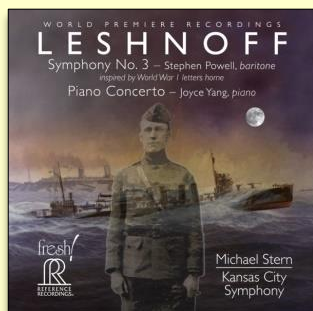


## Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

December, 2020



Leshnoff: Symphony No. 3 Stephen Powell, Baritone; Michael Stern, Kansas City Symphony (Reference Recordings)

Once again, an exploration of the music of American composer Jonathan Leshnoff proves rewarding. Leshnoff works out of the Baltimore metro area, where he has taught music theory and contemporary music history since 2003 at Towson University. I've previously had occasion to review recordings of his music on three different labels in my columns of September 2019 (Naxos) and July 2020 (MSR, Reference).

So much for history. What makes this composer so distinguishable from his contemporaries is easy to divine: it is the concentrated emotion, the lyricism, cohesive construction, and economy of his music. In the last-cited, Leshnoff reminds me of a similar economy we find in works of Ravel and Prokofiev, a trait all the more effective because it does not limit the emotion we find in his music. He seems to have a penchant for the larger musical forms (symphony, string quartet, concerto, oratorio) which he handles so skilfully the results seem positively intuitive.

As Leshnoff says in his booklet annotation for the present pairing of world premiere recordings, his Third Symphony relates to America's moment of involvement in world events. Its song texts are taken from two letters to home by soldiers who went off in 1918-1919 to serve in what was then known as "The Great War." The understated poignancy in his settings of these letters is epitomized by one in which the writer says to his wife "My greatest wish is to be with you this night... Should the God of all call upon me and I never see you again, know that I died with your name upon my lips." A lyric like that comes across with greatest conviction when sung naturally, as it is here by baritone Stephen Powell.

There is a connection between both these letters, taken from the collection of the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, and the fact



Brahms: String Quartets (2), op. 51  
New Orford String Quartet  
(Bridge Records)

Reprinted from *Phil's Classical Reviews* January, 2016.

The New Orford Quartet, consisting of Jonathan Crow and Andrew Wan, violins; Eric Nowlin, viola; and Brian Manker, cello, was formed in 2009, taking its name from its similarly named predecessor that disbanded in 1991. That organization in turn took its name from the Orford Arts Centre in Ontario. So now you know.

What you *don't* know, but will hear as soon as you put this new release of Brahms' Op. 51 on your CD player, is the precision and warmth cultivated by the New Orford, a winning combination that has been cited by critics as "sweet, balanced, and technically unassailable," qualities that make these artists ideal interpreters of Brahms' masterworks.

I have been historically slow to warm up to these two string quartets because I found the performances I'd heard to be less than enchanting. George Bernard Shaw, a passionate Wagnerite who was definitely no friend of Brahms, famously described the composer as "a sentimental voluptuary." Even today, it's a common assumption that Quartet No. 2 in A minor, with its somewhat more leisurely flowing of spontaneous lyricism, stems from earlier material than its predecessor. No doubt that is a reflection of the modern prejudice that a work filled with attractive melodies that people actually *enjoy* listening to must date from an earlier period, before its composer got too wise to himself.

The larger issue for interpreters of these quartets is how to characterize them. Brian Manker, in his program notes, describes the finale of Quartet No. 1 in C minor as "a tragedy on the order of the Greek epics, where the arrow of time is pressing

that their world premiere recording is given in the present performance by Michael Stern and the Kansas City Symphony.

The other work given its premiere recording on this Reference Recordings release is Leshnoff's Piano Concerto. It is performed by the Korean-American pianist Joyce Yang, whose sensational intensity and keyboard speed has impressed Leshnoff for some time. Both these qualities come into play in the present work in an energetic conversation between piano and orchestra in the opening movement, in the comic Scherzo which Leshnoff aptly describes as both "kinetic and propulsive," and the sensational Finale, quite simply marked "Fast" (*and how!*)

The most compelling movement is the second (of four), marked "Slow," which Leshnoff describes with a Hebrew character that translates "*Neshama*" and implies a "breathing soul," which is the part of the soul that expresses itself in thoughts and ideas. Joyce Yang appropriately gears down on her customary dynamism in order to express the beauty of a movement that is written in simple rhythms and melodies. She thus brings the supple structures in this movement immediately into a full, vibrant life that is enhanced by the sensitive partnership of Michael Stern and the Kansas City Symphony.

forward... relentlessly." Though most observers concede Quartet no. 2 to be less "terse" and "tragic" than its opus-mate, its finale is often cited for its conflict between theme and accompaniment – ignoring the fact that its meter is based on the Czárdás, a Hungarian dance that *will* do just that sort of thing.

The main issue encountered when interpreting Brahms' Opus 51 results from the way themes of remarkably different character evolve organically from one another. Rather like Aesop's fable of The Six Blind Men and the Elephant, it all depends on what part of the beast you have hold of at the moment. Manker cites the way the material used in all the movements of No. 1 springs from the rhythmic and melodic contour of its opening theme, like "a natural foreshadowing." Two very striking examples are the way in which the Allegretto of No. 1 changes character to a broader, more expansive theme at about the 4:35 mark, and the way the charming serenade intrudes on the opening Allegro non troppo in No. 2 at 1:22 and again at 5:15 like a welcome outburst of sunshine. The New Orford Quartet capture these moods and changes of character to perfection.



Schubert: Piano Sonatas in A Major, D959 and B-flat Major, D960  
Hans-Jürg Strub, pianist  
(Ars Produktion)

Hans-Jürg Strub, a native of Winterthur, Switzerland, has had a long and distinguished career as concert pianist, competition winner, professor and founder of numerous interpretation workshops. In the present 2-CD pairing of monumental works by Franz Schubert, Strub approaches the task as if it were the crowning achievement of his life in music. As well he might, for Piano Sonatas in A Major, D959, and B-flat Major, D960 were the summation of Schubert's own career as a composer. A dying man who *knew* he was dying, Schubert completed both sonatas and also the one in C Minor, D958 in September 1828, and performed all three in a single concert later that month, a remarkable achievement for one whose health had been racked by illness.

So, there is considerable reason for regarding what we hear in the present recital as constituting Schubert's testament. Both sonatas are laden with problems and hazards for interpreter

As well as listener, with the result that they have never been as popular with pianists and audiences as Schubert's much more accessible sets of Impromptus and Moments Musicaux. As Strub relates in his analysis of D959, the character of the sonata changes after a full-blooded opening, and everything is called into question by a contrasting second phrase consisting of descending triplet arpeggios.

"Such musical fractures and false paths are characteristic of the entire sonata," continues Strub, and he isn't kidding. Unusual harmonic progressions, contrasting phrases, and a wide cantabile arc can bedevil an unwary pianist, especially when endeavoring to maintain a moderate tempo. All the devils of Hell come into play in the desolate second movement, set in the dark key of F-sharp minor, as a furious outburst erupts suddenly in the midst of a barcarolle, a musical genre that is normally gentle and swaying. This time, it seems a cry of anguish, despair, even madness. Whatever it is, we are unprepared for it, and it completely wrecks the sense of harmonious time that the opening movement was at pains to create. Following this is a sublime modulation in *pianissimo*, and then the original theme returns, but decidedly different. As Strub observes, it is "almost trembling before it expires in the lowest melancholy register."

The innocent-seeming, playful Scherzo is on the whole better-behaved, and even includes some pizzicati in

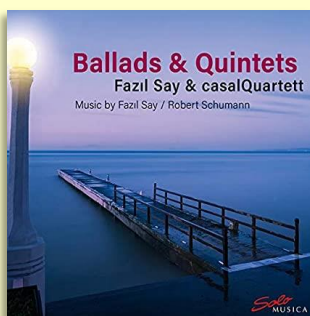
the left hand, reminiscent of plucked strings on a cello. An abrupt digression based on a downward rushing minor scale serves to remind us of previous events before the scherzo resumes its graceful, waltz-like character. In the finale, Schubert borrowed the rondo structure from Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 31, No. 1, no doubt as a tribute to the late composer whose memory he deeply revered. The finale, in the form of an expansive rondo, requires the artist to be vigilant for subtle changes in mood, texture, and rhythm, involving some pregnant pauses to keep up the suspense as to how Schubert is going to end a movement that seemingly does not want to end at all (and incidentally, allowing the performer time to re-position his hands). An enchanting melody in F-sharp major occurs in the recapitulation, before the coda steps in energetically, concluding with an inversion of the opening bars of the Allegro. In a sense, we have travelled full-circle in the past 41 minutes, but we have also experienced something in the nature of a sea-change.

Sonata in B-flat Major, D960, is longer, at almost 44 minutes' playing time, than its predecessor. Its architecture assumes a real symphonic dimension that allows Schubert to develop it as a persuasive drama, a fact of which Hans-Jürg Strub is keenly aware. When dealing with a work on such a large canvas, one doesn't want to get too cute with the details, as delicious as they are, and Strub is under no undue urgency when exploring the long, slow melody in the opening movement that sets a mood of deep introspection. That melody, which Strub characterizes as autumnal, melancholy, and infused with a sense of farewell, is interrupted by a tremolo in the bass that becomes more significant as we move along.

These rumblings in the bass act as upheavals, becoming more insistent as the 21-minute movement develops. Contrary to our expectation, they *rise* rather than fall, creating hazards for the interpreter – hazards which Strub takes in stride. "I disagree," he professes, "with the view that the vexing and unsettling nature of the fortissimo trill is just as crucial to the opening movement as are its epic dimensions."

Strub speaks of the sombre atmosphere of the slow movement, *Andante sostenuto*, and its hymn-like central section conveying warmth and optimism before it "retreats back to despondence towards the end." This sad, mysterious, hauntingly beautiful movement is the most audacious of all harmonically, with modulations that still sound striking to us today and must have really astonished its early audiences. The Scherzo, which Strub characterizes as "filled with levity and nonchalance" also contains a parody of the theme of the opening movement in double tempo which comes across very nicely here.

The finale is a mix of charm and pugnacity with a seemingly endless flow of melody over an uninterrupted and highly rhythmic progression of sixteenth notes. Coming as it does after the rigors we have encountered early-on in this sonata, it seems like playtime for the pianist. It is even replete with bright-sounding notes that seem, to me at least, to evoke happiness and merry laughter. About a minute before the movement concludes, we get a last *pro forma* effort by the darkly negative principle we encountered much earlier, but it is doomed to fail as the music concludes in a mood of ringing affirmation. "Maybe," Strub surmises, "things were not as serious after all."



"Ballads & Quintets," music of Fazil Say, Robert Schumann – casalQuartett (Solo Musica)

The casalQuartett, the chamber ensemble heard in this recording of **Ballads & Quintets**, was founded in Zurich in 1996 and is comprised of Felix Froschhammer and Rachel Späth, violins; Markus



"*Ins Stille Land*," Quartets by Franz Schubert – Signum String Quartet (Pentatone)

The members of the Signum String Quartet are as follows: Florian Donderer and Annette Walther, violins; Xandi van Dijk, viola; and Thomas Schmitz, cello. Stylistically, they are one of the



"Not Our First Goat Rodeo" Yo-Yo Ma, cello; Stuart Duncan, fiddle; Edgar Meyer, string bass; Chris Thile, mandolin (Sony)

In a keenly anticipated follow-up to their 2011 hit "Goat Rodeo Sessions," Messrs Ma, Duncan, Meyer, and Thile are at it again, throwing themselves into a well-



Fleck, viola; and Andreas Fleck, cello. The total commitment and warmth of their playing is readily accessible on the present album in performances of music by Fazil Say and Robert Schumann.

Say, born 1970 in Ankara, Turkey and still very much alive and busily engaged in his concurrent careers as a classical and jazz pianist and composer, is first represented here by 3 Ballads dedicated to subjects dear to him: the memory of famed Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, the birth of Say's daughter Kumru, and plans for the re-forestation of Mount Ida after decades of intensive gold mining. In music that deftly mixes classical techniques and popular idioms, Say, whose presence is felt here as collaborator as well as composer, contributes to the wonderfully luminous sonic blend he achieves with the members of the *casalQuartett*.

The good work continues in "The Moving Mansion," originally a suite for piano solo but here arranged for piano plus string quartet to take full advantage of a gripping interaction of different timbres. The title refers to a true story concerning Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who might be termed the George Washington of his country for the role he played in founding the modern Turkish state.

The story concerns a stately villa that he built in 1929 near Yalova on the eastern coast of the Sea of Marmara, and which he later had moved at some expense and trouble rather than prune back the branches of a certain plane tree of which he was especially fond (Mansion and tree are still there today, as a state trust). In a work that plays rather like a symphonic suite, Say reveals his passion for nature in the sounds of birdsong, as well as pungent rhythms, vivid colors, and lively dance-inflected melodies.

The rest of the program consists of Robert Schumann's auspicious Piano Quintet in E-flat Major, Op. 44. Composed in Schumann's

most engaging quartets on the current European scene, with performances thus far principally in Germany, the Netherlands, and London. Notable for their nuanced performances, smooth ensemble, and obvious love of the sonorities in the works they perform, they have the discipline needed to take on highly rhythmic and emotional passages without having the music run away from them.

Their latest album, *Ins stille Land*, gives us a good impression of all of the above-mentioned traits and more. A welcome item on the present program, all of works by Franz Schubert, is his early Quartet No. 6 in D major, D74. If we were led by its early Deutsch catalog number to expect a jejeune creation, we would be dead wrong. In terms of economy, style and rhythmic alertness, this is a remarkably advanced work for any 16-year old. For all its youthful exuberance, there's not a wasted note or phrase here. Of special interest are its shapely contours and the fact that the second movement, *Menuetto: Allegro*, is already very much a scherzo in all but name.

The major work here, of course, is Schubert's much-later Quartet in D minor, D810, known as "Death and the Maiden." Here, harmonic richness vies with deep underlying emotion, reflecting the fact that Schubert drew several of the melodies from his own songs based on texts dealing with the subject of death. Most notable, naturally, are the far-ranging variations in the slow movement on the song *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (Death and the Maiden), but Schubert also gives us, in the obsessive galloping rhythm of his finale, the underlying pulse of *Der Erlkönig* (The Elf King), another potent death symbol.

In this work, the artistic discipline of the Signum Quartet, which I mentioned earlier, comes into play, as you would not want the very headstrong emotions and powerful rhythms to run away with your performance. But there's

disciplined frenzy combining pop (mostly bluegrass) and classical techniques in the interest of personal artistic enrichment for the artists themselves and an ear-stretching experience for all us listeners. Engaging sounds, which are impossible to ignore at any rate, predominate in an album you will probably want to re-audition at every hearing.

So what is a "goat rodeo," anyway? The colorful name actually comes from aviator's lingo. It refers to a chaotic situation in which everything has to go right in order for it to work out safely. In all probability, it won't, and our only recourse is to sit back and watch the smashup happen. In other words, a fiasco. [Hmm... that sounds like an account of our recent U.S. election.]

Happily, that doesn't occur in the present album, thanks to the alertness and versatility of all hands involved. I must admit I had some reservations about reviewing this new offering because of previous experiences with "crossover" albums, which usually turned out to be an instance of either dumbing-down the classics for the sake of popular consumption or else glamorizing the pop genre in a way that recalled the old adage about putting lipstick on a pig.

Was I wrong about *this* Goat Rodeo! The really breath-taking virtuosity of our artists, each of whom is a Grammy Award winner in his own right, plus the fact that bluegrass music is a genre with a lot to offer the classical, combine to put this audacious album over with irresistible appeal. Should that surprise us? After all, when classical, that is to say non-liturgical "art" music, first came into existence some five centuries ago, it drew on the popular songs and dances of its day. (Where else would it find inspiration?)

The selections themselves are a hoot, with titles like "Your Coffee is a Disaster," "Walz Whitman,"

chamber music year of 1841, it significantly established the genre as being one for piano and string quartet, whereas earlier attempts, notably Franz Schubert's famous "Trout" Quintet with double bass of 1819, had been more leisurely, divertimento-type works.

Schumann's piano quintet comes across as more like a symphonic work, from its glittering *Allegro brillante* opening to its forceful finale whose theme is combined with the opening movement's main theme in a mighty double fugue as a means of adding to the work's harmonic riches (and perhaps also by way of a tribute to J. S. Bach). Along the way, Schumann took a suggestion by Felix Mendelssohn to add a really energetic second trio to the scherzo, thus concentrating the intensity of the music as we approach the finale.

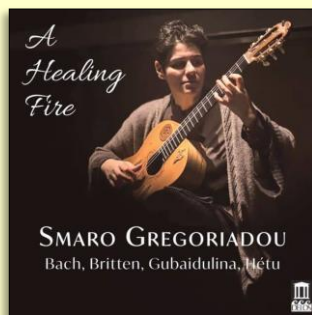
Say and the casual Quartett are keenly aware of all these features, as well as the general wealth of emotion that makes this work so very memorable.

another reason: philosophically we have a mood of affirmation in the idea of death as a liberation from earth-bound cares and sorrows and a transcendence to a higher sphere rather than just a tragic end, a credo of the romantic era to which Schubert very much subscribed.

Notable in the present program are the Signum Quartet's inclusion of a handful of transcriptions of Schubert songs by their violist Xandi van Dijk. They are: *Ins stille Land* (In the quiet country), *Frühlingsglaube* (Joy of Spring), *Vorüber, ach vorüber* (Pass by, ah, pass by) from Death and the Maiden, *Abendstern* (Evening Star), *Auf dem Wasser zu singen* (Singing on the Water), *Das Grab* (The Grave) and *Schwanengesang* (Swan Song). That so many of these song texts deal with a longing for death and transcendence is remarkable, and it really provides a useful key to the Signum Quartet's knowing interpretations of all these song-transcriptions

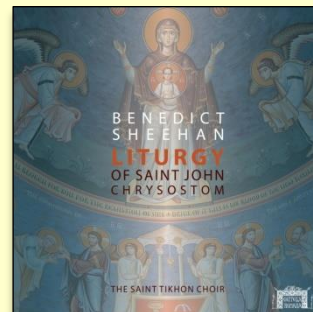
"Every Note a Pearl," "Not for Lack of Trying" (in which Edgar Meyer trades his double bass for a piano that helps fracture the sound barrier in a piece that is loaded with deliciously splintered tone colors), and "Voilà!" where Chris Thile switches to fiddle in order to engage in a spirited dialogue in which he and Stuart Duncan play off each other with stunning effect. And Yo-Yo Ma? We hear the rich sound of his cello on a number of tracks, mostly enriching the harmony but occasionally indulging in deeply satisfying melodies, as warm as they are unexpected.

We mustn't forget the guest vocalist. Aofie O'Donovan, best known as the lead singer for the bluegrass band Crooked Still, lends her distinctive voice to the two songs on the album First, "The Trappings" (*Never thought I'd find you in the trappings of potential / Happiness / Was a soft Ray of moonlight*). And then, "We Were Animals" (*If I leave and you want to know the reason why / Look yourself in the weary eyes / You can't be wondering anymore*). These songs deal with the need for human warmth and closeness, the exultation of finding it, and the pain of losing it.



"A Healing Fire" – Smaro Gregoriadou, guitar (Delos)

"A Healing fire" is the latest release in a series by Greek guitarist Smaro Gregoriadou that began with two volumes of "Reinventing Guitar" (2009, 2012). It continued with her album "El Aleph," applying what she had learned in her discoveries to music of the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It is an intriguing idea. As a concept it raises as many questions as it provides explanations.



Benedict Sheehan: Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom  
The composer conducts the Saint Tikhon Choir (SATB) with soloists Timothy Parsons (counter-tenor), Michael Hawes (baritone) and Jason Thoms (bass)  
(Capella Romana CD + Blu-Ray video disc)

The musical tradition embodied in the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom is so out of step with what we are pleased to call modern-day "American civilization" that it requires a little background before

For one thing, just what is a “pedal guitar”? The very name conjures up the ridiculous image of a weird guitar the playing of which involves use of the artist’s feet. I believe that the *electric* guitar, at least, has historically been spread out horizontally and floor-mounted like a xylophone, ostensibly to allow its softer sound to be heard amidst the louder instruments in a dance band. But that is clearly not the configuration we’re talking about here, as we can verify by viewing the visual images on Ms. Gregoriadou’s website. The closest thing we can see in any of the images is a small appliance added onto the outside of the resonating body of an acoustic guitar.

And actually, that’s what it is! These devices, called ‘pedals,’ evidently serve to amplify, compress, harmonize or modulate the guitar sound. Why go to all this trouble? Reinventing the guitar, as Gregoriadou expresses it, is *“not merely an attempt for historically informed interpretations. It expresses the dynamic process of assimilation by which a contemporary artist re-creates in his own terms the masterpieces of the past. Thus the objective is not as simplistic as making a modern guitar sound like a harpsichord or a baroque lute. The aim is to discover some vital but long-neglected aspects of the guitar’s tradition and historical milieu and to incorporate them into our current interpretive logic and mentality.”*

That applies most clearly to the sole baroque masterwork on the program, J. S. Bach’s Sonata No. 2 in A minor, BWV 1003 for solo violin. Obviously an acoustic guitar, with or without the use of a pedal or the “scalloped” frets we see in the model shown on Page 9 of the album booklet, cannot replicate all the features of a violin, nor is it desirable to do so in order to achieve Gregoriadou’s purpose. A guitar cannot execute stops as a violin can. Nor can it achieve the slow stacking of notes that Bach does in this work, a feat that astounded his contemporaries who’d previously considered it impossible. Nonetheless, Gregoriadou impresses us with the sense of gravitas she imparts to the opening movement, aptly titled *Grave*, as well as its decorative flourishes, the contrapuntal intricacies of the ensuing Fugue, the warmth of the Andante, and the lighthearted spirit of the Allegro finale.

Spatial considerations do not permit me to extoll the virtues of the other three works on the program. Nocturnal after John Dowland by Benjamin Britten is a very demanding single-movement work in eight sections that requires the utmost vigilance of the performer. Sofia Gubaidulina’s Serenade is a modern gem that says a lot in the smallest of spaces (3:06). And Jacques Hétu’s Suite for Guitar is filled with harmonic riches and interactions (or perhaps collisions?) between musical cells, all imbued with the composer’s passion for melody.

we discuss the new English-language setting by composer Benedict Sheehan. There’s a deliberately timeless and archaic character to this, the Liturgy of the Russian Orthodox Church. As Sheehan explains it, the purpose of the Liturgy is to transcend time and space, the “lay[ing] aside of all earthly cares,” as it says in the Cherubic Hymn. It is not simply worship per se, but a breakthrough to the transcendent for the believer.

Sheehan speaks at length of this need to “break through” the stuff of everyday life, so that *“created temporal nature might be experienced as permeable to what is uncreated and outside time.”* There are quite a few moments in Sheehan’s new setting of this Liturgy, as is also the case in its settings by Russian greats such as Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff, in which the sensitive listener might indeed become aware of the awesome presence of an eternal world.

Benedict Sheehan was the right man for the task when he was commissioned to compose an English language setting of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom by the Patriarch Tikhon Russian-American Music Institute (PaTRAM Institute). Starting from the premise that the Liturgy is *“the consummation of all created things and the expression of their purpose, meaning and direction,”* he reasons that tradition need not be a constraint but rather something that serves to enhance creativity rather than stifling it.

Sheehan has created a new musical setting, vibrant and steeped in Orthodox tradition (preserving, for instance, the traditional roles of Priest and Deacon and the exhortations assigned to each) but with a freshness that will be appealing to the modern-day listener. Per tradition, the setting is purely vocal without instrumental accompaniment. Sheehan breaks with tradition by employing female as well as male voices (something that was not done in the old Russia), utilizing blends that I personally find very satisfying. Of particular interest is the three-fold Alleluia that follows the Trisagion section. Here, it is based on the *Znamenny* chant of olden times, a very demanding vocal form in which there are no pauses or rests, and where the voices become concentrated and blended in such a way that they seem to be transformed into one single voice.

Not being Orthodox myself, I do not know for sure how many of the verses are obligatory and how many are optional. But I suspect the 75-minute work would not often be performed in its entirety, no matter what you might have heard of the endurance of the Old Believers of former times!



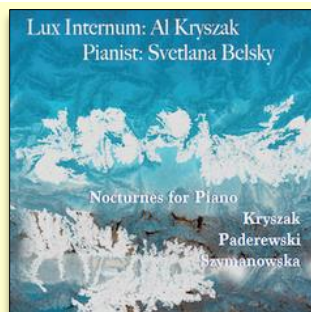


Handel: Messiah – Julia Doyle, Tim Mead, Thomas Hobbs, Roderick Williams, Justin Doyle, Akademie für Alte Musik, RIAS Kammerchor, Berlin (Pentatone)

This is a very special rendering of George Frideric Handel's ever-popular Messiah by the RIAS Kammerchor and orchestra of the Akademie für Alte Musik, Berlin. It is very much a singer's Messiah where the soft sounds of period instruments ensure a sonic environment in which chamber chorus plus vocalists are able to make their points clearly and decisively. One of the first things one notices about the quartet of vocal soloists is that soprano Julia Doyle is the only female voice, the part of the contralto being taken by a male countertenor. That lends a more authentic period quality to this Messiah than we might have at first expected.

Doyle's voice, sunny, gracious and lovely, is heard to good effect in some of the most purely lyrical verses in Messiah, especially in the ravishing air "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion," the florid soprano-countertenor duet "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd," the air "I know that my redeemer liveth," and the splendid accompagnato-recitative sequence in Part I dramatizing the good news the angel brought to the shepherds.

Mead's countertenor inherits the role customarily assigned to a contralto, allowing the penetrating quality of his voice to put across the numerous Old Testament passages dealing with prophesy, such as the recitative "Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd,

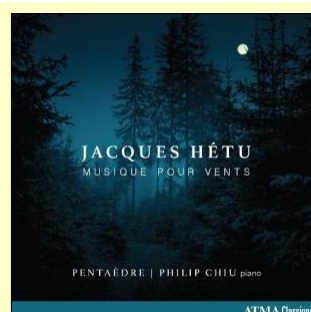


Lux Internum," Nocturnes for piano by Kryszak, Paderewski, Szymanowska – Svetlana Belsky (self-produced)

I've been having a devil of a time finding biographical information about composer Alan Kryszak, even including his date and place of birth. Maybe he was spawned instead of being born in the usual manner? That would accord with the proliferation of multiple talents and interests in a most remarkable figure who is pianist, guitarist and baritone and has done notable work with the REV alt-rock band. He has also won recognition for his film scores, particularly for silent films (*Broken Blossoms*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) which have been released by TCM. And he's even a visual artist in the media of acrylic painting and woodburning.

Svetlana Belsky, the pianist heard in the present recording of Kryszak's *Lux Internum*, was born in the former Soviet Union and later received Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Peabody Conservatory, where she studied piano under Ann Schein, and also a Doctorate in Music Performance from the Manhattan School of Music. Her interest in Kryszak is sincere, based on her regard for the underlying concept of *Lux Internum* (Internal Light) as a reflection of "the last region of a person's soul in soulless times; light not visible because it lies in wait for the need."

The twelve piano pieces that comprise this work seem to fall initially into triads based on striving and yearning, heightened expectations, and then a falling-



Jacques Hétu: Music for Winds Pentaèdre (ATMA Classique)

Pentaèdre, acclaimed woodwind quintet from Quebec, is currently comprised of Ariane Brisson, flute; Martin Carpentier, clarinet; Élise Poulin, oboe; Mathieu Lussier, bassoon; and Louis-Philippe Marsolais, horn. On the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of composer and Trois Rivières, Quebec native Jacques Hétu (1938-2010) they are joined in a memorial tribute by Philip Chiu, Canadian pianist who was been described as one who "turns every musical idea into a beautiful array of colours" (*La Presse*).

Considering such glowing praise of Philip Chiu and also my own sanguine review of Pentaèdre's luminous pairing of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (January 2014), this would seem to be an auspicious joining of forces to honor a composer who was renowned for his sincere love of music for woodwinds. Pentaèdre and Chiu do not disappoint.

The program features five works for individual woodwind voices: *Nocturne* (clarinet), *Aria* (flute), *Lied* (horn), *Élegie* (bassoon), and *Incantations* (oboe), all with piano accompaniment. All these works are designed to showcase the best features of each woodwind and stretch its capability. In *Nocturne*, for instance, we are given a contemplative clarinet melody set against a background of dark harmonic colors in the piano. It comes across as

and the ears of the deaf unstopped," the air "Thou art gone up on high" in Part II, and the alto-tenor duet "O death, where is thy stung?" in Part III.

Tenor Thomas Hobbs gets good marks for the recitative "Comfort ye, my people" and the ensuing air "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made low," numbers that set the stage for the very opening of the oratorio following the Sinfonia. In like measure, Roderick Williams lends distinction to such numbers as the accompagnato "Yet once, a little while, and I will shake the heav'ns and the earth" in Part I and the air "The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be rais'd incorruptible" in Part III, stirring pronouncements for which only a bass voice will suffice.

This is a live Deutschlandfunk Kultur broadcast from the Jesus-Christus-Kirche, Berlin, January, 2020, beautifully recorded and mastered by the production team. The chorus seem to be mostly Germans with a healthy mixture of the international participation we might expect in a music capitol such as Berlin. All do an exceptional job dealing with the intricacies of the 18th century English in which Handel's libretto was written (no easy task for modern English speakers, either!)

back to gather resources in which all is not lost but provides the basis for further yearning and striving. Kryszak's basic materials include 2- and 3-note patterns, tonal clusters, and even some microtonal music, an area of special interest to this composer. With No. 10, we arrive at what sounds a lot like a progression of "blue" notes, a breakthrough that allows for further consolidations and explorations in Numbers 11-12. Am I correct in imagining the "Internal Light" has dawned?

The rest of the album is given to nocturnes by Polish composers Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941) and Maria Szymanowska (1789-1831). The latter was well-known for the brilliance and the expressive quality of her playing, both of which we feel in Belsky's performance of the Nocturne in B-flat. Paderewski's Nocturne, Op. 16, No. 4, also in the key of B-flat, is suffused with the softness and mystery of the night in Belsky's sensitive account, along with what seems an unmistakable tribute to Chopin, the great master of the genre.

enchanted, as if heard against the moonlit darkness of a forest at night. Likewise, the *Élegie* (bassoon) is plaintive, and the *Aria* (flute) is airy and imaginative.

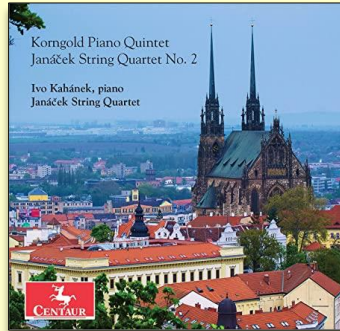
This is a composer who was fond of long, sustained musical phrases in his writing for the woodwinds. All of Hétu's habitual traits come together in his Quintet for Winds (1967), in which none of the best features of any of the five instruments is lost when they are amalgamated into the work as a whole. One may observe a similar procedure in his Four Miniatures for Oboe, Clarinet, and Bassoon, where you can almost taste the individual timbres of all three reeds.

As you've probably surmised, this is a program of particular appeal to woodwind musicians and fanciers of woodwind music. Nor does it neglect the hard-working pianist, enabling Chiu to make the most of a Prelude and Dance for Piano (1977) that assiduously explores both the high and the low ranges of the instrument.



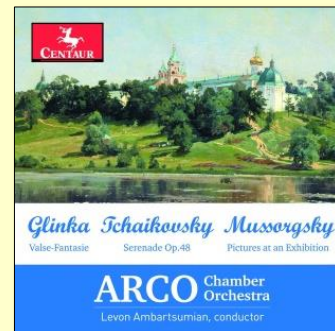
Chopin: Piano Sonata No. 2, Scherzos 1-4, "Heroic" Polonaise in A-flat, Op. 53  
Sophia Agranovich (Centaur)

I like Sophia Agranovich better every time I listen to her. This album is the third occasion I've



Janáček: String Quartet No. 2  
Korngold: Piano Quintet  
Ivo Kahánek, piano; The Janáček Quartet (Centaur)

The Janáček String Quartet have become a national institution of the Czech Republic in the



Glinka: Valse-Fantasie  
Tchaikovsky: Serenade for Strings, Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition – ARCO Chamber Orchestra (Centaur)

The ARCO Chamber Orchestra was founded at the Moscow



reviewed this artist (previous times were 10/2015 and 5/2018) and it may be the best yet from the Ukraine-born pianist who studied in the U.S. at Juilliard and now resides in the greater New York City area. She brings all her experience as teacher, lecturer, and performing artist into play in exploring some of Chopin's most demanding works.

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B Minor, Op. 35, known the world over as the "Funeral March," has not always been well-understood, going back to Robert Schumann's assessment of it as "four of his maddest children under the same roof." To be fair, it is much easier to see an emotional progression in this work than it is to fathom all of the various thematic and harmonic relationships between movements which an artist such as Agranovich must do in order to give as convincing a performance as we have here,

What is most apparent in this work is its evocation of a human life cycle with its aspirations and struggles. In the first movement, we are given the life force itself: striving, loving, and suffering. The ensuing Scherzo unleashes really demonic forces in the main section and contrasts them with the lyrical melody in the trio. When it ends, it is not yet clear which of the forces has emerged victorious. The third movement, *Marche funèbre*, provides a partial answer in its mourning for the death of the hero of the previous movements. In the brief but highly effective finale swirling figurations, evoking dark winds, howl over the grave of the hero, resting for all eternity (but with what peace of mind?)

There are numerous thematic and harmonic relationships between the movements as well, not as obvious, perhaps, as the emotive connections but evident to an artist with the patience to detect them. The kinship between the alternate melody in the first movement and the lovely theme in the scherzo is one. For

decades since since they were founded in 1947. Naturally, having been in existence more than 70 years, they have had a few personnel changes along the way. But present members Miloš Vacek (Violin 1), Richard Kružík (Violin 2), Jan Rezníček (viola), and Břetislav Vybíral (cello) continually strive to uphold the quartet's proud traditions of interpretation and expression.

That's a good thing in the case of Czech composers Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) and Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957). Other than the fact that both were natives of Moravia (b. Hukvaldy and Brno, respectively), and both wrote very emotional music, there is a lot that is deeply personal about their styles, and the members of the Janáček Quartet are adept at discovering the most essential characteristics of each.

Korngold, as you may know, was a child prodigy and later became one of the leading lights among progressive composers in Europe before he moved to Hollywood, where he was renowned for his film scores. In recent decades, the critics have been catching up with Korngold as a purely classical composer for whom Piano Quintet in E major, Op. 15 is a brilliant example. The Janáček Quartet are joined in this performance by the distinguished pianist Ivo Kahánek in a work in which piano and strings are often called upon to strike brilliant color facets by mutual friction.

In the first movement, marked *Mäßiges Zeitmaß mit schwungvoll blühendem Ausdruck*, implying a very large timescale with lively, flourishing expression, the initial pathos of Korngold's opening theme is countered by passages where the music seems to virtually disintegrate, only to reappear in deeper registers as it gathers again and reconstitutes itself.

The slow movement, an Adagio that is marked *Mit grösster Ruhe, stets äusserst gebunden und ausdrucksvoll* (with great peace

Tchaikovsky Conservatory in 1989 by violinist and conductor Levon Ambartsumian. When he came to the U.S. and joined the faculty of the University of Georgia, he moved its home base to the Hugh Hodgson School of Music. Today it is still going strong as a vibrant organization with an international blend of members.

ARCO's most recent album features Russian composers we all know and love, in stylish performances based in several instances on insightful string orchestra arrangements by Igor Kholopov. Using his experience as a cellist, Kholopov produced masterful transcriptions of works by Glinka and Mussorgsky that show a keen knowledge of the role of the lower strings in laying the harmonic groundwork that makes these string orchestra versions so very effective.

We begin with Glinka's Valse-Fantasie, in a lithe waltz tempo and with enough thematic variety to make this work irresistible. As Glinka recordings do not pop up in my mailbox with any great regularity, I hadn't actually heard this gem in some twenty years. But it all came back to me, immediately and vibrantly, in the present transcription and its performance by ARCO.

The well-loved Serenade for Strings in C major, Op. 48, by Tchaikovsky has never lost any of its charm by over-familiarity, and that isn't going to start here. The extremely rich harmonies of this work are much in evidence in the present recording, right from the beginning. Levon Ambartsumian and the orchestra do not take for granted even such a warhorse as the famous Waltz movement, which is often performed by itself as a program item or encore. Thanks to the steady beat underneath the melody, this waltz is almost literally danceable, if one only had the stamina. The center of gravity in the present account of the Tchaikovsky masterwork is where it should be,

another, the harmonies in the Funeral March can be found in the other three movements. A further tie exists in the fact that the first two movements both contrast a hard-driven opening with a lyrical second theme.

While unorthodox in some ways, Chopin's "Funeral March" Sonata proves a carefully worked out composition of great subtlety, and not merely the "four unruly children" Schumann surmised. In interpreting this work, Agranovich takes its dynamics for all she is worth, particularly at extreme ends of the keyboard. The tone she coaxes from her Steinway D is remarkably well-centered, and the recorded sound admirably captures her bold approach to the challenges of a work that she does not take for granted.

The union of keen interpretive insight and keyboard dynamics continues in this pianist's survey of Chopin's quirky Four Scherzi. The very word "scherzo" implies a jest or a joke, something that certainly does not apply to the darkness and pain in Scherzo No. 1, which opens with tension-filled chords, seeming like anguished screams, at the top and bottom of the keyboard, to be followed in the trio section by a mood of melancholy yearning, rather like a memory drifting in from another world. Nor does the word "scherzo" describe the Byronic passion that infects Scherzo 2. Scherzo No. 3 contrasts austere chords in the trio with a wild coda that ends victoriously in a harmonically rich C-sharp major. No. 4 is the happy member of the company, ending as a passionate celebration of pure love in a beautiful operatic melody that transforms into an intimate duet.

### Continued Below

That leaves us with the "Heroic" Polonaise in A-flat Major, a defiant and triumphant creation. It, too, should not be taken for granted, as familiar as it is. For one instance, take the way the melody varies the second time around, riding on descending chords whose downward trajectory gives no hint of acquiescence or defeat. Later, the rhythmic buildup of a racing figure in the right hand, just before the piece ends with an ecstatic rendition of the theme, allows Agranovich some of her best moments in a terrific recital.

and always extremely controlled and expressive), takes the listener on a journey of wide-ranging feeling and expression in nine sections based on the poetic beauty of Korngold's song cycle *Lieder des Abschieds* (Songs of Farewell). The finale, marked *Gemessen, beinahe pathetisch* (Measured, almost impassioned) reaffirms the principle of pitting emotional control against striving for unfettered expression that gives this work so much of its vital tension.

Janáček's String Quartet No. 2, subtitled "Intimate Pages" is such an electrically charged work that it should come as no surprise to learn that the composer was inspired to write it by a love affair he had experienced very late in life with a woman 38 years his junior. (*Darn, some guys have all the luck!*) It was originally subtitled "Love Letters," but the ascription was changed for the sake of discreet convention.

In keeping with the smoldering passions and volatile emotions that one might experience in an autumnal love affair, Janáček contrasted the folk-tinged melody for the viola in the first movement and the lilting dance-like episode in the second with some very discordant material, more spirited and rougher, as if to emphasize the uneven course of the love affair. The third movement is even more energetic, but now its energy is beautifully tempered by an extended slow episode that comes across like a lullaby. The spirited finale is enlivened by high-profile rhythms characteristic of the Moravian folk dances Janáček knew so well.

in the slowly unfolding, deeply moving, and melancholy Elégie.

Lastly, we have an intelligent and insightful account of Kholopov's string orchestra arrangement of Modest Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition. This arrangement is so inspired that even listeners who are long-acquainted with the orchestral versions by Ravel and others may not feel anything is less colorfully characterized or "missing" in the string orchestra version. Here, the richly detailed harmonies of the strings lend persuasion to Mussorgsky's far-ranging vision.

Of particular interest, naturally enough for a musical figure who died only a week after his 42<sup>nd</sup> birthday from the ravages of alcoholic epilepsy, are those tableaux dealing with decay and death, beginning with the deeply poignant meditation on times forever past in The Old Castle. This theme reaches its deep point in Catacombs. It is carried further in the following tableau, *Cum Mortuis in Lingua Mortua* (With the Dead in a Dead Language) which is mis-labelled on the end-sheet of the present album as "Promenade," although it has no relation at all to the promenade theme that occurs in numerous places in the score and serves to bind the musical picture exhibition together.

Death is also present in a very frightful Baba Yaga, also known as "The Hut on Hen's Legs," a depiction of the evil witch of Russian folklore who, it should be remembered, was a cannibal! The stunning moment when this tableau moves triumphantly and without a break into the finale, The Great Gate of Kiev, comes across sensationally here.