

## **Azerbaijani Music**

**Jovdat HAJIYEV (1917-2002)**

*Ballad* [5:02]

**Kara KARAYEV (1981-1982)**

*The Most Beautiful Beauty* [4:51]

*Waltz* (from ballet *The Seven Beauties*) [4:08]

**Arif MELIKOV (b.1933)**

*Three Preludes* [4:50]

**Azer RZAYEV (b.1930)**

*Reflection* [5:18]

**Akshin ALIZADEH (b.1937)**

*Saga* [7:27]

*The Sad Waltz* [2:57]

**Franghiz ALIZADEH** *Music for Piano* [8:09]

**Vagif MUSTAFAZADEH** *March* [2:40]

**Faradj KARAYEV (b.1943)**

*Monsieur Bee Line - Eccentric* [5:53]

**Ismayil HAJIBEYOV (b.1949)**

*Sketches in the Spirit of Watteau* [7:30]

**Javanshir GULIYEV**

*Seven Pieces with Interludes in Mugham Modes* [9:38]

**Faik SUDJADDINOV**

*Ballad About the Motherland* [4:25]

Nargiz Aliyarova (piano)

rec. 2016, Power Sound Studios, Amsterdam

**ET'CETERA KTC1556** [69:10]

This disc of skilled playing and advocacy by the Azeri pianist Nargiz Aliyarova stands as a successor to her first Et'cetera disc - a Chopin recital (KTC1508). She was born in Baku in 1968 and now combines a distinguished academic prize-winning career with concerts - orchestral, chamber and solo - in Azerbaijan and Europe. Honours have come her way - and no wonder. We are told that she "discovered these pieces only gradually, over a period of years ... [and] takes great delight in sharing the intriguing and self-revelatory aspects of this music." All credit to her for taking up the music of her homeland.

She opens the recital with **Jovdat Hajiyev's** *Ballad*. This composer wrote eight symphonies the first of which appeared in 1937 when he was 20. The *Ballad* is slow to stir from gloomy depths. Its trilling central-Asian exoticism later meets grand romantic gestures and rises to an eddying virtuosic flood. The effect is familiar from the Armenian, [Haro Stepanian's](#) piano music perhaps with a dash of [Griffes](#) or [Baines](#).

**Kara Karayev**, alongside Fikret Amirov, bids fair to be Azerbaijan's most famous composer with orchestral recordings on Naxos ([review review](#)) and [Delos](#); not to forget the [Russian Revelation](#) disc of the challenging Violin Concerto. Aliyarova keeps two places at the table for Karayev with the deliquescently romantic mistiness of *The Most Beautiful Beauty* and the haughty stiff gait of the *Waltz* from the wonderful ballet *The Seven Beauties*. The *Waltz* is reminiscent of Khachaturian's glaringly gaudy *Masquerade Suite*.

As with many of the other pieces here **Melikov's** *Three Preludes* show no trace of avant-garde tendency - subtle and pleasing. Early nationalistic Bartók is about as far as it goes although in the 1970s his music took on an unmistakably modernist colour. Melikov studied under Karayev - himself a Shostakovich pupil. Melikov's Second Symphony (1971) recorded years ago on [Russian Revelation](#) is dedicated to Shostakovich. Melikov's name may ring a more recent bell - this site has reviewed his Khachaturian-style ballet [Legend of Love](#).

**Rzayev's** gentle *Reflection* is followed by **Alizadeh's** darkly swirling, minatory and enchanted *Saga*. It is as if the sinister spirit of Liadov's orchestral miniatures had gripped the composer. The same composer's agreeably saccharine *Sad Waltz* has the music-box and icicle sweetness of a 1970s soft-focus film score.

**Franghiz Alizadeh's** *Music for Piano* trades in a hesitant and halting magic in which bejewelled textures are accentuated by quiet shimmering effects. These are achieved by the pianist plucking the strings inside the piano case as in Ronald Stevenson's *DSCH Passacaglia*. Alizadeh taps into Eastern fantasy and the supernatural.

**Vagif Mustafazadeh's** *March* is no regimental defence corps strut. In fact, I would never have guessed the title from the music. It's more of a gauzy delicate fantasy than a march. **Faradj Karayev** is the son of Kara Karayev. He is already [represented](#) in the catalogue. His *Monsieur Bee Line - Eccentric* is a flighty, slightly jazzy and mildly dissonant miniature, presumably with Debussy's *Général Lavine – Excentrique* in mind.

**Ismayil Hajibeyov's** *Sketches in the Spirit of Watteau* have a skippingly serene and indefatigable Bachian spirit: "... they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary". This enlivens the opening and close of this piece. There's hardly a trace of Azeri nationalism here. As the piece progresses, subtle dissonances add a tartness to the invention.

**Javanshir Guliyev's** *Seven Pieces with Interludes in Mugham Modes* again has the pianist beleaguering the whole piano rather than just the keyboard. It is the most challenging of the pieces recorded here by Aliyarova: dry, subtle and confiding rather than orating. The reference to the Mugam ("a highly improvisatory ... large rhapsodic musical form ... alternating song and dance ...") may remind you of another Azeri composer who achieved modest fame outside his native country: [Fikret Amirov](#) (1922-1984). Amirov's *Azerbaijan Mugam* was recorded by Stokowski in Houston in 1959 for [Everest](#). It never quite made it to the luridly coloured fame of Enescu's *Romanian Rhapsody No. 1* but it stood in the way of Amirov's name being forgotten. This was until Olympia took up the cudgels with some sultrily exotic and impressionistic scores in the early 1990s.

**Faik Sudjaddinov's** *Ballad About the Motherland* is another irresistible honey-oozing exercise in misty sentimentality. When not rising to quasi-Rachmaninovian heights it indulges in trilling folk-exotic material.

The recording is warm and full-on. An unusually generous gap of silence separates each piece. Well done Et cetera. Less impressive is the scant information about the music in the booklet and the lack of dates for each piece. That said, the notes by Jahangir Selimkhanov are readable and gently lead the listener through some unfamiliar shallows. The notes are in English and Azeri.

If this collection stirs your curiosity about Azerbaijani music then two multi-disc collections ([review](#) [review](#)) might also interest you although they will be hard to track down. Similarly tough to find is a two-disc Azeri and Western piano recital by [Farhad Badalbeyli](#). Easier of access is a [Naxos](#) collection of Azeri piano concertos played by Badalbeyli.

This disc will reward those who have discovered the delights and challenges of Armenian piano music courtesy of [Grand Piano](#) and of the Albanian piano solos championed by Kirsten Johnson on Guild ([Këngë](#) and [Rapsodi](#)). Aliyarova's advocacy of a modest spectrum of Azerbaijan's piano music pays dividends.

**Rob Barnett**

**Sir William WALTON (1902-1983)**

Cello Concerto (1956/1975) [27:20]

**Ina BOYLE (1889-1967)**

Elegy for cello and orchestra (1913) [7:24]

**Sir Edward ELGAR (1857-1934)**

Cello Concerto (1918) [27:35]

Nadège Rochat (cello)

Staatskapelle Weimar/Paul Meyer

rec. May 2016, Weimarhalle

**ARS PRODUKTION ARS 38.221** [62:40]

This is Nadège Rochat's third album; the previous one was an ARS Produktion CD of the Lalo and Milhaud concertos with the Württembergische Philharmonie Reutlinger under Ola Rudner.

The **Elgar** Concerto's predominance of inwardness clearly appeals to Rochat. That is where the emphasis of her reading lies. True, the storm-clouds of the first movement, the bite of the *Lento* and the lively heaviness of the final *Allegro* are by no means underplayed. That said, what I carried away from the listening experience was Rochat's unwavering fixity of gaze on the distant horizon and the work's elegiac burden.

The **Walton** lulls in the *Moderato* and the *Tema ed improvvisazioni*, basking in the pulse-slowng Mediterranean sun. While there is bite and flight in the *Allegro* Rochat's is an interpretation inclined to become contemplative and to sing from the shade. Like the Viola Concerto this is one of the more problematic Walton works. For it to shine you need the sort of rarely encountered impressive grip and edgy concentration you find in Piatigorsky's live European premiere with Sargent. It's on [Lyrita REAM.2114](#). The work shines strongly in this recording, much as the raw, coarse and throaty [Sony-CBS](#) disc of Dupré with Barenboim in the Elgar Concerto outstrips in grip and emotive warmth the EMI Classics studio [Dupré/Barbirolli](#).

I am very pleased that Rochat has opted for **Ina Boyle's** *Elegie*. Boyle was an Irish composer and an occasional pupil of Vaughan Williams. Like her countryman in Northern Ireland, Norman Hay, her musical works have taken an obliterating plunge away into the depths. The *Elegie* - she initially had it down to be a *Romance* - is a thing of Brahmsian topography. It was written in the year before the Great War. Its undulating pensive contours are tenderly brushed in this its first recording. Rochat confides, in her liner-note, that she will be recording Boyle's *Psalm* for cello and orchestra in the near future - come the day. There are many other Boyle works of interest including three symphonies (1927, 1930, 1951) of which the First, *Glencree* was dusted off for last year's RTE 'Composing the Island' festival. You can hear one movement of *Glencree* on RTE Lyric FM CD153. Then again there's a violin concerto and the tone poem *The Magic Harp* (revived in 1991 by the Ulster Orchestra and Proinnseas O'Duinn and recorded by [Dutton](#) in 2011). There's much else by this friend and contemporary of Elizabeth Maconchy.

The cosily cocooned sound achieved by the Ars Produktion team envelops the listener without blunting the treble range and I noted a plethora of pleasing detail especially in the Walton.

There is much to be taken from this disc. The respect and love that Rochat has for these works was no doubt influenced by her years of study in London's Royal Academy of Music as well as her lessons with Robert Cohen, who at the age of only 21 recorded the Elgar for [Classics for Pleasure](#).

I should add that the orchestra here are in superb form and make great and idiomatic capital of the Elgar in particular. Listen to them in the finale of the Elgar; Norman Del Mar and the RPO could not have bettered this.

There's always a downside so 'nol points' for whoever perpetrated "Edgar" Elgar on the electronic track readout - not that most people will see this.

The Walton and Elgar have been companions on disc before. Last year Stephen Isserlis was the cellist for the same concerto coupling and other works for [Hyperion](#). Isserlis does not offer the Boyle but does include pieces by Holst, father and daughter.

I hope that Rochat will now move to record the Finzi and Bax concertos alongside the Boyle *Psalm*. Also, there is still room for what will be a [second recording](#) of Florent Schmitt's fascinating *Introit, Récit et Congé* for cello and orchestra. She would also, I think, warm to one of the neglected masterworks of the English Musical Renaissance: John Foulds' Cello Concerto. It is equally effective in both guises - either as the Cello Sonata or as the Cello Concerto.

**Rob Barnett**

**Igor STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)**

Der Feuervogel (The Firebird), (Ballet suite 1919) [19.35]

**Benjamin BRITTEN (1913-1976)**

Sinfonia da Requiem, Op. 20 [19.50]

Staatskapelle Dresden/Rudolf Kempe

rec. January 1976, Lukaskirche, Dresden, Germany

**BERLIN CLASSICS 0300890BC** [39.37]

This Berlin Classics release features a recording each of works by Stravinsky and Britten originally issued on Eterna the East German record label and is a tribute to the work of Dresden born conductor Rudolf Kempe, working here with the Sächsische Staatskapelle Dresden.

These Stravinsky and Britten recordings from 1976 at Lukaskirche, Dresden were Kempe's final recording sessions.

In 1924-28 Kempe trained both on piano and oboe at the orchestral school of Sächsische Staatskapelle, Dresden before leaving the city for a post at Leipzig. In 1949 Kempe attained the great honour of becoming general music director of the Opera and Staatskapelle Dresden, serving until 1953. Kempe spoke of this post war period with the Staatskapelle as "the happiest years of my life – the last glimpse of 'Paradise' - with opera, concerts and chamber music all year round in the same place." Political tensions forced Kempe away from his Staatskapelle post in the city of his birth and it was only after twelve years away in 1965 that Kempe was invited back to Dresden then part of DDR at the time of Cold War, working regularly with the orchestra up to his death in 1976 aged sixty-five, both in concert performances and in the recording studio. The complete orchestral music of Richard Strauss recorded 1970-75 for Eterna (reissued on EMI now Warner) is generally ranked as his finest achievement with the Staatskapelle. As the Staatskapelle had no music director or principal conductor during the years 1968-1975, the author of the booklet essay Ringo Gruchenberg has suggested Kempe was in effect "The Secret Commander of the Staatskapelle Dresden".

Known as Stravinsky's breakthrough work, his ballet score *The Firebird* (*Der Feuervogel*, *L'Oiseau de Feu*) marks the start of the rewarding collaboration between Sergei Diaghilev and Stravinsky that notably resulted in the ballets *Petrushka*, *The Rite of Spring* and *Pulcinella*. Stravinsky's ballet music *The Firebird* is based on a Russian folk tale about the hero Prince Ivan searching an Enchanted Forest for the Firebird, a magical glowing bird resembling a beautiful woman. Composed for the 1910 Paris season of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* Stravinsky later prepared three separate concert suites that he himself conducted widely. The most admired of these suites is the 1919 version that Rudolf Kempe performs here which employs under half the material of the original ballet score together with some simplification of the orchestration.

Immediately one notices the brilliant playing of the Dresden orchestra, in music that swings from colourful drama to uplifting enchantment. It never feels as if Kempe is forcing the pace and the line of the music feels completely natural, with ideal handling of dynamics. Kempe's end-product has an abundance of excitement, drama and sensitive weight of volume. Notable for its dark, ominous wind writing that opens the 'Dance of the Firebird' this is a very attractive movement that simply skitters and scampers with wondrous expression. The exceptional woodwind contributions and the scurrying strings are striking and create a marvellous sound. The beautiful playing of the famous 'Princesses' Khorovod (Round dance)' is moving, with its wonderfully memorable song-like melody which is quite enchanting. Here the woodwinds, especially the reedy oboe, makes the most of the ample opportunity to shine. Thrilling playing saturates the 'Infernal dance of King Kashchei' with its compelling and rapidly shifting rhythms developing to near frenzy, evoking wild revelry. Very conspicuous are the gripping contributions of the dark brass which, with the low strings, underpin the movement. The popular 'Berceuse (Lullaby)', haunting and moving, is irresistibly performed. The near hypnotic, soothing quality that Kempe obtains from his charges is utterly convincing. In the final movement the haunting horn solo that announces the main melody is gradually taken up by the full might of the orchestra to

create an imposing Ravelian sunburst climax making the hairs rise on the back of one's neck. Throughout, the vivid and contrasting colours produced by Kempe's players are quite remarkable.

*The Firebird* remains a highly popular choice in concert hall and studio and together with the Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique* is one of the works I tend to encounter the most in live performance. There are numerous excellent versions of *The Firebird* in the catalogue. I have been re-appraising the recordings in my collection - complete ballet and ballet suites - and have whittled down the tally to three main contenders that should provide great satisfaction. There is the dramatic account of the complete *The Firebird* ballet from Antal Dorati conducting the London Symphony Orchestra from 1959 at Watford Town Hall, London. These are scintillatingly fresh performances with a wonderful sense of drama, rendered in vividly clear sound, if a touch dry, on Mercury Living Presence ([review](#)). Highly desirable too is Bernard Haitink with the Berliner Philharmoniker playing the complete *The Firebird* ballet from 1989 at Philharmonie, Berlin on Philips. Haitink's exciting account is both beautiful and powerful; intensely exhilarating stuff. Also greatly enjoyable, is the stirring and most attractively-played live account of 1919 *Firebird* suite from Mariss Jansons and Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks recorded in 2004 at Philharmonie, Munich on Sony ([review](#)). Jansons certainly knows this score inside out as I can attest from attending a magnificent performance of the 1945 suite with him conducting Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra at Philharmonie as part of 2010 Musikfest Berlin.

A high-quality score that makes a significant impression on me, Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* is heard far too infrequently in the concert hall. Andrew Manze conducting the Münchner Philharmoniker won me over to the work back in 2010 at the Philharmonie Munich. Also lodged in my memory is a 2016 Hallé concert with Andrew Gourlay conducting a compelling performance at Bridgewater Hall, Manchester. Should the opportunity arise to hear a live concert performance of the score I strongly advise that it should be taken without hesitation.

*Sinfonia da Requiem* was Britten's response to a commission from the Japanese government as part of its planned celebrations to mark the founding of the 2,600th anniversary of the Mikado dynasty. Owing to its Christian subject matter, which Britten based around the requiem mass, the commissioners rejected the score as they had been expecting something more celebratory in tone. Right from the threatening and darkly ominous timpani thwacks at the commencement Kempe marshals his large Dresden forces with impressively firm control. Clearly understanding the character of this dark and melancholic score Kempe convincingly balances the orchestral sections and individual instruments. With the 'Lacrymosa' Kempe maintains the funereal, bleak unrelenting tread high on suspense and tension. In the 'Dies irae', a fierce reaction to the pain of grief and man's base nature, the racing strings, stabbing wind figures and throbbing percussion exert their presence to striking effect. A change of mood is heralded by the amenable and soft rocking rhythms of the 'Requiem aeternam' that prevail until around point 2.07 when the sense of gloomy foreboding gradually returns. From around 3.00 the playing increases in weight and drama, exhibiting predominantly dark moods with a certain claustrophobic feel to the writing. At the conclusion Kempe and his players leave behind a resounding sense of accord and hope.

With playing of such elevated quality this Kempe/Dresden recording can undoubtedly stand confidently alongside my benchmark recording of *Sinfonia da Requiem* from CBSO under Sir Simon Rattle conducting an ominously dark, tension filled performance from 1984 at Warwick Arts Centre on EMI.

This Berlin Classic re-issue was recorded in 1967 at renowned studio at Lukaskirche, Dresden and we are told that the original Eterna master tapes have been re-mastered. Captured fairly closely and somewhat on the dry side, the sound quality is vividly clear and satisfyingly balanced. The accompanying booklet to this Berlin Classics card gatefold album contains two essays: 'The Secret Commander of the Staatskapelle Dresden' by Gruchenberg and 'In Memory of Rudolf Kempe (1919-1976)' by Eckart Schwinger taken from sleeve notes to the original 1977 Eterna LP which also provides

useful information on each work. The card CD sleeve is designed as a facsimile of the original Eterna LP sleeve.

With Staatskapelle Dresden on peak form, collectors should snap up this excellent album of Stravinsky and Britten works without delay.

***Michael Cookson***

## RECORDING OF THE MONTH

### Georges BIZET (1838-1875)

*Les Pêcheurs de Perles* (1863)

Mariusz Kwizien (baritone) – Zurga: Matthew Polenzani (tenor) – Nadir: Diana Damrau (soprano) – Leila: Nicolas Testé (bass) – Nourabad: Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra/Gianadrea Nosedà rec. live Metropolitan Opera, New York, 16 January 2016

*No extras*

**ERATO 9029589360 Blu-ray** [120 mins]

Opera, musicals and ballet are of course the three musical artforms which benefit most from the provision of the visual element; and opera is primarily so, because the availability on DVD of subtitles in what are frequently works written in a foreign language makes them peculiarly enhanced in dramatic terms. It is therefore a cause for some concern that so many of the DVDs of opera which are currently available come in modern productions where the degree of re-interpretation of both text and music often jars uncomfortably with the composer's original conceptions which are so closely highlighted by the medium itself. Examples are far too numerous to be cited, but time and time again the heart sinks when one reads in a review of a musically excellent performance that it is best encountered "with the eyes shut" – which surely completely negates the point of having the performance on DVD at all. Wagner particularly seems to be susceptible to such directorial glosses, and in reviews on this site over the years I have castigated productions which in seeking to overcome perceived tradition seem intent on substituting an ill-considered orthodoxy of their own (all the gods onstage from the beginning of the second scene of *Rheingold*, Fafner turning back into a giant in *Siegfried*, etc) which not only override Wagner's original dramatic specifications but actually contradict and undermine his musical argument as well.

For those who agree with this point of view the series of DVD releases from performances at the Metropolitan Opera in New York frequently offer balm. Constrained by the need to please a paying and subscribing audience, the productions usually adhere closely to the composer's original specifications and display a willingness to spend money to achieve the results on show. (Not that modern re-interpretations necessarily come cheap.) There is of course a flip-side to this. All too often the constraints of the Met's performing schedules mean that singers are shoehorned into roles with clearly inadequate rehearsal, with deleterious results particularly in dramatic terms. An element of routine, of doing things 'by the book' without sufficient thought or consideration, creeps in; and sometimes singers give the impression of being overwhelmed by the sheer size of the auditorium with the result that they have to simply stand and deliver, forcing their voices in an effort to be heard. This can make for especially uncomfortable results when the performances are subjected to the close-up scrutiny of the video camera.

In recent years considerations such as these appear to have forced some rethink by the Met of their production styles, with some new stagings which are more willing to court controversy by more unconventional interpretation of the operas concerned. As always with such a procedure the results can be a mixed bag, except for those critics (presumably those jaded with such 'conventional' productions as they can find nowadays) who crave novelty at all costs. Such considerations will certainly arise in the case of this updating of Bizet's *Pearl Fishers* to the current day, some 150 years after the opera's first production. But the opera was always regarded as contemporary by Bizet's first audiences (as indeed was *Carmen*) and the problems of sheer inconsistency between the composer's original vision and a modern staging present nothing like the anomalies that arise in more historically grounded or legendary operas with their paraphernalia of swords, shields and spears (often jarringly retained even in the context of updated productions). Penny Woolcock's production here, originally staged by English National Opera, creates no such jarring inconsistencies while at the same time providing a fresh outlook on the drama. Earlier reviews have concentrated on some of the more spectacular special effects – the diving sequence during the prelude (repeated somewhat unnecessarily as a backdrop during Leila's Second Act aria) or the tsunami which overwhelms the stage



at the end of Act Two – but these are almost incidental in a performance which concentrates so purposefully on the relationships between the characters.

This relationship is observed most perceptively in the passage early on which leads up to the famous duet, for many years the one ‘number’ which kept the score alive. Here there is no hint of “we are coming to a musical highlight, prepare yourselves while we shift into gear”; instead the interplay between tenor and baritone grows naturally out of the dramatic situation. This is helped even more by the carefully portrayed characterisation of the singers. Matthew Polenzani, a regular at the Metropolitan, has previously only come to my notice in relatively small roles; but here he emerges as a real star. His voice has the heft to ride over the climactic passages, but his controlled *mezza voce* and head voice are a miracle. He even contrives to deliver the interpolated high C at the end of his aria in the most delicate *pianissimo* imaginable. By his side Mariusz Kwiecien is a dramatic Zurga, who manages to convey his sometimes abrupt changes of motivation with perfect credibility. Last year I had admired his assumption of the title role in *King Roger*; here he displays himself equally at ease with the more *bel canto* demands of Bizet. Diana Damrau handles her *coloratura* in Act One with consummate ease, but also has plenty of the spitfire in her voice for the demands of the later Acts. Of the four principals only Nicolas Testé seems to be underpowered for his thunderous denunciations of sacrilege; but then again he, like the others at times, may suffer from the curious fact that the sound of voices just to the left of the stage seem to be somewhat ‘off mike’. Otherwise this must be regarded as one of the most consistently fine casts that the *Pearl Fishers* have received over the years.

The costumes and sets are wonderfully designed, even down to the boat in which Leila is brought to shore in Act One, and manage to make the somewhat artificial placing of the characters at the end of Act One believable. Zurga becomes a sort of dictator figure in Woolcock’s staging, but then this accords well with the absolute power he is given in the original libretto with the ability to order or cancel executions almost at a whim. Nadir might look rather like a graduate student from an American campus, but Polenzani has an engaging manner and attractively open face which win over this viewer immediately. By his side Leila and Nourabad look authentically Sinhalese, the chorus more or less so. The setting is unremittingly urban – this is an industrialised and commercialised seashore community, not a conventionally prettified beach with palm-trees – but nothing contradicts what the music is telling us, and Zurga’s office which replaces his hut in Act Three is convincingly business-like. A nice touch is the beginning of the scene (which follows without a break from the tsunami at the end of the previous Act) where Zurga comes in from the storm to dry himself off and change his clothes, just as he would in real life, before lighting up a cigarette to calm his nerves. It is oddly enough little moments like this that make the conventional dramatic situations into something so gripping and precisely observed.

The opera has been the subject of some textual controversy over the years; its theatrically successful revival following Bizet’s death was given in a version by Ernest Guiraud (the editor who has also provided the recitatives for *Carmen*, long ubiquitous in opera houses throughout the world) which re-ordered the score in the last act and replaced the final section of the famous duet with a reprise of earlier material. The latter amendment is adopted here (audiences would be reluctant to forsake a favourite edition in favour of the frankly inferior original) but otherwise the score is given as Bizet originally envisioned it. Gianandrea Nosedà does not pull any punches, and does not seek to apologise for Bizet’s sometimes clumsy transitions from one number to another. The orchestra responds magnificently to him, although the large chorus sounds surprisingly underpowered in the climactic hymns to Brahma in the First and Second Acts. In summation therefore, this is a quite simply marvellous re-imagining of Bizet’s beautifully perfumed score, one that never ever jars despite its existence in a time that the composer could never have envisaged. Subtitles are given in English, French, German and Spanish; booklet notes in the first three of these languages. The spoken on-screen introductions by Patricia Racette are supernumerary, but mercifully brief. The HD picture quality on Blu-Ray is superlative.

**Paul Corfield Godfrey**

## RECORDING OF THE MONTH

### Frédéric CHOPIN (1810-1849)

#### *Late Works*

*Barcarolle* in F sharp minor, Op. 60 (1845-6) [7:55]

3 *Mazurkas*, Op. 59 (1845): No. 1 in A minor [3:34]; No. 2 in A flat major [2:22]; No. 3 in F sharp minor [2:58]

*Polonaise-Fantaisie* in A flat major, Op. 61 (1846) [11:31]

2 *Nocturnes*, Op. 62 (1846): No. 1 in B major [5:45]; No. 2 in E major [5:01]

3 *Mazurkas*, Op. 63 (1846): No. 1 in B major [1:55]; No. 2 in F minor [1:50]; No. 3 in C sharp minor [2:00]

3 *Valses*, Op. 64 (1847): No. 1 in D flat major [1:43]; No. 2 in C sharp minor [3:20]; No. 3 in A flat major [2:40]

*Mazurka* in F minor, Op. posth. 68 No. 4 (?1849) [2:00]

Maurizio Pollini (piano)

rec. Herkulessaal, Munich, 2015/16

**DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON 479 6127** [54:37]

Suppose you already have, as I do, the Chopin complete edition in generally recent recordings by several artists (Brilliant 94660). Is it worth getting Maurizio Pollini's new CD of Chopin's late works? I will make comparisons through this review and answer the question.

The opening melody of Chopin's **Barcarolle** evokes lazy summer days and stays with you. Pollini makes you feel it has stayed with him, as has the elation which results. Pollini's account has a sleek flow yet is big-hearted in its climactic returns of the themes, all delivered with opulent tone and accordingly roseate. Particularly memorable are the ecstatic reprise of the opening melody and the mini nocturne (tr. 1, 5:10) which transforms the static transition from the central section. Alwin Bär's approach (Brilliant, recorded 1998) is calmer, as if painting in pastel shades rather than Pollini's bright colours. Yet his limpid shading makes the subsidiary theme of the opening section (1:11 in Pollini) more distinctive, while his treatment of the accompaniment at the opening theme reprise is stark in its ruggedness.

The **Polonaise-Fantaisie** thrives on the unexpected, vividly revealed by Pollini. In its introduction, an imposing majesty is offset by limpid reflection, within which the polonaise theme germinates, only fully to appear (tr. 5, 1:35) after we are knocked back by the summons of a fanfare. It has from Pollini a soft yet assured lyricism yet grows in passion and the diversion of fantasy in both its musical and psychological senses. Then the rippling semiquavers of the subsidiary theme (3:06) grow bolder and more exploratory before the opening theme is gradually engulfed in a transforming cloak. The central "slow movement" is a stately parade, yet Pollini's smoothness gives it serenity. But before you are anaesthetized, a nocturne arrives (7:09). Pollini makes it achingly telling, dispelled by a dazzling gathering of trills played with icy objectivity. The introduction returns, now with a soft opening but the reflections made more portentous by at first now plumbing the lowest depths of the piano. Now you expect the polonaise theme, but it is the nocturne that returns, yet soon swept away by a stormy passage conveyed with tremendous excitement, an unlikely but true prelude to the fiery return of the polonaise theme in an exultant peroration which also takes in the main theme of the "slow movement" now resiliently affirmative. More measured, timing at 13:04 to Pollini's 11:31, Folke Nauta (1998) is less imposing in the introduction but his polonaise theme has a pleasing lilt, more sadly reflective than Pollini's more majestic vein. This gives more edge to the passion of its climax. Pollini brings more character to the subsidiary theme. Nauta's "slow movement" theme has a melancholy poise, the nocturne even sadder than Pollini's, the gathered trills have a spectral character. Nauta is less exciting in the dramatic, sometimes more telling in the poetic elements.

In Pollini's hands, the *Andante* of the **Nocturne in B, op. 62/1** (tr. 6) flows calmly yet quite swiftly and neatly. Yet there is a sudden, appreciable freedom when he deftly lightens the texture from 1:10

when the semiquavers come at the first extended use of the upper register, an idyll swept away by the sudden shock of the loud outburst, a late Chopin feature clearly observed as is the later, restful one of the pause mid melody at 1:57. By contrast the *sostenuto* middle section enters seamlessly but you appreciate its more emotive manner. Pollini brings a glittering realization of the opening theme's return in trills while the semiquavers in the coda sound nonchalantly improvisatory. Earl Wild (1996) offers a slower, more poised, carefully sculpted *Andante*, savouring the arpeggios, but less distinctive pointing of outburst, middle section and opening theme return. In sum, Wild's approach, a little more measured, is more contemplative, the piece pre-digested and conveyed, whereas Pollini's account feels more spontaneous, realized as it progresses.

This may also be said of the **Nocturne in E, op. 62/2** (tr. 7) whose mellifluous theme has three variations. The first (0:30) transforms it through flights of fancy, making it both more decorative and aspiring. The second (0:56) brings harmonic contrasts. Hence there is a fusion of thematic variation and music development. And trickery: what looks at 1:48 like a warm coda turns into an agitated middle section. The return of the theme soon evolves into a fourth variation, reprising the earlier variations' features before the middle section opening returns as a true coda. Pollini's account is characterized by warmth, a flowing steadiness yet individuality to the variations and sections. The closing returns of theme and middle section opening have a satisfying sense of both summation and retrospection.

The dominant impression of Pollini's **Waltz in D flat, op. 64/1**, the *Minute Waltz*, is its joyous flow. The opening is a glistening challenge with its 4 leaps evenly placed to which the repeated second strain is a freer, rippling relief. The central section is warm and blithe, the return of the opening one strikingly athletic. Alessandro Deljavan (2015) opens more spikily without Pollini's lightness but finds a pleasing lilt in the central section and spotlights the chromaticism in the left hand.

The **Waltz in C sharp minor, op. 64/2** opens with a sigh, a couple of shrugs and wistful parade of quavers. Pollini's nonchalance beautifully catches the paradox of needing to reveal yet wishing to hide feelings, extended by the tripping lightness of his second strain, in the midst of its second and third appearances delicately glossing over moments of it. The central section is firmer in its emotion. Slightly slower, Deljavan contrasts a more deliberate, morbid basic manner with a capricious second strain and toying central section.

The **Waltz in A flat, op. 64/3** is more typically late Chopin in its unexpected piquant harmonic and melodic twists, regularity established then placed on shifting sands. Pollini presents it as a gently moving kaleidoscope energized by its own momentum. Its central section is more restful. Its melody in the left hand enigmatic before Pollini brings more abandon to the return of the opening section. Again slower, Deljavan emphasises the rhetorical elements of the outer sections which I find a drier, less satisfying approach; yet to the central section he brings more strength, skimming desperation.

Pollini's opening melody of the **Mazurka in A minor, op. 59/1** is both poised and progressive, his second strain more ebullient. His middle section joyfully expands. His return of the opening melody is more austere before the coda ends poignantly. The slower Rem Urasin (2014) treats the opening more deliberately. I miss Pollini's softer, more polished tone though Urasin makes the kinship of the second strain to the first clearer. In the middle section, he charts the cascading descents from right to left hand more distinctly with a more powerful climax and ominous coda.

Pollini begins the opening melody of the **Mazurka in A flat, op. 59/2** with an engaging homeliness which becomes heartiness in its repeat. After a plainer, more relaxed melody in the middle section the close subsides into a friendly parade of chromaticism and affectionate sequences of fragments of the opening melody, presented smoothly and with equanimity. The glory of Urasin's account is his soft touch in the middle section but his slower savouring of the opening melody and the lingering nostalgia of his coda I find overblown.

Pollini's opening section of the **Mazurka in F sharp minor, op. 59/3** is the marked *Vivace* but the speed seems to prevent it being compelling. Not so the blithe, skipping central section nor the expanded chromatic tail of the opening section reprise and delicious, surprisingly serene coda. The slower Urasin achieves a fiery opening section but his central section then becomes too diffuse.

Pollini's **Mazurka in B, op. 63/1** is more rustic, a homespun *Vivace* with bounce but also a diaphanous second strain of running quavers. The middle section also has bounce with folkly accents on the final beats of the bar, all stylishly tempered by Pollini where the slower Urasin rather bludgeons them, his preference from the start being a heavier, grander manner.

Pollini's **Mazurka in F minor, op. 63/2** is particularly beautiful: a sighing song for its opening section, with a warmer middle one as if a rejoinder that things are not that bad. The slower Urasin is more contemplative and at times sonorous but his approach seems comparatively stiff, not gliding over the keys like Pollini, as if caressing them.

The **Mazurka in F sharp minor, op. 63/3** is from Pollini livelier in rhythm yet still wan in melody. After a laid-back central section in which Pollini still finds warmth, the return of the opening cumulates to a climax. Here the slower Urasin makes more of the recurring descending three-note phrase where Pollini is content to allow the listener to observe it within his overall rounded presentation.

The **Mazurka in F minor, op. 68/4** is a reconstruction from sketches. Pollini uses the standard printed edition. Haunting, characteristically chromatic but seeming more than usual, it gauntly stares sorrow in the face and finds beauty in it, especially in Pollini's graceful account. Urasin, who uses a more fully realized but for me less convincing reconstruction, is harder edged.

It is time to answer my opening question. Is it worth acquiring Pollini's accounts even if you have other artists in the Brilliant box set? I would say an emphatic yes, as his playing is generally faster, smoother and more varied. Nevertheless, having two recordings is itself illuminating with regard to the different yet equally valid nuances of interpretation possible. Enjoy!

**Michael Greenhalgh**

## **Interactions**

### **Fartein VALEN (1887-1952)**

Sonata for Violin and Piano Op.3 (1915/22) [18:16]

### **Igor STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)**

Duo Concertant (1931/2) [16:31]

### **Witold LUTOSŁAWSKI (1913-1994)**

Partita (1984) [16:43]

Gunnar Flagstad (violin)

Bård Monsen (piano)

rec. January 2016, Sofienberg Church, Norway

**2L 2L237 SACD & Blu-Ray [53:00]**

This recital might well be regarded as in danger of falling into esoteric territory. The three works here are not generally well known although the Stravinsky has been recorded by Itzhak Perlman. Add to this that the set is very expensive, around £22. It consists of an SACD/CD compatible disc and a Blu-Ray in 2.0 LPCM Stereo, 5:1 DTS-HD (in which format I heard the performances), Dolby Atmos and 9.1 Aura 3-D. Many of these formats can only be appreciated by a few privileged audiophiles. The recording is very life-like and captures the instruments superbly.

The Norwegian composer Valen was a name to new me although some recordings of his compositions have been [reviewed](#) here. Based on this early piece I shall certainly explore others. There is a fascinating Valen article in Mark Morris's "Guide to Twentieth Century Composers" appearing in the section on [Norway](#). The *Sonata*, begun in 1915 and completed seven years later, is a fine piece. He had been studying Bach although the general tone is very much in the Romantic style. The first movement is lyrical and languid with the second movement comprising variations leading to a crescendo. I enjoyed it considerably and thought the playing very good. It's definitely not difficult listening. This is a discovery I will want to return to.

When we come to Stravinsky's *Duo Concertant* we reach slightly more familiar territory. There have been recordings going back to [Szigeti](#). Lewis Foreman thought highly of Lydia Mordkovitch's reading on [Chandos](#). My comparison is in a recital given in 1976 by Itzhak Perlman (EMI Classics now Warners). I have it in a big set of all Perlman's Warner recordings. *Duo Concertant* was written about the time of the *Violin Concerto* and according to 2L's excellent and extensive notes, was inspired by Virgil's *Georgics*. There are five short movements. These have a lyrical- pastoral feel and are slightly spiky and humorous; try the fourth movement. It's all perfectly accessible unless you are averse to twentieth century chamber music. I love Perlman's soulful rendition and would recommend his version; it is available as a single disc with other works by Stravinsky — cost should be under £10. Comparing an old "Classic" and a newcomer can be disadvantageous to the latter. In my view this is just the case here. Gunnar Flagstad is undoubtedly a proficient violinist but he hasn't the depth of feeling that Perlman has for this work; nor for that matter does he have quite the same empathy with the pianist. In Perlman's case this is the renowned Bruno Canino. I thought that the 2L duo were faster than the older pair but this is not the case. In addition, I prefer the re-mastered analogue sound of the 1976 recording despite the Blu-Ray's sophistication. That said, theirs is certainly a very good performance and I would love to hear Flagstad and **Monsen** live.

The third piece is by the Polish composer Witold Lutosławski whom I was lucky enough to see conduct two of his compositions, including the Cello Concerto at my first Prom in 1991. The *Partita* was composed in 1984 for Pinchas Zuckerman and Marc Neikrug and subsequently orchestrated for Anne-Sophie Mutter. As the title suggests, the composer harks back, at times, to Bach particularly in the startling *Gigue* of the first movement. Dominy Clements in his [review](#) of Cuckson/McMillen in this piece, apart from saying how fine a work this is, refers to the fact that Lutosławski always retained a Polish earthiness in his works. I was taken aback by the emotional power of this piece and felt it very melodic and approachable. There have been at least half a dozen CDs that have included this work and there are more than ten versions on Naxos Music Library. Without resorting to hyperbole, I'd

rate this as one of the finest pieces of late-twentieth century chamber music. In this work, I felt the two performers were totally at one with the music; so much so that I played it again immediately, something I wish might happen at a chamber concert with a new piece.

This is a fine collection of three very rewarding works and each definitely deserves wider currency. As I mentioned at the beginning this is a very expensive set and surely will not be purchased unless one has Blu-Ray. The standard of packaging, notes and pictures are first class. Clearly one is dealing with a quality product. This will appeal to audiophiles and lovers of modern chamber music prepared to spend over £20 for 53 minutes of real quality and stimulation. Appealing, particularly for the Lutosławski.

***David R Dunsmore***

## ***Many Are The Wonders***

ORA/Suzy Digby

rec. 2016, All Hallows' Church, Gospel Oak, London

Texts & translations included

**HARMONIA MUNDI HMM905284** [70:25]

I've followed the previous releases by Suzi Digby and ORA with considerable interest ([review](#) ~ [review](#)). Not only have the performance standards been consistently high but also, I have found their juxtaposition of Renaissance polyphony and new music very stimulating. In this latest release, they place the focus on Thomas Tallis. The music of the Tudor master is set beside pieces by eight contemporary composers; all but two of the modern pieces, those by Steven Stucky and Bob Chilcott were commissioned by ORA and here receive their first recordings. The piece by the American, Steven Stucky is one of his *Three New Motets 'In Memoriam Thomas Tallis'* (2005). By a poignant coincidence Stucky died on the day before these recording sessions took place and so his piece, and the Tallis piece which inspired it, were included in the programme as a tribute.

The programme is interspersed with the Psalm Tunes for Archbishop Parker's Psalter. These include the Third Tune which Vaughan Williams so memorably used in his *'Tallis' Fantasia*. Here it's sung in a brisk, forthright way. In fact, Suzi Digby ensures that all of these tunes are performed in different fashions, according to the words which they accompany. As an appendix John Milsom's edition of the Third Tune here receives its first recording. Milsom takes into account some subtle differences in the source material. The reason this bonus track is so much longer than the 'standard' version heard on track 7 is that the Milsom version is sung to the entire text of Psalm 2.

The Parker tunes are important but for my taste the polyphonic works are infinitely more interesting and the way in which various contemporary composers have responded to them is highly intriguing. The lovely *If ye love me* is here sung by male voices (TTBB). These lower voices give the piece a darker hue than we when the piece is sung by SATB forces; the effect is very pleasing. I'm very taken with the 'reflection' on *If ye love me* by the American composer Frank Ferko. It seems to me that Ferko has respected the spirit of the Tallis original but has very successfully refracted the sixteenth-century music through the prism of 21<sup>st</sup> century music.

The exuberant Pentecost responsory, *Loquebantur variis linguis* is splendidly sung and the piece prompts a fascinating response from Ken Burton. Burton is especially celebrated for his work over many years with the London Adventist Chorale and the Croydon SDA Gospel Choir as well as for his compositions and arrangements. It was an enterprising choice by ORA to turn to a Gospel musician to put a fresh slant on Tallis but, my goodness, it has paid off. Unlike most of his colleagues represented here Burton chose not to set the same words that Tallis did. Instead, he has set three verses from different Psalms. Burton takes his cue from the fact that the Tallis piece is a Pentecost responsory; he also finds Gospel/blues echoes in some of the Tudor composer's rhythms and false relations. Loosely, Burton adopts a structure similar to a responsory; so, at the start we hear not a plainchant *incipit* but, rather, a high-lying, fervent tenor solo. At first the music is slow-moving with some intriguingly spicy harmonies but after a second tenor solo the music is much quicker. It's all highly imaginative and though I wouldn't have expected Tallis and Gospel music to 'gel' Burton proves me wrong in fine style.

Harry Escott's responds to what he calls the "masterclass in simplicity" that is *O nata lux* in a rather more traditional fashion but he's no less imaginative. In his *O light of Light* Escott says he has "borrowed a handful of musical clippings and some of my favourite harmonies" from Tallis's little gem of a setting. Escott's piece includes some intense harmonic 'scrunches' and is, I think, very successful.

I've long admired the music of Alec Roth and his *Night prayer* doesn't disappoint. It's a response to the Tallis hymn for Compline, *Te lucis ante terminum* and the plainchant from Tallis's setting pervades Roth's piece in a wholly beneficial fashion. Bob Chilcott uses the Tallis melody for the Parker Eighth Tune and turns it into an ingenious canon for double choir. Kerry Andrew sets Psalm 150 in the English of the day. His is a most interesting take on the psalm, though I'm not sure how firmly it relates to Tallis. For the most part Andrews' music is extrovert so it comes as something of a surprise when the piece ends quietly.

At the heart of the programme, at least as far as I'm concerned, lies *Videte miraculum*, the responsory for the Feast of the Purification, which Tallis set in such a wondrous fashion. The Tallis receives a very fine performance indeed, though I retain my loyalty to Stile Antico's even more spacious performance ([review](#)). Suzi Digby and her expert singers ensure that all the vocal parts are superbly balanced so that Tallis's exquisite polyphony makes its effect. Richard Allain says that he found the prospect of complementing this masterpiece "daunting". Yes, it is a huge challenge, but I think Allain has succeeded triumphantly. His setting contains melodic echoes of the Tallis and like his Tudor predecessor Allain uses a cantus firmus; this provides a grounding for gorgeous part-writing. The music unfolds in spacious sequences and Allain follows the responsory structure by including plainchant sections. He has written a marvellous piece which is highly complementary to the Tallis – you can almost sense Tallis hovering at his shoulder. It's a very fine achievement which ORA magnify by giving a fabulous performance.

This album is every bit as stimulating and successful as ORA's two previous releases. Once again, the combination of polyphonic music and music of our own time works really well, not least because the composers who have been commissioned have been discerningly chosen. The singing of ORA is top-notch throughout: up to 20 singers are used (8/4/4/4) but in quite a few pieces smaller consorts of voices are employed. They have been most sympathetically recorded by Mike Hatch working with producer Tim Hadley. The documentation is excellent, including notes from all the commissioned composers and a very fine essay about Tallis from John Milsom. I await ORA's next album with no little impatience.

### [John Quinn](#)

Previous review: [Simon Thompson](#)

#### Track Listing

**Thomas TALLIS (1505-1585)** Man blest no doubt (First Tune for Archbishop Parker's Psalter) [1:01]

Let God arise (Second Tune for Archbishop Parker's Psalter) [0:54]

O sacrum convivium [3:24]

**Steven STUCKY (1949-2016)** O sacrum convivium [3:03]

**Thomas TALLIS** If ye love me [1:56]

**Frank FERKO (b. 1950)** Reflection on Thomas Tallis' If ye love me [2:36]

**Thomas TALLIS** Why fum'th in sight (Third Tune for Archbishop Parker's Psalter) [0:58]

O come in one to praise the Lord (Fourth Tune for Archbishop Parker's Psalter) [1:09]

Videte miraculum [9:52]

**Richard ALLAIN (b. 1965)** Videte miraculum [10:35]

**Thomas TALLIS** Loquebantur variis linguis [4:00]

**Ken BURTON (b. 1970)** Many are the wonders [4:43]

**Thomas TALLIS** E'en like the hunted hind (Fifth Tune for Archbishop Parker's Psalter) [1:00]

Expend, O Lord, my plaint (Sixth Tune for Archbishop Parker's Psalter) [1:16]

O nata lux [1:56]

**Harry ESCOTT (b. 1976)** O light of Life [2:29]

**Thomas TALLIS** Te lucis ante terminum [2:02]

**Alec ROTH (b 1948)** Night prayer [3:02]

**Thomas TALLIS** Why brags't in malice high (Seventh Tune for Archbishop Parker's Psalter) [0:46]

God grant with grace (Eighth Tune for Archbishop Parker's Psalter) [1:12]

**Kerry ANDREW (b 1978)** Archbishop Parker's psalme 150 [4:19]

**Thomas TALLIS** Come Holy Ghost (Archbishop Parker's Hymn Tune - Ordinal) [0:37]

**Bob CHILCOTT (b 1955)** Tallis Canon [2:32]

[Appendix] **Thomas TALLIS** Why fum'th in sight (ed. **John MILSOM**) [4:51]



## Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809)

### String Quartets

Amadeus String Quartet

rec. 1950-69, Berlin, Siemensvilla, Berlin-Lankwitz except Jesus-Christus-Kirche, Berlin-Dahlem (Op.64 no.4), Studio 7, RIAS Funkhaus (Op.77 no.2)

Mono except Op.54 No.2 and Op.77 No.1

**AUDITE 21.426** [5 CDs: 313:23]

The sixth volume in Audite's survey of the Amadeus Quartet's RIAS broadcasts covers a two-decade period between 1950 and 1969 and focuses securely on the Haydn quartets. Lest this seem merely peripheral or ancillary to the ensemble's commercial discography it should be pointed out that of the fourteen quartets and the quartet version of *The Seven Last Words* included in the box, three of the quartets were never recorded by the Amadeus in the studio: Op.9 No.3, Op.20 No.5 and Op.33 No.2. That is certainly reason enough for considering this 5-CD collection.

Audite have taken the decision to programme the quartets chronologically so that the trio of previously unrecorded quartets appear on the very first CD. This also means that a work recorded in 1951 can be followed by one taped in 1969 which is itself followed by something from 1950. It's fortunate that the engineers achieved so high a standard throughout the sequence, so that the switch between years is not jarring. Op.9 No.3 is quite taut and forward-moving in the opening, possibly more Allegro than Moderato as marked whilst Brainin's concertante role in the Menuet is played with rich sweetness. The Adagio in Op. 20 No.5 is beautifully cantilevered, songfully expressive with the decorate first violin flourishes dexterously dispatched. Op.33 No.3, nicknamed *The Joke*, goes so well in this performance that one wonders why it was so seldom played and never recorded by the quartet. These are the many highlights of the first disc but one shouldn't omit the rapt slow movement of Op. 54 No.2 which is heard in two contexts – firstly in a performance of the quartet from 1969 and as an appendix, as an isolated movement in a broadcast from June 1950.

Though one now moves into *terra cognita* from the second disc onwards there are always changes in emphasis or breadth when considering these broadcast performances in the context of the DG legacy. So, for instance, the 1956 reading of Op.64 No.3 is more tightly charged than the later 1973 studio reading and so too is the slow movement of Op.64 No.4 from 1959. There's just a little bit of an edge to the corporate sound in the November 1951 recording of Op.74 No.1 but it sounds altogether more committed than the tamer-sounding DG LP. I happen to find the tempo of this 1957 reading of the slow movement of *The Rider*, Op.74 No.3, preferable to the significantly slower but beautifully voiced DG. The group's readings of Opp.76 and 77 were always amongst their very best and Op.76 No.1 is no exception. There's little to choose between this 1960 performance and the commercial recording, as the slow movement is beautiful in both cases. The bucolic pizzicati in the succeeding Menuet work equally well here, as indeed does the buoyant and nobly conceived reading of the *Emperor*, recorded in April 1951. Like the studio performance, the slow movement of *The Sunrise* is quite expansive. Disc four reveals an Op.77 No.1 that's slightly more mellow sounding than the shriller DG recording. Warmer, wittier and a lot less acidic this is a real improvement on that commercial legacy. Though the 1950 sound is not of the best, the performance of Op.77 No.2 is laudable with an especially touching and solemn close to the Andante. *The Seven Last Words* dates from December 1952 and its meditative beauties are perfectly conveyed in this reading. Note that an extended version with the German texts is available as a free download via Audite.

A well-crafted booklet, in German and English, reinforces the novelty of those three early quartets and the fact that all the performances are making their first ever commercial appearance here. All this makes this box of high importance to admirers of this august group.

### **Jonathan Woolf**

## Contents

CD 1 [74:36]

String Quartet in G major, Op.9 no.3 (Hob.III:21) [14:20]

String Quartet in F minor, Op.20 no.5 (Hob.III:35) [19:31]

String Quartet in E flat major, Op.33 no.2 (Hob.III:38) [18:29]

String Quartet in C major, Op.54, no.2 (Hob.III:57) [19:19]

*Bonus:* Adagio from String Quartet in C major, Op.54, no.2 (Hob.III:57) [3:40]

CD 2 [71:16]

String Quartet in B flat major, op.64, no.3, (Hob.III:67) [17:56]

String Quartet in G, Op.64 No.4 (Hob.III:66) [14:55]

String Quartet in C, Op.74 No.1 (Hob.III:72) [20:10]

String Quartet in G minor Op.74 No.3 "The Rider" (Hob.III:74) [18:04]

CD 3 [59:54]

String Quartet in G major Op.76 no.1 (Hob.III:75) [17:53]

String Quartet in C major Op.76 no.3 (Hob.III:77) "Emperor" [21:34]

String Quartet in B flat major Op.76 no.4 (Hob.III:78) "Sunrise" [20:21]

CD 4 [56:38]

String Quartet in G major Op.77 no.1 (Hob.III:81) [21:26]

String Quartet in F major Op.77 no.2 (Hob.III:82) [24:27]

String Quartet in D minor Op.103 (Hob.III:83) - uncompleted [10:38]

CD 5 [50:59]

The Seven Last Words of Our Saviour on the Cross, Op.51 (Hob.III:50-56) [50:59]

### **Dmitri SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)**

Concerto for Piano, trumpet & String Orchestra No.1 Op.35 in C minor (1933) [21:29]

Piano Concerto No.2 Op.102 in F major (1957) [18:11]

Violin Concerto No.1 in A minor Op.77 (1948) [38:25]

Violin Concerto No.2 in C sharp minor Op.129 (1967) [32:47]

Cello Concerto No.1 in E flat Op.107 (1959) [28:19]

Cello Concerto No.2 Op.126 (1966) [37:17]

Lukas Geniušas (piano: 1), Dmitry Masleyev (piano: 2), Sergey Dogadin (violin: 1), Pavel Milyukov (violin: 2), Alexander Buzlov (cello: 1), Alexander Ramm (cello: 2)

Tatarstan National Symphony Orchestra/Alexander Sladkovsky

rec. 2016, Kazan, Tatarstan, Russia

**MELODIYA MELCD1002465** [3 CDs: 176:31]

When recently reviewing a solidly respectable set of Stravinsky ballets, I found myself asking the perennial question; do we need *another* collection of this repertoire? In that instance the answer was a regretful no - the proverbial "good but no cigar". With ferocious competition from stellar soloists, orchestras and conductors in all six concerti, the same question has to be asked of this set. Especially since the performers are not exactly household names outside of the Russian Federation. But the answer this time is a resounding and rather wonderful yes! Why? - simply because there is a continuity and profoundly convincing insight into Shostakovich's musical and spiritual world that is utterly compelling.

Consider something else; the catalogue is full to bursting with recordings of all six works either in single disc pairings or collected 'sets' - DG, Warner/EMI, Brilliant Classics, Decca to name but four of the latter. *However*, none of these sets offer a modern or coherent vision from a core group of the same artists recorded over a concentrated period of time. All the sets mentioned above are collations of different orchestras, conductors and recording dates. The only other set that seems to offer the same conductor/orchestra throughout appears to be the Blu-ray set of the complete symphonies and concerti from Gergiev and his Mariinsky orchestra. But this comes at a considerable price and does not appear to have been released in an audio/CD format. So on CD alone - rather remarkably - conductor Alexander Sladkovsky and his Tatarstan Symphony Orchestra seem to have the field to themselves. I have to say - even if the competition was more intense in terms of 'complete' surveys I think these new versions would hold up with the best. Sladkovsky is a name completely unknown to me, although I see that he has appeared on recent MW reviews with a well received group of Mahler Symphonies and a glowingly received group of piano concerti by Rachmaninov, Ravel and Gershwin. His orchestral colleagues on both those sets are, as here, the Tatarstan Symphony Orchestra and goodness me they are quite superb in Shostakovich. I hanker rather nostalgically after the raw power of Soviet ensembles and while there is none of that here, instead there is a legacy of intensity and dynamism that is absolutely right for this composer. Sladkovsky as well is utterly at home in this idiom - time and again his musical choices just feel right. Not always completely predictable or 'standard' - but they work. Allied to this - I really do feel there is a sense of continuity across all six works. Yes of course masterpieces such as these can and *should* be interpreted in a variety of ways but I have enjoyed greatly the way Sladkovsky manages to bind the early 1st piano concerto to the late sorrowing 2nd Cello concerto.

So if orchestra and conductor are very good indeed, how about the soloists? All six are young prize winners at the International Tchaikovsky competition(s) - and in most cases many other competitions too. The standard across all six is superlatively high - again as recorded here none of the players give anything to any more famous names from across the years. Again, I would not say that this or that performance displaces old favourites, but in every case they are strongly imagined, wholly convincing and valid interpretations. Before moving onto the individual performances, a quick word about the engineering/production. This, too, is hugely impressive - no recording venue is given - there is a neutrality to the sound that suggests a dedicated recording studio rather than a concert hall or church-type venue. The recording is quite close and unglamorous - the upper strings have a slight edge to

their tone that sounds like an accurate representation of the section's sound and is wholly apt for this music - a great warm bed of string tone is not really what Shostakovich is about.

One big hurrah is that the engineering does *not* make a big issue of the prominent trumpet part in the 1st piano concerto or the horn part in the 1st cello concerto. Far too often - in the former concerto especially - the trumpet part is treated as some kind of solo part. Well, yes, it is in the sense that apart from the strings it is the only other instrument and the writing is quite demanding, but I am sure it is quite wrong for it to be recorded or performed as a concertante part. Worth noting that the Boosey score places the trumpet on the page where it would be as an orchestral instrument and that the work is titled "concerto for Piano & String Orchestra". Here the trumpet line is always audible but without being placed at the front of the orchestral mix. The liner names *all* the orchestral soloists and again they are superb. Trumpeter Dmitri Trubakov joins pianist Lukas Geniušas in one of the best versions of the acerbic 1st piano concerto that I have heard in recent years. Quite why this work was included in the Decca 'Jazz' album of Shostakovich I never quite understood, except as a poor marketing ploy. The piece has nothing to do with jazz at all - instead what we are given here is the remarkable neo-classical character of the work. Geniušas plays with exceptional clarity and articulation. At the same time there is a dry-eyed objectivity to the work in the outer movements that emphasises the po-faced humour of so much of Shostakovich's elusive personality. But just when you thought all emotion was being kept on a tight rein, Geniušas can build a cadenza of cathartic power. Likewise, Trubakov for all the bubbling good humour of the first movement then spins a poignantly beautiful lyrical line in the second movement. Here, Trubakov's tone hearkens back to the great players of the Soviet era. Also, in this movement you hear for the first time a characteristic of the accompaniment that Sladkovsky brings to all the concerti - he favours a truly hushed, almost etiolated quality to the string sound that makes the music sound fragile and almost vulnerable. When juxtaposed against the stamping, accent-heavy passages the same players produce elsewhere in the works, it makes for a very wide expressive range.

The lack of recording information makes it impossible to know how closely together the 2 piano concerti were recorded. Dmitry Masleyev in the 2nd concerto seems to have been given a slightly richer piano sound than Geniušas. Without doubt this 2nd concerto is the 'lightest' of the six and its genesis as a work for the composer's young son often can give it the feeling of being a 'youth' concerto much in the style of the delightful Kabalevsky concerti of that description. Masleyev's achievement is to make this into a more substantial work than it is usually credited. The outer movements again are given real power and momentum and for the first time we are introduced to the excellence of the Tatarstan wind and brass. A consistent joy is the bite and brio of the horn section individually and collectively. Sladkovsky is never fast in the sense of pushing through this music, but on the other hand he does like to maintain tempi that keep the music flowing. So the central *Andante* of this 2nd Concerto benefits greatly from being simply what it is - a beautifully unadorned melody - rather than trying to make it sound like Rachmaninov-lite. By not offering any other coupling this disc does not even break the 40 minute barrier but I think this is the right choice - to have included one of the concertante film excerpts or a piano chamber work would have broken the vision of this set and when the music making is of this quality then quantity becomes irrelevant.

Disc two focuses on the two violin concerti and all of the good opinions formed by disc one are maintained. All praise to the engineering for allowing the soloists to sit back in the orchestral writing. The liner note makes the astute comment that the 1st concerto can almost be considered as a "violin-symphony" so, yes, there are times when details of the solo writing are obscured in complexity of an orchestral tutti, but to my ear this adds to the sense of struggle in a very appropriate way. All four of the remaining concerti are 'bigger' than the two piano works and another virtue of Sladkovsky's direction starts to become apparent. He is very good indeed at building musical tension over extended paragraphs. This becomes very clear in the opening *Nocturne* of the 1st violin concerto and especially the remarkable *Passacaglia* which is placed third. This concerto was a work that Shostakovich wrote during the fallout from the infamous Zhadanov in the late 1940's and it was a work considered too personal/dangerous to be released, while Stalin was still alive. The presence of the DSCH motif that

was to become - quite literally - the composer's musical signature is used for one of the first times and embodies his defiance and resolve. The soloist here is Sergei Dogadin and he brings to the work remarkable maturity allied to complete technical mastery. The second movement scherzo is not as 'demonic' as some versions I have heard - Oistrakh with Maxim Shostakovich on EMI/Warner careens through the movement in 6:32 with gleefully manic playing - he is 20 seconds faster still in a hissy BBC Legends recording with Rohzdestvensky. Dogadin is a weightier 7:15 - possibly the only time in the entire set I find myself hankering after a different approach. But then the aforementioned *Passacaglia* is built with supreme skill - arguably Shostakovich's finest concerto movement. If I was not completely convinced by the central scherzo, the closing *Burlesque* is again brilliant. Quite how or why I am not sure, but Sladkovsky and Dogadin find a cossack dance-like quality in the music, which I must admit never having registered to this degree before. This is one of those wonderful movements with Shostakovich, where you are not quite sure if he is smiling or grimacing. I recently heard for the first time the very impressive recording of these 2 concerti by Sergey Khachatryan with Kurt Masur. This is stunning playing, but, interestingly, by playing this closing *Burlesque* substantially faster than Dogadin, quite a bit of the character of the music is lost. What remains is still mightily impressive, but somehow Dogadin/Sladkovsky find in their earthy stamping weight more than just exciting display - but that said Khachatryan is very exciting!

With an opus number of 129 the 2nd violin concerto is the last of the six concerti. By this time the youthful certainties of the 1st piano concerto are just a distant memory - it might be a critical cliché, but this music is death-haunted. Recently I reviewed an impressively somber version of this work, played by Linus Roth. I enjoyed Roth's performance very much - he takes a daringly unflinching and extended view of the work. Pavel Milyukov is more 'centrist' - if this work could ever be deemed to have such an interpretation - and again I am moved all over again by the genius of this work. Directly comparing the opening of these two contrasting interpretations is telling. My earlier point about the engineering of this Melodiya set avoiding the 'glamour' of some recordings comes into immediate play. Roth's accompanists on his SA-CD set are the excellent LSO, but I do find the sheer weight and richness of the recording in a church acoustic to somehow make the music more 'hearty' than perhaps the composer wanted. Sladkovsky deploys his preference for pared-back tone (the score marking after all is just *mp*) with the soloist entering *p*. Milyukov finds a fragile musing from which he and Sladkovsky then can build a perfectly paced implacable build over the work's opening pages. The joy of hearing this work as part of the entire set shows how Shostakovich developed his compositional traits, albeit with a change in emphasis across his entire working life. By this later concerto, the slabs of implacable brass/horn tone are set as shocking contrasts to lighter instrumental textures. This was something Shostakovich was experimenting with right back in his 1st Symphony, but by the late works the conflict between these extremes are more explicit, bleaker. This is where the edgy tone of the Tatarstan horns and the laser-like intensity of the wind soloists pays great dividends - even in this familiar music the juxtaposition of musical ideas shocks when played with this conviction.

All of which carries over again into the final disc of the two cello concerti. By the early 60's Shostakovich could explicitly build an entire work out of his DSCH motif and of course so it is with the 1st cello concerto. I doubt any player will ever supersede Rostropovitch's reference recordings - it would be foolish to try - but again this pair of new recordings are very impressive indeed. I could always do with as much contra-bassoon as the mixer will allow in No.1 and that is slightly lacking here. However, a perfectly balanced and suitably bravura horn solo part from Sergei Antonov and dynamic timpani playing makes up for that minor cavil. But, again, it is the sense of climaxes being inexorably built by both Sladkovsky and cellist Alexander Buzlov that lingers longest in the memory. Buzlov is excellent in the cadenza that links the pained musings of the 2nd movement *Moderato* to the closing *Allegro con moto*. Again Sladkovsky finds a stamping cossack feel that, once you hear it, seems obvious, but it notable in its absence in other performances.

Likewise in the set's final work. In many ways the 2nd Cello concerto is the Cinderella of these six works. My sense is that it *is* the most elusive of the group, but that is not to say it represents any kind of diminishment in quality. Interestingly it is also the second longest of the concerti with two

substantial outer movements dwarfing a four minute central *Allegretto*. As an aside - did any composer ever use such terms as *allegretto* so often or so elusively? In that central movement the Tatastan woodwind have the pawky, eccentric character of the writing off to perfection, with the horns blaring in with disdainful irritation. For performers I think it is this structure that causes the greatest problem - the opening movement in particular can seem to meander with the sparse textures and gnomic musical phrases not as obviously appealing as in the other works. So huge credit *again* to Sladkovsky, here accompanying cellist Alexander Ramm, for making the music seem so inexorable and inevitable. Perhaps because of its underappreciated status, I am tempted to say this is the most impressive performance in this most impressive set. All the elements of formal control, individual and collective virtuosity and character and a sure-handed understanding of the motivations behind the music come together in one of the most impressive versions of this work I have ever heard. Although not the latest opus number, as previously mentioned, there is something wholly apposite about this set tickering off into a musical void with the bizarrely effective conclusion - Ramm making more of the pizzicato glissandi than I have heard before.

The set is presented rather attractively in a cardboard tri-fold arrangement with the booklet tucked into to front sleeve. The booklet comes in cyrillic and English only and includes detailed biographies and photographs of the artists as well as some astute information about the individual works . However, the translation is not the great glory of the set - my favourite line apropos the 1st piano concerto states; "he surrenders himself to the lyrical bits with gusto and confidently fugles[!?] the orchestra in the energetic motion of the finale". Answers on a postcard please..... But, that apart, this is a set of quite unexpectedly excellent quality. Every element of the music making and engineering is really first rate. So good in fact that it becomes a strong contender for one of my discs of the year. For a modern survey of Russian interpretations of these classic 20th Century Soviet concertos this is simply superb - bravo to all involved!

**Nick Barnard**

## **Nicolaus BRUHNS (1665 - 1697)**

### ***Complete Cantatas***

Paratum cor meum\*\* [11:44]

Hemmet eure Tränenflut [14:39]

De profundis clamavi [14:31]

Die Zeit meines Abschieds ist vorhanden [07:04]

Jauchzet dem Herren alle Welt [12:54]

O werter heil'ger Geist [14:51]

Mein Herz ist bereit [09:43]

Ich liege und schlafe [14:17]

Erstanden ist der heilige Christ\*\*\* [08:34]

Wohl dem, der den Herren fürchtet\* [08:11]

Der Herr hat seinen Stuhl im Himmel bereitet [07:36]

Muss nicht der Mensch auf dieser Erde im steten Streite sein [14:54]

Harmonices Mundi/Claudio Astronio

rec. 2015, Radiokapelle, Haus St Benedikt of the Convent Muri Gries, Bolzano, Italy

**BRILLIANT CLASSICS 95138** [75:47 + 63:19]

Nicolaus Bruhns is one of the best-known representatives of the North German organ school. Being a contemporary of Dieterich Buxtehude, he belongs to the last generation of that illustrious school. His father was organist in Schwabstedt when Nicolaus was born. He learnt to play the organ as well as string instruments. In the latter department his teacher was his uncle Peter in Lübeck; here he also became the favourite pupil of Buxtehude. Bruhns developed into a virtuoso on the violin and on the organ. The German composer and theorist Johann Mattheson reported that Bruhns sometimes played both instruments at the same time: while playing the violin he realized the basso continuo part on the pedal of the organ. For some years he worked as a composer and violinist at the court in Copenhagen. In 1689 he was appointed organist of the Stadtkirche in Husum. It was stated that "never before (...) [had] the city heard his like in composition and performance on all manner of instruments". When the civic authorities in Kiel tried to make him move to their town the Husum authority raised his salary. He remained there until his death.

Bruhns has become best-known for his organ music. He has left only six organ works which can be explained by the fact that organists used to improvise. The rest of his extant oeuvre comprises sacred cantatas, mostly on a German text; only two have a text in Latin. It is especially regrettable that no chamber music from his pen has come down to us. Whether he has written any, is impossible to say. Some of his cantatas include virtuosic violin parts and it is generally assumed that he intended them for his own performance. Also notable is the fact that three of the twelve sacred works are for bass solo. It is possible that they were written for the bass Georg Ferber, who had been *Kantor* at Husum for 14 years before moving to nearby Schleswig two years before Bruhns arrived.

Most of the sacred works are in the tradition of the sacred concerto. This means that they are through-composed, without formal division into different sections, and that solo and tutti episodes are fully integrated. There are also a couple of pieces which point in the direction of the cantata that was to become the standard in the 18th century. One of these is *O werter heiliger Geist* which comprises five stanzas. The first are solos for bass, soprano, tenor and alto respectively, whereas the fifth and last is for the tutti. It is one of three pieces on a madrigalian text; the second is *Hemmet eure Tränenflut*. The third, *Muss nicht der Mensch auf dieser Erden*, is based on the first verse from Chapter 7 of the Book of Job. The Lutheran chorale plays a minor role in Bruhns's sacred vocal oeuvre: *Erstanden ist der heilige Christ* is based on the first three stanzas of the chorale, but Bruhns doesn't make use of the melody on which it was sung. The only time Bruhns includes a chorale melody is in the fugal Amen of *Hemmet eure Tränenflut*, whose subject is the first line of *Christ lag in Todesbanden*.

The other pieces are all settings of complete psalms (130: *De profundis clamavi*; 100: *Jauchzet dem*

*Herren alle Welt*; 128: *Wohl dem, der den Herren fürchtet*) or verses from psalms. *Paratum cor meum* and *Mein Herz ist bereit* have exactly the same text: Psalm 57, vs 8-12. *Der Herr hat seinen Stuhl im Himmel bereitet* is a setting of four verses from Psalm 103. A hybrid piece, so to speak, is *Ich liege und schlafe*, which opens with the last verse from Psalm 4 (I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety) and continues with a madrigalian text in two sections. Lastly, *Die Zeit meines Abschieds ist vorhanden* is a setting of verses from Paul's second letter to Timothy (ch 4, vs 6-8).

Bruhns's cantatas are a mixture of Italian influences and German traditional counterpoint. *De profundis clamavi* is a fine example: it is scored for bass, two violins and bc, and imitative counterpoint plays a prominent role in this piece. It is not only the violins which imitate each other, but they also imitate the solo voice. Obviously the tutti episodes are also dominated by counterpoint. It is especially the virtuosity of the vocal and instrumental solo parts which testifies to the Italian influence. *Jauchzet dem Herren alle Welt* is a sacred concerto for tenor, two violins and basso continuo. The tenor part is full of coloratura and long melismas. *Mein Herz ist bereit* is for bass, violin and basso continuo, and here the violin part is technically demanding, including double stopping and virtuosic figurations. This piece is comparable with, for instance, the concerto *Nisi Dominus* by Bruhns's contemporary Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber.

The interpretations by the Italian ensemble is quite good. It was probably a good idea to attract German-speaking singers for the most demanding parts: not only the four solo concertos, but also those for two tenors (*Erstanden ist der heilige Christ*) and for two tenors and bass (*Paratum cor meum*). I did not know Richard Resch; for me he is the revelation of this production as he has a very beautiful voice which is perfectly suited for this repertoire. His diction is excellent and so is his text expression. I also like his dynamic shading on long-held notes. He deals impressively with the coloratura in *Jauchzet dem Herren alle Welt*. Johannes Weiss is also quite good, but is a little underexposed; the balance between the voices could have been better. I am less enthusiastic about Christian Hilz. There is little wrong with his singing, but it is not very differentiated in colour and the lower part of his tessitura is rather weak. As a result the concertos for bass solo are not very expressive. Marina Bartoli Compostella, Karin Selva and Elena Biscuola are doing well, despite being not German speakers. The pronunciation of the latter leaves something to be desired, and the same goes for the diction of the two sopranos; the text is sometimes hard to understand. I have nothing but praise for the contributions of the instrumentalists. Esther Crazzolara deserves special praise for her performance of the violin part in *Mein Herz ist bereit*.

Bruhns's cantatas have been recorded before by the Ricercar Consort (Ricercar, 1989). This new recording is no match; only Richard Resch is up to the competition. That said, this is a very respectable and in many ways enjoyable production. The fact that it is available at budget price is a not unimportant bonus.

### **Johan van Veen**

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### **Performers**

Marina Bartoli, Karin Selva\* (soprano), Elena Biscuolo (contralto), Richard Resch, Johannes Weiss\*\* (tenor), Christian Hilz (bass), Davide Giacuzzo, Anja Steiner (trumpet), Esther Crazzolara, Elisabeth Lochmann (violin), Luigi Azzolini, Maria Bocelli (viola), Francesco Galligioni (viola da gamba, cello), Riccardo Coelati Rama (viola da gamba), Davide Nava (violone), Pietro Prosser (calichon), Claudio Astronio (harpsichord), Marco Facchin (organ)