

Peter Racine FRICKER (1920-1990)

Rondo Scherzoso (1948) [13:25]

Symphony No. 1 Op. 9 (1948-1949) [34:51]

Symphony No. 2 Op. 14 (1950-1951) [29:35]

Comedy Overture Op. 32 (1958) [5:02]

Symphony No. 3 Op. 36 (1960) [30:39]

Symphony No. 4 Op. 43 (1966 rev. 1978-1979) [37:53]

BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra/Bryden Thomson (1, Rondo), Albert Rosen (2, Overture), Sir Edward Downes (3); Maurice Handford (4)

Originally broadcast by the BBC in September and October 1980.

Stereo ADD

LYRITA REAM.2136 [77:51 + 73:34]

London-born Peter Racine Fricker, (his middle name originated from his great-grandmother who was a descendant of the French dramatist), enrolled at the RCM in 1937 and studied composition with R.O. Morris, organ with Ernest Bullock and piano with Henry Wilson. Supplementary tuition came courtesy of Morley College. War halted proceedings with Fricker assuming the role of a radio operator in the Royal Air Force. Mátyás Seiber became a friend and mentor after the war, and in 1952 Fricker returned to Morley as musical director, succeeding Michael Tippett, a role he held for twelve years, with a professorship at the RCM running in tandem. In 1965 he moved to California, taking up a post at the University. He remained in the States until his death in 1990 of throat cancer.

Fricker was influenced by the music of Bartók, Schoenberg and Stravinsky, but he wasn't slow to find his own voice. He amassed an impressive oeuvre, composing in all the main genres, with the exception of staged opera. He composed five symphonies in all, the first four are included here. No. 5 is a single-movement work for organ and orchestra, which has been issued by Lyrita ([REAM.1124 - review](#)), coupled with *The Vision of Judgement*, Op.29. His reputation as a composer was forged after World War II, as was Humphrey Searle's and Iain Hamilton's. After his death it suffered decline, partly due to his preference for more established genres e.g. symphonies, concertos and string quartets, which some considered flew in the face of progressive trends, and his relocation to California which hampered his British exposure.

The First Symphony was afforded the accolade of a Koussevitsky Prize in 1949. A year later it was premiered at the Cheltenham Festival by the Hallé Orchestra and Sir John Barbirolli. It enjoyed some initial success, no doubt due to its adept contrapuntal writing, imaginative scoring and rhythmic intensity. After a potently virile opening movement, there's an eloquently contoured Adagio, sombre and reflective. A brief third movement marked '*Tableau and Dance*' breaks the spell with its animated vivacity. The finale, for the most part, is laced with verve and vigour. The BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra under Bryden Thomson's bring infectious enthusiasm to this potent work.

Ten years elapsed before the composer embarked on his Second Symphony. This one is cast in three movements. The work is Fricker's response to a commission from the City of Liverpool for the Festival of Britain, and the city hosted the premiere, with its Philharmonic Orchestra under Hugo Rignold in July 1951. Although large orchestral forces are harnessed, the texture, surprisingly, is far from dense, especially in the first two movements. Four trumpets are scored in, with the brass having a dominant role in the finale. Rondo form, highly favoured by Fricker, informs all three movements. The first is rhythmically driven. The elegiac *Adagio* has Bartók lurking in the wings. Energy returns in the impressive finale, harshly dissonant and angular.

The Third Symphony is dedicated to the London Philharmonic Orchestra who premiered it in November 1960 under John Prichard. It adopts a conventional four-movement pattern, and is powerfully dramatic. Fricker here flirts with serial methods and the music approaches the fringes of atonality. The first movement's energy is invigorating. This is followed by a *Lento*, ushered in on a solo oboe, and the

mood instils serenity and calm. There's a sense of loneliness, isolation and angst pervading the music. Light, airy and mercurial, the Scherzo offers an element of light relief, before a broad *maestoso* finale.

The one-movement Fourth Symphony was premiered at the Cheltenham Town Hall in February 1967 by the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra under Hugo Rignold. It bears a dedication to Mátyás Seiber, his teacher and friend, who had been killed in a car accident in South Africa in 1960. It was revised by the composer prior to this performance. As a tribute, near the end Fricker quotes from Seiber's Third String Quartet. The work consists of ten continuous sections. Centre stage is a heartfelt *Adagio elegiaco*, a touching lament of profound beauty. Maurice Handford has full measure of the ebb and flow of this compelling score, steering the orchestra with sensitivity and skill.

The two fillers consist of the 1948 *Rondo Scherzosa*, a form the composer enthused over, as I mentioned earlier. It can be seen as a sort of trial run for the First Symphony. The *Comedy Overture* of ten years later was a commission by the Friends of Morley College. It constitutes a light-hearted curtain-raiser.

In 1980, the BBC broadcast seven programmes to celebrate the composer's 60th birthday. The recordings here, all in stereo, derive from that series. Notwithstanding some minor blemishes, including some tape damage during the final bars of the second movement of the First Symphony, I have to say, they've scrubbed up well. They originate from the Richard Itter Archive, and form part of Lyrita's Recorded Edition Trust's transfer programme, begun in 2014. Paul Conway's erudite liner is, as always, detailed and informative.

Stephen Greenbank

Previous review: [Nick Barnard](#)

Felix MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

Works for Cello and Piano

Variations concertantes Op. 17, MWV Q 19 (1829) [8:37]

Cello Sonata No. 1 in B flat major, Op. 45, MWV Q 27 (1838) [22:34]

Song without Words for Cello & Piano, Op. 109, MWV Q34 (1847) [3:56]

Assai tranquillo in B Minor, MWV Q 25 (1835) [1:57]

Cello Sonata No. 2 in D major, Op. 58, MWV Q 32 (1843) [23:15]

Christian Poltéra (cello)

Ronald Brautigam (piano)

rec. 2016, Reitstadel, Neumarkt in der Oberpfalz, Germany

Reviewed as a 16-Bit Download

BIS BIS2187 [60:18]

One of my Classics teachers at school used to punish us for lacklustre homework by getting us to translate many of his rather singular prejudices into Greek or Latin prose. Many of these reflected his artistic enthusiasms and one such punishment I remember receiving was the tricky sentence “Mendelssohn composed more masterpieces in his youth than Mozart”. I suspect this was his way of getting us to dig that little bit deeper into the world of music and I can trace my affection for the blessed Felix right back to that particular linguistic challenge. What a joy it is then to spend an hour or so in the company of that master’s cello works; it is an oeuvre that is guaranteed to kindle a warm glow inside and broadly covers the entirety of his tragically short-lived career. There are many fine accounts of these works; two I would certainly recommend are those by the Watkins brothers Paul and Huw (with conventional piano - CHAN 10701 reviewed [here](#)) and Stephen Isserlis and Melvyn Tan (with fortepiano – RCA Red Seal 09026 62553-2 nla)

I would argue that this sparkling account from Poltéra and Brautigam adopts a kind of middle ground – the cellist has furnished his 1711 Strad with gut strings, while Brautigam performs on a copy of an 1830 Pleyel instrument (on which he recently recorded the *Songs Without Words* for BIS). Both Sonatas and Variations are characterised by pretty swift tempi, not unlike the Isserlis/Tan recording. The sounds of the two instruments complement each other delightfully, and duly illuminate the originality of Mendelssohn’s inspiration.

All three extended works here were inspired by the composer’s younger brother Paul who was a gifted amateur cellist. The *Variations Concertantes* are another miraculous product of the composer’s late youth, a concise mini-masterpiece whose classical poise impetuously splinters into something quite different in its concluding variation. The account here is quite devoid of ego and suffused with the spirit of shared responsibility. Poltéra’s playing is lithe and agile and beautifully complemented by Brautigam’s flexibility. There is a striking similarity between Mendelssohn’s theme and that of the fourth movement (the Theme and Variations) of Schubert’s *Trout Quintet*.

At times in the B flat major Sonata, Poltéra’s playing is so tactful listeners could be forgiven for thinking that the recorded balance actually favours the pianist, but this is likely to be due to the cellist’s wonderful appreciation of dynamic contrast and the actual sound of Brautigam’s instrument. These features become clearer as the work proceeds, while the songful quality that pervades the sonata is omnipresent in this account. The delightful final *Allegro Assai* eventually unfolds into a sonata-rondo that recalls the first movement before it gently and hauntingly melts away. This is wonderfully managed by the performers here.

Most recordings of Mendelssohn’s cello music nowadays routinely include the two miniatures recorded here, needless to say there is nothing remotely routine about Poltéra and Brautigam’s deeply felt accounts of the late *Song Without Words*, Op 109 (the only one from the set that involves another instrument) and the brief, emotionally-ambiguous *Assai tranquillo*.

The four movement Sonata No 2 is a work of Mendelssohn's maturity, which represents a considerable advance in confidence and technique compared to its sibling. Poltéra's delivery of the heroic theme in the first movement is impassioned and assertive though utterly devoid of histrionics; he extracts some gorgeous, ripe colours from his instrument here while amply conveying the restless quality of Mendelssohn's inspiration. Similarly, in sonic terms the pizzicatos of the second movement are wonderfully complemented by Brautigam's copy Pleyel; the quiet playing in this movement is exceptional. The apparent novelty of the textures as captured here epitomises the adventurousness of Mendelssohn's harmonic experiments. This sense of bold exploration continues into the final two movements; the piano arpeggios of the slow movement concealing a rather Bachian chorale and recitative-type design; the pithy notes suggest this panel functions as a prelude to the beautifully proportioned finale.

The engineering is exemplary as is usual from this source. The sound is as light as air yet splendidly detailed. Much as I have enjoyed Poltéra's earlier recordings of Honegger, Schoeck and Frank Martin (among others) it has been an absolute delight to hear him in Mendelssohn. Brautigam is a deeply insightful musician whose contribution goes way beyond accompaniment. I anticipate spending many happy hours in the company of this lovely disc.

Richard Hanlon

Christmas Presence

The King's Singers

rec. live, Chapel of King's College, Cambridge, December 4 2015

SIGNUM CLASSICS SIGCD497 [52:50]

The men of the King's Singers are no strangers to Christmas discs. What makes this one a little unusual, however, is that it was recorded live (and unedited, we are assured in a booklet note) at a concert in that most Christmassy of English buildings, the chapel of King's College, Cambridge which, not coincidentally, is also a building that is central to the genesis of the King's Singers themselves. That means you can expect a wonderfully generous acoustic, and the group use it to their great advantage. Indeed, it's rare to hear the vast acoustic of the chapel used to capture such a small group of performers (only six singers) and that gives this disc a touch of uniqueness that's rather special.

The range of what is on offer is typically varied, ranging from Renaissance polyphony through to contemporary secular songs, and the King's Singers acquit themselves very well in each genre. They carry off the steady plainchant of *Hodie Christus natus est* with aplomb, and the interplaying lines Renaissance polyphony sound wonderful in Lassus' *Resonet in laudibus* and in Byrd's *Beata viscera*. The simple beauty of Praetorius' *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen* sounds surprisingly intimate in the huge acoustic, while they fill it very convincingly with the joyful swing of Sweelinck's *Hodie*. We get three of Poulenc's four *Motets pour temps de Noël*, and they are sung with focus and concentrated intensity, with a lovely touch of brightness to the closing *Hodie*. We also get a trilogy of Howells' Christmas anthems which sound fascinatingly dark - *A Spotless Rose*, in particular - in ATB arrangements without the top line of sopranos. I didn't particularly warm to this version of *I Saw Three Ships*, but the jazzy *God Rest Ye* is right up the King's Singers' street, and they do a delightful bilingual *Still, Still, Still*. On the secular front, Peter Knight's arrangement of *The Christmas Song* is deliciously schmaltzy, while Gordon Langford's *Jingle Bells* trips along lightly and with humour.

So far so fine and, fine as the disc is, it struck me as just a little bit samey and ordinary by the King's Singers' high standards. However, they pulled me back with their final track, a gorgeous setting of a thanksgiving text by St Richard of Chichester, for which they are accompanied by the National Youth Choir of Great Britain. That lifts the disc into the realm of the slightly special and makes it more easily recommendable.

The booklet contains no information about the music, but you do get the texts and, where appropriate, the parallel translations into English. It's perhaps not the most original or brilliant of Christmas discs, but King's Singers fans will love it.

Simon Thompson

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Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART (1756-1791)

Complete Sonatas for Piano and Violin

Dmitry Sitkovetsky (violin),

Antonio Pappano (piano, CD 1)

Konstantin Lifschitz (piano, CDs 2-4)

rec. 2006, Potton Hall, Suffolk, England (CD 1), and 2007-09, Tonstudio van Geest, Heidelberg/Sandhausen.

HÄNSSLER CLASSIC HC17013 [4 CDs: 295:31]

The explosive first movement to the *Sonata for Piano and Violin in A major, K.305* that opens this set promises to make it an exciting one, almost to a fault. The first disc of this set is accompanied by Antonio Pappano who is of course better known as a conductor, but has worked as a pianist to great effect with the likes of [Ian Bostridge](#) and [Roberto Alagna](#). I find his approach to Mozart a bit prickly on this first disc, though it is never short on musicality and sensitive dynamics. There is a change of sound perspective between *K.305* and *K.380*, the second session sounding a little darker in balance, the piano a little more subdued and therefore mixing less well with the violin, though Dmitry Sitkovetsky is well aware of the violin's accompanying function in swathes of this music.

After this first disc the set settles down into a partnership with pianist Konstantin Lifschitz, who broke onto the scene with a 1994 recording of the *Goldberg Variations* on the Denon label, and who has since also gone on to record the Beethoven violin sonatas with Daishin Kashimoto ([review](#)) and a great deal more. Lifschitz possesses no less energy than Pappano, but is not quite so 'in your face' to my mind, though this may in part be a side-effect of the recording balance or venue. In any case, the synergy between these two products of the Moscow music education system is palpably evident, and while quite big-boned and 'modern' sounding, these Mozart recordings are highly satisfying. Both violinist and pianist make way for each other where the music demands an accompanying role from either, and while there can be a certain amount of masculine testosterone on display this doesn't see the music leap out of its 18th century classical idiom into anything overly romantic or experimental.

So, leaving aside versions with harpsichord or fortepiano, where can we look if we're uncertain about which set of Mozart's complete violin sonatas to acquire? What, in fact, should a 'complete' set contain? The Naxos label pairs violinist with Takako Nishizaki and Benjamin Loeb in its sixth volume ([review](#)) of a collection that evolved over many years and with several different musicians. This particular release is perfectly fine, but in this example is less characterful and involving than with the suppressed and at times crackling energy of Sitkovetsky and Lifschitz. Johannes and Elisabeth Jess-Kropfisch on the Gramola label ([review](#)) are very good, but the recorded acoustic makes them sound as if they recorded the pieces in your nicely upholstered front room, which you may or may not appreciate. The piano is a little tubby sounding perhaps, and the general results might be summed up as 'reliable', but if you are looking for a set that includes Mozart's youthful sonatas then this might be worth considering if it hadn't since been overtaken by violinist Alina Ibragimova with Cédric Tiberghie on the Hyperion label.

This latter series has become something of a new benchmark for the Mozart violin sonatas. Superbly recorded, Ibragimova and Tiberghien seem to have stripped away the accretions of past interpretation to bring us a Mozart that shines in its deceptively simple sophistication. Something like *K.378* that closes their fourth volume ([review](#)) acquires a jewel-like atmosphere in their hands, where with Sitkovetsky and Lifschitz it has a more adventurous, almost concerto-like quality.

If you are not bothered the childhood works and further completions to the 'complete sonata' collection then there is further competition from Anne-Sophie Mutter and Lambert Orkis ([review](#)). That lyrical opening to *K. 378* speeds up in their hands to create something that has witty sparkle as well as elegant grace. Mutter's fairly ubiquitous vibrato is something you will have to warm to, but there is no doubting the involving nature of this duo's playing. They have a more elevated sense of sparkle than Sitkovetsky/Lifschitz, and this comparison is one that makes one realise quite how much

Russian 'soul' there in their particular set. There is no absence of the light touch in the playing from this duo, but they also have a healthy earthiness that keeps everything grounded and human when compared with Mutter's more fantasy-like approach. Comparing something like the *Rondeau* second movement of K.302 you hear an opening from Mutter and Orkis that might be infused with the poetry of Schumann, prepared to linger just a little on certain notes, and with a whispery sense of anticipation that speaks of candle-lit glimpses of ankle and secretive winks behind fluttering fans. This is where Sitkovetsky and Lifschitz are more four-square and honest sounding, much more of a below-stairs affair and none the worse for it, but if you want your imagination inflamed by something more transformative than Mutter will take you to unexpected places indeed.

There are of course more alternatives. Itzhak Perlman and Daniel Barenboim for instance form a classic duo for Deutsche Grammophon ([review](#)), full of verve and joyous musicality, but still not conveying that essence-of-Mozart I hear in the Hyperion recordings with Alina Ibragimova and Cédric Tiberghie. If I was guiding anyone towards a set that will stand the test of time and draw you back for more on a regular basis then it would be this one. Dmitry Sitkovetsky, Antonio Pappano and Konstantin Lifschitz are a great team and this set is by no means to be sniffed at if it appears in your Christmas stocking, but by all means throw your net far and wide to find out where your own preferences reap the richest harvest.

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Julián CARRILLO (1875–1965)

Orchestral Works

Symphony in D major (1901) [32:57]

Theme with Variations for orchestra, Op. 2 (1899) [14:04]

Suite No.1 for orchestra, Op. 1 (1896-99) [15:33]

Orquesta Sinfónica de San Luis Potosi/José Miramontes Zapata
rec. Teatro de la Paz, San Luis Potosi, Mexico, 2015

STERLING CDS1107-2 [62:48]

Though the violinist and composer Julián Carrillo became known for his acoustical experimentation with micro-intervals – a highly progressive course for a Mexican composer born in a small village in 1875: highly progressive, indeed, for anyone – this disc of orchestral music dates from the time when he was polishing his instrumental and compositional resources in Berlin. There he studied with Salomon Judassohn, who himself has escaped from history's cloak with some excellent recent recordings to his name.

The First Symphony dates from 1901. It's a verdant, spry work with lowing wind writing and horn calls that summon up Austro-Germanic landscapes rather than anything South American. Rooted deeply in late-Romantic musical soil it does however admit some hints as to Mexican colours and rhythm though these are very slight in the first movement. For the most part Carrillo shows that he has listened to the latest from Strauss but is more rooted in Schumann. The slow movement flows and rises to an apex very attractively, poetic woodland winds once more to the fore, an ascending and winding solo violin attractively adding to the sonic panorama. It's in the *paso doble* insinuations of the scherzo that one hears a more personal stamp, as in the delightful series of instrumental soliloquys that follow, whereas for the finale Carrillo piles on the orchestral weight, lower brass powering away, building up vast climaxes and ending the work in a blaze of surging majesty. Hardly an unconfident work, the First Symphony served notice of real talent.

The Theme and Variations was composed two years before the Symphony, its ethos being broadly that of Leipzig-meets-Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings. Each of the variations is helpfully tracked allowing one to enjoy their felicitous warmth and variety. The highlight is the slinky Habanera, a touch perfumed, and immensely evocative, though the concluding *Tempo di Polonesa* is a truly stirring way to end things. The First Orchestral Suite, which occupied him from 1896 until 1899, was his official Op.1. In four movements it exemplifies the high standard of lighter orchestral music to be encountered at the time, with an easy-going waltz, a strong Gavotte and a suitably (lightly) serious *Andante Religioso*.

This disc shines rewarding light on Carrillo's embryonic composing years, a process helped by the excellent and valuable notes. The recording is generally good, though the orchestra's percussion can sound a bit tinny in the Symphony. No matter; the performances are all committed and strong and certainly worth a listen or three.

Jonathan Woolf

Previous review: [Rob Barnett](#)

Il Violoncello del Cardinale

Pietro Giuseppe Gaetano BONI (1686-c1741)

Sonata No. 1 in C major, Op. 1 No. 8 [10:09]

Filippo AMADEI (c1665-c1725)

Sonata in D minor, WD896/10 [5:10]

Nicola Francesco HAYM (1678-1729)

Sonata No. 1 in A minor/E minor [3:57]

Giuseppe Maria PERRONI (fl. 1699-1737)

Sonata No. 2 in D major [6:22]

Pietro Giuseppe Gaetano BONI

Sonata in G minor, Op. 1 No. 9 [7:25]

Giovanni Battista COSTANZI (1704-1778)

Sinfonia a violoncello solo in D major, WD551 [9:15]

Giuseppe Maria PERRONI

Sonata No. 1 in A major [5:59]

Giovanni BONONCINI (1670-1747)

Sonata in A minor [9:40]

Giovanni Lorenzo LULIER (c1662-1700)

Aria 'Amor di che tu vuoi' [transcribed for two cellos] [5:17]

Accademia Ottoboni (Marco Ceccato (cello & director); Rebeca Ferri (cello); Francesco Romano (theorbo & guitar); Anna Fontana (harpsichord))

rec. 2016, Cori, Italy

ALPHA CLASSICS 368 [63:27]

With the very notable exceptions of Corelli and Vivaldi, the period from the end of the 17th century to the beginning of the 18th century in Italy – i.e. the High Baroque in music – is mainly held in regard for its vocal music. This disc casts an interesting light on some of the instrumental music which was composed within the spheres of the influential Roman courts of Cardinals Benedetto Pamphili and Pietro Ottoboni – perhaps most famous for their patronage of the young Handel. Indeed some of the musicians on this disc are probably best known, if at all, for their connections with that composer rather than for any actual compositions of their own: Haym wrote the libretti for some of the operas of Handel's Royal Academy in the 1720s; Amadei was principal cellist in that institution's orchestra; and he and Bononcini each composed an act, in collaboration with Handel, for the opera *Muzio Scevola* in 1721, though Bononcini was otherwise a rival with Handel on London's opera scene in that decade.

This recording focuses on music for cello by such composers, some of whom were virtuoso cellists, written at a slightly earlier period in the service of the aforementioned cardinals. The earliest work here, by Lulier, is in fact the (uncredited) arrangement of an aria for soprano and obbligato cello, as no original compositions for the instrument survive by him. In Marco Ceccato's hands it becomes a convincing duet as the gently-played vocal melody is rendered in an idiomatic transcription that intertwines delectably with the original obbligato part.

Elsewhere Rebeca Ferri's role on the subsidiary cello as part of the continuo is generally less obtrusive, alongside the harpsichord and theorbo, whilst Ceccato remains in the aural foreground, though the playful echoes by Ferri of the falling arpeggio figure in the cadential phrases of the second movement of Amadei's Sonata are delightful. In its first movement it would perhaps have been welcome if the sustained notes of the continuo had come into greater prominence in order to weave more clearly with the spikier arpeggiated figures given to Ceccato, and therefore to make for a more telling and effective contrast between the two. Only in the virtuosic, but musically indifferent, figurations of the solo cello line in the Allegro second movement of Perroni's Sonata No. 2 is Ceccato overtaken by the more vigorous harpsichord part.

Otherwise the selection of sonatas here gives Ceccato scope for an enticing variety of colours and textures. The effusive yearning of the slow movements in Boni's two Sonatas – the G minor naturally

eliciting darker introspection – and at the opening of Haym’s Sonata No. 1 are compelling, if at times a little dry, whilst his seamless and controlled legato for the faster movements is impressive, such as in the final gigue-like Allegro of Boni’s op. 1 no. 9, as well as the French-style dotted rhythms of the ‘Alla Francese’ movements in each of Boni’s sonatas, in addition to the persistently similar rhythm of the final movement of Bononcini’s example, which might have been so much less elegant in less expert hands.

Despite the more or less uniform textures and form of the works on this release – the sonatas tend towards the more old-fashioned four movement form, rather than the three which eventually came to dominate – Ceccato maintains an intelligent musical sensibility throughout. Lovers of Baroque music should find this unusual programme as pleasurable as it is stimulating and edifying.

Curtis Rogers

Previous review: [David Barker](#)

Gioacchino ROSSINI (1792–1868)

Sigismondo

Sigismondo – Margarita Gritskova (mezzo-soprano)

Aldimira – Maria Aleida (soprano)

Ladislao – Kenneth Tarver (tenor)

Ulderico – Marcell Bakonyi (bass)

Anagilda – Paula Sánchez-Valverde (soprano)

Zenovito – Marcell Bakonyi (bass)

Radoski – César Arrieta (tenor)

Camerata Bach Choir, Poznan, Virtuosi Brunensis/Antonino Fogliani
rec. live, Trinkhalle, Bad Wildbad, Germany, 14, 16 and 24 July 2016

The Italian libretto is available online

NAXOS 8.660403-04 [70:27 + 78:45]

Sigismondo, premiered at La Fenice in Venice on 26 December 1814, was Rossini's thirteenth opera. He was only 22 at the time but already a veteran. The previous year saw his two break-throughs: the serious *Tancredi* and the comedy *L'italiana in Algeri*. Little more than a year later came his greatest success (although it was a failure at the premiere) *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, still one of the most frequently played of all operas. It was number 7 on Operabase's ranking list for the season 2015/2016. *Sigismondo*, on the other hand, is one of the least played of Rossini's 39 operas. The reason for this neglect is, in the general opinion, Giuseppe Foppa's libretto, which has been seen as "confused and illogical". But Foppa was an experienced writer since more than twenty years, much in demand in Italy as well as in Vienna and Lisbon, and he wrote several librettos for early Rossini operas. The basic story is the same as the one for Rossini's *L'inganno felice*: "a rejected courtier maligns an innocent wife, whose husband orders that she be put to death. Instead she is rescued by a protector and lives under an assumed name as his daughter. When her husband and the rejected courtier come upon her they are astonished and confused. In the end the truth comes out and husband and wife are reconciled while the villain is punished." Foppa locates the story to Poland and he begins the libretto towards the end of the story, when the wife (Aldimira) has been living in a forest and the husband (Sigismondo) has gone mad. In the opera his madness is central and Foppa describes his state of mind through verbal irregularity in the verses of some arias, notably Sigismondo's opening cavatina (CD 1 tr. 4), where Rossini's music closely follows the text and the result is also irregular. Also the villain, Ladislao, has bouts of mental disorder, which also is mirrored in the music. Possibly could this modernity have been a reason for the hostile reception of the premiere audience. Today we have no problems to appreciate the music.

The overture is one of his longest – nine minutes – the opening adagio is borrowed from *Il Turco in Italia*, which was premiered less than four months earlier. After a while it gains momentum and fizzes along vividly. It is characteristically Rossinian with obligatory crescendo. During the course of the play jaded Rossinians will recognize some music from other operas as well, but these are not loans, it's the other way round: since the opera was a flop Rossini picked some plums and reused them in some future works: *Elisabetta*, *Torvaldo e Dorliska*, *Barbiere*, *Cenerentola* and *Adina*.

Structurally the opera follows the usual pattern with arias and ensembles knit together by secco recitatives accompanied by *fortepiano*. The introduction of act I is vivid and dramatic with chorus and soloists and Ladislao has a long virtuoso solo, skilfully executed by Kenneth Tarver. Sigismondo's cavatina, mentioned above, is interesting, and Sigismondo's utterances are interrupted by comments from the others. Aldimira also has a long scene and cavatina (CD 1 tr. 6) with a lot of coloratura, and Ladislao's aria (CD 1 tr. 10) also stands out for its irregularity. There is a beautiful duettino for Sigismondo and Aldimira (CD 1 tr. 12), and the Polish nobleman Zenovito's aria (CD 1 tr. 14) is remarkable for a brief recurrent quotation from *La Marseillaise* and a double-bass solo in the postlude. The duetto for Ladislao and Aldimira is good (CD 1 tr. 16) and the act I finale (CD 2 tr. 1) is grandiose.

The introduction to the chorus opening act II (CD 2 tr. 2) was later reused as introduction to the first act of *Barbiere*. Aldimira and Sigismondo have a second duet (CD 2 tr. 6), which is rather modern. Rossini later replaced it with a more conventional duet. Ladislao's sister Anagilda has a rondo (CD 2 tr. 8), which requires some virtuoso singing and it is followed by Ladislao's scene and aria, which is dynamic and powerful, and after a brief recitative Aldimira has a long scene (CD 2 tr. 11). The quartetto (CD 2 tr. 13) with Aldimira, Sigismondo, Ladislao and Ulderico, the King of Bohemia) is long and irregular and has a final crescendo but, against the rule, there is a decrescendo leading over to Sigismondo's big scene *O sorte Barbara – Alma rea!*, where Ulderico's bass is really mighty. The short finale: reconciliation and everything is peace and rejoicing!

The singing is on the whole very good. Margarita Gritskova is a worthy Sigismondo and Maria Aleida as Aldimira sings well and has no problem with the coloratura. Kenneth Tarver sounds a bit worn a couple of times but is up to the mark. Anagilda's virtuoso rondo is excellently sung by Paula Sánchez-Valverde and Hungarian born Marcell Bakonyi, doubling as Zenovito and Ulderico, has a well-defined bass-voice.

Antonino Fogliani conducts with style and vitality and the live-recording is worthy of the occasion. The libretto is available on-line but it is in Italian only. The detailed synopsis with cue-points in the booklet is however a very good substitute. The target group is primarily Rossini-lovers, but general opera lovers should also derive a lot of pleasure from this set.

Göran Forsling

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770 - 1827)

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Opus 125

Gundula Janowitz (soprano); Grace Bumbry (mezzo-soprano); Jess Thomas (tenor); George London (bass-baritone)

Chor und Orchester der Bayreuther Festspiele; Karl Böhm

rec. 23 July 1963, Bayreuth, Germany. AAD (mono)

ORFEO C935171B [71:17]

Furtwängler's post-war Beethoven recordings at Bayreuth (in 1951 and 1954) are legendary. Much less well-known is this performance conducted by Karl Böhm in 1963 to mark two Wagner anniversaries: the 150th of his birth, and the 80th of his death. The live recording (with applause at the end) is issued here for the first time by Orfeo on a single CD under the rubric of *Bayreuther Festspiele Live* - a series conceived in the spirit of Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner's 'Neue Bayreuth' to communicate outside and beyond the Festspielhaus and extend the music of Wagner and others such as Beethoven to a wider audience.

Böhm's Bayreuth debut represented the arrival and establishment of a new, younger musical generation. He conducted *Tristan* in 1962 and the *Ring* in 1965 with both *Meistersinger* and this Beethoven 9th in 1963, and then went on to become one of Bayreuth's defining conductors of the 1960s.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Böhm followed Wagnerian traditions for the strength and disposition of the orchestra and its instruments; the choir was also large at well over 200. Despite such weight, this is not a ponderous or dense performance. From the first movement, although it begins suitably quietly, there is a spring in Böhm's step and a freshness in his *tempi* and phrasing.

There are times - such as the middle of the second movement [tr.2] when the strings and woodwinds sound a little forced, mechanical; when they come across as though their playing is just the wrong side of perfunctory. This tends to add to the feeling that Böhm lacks pathos, depth and introspection. Although he was by then in his seventies, he seems less interested in introspection and measured reflection than in bringing a Mozartian transparency to the work.

And, at the same time, he avoids Furtwängler's impulsive energy. The opening of the fourth movement [tr.4], for instance, has a tenacity and determination, an authority and certainty that leaves little room for sensitivity and rumination. This is not to say that this interpretation lacks nuance or colour. Indeed, it is tempting to think that the audience on that May night in 1824 at the Theater am Kärntnertor in Vienna would have heard something equally punchy, unfussy, focused. Something which made a tremendous departure from classicism - yet in apposite and accessible ways.

One positive side of this interpretation is indeed its sense of movement; and a clean understanding of the work's architecture, the journey which Beethoven makes throughout the Symphony's 72 minutes; and which the composer has made from his First Symphony (a quarter of a century and a hundred opus numbers earlier). So if you are looking for a Ninth which aggressively celebrates the values of universal brother- and sister-hood, the permanence of the human spirit, and the elevation of music itself in the service of peace and delight - a kind of unquestioning fanfare (the performance was given, after all, on the eve of the 1963 season) - this recording will fit the bill.

Böhm's conception is tight (though not too tight) and focused. It's collected, somewhat dispassionate. There are moments when a degree of 'raggedness' which one would never hear in an orchestra of this status nowadays draws attention to the age of this performance and recording. Böhm's account is not one which consciously acknowledges other ways of arriving at where he is determined to arrive. It has élan, sparkle, almost. It has verve, energy and transparency. But very few actual moments, if not of surprise, then of stopping us in our tracks and inviting us to listen to this

immense creation in new ways. Nothing notably spontaneous or original.

It's not at all that the performers are (reluctantly) serving their time, plodding through the familiar. But some listeners will miss the thoughtful, the speculative, the awe-struck response.

Less partially compromised, if that's not too strong a word, is the stellar quartet of some of the best vocal soloists at Bayreuth of those years: Gundula Janowitz, Grace Bumbry, Jess Thomas and George London. They serve to cap the performance with a *gravitas* that matches the rigour and concentration which marks this account. Janowitz is full of spirit and elegance; her high notes are truly beautiful.

As expected, the acoustic of a recording made over 50 years ago is restricted in the ranges of dynamic and pitch. Nor does the choir sound particularly rich, considering its size. And it too tends to exhibit those feelings, not of a pedantic, but a somewhat routine delivery at those very moments when Beethoven's sense that joy is unbounded needs to touch us. This does sound more like Mozart than the C19th Romantics. The booklet sets the scene, gives some background and describes the performance. Not an earth-shattering 9th. But a clean and characterful one. Less Romantic, perhaps, than Classical. But well worth investigating.

Mark Sealey

Charles KOEHLIN (1867-950)

Chamber Music

rec. 1980-2009

SWR MUSIC SWR19047CD [7 CDs: 509:04]

Despite the 27th of November 2017 being the 150th anniversary of the birth of Charles Koechlin, recording companies have been slow in celebrating the event apart, that is, from SWR Music who have collected their many recordings made for the Hänssler Classic label and combined them into two very fine 7 CD box sets.

Born in Paris, his family originated from the Alsace, and this leads to the first problem, how to pronounce his name; this has led to different pronunciations even amongst French enthusiasts. Koechlin was also a very prolific composer, there being 225 works with opus numbers, including many suites of small pieces, but he also allotted his teaching pieces opus numbers too, which means that not all his music is of the highest quality. He originally studied, at his family's insistence, as a civil engineer, this despite his preference for music. After he graduated with modest qualifications he persuaded his family to allow him to study music at the Paris Conservatoire, where his teachers included Massenet. In 1896 he became a pupil of Fauré along with Ravel, Fauré was to have a great influence on Koechlin who, in 1927, would write the first biography of his teacher.

His compositional style is individualistic, due to his many influences including nature, oriental music, French folk song, Bach and Hollywood films; although his early works show an impressionism that has led him to be described as a missing link between Debussy and Poulenc. My own personal introduction to his music came in 1994 with David Zinman's wonderful recording of the complete settings of Kipling's *Jungle Book* (090266195527); I remember being blown away by the music. This was followed shortly afterwards by a performance during a student concert of his lovely Horn Sonata, the only piece of Koechlin's music that I have ever heard live, which is sadly not included in this set. I have since invested in a number of recordings of his music, some included in the orchestral box, and all of which I have found to be captivating.

The first disc in this set concentrates on Koechlin's music for clarinet and was originally issued by Hänssler as CD 89.446. This disc contains some wonderful music, not least the sonatas of 1923 which I never tire of hearing; the same can be said of the rest of the works presented here, especially the Quatorze Pieces pour Clarinette et Piano that offers 14 charming short character pieces. This is a disc which, like the rest in the set, I have listened to again and again.

The second disc presents some of his music for flute, most of which is present on CD 93.157, the exception being the Flute Sonata, Op. 52. This, like the disc of music for clarinet, presents some charming and highly melodic music that does not outstay its welcome. It presents the short *Epitaphe de Jean Harlow*, this not only shows his fondness for Hollywood, but also his great admiration for the actress. It is a piece of great tenderness and beauty and this despite its unusual scoring of flute, alto sax and piano.

I think disc three is my favourite of the chamber music discs, with both *Le Portrait de Daisy Hamilton* for clarinet and piano, once again inspired by an actress, this time Lillian Harvey, (who also appears in the second movement of his Seven Stars' Symphony) and the Oboe Sonata being a revelation to me. His writing for the oboe is inspired and should, along with the sonatas for clarinet, for flute and for the bassoon that follows the oboe sonata, in my opinion be judged as important as the sonatas of Debussy or any of his contemporaries. This feeling is only strengthened by the Suite for Solo Cor Anglais, a work which shows the range and colour of the instrument to its full extent.

The fourth disc presents two of his string sonatas, those for Viola and Piano and for Cello and Piano; the first of these presents the 'Cinderella instrument' in a glowing light and was premiered in 1915 by Darius Milhaud and Jeanne Herscher-Clément. The final sonata in this set is that for cello, the fifth in a

series of nine sonatas that Koechlin composed between 1911 and 1925. It is a work that brings the instrument's full range of sonorities to the fore. However, if I had to choose just one piece for cello and piano it would be the *Vingt Chansons bretonnes*; it was in this work, written in three books, that Koechlin first directly quoted folk songs in his music, twenty in all, with the variety bringing out the best of the instrumentalists.

The following three discs present some of Koechlin's music for solo piano, something I have greatly enjoyed over the years. That being said, I have a problem with the fist of these piano discs, it is not with the performance but with the programming. The disc presents the First and Second parts of *L'album de Lilian*; well that is the six pieces for solo piano taken from the two albums which is a great shame. I came to know the full works through the 3 CD set of Koechlin's chamber music on the Accord label (465 894-2), and here they present the full works for soprano, flutes and piano in the first album, and flutes, ondes martenot, harpsichord and piano in the second, this portrays the music in its context and so sits better than just excerpt. Sadly, however, this excellent set is long deleted and can only be found at exorbitant prices on certain online sites. The Accord set also offers a fine recording of *Paysages et marines*, but in the chamber ensemble version; I do have Deborah Richards performing it on a CPO disc (999 054-2), but Michael Korstick's version is certainly more desirable.

The sixth disc in the set offers *Les heures persanes*, again something I know well, both in its piano version, by Kathryn Stott (CHAN 9974), and in its orchestration, Lief Segerstram (8.550890). I must say, I have always found the original piano version the better of the two versions; the colouration in the piano heightens your imagination. Composed in 1919, Koechlin orchestrated it two years later, it was inspired not by his own travels, but by *A Thousand and One Nights* and by the travel writings of Pierre Loti; whatever the inspiration, the result is probably the composer's most important piano work. I have always had a soft spot for Kathryn Stott's version and it still remains my favourite, but only just.

The final work in this set begins with the wonderful *Danses pour Ginger*, two short pieces inspired once again by Hollywood, in particular the films of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. However, it is the *L'ancienne maison de champagne* which is the most important work here. This is the third recording I have, of the others Christoph Keller, who also gives the *Quatre Nouvelles Sonatines* Op. 87, here presented on disc five, gives a stronger performance on the Accord set than Deborah Richards on CPO, his also being the quickest version; Michael Korstick gives us a very committed and nuanced version one that is equal to that of Keller.

The performances throughout this set are excellent; whether in the chamber music or the works for solo piano each performer gives a more than committed performance, seeming to get to the heart of this music and of the composer, the result being an excellent set and an ideal way to get to know Charles Koechlin's chamber music. Yes there are works that I wish were here, not least the monumental Op. 80 Quintet pour piano et cordes, which remains on my wish list. The recorded sound is excellent whilst the accompanying booklet is exemplary. 164 pages long in German French and English, the notes give in-depth details on the composer and his music that has been derived from the original booklet notes from the single releases. This is a wonderful set, one which, if I gave Recording of the Month accolades to reissues, would certainly deserve it.

Stuart Sillitoe

Disc 1 [75:13]

Clarinet Sonata No. 1, Op. 85 [9:00]

Les confidences d'un joueur de clarinette (The Con [17:48]

Clarinet Sonata No. 2, Op. 86 [8:43]

Idylle for 2 Clarinets, Op. 155bis [1:48]

Quatorze Pieces pour Clarinette et Piano, Op. 178 [27:04]

Monodies, Op. 216 [11:03]

Disc 2 [66:31]

Flute Sonata, Op. 52 [11:12]
Építaphe de Jean Harlow, Op. 164 [3:43]
Trio for 2 flutes and Clarinet Op. 91 [8:04]
Suite en quatuor, Op. 55 [10:45]
Trio for Flute, Clarinet and Bassoon Op. 92 [10:35]
Sonata for 2 Flutes, Op. 75 [7:40]
2 Nocturnes, Op. 32bis [5:43]
Sonatine modale for Flute and Clarinet Op. 155a [5:44]
Piece for Flute and Piano Op.218 [2:00]

Disc 3 [77:17]

Le Portrait de Daisy Hamilton, Op. 140 [9:51]
Oboe Sonata, Op. 58 [27:32]
Bassoon Sonata, Op. 71 [10:47]
Suite for Solo Cor Anglais Op. 185 [22:03]
Stèle funéraire for 3 Flutes, Op. 224 [6:41]

Disc 4 [73:11]

Viola Sonata, Op. 53 [31:20]
Cello Sonata, Op. 66 [11:46]
Vingt Chansons bretonnes, Op. 115 [29:24]

Dirk Altmann (clarinet)
Joachim Bänsch (horn)
Michael Baumann (piano)
Peter Bruns (cello)
Johanna Busch (cello)
Chia Chou (piano)
Hans-Georg Gaydoul (piano)
Mila Georgieva (violin)
Sybille Mahni Haas (horn)
Barbara Hank (flute)
Florian Henschel (piano)
Eckart Hübner (bassoon)
Roglit Ishay (piano)
Rudolf König (clarinet)
Lajos Lencsés (cor anglais)
Mako Okamoto (piano)
Alexander Ott (oboe)
Paul Pesthy (viola)
Ingrid Philippi (viola)
Inge-Susann Römhild (piano)
Tatjana Ruhland (flute)
Libor Sima (saxophone, bassoon)
Christina Singer (flute)
Yaara Tal (piano)
Gunter Teuffel (viola)
Peter Thalheimer (flute)

Piano Works

Disc 5 [73:11]

Andante quasi adagio [7:25]
Sonatine No. 1, Op. 87 [4:15]
Premier L'album de Lilian, Op. 139 [2:50]
Sonatine No. 2, Op. 87 [7:08]
Paysages et marines, Op. 63 [27:18]

Sonatine No. 3, Op. 87 [7:48]
Second L'album de Lilian, Op. 149 [12:51]
Sonatine No. 4, Op. 87 [6:53]

Disc 6 [66:53]

Les heures persanes, Op. 65 [66:53]

Disc 7 [76:38]

Danses pour Ginger, Op. 163 [5:25]

Sonatine Op. 59, No. 3 [4:54]

Andante con moto [6:53]

L'ancienne maison de campagne, Op. 124 [29:23]

Piano piece, Op. 83bis [2:21]

Sonatine Op. 59, No. 2 [7:43]

Esquisses, Book 1, Op. 41 [1932]

Michael Korstick (piano)

Luigi CHERUBINI (1760-1842)

Marche funèbre (1820) [7:20]

Chant sur la mort de Joseph Haydn (1805) [19:14]

Requiem in C minor (1816) [49:51]

Akiho Tsujii (soprano); Martin Lattke (tenor); Paul Kroeger (tenor) (all *Chant*)

Kammerchor der Frauenkirche Dresden,

Philharmonisches Orchester Altenburg-Gera/Matthias Grünert

rec. live 6-8 February 2017, Concert Hall of the Bühnen der Stadt Gera, Germany

RONDEAU PRODUCTION ROP6142 [76:25]

In November 2010 Michael Cookson reviewed a period-instrument recording of Cherubini's C minor Requiem conducted by Frieder Bernius (Carus) that so impressed him he designated it a Recording of the Month ([review](#)). I also reviewed that recording a few months later and was moved by it, indicating that I couldn't imagine the work receiving better treatment ([review](#)). The sole drawback was the disc's short timing, since the requiem was the only work presented.

Now we have this new performance by a Dresden choir and employing modern instruments, and the disc includes two substantial fillers. The *Marche funèbre* has appeared before with the Requiem, but the much longer *Chant sur la mort de Joseph Haydn* has not to my knowledge. As with the earlier performance, this one is recorded live. With fuller sound this recording adds depth and gravitas to the music, though at the expense of clarity and incisiveness of Bernius' account. If I had just one recording of the Cherubini Requiem I would opt for Bernius, but Grünert has much going for it, too. If Bernius looks back to Mozart, Grünert is positively Beethovenian in his performance. This is a big account and the choir is impressive, if not as refined as Bernius' forces. The orchestra plays at standard pitch, whereas Bernius with his period group are a half-step lower. What is particularly noticeable at the start of the *Dies irae* is its startling tam-tam stroke, as potent as Bernius' but with a deeper sound, and the brass fanfare following it. The sound tends to swallow up the choir, so when the singers come in they are not as clearly heard as they are with Bernius. Like Bernius, Grünert inserts the tract of the liturgy for the dead, *Absolve, Domine*, sung a cappella, into the score. Michael Pauser of the International Cherubini Society in the CD notes cites Cherubini as calling for this insertion of Gregorian chant. Older recordings omitted this section presumably because it is not part of the actual score. It may be viewed as effective liturgically, but also disruptive musically. Of course it can always be omitted, since it is tracked separately. Elsewhere, both accounts have their respective virtues, though Bernius has the advantage in his SACD recording's clearer and more vibrant sound.

What makes this disc a more attractive alternative are the other pieces on the programme. The *Marche funèbre* is cut from the same cloth as the Requiem and employs the tam-tam in a way similar to its use in the earlier work. Grünert seems to revel in the tam-tam's role and the work's vehemence. The *Chant sur la mort de Joseph Haydn*, on the other hand, is quite a contrast. I had not heard it before. Cherubini composed it in 1805, when a rumour had spread in Paris that Haydn had died. He was commissioned by a Masonic Lodge there. The première took place in 1810 after Haydn had actually died. The work is cantata-like in structure with a long orchestral introduction, lasting roughly a third of the piece, followed by two sections for tenor solo, one for soprano, and finally a trio of the two tenors and the soprano. The tenor soloists each act as *coryphaei* (the name given to choir leaders in ancient Greek tragedies) and they are followed by a "*voix de femme*," the soprano soloist. As Pauser explains, "out of the [work's] gloomy character in the minor key, a brighter character in major gradually emerges." The last part for the three soloists is especially lovely. The tenor soloists on this recording are well matched and in fine voice and the soprano is radiant. There is no choir in this particular work, but the orchestra plays an important role with notable parts for the brass and memorable horn solos. I was quite taken with this work and I am certain to return to it. Intentionally, or not, the piece reminded me of Haydn's *Creation* in its vocal writing.

I still prefer the Bernius account of the Requiem for the qualities noted above, but the additional works on this disc are worthy in themselves and the performance of the Requiem is very good, resulting in an enticing proposition overall.

Leslie Wright