñoz, highly talented flutist from the Argentine, in her much lauded album of flute concertos by Mozart and CPE Bach. She has evidently traveled far and learned much in the intervening years, as she is quick to demonstrate in her new album with pianist Tiffany Butt, *Libertad*, subtitled "The Will to freedom."

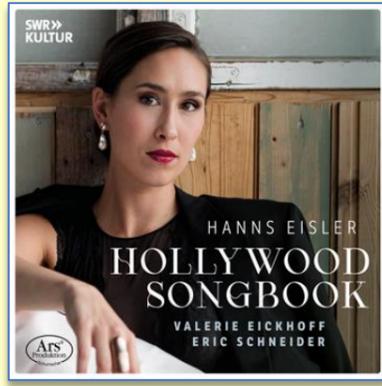
Native Parisienne Mélanie Bonis (1858-1937), a highly prolific composer, is heard from first in *Pièce, pour flûte et piano* op. 189, and *Une flûte soupire*, in the latter of which the composer effectively utilizes the "sighing" affect hinted-at in the title. Getting the program off to a good start, it is followed by *The Bird Fancier's New Delight* (2023) by our contemporary David Braid, the only composer possessing both X and Y chromosomes in a program dominated by the ladies. The five pieces include a wicked "Clock-Caged Canary," "Canary," "Woodlark Dogfight," "Trossill's Wing," and "Country Linnett," sketches that can be occasionally satirical as well as descriptive.

Up next, Clara Schumann (1819-1896) needs no introduction. Her *Drei Romanzen* for violin and piano, Op. 22 start off quietly with an *Andante Molto* characterized by sensational trills and a cool, refreshing interlude. The other movements are a contrasted pair: a lively *Allegretto* and one entitled *Leidenschaftlich Schnell*, which true to its title proves, by turns, both sorrowfully laden and quick.

Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina (b.1931), up next, is heard from in her *Allegro Rustico*, a jazzy and jaunty work that impresses the listener right from the outset with its frantically warbling, burnished trills and pulse-quickenning pacing. It requires, and receives, the utmost in close collaboration between artists Maria Cecilia Muñoz and Tiffany Butt.

Next, we have a superb setting for flute and piano by our present artists of the *Sonata in A minor* for Violin and Piano, Op. 34 by Amy Beach (1867-1944). This American composer whose music has been getting a lot of attention from musical scholars and audiences alike in recent decades, shows a masterful hand in a harmonically rich and beautifully laid-out work in four movements: an opening *Allegro Moderato* that trails off superbly at the end, a devil-may-care *Scherzo* with a movingly subdued middle section and a *Molto Vivace* closing, a *Largo con dolore* that creates a quiet space all its own, and a finale marked *Allegro con fuoco* ("with fire") that is beautifully paced and executed by our present artists all to the way to its end. [This work is currently getting around. For a review of the original *Sonata* for Violin and Piano, readers are referred to *Phil's Classical Reviews* for October, 2023]

The recital ends on an appropriately sombre note with Tiffany Butt's own setting for flute and piano of *Lied: Ich wandre durch Theresienstadt* by Ilse Weber, Jewish poet and songwriter who died in the concentration camp at Auschwitz. It unfolds in a single movement, subdued in mood and characterized, following a frantic opening, by its deliberately slow progress,



Hanns Eisler: Hollywood Songbook
 Valerie Eickhoff, mezzo-soprano
 Eric Schneider, piano
 (Ars Produktion)

Valerie Eickhoff was born in the town of Herdecke in the Ennepe-Ruhr district in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. We even know when she was born (1999), a rare admission in the case of opera singers, whose birth years are usually guarded more securely than state secrets.

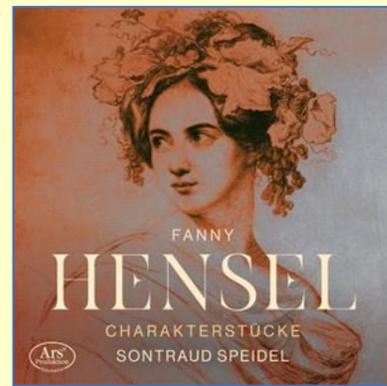
What is no secret is the beauty of her mezzo-soprano voice, which is increasingly in demand in the opera house and the recital hall. "Hanns Eisler: Hollywood Songbook," her debut album, is quite obviously a good fit in terms of the brightness warmth, and penetrating quality of her voice.

Composer and songwriter Hanns Eisler was an intriguing figure whose career in some ways paralleled that of Kurt Weill. Eisler, like Weill, was a Jew who found it expedient to leave Germany upon the rise of the Third Reich. In the United States, he was a professor at the University of Southern California. But, as a staunch Marxist whose music was frequently informed by ideology, he was to find life in America, at a time when senator Joe McCarthy was rampaging through the political scene denouncing Communists right and left, not much happier than it had been in the old world. He was deported and sought refuge, somewhat uncomfortably, in East Germany where his propensity for using music as a tool in political discourse remained as troublesome as ever.

"This is the life of men on earth / Out of darkness we come at birth / Into a lamplit room, and then / Go forward into dark again." Hanns Eisler's setting of this lyric by Maxwell Anderson reflects a noticeable penchant in this program for superimposing piquant lyrics with persuasive settings.

"This Only Thing," Eisler's inspired song setting setting of a *Pensée* by Blaise Pascal, captures the essence of this somewhat jaundiced relection on the folly of our trying to divert ourselves from our own human condition: "The only thing which consoles us / for our miseries is diversion, / and yet this is the greatest of our miseries. / For it is this which principally hinders us from reflecting upon ourselves, / and which makes us insensibly ruin ourselves. / Without this we should be in a state of weariness, / and this weariness would spur us to seek a more solid means of escaping from it. / But diversions amuse us, / and lead us unconsciously to death." [Readers: *Don't take the above thought too seriously, or you probably won't want to finish reading this review!*]

Another Eisler setting from *Zwei Lieder nach Worten von Pascal* focuses on the ironic disparity between the ambitions to which we aspire and the reality to which we are usually obliged to come to terms: "Despite these miseries, man wishes to be happy, and only wishes to be happy, and cannot wish not to be so. But how will he set about it? To be happy he would have to make himself immortal. But, not being able to do so, it has occurred to him to prevent himself from thinking of death." As with the previously discussed setting of a text by the 17th century French philosopher, Eisler underscores the ironies in the text with trenchant rhythms and poignant harmonies, of which Valerie Eickhoff is the keenest of interpreters.



Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel:
 Charakterstücke (Character Pieces)
 Sontraud Speidel, pianist
 (Ars Produktion)

Karlsruhe, Germany native Sontraud Speidel has had a long and successful career as recitalist, conductor of master classes, and distinguished visiting professor in both Europe and America. As one who has recorded more than fifty CDs, she is no stranger to the recording studio, either. A recent high point in her career was her premiere, with fellow artist Evelinde Trenkner, of the four-hand piano version of Gustav Mahler's Fifth Symphony (Opus Klassik Award, 2019). She is currently Professor of Piano at the Music University of Karlsruhe

The beautiful expressive quality and the sense of dimension in her performances that have so often earned her the highest praise of critics shows itself once again in this latest release of *Charakterstücke* (character pieces) by Fanny Hensel. The project seems obviously to have been close to Sontraud's heart, as this composer, the three-years older sister of Felix Mendelssohn, was an important figure in the long, gradual, two-centuries progress of women to achieve equality with men as performing artists and composers in the world of classical music.

You might expect music by a woman composer this early in history to exist mostly of simple melody and accompaniment, and if so you would be wrong. The music we have here is melodious enough, to be sure, but its density of sound and emotion, and the myriad of ways in which Fanny harmonized her material, as heard here, can be quite complex, belying their description as simple "character pieces." *Sonata Satz* (Sonata Movement) in E Major, entitled "Tendresse," for instance, sets shy, hesitant musings and flavorful accents at the very opening against strivings of ever-increasing urgency as the piece develops.

Allegretto, the second of *Six Melodies*, Op. 4, rides on a gracious curve of melodious chords. On the other hand, the following *Melodie*, *Allegro molto quasi Presto*, superbly contrasts a full sound with moments of great tenderness. No. 4, *Lento appassionato*, is characterized by its gently swaying opening and very effective use of retrograde motion, while the composer uses vigorous tumbling measures to convey urgency in No. 5, *Allegro molto vivace*. And No. 6, *Allegro soave*, true to its description, is initially very soothing and contemplative in mood, later using busier incidents very skillfully for an effective contrast.

Of special interest here are the inclusion of selections from Fanny's cycle of 12 character pieces for piano entitled *The Seasons (Aus das Jahr)*. They include *Januar: Ein Traum* (January: a dream), whose slow, quiet opening conveys the impression of a world asleep, gradually awakening to life and activity by means of very effective contrasts. *Juli* (July), a *Larghetto*, opens slowly, evocative of torpid weather, with a surging bass line, suggesting the life principle asserting itself, being employed for contrast in the middle section. *Dezember* (December) opens with frenzied activity (winter sports?) and then contrasts a quiet, slow middle section, perhaps suggesting hibernation, with a very stirring conclusion. The cycle ends in a well-known chorale, *Das alte Jahr vergangen ist* (The old year has departed) by way of a very effective postlude.

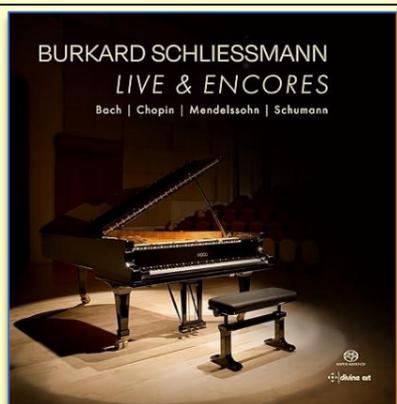
ending quietly in an extended reverie and on the simplest of note progressions. At the end of a recital marked by much fire and virtuosic brilliance, we are left by our artists in a markedly different mood at the very end:

“Theresienstadt, Theresienstadt, just when will the suffering have an end, when will we be free again?”

“Hollywood Elegy No. 7,” to a text by Berthold Brecht, represents a deep-water mark in this program in terms of its sheer dark outlook. The poet seems to be reflecting, in conversation with a friend, on the time they have wasted toiling in an uncongenial artistic milieu: “and the memory of our long talks about the swamp, / which already held so many powerless. / Now I watched him leaning back / covered with leeches / in the shimmering softly moving slime / upon the sinking face the ghastly blissful smile” Pessimism, the under-side of hope and optimism, doesn’t get any darker than this.

In all, there are no fewer than 48 Hanns Eisler song settings in this exceptionally well-filled release from Ars Produktion, a quality music label based in Ratingen, Germany. For lack of space, I’ve focused on the four songs with English texts, rather than the majority with texts set in German, a language in which I am not sufficiently fluid to grasp all the nuances we might expect to find in a song composer for whom darkness and light, hope and despair, innocence and intrigue, seem to be continually at war.

The highlights from Four Songs for Piano, Op. 6, include an *Allegro vivace* based on effectively deployed rhythms and an *Andante cantabile* superbly employing polyrhythms for variety and contrast between repeated phrases. The program concludes with a really exciting *Saltarello*, evocative of the old Italian folk dance in lively triple metre.



“Live & Encores,” Burkhard Schliessmann, pianist, plays Bach, Chopin, Mendelssohn and Schumann (Divine Art 2-CD)

As I wrote of Burkhard Schliessmann several years ago, “The native of Aschaffenburg Germany has often been noted for his passion for using all the resources of the instrument to get to the heart of the music and bring it out in all its expressive power and beauty...He is the last sort of pianist you would expect to just play the notes as written, without comment” (Phil’s Classical reviews, Jan, 2022). What I said then still goes, as the present album “Live & Encores,” a 2-CD compendium of previously and newly released performances, bears out.

Disc A opens with a generous selection of the best keyboard works of J. S. Bach, starting with Partita No. 2 in C Minor, BWV 826. Bach leads off in a big way with a Sinfonia (another word for “overture”) that is distinguished for its bold opening with measured cadences and a quick-paced middle section. It is followed in this suite of pieces in dance tempo by a florid Allemande, nicely accented and rather quick for a dignified formal dance. The Courante, briskly paced and articulated, opens with a zestful lift-off. Then comes a Sarabande, usually the slowest of dances but rendered here in a lively tempo and in well-contrasted sections (which is Bach’s innovation, by the way, not Schliessmann’s). The Rondeau, a lively French dance with notable foot-falls and flourishes, is taken by Schliessmann for all it is worth, and he renders the Capriccio with a terrific tempo that pushes its limits.

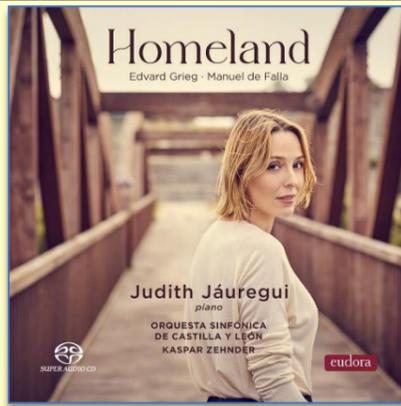
The Italian Concerto, BWV 971, begins with a movement that is an Allegro in all but name, and is well-decorated with trills. An Andante in the style of a deeply moving arioso with florid embellishments and a mood of gentle pathos lies at the heart of this work. With a basic tempo that is almost funereal in its affect, it sets the listener up for the stunning contrast provided by the sensational Presto, concluding one of the best keyboard works of J. S. Bach. Schliessmann’s performance shows he is well cognizant of its beauty.

The Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in D Minor, BWV 903, another all-time Bach favorite, is well-chosen for the next spot in the program, opening with swirling figurations and a restlessly questing mood. The slower tempo Bach chooses for the main section is just right for creating a philosophical impression as the overall effect. The work concludes with the Fugue, characterized by a slow, quiet opening that gradually increases in purposeful momentum as it progresses. Schliessmann observes the nice, steady pulse Bach gives this movement, as well as overall tempi that are well-chosen to allow for flourishes, and even drama, as he moves along.

The disc concludes with Felix Mendelssohn’s Variations sérieuses, Op. 54. “Serious” is right, as many of these short piano pieces are as terse as they are furious, and Schliessmann does them full justice. But with such markings as *Agitato*, *Con fuoco*, and *Allegro vivace*, they would seem more significant for the challenge they pose for the performer than any attraction they might have for the listener – aside from Variations 11, *Cantabile*, consisting of a simple melody with active accompaniment, and 14, a very poignant *Adagio*. Generally speaking, with the exception of some of his Songs without Words, Mendelssohn did not put his very best into his solo piano music as compared with other genres. (See his Violin Concerto, Symphonies 3-5, his Octet, the Hebrides Overture and the Midsummer Night’s Dream Music for a better impression of his genius if you are just getting acquainted with this composer.)

Disc B opens with Robert Schumann’s famed Fantasie in C Major, Op. 17, which is notable for the composer’s mastery in blending, contrasting, and superimposing timbres. Schliessmann takes all these issues in stride, making this an eminently satisfying account of one of the most difficult works in the repertoire. It is marked by its rhapsodic lyricism occasioned by trill structures, which are typically in downward motion, in the opening movement. This is succeeded by a march in the middle movement that culminates in sensational back-rhythms and syncopations that still have the power to astonish us today, and a finale whose harmonic structure conjures up the image of a star-filled night of which Schumann was doubtless thinking when he subtitled this movement “Crown of Stars.” The reader will note how the composer reversed the usual order of this slow movement, marked “thoroughly fantastic and sorrowfully laden” (*Durchaus fantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen*) and what then became the middle movement with its thumping fortes in the afore-mentioned march tempo.

Two choice Schumann encores follow, concluding the program. In “Chopin” from the well-loved *Carnaval*, Schliessmann makes the most of its widely spaced chord structures, lending a distinct mood of aloneness, if not outright sadness. In “Warum?” (Why?) from *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 12, with its limpid, highly expressive harmonies that serve to justify the title, the rising intensity in the middle, followed by a return to the initial mood of resignation, is handled superbly by the present artist.

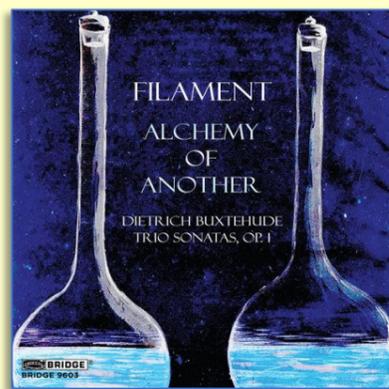


"Homeland," Grieg: Piano Concerto
 Falla Nights in the Gardens of Spain
 Judith Jáuregui, piano
 Kaspar Zehnder conducts Orquesta Sinfonica de Castilla y Lyon
 (Eudora Records)

Judith Jáuregui, young Spanish pianist born in San Sebastián, has been making quite a name for herself of late, and it isn't hard to hear why if we are to judge from her recently released album on the Eudora label. In performances characterized by eloquence and refinement and infused with her own personality, she presents the best-known works for piano and orchestra by Spain's Manuel de Falla and Norway's Edvard Grieg.

We begin with Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*, a picture of a country drenched in evocations of history, romance, and the exotic beauty of its music and folklore. The work depicts gardens in three regions of Spain: 1) In the Generalife, evoking the jasmine-scented gardens of the Alhambra, 2) *Danza Lejana*, an exotic dance in the garden of an unidentified region, and 3) In the Gardens of the Sierra Cordoba. Falla orchestrated his score with a substantial complement of instruments that include piano, three flutes and piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, and cymbals, triangle, celesta, harp and strings. They are judiciously employed to enhance the evocative beauty of the music rather than for massive effects, so that the impression we home listeners get is that of a lovely transparency of sound. A furious onset of orchestral fury at the very opening is followed by music in subdued moods in which the piano leads the way. The second movement, *Danza Lejana*, is mysterious, probing, with passion lurking just under the surface. The percussion makes its presence felt here as a low level of tension present just under the surface. Surging emotion at the end of this movement leads into the third, marked by a combustible fury unleashed by the orchestra, equated by the fate-driven piano. Beautiful quiet moments make themselves felt amid the turmoil. The fourth movement is simply marked *Allegretto tranquillo e misterioso*, a mood captured in this recording by the excellent rapport of pianist and orchestra.

Edvard Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16, is the major work of a composer known for his many piano and chamber works and songs, a body of music largely evocative of his own native Land, Norway. In this recording Jáuregui and Zehnder show us they know their Grieg, as well as their Falla. That's a good thing, because I don't recall hearing many new recordings of what used to be one of the most popular of all concertos. That benign neglect in the concert hall and the recording industry is even more puzzling, as the old warhorse still shows it has plenty of rugged energy and exquisite beauty, two elements that play very well against each other in the present recording. From the sensational opening flourish by the piano that follows right after a dramatic tympani roll – a double-octave cadenza with a falling major second succeeded by a falling major third – we know we are in for an outstanding account of great music. Together, Jáuregui and Zehnder explore depths of sentiment without lapsing into sentimentality, for those who know the difference, set against the colorful harmonic backdrop that Grieg created for us. In the finale, which begins without a break, the full resources of orchestra and soloist, hitherto held back, at last come into play.

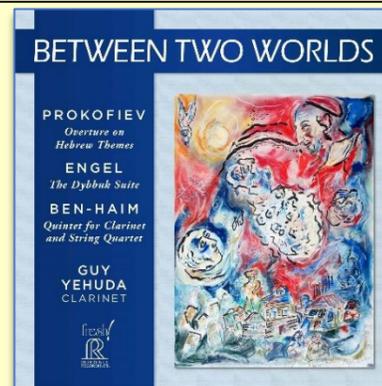


"Alchemy of Another"
 Buxtehude: Seven Trio Sonatas, Op. 1
 performed by Filament
 (Bridge Records)

Filament consists of a trio of Philadelphia-based musicians: Evan Few, violin; Elena Kauffman, viola da gamba; and John Walthausen, harpsichord. They play music of their chosen sphere, the Baroque, as if they were on a mission to bring out the grand, expressive qualities of the music of that era. In that respect, they are true to their chosen name, which recalls the essential element that makes a light bulb work. When the subject is the music of the Danish-born German composer Dieterich Buxtehude (1637-1707), the results are particularly gratifying.

All the more so because recordings of this particular genre are rare for a composer better known for his liturgical and organ music. In recreating his music, the members of Filament cultivate a "cozy" gracious sound that ideally suits music that would seem to have been intended primarily for enjoyment. This is period sound, not period dentistry. The slow opening of Sonata III in A minor comes across as yearning, rather than sad or despondent. The quickening pulse of the second movement, *Allegro*, sets us up for a *Largo* that makes a fine impression in just 0:48. A very brisk *Allegro* concludes matters satisfactorily. Sonata I in F major features dramatic contrasts in tempo and expression in the opening (*Vivace-Lento*), second (*Allegro-Adagio*), and third movements (*Andante-Grave*), closing the deal with a *very fast Presto!*

Sonata VI in D minor opens with a *Grave* that really lives up to its billing, followed by an *Allegro con discretione* characterized by exceptionally rich harmonies. Sonata IV in B-flat major starts off with a very alert movement marked *Allegro/Presto*, followed by a *Lento* movement that makes for a very striking contrast in tempo and mood. Sonata V in C major starts off with a brief but very effective violin solo, a *Largo* that really sets us up for the bracing *Allegro* that comes next.



"Between Two Worlds," Prokofiev: Overture on Hebrew Themes;
 Engel: The Dybbuk Suite; Ben-Haim: Quintet for Clarinet & String
 Quartet - Guy Yehuda, clarinet
 (Reference Recordings)

"Between Two Worlds" is an intriguing program of works for clarinet and string quartet, with double bass and percussion inserted as required. The ultimate inspiration underlying all these work by Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953), Joel Engel (1868-1927), and Paul Ben-Haim (1897-1984) lies in traditional Jewish folk music, particularly in the *Klezmer* style. The remarkable thing is that you don't have to be Jewish to respond to the music on this album, even when you encounter, at its most (flavorably) dissonant, the undeniably rhapsodic quality of so much of what you hear in "Between Two Worlds."

Which, by the way, was the original title for *The Dybbuk*, the play by S. Ansky (1863-1920), a Polish Jew who was intrigued by the character of the eponymously named revenant in Jewish folklore. In the play, a young man, a poor Talmudic student, takes his own life out of despair when his betrothed forsakes him for another suitor. He then returns from the dead on her wedding day in the form of an evil spirit, the Dybbuk of the title, who possesses her body and soul and must be exorcised. Engel's *Dybbuk* suite encapsulates this story in music that is alternately rhapsodic and despondent, extremes between which Guy Yehuda's clarinet is admirably equipped to turn on a dime as he negotiates Ansky's deliciously flavorful music.

Russian composer Sergei Profoviev (1891-1953) was himself not a Jew, but was intrigued by the capacity for beauty and pathos in traditional klezmer music. He composed his *Overture on Hebrew Themes* for Clarinet, String Quartet and Piano, Op. 34 in 1919, during a sojourn in New York during which he was approached by the Zimro ensemble, a Russian sextet that had just arrived in America, with a request to write a work amenable to their style. The result was an exciting work, favorable

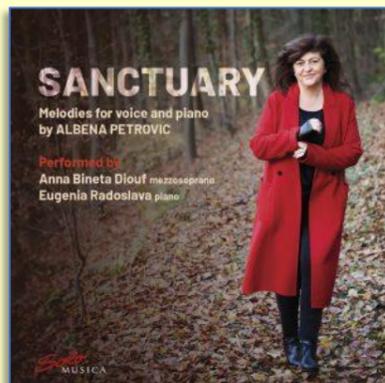
Sonata II in G major leads off with a Lento in gently rippling passages that (again) sets us up for the bracing Vivace-Adagio that follows. This sonata, among its other felicities, concludes with a really glorious Arioso that qualifies as one of the greatest joys in a well-packed opus. And Sonata VII in E minor concludes the program in fine style with movements marked (1) Allegro-Largo, (2) Presto-Vivace-Adagio, and (3) Poco Presto-Lento-Prestissimo (and how!)

Listening to this program presented so optimally by Filament, you get an idea of the joy and pleasure his original audiences (three centuries ago!) must have felt on hearing music that trades so unabashedly on the elements of surprise and delight. Our own contemporary composers seem to have lost the knack of something that came second-nature to Dietrich Buxtehude. Time to turn back the page and take a lesson!

to the ensemble and also to the ability of the clarinet to alternate between high and low registers and execute "hairpin" dynamics. In addition, there's also a lot of flavorful music for the cello, which has virtually as much time in the spotlight as the clarinet, music which still stands by itself as a happy marriage of sweetness and diatonic.

Ben-Haim's 1941 Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet is in three movements, 1) a Molto Moderato that introduces the main themes, 2) a Capriccio that tosses them about while showcasing the playfulness and agility of the clarinet, and 3) a Theme and Variations that explores different aspects of the theme: lyrical, dramatic, serene, and passionate.

All the artists heard on this album can take a bow: Guy Yehuda clarinet; Dmitry Berlinsky and Yvonne Lam, violins; Eric Nowlin, viola; Suren Bagratuni, cello; Kevin Brown, bass; Jon Weber, percussion, and Eric Zuber, piano. Kudos also for graphic artist Shoshannah Brombacher, whose delightful illustrations grace the booklet.



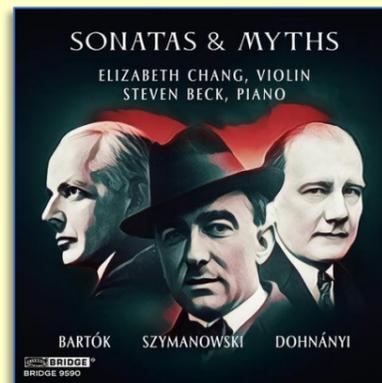
"Sanctuary: Melodies for Voice and Piano by Albena Petrovic, with Anna Bineta Diouf, mezzo-soprano And Eugenia Radoslava, piano (Solo Musica)

Pictured on the booklet cover, Albena Petrovic Vrachanska, composer of "Sanctuary," is a native of Bulgaria who now lives in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg where she has been honored as a Knight of the Order of Merit among many other distinctions. On the present album, the German-Senegalese mezzo-soprano Anna Bineta Diouf teams with Austrian pianist Eugenia Radoslava to bring to immediate life a program of settings of a dozen compelling poems that speak eloquently of the need for wholeness and a centered identity in a world of conflicts that is, in fact, the world we live in.

"Hail Mary," first up in the program, is marked by its poignant yearning and transparent texture. "To God" opens with ominous jangling chords and a startling wail from the vocalist, heralding a lyric poem in which soft, prayer-like urgings struggle to be heard against shrill outcries to a God who is obviously not in a giving vein. "My People" reinforces the prevailing mood with thinly stretched vocal timbres and urgent entreaties set against, and superbly contrasted to, shrill piano trills at the very opening. "The Crows Scream" (what else should we expect them to do?) pits breathless anticipation against widely spaced piano tones, with sudden screeching outbursts in the vocal line, growing ever more urgent until the poem ends suddenly, without any sort of satisfying conclusion. Which serves, of course, to amplify the prevailing mood of striving for wholeness and centeredness in a world that seems rigorously opposed to human happiness.

Well, you get the idea. The challenge to our performing artists is to impart a sense of wholeness and variety to song lyrics that seem determined to promote diametrically opposite moods. Happily, there are occasional glimmers of light and hope as we move along. "A White Swan" seems overwhelmed by an ideal beauty that is hopeless to attain, a message that is reinforced by the rattling accompaniment at the very end. "Eros" opens in a quietly pleading, expectant mood, with rising urgency in the middle passages giving way to subdued resignation and the jangling of dry, untuned keys at the end of the keyboard. The message seems clear: Eros, erotic love, is ultimately unsatisfying as a substitute for the real thing. Following which, "Secretly at Night" expresses a similar mood of unsatisfied yearning for wholeness in its plangent, delicately spaced piano tones.

"Je veux vivre" (I want to live) employs a spacious, thinly stretched vocal line, ending in "footsteps" at the very end, to create a mood of longing, accented by soft tears. "This Sacred Place" comes closest to resolving the pain and alienation, expressed in the very title Sanctuary with a shy, tentative approach to ultimate happiness in the vocal line which is met with a thunderous response from the piano. Finally, "Ernestine's Biography" ends the program in a mood of rising urgency which provides a thin solace for the sad realization of one's human condition and its limitations.



"Sonatas & Myths," music of Bartok, Szymanowski, and Dohnányi Elizabeth Chang, violin; Steven Beck, piano (Bridge Records)

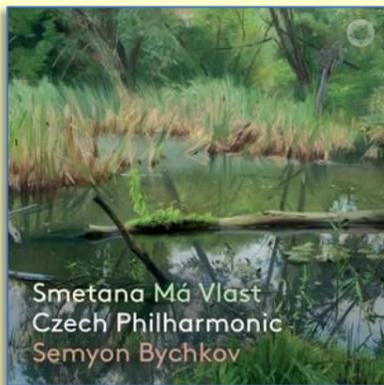
Elizabeth Chang is currently professor of violin at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a member of the violin faculty of the Pre-College Division of the Juilliard School. Steven Beck, her collaborator on this album, is a Steinway Artist and is on the faculty of the University of Massachusetts Amherst. So much for their academic achievements, of which I've only briefly hinted: Chang and Beck also do a swell job of putting across an intriguing program of music by three composers who, in various degrees, have had an impact of the music of the 20th Century – and no fooling!

Poland's Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937), first up in the program, is represented by three pieces recalling Greek mythology. *La Fontaine d'Arethuse* (The Fountain of Arethusa) evokes the rippling fountain of the title, habitat of Pan and the Nymphs, in cascading, ceaselessly flowing measures and tormented violin passages that serve to suggest love-passion and pursuit. *Narcisse* (Narcissus), by contrast, suggests the bottomless sadness occasioned by unrequitable love (see our expression "narcissistic"). *Dryades et Pan* (The Dryads and Pan) evokes forest murmurs, mysterious voices, light and darkness, ending in silence like a stone in water.

Hungary's Ernst von Dohnányi (1877-1960), up next, is represented by a splendid Violin Sonata in C# minor, Op. 21. There are three movements, taken *attacca*. The first, *Allegro Appassionato*, allows the violinist to cultivate a lovely tone of considerable richness. The next, *Allegro ma con tenerezza*, emphasizes a conspicuous tenderness that is contrasted to a prevailing mood of real sadness. The third and last, *Vivace assai*, starts fast, with a sound of alarm giving way to vivacity, allowing plenty of opportunity for risk-taking by both partners in the way of mood changes and the necessary alertness to encompass them. At the end, the close partnership of Chang and Beck is needed to close the deal.

The program concludes with Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano by Hungarian composer Bela Bartok (1881-1945), one of the greatest figures of the past century. A very busy and richly textured opening with swirling figurations, rich dissonances, and a strong feeling of urgency is coupled with an opposed disinclination to stay on task and resolve an intimidating conflict. The music settles on a sad theme, a meditation, and then a big, fullsome sound conveying sadness and passion. The next movement, Adagio, cultivates a serene beauty that is nonetheless equated with sorrow and longing. Strong articulated chords come into play in music that requires a close integration of both voices that is a far cry from inherited romantic notions of melody and accompaniment. Here, Bartok takes western music into unfamiliar waters.

Big, impressive chords are heard at the opening of the Allegro finale, with a widely spaced violin part, and then strident violin chords poised against an insistent driving accompaniment. Big piano chords reinforce the impression of a trainwreck of melody in the violin. Conflicting dissonances ensue before a serene melody ca. 8:45 signals a final dash to the finish line by both voices. (Not suitable for "quiet hour" listening!)



Bedřich Smetana: *Má Vlast (My Country)*
Semyon Bychkov conducts the Czech
Philharmonic Orchestra
(Pentatone)

Semyon Bychkov conducts the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra in *Má Vlast (My Country)*, the work for which Czech composer Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884) is best known. The set of six tone poems, celebrating the dark history, legends, and natural beauty of his homeland, was personally meaningful to Smetana himself, and he gave it his very best.

It opens with swirling harp glissandi, taking us back in history as it celebrates *Vyšehrad* (The High Castle), overlooking the city of Prague. Now open to the public, it had been long deserted by the composer's day, a symbol of past glory. The strings carry the music until the brass rises softly, succeeded by a twilight / nocturnal mood in tribute to the past. (Incidentally, Smetana himself is buried in a graveyard on the castle grounds).

Vltava (The Moldau), best known of the six tone poems, depicts the river that runs through Prague, finally merging with the Elbe. It opens at rise of day, taking on a festive air as it flows past the city. Twilight and swirling eddies, conveyed by flutes and other woodwinds, give way to a triumphal climax to this watery procession of the Moldau in all its majesty as brass and percussion rise to the task, ending in a stunning thump of the tympani when the river disappears in the distance.

Šárka, comes next, its title recalling a dark legend of love, passion, and murder in which the amazon warrior of the title disguises herself as a maiden in distress, from which she is delivered by the hero Ctirad. After a night of sexual bliss in which Šárka has secretly drugged their mead, she and her maidens fall upon Ctirad and his sleeping comrades and slay them all. There are a lot of conflicting elements in this tone poem – love, longing, lust, passion, and murder – all conveyed in Smetana's vivid orchestration, ending in a furious, violent climax.

Z českých luhů a hájů (From Bohemia's Woods and Fields) offers a lovely pastoral vision as a striking contrast to the fury of its predecessor. In this tone poem, which ranks with *The Moldau* as Smetana's most eternally popular, the composer celebrates the beauty and power of nature and the Czech countryside in a gloriously evocative pastoral vein. Stirring nationalistic music, recalling Smetana's original purpose in writing *My Country*, comes rather as a surprise at the end of a tone poem more difficult to convey than we might imagine.

The last poems are *Tábor*, commemorating the valor of the Hussites, who rebelled against ecclesiastical authority in the 15th Century, and *Blaník*, beginning with a reiteration of the stirring *Tábor* motif as it evokes with distant horn calls the mountain inside which legend says a great army of knights, led by St. Wenceslaus, sleep until their country should need them. (Kind of like King Arthur with a Czech accent. Because of their subject matter, these last two poems are probably the most difficult to convey to an international audience. Bychkov, a native of St. Petersburg, Russia who emigrated to the U.S. and now resides in France, doubtless knows something about what it's like to be in search of a country. And in the Czech Philharmonic he certainly has the right orchestra to put it across!



Strauss: *Ein Heldenleben*
Mahler: *Rückert-Lieder*
Sonya Yoncheva, soprano; Rafael
Payare, Orchestre Symphonique de
Montreal (Pentatone)

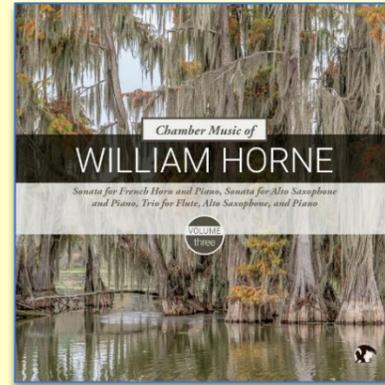
It's a small world, after all. Rafael Payare, born in Puerto la Cruz, Venezuela, first conducted the Orchestre Symphonique de Montreal (OSM) as early as 2018 and was appointed its music director beginning the 2022-2023 season. Here, he joins with soprano and Plovdiv, Bulgaria native Sonya Yoncheva in a memorable performance of Gustav Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder*, perhaps the composer's most memorable song cycle of all. The results are as fine as we had the right to expect, given Yoncheva's beautifully textured voice, with the range and nuance to put across some of the composer's best songs based on the immortal poetry of the German romantic poet Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866).

The five songs are as follows: *Ich atmet' einem linden Duft* (I breathed a delicate fragrance), *Blicke mir nicht in die Lieder!* (Do not look at my songs), *Um Mitternacht* (At Midnight), *Liebst du um Schönheit* (If you love for beauty), and *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (I am lost to the world). They benefit from the artists' sensitivity to Mahler's song settings. All are memorable. My personal favorite is the last-named, which ends (translated): "I am dead to the world's tumult / And rest in a quiet realm! / I live alone, I live alone, in my heaven, / In my love, in my song!" Song lyrics don't get more memorable than that. Two notable assets that our artists possess are Yoncheva's splendid breath control and Payare's well-known penchant for conducting without a score. "It's very important," says he, "that you don't have your head in the score, but the score in your head. That way you don't have a wall between you and the musicians."

Payare undoubtedly applies that same remarkable ability when he directs Richard Strauss' feature-length tone poem *Ein Heldenleben* (A Hero's Life) which is through-composed and performed without a break other than a pause at the end of the first movement, entitled "The Hero." Thereafter, all the remaining movements are taken *attacca* in a wide-ranging score that takes up to fifty minutes to put across.

Ein Heldenleben unfolds in eight movements: 1) The Hero, 2) The Hero's Enemies, 3) The Hero's Companion (*Gefährtin*), 4) The Hero's Luck, 5) The Hero in Battle, 6) Certainty of Victory, 7) The Hero's Retirement from This World, and 8) The Hero's Fulfillment.

Early on, the cat was out of the bag about the "Enemies" movement being a wicked portrait of the composer's adversarial music critics in Vienna (lots of cacophony in this movement). Significantly, it does not end with a funeral march: the hero (Strauss' alter ego) lives on, though as he himself observed: "It does have lots of horns, being quite the thing to express heroism." Suffice it to say, Rafael Payare handles a very big and complex score with such economy that it doesn't seem either long or wearisome (no small achievement).



William Horne: *Chamber Music Volume 3*
Brandon LePage, Flute; Walter Puyear,
Alto Saxophone; Mollie Pate, French
horn, and Xiting Yang and Joonghun
Cho, pianists (Blue Griffin)

William Horne is virtually unique among today's composers in that his music incorporates elements of both classical and jazz idioms without any seeming contradiction. The Emeritus faculty member of Loyola University in New Orleans and former student of Yehudi Wyner, Horne composes music that is equally accessible to lovers and performers of jazz and the classics. So much so that the classical crowd don't feel they are going slumming when they respond to the siren call of his music, and jazz musicians and aficionados don't feel any necessity for "putting on the ritz." It's all there for everyone to enjoy.

This is Volume 3 of Horne's Chamber Music in what promises to be an ongoing series on the innovative Blue Griffin label. We open with *Sonata for French Horn and Piano* (2021) in three movements. *Passionately* lives up to its name as the penetrating tone of the horn is superbly set against widely spaced piano chords, creating the sort of conflict on which music thrives. The slow movement, labelled *Gently*, opens in a yearning mood with broadly pronounced rhythms. The horn really shines in a middle section based on widely spaced notes and travelling rhythms. The third movement, entitled *Quick, energetic*, features a nice bloom in the horn and a jaunty piano accompaniment, to which the horn does a great job keeping pace before tearing off at the end.

Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano (2022) opens *Not too fast*, and in a real spirit of adventure. The flavorful sax tone plays well against percussive rhythms in the piano. There's even a kind of "string tone" in the ostinato before the movement closes quietly. Rising intensity in the middle movement, *Slowly and gently*, engages both players. The finale, marked *Moderately*, has a slow, blues-y opening followed by a pulse-quickening pickup in the mid-section featuring tones both quick and melodious from the sax, and a lively interaction between both players.

Trio for Flute, Alto Saxophone and Piano (2023) opens *Not too fast, amiably*, with nicely integrated, flavorful timbres and breezy tempi which give both flute and saxophone a real workout. The slow movement, marked *Simply and reflectively*, opens in a yawning chasm for the sax and piano, following which the flute makes a delayed but welcome entry. The movement ends in a really engaging dialogue among all three instruments and what the composer terms "an extended coda of glowing warmth." In the finale, *Playfully, but not too fast*, the dialogue resolves into a swell romp for all three players, ending decisively.

Kudos for our performing artists: Mollie Pate, French horn; Walter Puyear, alto saxophone, and Brandon LePage, flute; with Xiting Yang the pianist in the *Sonata for Horn and Piano* and Joonghun Cho, pianist in the other two works.

ⁱ For reviews of the previous releases in John Brawn's "Beethoven Odyssey," see my Classical Reviews for Feb 2013, Oct 2013, July 2014, May 2015, Feb 2018, June 2019, Jan 2023, and Aug 2023.