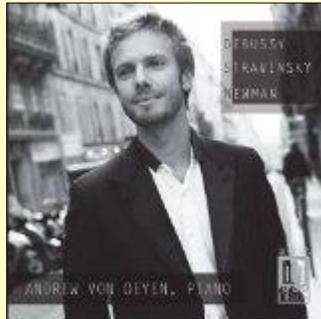


Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

February, 2014



Debussy: Preludes, Book I + Stravinsky: Three Movements from Petrushka
Andrew von Oeyen, piano
Delos Recordings

American pianist Andrew von Oeyen (b.1979) is a frighteningly capable artist thus far in his early maturity. Of course, he has the high degree of technical skill that one almost takes for granted in the present generation of Juilliard-trained artists. But he also knows what to do with it. In particular, his understanding of musical values and sense of timing border on the phenomenal. He has all the equipment for a truly great career except one: judging from his booklet photo, can anyone recommend the services of a good, reliable barber?

Von Oeyen shows not the slightest hesitation in meeting two of the most challenging works in the modern repertoire head-on. They are Claude Debussy's Preludes, Book I and Three Movements from Petrushka by Igor Stravinsky, with Prelude and Antipodal Rag by the contemporary American composer David Newman as far-from-easy encores. In fact, the deeper you go into this recital, the tougher the going, as the piano music gets less idiomatic all the time. This is music where the piano relies less on its traditional purling cantabile and is made to do what composer and artist *want* it to do, which is something else.

Andrew von Oeyen shows his prowess early on in the Preludes in the quasi-orchestral techniques Debussy employs in pieces as dissimilar as the exotic, languorous *Danseuses de Delphes* (temple dancers of Delphi) and the blustery *Le vent dans la plaine* (the wind on the plain). In *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* (sounds and perfumes swirl in the evening air) he gives the only convincing, as well as sensually appealing, performance I've ever heard. There is a certain sadness that comes over Debussy whenever the subject is wind or water, and von Oeyen has his finger on its pulse, whether it be the dispirited attempt of sails to catch the wind on a becalmed day in *Voiles*, the hard-driving explosiveness and gusts of wind and rain in *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest* (what the west wind saw), or the slow, labored progress of a solitary



"The Classical Style,"
Sonatas by Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven
Susan Merdinger, piano
Cd Baby

The name of Susan Merdinger's excellent piano recital recalls the book of that title by the late Charles Rosen (d. December 9, 2012), and may even be taken as an unofficial companion to it. Indeed, Rosen could not have asked for a better champion of a book that has profoundly influenced pianists and scholars over the past forty years. As did Rosen before her, Merdinger avidly explores the many fascinating ways in which the three great figures of the era – Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven – challenged one another and built on each other's discoveries.

With all three of these composers, form is paramount because it structures content and emotion. Merdinger opens her program with an excellent example, Mozart's Sonata in D major, K311. The opening movement begins typically with a cheerful, invigorating melody in the tonic key, and then becomes increasingly animated in a passage of rapid sixteenth notes. The section ends with four decisive chords, and then springs into the second section, which features a repetition of its theme in a minor key. All three movements, in fact, feature minor-key repetitions, imparting suspense and a sense of restless movement and operatic-like intrigue.

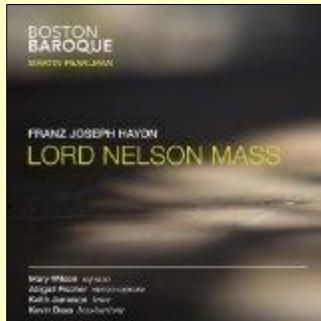
Merdinger manages all this very well as she does the emerging power in the opening of Haydn's Sonata No. 48 in C major, in which the emotion surges upwards from restlessly probing arpeggios in the bass, lending the music a defiant character. There are but two movements in this tightly structured sonata, the *Andante espressivo* (in which Merdinger takes Haydn at his word) and a *Presto* in Rondo form where the storm clouds have been replaced by happier, sunnier music that moves effortlessly to a final climax.

This artist, who appears to have all the right instincts and temperament for an ideal Haydn interpreter, makes

figure on a bleak landscape in *Des pas sur la neige* (footsteps in the snow). All are feelingly realized here.

The exception to Debussy's watery depressiveness is *La cathédrale engloutie* (the submerged cathedral). The piece serves to explain why historic attempts to orchestrate the Preludes have been mostly confined to Book II and have been largely unsuccessful. Von Oeyen shows us the futility of such efforts, as Debussy's piano preludes are already "symphonic" in concept. This piece is the crowning glory in the set, as Debussy uses all the resources of which the piano is capable, including chords that reach down to a seismic low C, to conjure up the image of a legendary cathedral that rises from the sea once a year to the ghostly pealing of bells and chanting of monks before sinking once more to its watery grave. By contrast, the well-loved *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (the girl with the flaxen hair) is as simple and straightforward as Debussy can be. Also symphonic in nature is the stand-alone *L'isle joyeuse* (isle of joy), in which von Oeyen revels in the gently rocking motion and the sense of erotic excitement at the end.

As with *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Stravinsky's *Petrushka* has enjoyed a vibrant life in both the symphony and the recital hall. The 3 Movements von Oeyen plays here are no mere transcription from the orchestral score, but a re-written and dramatically condensed version by Stravinsky that amounts to a piano tour de force. Keyboard jumps and bumps, polyrhythms, glassy glissandi, and tremolos add real bite to the folk-influenced themes. Through it all, von Oeyen does a fine job of characterizing *Petrushka*, the hapless puppet who meets a tragic fate at the end. The "chaser" here is Stravinsky's saucy *Piano Rag Music*, a work I'd never liked before because other pianists had butchered it. In von Oeyen's hands, it emerges in all its glory as an apotheosis of ragtime.

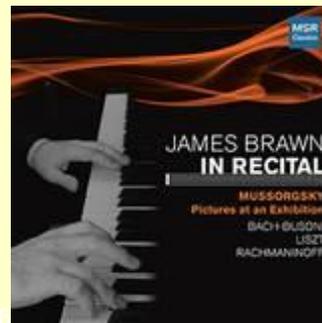


Haydn: "Lord Nelson Mass"
Martin Pearlman, Boston Baroque
Linn Records

This performance of the *Lord Nelson Mass* by Pearlman and Boston Baroque, even more than their 2012 release of Haydn's *Creation* (Linn CKD401) solidifies, for me at least, the impression that Haydn is the guy they should have made their major focus all along. Reflecting the style of this *Mass*, the performance is lean and filled with lots of red corpuscles. That is as befits a work conceived at a

her points just as impressively in *Sonata No. 52* in E-flat major. Here, a grasp of the work's form and purpose is of utmost importance, as the contour and dotted rhythms of the theme in the Adagio form the strongest connection with the main theme in the opening movement. Again, form comes first, and it channels and develops feeling as nowhere else in Haydn's music. In Merdinger's hands, the emotion in this movement in E major achieves an effect of radiant, unworldly beauty.

The program concludes with Beethoven's *Sonata No. 26* in E-flat major, "*Les Adieux*." Is my memory playing tricks on me, or haven't I reviewed this sonata as often as any keyboard work by *anyone* in the past few years? There's no mistaking the source of its popularity, as its three-movement form implies an autobiographical program: preparing for departure (*Das Lebewohl*), the sadness of bidding farewell (*Abwesenheit*) and the joy of returning home (*Das Wiedersehen*), with appropriate changes of mood and transformation of themes throughout the work. Merdinger manages its fleet movement and changing moods very well, particularly in the middle movement, which is very emotional and requires a lot of rubato. The ebullient finale with its brilliant key transformation and forte arpeggios leaves no doubt about Beethoven's intentions.



James Brawn Recital, Vol. 1
Mussorgsky: *Pictures + Bach, Liszt, Rachmaninoff*
MSR Classics

I've listened intently to "James Brawn in Recital" over a three-day period, and liked it better each time I returned to it. The English pianist's highly nuanced performances of Mussorgsky, Bach, Liszt, and Rachmaninoff get to the heart of the matter more surely than those of almost anyone I've ever heard. His dynamic range is beautifully accomplished in the way that soft keyboard dynamics should be, giving us a closer perspective on the key elements in the music. His fortes really command attention in the moments when the music grabs the listener by the ears. And he uses pauses to great effect, both within and after an individual piece. The details in this August 2012 live recital at Patton Hall, Suffolk may be finely crafted, but the larger canvas is always more than just their sum total. Brawn is the total artist.

Brawn shows his prowess right from the beginning of the program in the famous Busoni arrangement of J. S.

crucial moment in history, as its subtitle tells us: *Missa in angustiis*, a “Mass in Troubled Times.”

Did we say “troubled”? By the summer of 1798, Napoleon’s armies had won four major battles over the Austrians in less than a year and had even laid siege to and bombarded Vienna itself. They had invaded Egypt and threatened England’s access to her trade routes in the east. Just when it appeared “the Little Corporal” was unbeatable on land, the English fleet under Lord Horatio Nelson dealt the French a stunning defeat on August 1st at the Battle of Aboukir (Battle of the Nile). To Haydn and his contemporaries, it seemed nothing less than the victory of the Righteous over the Antichrist.

I wish I could say Haydn wrote his work to commemorate that sensational event, but alas, such was not the case. News travelled slowly in those days, and the ink was still damp on Haydn’s score in anticipation of its September 15th premiere when it finally reached Vienna. No matter. The public quickly dubbed it as a tribute to the man of the hour, and it has been the “Lord Nelson Mass” ever since. It was performed at court in 1802 upon the visit of Nelson and his travelling companion Lady Emma Hamilton. To the Austrians, the Benedictus (Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord) with its stirring writing for soloists and chorus ushered in by a fanfare of trumpets and tympani, must have seemed prophetic.

In re-creating a work which a number of Haydn scholars have considered the composer’s greatest achievement, Martin Pearlman has all the right forces at his disposal. They include a superb quartet of vocalists, consisting of Mary Wilson (s), Abigail Fischer (m/s), Keith Jamison (t) and Kevin Deas (b/bart). They are “spot on” every time they are heard from, whether as soloists or as a quartet on which this work depends for so much of its intellectual and emotional impact. Wilson’s soprano calls for special commendation, both in moments such as the remarkable canon between soprano-tenor and alto-bass in the first part of the Credo and the announcement of the good news *Et vitam venturi* (and the life everlasting), just before the movement ends in a blaze of glory for the combined forces of singers and orchestra. Fischer has a fine moment in the sublime *Agnus Dei*, a role reserved by tradition for the alto. In a work that consistently reaches the highest level of inspiration as so few do, Pearlman marshals his forces with such skill that there are no low moments in what is truly a symphonic mass in every sense of the word.

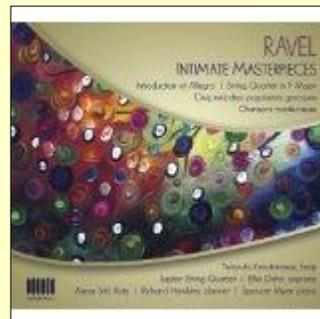
The companion work, Haydn’s Symphony No. 102 in B-flat major, was robbed of its birthright historically, since the nickname “Miracle,” alluding to the fact that there was no loss of life when a chandelier fell on the occasion of its London premiere, was mistakenly applied to Symphony 96 when Haydn’s last symphonies were printed. Regardless, it is one of the composer’s best works in the genre, with its slow, moody introduction the boisterous riot of activity that soon ensues, and the beautiful Adagio movement that flows with the greatest gentleness as a sextuplet with a wonderfully expressive cello solo. A stomping folk dance in the Menuetto, and a rousing finale in which Haydn pulls

Bach’s Chaconne in d minor from Violin Partita No. 2, taking us from one stage to the next with consummate mastery and superb timing. It is alert rhythmically, in subtle ways that strike the listener as a work of high imagination, rather than a mere academic exercise.

Two Liszt works, up next, reveal Brawn to be an artist who is disinclined to throw away *any* notes, even the slightest accents struck off from the main line of the melody like chips of marble from a sculptor’s hammer. Mephisto Waltz No.1 ranges from passionate exposition to the quiet evocation of a lovers’ tryst in a garden at night, as Brawn takes us from one episode to the next in Liszt’s Faustian drama with the superb timing that is this pianist’s trademark. A gently undulating melody in triplets and a magical chord change at the end in the aptly-named Consolation No.3 give Brawn ample scope to display his sensitivity of touch and phrasing.

In his beautifully paced and nuanced account of the original piano version of Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition, Brawn shows listeners who have only been previously acquainted with the orchestral version by Ravel what they’ve been missing. This work was a “natural” for orchestration because its basic feel in the keyboard version is already symphonic. Brawn takes those big built-up chords in the powerful climaxes of tableaux such as Baba Yaga – The Hut on Fowl’s Legs and The Great Gate of Kiev with an intensity that makes the Ravel orchestrations seem superfluous. He is equally deft in painting the picture of faded splendor in The Old Castle and the subtly changing mood of With the Dead in a Dead Language (*con mortuis in lingua mortua*) as it changes from gloom to a rising note of confident, patient hope in the Resurrection.

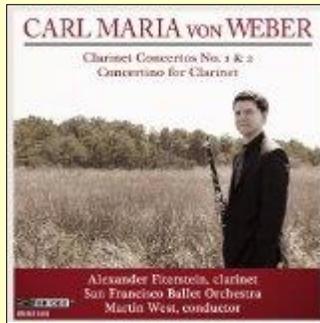
In Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in b minor, Op 32, No. 10, Brawn makes much of the prevalent mood of languid despair, as the music rises at last to the top of the keyboard in a cascade of notes before subsiding into resignation. The charming simplicity of Bach’s Prelude in C major makes for a refreshing end (or encore) to a recital in which we’ve really been places.



Ravel: “Intimate Masterpieces”

Yolanda Kondonassis, harp; Ellie Dehn, soprano; Alexa Still, flute; Richard Hawkins, clarinet; Spencer Myer, Piano; Jupiter String Quartet
Oberlin Music

out numerous items from his bag of tricks, conclude a very satisfying work. As in the Mass, Pearlman keeps things moving swiftly from one fine moment to the next.



Weber: Clarinet Concertos (2), Concertino
Alexander Fiterstein, clarinet
Martin West, SF Ballet Orchestra
Bridge Records

Alexander Fiterstein, currently professor at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities following an exceptional career marked by many international honors, shows his very impressive skills in the two Clarinet Concertos and the Concertino of Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826). Providing yeoman support are the members of the very sizeable San Francisco Ballet Orchestra under Martin West. That an orchestra of this nature should accompany Fiterstein in these performances is no more than fitting, for Weber's works for clarinet and orchestra are nothing if not theatrical.

I used to shun reviewing Weber's music because I regarded it as mostly superficial, preoccupied with surface appearances and showy virtuosity. In recent years, I've come to make my peace with it. For sure, the opening movements of both Weber's clarinet concertos are imbued with an operatic idiom that reminds us that, though his operas may be neglected today outside the German-speaking world, their engaging overtures still rival Mozart and Rossini in number of performances and recordings. His finales are pure, zestful virtuosity, unabashed and shameless. The Allegretto of Concerto No. 1 in F minor is an energetic Rondo in which the clarinet soloist has the chance to show off virtually every trick of the trade, with sensational trills up to the top of his register. No. 2 in E-flat major ends in a jaunty Polacca, where Weber takes full advantage of the genre's irregular meters. Colorful extravagance is the order of the day in a clarinet part that is both idiomatic and extremely challenging – unless, of course, your name is Alexander Fiterstein.

But, just as we are ready to dismiss Weber's music as mere flashy showmanship, devoid of musical substance, he gives us wonderful slow movements. In No. 1 we have a very expressive and deeply moving Adagio with a contemplative clarinet theme against a gentle string backdrop, which is followed by sensation arpeggios in the middle section. The slow movement in No. 2 is a moody Romanza, with expressive dynamics ranging from

"I have always had a bit of a Ravel obsession," writes Yolanda Kondonassis in the booklet notes, "and not just because he wrote one of the most luscious pieces ever composed for the harp, but because his music takes me places I've never been." That comment refers most clearly to the composer's Introduction et Allegro for Harp, Flute, Clarinet, and String Quartet, which leads off the program, but it applies as well to the magic carpet ride that we experience with every single work on this imaginatively conceived program.

Introduction et Allegro, in one continuous 11-minute movement does of course provide "Y.K." and her harp with some luminous moments. Written at the request of the Pleyel company to showcase its new chromatic harp, it serves the purpose admirably, allowing our artist to display a range of harmonics, rapid pedal changes, and uncharacteristic driving rhythms while reveling in the seemingly effortless arpeggios that one usually associates with the instrument. All of the present players get abundant opportunities to explore the rich palette of primary colors and the symphonic textures this work encompasses.

Ravel achieved a marvel of tight construction, balance, and unity of similar themes and procedures in his Quartet in F major (1904), which remains his most highly regarded chamber work. It parallels in many ways Debussy's Quartet in G minor (1893), especially in the pizzicati that dominate the second movement, only that Ravel employed more objective means instead of Debussy's romantic impressionism, to achieve much the same ends. One key to interpretation is the keen understanding of Ravel's rhythms which the Jupiter Quartet, comprised of Nelson Lee and Meg Freivogel, violins; Liz Freivogel (sister of Meg), viola; and Daniel McDonough, cello, possess to a fine degree. The opening movement is marked both *Allegro moderato* and *Très doux*, requiring the performers to play both quickly and lively in moderate time, and also very softly – not as easy as it sounds. The second movement, *Assez vif – Très rythmé*, demands and receives the utmost in scintillating exactness from the Jupiter players. The slow movement, *Très lent*, is simply one of Ravel's finest conceptions, taken slowly as befits a dreamy reverie. The Jupiter sum up a memorable performance with the finale, *Vif et agité*, taken with all the (discrete) quickness and agitation Ravel requires.

Two song cycles, *Chansons madécasses* (Songs of Madagascar) and *Cinq mélodies populaires grecques* (Five Popular Greek melodies) feature the luscious voice of soprano Alexa Still. They are a study in contrasts. The earlier work, Greek Melodies, celebrates the joys of love, sunlight, and a celebration of marriage in a simple, straightforward way. The three *Chansons madécasses* are more problematical. The first and last, "Nahandove" and "Il est doux" (It is sweet) are suffused with an exotic eroticism that must have shocked even Parisian audiences when the work premiered in 1926, while the middle song, *Aoua!* (cry of despair) was an

fortissimo to piano in the space of a single bar, plus numerous scale passages and virtuosic runs, and then a recitative in operatic style, like the pleading of a distressed heroine. In these moments style is allied with deep feeling.

First-rate sound recordings support Fiterstein's superlative performances. Should we have expected any less from Adam Abeshouse, award-winning producer and session engineer who mixed, mastered, and edited the results?



Mahler: Das Lied von der Erde
Sarah Connolly, alto; Toby Spence, tenor
Yannick Nézet-Séguin, London Philharmonic
LPO

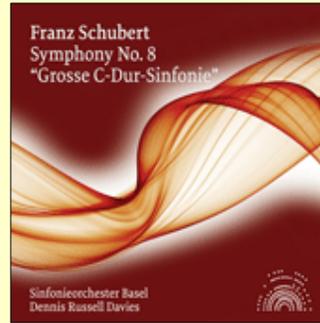
What an exceptional recording this is! Everything seems to have come together perfectly in this live performance by Nézet-Séguin and the London Philharmonic, recorded at the Southbank Centre Royal Festival Hall. The orchestra is in fine shape, the conductor brings out every single point in the score without neglecting its overall sweep and cumulative effect, the vocalists are first-rate, and the recorded sound (producer Andrew Walton, engineer Mike Clements) supports the artistic aims admirably. There is also a sense of real spontaneity that is the last thing one expects in a perfect recording. Even the booklet cover art is right-on, as the origami swans capture the soaring feeling of Mahler's masterwork in their upward flight.

Mahler considered *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth) to be his most "personal" work. Indeed it is, though the reason only gradually creeps in upon the listener's consciousness. It was based on German translations that attempted to capture the spirit of the T'ang Dynasty poets of China. Mahler used a very large orchestra, with expanded woodwinds and a percussion section that has cymbals, triangle, tambourine, tamtam, glockenspiel, celesta, two harps, and mandolin, plus a large string section to make his points. He employed it with such restraint that the texture often resembles chamber music. He knew exactly what instruments he wanted to use at each significant moment in the score. Significantly, he refrained from tinkering about with his orchestration once the work was ready for production and publication. He had something good here, and he knew it.

In the opening poem, translated "Drinking Song of the Earth's Sorrow," Mahler stretches the tenor voice in its upper range to overcome the power of the full orchestra.

impassioned denunciation of French imperialism that drew contemporary criticism on a different score.

The present CD is a flagship release on a new label put out by the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, showcasing the talents of faculty, alumni, and resident artists. State of the art sonics have a wonderful presence that serves all the performances heard here admirably.



Schubert: "Great C Major Symphony"
Dennis Russell Davies, Basel Symphony
Sinfonieorchester Basel label

Dennis Russell Davies leads his finely-mettled Basel Symphony Orchestra in a spirited follow-up to the earlier recording on their in-house label of Schubert's "Unfinished" and Fifth Symphonies. This time, it's the composer's feature-length-plus Symphony in C Major.

Usually known as Symphony No. 9, it is called No. 8 here, and has sometimes been labeled No. 7. The confusion arose because an earlier symphony in E major, existing as a sketch with the first movement partially orchestrated, has been considered by many critics an inferior work, not worthy to be included in the Schubert canon. Another symphony that Schubert was thought to have been composing in 1824 at Bad Gastein (don't blame *me*: I didn't name the place) has apparently been lost forever, if it ever existed. In its place, some scholars have attempted to restore this "seventh" symphony by orchestrating Schubert's Grand Duo Sonata for piano four hands – though not to universal satisfaction. So, Schubert's elusive "Seventh" must remain either inferior, lost, or a cuckoo's egg. I have no trouble numbering the composer's canonical symphonies 1 thru 6, 8 and 9, as they were known for many years, omitting 7 altogether.

The other thorny problem concerning the "Great C Major" has been its extreme length. It clocks in at 62:11 in the present Basel SO performance, and Davies is no slowpoke but takes the tempi moderately quick. In the bad old days of vinyl records, the only way to include the work on a single LP was to sheer off the exposition repeats, which did it some injury, as these repeats are not perfunctory, but integral to the design. Schubert's "Great C Major," together with Beethoven's Ninth and Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*, all composed within a

The aim was evidently to replicate the denatured voice of the Chinese falsetto style (and here I was, all these years, thinking Mahler's tenors had cinched their corsets too tightly!) It is an unforgiving, thankless task, and Toby Spence performs it as well as I have ever heard any tenor, so that the sound replicates the sense of the lyrics beautifully. Drinking is an act of defiance: "empty your golden cup – dark is life, dark is death." The image of a howling ape on an open grave in the last stanza is superbly reinforced by the dark sounds of English horn and contrabassoon. Death gnaws at the heart of life.

We next have the poignant "Loneliness in Autumn," in which Sarah Connolly makes her presence felt in her interpretation of the poem, ending with voice lowered to emphasize the words "Sun of love, will you never shine again?" The answer is snuffed out, like the little lamp at the weary person's bedside. Two poems of Li Tai-Po, China's romantic poet, follow: "Youth" and "Beauty." Amid the froth of young life – scholars drinking wine and singing the classics in a porcelain pavilion by a lake, maidens gathering blossoms by a river side, their graceful swaying and singing interrupted by a company of gallant youths on horseback – there is a sad sense of the impermanence of youth, love, and beauty. That theme is repeated in "The Drunkard in Autumn," where the poet (again Li Tai-Po) concludes "I fill my glass anew and drain it to the bottom, and sing until the moon shines out in the dark heavens.... What have I to do with spring? Let me remain a drunkard!"

The mood deepens even as Mahler's superbly restrained orchestration reinforces the impression of distant blue-tinted horizons, in "Farewell." Alto and tenor alternate in music that expresses the speaker's leave-taking of life and companionship as he sets out on his final journey to an undisclosed homeland. The setting is as long as the five previous movements combined, but it doesn't seem at all lengthy under Nézet-Séguin's baton. In the end, we are left with the word "ewig" (forever) repeated like a mantra by the alto before the last chord fades into silence.



"Great American Songbook"
The King's Singers
Signum Records

The King's Singers have more fun than the law allows in their latest release "Great American Songbook," dedicated to American standards from the 1920s through the 1950s. These are the songs we heard back then on record by famous vocalists backed up the big bands of the day. Most

five-year span, were the first of what I should call a breed of "über-symphony" that took the symphonic genre to new horizons in length and expressive range.

Schubert did so by lengthening his expositions, particularly in the outer movements, adding interpolations and repetitions, and thus extending his recapitulation sections to what Robert Schumann termed "heavenly lengths." Other contemporaries were not as admiring, including the musicians who giggled uncontrollably when Felix Mendelssohn first rehearsed the work in London, prompting that sensitive soul to withdraw the work before its premiere. The axiom spread among conductors over the years that "you don't get to be famous doing Schubert's Ninth."

The key to a successful performance, as Dennis Russell Davies knows very well, is to keep things moving evenly; employing sure, precise attack and phrasing, and avoiding the trap of getting ahead of oneself in the score through extremes in tempi. The big canvas is important here, not the small details that may get you critical kudos but will distract from the overall "cinemascope" impression. There are many gorgeous melodies in this work: to cite just one example, the sinuously weaving melody stated by the oboe in the ABA section of the Andante movement. It is contrasted by the sublimely expansive theme in the strings that occurs later in the same movement and creates a marked lightening of mood. This lyrical impulse requires the time and breadth to make its full impression that Davies is willing to devote to it. (And so, you *do* get to be famous for your Schubert Ninth after all!)



Sibelius: Symphonies 6 & 7, Tapiola
Robert Spano, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra
ASO Media (DSD)

Three often-ignored but nonetheless vital works by Finland's national composer Jean Sibelius are given stirring performances by Robert Spano and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra that are certain to make more friends for them. Under Spano's direction, Symphonies 6 and 7 and the tone poem Tapiola, the last really important works for orchestra that Sibelius ever wrote, stand out for their clarity of purpose and movement and their constant attention to the rhythmic pulse of these works. The best efforts of producer Elaine Martone and session engineer Michael Bishop, assisted by Fyodor Cherniavsky and Ian Dobie, bring these qualities into

importantly, we heard them in our homes, with a real presence that was only possible when radio sets were powered by vacuum tubes, rather than transistors. Popular music simply hasn't been the same since.

With the notable exception of George and Ira Gershwin, many of the great songwriters and songwriting teams are represented here: Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart. Cy Coleman's "The best is yet to come" leads off the parade, and Porter's "Ev'ry time we say goodbye" ends it appropriately on a note of *au revoir* rather than farewell, for as the singers imply in their booklet notes, "there are loads more." Indeed, the genre is so incredibly rich that we must wonder why this a capella group of six male voices has waited 150 albums into their career to delve into it, having previously expanded on their 16th century madrigal repertoire to include virtually all of music as their domain, from Broadway to the Beatles, and from Richard Rodney Bennett to Paul Simon. And why not? As Cole Porter puts it (*Let's Misbehave*), "When Adam won Eve's hand / He wouldn't stand for teasin' / He didn't care about those apples out of season."

Actually, the Singers, originally founded in 1968 by six choral scholars at King's College Cambridge, are well-suited in terms of vocal style for this repertoire. They have long cultivated a "pyramid of sound" in which the upper voices are built on a solid bass-baritone foundation. Now consisting of David Hurley and Timothy Wayne-Wright, counter-tenors; Paul Phoenix, tenor; Christopher Bruerton and Christopher Gabbitas, baritones; and Jonathan Howard, bass, their distinct vocal style encompasses the flawless harmonizing and the smooth segueing and layering that serves the Great American Songbook very well. The genre, by the way, is currently much in vogue among jazz vocalists in the United Kingdom today (I've reviewed such luminaries as Claire Martin and Gill Manly doing many of these standards in past music reviews).

So, what's the departure here? Well, the present album by the King's Singers uses extensive post-production techniques and multi-tracking to create a more modern acapella sound, while retaining the group's trademark blend and balance. Nor do the British accents trouble me terribly (You say "dauncing," I say "dancing"). Their hi-lo phrasings, daring swoops and occasional doo-wops, impart a nostalgic sense of period to their arrangements. By way of comparison, the album includes accompanied versions of eight of the songs (*Let's Misbehave*, *Begin the Beguine*, *At last. It's de-lovely*, *The lady is a tramp*, *My funny valentine*, *I've got the world on a string*, *Ev'ry time we say goodbye*) with orchestral arrangements made and conducted by David Firman. Not to slight his prowess as an arranger, but I do like the acapella versions better. They are what the King's Singers do best.

fine focus.

It seems to be true of symphonic music that the most economically scored work requires the largest orchestral forces to realize it. Symphony No. 6 is no exception. Sibelius calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, plus 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, harp, timpani and strings. With the exception of a bass clarinet that is also included, the forces will remain more or less standard in this final trio of masterworks. Yet from the very opening of the Sixth Symphony, with a glorious swirling of the flutes evoking what Sibelius called "the scent of the first snow," a sensation that never failed to inspire him, the economy of means and coloration in this otherwise conventional work in four movements really strikes the listener. The rhythms dance in the opening movement with surprising lightness. "Rage and passion," cautioned Sibelius, "are utterly essential in [the Sixth], but it is supported by undercurrents deep under the surface of the music."

Those undercurrents, usually associated with the dark sound of the four horns and the other brass, are also found in the Seventh Symphony. Contrary to most classical procedures, Sibelius seems to be determined to find how many interesting and original things can still be said in the time-honored key of C. Every significant utterance in this work is in either C major or C minor. Sibelius' many subtle changes in tempo provide the variety in this intricately structured and beautifully textured symphony in a single movement.

Tapiola, Sibelius' last flicker of greatness, celebrates the beauty and mystery of the great pine forests of Finland, much as Debussy's *La Mer* evokes similar qualities that intrigue us about the sea. The tone poem begins with an attention-arresting roll of the tympani, followed by the prominent sound of the horns and muted trumpets over the lower strings. At first, nothing seems to "happen" in Tapiola. We have come 180 degrees from the 16th century landscapes of Peter Breughel, bustling with human activity. Here, by contrast, nature seems to be not so much hostile to man as rather to take no notice of him. A storm, evoked by a flurry of activity in the orchestra, subsides to the initial mood of the opening. Only on repeated listening do the details in the work's texture reveal themselves.

Sibelius famously regarded Herbert von Karajan as "the only one who truly understands my work." Had he been alive to hear Robert Spano's interpretation of the works on this program, he might well have updated his list.



Ravel: Orchestral Works, Vol. 2
Leonard Slatkin, Orchestre National de Lyon
Naxos

Volume 2 of an ongoing Ravel series by American conductor Leonard Slatkin and the National Orchestra of Lyon has a lot going for it: precise, scintillating performances, lots of movement and orchestral color, and a feeling for Ravel's distinctive style.

An aloof personality, Ravel was very much a perfectionist personally and artistically and is not known to have had any intimate relationships. The wonder is that, operating from different premises, he achieved much the same impressionistic results in music as his more passionate contemporary Debussy. To understand the Ravel enigma, we much approach it as Slatkin does, through the composer's obsession for form and detail.

With one exception, the works in this program are Ravel's orchestrations of his own piano works. *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911) take their name from a similarly titled set of waltzes by Franz Schubert and were supposedly a tribute to him, though for the life of me I don't hear the connection. They are constantly filled with witty surprises in harmonic and rhythmic contrasts, reflecting Ravel's lifelong fascination for the waltz. *La Valse* (1920), by contrast, is a backward look at the glitter of a ballroom filled with swirling dancers, ending with the most wickedly sardonic deconstruction in all of music, a comment on the fall of empires at the end of WWI.

Le tombeau de Couperin (In Memory of Couperin) is Ravel's tribute to his 18th century predecessor. We are to



Massenet: Ballet Music
Patrick Gallois, Barcelona Symphony Orchestra
Naxos

Patrick Gallois leads the Barcelona Symphony and Catalonia National Orchestra in engaging and rarely-heard performances of ballet music from four operas of Jules Massenet (1842-1912). The composer was, and still is, best-known for his operas, at least two of which, *Manon* and *Werther* are still in the repertoire of opera houses around the world. The ballets are another story, as it is rare to hear so many suites in one program.

At the time, the Paris Opéra required that the scores submitted to them include a ballet. The rule was so inviolable that even Richard Wagner had to respect it (hence the Venusberg Music in *Tannhäuser*). In his day, Massenet was a past master of the art of writing discretely erotic ballet music to avoid condemnation as immoral by either the bluestocking critics or the Bishop of Paris. The ballets for *Bacchus*, *Herodiade*, and *Thais*, heard in this program, all contained potentially objectionable themes: Dionysian revels, Salome's obsession for John the Baptist, and the lust of the hermit Athanael for the harlot Thais. If the sensuous element in these ballets seems tame by the standard for exotic dances that Borodin, Mussorgsky, and Stravinsky would set in the next 20-30 years, we must keep in mind that Massenet had to be a man of fine discretion.

He did his best job balancing sensual beauty and sexual desire in the ballet for *Thais*. The famous Meditation does not occur here, but a lot *does* happen, including the demon of Perdition, in the form of a woman



Bizet: L'Arlesienne Suites 1 & 2
+ suites by Gounod, Fauré
Kazuki Yamada, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (PentaTone SACD)

Kazuki Yamada, principal guest conductor of the Orchestra of the Suisse Romande, leads that time-honored orchestra in a program of French music that does full credit to its venerable past and historically rich sound. The young Japanese conductor, a protégé of Seiji Ozawa, brings out "*la Gloire*" in familiar symphonic works of Georges Bizet, Gabriel Fauré, and Charles Gounod.

I really love this performance of the two suites from Bizet's incidental music for *L'Arlesienne*. This music is hard to resist for its color, its melodies, and its evocations of Provence, where Alphonse Daudet's play is set. So much charm, in fact, it obscures the essentially tragic nature of the story, leading up to the death by suicide of a young man who is hopelessly in love with a married woman, the "Lady of Arles." Only a disturbing intensity in the outer sections of the Intermezzo in Suite 2 hint at this conclusion. Otherwise, the stirring Prelude, lively Minuetto, gently nostalgic Intermezzo and joyous Carillon of Suite 1, and the gloriously flowing Pastorale, folk style Menuet and foot-stomping Farandole in 2, are all suffused with the sun-drenched color of the region.

Fauré's *Masques et Bergamasques* was created as a divertissement for Prince Albert I of Monaco. It is pure music, recalling the music of the 18th century royal courts of France and the paintings of Watteau. With stunning economy and scintillating movement, the music pays homage to the sentiment in a poem of Paul Verlaine from which it drew its title:

<p>imagine Couperin composing while at his harpsichord. Ravel's deft, objective instrumentation, includes brilliantly subtle scoring for solo oboe and then bassoon, accompanied by plucked strings in the contrasted section of the rustic Rigaudon. No composer ever accomplished more with spare but deftly applied touches.</p> <p><i>Gaspard de la Nuit</i> is the "exception" I mentioned earlier, having been orchestrated as late as 1990 by Maurius Constant, decades after the 1909 premiere of the piano work. Ravel based the original on three prose poems of Aloysius Bertrand. The unusual French word <i>gaspard</i> refers to a demon or "spolier" of the night, in other words a nightmare. The work, even in the piano version, is moody, mysterious, fiendishly difficult to grasp and perform. That goes double for the final piece <i>Scarbo</i> the evocation of a malicious shape-shifter who can drift like smoke from the chimney, settle in a corner of the room, and then rise up suddenly like a cathedral tower with a sounding bell (realized beautifully in Constant's inspired orchestration). Slatkin's equally inspirational conducting makes <i>Gaspard</i> the high point of the program.</p>	<p>who appears to Athanael in a dream together with seven spirits of the earth and a host of Sirens and Tritons, tempting him with all the treasures of earth and sea if he will renounce his holy vocation and succumb to his passion for Thais. Opposing all this is the Star of Redemption, which gradually grows fainter as the evil forces prevail. Following this dream, which ends in something like a black sabbath, Athanael rushes to Thais' room, only to find her dead, and that he has lost both his salvation and the girl.</p> <p>The program concludes with ballet music from <i>Le Cid</i>, based on the legendary Spanish hero. It consists of dances celebrating the return of the Cid from battle after rumors of his death have proven false. Massenet used authentic Spanish dance rhythms to enhance the appeal of this music, ranging from the jaunty <i>Castilliane</i> that opens the suite to the brilliant <i>Navarraise</i> that closes it. While one suspects the members of the Barcelona Symphony may have put a little extra into this suite out of national pride, it really <i>does</i> contain the best music in the program.</p> <p>Gallois conducts everything with flair and dispatch. Though it isn't clear from the booklet annotation whether this artist, who studied with the great Jean-Pierre Rampal, plays any of Massenet's glorious flute passages, I wouldn't be surprised.</p>	<p>"Your soul is a chosen landscape where charming masqueraders and Bergamaskers go playing the lute and dancing, almost sad beneath their fanciful disguises."</p> <p>Finally, Gounod's Ballet Music for <i>Faust</i> was his creative response to the Paris Opéra's requirement that every opera submitted to it must have a ballet. Gounod undertook the chore reluctantly at first, but ended by writing some of his best-known music. The setting is Walpurgis Night, when Mephistopheles tempts Faust from rushing to the distressed Marguerite by conjuring up a pageant of the most famous beauties of Legend: Helen of Troy with her retinue of Trojan maidens, Cleopatra with a similar retinue of Nubian slave girls, and finally Phryne, a famous courtesan of ancient Greece. For sheer lavish, sensual beauty, I'd have to rate Cleopatra and her entourage ahead of Helen <i>et cie</i> in a battle of the queens. I don't know as much about Phryne, but judging from the pulsating rhythms of her dance, she must have been quite a girl.</p>
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