

Phil's Classical Reviews

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"Allegro io son," Arias of Donizetti and Bellini – Lawrence Brownlee, tenor; Constantine Orbelian, Kaunas City Symphony (Delos)

Lawrence Brownlee is a renowned opera singer who didn't start out with opera in mind. An Ohio native who grew up singing gospel music, he didn't discover the classics until his student days at Anderson (SC) University and the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University.

He is now a resident of Atlanta, but we don't get to hear him much in these parts because he is usually flying off to engagements at the great opera houses of three continents. For he is universally recognized as the tenor of choice when the subject is the demanding Italian operatic style known as *bel canto*.

Several years ago, Delos released his premiere album of Rossini arias (see Phil's Classical Reviews, October 2014). What I said about him then goes double for this latest album of arias by the other two great figures in *bel canto*, Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini: "This artist has a voice as liquid as golden honey but it is capable of rising to the peak of his range and intensity on the shortest notice. His High D seems deceptively effortless, while his High F takes a little more effort to achieve, but is still within his capability."

The present program does not often call upon Brownlee to rise above High C, but otherwise it tests his versatility in choice arias from some of his



Kaleidoscope: Beethoven Transcriptions - Mari Kodama, piano (Pentatone)

Once she had finished her critically celebrated cycle of the Beethoven sonatas for Pentatone Music, where was pianist Mari Kodama to turn next? One answer, as interesting as it was unexpected, is found in *Kaleidoscope*, an album devoted entirely to piano transcriptions of and by Beethoven. Aided by Kodama's flawless keyboard technique, we have the surprisingly exciting opportunity to get a closer understanding of some of the composer's greatest music.

I say "surprisingly" because keyboard transcriptions of this sort have never been regular concert fare. The original purpose of the transcriptions of Beethoven string quartet movements by Saint-Saëns, Mussorgsky, and Balakirev that we are given here was undoubtedly the closer analysis and study of the originals they permitted. That they should end up affording the pleasure and spiritual refreshment that Kodama realizes here is all the more welcome for being unexpected.

We begin with the second movement, *Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando* from the first "Razoumovsky" Quartet, Op. 59, No. 1, in Camille Saint-Saëns' transcription. Beethoven seems to have fashioned this movement from a mere rhythmic scrap, yet its repeated scherzando plus trio structure is really quite complex in a way that serves to keep the listener's expectations off-balance. In Saint-Saëns' transcription of the Adagio from Quartet No. 6, Op.



Of Love and Longing: Piano Music of Franz Liszt – Jerry Wong, pianist (MSR Classics)

American pianist Jerry Wong is at it again, exploring all the delicious and compelling ways harmonic changes, strong rhythms and powerful dynamics can affect our response to the music of Franz Liszt. Wong's take on Liszt puts the composer in perspective as one who pushed the envelope in all these matters, and whose impact continued to be felt long after his own lifetime.

Still among the best-loved pieces by Liszt are a selection from the first year (*Suisse*) of his collection *Années de Pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage) which recall the experiences he shared in Switzerland with runaway Countess Marie d'Agoult. First, heroic music emanates from the depths of the tomb of the Swiss national hero in *Chapelle de Guillaume Tell*, a call reminding us of the ongoing struggle for freedom.

Au lac du Wallenstadt, recalling the natural beauty of the Wallensee, was prefaced by a quote from Lord Byron: "The contrasted lake with the wild world I dwell in is a thing which warns me, with its stillness, to forsake earth's troubled waters for a purer spring." Its opening melody stretches out peacefully over a semi-Impressionistic accompaniment of arpeggios supported by a tonic pedal. As the accompaniment flows between tonic and dominant harmonies like gentle waves on the surface of the lake, the melody rises and falls gracefully, its sounds conjuring up the image of bright sunlight reflected on

favorite operas. They include the buoyant "*Allegro io son*" (Happy as a finch, happy am I) from *Rita*, Ernesto's delightful serenade with guitar "*Com é gentil*" (How soft the April night is) from *Don Pasquale*, and the sighing aria "*Seul sur la terre*" (Alone upon earth, in my misery I have nothing) from *Don Sebastien*, all by Donizetti.

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 program concludes once again with arias by Donizetti: two each from *L'elisir 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.

18, we have a movement seemingly clothed in innocent beauty but with strange octaves and unexpected accents and silences that Kodama takes care to delineate.

There follow bold transcriptions by the Russians Mily Balakirev and Modest Mussorgsky. First, the 3rd movement, *Allegretto maggiore*, from the "Razumovsky" Quartet No. 2, Op. 59, in which the contrapuntal treatment of the theme as it passes from one string instrument to another is replicated so stunningly in the piano transcription, particularly given Kodama's assured performance, that we are often in doubt as to whether we are listening to a solo keyboard artist or a team of duo-pianists.

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.

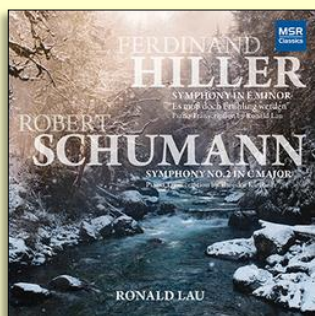
Mussorgsky follows with transcriptions of the 2nd movement, *Vivace*, and the 3rd *Lento assai cantate e tranquillo* (rather relaxed, songlike and tranquil) from Quartet No. 16, Op. 135. This was Beethoven's final published work in any genre, and for many scholars it contains his last thoughts on a lifetime 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.

the water. Even the turbulent middle section fails to dispel the peaceful ebb and flow which returns at the end.

Les cloches de Genève (The Bells of Geneva) capturing the overlapping sounds of church bells heard from afar on a calm evening, requires the light sensitive touch that Wong applies here. A more complex piece, *Vallée d'Obermann*, is not the simple exercise in landscape painting that the title might suggest, but the dark detailing of a young man's struggles with life and love, inspired by a French novel of the same name. As such, it would have had a strong appeal for someone with "the complex trajectory of Liszt's creative life" (Wong). Of interest is a descending scale figure, informing every page of the score, which undergoes harmonic and chromatic changes that parallel the mental turmoil of the novel's hero. Those perturbations include a tumultuous tremolo passage with octaves flying about with the fury of a caged animal. At the end, Liszt takes pity on his tormented hero by harmonizing the descending scale figure and transforming it into a melody that offers warmth and consolation.

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. *Funérailles* (funeral ode) and *La lugubre gondola* (the funereal 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!)

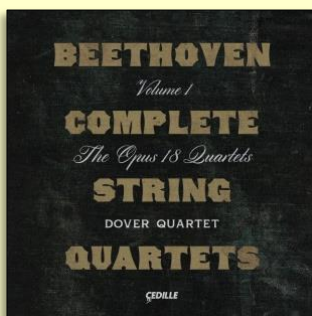


Hiller + Schumann: Symphonic Transcriptions – Ronald Lau, piano (MSR Classics)

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 near-quotations and resemblances to themes from Bach (opening of the Trio Sonata in the Musical Offering) and Mozart (Tamino's aria from Act II of The Magic Flute), and a theme from Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* (To My Distant Beloved), of which he was particularly fond.

Schumann's striking use of the rhythm of "*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*" (All men shall be brothers) from the Ninth Symphony adds to the noticeably aggressive mood at the end of his own finale. In contrast to the general buoyance we have a slow movement, *Adagio espressivo*, which starts off

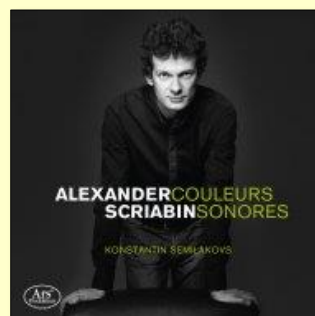


Beethoven: The Opus 18 Quartets Dover String Quartet (Cedille)

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 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



Couleurs sonores. Scriabin: Piano Sonatas 4 & 7; Preludes, Op. 11 Konstantin Semilakovs, pianist (Ars Produktion)

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 professed aim was to transform the world through music, preparing it for a final cataclysm of blinding 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-quickenings 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 muß 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 affettuoso 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'm going

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.

OK



A Character of Quiet, Glass: 3 Etudes
Schubert: Sonata in B-flat, D.960
Simone Dinnerstein, piano
(Orange Mountain Music)

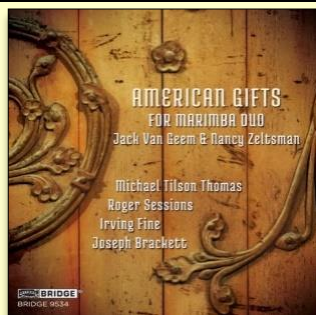
Franz Schubert and Philip Glass. My first reaction was, "Migosh, only someone like Simone Dinnerstein would think of teaming *these two* composers on the same album!" The surprising thing is, the further I delved into this program the more Ms. Dinnerstein's logic became clear. As she puts it, the two 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, engineered, 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.



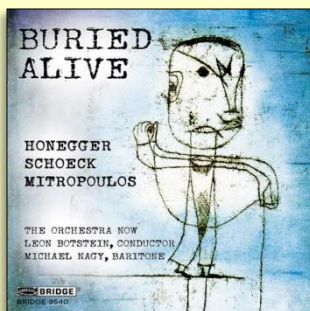
American Gifts for Marimba Duo
Jack Van Geem, Nancy Zeltsman,
with assisting artists
(Bridge Records)

"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



"Buried Alive," music of Arthur Honegger, Othmar Schoeck, Dmitri Mitropoulos – Leon Botstein, The Orchestra Now (Bridge Records)

Buried Alive: "Gee," I thought, what a swell name for a CD to help while away the dreary months as we wait for the Covid-19 lockdown to end!" The title refers to a lieder cycle by Othmar Schoeck (1886-1957) that occupies pride of place in the middle of a program, that also features *Rugby* by Arthur Honegger (1892-1955) and *Concerto Grosso* by Dmitri Mitropoulos (1896-1960). All bear testimony to the passion of conductor Leon Botstein for digging up neglected 20th century works in need of the solid championing The Orchestra Now can give them.

Honegger, of Swiss origin, is often identified with a group of French composers celebrated as "*Les Six*." As he did in his earlier work *Pacific 231*, a sonic evocation of the sheer power and dynamism of a diesel locomotive, the symphonic scherzo *Rugy* (1928) conjures up the back-and-forth battle between two teams of footballers. As Honegger's music escalates, the time signatures in triple and duple meter change almost every other measure as we wait breathlessly for one "team" or the other to prevail (*Hint*: the smart money is on the team in 3/4 time!)

Schoeck, another Swiss, was very much a modernist but he took the texts of the fourteen poems in his stunning 1926 lieder cycle *Lebendig begraben* (*Buried Alive*) from an 1846 book of poems by Gottfried Keller. As in some other German language lieder cycles, we move from death and despair to joy and transfiguration. Its protagonist is one who has been buried prematurely but whose thoughts persist in the grave – memories of a Christmas tree, a festival, and a girl of the mountains



American Classic Widor, Vol. 3: Joby Bell, organist. Recorded at Providence United Methodist Church, Charlotte (Centaur)

Organist Joby Bell, noted for the warmth of his playing, and in particular for his skill in articulating and shaping musical phrases, once again scores a hit with Vol. 3 of a series on the music of Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937). The very long-lived French organist and composer is best remembered for his ten organ symphonies, a genre he seems to have created. (For more on this composer, see my *Classical Reviews* for December, 2017.)

Bell, an artist whose bold, ebullient spirit readily communicates with the listener, has chosen an appropriate instrument for Widor's music in the Opus 1472, one of the last organs made by the fabled Aeolian-Skinner company of Boston before they ceased operations in 1972. These instruments, frequently described as "symphonic organs," were prized for their wide sonic compass and their ability to change registration and dynamics smoothly and naturally, without the annoying "slam" to which audiences had been ruefully resigned. They were particularly popular in the early decades of the 20th Century when they enriched people's lives by bringing them the music of the opera and the symphony before the advent of phonograph records. They are still prized by organ fanciers today.

Joby Bell, a native of Statesville, N.C., studied at the North Carolina School of the Arts and received a Bachelor of Music in organ and piano from Appalachian State University and Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees in organ from Rice University. In his zeal for performing and recording the great music for the

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/Zeltsman 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.

with wildflowers in her hair. He cries out from the depths of the grave for release from his being "buried alive," release either through the love of a woman or the intrusion of a grave robber: "A golden ring would be my rescue," he broods, but alas, "The only thing you get for free is death."

Cynical despair slowly changes to thoughts of glorious aspirations, as he imagines a tree being felled to make a ship's tall mast with with flags flying in the blue skies. "I'd cling to you with hands as strong as iron," he cries. "Together we would swim toward the world's end." His salvation is complete at the end of the cycle. As the clock strikes twelve he realizes "I'm free, my woes have made a turn. I am alone [in the universe], and still I'm not alone!"

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 folklike 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.

Continued Below:

in his Concerto Grosso (1928). In four movements (Molto Largo, Allegro-Largo, Chorale (Largo), and a concluding Allegro), it pays tribute to baroque counterpoint and fugue but in an uncompromisingly dissonant harmonic idiom rather than an exercise in neo-classicism. Each of the four movements uses a different instrumentation, frequently setting sections of the orchestra against each other in rhythmic opposition, as he does the two horns and the strings in the opening movement. Clashing sonorities, doubled voices and high-energy rhythms at the end make for a spectacular finish to a work that, for all its dissonance, ends up being surprisingly attractive and flavorful, at least under Botstein's baton.