

More Obscure Favorites by Andrew Hartman

The history of classical music is filled with innumerable fine works written by relatively obscure composers. While the historical consensus of critical opinion on the quality of a piece of music is accurate more often than not, it is also a fact that many little-known pieces are of a quality to rival those that are well known and frequently played. Many factors contribute to a work's notoriety besides artistic quality, including a composer's circumstances and personality, the critical climate in which they write, and even pure luck. With that in mind, the adventurous listener who is satiated with the "canon" will seek out other works of high quality. Bringing such works to the attention of a wider audience has been the goal of my previous articles and is the goal of this one as well. So here we go with another dozen obscure favorites.

Vissarion Shebalin – Piano Trio, op. 39

Vissarion Shebalin (1902-1963) was born in Omsk to parents who were school teachers. In 1922 he traveled to Moscow to attend the Conservatory where he studied under Myaskovsky, who would remain a lifelong influence. Shebalin was also a great friend of Shostakovich who kept a photo of him on his desk, and who admired him not only for his music but for his artistic integrity. Shebalin excelled at all genres and wrote five symphonies, several operas including the delightful "Taming of the Shrew" and nine string quartets ([review](#)). His only chamber work combining piano and strings was his piano trio written in 1947. The work has an interesting form with a moderato opening movement, an allegro assai second movement, and a theme and variations finale.

The work opens with a gentle piano arpeggio as the strings sing out a beautiful melody which is eventually picked up by the piano. This distribution of instruments will dominate the piece as Shebalin gives pride of place to the strings instead of the piano throughout. The cello then sings the theme over the piano and launches into a second motif, joined by the violin. After trading phrases, a climax is reached and the piano comes in with dramatic chords which lead us back to the opening theme over a chordal piano accompaniment. The violin and cello interweave the theme in beautiful counterpoint. The cello then sings alone, is joined by the violin, and finally by the piano in a hushed tone which brings the movement to a quiet close.

The stormy allegro which follows begins with powerful chords on the piano, then the strings launch into a striding rhythmic motif. The violin introduces a second theme over pizzicato on the cello and piano arpeggios. The piano picks up the theme as the strings join in scintillating unison until a quiet pause is reached. The cello and piano then restate the opening melody, alternating interweaving and coming together till the violin takes the lead as the piano drives the rhythm. A bouncy tune on the piano ensues over pizzicato, the violin then takes the lead and is eventually joined by the cello. After trading snatches of the theme the three instruments come together until the piano returns alone and the movement unexpectedly dies away pianissimo.

The theme and variations finale opens with a stately melody on the strings. The first variation shortens the note values with the strings again leading until a long held note on the violin dies away. A faster more rhythmic treatment of the theme follows, then the note values are further reduced, and the piano takes the lead against unison strings. An accelerando in the piano follows over swirling strings and is repeated. A romantic adagio variation comes next, with the violin singing out the melody and showing its resemblance to the trio's beautiful opening motif from the first movement. Another accelerando ensues, then crashing chords on the piano brings in a Rachmaninov tinged flourish as the strings sing out the trio's opening motif as the piece comes to a dramatic finish.

Shebalin is one of the finest Soviet era composers. His work is characterized by meticulous form, beautiful melodies, and an artistic integrity that led him to be condemned by the authorities in the

infamous 1948 Zhdanov decree. Any listener who enjoys Myaskovsky and the more accessible works of Shostakovich will find much to enjoy in Shebalin's oeuvre. His piano trio is a marvelous work in every way and deserves a much wider acquaintance. My recording is a 1959 Melodiya LP with Rostislav Dubinsky on violin, Valentin Berlinsky on cello, and Luba Edlina on piano. There is also a version from the Oistrakh Trio - [review](#)]

Janis Ivanovs – Violin Concerto in E Minor

The Latvian composer Janis Ivanovs (1906-1983) was one of the many artists working under Soviet rule who tried to balance his artistic creativity and integrity with the dictates of his communist rulers. That so many of these artists were able to write quality music that subtly spoke truth to power and reflected their artistic imperatives, while ostensibly toeing the party line, is testimony to artistic freedom. Ivanovs' orchestral output includes twenty-one symphonies making him one of the leading symphonists of the mid-twentieth century. Fine as many of them are, I have chosen his sunny violin concerto from 1951 for consideration here. The concerto was written while the Zhdanov decree was still fresh in the composer's mind, so the language is romantic and accessible. Yet within these parameters Ivanovs managed to create a heartfelt tribute to his beloved Latvia that sent its own subtle message of protest to the authorities.

The concerto begins with a portentous six-note arching motif that leads into a poignant entrance by the soloist who plays the theme alone then is joined by the orchestra. The violin slithers up and down the scale, playing the theme in different registers until it introduces a folk-like tune of great beauty. The first theme is restated and developed by the soloist, and then by the full orchestra alone. The violin takes flight over the orchestral backdrop, then an inventive cadenza explores various guises of the motif. The coda briefly brings back the folk-like tune but the portentous opening motif has the last word.

A peaceful, stately melody opens the andante, a hymn to the composer's native land. The violin tenderly sings the theme in a heartfelt tribute to Latvia, a country torn by war and oppression the composer's entire life. An interlude brings a dance melody then the strings resume the hymn to Latvia's beauty which is then expanded on by the soloist. A second dance melody ensues with the violin leading the way in painting a simple country scene. The hymn tune returns in the tenderest garb as the composer expresses his love of his homeland. As the movement serenely dies away the soloist floats a last high note of bliss.

A bustling dance-like theme opens the allegro molto finale in high spirits with the orchestra and soloist trading jocose statements. A brief secondary theme flits by then the main theme returns. The violin then reminisces over themes from earlier in the concerto including the lyrical second theme from the opening movement, and the second movement's main theme. The dance-like motif returns with laughing accompaniment by soloist and orchestra, then the opening theme from the concerto is recalled. A brief cadenza restates the theme then we are off to the races with the finale's happy theme. A final grand restatement of the concerto's opening melody ends the piece on a high note.

Janis Ivanovs was a leading figure in Latvian music in the last century along with his teacher Jazeps Vitols, Janis Medins, Alfreds Kalnins, and Adolfs Skulte, a tradition ably carried on today by Peteris Vasks. That a small country occupied by oppressive rulers could give the world such a rich harvest of music is a testament to the strength of Latvian culture. My recording of the Ivanovs Violin Concerto features Vassily Sinaisky conducting the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra with Valdis Zarins as soloist on a Campion CD ([review](#)).

Andria Balanchivadze – Symphony No. 1

The Georgian composer Andria Balanchivadze (1906-1992) is considered the father of Georgian classical music. Along with his younger contemporary Otar Taktakishvili he represents the pinnacle of

twentieth century musical achievement in this ancient and very musical land. The older composer Zacharia Paliashvili is also in this pantheon, but his achievement rests primarily on three operas and a handful of other vocal works. Balanchivadze and Taktakishvili excelled in every genre. The composer was the younger brother of the legendary choreographer George Balanchine. He studied in Russia as well as Tbilisi and settled in Georgia where he held several musical posts. In the 1930s Balanchivadze narrowly avoided death in Stalin's purge of artists and the intelligentsia, an incident that impacted his work and world view. In later years he won several prizes from the government including People's Artist of Georgia and of the Soviet Union.

Balanchivadze's monumental first symphony from 1944 is lacking any concrete war references, instead reflecting the composer's personal journey and emotions. It is in four broad movements and is a work of his full maturity. The opening *allegro vivo* jumps right into a sprightly, surging five note motif with quicksilver exchanges between strings, winds, and brass with some explosive percussion. A repetitive four-note motif is played against a three-note brass fanfare as a grotesque mock-heroic march ensues getting ever wilder till the four-note theme is hammered home. A quieter section follows with snippets of the five note ascending theme from the opening. A mocking descending scale briefly interrupts then the grotesque march theme returns. One gets the distinct impression the composer is satirizing "Soviet realism" with this buffoonish parody of what the party hacks were writing at the time. Two explosive chords conclude the movement.

After this raucous beginning, the *andantino* opens with a tender melody contrasting vividly with the first movement. The theme is traded between horns and strings, then taken up by the full orchestra. The episode has a cinematic sweep to it that is very captivating. In the development, snatches of phrases in the winds and delicate chamber music touches so typical of this composer's orchestrations bubble on until the main theme returns slightly transformed. The horns play a melancholy version of the theme, commented on by the winds. A six-note hopping theme briefly interjects before a dance-like theme in the strings takes us to the ballroom. The full orchestra sings out the main theme which is repeated and varied in mood and orchestration until the movement quietly dies away. There could hardly be a greater contrast between the sardonic opening movement and this heartfelt, beautiful *andante*.

The third movement begins with a pompous theme in the horns which is quickly picked up by the bassoon, played over a pulsing bass and timpani. A frenzied episode for the trumpets leads to a climax, then the winds race crazily along over the pulsing bass till the full orchestra blazes out the pompous theme and a drum roll leads to a *diminuendo*. A clarinet and flute play a plaintive theme over the ever-present pulsing in the bass. A bombastic trumpet fanfare is followed by a sad theme in the strings, then the two alternate leads. The opening theme returns played *pizzicato*, then gathers steam as the clarinet and bassoon weigh in. The orchestra breaks into a full statement of the main theme and rushes to a crashing climax. This hectic movement leaves the listener breathless and not knowing exactly what to expect in the finale.

Balanchivadze is not through with surprises and contrasts. The finale is an *adagio* that opens with a sad, quiet theme which builds in power to a climax of biblical proportions, reminding one of the Miklos Rozsa Hollywood scores of the 1950s. The eerie quiet of the opening returns with the theme gently stated on organ. A tortured climax is reached with the theme increasing in stridency and power as the brass joins in. The organ returns quietly then suddenly the trumpets blaze out a solo fanfare three times, interrupted briefly by murmurings in the orchestra. The triumphant theme battles the melancholy one under it until the triumphant theme carries all before it with trumpet fanfares over swirling strings. A powerful *fortissimo* ends the symphony.

This symphony, so rich in incident, so varied in mood, so brilliant in orchestration, and so full of powerful emotion reveals more at each listening. Balanchivadze's first symphony is an audacious work on a broad canvas, encompassing all of the composer's emotions during the stressful times he

had lived through. It is a major achievement deserving of a wider audience. My recording, dating from 1958, features Alexander Gauk conducting the USSR Radio Symphony Orchestra on a Melodiya LP.

Anatoly Alexandrov – Symphony # 1 in C Major, op. 92

Anatoly Alexandrov (1888-1982) was one of the most talented Russian composers of his generation. Born at the height of the era of Russian nationalist romanticism his training included study with the famed composer and pedagogue Sergey Taneyev, as well as with Sergei Vasilenko. He also was influenced by Medtner and Scriabin, who represented to him the more modern trends in Russian music in his youth. Alexandrov's musical ethos remained fixed in this era and his compositions remained accessible despite the various modernizing trends he witnessed in his long life. Like many other composers working in the Soviet Union who were not revolutionary or who did not publicly challenge the authorities (Rakov comes to mind), Alexandrov's high quality oeuvre has received too little attention in the west. The composer's favorite means of expression was the piano, for which he composed fourteen sonatas and many smaller pieces ([review](#)). He also contributed greatly to the song repertory. Alexandrov wrote few orchestral pieces and they are all late works but they are of high quality. The music that first introduced me to the composer was his Symphony # 1 in C Major written in 1965. It remains one of my favorites of his works.

The symphony opens with a trumpet flourish which immediately gives way to a pensive theme which hesitatingly gropes its way forward. A flute solo leads us into the allegro proper as pulsing strings underpin trumpets and winds till a full orchestral statement of the upwardly stepping main theme evolves. It ends with an ominous growl before a wistful second theme is launched by the winds then picked up by the strings. Growing in power it is interrupted by the trumpet flourish. The upwardly stepping melody battles the trumpet fanfare for dominance until the struggle is exhausted and the second theme returns. After a full orchestral restatement of this motif the trumpet fanfare returns, bringing with it the pensive mood of the introduction. The main theme begins another battle with the trumpets until the fanfares eventually win out and have the final word.

The slow movement begins with a plaintive theme which evolves hesitatingly from the strings into a powerful statement for full orchestra. A lengthy quiet development ensues with many felicitous touches in the winds until the movement dies away peacefully.

The trumpet fanfare blazes out as the scherzo is launched and a jaunty march tune cheerily bounces along. A clarinet solo ushers in the trio section of lush strings and a romantic theme recalling Rachmaninov. The march theme returns in full force and with trumpets blaring brings us to a climax reminiscent of Korngold at his Hollywood best. The finale begins slowly with meditative musings in the lower strings before the flute leads us into a lovely, bright theme picked up by the full orchestra. The opening trumpet fanfare is briefly heard, leading to a cyclic unification of the symphony with quotations from the slow movement's main theme, the main melody from the first movement, and the trio theme from the scherzo. The flute theme is restated and builds to an orchestral climax then the trumpets burst in and unleash a fevered battle of themes. The movement's opening meditative musings are recalled, followed by the flute theme and the trumpet fanfare. A pensive coda recalls the romantic trio theme from the scherzo. The trumpets try to break through but are calmed by the strings, then another attempt is beaten back. Calm and beauty win the day as the romantic theme banishes the trumpets and the symphony draws to a serene close. While Alexandrov did not elucidate a formal program for the symphony, the music surely hints at one.

This symphony, written in the composer's seventy-seventh year after a lifetime of piano music and songs, shows a freshness of imagination and a willingness to tackle new forms unusual for an aging composer. Alexandrov stayed true to his musical roots however, producing a work that would not have shocked his conservative teacher Taneyev, at a time when the avant-garde was a prevalent

trend in classical music. My recording features Igor Blazhkov conducting the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra on a Melodiya LP.

Pavel Chesnokov – The Cherubic Hymn

The Russian choirmaster and choral composer Pavel Chesnokov (1877-1944) devoted his life to church music. He studied under Taneyev and Ippolitov-Ivanov at the Moscow Conservatory and had written nearly four hundred sacred pieces by the time of the Russian Revolution. In the last thirty years of his life the communist authority's restrictions on religious worship forced him to switch to secular works but his heart was with the church and his great works were behind him. Chesnokov was one of the greatest writers of sacred *a cappella* music in the early twentieth century, creating heartfelt works of stunning beauty that burned with a vibrant faith in God. Drawing on the traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church he used traditional melodies as the starting point for many of his works, including The Cherubic Hymn, based on an old melody from the Simonov monastery.

The work starts with the sublime Simonov melody which arches upwards towards heaven then descends to earth. The male choir sings as if time is suspended with greatly elongated note values and beautiful interweaving of the voices. The angels sing "Let us mystically represent the cherubim who sing the thrice holy hymn to the life creating Trinity, now lay aside all cares of this life that we may receive the King of All who comes invisibly upborne by the angelic host, Alleluia."

The melody is embroidered as the voices repeatedly rise and fall, weaving a tapestry of heavenly sound. A pedal point in the bass voices launches a reprise of the melody by the tenors that grows in power and emotion. On the words "lay aside all cares of this life" the choir comes together, achieving a sublime tranquility as if the singers have indeed reached divine peace. This closes the adagio section of the work and the choir launches into an allegro to welcome with joy the King of All. The angels joyously sing the Alleluias as their voices ring out in perfect faith.

It is difficult to put into words the sublime beauty of this piece. The nearest comparison might be the famous Georgian hymn "Shen Khar Venakhi" sung by the Rustavi Choir. This hymn is on a wonderful CD called "Teach Me Thy Statutes" on a Reference Recordings ([review](#)) produced by the PaTRAM Institute featuring a mixed Russian and American choir and conducted by Vladimir Gorbik. I urge you to seek it out.

Alan Hovhaness – Symphony # 63 "Loon Lake"

The Armenian-American composer Alan Hovhaness (1911 – 2000) was born in Massachusetts to an Armenian father and a Scottish mother. An introverted only child he started writing music at an early age, wandering the woods and fields of his native New England. Hovhaness had a long and prolific composing career producing over five hundred works. While he eventually won fame and success starting in the 1950s with his second symphony "Mysterious Mountain", which was championed by Stokowski and Reiner and received grudging admiration from Leonard Bernstein, he remained an outsider in the classical music scene. One does not have to search far for the reasons. Hovhaness was an iconoclast who followed his interests regardless of critical approval. He was one of the first composers who attempted to merge eastern and western musical traditions (John Foulds was another), incorporating influences from Armenia to Japan. Hovhaness went where his curiosity took him and was not afraid to experiment. He did not expect every experiment to be a success. His self-proclaimed credo to write music that all could appreciate and that would bring spiritual tranquility to his listeners placed him at odds with the modernist trends of the time and won him the sneering label of a "new age" composer from some critics, though most of his career predates that genre. While his oeuvre is uneven, his best works achieve his goals, bringing a spiritual peace and tranquility to the listener.

The Symphony # 63 “Loon Lake” was written in 1988 to a commission by the New Hampshire Music Festival. Writing a symphony recollecting his early New England wanderings obviously appealed to the aging composer and he produced a totally characteristic work that beautifully captures the peace of a New England lake in the woods, where the loons and other birds are the sole occupants. As someone who has spent many happy hours tramping the woods of New England, this symphony resonates with me and will hopefully resonate with many other listeners.

The work is in two connected movements and opens with a beautiful, stately melody in the strings as we approach the lake. Gentle pizzicato with soft chimes and percussion lead us to a plaintive melody on the English horn portraying the magnificent loons swimming around the lake. There is a hushed aura of mystery as if the lake is shrouded in mist and the observer is alone with nature. A swarm of pizzicato suggests buzzing insects flying by. As the second movement continues attacca, the flute introduces another theme, related to the first. The piccolo plays two bird calls, a hermit thrush and a loon as the hypnotic, gently swaying pizzicato accompaniment continues. The various winds call to each other; flute, English horn, oboe, and clarinet. Occasionally the strings interject with the beautiful opening theme of the symphony, then the birds come back. One can close one’s eyes and be transported to a New England lake, deep in the woods, with only the birds for companions.

Suddenly the tempo picks up and a two note timpani motif is repeated under a lively flute solo. Activity on the lake accelerates as the birds chatter and feed themselves as the sun emerges brightly overhead. The plaintive theme returns but in a livelier tempo with the pizzicato and timpani motif supporting it. The solo flute sings as time seems suspended, then a new theme is heard in the winds over an arching pizzicato motif. The lower strings begin a swelling theme as the upper strings and harp join in. Suddenly a trumpet sings a lovely fanfare over strings and chimes as the orchestra builds to a thrilling conclusion, a glorious apotheosis of nature. All must bow before nature’s beauty and majesty. My recording of “Loon Lake” features Stewart Robertson conducting the Royal Scottish National Orchestra on a Naxos CD ([review](#)).

Joly Braga Santos – Symphony No. 4

The Portuguese composer Joly Braga Santos (1924-1988) was born in Lisbon, a city he loved deeply and lived in his entire life. He studied at the Lisbon Conservatory where he became a disciple of Luis De Freitas Branco, the leading Portuguese composer of his time, whose compositions are definitely worth investigating. Braga Santos was a precocious talent, composing four major symphonies and numerous other works before his twenty-seventh birthday. His early style is romantic and includes influences from the Portuguese renaissance as well as from the folk music of his country. Starting in his mid-thirties, the composer traveled widely and was exposed to the modernist trends of the day which led to a marked shift in style. Unlike many composers who stay true to the milieu in which they were trained, and whose style changes little from the beginning to the end of their career, his later works could almost have been written by a different composer. Although his later works are never less than interesting, and many are of high quality, it is his earlier works that represent his most lasting achievement.

The Symphony No. 4 represents the culmination of Braga Santos’ early style. It was written in 1950 and is on an epic scale, lasting nearly an hour. It begins with a whispering string tremolo as the main theme is heard in the winds. It is a descending motif consisting of a three-note phrase, a pause, and a four-note phrase. A brief climax leads to a hushed section for muted brass. A growing pulse in the strings gains in power and accelerates in tempo leading to the allegro section of the movement. A new theme is stated by the full orchestra over a relentless beat of the timpani, then a second theme quickly follows over the same beat. Excitement is whipped up then released as the development begins. As different sections of the orchestra recall elements of the preceding themes, the brass emphatically repeats a powerful refrain. An underlying pulse is retained virtually throughout the movement, first by percussion, then by the strings. The opening tremolo returns with a brief

cessation of the pulse, then it quickly returns growing in power and tempo as the brass and winds trade the first three notes of the seven-note opening motif. The full orchestra returns with the percussion driving the pulse, which then switches to the horns as the trumpets play over them. The full orchestra then blares out the triumphant main theme from the allegro section. The pulsing horns return as the brass thrillingly ends the movement.

A funereal arching four note motif in the strings underpins the andante second movement as the clarinets play the main theme followed by the bassoons. This is followed by a quiet section where the strings sing a lament which grows to an impassioned climax ending with repeated slashing chords. The main theme returns in a more tragic guise on the strings, and this grief-stricken episode leads back to the funereal four note motif becoming an inexorable tread of death which builds to a powerful climax then dies away. The grimness of this andante is overwhelming. The scherzo opens with string tremolos and pizzicato as the oboe states the main theme, quickly picked up by the strings. The winds then play a puckish theme over pizzicato leading to a reprise of the first melody. The trio section has a folk music character reminding one of a gracious village dance. The composer includes some beautiful touches from the winds in this section. The entire thematic material of the movement is then repeated with slightly different orchestration before an accelerando leads us to the close.

The grand finale opens with a slow introduction quoting the theme that opened the symphony. An accelerando leads us into the allegro. Over a trumpet ostinato a joyous and memorable theme is sung by the strings. A march interlude leads us into a heroic second theme with pounding strings in the lower register. A folk-like theme follows played against a complex rhythm that blazes to a climax. A reminiscence of the theme from the slow introduction follows then crashing percussion leads us back to the joyous theme. Pizzicato underpins a restatement of the second theme then the joyous theme comes charging back with pulsing strings ratcheting up the excitement till a crashing halt is reached. Then an epilogue begins which Braga Santos called a hymn to youth. A beautiful stately chorale ensues, the third ear-worm melody of this stupendous movement. The symphony builds to a triumphant conclusion blazed out by full orchestra.

I have no hesitation in calling Braga Santos' Fourth Symphony a masterpiece. That it was written by a composer in his mid-twenties is astonishing. It should be played as often as the symphonies of Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Sibelius, Dvorak and Brahms. It is that good. My recording is on Naxos and features Alvaro Cassuto conducting the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland ([review](#)). There is an alternative choral version of the symphony that was recorded by Portusom ([review](#)).

Vitezslav Novak – The Storm, op. 42

Vitezslav Novak (1870-1949) was a Czech composer of the generation following the first flowering of Czech musical nationalism under Dvorak and Smetana. He studied at the Prague Conservatory in the 1890s, attending Dvorak's classes in composition with fellow students Josef Suk (Dvorak's future son-in-law) and Oskar Nedbal among others. As he reached his full maturity as a composer in the years leading up to The Great War, he produced his greatest works among which is the giant secular cantata "The Storm". Novak poured his soul into this epic work, based on the words of Svatopluk Cech written several decades earlier. This symbolic work portrays a storm at sea as a metaphor for the storms of human emotions. Novak interestingly called "The Storm" A Sea Phantasy for Orchestra, Chorus and Soloists, emphasizing how the sea in all its guises dominates the work. Indeed, Franz Lachner's comment on "The Flying Dutchman" that "whenever I open the score the incessant wind blows out at you", aptly describes "The Storm" as well. The feel of the stormy sea never lets up throughout the seventy minutes of the score, of which thirty minutes are orchestral, and forty minutes have vocal accompaniment.

The work opens with an explosive fanfare that grabs one's attention immediately and will play a role throughout the work. It is the storm motif. The music then quiets to an ominous stirring in the basses. A rising and falling theme portrays the restless waves of the sea. A purposeful, striding theme brings us to the shore. It grows stronger as a wordless chorus cries out fearfully. A girl from the fishing village, who lives in a cottage on the cliff, prays in front of a chapel. She implores the star of the sea to chase away the tempest and repair the ship carrying her beloved who has set sail to explore the world and bring back its treasures. As the stormy music rolls and the fearful cry from the chorus sounds again it becomes evident the girl's passionate prayers are not simply to safeguard her lover but reflect the physical passion she feels for him and longs to express. She sings that desire for her lover is pushing her like the wind in the sails and she prays to the goddess of love for fulfillment. The music storms passionately and the storm motif rolls on.

The scene switches to the ship where a sailor's chorus sings the legend of the ship's fairy. He guards the ship and the sailors, but he is capricious and fond of his liquor. If the sailors are stingy with it he will leave, and the ship will be destroyed. The scene changes to a boy in the masthead, acting as lookout as the storm rages. He sings that his father is the ship and his mother is the sea. To a swirling motif he declares that the storm might crack the masthead and sink the ship but even with that worst-case scenario his mother the sea will welcome him into her arms. The passions of fatalistic risk-taking and devil may care bravado are captured in this disturbing section.

As the storm motif continues to rage, a lovesick youth sings of his longing for his maiden back home who surpasses all of the exotic ports of call and treasures he has seen on his travels. It is the lover of the maiden by the chapel. He prays to the celestial priestess to protect the ship so he can see his love again. As with almost all the prayers in "The Storm", the prayers are not to "The Prince of Peace" but are to the pagan gods of the sea, the stars, and of love, emphasizing the elemental instincts of humanity, not the more intellectual aspects of mankind. The restless, passionate music lurks in the background as the storm motif on the trumpets is repeated. The emotion of selfless love is picked up by the sailors as they join in the prayer to the star of the sea to protect the love of two true hearts as the sea theme swells and is driven home by powerful chords. The music reaches a spinetingling climax and soars on waves of love, fear, and hope, then becomes gentle and calm as the emotions are spent.

A long orchestral interlude follows depicting the various moods of the sea and human emotions in impressive fashion. The scene switches below decks where a wealthy young woman is with her African slave, sheltering from the storm. She tells him she is afraid of him, there is madness lurking in his eyes. As the storm motif begins to build again, the slave tells her to sleep. She is white, wrapped in muslin as in a fog, with pearl earrings and a tiara. He is just a black slave. Emboldened by the possible imminent wreck of the ship, the slave begins to speak and act as he would never dare to otherwise. He tells her that although they are opposites, soon they will sleep together, and both be white as they are wrapped in the sea and drown together when the storm wrecks the ship. The musical passion grows as the storm motif mingles with the sea motif. The girl fearfully asks her slave if he hears the cracking of the ship in the storm. The slave, realizing he has nothing left to lose bursts out in vengeful terms that he is no slave but a great king of Sudan who used to rule with an iron fist, wear gold bracelets, pearls, and a tiger skin. As his anger grows he recounts the crack of the whip and his chains, but now in this storm he will be a great king again. He seizes the woman and smothers her with lustful kisses. She screams, and he takes her by force as the exotic, erotic and sinister music portrays his emotions of lust, hate and revenge.

The ship is taking on water, the captain calls for the sailors to help but they threaten mutiny. All the ties of discipline and duty have disappeared as the raw emotion of panic ensues. The lovesick youth desperately prays for the salvation of the ship. As the mutineers mock the captain and drunken sailors mock the cowards who are afraid of dying, we hear the desperate cry of the woman below deck "Oh Jesus, my slave!" Is it a cry of loathing and fear, or of delirious satiated passion? The music

is ambiguous, and the listener is left with the impression it is a little of both. The other women passengers cry for protection for the ship while the reckless, fatalistic lookout sings carelessly as the ship sinks.

The scene switches to the shore. Two local pirates who make a habit of looting the cargo of wrecked ships compare what they have found from the wreck. One tells the other that a body that washed on shore was a youth from their own village. It is the lovesick youth, loved by the maid. The pirate says the youth left with only the girl's ring when he sailed to find his fortune and that is all he returned with. They agree to leave him with the ring and sink his body in the sea as a burial. Just then they look to the cliff where the cottage of the youth's lover is. She has seen what they have done and distraught, she leaps into the sea to be united with her dead lover. Following an orchestral interlude, the final scene is in front of the chapel where the villagers pray for the souls of the lovers. They pray for the star of the sea to give peace to all who rest in the sea's embrace. They pray for the abatement of all storms, and if a storm does wreck a ship, that a new cottage may be built from the timber. An eternal cottage of love. The music swells upwards in a glorious crescendo then ends quietly. The storm has abated.

Novak's "The Storm" is an epic masterpiece that is sui generis. Not an opera or oratorio, grander than what we would think a cantata would be, it is something bold and new. Its depiction of the gamut of instinctive human emotions playing out against the metaphor of the violence of a storm at sea leaves the listener awed. "The Storm" should be known to every music-lover and played frequently in the concert halls of the world. It is an enormous achievement. My recording of "The Storm" features Zdenek Kosler conducting the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra on a Supraphon disk ([review](#)).

Carlos Chavez – Piano Concerto

Carlos Chavez (1899-1978) was born in Mexico City and received his earliest musical education there, including piano lessons from his older brother. In his early twenties he embarked on a series of international travels including Germany, Paris, and New York City where he met fellow composers and absorbed diverse influences. After returning to Mexico he founded the Orquesta Sinfonica de Mexico, becoming an ambassador for classical music throughout his country. His developing style drew on native Mexican instruments and indigenous musical traditions. Within a few years he was named director of Mexico's National Conservatory of Music, cementing his status as Mexico's leading musical figure. He later developed friendships with several American composers, particularly Aaron Copland, who incorporated Hispanic influences into several of his own pieces.

Chavez wrote his piano concerto in 1940 and it was premiered by Eugene List under Dimitri Mitropoulos with the New York Philharmonic. List later recalled "it was the hardest piece I ever played." The concerto was given its Mexican premiere the following year with the great Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau under the composer's direction. The concerto is in three movements played without pause. It opens with a stately introduction for piano and orchestra together, which quickly explodes into a pounding allegro with mad scrambles on the piano and thrusting and jabbing orchestral commentary. The soloist's perpetuum mobile continues for five minutes with the orchestra wildly banging away until a less feverish section for solo piano commences. This cadenza-like section, occurring at the end of the first third of the mammoth opening movement, leads back to the mad scrambling of the soloist as the frenetic energy is maintained by the hypnotic rhythms of the orchestra. After eight continuous minutes of frantic playing, the soloist is given a breather as the orchestra plays alone with exotic percussion effects accompanied by snatches of phrases in the winds and brass. After a metronomic section for flutes and percussion the orchestra explodes with pounding drums and slashing brass. The soloist returns scooting up and down the keyboard with powerful chords, is briefly paralleled by the flute, then briefly plays alone. The orchestra returns playing counterpoint to the frenetic piano. A cadenza ensues with the soloist cascading up and down

the scale with crashing chords before becoming gentler. After a series of ascending chords the orchestra returns, lets the piano have a brief solo, then combines with it for a majestic climax.

The slow movement begins attacca with a brooding, mysterious mood from the piano. The oboe then joins in a sad duet. The piano returns alone, still meditative with snatches of themes that never quite develop, then is joined by the flute. Eventually the orchestra joins with chamber music touches and delicate orchestration.

After the brief respite of the slow movement, an increasingly powerful five note motif in the piano is joined by a march theme in the orchestra and we are off again into the finale. The piano rushes frantically in a headlong dash reminiscent of the opening movement. The orchestra responds with crashing cymbals, gongs, and exotic percussion. The soloist and orchestra closely follow each other as both scamper about in irregular rhythms. With the orchestra chugging along like a runaway train, the piano rushes in madly, crazily chased around by the orchestra. A strident trumpet joins the cacophony then after a brief slowing, orchestra and soloist build to an emphatic climax.

Chavez once declared that a masterpiece is an experiment that succeeded. His piano concerto, with its fiendishly difficult solo part, electronic intensity, exotic orchestration, and overwhelming energy carries all before it and certainly meets that definition. For those with a taste for the exotic and exhilarating, it is well worth exploring. My recording features pianist Jorge Federico Osorio with Enrique Arturo Diemecke conducting the Orquesta Sinfonica Nacional de Mexico in a scintillating live performance on the Prodisc label. Another recording with the same soloist and orchestra but a different conductor was issued on the Cedille label ([review](#)).

Adolphe Biarent – Piano Quintet in B Minor

Adolphe Biarent (1871-1916) was one of the leading composers of the Belgian musical flowering that emerged in the late romantic period. The brilliant but tragically short-lived Guillaume Lekeu, Joseph Jongen and August de Boeck were also members of this generation. Biarent was born near Charleroi, Belgium. He studied at the Conservatories of Brussels and Ghent where his teachers included Emile Mathieu. He won a Prix de Rome in his first try with his cantata “Oedipe a Colone” and a bright future seemed assured. However, the headstrong young man was more intent on developing musical culture in his hometown than in promoting his own compositions. He established a conservatory and orchestra in Charleroi and stayed loyal to it throughout his relatively brief life. Biarent was frequently in fragile health and was given to solitude, meditation, and mysticism. He had a rather dark view of the world, seeing it as an unequal contest between good and evil, with the latter too often the victor. This comes out clearly in several of his works including the chamber piece under consideration here.

Orchestral in its scope, the piano quintet is one of Biarent’s greatest works, and one of the finest works in this genre of any era.

The work opens with six descending notes on the piano, a harbinger of the dark voyage to come. After the strings echo the theme, the piano storms in angrily with an explosive solo outburst. Finally, arpeggios in the piano lead to the full engagement of the strings with a melancholic descending theme. The ensemble then launches an agitated allegro with piano and strings trading an obsessive five-note theme, ratcheting up the tension. The stormy episode eventually calms down but the dark, downward flowing theme continues in the strings with occasional outbursts from the piano. Tension is maintained at a high pitch until a brief relaxation brings a calm restatement of the opening six note theme. The piano, as if exhausted with the struggle, repeats the opening theme in a discouraged way, then becoming re-energized is off on a development section that quotes the obsessive theme in tension building cycles. After another brief respite the storms return with the second theme as the piano pounds out the motif answered by the strings. As the music struggles to escape the darkness, snatches of the obsessive five note theme battle with the melancholic theme in a cataclysmic

struggle. The piano briefly meditates sadly alone and the strings echo the despair. Finally, the piano bids a sad, resigned, quiet farewell and the movement ends quietly. This massive twenty minute opening movement leaves no doubt who is winning the battle between good and evil.

The second movement, titled intermezzo, begins with the piano playing the same six note downward motif that opened the quintet. A galloping whirlwind theme ensues with swirling strings and a virtuosic piano part, reminding one of Mendelssohn but much darker. Occasional snatches of themes try to emerge on the violin but are quickly absorbed in the maelstrom. The galloping theme is repeated obsessively by the full ensemble with little rest. Finally the piano and strings trade phrases as the tempo and tension increase, spiraling ever higher. Suddenly there is a pause and the piano plays the descending motif that started the intermezzo and the movement ends.

The finale opens with a stormy theme which eventually exhausts itself. It struggles to regain momentum but ominous downward spirals continually squelch it. A second theme emerges, even angrier than the preceding one, with slashing strings and swirling piano. The theme is hammered home then a brief calm arrives as the piano struggles to climb out of the darkness with a new theme, the first ascending theme of hope in the quintet. It is as if the composer is shaking a fist at the darkness, but does not expect victory. After the descending theme that acts as a leitmotif in all three movements is heard again, we gallop off with relentless exchanges between strings and piano recalling themes from earlier in the quintet. The melancholic theme from the opening movement is gently heard, underpinned by the piano. The brief calm is dispelled by accelerating tempo and power as the angry darkness builds to a crashing climax. A cyclone of swirling instruments spirals down to a crash. After a pause the strings resume their hesitant questing for the light with the ascending theme played over triplets in the piano, but it is not to be. The piano obsessively pounds out the descending theme as the tension builds to the breaking point, then the galloping theme from the intermezzo is heard once more before the quintet crashes to a conclusion.

This dark, cataclysmic cyclone of a piece leaves the listener breathless and totally drained emotionally. In its portrayal of a battle between the forces of light and darkness, it is evil that triumphs despite all efforts to fight it. Written just months before the cataclysm of The Great War, and only two years before the composer's untimely death from a cerebral haemorrhage, it seems prescient. In today's dark climate this masterpiece should resonate particularly strongly with many listeners. My recording of the Biarent piano quintet features the Danel Quartet with pianist Diane Andersen on the Cyprès label which also features two marvelous disks of Biarent's orchestral works ([review](#) ~ [review](#) ~ [review](#)).

Pancho Vladigerov – Hebrew Poem, op. 47

Pancho Vladigerov (1899-1978) was born in Zurich but grew up in Bulgaria. His mother was a Russian Jew and his father a Bulgarian attorney. After his father died in 1908, Pancho's maternal grandfather Leon Pasternak became a father figure to the boy. Pasternak was a mathematician, chess champion, and amateur composer. He also played the violin and would be a significant influence on his grandson's musical career. In 1912 Vladigerov moved to Germany to study music. His teachers included Paul Juon, Friedrich Gernsheim and Georg Schumann. Vladigerov stayed in Germany until the rise of the Nazi's then returned to Bulgaria. He lived primarily in Sofia the remainder of his life and became the dominant figure in Bulgarian music, composing high quality pieces in all genres.

One of Vladigerov's most profound pieces is undoubtedly his "Hebrew Poem" in commemoration of those who died in the Holocaust. The composer is said to have gotten the inspiration for this moving work from his grandfather.

The work opens with an ominous theme in the bass which rises up from the depths of darkness. The theme is picked up by the upper strings, then by the full orchestra and swells to a heartrending

climax before sinking back down to the basses again. It is as if a Holocaust survivor is looking back in horror at their memories. A harp brings a pause, then a soulful Hebrew melody taught to Vladigerov by his grandfather begins. It captures the resigned sadness of a persecuted people, and grows to a scorching intensity that will bring a tear to the eye of a receptive listener. It eventually dies away until only the bassoon and the basses are playing.

Eventually we hear a trill in the winds and the mood lightens with a new theme. Even in darkness, humanity and kindness can be found. Hope is eternal. The passionate, obsessive theme builds to a crescendo. Winds sing over shimmering strings and the harp creates a touching effect. After a brief pause, there is a hesitant groping forward, then another pause. Then comes a quiet, ambiguous ending that leaves the listener in doubt. Is good stronger than evil? Will hope defeat despair? Will light defeat darkness? No one knows.

This utterly sincere work won the composer a state prize and the plaudits of no less a figure than Shostakovich who commented "A work like this is written only once in a hundred years." There have been many musical tributes to the victims of the Holocaust but Vladigerov's might well be the most impressive. My recording features the composer's son, Alexander Vladigerov conducting the Symphony Orchestra of the Committee for TVR on a Balkanton LP.

Georg Schumann – Symphony in F Minor, op. 42

Georg Schumann (1866-1952) was a noted German composer, pedagogue, conductor, and performer. He was born in Königstein where his father was town music director. The music loving family included Georg's brothers Camillo, Alfred, and Clemens who all had musical careers. Schumann occupied several pedagogical posts during his long life including director of the Sing-Akademie in Berlin where he remained for decades. He was a frequent guest conductor throughout Germany, including many visits with the Berlin Philharmonic. Schumann studied at the famed Leipzig Conservatory and his compositions are distinguished by exceptional craftsmanship and a love of thematic variation. Although he left relatively few works for orchestra, those he did write are of high quality and none is finer than his Symphony in F Minor written in 1905 when the composer was at the height of his powers.

The symphony opens with an energetic and forceful theme stated by the full orchestra, including a repeated hammering chord reminiscent of Beethoven. Indeed, Schumann's opening allegro reminds one of the "Eroica"'s first movement throughout. This theme in various guises will dominate the entire movement. The music quiets to a pensive meditation as time seems suspended, then the brass gathering speed and power restate the opening theme. A lengthy development ensues with various sections of the main theme examined before a powerful forte arrives complete with trills on the trumpets. The music then quiets again to gather strength for another climax. Solo winds plaintively call the opening phrase of the main theme as the strings gently accompany. The brass begins calling the theme, then are joined by the strings and timpani as the music accelerates to another climax with the trumpets thrillingly blaring forth the main theme. Three very Beethovenian chords lead to an emphatic conclusion.

A quiet striding theme played pizzicato opens the adagio then leads to a beautiful, stately theme in the strings. Eventually the full orchestra joins in on a meditation on the melody. A second theme of equal poise and beauty is heard in the winds then grows more passionate, reaching a powerful climax of high tension before relaxing to a quiet restatement of the first theme. This is made more poignant as a counterpoint to the second theme's climax and exhausted dying away. The main theme reaches a climax with the brass leading the way supported by swirling strings. A solo English horn gently sings the theme then a quiet conclusion follows.

The scherzo begins with a hesitant rumbling in the basses, hypnotically repeated as other instruments join in. An emphatic four note motif emerges and is varied rhythmically and orchestrally. Brief fanfares are repeated with increasing urgency as the obsessively repeated theme is hammered home supported by bustling strings. A horn call introduces the trio with an upwardly climbing theme that attempts to pull us out of the depths of the movement's opening section. It spirals higher, becoming more emphatic and bringing a glimpse of light and hope. Then an ominous horn call returns us to the opening mood of the scherzo. The four note motif powerfully returns sweeping us into a whirlwind which is joined by pounding timpani and ominous brass fanfares. Then the strings launch us attacca into the finale with a glowing theme in the trumpets, full of affirmation. The strings add a secondary theme of optimistic hue. Suddenly, reminiscences of the darker material from the first movement threatens to return but the triumphant theme vanquishes it with a flourish. A quiet respite gives some breathing space then various solo instruments quote the main theme before coming together to powerfully restate it. After a last quiet interlude the theme comes roaring back triumphantly to close the symphony in an affirmative blaze of glory.

This is a magnificent work. Why this symphony and Georg Schumann's other works are not heard more often is a mystery. My recording features James Feddeck leading the Deutsches Symphony Orchestra Berlin on a CPO disk ([review](#)).

So there we have it, another dozen obscure favorites that will well repay the adventurous listener. The power of music to inspire, to heal, and to express the full range of human emotions, is never more needed than right now. May these works prove a balm to the soul and a joy to the heart.

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