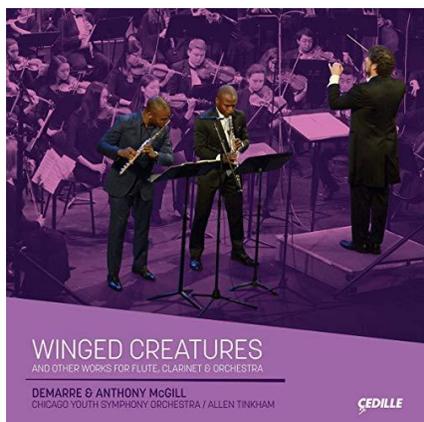




Colin Clarke Sept/Oct 2019 Issue



What a treat it is to have multiple excellent available recordings of Danzi's op. 41 *Sinfonia concertante*. As we will see, it is a lovely work, and how imaginative to couple it with a delightful six-minute piece by Saint-Saëns; these two works, from the lighter end of the spectrum, are bookended by two world premiere recordings.

The first of those premieres is Michael Abels's *Winged Creatures*, from which the disc takes its name. Written specifically for the present soloists (who are brothers), Abels's piece was initially inspired by the graceful but unpredictable flight of a butterfly, which took him down a thought process to consider how different birds fly with different styles. ("Some soar, some fly with speed and

purpose, some seem random and erratic" says Abels in his booklet notes.) The result is of astonishing virtuosity. Demarre and Anthony McGill, both significant instrumentalists in their own right, offer playing of the highest echelon. They interlace, interact and (musically) argue with impeccable confidence: It must have been a joy to write for them, and the result is indeed joyful. Abels's piece is brilliantly scored, and with its infectious lightness it harkens back to *Delights & Dances*, recorded on another Cedille disc (reviewed by myself in *Fanfare* 37:2 and performed by the Chicago Sinfonietta). The orchestral contribution to *Winged Creatures* glistens: The Chicago Youth Symphony is a most disciplined ensemble, and passages where the orchestral winds are garlanded by the soloists' contributions reveal just how high the youth standard is in Chicago today. It will come as no surprise that the work close is as witty as can be.

Perhaps the highest-profile Danzi available is that by James Galway and Sabine Meyer on RCA, in a rather upholstered and unsatisfactory performance (it is an all-Danzi disc), but the one that is most successful to my mind is on an illuminating disc entitled simply *Concertante* by Les Vents Français on Warner (a twofer of works of this ilk by Danzi, Devienne, Pleyel, and Mozart). The accompanying ensemble on the latter disc, the Munich Chamber Orchestra, plays magnificently, and the whole is beautifully recorded. If the Chicago Youth Symphony is less neat, less idiomatic, the McGills demonstrate it is just at home in Danzi as it is in contemporary fare, offering playing of grace and the utmost musicality. Decorations of line are particularly noteworthy from the soloists, especially from the clarinet of Anthony McGill. The central *Largo* is tastefully done; the finale could, however, exude just a tad more *joie de vivre* in the orchestral contributions. While the McGills scamper and tease, the orchestra remains rather earthbound.

It's wonderful to have some lesser-known Saint-Saëns, too, in the form of the *Tarantelle* of 1857, written during a trip to southern Italy. There is indeed a touch of Mendelssohn in Italian mode about

Saint-Saëns's writing here; there is also the palpable feeling of youthful enjoyment of life (he was 22 years old when he wrote this piece), and so it feels apt that a youth orchestra is involved, and indeed their enthusiasm adds much to the experience. There is also a version for flute, clarinet, and piano (well recorded on Naxos by members of Canada's National Arts Centre Wind Quintet) as well as the top recommendation with orchestra, Sharon Bezaly and Harri Maki with the Tapiola Sinfonietta on BIS.

The sibling bond between the McGills was the generating impulse for Joel Puckett's Concerto Duo, although the three movements that comprise the piece are each dedicated to "three very special toddlers" (Pickett). The link between screaming winds (a contemporary music trope if ever there was one) and screaming kids (an eternal constant if ever there was one) is amusingly made in the first movement, "Great American Scream Machine." A response to summer trips to Atlanta's Six Flags amusement park and its wooden rollercoaster (one of the world's largest) has more than a hint of a non-Minimalist Short Ride in a Fast Machine about it. The central "Mama Dee's Song for Joel" describes a lullaby-based tussle between crooning parent and a child determined to avoid sleep at all costs. Heard as program music it works, but it works as a structural entity as pure music also. Here the orchestra comes into its own, the textures often warm and inviting. Puckett's ear for sonority is magnificent; the contrast between the first two movements is nothing if not maximal. The finale invokes the "cool breeze and sunshine of Southern California" magnificently.

This is a most interesting disc, brought to life by the vibrant playing of the McGill brothers.