

### **George ENESCU (1881-1955)**

Symphony No.1 in E flat major Op.13 (1905) [35:09]

Suite No.3, Op.27 *Villageoise* (1937-38) [30:44]

Romanian Rhapsody, Op.11 No.2 (1901) [14:04]

Symphony No.2, in A major Op.17 (1912-14) [57:34]

Symphony No.3, in C major Op.21 (1916-18) [54:51]

Romanian Rhapsody, Op.11 No.1 (1901) [12:57]

Leeds Festival Chorus/Simon Wright

BBC Philharmonic/Gennady Rozhdestvensky

rec. Studio 7, New Broadcasting House, Manchester, 1995-1997

**CHANDOS CHAN 10984** [3 CDs: 198:18]

Most composers have at least one 'trigger work'. It's the one that you hear that takes you by the heart or the tear ducts and ends up telling you that you need to hear more by this person. You might have been pretty unmoved by pieces by this composer that you have heard earlier. I heard the Romanian Rhapsodies and was attracted for a while by the flush of nationalistic colour - Stokowski's version of Enescu's First Romanian Rhapsody, say - but the colours and the glare tarnish, as does the wish to return to them.

All credit then to BBC Radio 3 again for broadcasting on 19 August 1981 what I took to be Rozhdestvensky's first recording of Enescu's First Symphony. It was this broadcast of Rozhdestvensky's late Soviet era [Melodiya](#) recording of the First Symphony that persuaded me that this composer's music was something I wanted to spend time with and precious cash exploring.

First Symphonies can be awkward cusses - difficult to love. Shostakovich's First still fails to win me over; likewise George Lloyd's; others like Sibelius and Prokofiev present no difficulties. Enescu's First is young man's music; he was only 24 at the time and the rapture of limitless possibilities shakes the music's rafters from the first movement onwards. The whooping indomitable opening represents a heroically voluptuous celebration of indefatigable youth at its rising zenith. In the later movements it sometimes has its overly relaxed moments but in full flight it is exhilaration on Speed. Compare the effect to that of the eruptively Straussian Szymanowski *Concert Overture* which, sadly, tends to indigestible congested textures, or to the opening of Mahler 3 in Horenstein's Unicorn recording. Enescu holds onto the clarity even through the most emotionally intense and accelerating moments. Contrary to what I had first feared Rozhdestvensky had lost none of the heat of his Melodiya recording and the BBCPO were with him to a man and woman. The Symphony is stunningly recorded by Chandos - as, indeed, are all these works. The venue is the wonderful bloom-and-boost acoustic of Studio 7, New Broadcasting House, Manchester - now gone. All these recordings were made there.

The large-scale five-movement Suite No.3, Op.27 *Villageoise* from three decades after the First Symphony is lush and plush, zesty and fleet-footed although the third and fourth movements are more hauntingly expressionistic and nostalgic. There's a touch of Rózsa's *Hungarian Sketches*, Kodály's *Summer Evening* and Zádor's *Variations on a Hungarian Folksong*. The Suite's movement titles are: I *Rural springtime*; II *Children playing outdoors*; III *The old childhood house in the sunset, Shepherd. Migrating birds and crows. The Vesper bell*; IV *Moonlight upon the river* and V *Rustic dances*. You are never in any doubt that Enescu specified a large orchestra, not least when Rozhdestvensky makes hay with the composer's magnificent blazing conclusion.

Onwards and upwards. The second CD opens proceedings with the lesser-known of the Romanian Rhapsodies. It too is well upholstered yet cleanly rather than densely orchestrated. Enescu has no intention of creating any illusion of a small village band and a blazing camp-fire. It has its possessed and blazing moments but ends with a gentle misty glow and a supine gesture from the flute.

The Second Symphony is the longest of the three numbered symphonies and was written just before the start of the Great War. It plays for a stone's-throw short of an hour. The 20-minute first movement

often bursts its banks with a Straussian tumult. This usually subsides into a golden dream and does so without a shiver, which is how the movement ends. This is not so much a whimper as a sustained and satisfying exhaled sweetened breath. The *Andante giusto* is a tad mournful - not tragic but just a controlled and even pleasing melancholy. The third movement us a stuttering march that grunts and grumbles its way forward and rises to a strangely changeable fourth movement, *Allegro vivace*. The two concluding movements each carry the label 'marziale'. The fourth movement feels indulgent, arteries clogged and constantly slipping and shifting from heroic to sad to jaunty. The language is constantly peripatetic between elements of Tchaikovsky, Bax, Strauss, Delius and Scriabin. It does not feel like a success and it's notable that it only had one performance during Enescu's lifetime. It is a work that draws you back because you know it will be an interesting rather than an instantly compelling experience - an exercise in luxuriously over-blown rodomontade.

In contrast with CD2 the third CD opens with the Symphony and closes with a Romanian Rhapsody. This is in fact *the* Romanian Rhapsody which charms, curtsies, bubbles and races. It benefits from this more feet-on-earth approach. It is also light on the sort of glare and neon the work usually attracts.

As for the 55-minute Third Symphony it is in three movements and deploys a vocalising choir in the last of these. The writing in the first movement is more angular while not a whit less opulent. Although it feels more taut than the Second Symphony - written only four years earlier - it remains essentially a work of orchestral spendthrift distinguished by progress made by instinct and impulse rather than to any immediately evident firm ground-plan. At about 14:00 and 16:00 one of the themes from the First Symphony is candidly recalled. The second movement - marked *Vivace ma non troppo* - proceeds as if charting a meditative dream-journey - expansively relaxed at one moment and at others purposeful. The final *Lento* - again carrying the qualifier *ma non troppo* - sinks further into the golden dream. The whole work has the feel of a cocooned hymn or invocation to some wished-for serene utopia. The writing has a Scriabin-like air about it - one that is also found in the early symphonies of Ivanovs, Myaskovsky and Cuclin. That mood is perhaps not astonishing given the war from which Europe and Enescu was emerging. It was premiered in Bucharest in 1919, conducted by the composer.

The notes, which are work specific, have been gathered in from the original releases and are by Paul Banks. They are ideally supportive of the listening experience. The original is in English but there are translations into German and French.

The superior sound secured by the classic Chandos team does justice to these ambitiously passionate and self-indulgent scores and performances.

There are other Enescu cycles including ones by [Lawrence Foster](#) and [Christian Mandeal](#) but they are not directly comparable. In addition CPO have been busy recording recovered symphonic works beyond the initially numbered three piloted here ([review](#) [review](#)).

If you would like the scene set in more detail then Evan Dickerson is your man. There are extremely useful articles on [Enescu, The Composer](#) and a [Survey of Enescu recordings](#).

For the record I should add that when initially released these discs were Symphony No. 1 and Suite No. 3 CHAN 9507; Romanian Rhapsody No. 2 and Symphony No. 2 CHAN 9537; Symphony No. 3 and Romanian Rhapsody No. 1. CHAN 9633.

Now you can have all three in a well-appointed box, with full notes and each in its individual stiff-card sleeve for about £16.00. Chandos do these things well. I continue to keep my fingers crossed that they will issue Järvi's glorious Detroit Symphony recordings of American classics in the same way. Although multiply reissued they could easily stand this treatment.

**Rob Barnett**

### **Giuseppe VERDI (1813-1901)**

***Macbeth***. Opera in 4 Acts. (1847, revised 1865)

Macbeth - Plácido Domingo (bar); Lady Macbeth, Ekaterina Semenchuk (mezzo soprano); Banquo - Ildebrando D'Arcangelo (bass); Macduff – Joshua Guerrero (ten); Malcolm - Joshua Wheeler (ten); Doctor, (bass); Lady Macbeth's attendant, Summer Hassan (soprano)

Los Angeles Opera Orchestra and Chorus/ James Conlon

Director and Co-designer. Darko Tresnjak;

Co-Scenic Designer Colin McGurk

Costume designer, Suttirat Anne Larlarb

Lighting designer, Matthew Richards

Video Director, Matthew Diamond

rec. 2016

Sound Format LPCM Stereo. DTS 5:1. Aspect ratio 16:9

Booklet language English, Subtitles, Italian (original language), English, German, and French

**SONY 88985403579** [2 DVD: 149 mins]

How many operas did Verdi write? The answer depends who you ask. Some years ago I heard Mark Elder suggest twenty-seven. Meanwhile I have seen the figure thirty-four suggested and argued. Certainly there are twenty-eight titles in the Verdi operatic oeuvre. It all comes down to the matter of re-writes. In the case of *Macbeth* there are two distinct versions with the same title, one the composer's tenth opera composed for Florence and premiered in March 1847 and the second a major rewrite, complete with ballet, premiered at Paris' Théâtre Lyrique in April 1865. The first version comes in the period of Verdi's Risorgimento operas when he, and much of his music, stirred up Italian patriotic feeling. It is raw and vital, and whilst lacking something of the orchestral sophistication of the later version the choruses are vibrant, as in many of his works of that period and are present here.

Verdi's second version came about as much by circumstance as planning. Verdi and his wife, Giuseppina went, as usual, to the more temperate climes of Genoa for the winter of 1863-1864. Whilst there Verdi was visited by his Paris representative, Léon Escudier, who informed him that the capitol's Théâtre Lyrique had enquired if the composer would write ballet music for insertion into his earlier version of *Macbeth* for performance at the theatre. Later, when a formal approach was made, Verdi's response was more than Escudier could have hoped for, indicating that the composer wished to undertake a radical revision, originally in French, of the opera he had written eighteen years before. Verdi's proposals for the revised *Macbeth* included new arias for Lady Macbeth in act 2 with the conventional two verse *Triofonai sicuro* being replaced by *La Luce langue* (DVD 1. Ch. 16), its chromaticism in his later style. He also made substantial alterations to act 3 including *ora di morte*, a duet for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (DVD 2. Ch.6) as well as the additional Ballet, de rigueur for Paris, not included in this staging. In act four, Verdi rewrote the opening chorus *Patria oppressa* (DVD 2 Ch.7), added the thrilling battle scene and replaced Macbeth's death scene with the finale *inno de Victoria* (DVD 2. Ch.18) as Macduff reports killing Macbeth, to cause great rejoicing, and pays homage to Malcolm as king.

As General Director of Los Angeles Opera, and not unknown for wielding a baton there and elsewhere, it might be assumed that Domingo, former tenor supremo of his generation, would have expected to be seen on the podium rather than in the eponymous role. He had, after all, conducted when Los Angeles Opera first presented *Macbeth* in 1987. As we all know Domingo has been intent, for the past few years, to put his stamp on several of Verdi's baritone roles. In my experience the venture has more often been an embarrassment to his reputation rather than an enhancement, his sometime baritonal tenor lacking the vocal range and heft that the great Italian master demanded of interpreters of the major roles he wrote for that vocal register. However, in the opening act Domingo, looking, at the start, like an unwashed Scottish medieval clan leader, is in the best baritone voice in terms of tone and heft that I have heard from him.

In so many Regietheater or concept stagings from Europe, I often end up frustrated at what I see and incline to label it in my mind as abuse of the music despite it often being associated with excellent singing. In this performance, the unusual, but imaginative, staging of Darko Tresnjak and his co-Scenic Designer Colin McGurk, along with highly evocative lighting effects drew me into the performance. Add the long tailed androgynous other worldly witches, in painted body stockings, cavorting around with the chorus providing vibrant singing from a balcony above, I was drawn into the opera in a way that I so often fail to be. The further good news from act one was the sonorous toned and well phrased singing of Ildebrando D'Arcangelo as Banquo and, particularly, the masterly work of James Conlon on the podium.

Act two introduced me to Ekaterina Semenchuk, a voice new to me. A Russian mezzo widely admired in her own country as well as abroad and one who comes with a formidable reputation. She and Domingo have sung the work together elsewhere before this Los Angeles production and an easy histrionic cooperation was evident. Her vocal strength and acting reminded me of those formidable Italian mezzos of yesteryear such as Fiorenza Cossotto whom I was privileged to hear live. If Semenchuk is insufficiently Italianate in her strong and expressive vocal tone that is her only limitation. She sings and acts the role to perfection. I have not seen better for many a year. She makes a significant, well acted and well sung contribution in both the banquet scene and the act four sleepwalking scene (DVD 2. Ch. 12). Domingo, regrettably, is not able to sustain the vocal strength of his singing in act one through to the conclusion, (DVD 2. Ch. 16). There is one curdled note in act four as Macbeth faces up to the reality of his declining power. Joshua Guerrero sings a plangent, well phrased and acted Macduff, and Joshua Wheeler is adequate in the smaller tenor role of Malcolm.

As the performance progressed the lighting effects, along with the vibrancy of the chorus and acting of the unusual witches, enhanced my enjoyment of this unusual staging. The fact that the costumes were in period mitigated any angst I might otherwise have had. As it was I was swept into easy acceptance and admiration and was able to immerse myself into the pleasures of the musical performance and the singing. Whilst Domingo does not have the perfect tonal depth of voice that Verdi envisaged in 1846 when it was created by Felice Varesi, who later also created Rigoletto, Domingo's committed acting is always welcome. The film will enjoy a place on my shelves alongside the old Glyndebourne performance with Kostas Paskalis and Josephine Barstow. Barstow adopts an occluded singing voice which Verdi wanted. Also caught on the film is the magical atmosphere for the passage of the kings. It remains in my memory from the stage performance as well as on film ([review](#)). A colleague greatly enjoyed the Covent Garden performance featuring Simon Keenlyside and Ludmyla Moastryska with Pappano on the rostrum ([review](#)). It was one of the early live transmissions to cinemas from that venue and is now available in Bluray and DVD in excellent modern sound.

**Robert J Farr**

## **Guillaume de MACHAUT (c 1300 - 1377)**

### ***Sovereign Beauty***

*Tres bonne et belle, mi oueil* [6:01]

*Foy porter, honneur garder* [4:30]

*Dame, ne regardés pas* [6:17]

*J'ay tant mon cuer/Lasse! je sui en aventure/Ego moriar* [3:13]

*Se quanque amours* [5:00]

*Dame a qui m'ottri* [4:55]

*De desconfort* [5:30]

*Quant j'ay l'espart* [3:40]

*Comment qu'a moy lonteinne* [2:48]

*De Bon Espoir/Puis que la douce/Speravi* [3:09]

*Pour ce que plus proprement ('Lay de consolation'), lai for voice* [18:23]

Orlando Consort

rec. 2015, St John the Baptist Parish Church, Loughton, Essex DDD

**HYPERION CDA68134** [63:26]

In this enticing and entirely satisfying collection of substantial works by Machaut, the Orlando Consort continues its series, begun for Hyperion with *Le Voir Dit* (CDA67727), followed by *The Dart of Love* (CDA68008), and *A Burning Heart* (CDA68103). The penetration and purity of their singing convey great insight into the music of a composer whom they consider 'close to the summit' of the greatest composers of all time.

The four-voice, all-male group was founded in 1988 as part of the Early Music Network of Great Britain; they soon acquired a just reputation as one of Europe's expert groups concentrating on music from the half millennium after 1050.

This CD consists of two motets, three ballades, four works in virelai form, one lay and one rondeau. Several of these are familiar. But the sequence makes for a refreshing hour's listening. The milieu is unmistakably one of courtly elegance. Yet the Orlando Consort blends the restraint, which this implies, with a directness and intimacy. Poetic and melodic lines are not so much imposed as 'offered', in expectation that the singers' deep, yet unassuming, understanding of Machaut's world - and his amazing achievement - will communicate the wonder, with which his contemporaries clearly regarded him in the fourteenth century. For all the richness of the Orlando Consort's singers' voices, one finds oneself listening to the music, not the performance.

Most of the works to be heard here date from the earlier part of Machaut's life and work. The lay and motet were established forms; at the same time, the composer-poet was experimenting with the ways, in which the chanson could use those newer forms rondeau, ballade and virelai. Such experimentation actively embraced novelty, wordplay and homonyms; as well as showing a happy concern with the solid sounds of words, rhymes and rhythms.

On the one hand this close fitting of music to text makes the tasks of singers easy - because there are clear pointers to what Machaut was thinking; and even in part why. But on the other, it would be all too easy to jump from evident fancy to evident fancy and to let the poetry carry a greater load than the beauty of Machaut's melodic lines should allow. Instead, the Orlando Consort sings with a superb blend of sophisticated delivery and sweetness, with a gentleness that results in a whole, not a collection of colliding tropes.

The acoustic of the St John the Baptist Parish Church in Loughton (Essex) is surprisingly dry and immediate. This means that the clarity and particularity of their diction is never lost to spurious 'atmosphere'. There is very little reverberation. This consistently directs our attention to the singers' lines and enunciation - both singly and in ensemble. Perhaps surprisingly, such uplifting works as *Se quanque amours* [tr.5] truly benefit from the lack of a sense of surround... the singers are apparently

intent only on projecting the intensity of the poet's love, which is 'carried within' (*toudis en my*). Focus again.

The booklet - well up to Hyperion's usual standards - contains descriptions of the songs in context and full texts in French and English. Those prospective buyers hitherto convinced by the other volumes in this series will have no hesitation in adding *Sovereign Beauty* to their collection. There are indeed other recordings of this repertoire. These too deserve consideration. But there is something satisfying and appealing about the way, in which these four singers leave us with a sense of how important spontaneity is (listen to countertenor Matthew Verner's spritely *Dame, a qui* [tr.6], for example) alongside surety in Machaut's long, unfolding lines (such as those in the very next work, *De desconfort*, [tr.7], where the impact comes from our knowing how thoughtful the composer was. The Orlando Consort respects the fact that he wrote from the heart, and only secondarily in any particular 'genre'.

**Mark Sealey**

**William STERNDALÉ BENNETT (1816-1875)**

Piano Sonata, Op. 13 (1837) [36:28]

**Robert SCHUMANN (1810-1856)**

Symphonic Études, first version (1834) [25:04]

Hiroaki Takenouchi (piano)

rec. 2016, St John the Evangelist, Oxford

**ARTALINNA ATL-A018** [62:01]

Last year (2016) saw [Sterndale Bennett's centenary](#). Hiroaki Takenouchi has played a significant role in bringing this composer's Romantic-era music further out into the sunshine. This recording was made as part of that effort. In addition, he has made studio recordings of some WSB miniatures for the BBC and these were heard as part of Donald MacLeod's *Composer of the Week* series on Radio 3 in April 2017: *Butterfly*, Op 33 No 5, *Études Nos. 2 and 6*, Op 11, *February*, WoO 56 and *Two Characteristic Studies*, Op 29. He has done a similar service on radio for the piano music of A.C. Mackenzie.

Work on the writing of Sterndale Bennett's op. 13 Piano Sonata took place in London. It was completed in Leipzig where the young composer stayed for more than seven months. These years saw a whirl of activity in which Mendelssohn took up the English composer's cause. It was Mendelssohn who conducted the premiere of WSB's first piano concerto at the Gewandhaus. The op. 13 Sonata is dedicated to the German composer on the occasion of his marriage in 1837.

The Sonata is in four movements: I. *Moderato espressivo*; II. *Allegro agitato*; III. *Moderato grazioso* and IV. *Presto agitato*.

The first of these runs to an extraordinary 16:12 in a tirelessly inventive flow of romantic *bel canto* with moments of bell-like lyrical repose. The emotional temperature cools and then rises a degree or so for the six-minute *Allegro agitato*. The effect overall recalls the Schumann Piano Concerto.

The Op. 13 Sonata has been recorded at least once before - in 2007 by Simon Callaghan on Gents Muzikaal Achief CD RP/GMA 069/073 (2007) although I have not heard that recording. Takenouchi seems much more than equal to the task.

The Schumann *Symphonic Études* (1834) were dedicated to William Sterndale Bennett so there is a case for these two works sharing a disc. Bennett responded in kind by dedicating his own *Fantasy* op. 16 to Schumann. Takenouchi's reading is romantically affluent, poundingly sonorous and rich in pathos. I especially enjoyed the stiff-legged strut of Étude IV but he is generally in commanding form throughout. Artalinna thoughtfully provides an access track for each of the work's theme and twelve variations.

The pianist has written the helpful booklet notes and they are in English with German and French translations.

Takenouchi revels in the tempestuous ferment that shakes these two peaks of the romantic *fleuve*. He is excitingly recorded with unflinching stopping power.

**Rob Barnett**

## **Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)**

### *Brandenburg Concertos (c.1721)*

Concerto No.1 in F major, BWV 1046 [23:02]

Concerto No.2 in F major, BWV 1047 [12:33]

Concerto No.3 in G major, BWV1048 [13:55]

Concerto No.4 in G major, BWV 1049 [17:29]

Concerto No.5 in D major, BWV1050 [21:22]

Concerto No.6 in B flat major, BWV 1051 [18:01]

Hamburg Chamber Orchestra/Harry Newstone  
rec. Hamburg, 1959

**HERITAGE HTGCD195/6** [49:30 + 56:52]

In the years after the War, performances of Bach, and baroque music generally, on big modern orchestras were giving way to those with smaller forces though still with modern instruments. Yehudi Menuhin, Benjamin Britten, Karl Münchinger and later Neville Marriner were active in this way. Then the period instrument movement started, with such people as Nikolaus Harnoncourt, John Eliot Gardiner and Christopher Hogwood leading the way and, as they grew in skill and confidence, they gradually swept all before them. Now, indeed, the influence is working the other way, as full orchestras offer 'historically informed' performances which have learned from period performance while retaining modern instruments.

Harry Newstone (1921-2006) was part of the earlier wave of baroque performance and his 1959 set of the Brandenburg Concertos was enthusiastically received when it first came out. It held its place in the catalogue for a number of years. Newstone studied baroque practice carefully and followed it, though using modern instruments. For example, the string band was small and the wind instruments could easily make themselves heard. The timpanist used hard sticks. He followed the written ornaments, occasionally and discreetly adding a few others in the right style. Tempi were faster than previously and the phrasing and articulation followed the written directions where available and were consistent with them and musical where not.

I should explain that modern instruments, as we call them, were mostly developed in their present form in the mid-nineteenth century. Woodwind instruments were fitted with elaborate keywork and brass instruments with valves so that they could command a full chromatic range with ease. The material they were made of also changed and they were made somewhat wider and more powerful. Violins had their necks lengthened and steel strings replaced gut. The cello replaced the viola da gamba. All this was to make the right sound for the larger orchestras and concert halls of the Romantic period. In the course of this, the timbre of the instruments changed subtly, generally towards a smoother and more rounded sound. In comparison, earlier instruments tend to sound thinner and more pungent to our ears.

These performance were with the Hamburg Chamber Orchestra, which was drawn from members of the city's two resident full orchestras. The players were therefore not baroque specialists, as would happen now, but normal orchestral players with modern instruments. They enter into this project with gusto, with rhythmically alert and beautifully phrased performances. A particular pleasure is the way the wind interact with the strings, for example in the fourth and fifth concertos, and also the lovely tone of these instruments: the first flute, Gertrud Weitz, is a particularly fine player. So is the highly virtuosic trumpeter Adolph Scherbaum, who plays the stratospherically high solo part in the second concerto. This was apparently his party piece and he played it some 400 times in all. The solo violinist Friedrich Wührer, who also plays violino piccolo in the first concerto, is also a fine player. I should also note the attractive and also secure horn playing of Heinrich Keller and Gerd Haucke in the first concerto. Two harpsichordists were engaged: Karl Grebe plays continuo in all the works except the fifth concerto and also plays the sarabande from the fifth English Suite (BWV810), interpolated between the two movements of the third concerto. Bach would have done something like this, though



there is, as far as I know, no record of what he actually played. In the fifth concerto, Waldermar Döhling does the honours, including the long and tricky solo – it is not really a cadenza – in the first movement.

The recording is early stereo and at first it sounds a bit raw, rather close and a bit airless. However, the ear soon adjusts and when I went back to the recording I found I was no longer noticing it. It has been carefully transferred direct from vinyl by John Whitmore; there are no surface noises or blemishes. There is a very interesting sleevenote by Tully Potter, in English only, dealing with Newstone's career. He was not simply a baroque specialist but conducted later composers up to Lutosławski.

This is obviously not a recording to put in the hands of someone new to the works. For them, there is an enormous choice as you can see from the MWI listing [here](#). I shall mention two others I enjoy: the recent one by the Dunedin Consort under John Butt ([review](#)) and the older one by the orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (Virgin Veritas 7243561552). Both of these use period instruments. But for those interested in the development of performance practice there is both pleasure and instruction to be had from this set.

***Stephen Barber***

Previous review: [Jonathan Woolf](#)

### **Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897)**

Trio for Piano, Violin and Horn in E flat major, Op. 40 [27:07]

Sonata for Piano and Violin in G major, Op. 78 [24:57]

Sonata for Piano and Violin in D minor, Op. 108 [20:15]

Bojidara Kouzmanova-Vladar (violin)

Wolfgang Vladar (horn)

Magda Amara (piano)

rec. Studio Tonzauber, Konzerthaus Vienna, 2016

**PALADINO MUSIC PMR0078** [72:24]

All three artists recorded on this disc are internationally recognised for their impressive achievements as executant musicians. All are based in Vienna but only one of them – Wolfgang Vladar – is Viennese-born. Bojidara Kouzmanova-Vladar is a native Bulgarian and Magda Amara hails from Moscow.

The Horn Trio, a work in four movements scored for horn, violin and piano, was composed in 1865 in memory of Brahms' mother, Christiane, who had died earlier that year. He adopted a rather unusual order of movements for the time (slow-fast-slow-fast) and wrote the work for natural horn (rather than valve horn, which was by then available). The CD booklet has a photograph on its front cover showing Wolfgang Vladar holding a valve horn which was presumably used for the recording. While such an instrument may not replicate the sombre and melancholic sound of the natural horn, it allows for greater virtuosity, including greater accuracy of pitch. So, no serious complaints about this matter.

The progression of the movements simulates the stages of mourning. The performance captures, with strength as well as sensitivity, the sombre mood of the slow movements and the comparative relief offered by the first fast movement, marked *Scherzo (Allegro)*. The final movement - *Allegro con brio* - is played with fine zest, appropriately symbolising the recovery after mourning. But, alas, the problem of balance has not been solved. The piano is in approximately the right place on the aural stage, but the violin (played with notable intensity) is somewhat close and has acquired an edge to its tone which might have been absent with a more natural balance. The horn is too far back and the result is that we can only hear the player's wonderful tone clearly when Brahms instructs his violinist and pianist to play softly or (occasionally) not at all. When the three play tutti one struggles to discern the horn line. So the sense of a 'conversation' occurring between the instruments which should inform every chamber music performance is compromised. This cannot be a fault in the playing (Vladar has played second and third horn in the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra) but must be attributed to the production and engineering.

For comparative purposes, I listened to two recordings of the last movement: the first by Barry Tuckwell, Itzhak Perlman and Vladimir Ashkenazy and the other by Myron Bloom, Michael Tree and Rudolph Serkin. Both revealed notably more successful resolutions of the balance problem, with the horn having a satisfying presence. Of the three performances under discussion, Tuckwell and colleagues offer the fastest and most exciting reading of this movement but the other two lack nothing in zest and are more probing. Overall, however, the Vladar/Kouzmanova-Vladar/Amara recording remains an unsatisfying presentation of the work, despite some wonderful playing.

The two Sonatas for Violin and Piano fare better in terms of recording. The violin still sounds a little close to this listener, with consequent effects on its tone, but with the piano well into the picture and the only other instrument, that is less of a problem than in the Horn Trio. Like that work, the Opus 78 Sonata has a link with death – in this case the passing of Felix, the youngest son of Brahms' close friend Clara Schumann. Felix, who was Brahms' godson, was seriously ill and died before the work was completed. Brahms sent Clara an ornamental 'leaf' inscribed with the first twenty-four bars of the second movement *Adagio* and a message of condolence on the reverse. The players here present this movement with the appropriate feeling and the two fast movements which surround it are delivered with energy and finesse.

In performing the four-movement Opus 108 Sonata for Piano and Violin, the players follow the pattern of their two preceding performances by responding with vigour and sensitivity in accordance with the music's varying moods. The second movement *Adagio* is delivered with immense affection without any distortion of the music and is the high point among all three performances.

I listened to extracts from Josef Suk and Julius Katchen's recordings of these two sonatas. In their performances, I get a rare sense of ebb and flow, of sensitivity to mood, which does not, however, threaten the cohesion of the music. The American Record Guide's *Overview* of Brahms's music suggests that Suk has '...lovely tone, but little intensity...' in these sonatas. Perhaps that is partly due to the engineering, which avoids spotlighting and offers a relatively natural, concert hall balance. From Suk and Katchen, one hears the warmer, romantic side of Brahms's musical personality, whereas Kouzmanova-Vladar and Amara incline more to Brahms the classicist.

The notes which accompany this production contain a short, generalised discussion of Brahms' use of music to express his thoughts and feelings. There is no specific information about these three pieces apart from a list of the movements and their timings. Brief summaries of the three players' careers are provided.

***Rob W McKenzie***

## **Parfum**

**Maurice RAVEL (1873-1937)**

Shéhérazade [17:02]

**Claude DEBUSSY (1862-1918)**

Le Livre de Baudelaire (Four songs from *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*) (orch. John Adams) [23:41]

**Benjamin BRITTEN (1913-1976)**

Quatre chansons françaises [12:47]

**Charles KOEHLIN (1867-1950)**

Épiphanie (Trois Mélodies, Op. 17/3) [7:02]

**Henri DUPARC (1848-1933)**

Invitation au voyage [4:33]

La vie antérieure [4:18]

Phidylé [4:06]

Christiane Karg (soprano)

Bamberger Symphoniker/David Afkham

rec. 2016, Konzerthalle Bamberg, Joseph-Keilberth-Saal. DDD

French texts and English & German translations included

**BERLIN CLASSICS 0300832BC** [74:31]

I've already heard the German soprano, Christiane Karg on a number of occasions and I've been very impressed. To the best of my recollection, though, I've only heard her singing in German. This opportunity to hear her in a French programme is doubly welcome, therefore.

Her account of Ravel's *Shéhérazade* makes a strong impression. Miss Karg's sensuous tone seduces the ear. She maintains a good line and it seemed to me that her French was pretty good. However, when I listened to the great Régine Crespin's Decca recording of 'Asie' I found that she does even more with the words. Perhaps you'd expect that since Crespin was a Francophone singer. Moreover, her recording, made in Geneva's Victoria Hall as long ago as 1963 still sounds very well indeed and I think it helps that the Decca engineers opted for a somewhat clearer sound than the Berlin Classics team. Decca don't sacrifice ambience but the singer is accorded more presence and you can also hear how much Ernest Ansermet is getting out of the orchestration. The Crespin recording is pretty incomparable, of course, and I'm also more accustomed to it than I am to this newcomer. I think Miss Karg is impressive in her own right. It's a pity the excellent Bamberg flautist who plays in 'La flute enchantée' isn't credited. I love the languid regret with which Christiane Karg sings 'L'Indifférent': mind you, one suspects that it won't be long before another attractive young man hoves into view.

*Le Livre de Baudelaire* is the title given to John Adams' 1994 orchestration of four of Debussy's *Cinq Poèmes de Charles Baudelaire* (1888/89). The one that was omitted is 'La mort des amants'; perhaps Adams felt this song didn't readily lend itself to orchestration. Let me say at once that Adams' scoring seems completely credible to me: his orchestrations respect Debussy's music, don't get in the way and cast the music in a different and alluring light. Miss Karg is excellent in 'Le balcon'; this seems to be music that cries out for the diaphanous scoring that Adams provides and David Afkham and the Bambergers offer playing that's really refined and poetic. Miss Karg's singing here and elsewhere ravishes the ear: I see she's sung *Mélisande* and here she sounds completely at home in the Debussyan *milieu*. Her singing is simply gorgeous in the erotic languor of 'Le jet d'eau'; hereabouts the orchestral backdrop is both beautiful and finely detailed. 'Recueillement' is shot through with intense regret.

Britten wrote his *Quatre chansons françaises* when he was a mere 14 years of age. How precocious yet how accomplished these songs are even if, as Roger Nicholls observes in his authoritative notes, the influences of Debussy and Ravel are plain to hear. Ever self-critical, especially about his juvenilia, Britten suppressed these songs during his lifetime and they did not achieve a first performance until 1980. It seems to me that the settings are very sympathetic to the words while the orchestral scoring is very effective. I especially admire Christiane Karg's range of expression in the third song, 'L'Enfance' but, in truth, she's highly expressive in all four songs.

I freely confess that I don't know the songs of Charles Koechlin but if the gorgeous *Épiphanie* is typical then that's an omission which I must hasten to rectify. As Roger Nicholls suggests, the melodic aspect is not especially memorable but the piece makes a fine overall effect in this performance. Christiane Karg's delivery is marvellously poised.

She closes with three of the frustratingly small output of songs – just 17 in total – from the pen of Henri Duparc. All three are masterpieces in the literature of *mélodies*. Karg gives us a rapturous account of *L'Invitation au voyage* and she's no less expressive in the other two songs.

This is a fine disc, which I've enjoyed very much. Christiane Karg's sensuous and refined singing consistently gives pleasure. She benefits from sensitive and highly responsive support from the Bamberger Symphoniker under David Afkham. The recordings themselves are very good. The documentation is comprehensive though I have to report that I found it something of a trial to read since the font is very small and the various colour schemes chosen for the pages prevent the words from standing out with ideal clarity.

[John Quinn](#)

## Pyotr Ilyich TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

### *Ballet suites for piano duo*

List of contents at end of review

Mari & Momo Kodama (piano)

rec. Studio 5, MCO Hilversum, The Netherlands, 2016

Reviewed as a stereo DSD64 download from [NativeDSD](#)

Pdf booklet included

**PENTATONE PTC5186579 SACD [63:15]**

We all do it, don't we? Go through musical phases, that is. My ongoing fascination with piano duos is no exception. Then again, the standard of playing has never been so high, or the range of repertoire so wide. Among the fine recordings I've heard or reviewed in recent years are: Alessio Bax and Lucille Chung's [Brahms, Piazzolla and Stravinsky](#); an equally eclectic mix of [Martinů, Stravinsky, Poulenc and Shostakovich](#) from Sanja and Lidija Bizjak; the [third](#) and [fourth](#) volumes of the Invenia Duo's Florent Schmitt series; and talented twosomes in a double helping of [Shostakovich](#).

The Osaka-born sisters Mari and Momo Kodama, who grew up and had their musical training in Europe, are both new to me. That said, Dominy Clements welcomed the latter's solo album, [Point and Line](#), and Michael Cookson found the former's [Beethoven concertos](#) with Kent Nagano and the DSO Berlin to be 'impressive', if not really competitive. Mari has also recorded the Beethoven sonatas and a new [Falla](#) album with Kazuki Yamada and the OSR, both for Pentatone. In their spirited preamble to the booklet notes – the word 'fun' appears several times – the sisters confirm they've played together before, but that this is their first recording as a duo.

These iconic ballet suites have certainly attracted some prestigious arrangers for piano duo, among them Anton Arensky, Claude Debussy, Sergei Rachmaninov and, in our own time, the Cypriot pianist-composer Nicolas Economou. Solo versions include pianist-conductor Mikhail Pletnev's *Nutcracker* suite, attractively played by Alexandra Dariescu on a recent [Signum](#) release. In another league entirely is the complete ballet, arranged and played by Stewart Goodyear. That [Steinway](#) album – recorded by Sono Luminus at their studios in Boyce, Virginia – is a musical and sonic treat; indeed, it's a must for Tchaikovsky fans and pianophiles alike.

Rachmaninov's piano four hands arrangement of *The Sleeping Beauty*, begun in 1890, required a number of corrections and revisions before Tchaikovsky was satisfied with it. The Kodamas have chosen just five numbers, but those interested in hearing the full version might be interested in [this](#) recording from New Classical Adventure. I hope to review it some point, although the download's lack of documentation is a powerful incentive not to. At least Pentatone are scrupulous about providing Pdf booklets which, in general, are pleasing to look at and good to read.

But those are peripheral issues; what of the performances? The first appearance of *The Lilac Fairy* is certainly arresting, with fine articulation, thrilling amplitude and a real sense of drama. Add to that Polyhymnia's full, fearless recording – engineered by Jean-Marie Geijsen – and the auguries are very good indeed. And it's not just the bravura bits that make such an impact, it's the gentler, bell-like ones, too. Goodness, these may be artists of contrasting temperament, but they do work well as a team. Responsive to both the music and to each other, the power and unanimity of their playing is astounding, especially in that pivotal *Adagio*.

After that all-conquering number comes the clarity and point of *Puss in Boots* and the supple, bouncing rhythms of the *Panorama* and that ubiquitous waltz. On the whole, dynamics are well judged, but some may feel the pace is a little hectic at times. That said, this really is fun, with spark and spontaneity in every bar. Of course, these are but fragments, so there's no sense of a larger, coherent whole. Then again, they say it's always best to leave your audience wanting more, which is precisely how I felt at the end of this enticing opener.

Unlike Rachmaninov's *Sleeping Beauty*, Arensky's two-piano arrangement of *The Nutcracker* – derived from Tchaikovsky's orchestral suite – didn't benefit from the composer's oversight. That may be why, to my ears at least, this arrangement seems a little further from the Tchaikovskian idiom than others of their ilk. Interestingly, Mari Kodama prefers it to Economou's two-piano suite; she and Martha Argerich give a vibrant performance of that on a [Deutsche Grammophon](#) recording, first released in 1983. The coupling, a two-piano arrangement of Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*, is an added bonus.

The Kodamas' *Nutcracker* has plenty of festive glitter – the overture especially so – and the march is cleanly done. As for the remarkable range and subtlety of Arensky's colour palette, it's particularly noticeable in the celesta-laced *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*. The sinuous *Arabian Dance* and the delightful, very delicate *Dance of the Reed Flutes* are no less enchanting, although there are times when essential fantasy is compromised by the Kodamas' unwavering precision and focus. In mitigation, the *Waltz of the Flowers* has just enough lift and lean to remind us that it is, after all, a dance, and not a competition piece.

Economou's arrangement, which omits the final *Pas de deux*, makes for an interesting contrast. In that DG recording with Argerich the jewelled overture sounds much closer – in both letter and spirit – to Tchaikovsky's original; textures are more transparent and, most important, there's an easy charm to the playing that I like very much indeed. True, Economou's Sugar Plum Fairy can't match Arensky's in terms of fine detail and exquisite colour, but the ensuing dances – plainer, less nakedly virtuosic – are as beguiling as ever. The highlight, though, is an expansive *Waltz of the Flowers*; indeed, the warmth and affection here illustrates just how forensic, almost forceful, the Kodamas are at times.

The piano four hands *Swan Lake* suite was taken on by the Moscow Conservatory professor of piano, Eduard Langer (1835-1905), who arranged a number of Tchaikovsky pieces for piano. It's in six movements, but our duo play only three. The first of two *Scènes* shows remarkable skill on Langer's part, the swell and sweep of the orchestral original superbly evoked at every turn. And while the *Dance of the Swans* is deftly despatched, it's the second *Scène* that's most memorable, both as a score and as a performance. Now I'm curious to hear more of Langer's work; Mikhail Glinka's *Jota Aragoensa*, arranged for two pianos eight hands, sounds like fun.

More *Swan Lake*, and the national dances from Act 3 as arranged by the 18-year-old Claude Debussy. This was written at the request of Tchaikovsky's patron, Mme von Meck, while on her European travels in 1880. The *Russian Dance* is a lovely blend of inwardness and exuberance, and our doughty duo bring real verve to both the Spanish and Neapolitan displays. This is a classy arrangement, and remarkably assured for one so young; happily, the Kodamas do it full justice.

Formidable pianism, a little short of charm at times; arresting sound.

**Dan Morgan**

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