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favorite operas. They include the buoyant "Allegro io son" (Happy as a finch, happy am I) from I Puritani, in which the cavalier Arturo takes his cue from a troubadour song sung from within a nearby house by his beloved Elvira (here, the lovely, warm voice of soprano Victoria Miskunaite, which makes us long to hear more of this singer).

The program concludes once again with arias by Donizetti: two each from L'allir d'amore (including the tender "Una furtiva Lagrima" (a secret tear) and from La fille du régiment, ending with the exultant mood of the scene in which Tonio wins the consent of the hardened veterans, who have a fatherly stake in the matter, to wed Marie, the "Daughter of the Regiment."

Note: This review is a reprint. It originally appeared in Phil's Classical Reviews for January, 2017.

We are then given four arias by Bellini, including the glorious "Son Salvo" (Safe am I, safe at last) from I Puritani, in which the cavalier Arturo takes his cue from a troubadour song sung from within a nearby house by his beloved Elvira (here, the lovely, warm voice of soprano Victoria Miskunaite, which makes us long to hear more of this singer).

The Cavatina from Quartet No. 13 in B-flat, Op. 130, follows in a Balakirev transcription that gives us some idea of its somber, melancholy expression and profundity but does not give us an impression of its true breadth. Kodama does the best she can with this transcription that fails to capture (for me at least) the exquisite sadness of the original, for which the timbres of the original strings are essential.

Mussorgsky follows with transcriptions of the 2nd movement, Vivace, and the 3rd Lento assai cantante e tranquillo (rather relaxed, songlike and tranquil) from Quartet No. 16, Op. 135. This was Beethoven's final published work in any genre, and for many scholars it contains his last thoughts on a lifetime spent contending with the problems of sound and silence. That includes the remarkable outburst in the midst of the otherwise serenely untroubled Vivace. Kodama handles all the vicissitudes inherent in these movements with the greatest composure and assurance.

For the sheer fun of it all, we are lastly given Beethoven's own transcription of the Allegretto with variations from Mozart's Quintet in A major for Clarinet and Strings, K581. Based on a delightful theme of almost childish simplicity, the variations come across as an exercise in pure joy in Mari Kodama's performance.

I've talked at length about Liszt's "Swiss" pieces because they are the ones that appeal to me the most. But don't ignore the really progressive pieces that Wong presents for us to chew on. Nuages gris (dark clouds), for instance, reveals the experimental side of Franz Liszt with its use of an augmented triad of striking sonority to help create a haunting sense of beauty. Funerailles (funeral ode) and La lugubre gondola (the funerale gondola) evoke feelings of desolation and grief, the former with left-hand tremolos and ostinato octaves in the bass, and the latter with unresolved diminished sevenths and unfinished phrases that remind us this piece was intended as a memorial to the recently-deceased Wagner. Add in the rarely-performed Unstern! Sinistre, Disastro (dark star, sinister, disastrous) with its darkly glittering sonorities, and you have enough gloom to satisfy any necrophile (or challenge the keyboard prowess of even a Jerry Wong!)
Ronald Lau, U.S.-based pianist with Hong Kong roots, gives a good account of himself as both scholar and performing artist in an intriguing pairing of romantic symphonies transcribed for solo piano in ways that tell us a lot about the music. Lau’s performance of Schumann’s Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61, in the 1882 transcription by Theodor Kirchner, gets to the essence of a standard orchestral work that we might have been in danger of taking for granted. And his account of his own transcription of Symphony in E minor, Op. 67 by Ferdinand Hiller may help to resurrect a forgotten musical figure.

Let’s begin with the first-cited. Robert Schumann composed his symphony in a period in which he experienced bouts of depression for which he was eventually hospitalized. Perhaps as a counterweight to his medical condition, the mood of the work is basically quite positive, ending in a very affirmative Allegro vivace finale. Schumann also paid tribute to his spiritual forebears in the ways in which they are maturing as a very special ensemble. There is, of course, no reason why they should schedule these six “Early Quartets” as the first release in a cycle of the complete quartets, but in a way that’s very appropriate. As did the young Beethoven in this 1801 publication, the splendid young foursome give ample proof of where they are in terms of their development and their artistic profile. And are they a force to be reckoned with!

It’s still a commonplace among critics who have little to say to cite the Opus 18 quartets as rooted in the tradition of Mozart and Haydn. That’s true enough, but ignores the really startling innovations that must have astounded his contemporaries and marked the 30-year old composer as one who had really arrived as a distinct voice. It’s interesting to note they weren’t composed in apple-pie order but in the sequence 312564. The composer arranged them for publication as he did because they follow a curve in terms of stylistic maturity, with Quartet No. 1 in F major the most immediately appealing and No. 6 in B-flat major pushing the envelope in the direction of future developments.

By this time in musical history the first violin was no longer the autocrat in a string quartet that it had originally been. But Beethoven went further in the interest of stylistic democracy by

The Dover String Quartet, consisting of founding members Joel Link and Bryan Lee, violins; Milena Pajaro van de Stadt, viola; and Camden Shaw, cello, give plenty of evidence in Beethoven: The Opus 18 Quartets of the ways in which they are maturing as a very special ensemble. There is, of course, no reason why they should arrange these six “Early Quartets” as the first release in a cycle of the complete quartets, but in a way that’s very appropriate. As did Beethoven in this 1801 publication, the splendid young foursome give ample proof of where they are in terms of their development and their artistic profile. And are they a force to be reckoned with!

Konstantin Semilakovs studied piano under Wolfgang Manz in Nuremberg and Michael Wladowski in Paris, and was appointed professor of piano at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna in 2018. From his early years as a music student, the native of Riga, Latvia has been aware of the phenomenon of synaesthesia, the perception of musical tones as colors.

This has drawn him inevitably into the study of Alexander Scriabin, one of the strangest figures in 19th/20th century music. The Russian composer has been a particularly absorbing study for Semilakovs because he associated colors with certain specific harmonies. Semilakovs is well-suited to performing Scriabin’s music because he perceives it as direct and honest, and because he himself has come to suspect a correlation between synaesthesia and the structure of the harmonic series.

From this point of view, he is able to present Scriabin in purely musical terms that allow us to understand his artistic aims without getting distracted by the popular view of the composer as a monumental egotist. Scriabin really was a religious nut, one whose self-professed aim was to transform the world through music, preparing it for a final cataclysm of blind light and rapturous musical tones in which the world and all mankind would instantly become de-materialized. Semilakovs’ approach to Scriabin makes him a more approachable, sympathetic figure whose music is easier to comprehend and absorb without prejudice.

The 24 Preludes, Op. 11, finished
sounding rather melancholy but ends in a mood of life-affirmation.

Ferdinand Hiller (1811-1885) was a friend of Mendelssohn and Schumann. That actually worked to his detriment in the E-minor Symphony of 1848, which was enthusiastically received by its first audiences but was panned for an alleged lack of originality by the critics, who cited its resemblances to the styles of both his more celebrated friends. The main resemblance, it seems to me from Lau's transcription and performance, lies in his use of dotted rhythms and pulse-quickening tempi, in which he was actually very resourceful in the ways he employs those musical elements.

As Lau observes in his perceptive analysis, the suspense Hiller creates in the very opening of the symphony “foreshadows the storm in the rest of the first movement, created by [the way] a bold ascending major seventh is sustained through the piece and is ‘answered’ only in the jubilant finale with the descending octave motives.” Notably charming is the second theme with its mood of gentle yearning for hope and happiness. We find it transformed and echoed in the expressive Adagio, the lighthearted scherzo, and the jubilant finale, of which Hiller hints in the motto with which he prefaced the work: “Es müß doch Frühling werden” (Spring must surely come).

In the final analysis, Ronald Lau's championing of the Hiller work piques us to hear the original Symphony which, alas, is totally absent from the current discography.

assigning a good many solo passages to each of the instruments. In many instances, the second violin part is so vividly characterized that we could imagine the two violinists Indian-wrestling for the privilege of playing that part. The viola is solidly in the middle of the harmony in all these quartets. And the cello can be heard (very clearly in these recordings) as a moving force constantly urging matters along in tempo and rhythm, its warm, rich tones giving it a distinctive voice, not content to merely underpin the melody.

For the sake of brevity, I'm going to concentrate on Quartets 1 and 6, though all six show evidence of Beethoven’s unmistakable hand at work. Right from the opening of the Allegro con brio of Quartet No. 1, a gently curving theme with repeated notes is taken with an intensity that must have shocked Beethoven’s early audiences. The impression “something new has been added” is confirmed by the slow movement, a gloomy Adagio affetuoso ed appassionato in which the intensity of the latter section, said to have been inspired by the Tomb Scene from Romeo and Juliet, leaves a lasting impression.

Who but Beethoven would have done the things he pulled off in Quartet No. 6? They include mysterious octaves in the Adagio, syncopated accents, ties extending beyond the bar lines, and the deliberate confusion between 3/4 and 6/8 in the Scherzo. In the finale, the somber opening entitled La Malinconia (melancholy) is succeeded without warning by the fleet-footed scamper of the Rondo section, a striking innovation so like Beethoven.

Elsewhere, Beethoven creates a sensation in No. 5 by the way a sudden rousing fanfare shakes us out of our expectations in the otherwise gentle Andante cantabile. The slow movement in No. 2 is a Cavatina, an intimate, slowly unfolding discourse which the members of the Dover Quartet treasure for all its rare beauty.

In the slow movement of No. 3 in D major Beethoven gravitates to the rare dark-sounding tones of B-flat minor and E-flat minor, anticipating Scriabin by almost a century. But in both 4 and around 1895, show how the 23-year old composer was already inclined to an adventurous pursuit of ever more expressive tone colors. Like Chopin’s comparable set of Preludes, Op. 28, they are based on the composer’s harmonic theory. In Scriabin’s case, the choice of key signatures is pretty much what one might expect in terms of traditional harmony until we get to Preludes 11-16, and here he trots out a decidedly strange company of keys seldom-used in larger compositions because of their challenging arrays of sharps and flats. These “bad actors” are as follows: B major, G-sharp minor, G-flat minor, E-flat minor, D-flat minor, and B-flat minor. As Semilakovs performs these pieces, the strange beauty inherent in their unusual keys gives a clear idea of the direction Scriabin was to take in his later music.

Of particular interest here are two Sonatas, No. 4 in F-sharp minor, Op. 30, of 1903 and No. 7, Op. 64, dating from 1912, both written during periods of white-hot creative activity. The former occurs in two contrasted movements which Semilakovs takes without a break in keeping with the composer’s intention that there should be a seamless transition, reflecting his striving for ever greater compression. (The entire duration of the sonata is just under 8 minutes) Beautiful rippling figurations in the first movement give way to restless activity in the second, where the theme from the first is repeated on the way to an ecstatic conclusion. To accompany the sonata and clarify his agenda, Scriabin wrote an ecstatic ode in French to a bluish star which the poet desires to engulf and swallow in a sea of pure light.

Sonata No. 7, which Scriabin titled the “White Mass,” may well have been his personal favorite. Typically of his late period, he did not give it a key signature, although it appears hurtling toward a conclusion in F-sharp minor based on enormous fortissimo bell-like passages in arpeggiated chords. But then comes the shock, as the work simply ends, not with the expected key resolution but in “the mystical clouds of a subset of pitches selected from the overtone series” (to quote program annotator Johannes Schäbel.)

Even as sensitive an interpreter as
5 he follows tradition in calling the quick middle movement a Minuet, though they are scherzos in all but name. They may be marked in the requisite triple meter, but they are not in moderate time and you certainly wouldn’t want to dance to them! For the sake of brevity, I’ll go on.

Konstantin Semilakovs is hard-pressed to present the ending of this sonata as anything other than an anti-climax, although that conclusion accords with the philosophy of a composer who viewed the end of all existence as a moment of dematerialization. In this sense, the “White Mass” Sonata, and a lyric piece of 1914 entitled “Vers la Flamme” (Toward the Flame), also included in this program, share a kinship with the azure moonlight conclusion of Scriabin’s symphonic work Prometheus: Poem of Fire.

Franz Schubert and Philip Glass. My first reaction was, “Migosh, only someone like Simone Dinnerstein would think of teaming these two composers on the same album!” The surprising thing is, the further I delved into this program the more Ms. Dinnerstein’s logic became clear. As she puts it, the two otherwise disparate voices share some unexpected similarities: “I love their pared down quality, their economy, their ability to change everything by changing just one note in a chord.” Further, “They both create a feeling of a solitary journey, a sense of being trapped through repeated vision and revision as the music tries to work itself to a conclusion.”

In the case of our contemporary Philip Glass, I must confess his music was not love at first hearing for me, and it has only been gradually that I have come to realize its strange persuasive beauty. Perhaps I was too much influenced by the common perception of this composer as a “Minimalist” (a term which Glass personally loathes because of its limiting connotations). He sees his music in terms of “repetitive structures” which take some time and diligence to work through to a satisfying conclusion. In a way, the three piano Etudes heard in this program (out of 20 that Glass composed over a period of several decades) are an ideal means of understanding what he is aiming at. These are true etudes in the sense that each is devoted to the working-out of a particular point or technique of keyboard artistry. That they may have some artistic merit or audience appeal of their own, as do each of the three Etudes heard in this album, is not essential but may constitute a plus for the listener. No. 2, at 11:24 the longest in duration of the three, amazingly holds our attention to the very end, when we are astonished to discover, looking back, at the distance we have travelled without being aware of any tedious journey. In spite of a few salient moments, such as the notable leap of tempo that occurs at about 5:56, the change that occurs in this etude takes place organically through small increments.

That Glass should admire Franz Schubert may not be the first thing that strikes the listener, but it was not for nothing that the great teacher Natalia Boulanger, with whom he learned composition in Paris in 1964-1966, recommended Schubert to him as a particular object of study (along with Bach and Mozart). That Schubert preceded Glass as a composer of sublime lengths is evident in the Sonata in B-flat major, D960, which he finished in the last month of his pitifully short life (1797-1828). The opening movement, Molto moderato, is a good example of the Schubert challenge, as the pianist has to maintain a steady, albeit nuanced, moderate time throughout its great length (22:34 in the present instance). The changes occur gradually, building to an impressive conclusion, and marked along the way by sensational rumblings in the bass that act as upheavals and signposts. (Contrary to expectation, these rumblings rise instead of falling, creating pleasant hazards and challenges for a true keyboard artist like Simone.)

There is a background story to these recordings of July 22-23, 2020, which for reasons of the COVID-19 restrictions, could not have been made in a recital hall or a regular recording studio. The unsung hero, as Simone intimates, was Adam Abeshouse, who set up her home in Brooklyn for an acoustic ambience of great integrity and then produced, engineereed, edited, mixed and mastered the end results. “It was Adam,” she confides, “who talked me back into music” after the numbing enervation of the pandemic that has affected musicians just as it has the rest of us. The end result is ours for the hearing, thoughtful and beautiful music-making that we can all enjoy and feed upon for spiritual nourishment.
“American Gifts for Marimba Duo” was really a pleasant surprise to find in my mail box. This album by American marimba artists Jack Van Geem and Nancy Zeltsman and assisting artists resonates on a number of levels. The “Simple Gifts” of the title recalls the old Shaker hymn “Tis a gift to be simple, ‘tis a gift to be free, / ‘Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be” by Joseph Brackett (1797-1882), which is quoted here in a piano arrangement by Penny Rodriguez (with just a few syncopations not found in the original).

Simplicity is the key to understanding and playing the marimba, in which large wooden keys are struck by mallets with either hard rubber tips for brilliant, loud, percussive sounds, or else wound with woolen yarn for mellow tones. Unlike the piano, the marimba cannot play really complex or widely spaced chords, but its beautiful warm sound and diversity of tone color more than compensate.

Of course, even the above-mentioned limitations largely disappear when you have a talented pair of marimba artists such as Van Geem and Zeltsman. We hear them as a duo in their adaptation of Irving Fine’s Music for Piano (1947) and Zeltsman’s own adaptation of Roger Sessions’ Sonata No. 1 for Piano (1930). Fine’s Music reflects the charm and refined gestures found in French neo-classicism, as well as a passion for poring new wine into the old bottles of received classical forms and genres.

The Sessions is in three movements: an Andante that is really the beginning of the slow middle movement, another
Andante which is marked Poco meno mosso (a little less lively) as it is preceded by a fast Allegro; and then a finale marked Molto vivace which challenges the Van Geem/Zellsman marimba duo to rise to greater heights in a work that seems to recall the beauty of a Bach aria.

The final work on the program, consuming almost half its length, is Island Music (2003) by Michael Tilson Thomas, celebrated music director of the San Francisco Symphony who recently retired after 25 years’ tenure. Here the Duo are joined by tutti marimba artists Raymond Froelich and James Lee Wyatt III and also by percussionists David Herbert and Tom Hemphill in a tour de force of wide-ranging persuasion and complexity that benefits from the extra manpower.

The diversity of sounds produced is simply amazing in a work which Tilson Thomas describes as a reflection of traditions East and West, music that “drifts back and forth between the islands of Indonesia and the Caribbean, stopping along the way in the United States.” It is in the form of an introduction and three parts. Perhaps the most memorable of these is Part II, “In the Clearing,” which imagines a break in the dancing and a pause for the remembrance of “those who are sadly no longer with us on the dance floor.” The composer adds: “The music becomes more and more lyrical until it dissolves into arabesques.” There is a haunting beauty in this work that will stay with us for a long time.

This song cycle contains powerful thoughts and emotions, of which I’ve been able to give you only a glimpse. Much of the success of this recording is due German baritone Michael Nagy, whose deep, honest tone production encompasses all the dramatic power, violent outbursts, and quiet recitations on a single note required in the scores. He is well-equipped to bring out the emotions voiced by the protagonist, as well as the musical demands of the sprechstimme used by Schoeck. The latter is a cross between speaking and singing in which the tone quality is heightened or lowered in pitch along melodic contours indicated in the musical notation. It is quite different from our usual notions of supported melody, and takes some getting accustomed-to.

Dmitri Mitropoulos is today better remembered for his work as conductor with the New York Philharmonic 1949-1960, but his earlier career as a composer gets overdue recognition from Botstein and the Now Orchestra organ, he has been untiring. One of his pet projects has been to record all the Widor organ symphonies, of which the Fourth and Seventh are heard on the present CD.

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, up first, has a great deal of variety, beginning with a beautifully constructed Toccata and Fugue in moderate time, revealing the sure hand of one who understood the relevance of baroque counterpoint to a later era. The first movement is a weighty drama, with pregnant pauses and short harmonic deviations, the latter discrete and dignified. The third movement, marked Andante cantabile, has a folkslike melody, in which Bell detects a Scottish flavor. He describes the fourth, a scherzo marked Allegro vivace, as “a diabolical exercise in perpetual motion, with lightning-speed notes flying by on quiet stops given barely enough time to speak.” Then we have another slow movement, marked Adagio, a moment of calm before the onslaught of a finale which ends confidently, like a hymn of triumph.

Symphony No. 7 in A minor, with a duration of 43:39, is one of the longest and most demanding works in the literature. The opening Moderato is distinguished by its angular theme and high-energy requirements. The second movement, a weighty Choral, and the third, a gothic, brooding affair marked Andante / Allegretto, are followed by a rhapsodic Allegro non troppo with swelling and ebbing figurations. The fifth is a plaintive Lento in C-sharp minor ending in C-sharp major, a rarely-used but rich key with seven sharps in its signature. For the finale, Allegro vivace, Widor borrows the theme from the Choral, giving an impression of cyclic unity. Bell starts this movement slowly and builds in intensity through various textures and dynamics, all the way to a glorious fanfare in A major.