

Robert BEASER (b.1954)

Guitar Concerto (2010) [28:45]

Notes on a Southern Sky (1980) [12:10]

Evening Prayer (2007) [14:59]

Ground O (2011) [5:51]

Eliot Fisk (guitar)

Royal Scottish National Orchestra/Jose Serebrier

rec. Royal Scottish National Orchestra Centre, Glasgow, 2015

LINN RECORDS CKD 52 [62:00]

The American composer Robert Beaser is from a non-musical family. He studied with Jacob Druckman at Yale. His conducting teachers included William Steinberg but his honour roll of professors numbers Takemitsu, Franchetti, Petrassi and Earle Brown in its strength. For this disc Beaser provides his own factual background. The booklet also includes essays by John Corigliano, [Serebrier](#) and Fisk. The English-only documentation for this disc is superb. It's full, typographically pleasing and legible. Beaser's discography includes [Mountain Songs](#) - also involving Fisk - and a Piano Concerto issued by [Phoenix](#) from an Argo original.

The Guitar Concerto is one of quite a few works Beaser has written for Fisk, a noted pupil of Andrés Segovia. This one has movements as follows: *Chains and Hammers*, *Tombeau* and *Phrygian Pick*. The first of these is most luminously orchestrated. It's an artful piece of work leaving aural space around the guitar - an instrument too easily swamped. It's a most attractive work in an open and welcoming style which combines delicacy, half-light and a dazzle of joyous detail. The last time I heard a guitar concerto this welcoming it was the glorious concerto for acoustic guitar, electric guitar and orchestra from Birmingham-based British composer Andrew Downes. Fisk brings gentle illumination in the sentimental *Tombeau* which owes something to Barber at his most accessible. The last movement, *Phrygian Pick*, is quietly driven. Here is another composer who is confident and happy to inhabit and invent within the frame of tonal music. He does this with tension and allure. Only the last couple of minutes felt contrived as if Beaser had to find a dynamic way of ending.

Then come three other works. *Notes on a Southern Sky* is the oldest here. I take Beaser's note on trust in reporting that it is inspired by the music of Venezuelan composer Antonio Lauro and guitarist Alirio Díaz. The composer tells us that this is a revised version - tightened and shortened. It's a work of subtle delicacy and, without being in any way a trial, is more challenging than the Concerto. A tempered, crepuscular atmosphere suffuses every bar.

Evening Prayer finds its impetus in Kodály's choral folk piece, *Esti Dal*. It owes its existence to a commission from an orchestra in which Beaser played as a young musician. Its salty, rippling and surging ways meld a guileless North American folk idiom with that of Eastern Middle Europe. It has many moments that link with the grand outdoors tradition exemplified by Copland's works of the 1940s. While I had some misgivings about the way the Concerto ended this work closes most naturally with a confident and contented valour.

Ground O, as its title suggests, is bound up in the composer's reaction to 9/11. This small piece is based on a movement from an earlier chamber work. Its fractal glistening and dignified glow achieve a telling effect. It's all delivered in an unhurried breath which gives the sense of a rising gradient. The music is epic in its substance but most skilfully achieved in brevity. This is most impressive and, as with the other works, its countenance never slips into anything approaching the mundane.

The RSNO and Serebrier know each other very well as may be expected from their [Glazunov](#) cycle. The audio engineering presents the music with vigour and clarity. Beaser has been associated with Linn before. He wrote the liner notes for Linn's CD of [Adler's orchestral music](#).

Rob Barnett

Henri TOMASI (1901-1971)

Le silence de la mer - drame lyrique en 1 acte (1959) [32:55]

Bernard Demigny - Officier; Janine Capderou - Nièce

Orchestre lyrique de l'O.R.T.F./Pierre-Michel Le Conte

Symphonie du tiers-monde (1969) [21:03]

Orchestre philharmonique de l'O.R.T.F./Pierre Dervaux

Retour à Tipasa - cantate profane for orator, men's choir and orchestra (1966) [14:14]

Daniel Mesguich (orator)

Orchestre philharmonique et chœur de l'Opéra de Marseille/Patrick Davin

rec. 2005 (Tipasa), 1968 (Symphonie), 1971 (Silence)

AD VITAM AV121115 [68:14]

French composer Henri Tomasi is not numerously represented in the catalogue. This disc of radio-originated recordings - each in ruddy health - is well worth hearing and getting to know.

Le silence de la mer is a single act opera running about half an hour and setting words by Vercors - a wartime pseudonym adopted by Jean Bruller. The minimal plot has an old man and his niece showing resistance against the Nazis. The predominance of tense gloom is undeniable but there is more than a little melody scattered here and there. This includes a superb vocal *cantabile* at about 08:56 and a lengthy and touching Bachian *arietta* (almost Finzian) for piano and orchestra at around 11:00. Bernard Demigny pulls off a neat balance of *bel canto* and *sprechgesang* in which his acting ability is directly communicated. His singing is limber and rich in redolence. As it unfolds the piece reveals itself as a sung monologue with an upward gradient towards nightmare tension and despair verging at its peak on taloned horror. It's ironic that *Le Silence*, as heard in Berlin in 1959, was reckoned by Tomasi as an absolutely satisfying production; likewise the Berlin premiere in 1956 of Tomasi's full length opera *Don Juan de Mañara*. The latter was recorded by Forlane as was Tomasi's *Le Triomphe de Jeanne*. Neither disc is currently available; does anyone have *Le Triomphe de Jeanne*, I wonder?

Symphonie du tiers monde (Symphony of the Third World) was written as part of the Berlioz centenary celebrations but its soundworld has precious little to do with Berlioz except in the most generalised fantastic sense - perhaps a leaping-off point from the Scaffold and Sabbath movements of *Symphonie Fantastique*. Tomasi provided background text for each movement. Only three years away from death at this point, the composer channels insurrection and hope. He shows a fierce affinity with the cobble-throwing youth and banner-waving of the period; he would have made common cause with Alan Bush in the 1930s and 1940s. Three compact movements include a remorselessly searing and belligerent funeral march, *Lamentoso*. That glowering first movement is followed by an intense *Allegro furioso* placed under buckling heat by protesting and whooping brass, sharply stabbing strings and implacable percussion. The last movement is an *Allegro giocoso* in which a grim confidence in ejecting from the Temple the ills and injustices voiced in the earlier two movements drives things to a conclusion. This is crowned by rolling and roiling horns and the clang of victorious percussion. This startlingly clear recording was made in the composer's presence.

Retour à Tipasa, to spoken words by Albert Camus, is primarily a piece for reciter. Its compelling ways are amplified by the orchestra and a discreetly placed male chorus. The voices often vocalise but find words towards the end. Tension is again Tomasi's all-embracing hallmark with the wailing of the choir amplifying the effect. Sinister music-box chiming plays the same sort of ostinato role one hears in the 'riding' motif in Sibelius's *Nightride and Sunrise*. Tomasi was an enthusiast of the saxophone and the instrument puts in several prominent appearances. The reciter, Daniel Mesguich handles his central role with great concentration and with an attention to detail that extends to virtuosic variations of speed of delivery. This compact piece has the feeling of a radio piece and a touch of [Roberto Gerhard's *The Plague*](#) - another Camus piece from 1964.

These three works are taken from French radio and are in forthright sound. True there are a few moments where dynamic contrast is ironed out by the engineers as in *Le Silence de la Mer* but there is really nothing of substance to complain about.

The more than useful booklet note in French and English is by Frédéric Ducros.

If you would like to know more there is a lavishly illustrated and atmospheric book about Tomasi. It's by Michel Solis and is in French only.

Criticisms of the disc? Well, it's a pity that *Le silence de la mer* is presented in one track even if it is a single act opera. More lavish tracking would have been preferable. There are natural breaks here and there including at about 09:10 an extensive section of scene-setting narration. Two of the three works set words. I would have liked to find the words and translations in the otherwise admirable booklet.

The composer's son is Claude Tomasi-Solis. He has done a great deal for Tomasi's music and life story and I hope that in addition to the existing valuable disc he will find support and funding to do more. Quite apart from reissues of the [Dutton](#), [Lyrix](#) and Forlane discs we need to hear the seemingly opulent songs for voice and orchestra and the exotic tone poems, ballets and symphonies of the 1930s and 1940s.

Three eloquent and knowingly 20th century works by Henri Tomasi in recordings and performances that do justice to the material.

Rob Barnett

Vincenzo BELLINI (1801 – 1835)

Sei Ariette / Six Ariettas

1. No. 2: *Vonne, o rosa fortunata* (Metastasio) [2:48]2. *La farfalletta* (Anon) [2:11]

Sei Ariette / Six Ariettas

3. No. 5: *Per pietà, bell'idol mio* (Metastasio) [3:06]4. No. 6: *Ma rendi pur contento* (Metastasio) [2:34]**Franz SCHUBERT (1797 – 1828)**

4 Canzonas D 688

5. No. 1: *Non t'accostar all'urna* (Vittorelli) [3:25]6. No. 2: *Guarda, che bianca luna* (Vittorelli) [3:28]7. No. 3: *Da quel semiante appresi* (Metastasio) [2:09]8. No. 4: *Mio ben ricordati* (Metastasio) [2:13]9. *Vedi quanto adoro* D 510 (Metastasio) [4:44]**Franz LISZT (1811 – 1886)**

3 Sonetti del Petrarca S 270a

10. I. *Pace non trovo* [7:27]11. II. *Benedetto sia 'l giorno* [6:01]12. III. *I vidi in terra* [6:07]**Richard WAGNER (1813 – 1883)**13. *Les adieux de Marie Stuart* WWV 61 (Peirre-jean de Beranger) [6:47]

Julie Davies (soprano)

Charles Spencer (piano)

rec. 4tune Studios, Vienna, 2015

No song texts enclosed

CAPRICCIO C3003 [53:33]

Under the collective title *Première Portraits* Capriccio started a series a couple of years ago, where they launched promising young singers – a kind of rising stars. So far I have reviewed four of them ([review](#), [review](#), [review](#), [review](#)) and here now is the fifth one. As before the presentation is meagre: bios on the singer and the pianist in German and English and a track-list on the back of the jewel-case, but there is not a word about the music, and besides the three Liszt songs, which are fairly well-known, the rest of the programme is far from that. The sung texts are not enclosed either, which is another black mark. Considering that the discs sell at only slightly below full price this is rather parsimonious.

Leaving these matters open, the musical side has a lot to offer. The pianist, Charles Spencer, is certainly one of the most reliable accompanists around, and so far he has participated in all but one of the issues in this series. He certainly makes the most of Liszt's Petrarch sonnets, which tend to be the highpoint of this disc with truly expressive singing by Ms Davies. She is American and has made her mark in several international opera houses in roles like Lucia di Lammermoor, Violetta in *La traviata* and Amina in *La sonnambula*. Her tone is sometimes a bit edgy but her technique is healthy and she has a good legato. The Bellini songs are charming. Three of them are settings of Metastasio, arguably the most popular librettist of the 18th century. He was famous for the beauty of his poetry, grateful for the singers. *Ma rendi pur content* (tr. 4) is perhaps the most beautiful and it is sung here softly and sensitively. The most immediately catchy is however the lively *La farfalletta* (tr. 2) to an anonymous text.

Schubert's 4 *Canzonas* – two of them also to Metastasio texts – are not very typical for the composer. In fact they are rather anonymous. They are quite modest and were composed for a young singer, Franziska Roner von Ehrenwerth, who belonged to the Schubert circle. She was no virtuoso, but she obviously was more than just an amateur. The fifth song, *Vedi quanto adoro* (tr. 9), is a different matter. The text, again by Metastasio, is from *Didone abbandonata*, a full-length opera libretto from 1724. John Reed supposes that Schubert composed the aria as a calling-card to present

to some opera house, with the possible outcome that he would be employed. It is a dramatic, rather dark aria, which shows that Schubert might have become an opera composer, if he had found the right libretto. Julie Davies sings with great intensity but presses the voice too hard.

This also happens occasionally in the Liszt songs, where her vibrato tends to spread under pressure. But it is expressive! Listen to her deep identification in the third, *I vidi in terra* (tr. 12). Here is communication on a high level, and this is a sign that Julie Davies has the potential to reach the stars.

The concluding song, Richard Wagner's *Les adieux de Marie Stuart*, was composed in Paris in 1840, while he tried to make a living on writing articles and novelettes and also composed songs, hoping they would attract the French. *Les adieux de Marie Stuart* is certainly Wagner at his most turgid.

There are swings and roundabouts here, both musically and vocally, but even the weaker songs have their attraction and Julie Davies at her best is worth the attention of a wide audience.

Göran Forsling

Jonathan DOVE (b. 1959)

In Damascus

Piano Quintet (2009) [21:14]

Out of Time for String Quartet (2001) [17:58]

In Damascus for Tenor and String Quartet (2016) [34:04]

Sacconi Quartet

Mark Padmore (tenor)

Charles Owen (piano)

rec. 2016, All Saints Church, East Finchley, London. DDD

English texts included

SIGNUM CLASSICS SIGCD487 [73:20]

I like Jonathan Dove's music a lot and recently I've had some welcome exposure to it. First came Kitty Whatley's marvellous disc of his songs for mezzo ([review](#)). Unfortunately, I was unable to attend what I've been told was a very fine recital that she gave in July at the Three Choirs Festival when she included a number of the Dove songs. However, the previous evening I was able to enjoy an excellent performance of his choral/orchestral work, *There Was a Child*, also at the Festival ([review](#)). Most of the music by Jonathan Dove that I've heard has been choral or orchestral plus one or two of his operas. I was glad therefore to get the chance to have a serious listen to some of his chamber music.

The earliest work here is *Out of Time*. Julian Grant tells us in his very useful notes that this is the composer's only work to date for 'pure' string quartet. It's cast in six short movements, the last three of which play continuously. Mrs Elizabeth Allsebrook commissioned it in memory of her late husband and Grant comments that the piece "is not a musical portrait, but an evocation of someone with life-enhancing energy and an elegy for his departure." The opening movement is highly propulsive and so when an expansive melodic idea first emerges (1:21) we value the melody all the more. The chordal energy of much of this brief movement put me a little in mind of John Adams' *Shaker Loops*. The second movement has the feel of a nocturne and it's a welcome contrast after the driving music of the preceding movement. The third movement sounds rather like a hoe-down. Its successor is a jig-like creation that evolves into a folk-like episode in which the cello introduces the theme. After a vigorous fifth movement, the concluding section is tranquil and gently elegiac. *Out of Time* is a most interesting piece which the Sacconi Quartet plays very well indeed.

They're joined by pianist Charles Owen for the Piano Quintet, a work cast in three movements. After an arresting opening the first movement is characterised by driving, high-energy music much of which features treble-dominated textures. Twice the music becomes more legato in nature but otherwise Dove's writing is vigorous and highly charged. The central movement, marked *Very spacious*, is the crux of the Quintet: At just over 9 minutes in this performance it accounts for nearly half the duration of the whole work. As Julian Grant says, you can hear an echo of the *Adagietto* from Mahler's Fifth at the start. Essentially there are two elements to the musical argument: one is long, legato lines for the strings; the other consists of bell-like episodes for the piano. Eventually the percussive piano and the legato strings come together, gently at first. After another bell episode, the ensemble coalesces for what Grant terms "a solemn processional". After this the intensity relaxes somewhat and the movement achieves a tranquil close. The finale is full of energy and the clever use of accents and emphases continually spring little surprises. Not for the first time in fast music by Dove I hear something of a kinship – which may simply be my imagination – with John Adams; the kinship, if such it is, concerns rhythmic dexterity and inventiveness. This last movement is extrovert in nature and full of exuberance. The present performance of the Quintet seems to me to be an excellent, incisive one.

In Damascus is very different from the other two works on the disc and not just because it introduces a human voice. The piece was commissioned by the present artists who suggested a Syrian theme. As we read in the booklet, Dove had visited Syria some two decades ago, was made welcome and loved the country. In recent years he's been appalled, as surely we all have been, at the tragedy that has unfolded there during the country's civil – or proxy – war. Searching for texts that could reflect his

feelings about the Syrian tragedy Dove came across *A Black Cloud in a Leaden White Sky*, a piece of prose by the Syrian writer, Ali Safar. The piece is contained in an anthology, *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (Saqi Books, 2014). Dove read, and has set, the words in an English translation by Anne-Marie McManus. He describes Safar's writing as "an eloquent, thoughtful, contained yet vivid account of life in a war-torn country, all the more moving for its restraint." Dove, it seems to me, has echoed Safar's restraint in his music. It's true that there are a few loud, gritty passages for the strings and one or two anguished or angry outbursts for the tenor. For the most part, however, the music is fairly quiet – but suffers no lack of tension thereby – and the singer sings softly, sadly and sometimes tenderly. The plangent, expressive tones of Mark Padmore, who often uses head voice, are ideally suited to this assignment.

Eleven short movements, the sixth of which is instrumental, constitute *In Damascus*. I'm not going to attempt to describe them in detail – it's far better to let the listener make his or her own discovery. What I will say, however, is that there's a bare spareness in the writing that I've not previously encountered in this composer's music. In my experience, he never resorts to over-padded textures in any case but here he seems to have consciously pared his music back to the bone. The words seem to dictate the pace of the music and Dove seems determined to let as little as possible intrude between the listener and what Ali Safar is saying. I was especially moved by the seventh movement, 'Soon, we will be free' where the simplicity of the music and the words really tug at the heartstrings. The chilling message that Safar's words carry here is that soon the Syrian civilians will be dead and "the happy world won't have to listen to our clamour anymore....Soon, mankind, you will have your quiet once more, and we promise we won't disturb you again." The words are devoid of self-pity and Dove's music reinforces that. We've all heard comment about a tragic event fading from the public attention once the TV cameras and the media have moved on; Safar's words similarly that message and do so starkly. From this point onwards *In Damascus* becomes ever sadder until we reach the final section, 'My country, please wait a little longer'. There's a desolate beauty about this final setting. Is there, perhaps, the faintest of hope that one day the agony of the ordinary Syrian people will come to an end and it will be possible to start the process of rebuilding? Safar and Dove provide the merest hint that this may not be an entirely forlorn hope.

What is so moving about *In Damascus* is that it focuses on the sufferings of *ordinary people*. Not once are the rights and wrongs of the Syrian conflict discussed; instead we are reminded that millions of innocent civilians and a once-beautiful country have been caught up in this terrible war. The frightening thing is that if and when the Syrian war does eventually come to an end there'll be another dreadful conflict somewhere else in the world. *In Damascus* is a response to a particular set of awful circumstances but its message surely has a wider application. It is a profoundly unsettling and very moving commentary on human tragedy.

The present performance is magnificent. Mark Padmore's singing is eloquent in the extreme and he sings with great technical and emotional control. The Sacconi Quartet are no less admirable, no less eloquent.

The recorded sound for all three works is very good indeed. All the elements in the different ensembles required for each work are expertly balanced and the sound is pleasingly natural. The booklet is excellent.

I'm not sure that either the Piano Quintet or *Out of Time* has been previously recorded; I suspect not. I'm certain that this is the first recording of *In Damascus*. This disc is an important addition to the discography of Jonathan Dove.

[John Quinn](#)

Gustav MAHLER (1860-1911)

Symphony No. 5 in C sharp minor (1901-1902) [73:00]

Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks/Mariss Jansons
rec. live, March 2016, Philharmonie im Gasteig, Munich

Reviewed as a 16-bit press download

BR KLASSIK 900150 [73:00]

Gustav MAHLER

Symphony No. 5 [75:30]

Minnesota Orchestra/Osmo Vänskä

rec. June 2016, Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis

Reviewed as a stereo 24/96 download from eClassical.com

Pdf booklet included

BIS BIS-2226 SACD [74:57]

Two new Mahler Fifths, one from a conductor with a proven track record in this repertoire, the other not. Two very different orchestras as well, with well-defined sonic signatures and recorded by engineers with impeccable credentials. But, just in case you think you've died and gone to heaven, I must warn you that there are some surprises here, not all of them pleasant.

Mariss Jansons' Mahler is decent, if not stellar, as his Concertgebouw (RCO) readings on both audio and [video](#) tend to demonstrate. Also, having both the RCO and the BRSO at his disposal has allowed him to rerecord some works with both ensembles. [This](#) Suk/Dvořák album is a case in point. Osmo Vänskä has also been able to take a second bite of the cherry, albeit with the Sibelius symphonies; his Lahti box, full of wonder and a powerful sense of discovery, is a must for all Sibelians. I'm much less enthusiastic about his Minnesota remakes – much praised elsewhere – not least for the sleek, rather corporate sound of that orchestra.

The BRSO, with whom Rafael Kubelik recorded his fine Mahler set in the 1960a, continues to impress in this music; indeed, their recent recording of the [First Symphony](#) with Yannick Nézet-Séguin was of my top picks for 2016. But then Mahler has been well-served by other bands/conductors as well: the New York Philharmonic (Bruno Walter and Leonard Bernstein); the RCO (Bernard Haitink); the London Philharmonic (Klaus Tennstedt); the Berliner Philharmoniker and the Lucerne Festival Orchestra (Claudio Abbado); and, of course, the Wiener Philharmoniker (Zubin Mahta, Pierre Boulez and Bernstein).

That's not an exhaustive list, of course, but it's no coincidence that when it comes to Mahler's Fifth those partnerships excel. Walter's classic 1947 recording is mandatory listening, especially in Andrew Rose's splendid remastering for [Pristine](#). Tennstedt was at his best in this symphony – on CD for EMI-Warner and on DVD for [ICA Classics](#) – while Abbado's Berlin and [Lucerne](#) versions are among the most cogent, far-sighted and hard-hitting I know. Then there's Lenny's WP recording for DG, which Brian Wilson declared his benchmark when reviewing the [Vänskä](#). I doubt many would quibble with that.

Let's start with Jansons and the BRSO. I've also listened to a 24/96 download of his earlier RCO recording, available from [eClassical](#). The latter is a little quicker, notably in the *Rondo-Finale* – 15:45 as opposed to 16:20 – but there's not much in it. His BRSO *Trauermarsch* is darker – grittier, even – and I prefer it to the very refined RCO version. It's swings and roundabouts though; for instance, the side drum is more disquieting in the Bavarian recording, but the Dutch one is rather better at conveying weight and amplitude. And if you want *größter Vehemenz* in the second movement, Jansons and the RCO should fit the bill; ditto if you like a nimble, dancing *Scherzo*.

I've heard it said that the Concertgebouw choose who they play well for; true or not, they're at their refulgent and responsive best in the Jansons Fifth (as indeed they are in a barnstorming performance

under [Daniele Gatti](#), recorded as part of the Mahler celebrations in 2010). In both cases the horns are simply glorious, eclipsing the Bavarians at every turn. The same is true of the Amsterdam strings in the *Adagietto*, which have all the glow and purity of line that's missing from the Munich performance. And yes, the RCO's *Rondo-Finale* is tauter and packs a bigger punch, especially in the closing pages.

Neither of Jansons' Mahler Fifts is s must-have, but if I had to choose I'd take the earlier performance over the later one, not least because there's a greater sense of the work's architecture, its nodal points better prepared for and more convincingly executed. Jansons is just more compelling first time around; besides, it's always a pleasure to hear one of the world's great Mahler orchestras at their very best. And, quite apart from the lower resolution of their recording, the Bavarian Radio engineers have done a fine job here; that said, they must yield to their Dutch counterparts in almost every respect.

Now for Vänskä, whose only Mahler recording until now was a Lahti [Das Lied von der Erde](#) from the early 1990s. Given that the acrimonious Minnesota lock-out is past, the time is right for another big project; indeed, Vänskä has extended his contract with the orchestra until 2022. Without wishing to jinx this new cycle I do have reservations about the conductor's credentials in this repertoire, especially when the competition is so fierce. And listening to audio samples – the opening immense, but not in a good way – I began to worry about the album's sonics as well.

As it happens, the genuine article is not nearly as overpowering as I'd feared; also, Vänskä paces and phrases the *Trauermarsch* very well, although he's not as wild as some in those big, despairing outbursts. The range and detail of this recording is astonishing, Mahler's distinctive timbres most beautifully rendered. What really surprises me here are Vänskä's *echt*-Mahlerian rhythms; they're far more supple and spontaneous than either of Jansons' performances. The Finn also finds greater light and shade in this opener – more drama, too – and that's very encouraging.

The second movement is no less appealing, the playing both clean and propulsive. And while Vänskä dwells lovingly on the smallest details he does so without really sacrificing shape or momentum. Quiet passages are very quiet, but they're still perfectly audible. The sheer tactility and presence of this recording, and its plausible balances, puts the listener firmly in the front stalls, those drenching climaxes properly scaled and thrillingly caught. No, Vänskä isn't as excitable as Bernstein or as powerful as Abbado here, but his steady, implacable approach is still pretty compelling. As for the *Scherzo*, it's attractive enough, but Jansons and his Dutch payers are more buoyant – and affectionate – at this juncture.

But it's Vänskä's unforgivably sluggish *Adagietto* – 12:39, as opposed to Jansons' 9:16 in Amsterdam and 8:51 in Munich – that, quite literally, stops this performance in its tracks. Beautiful, yes, but utterly misguided. And despite some fine playing, Vänskä's *Rondo-Finale* strikes me as dull and discursive. Goodness, where has all that energy and promise gone? Perhaps such ruinous misjudgements are what separate merely average Mahlerians from good or great ones. In any event, these final movements do for Vänskä's Mahler Fifth as surely as a stiletto between the ribs. In short, a terrible disappointment after such an auspicious start.

Musically, Jansons and the RCO are the winners here; technically, though, BIS are way out in front.

Dan Morgan

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)

[Violin Concerto](#) No. 2 in E Major, BWV 1042 [16:50]

Partita No.1 in B minor, BWV 1002 - *Sarabande* [3:39]

Georg Philipp TELEMANN (1681-1767)

Sonata for Violin and Harpsichord in A minor [7:59]

Sonata for Violin and Harpsichord in G minor [6:16]

Giuseppe TARTINI (1692-1770)

Sonata for Violin and Harpsichord in B flat major [11:17]

Johann MATTHESON (1681-1764)

Sonata for Violin and Harpsichord in E minor [9:15]

Louis Kaufman (violin)

Bach Chamber Symphony Group/Jacques Rachmilovich

Antoine Geoffroy-Dechaume (harpsichord)

rec. 1945-55

FORGOTTEN RECORDS FR1234 [55:20]

Forgotten Records' reclamation of Louis Kaufman's LP legacy continues at a brisk pace with this latest example of the consummate tonalist's artistry. The repertoire also makes a lot of sense, devoted to composers born between the years 1681 (Telemann) and 1692 (Tartini) by way of Bach, JS. The former two composers also attest to Kaufman's unusual diligence in seeking out old music in archives and in his editorial responsibilities in bringing it to life in performance and on disc.

The first work, however, is Bach's Concerto in E major where he is joined by a long-standing friend and collaborator, Jacques Rachmilovich. Their recording of the Khachaturian Concerto made with the conductor's orchestra in Santa Monica was quite an ear-opener for its time, made just after the end of the War, and it's been transferred to CD. They also recorded the Saint-Saëns No.3 together. The Bach however is a sad disappointment. There's a Gatling gun attack from the lower strings that is positively unpleasant and the speeds in the two Allegros are uncomfortably fast for proper articulation; it's as if Kaufman's fabled tone hasn't enough time to expand before he's harried on to the next phrase, though presumably he was not wholly innocent when it came to the choice of tempi. His own accompanying figures are also over-recorded. In the slow movement his succulent, indeed tremulous approach is more the Kaufman known and loved by posterity but in an era when recordings by such as Busch, Menuhin and Huberman were freely available this was then, and now, a non-starter. The thoughtlessness and indifference of the Bach Chamber Symphony Group is shown up by Kaufman's solo rendition of the Sarabande from the First Partita. The recordings were made in 1945.

Thenceforward things improve appreciably. The Telemann and Tartini sonatas enjoy the accomplishment accompaniment of harpsichordist Antoine Geoffroy-Dechaume, less well-known perhaps than Veyron-Lacroix – at least on disc – and perhaps a more fragile performer but one who lends perceptive support to Kaufman. That said, the tension between his style-conscious playing and Kaufman's old school burnish is certainly ear-titillating and more overtly so, in fact, than the meeting a few years before of Campoli and George Malcolm in Handel sonatas. The 1955 Parisian studio sound is typically dry but Kaufman's tone transcends the limitation in its vivid and ardent singing warmth, rich cantabile and luscious Kreisler-derived slides. This is explicitly encountered in the slow movement of the (second) Telemann sonata and the glamorous lyricism, redolent of Elman and Seidel, of the opening of the (first) Telemann. Kaufman later edited a series of Telemann sonatas which he recorded with harpsichordist Frederick Hammond and they can be found on Music and Arts. The rarely encountered Johann Mattheson sonata is finely played though the third movement doesn't sound much like a Gigue in this reading.

These successful restorations have dealt very well with the vagaries of the original Tempo and Lyrichord LPs and Kaufman collectors will welcome the chance to fill the gaps which this disc offers.

Jonathan Woolf

Previous review: [Stephen Greenbank](#)

Randall THOMPSON (1899-1984)

Symphony No. 2 in E minor [28:51]

Samuel ADAMS (b. 1985)

Drift and Providence [18:59]

Samuel BARBER (1910-1981)

Symphony No. 1, Op. 9 [22:02]

National Orchestral Institute Philharmonic/James Ross

rec. Elsie & Marvin Dekelbourn Concert Hall, The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Centre, University of Maryland, 2016

NAXOS 8.559822 [69:52]

Randall Thompson achieved a degree of eminence in choral music but, in terms of orchestral music, was one of that group of 20th century American composers (notably including Virgil Thomson, Quincy Porter and Walter Piston) who rather stood in the shadows of better-established composers such as Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber and Roy Harris. Listening to his highly approachable Second Symphony I was struck by the many similarities of sound and style that the work exhibits with the 'American' sounding works of Copland – notably the latter's three famous ballets (*Rodeo*, *Billy the Kid* and *Appalachian Spring*). It is, however, surprising to learn that this symphony actually predates the period of Copland's career when the ballets were composed – so Thompson might better be regarded as being at the forefront of a movement than being a mere follower.

The symphony's first movement *Allegro* is an optimistic piece, bright and vibrant, with a playful, character – poles apart from some of the angst-ridden offerings from Europe at the time. It opens with a syncopated fanfare and then settles into a driving theme with suggestions of the later music of Douglas Lilburn. The booklet notes claim that what follows has "...echoes of jazz – the musical style that American composers were quickly assimilating into their more traditional works at the time". Whilst there may be something in this comment, the music of this movement doesn't necessarily sound to me particularly suggestive of jazz or derived from it. It is, for example, a long way from Gershwin. The following *Largo* movement is more American and sounds like film music although, given that it dates from 1931, it is likely that contemporary film music was influenced by it rather than the other way round. Some passages sound like Korngold although that composer was probably unknown to Thompson at the time. Here, however, there *is* a very slight jazz element in that, towards the end of the movement, a horn chord includes a Gershwinesque "blue" note that leads the orchestra into the vigorous and syncopated third movement scherzo (*Vivace*) – which has pre-echoes of Bernard Herrmann. The last movement, *Allegro moderato*, commences with a slow introduction, giving way to an *Allegro* section that is bracketed by two *Vivace* sections. There is a jokey second theme, complete with trombone slides. The second *Vivace* section builds to a noble and exciting coda.

Brief research suggests that at least five alternative recordings of the symphony are available. My own collection includes the one by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra conducted by Neeme Järvi (Chandos) and a quick comparison suggests only marginal differences. Järvi is fractionally faster throughout [26:46 overall] – and this is slightly preferable - but, as far as performance quality goes, honours are about even. Considering that the National Orchestral Institute Philharmonic is effectively a student orchestra, this is a pretty good result for the Naxos disc. The Naxos recording sounds brighter and more forward, if less subtle than the Chandos.

The principal coupling, Barber's First Symphony, was modelled on the Seventh Symphony of Sibelius and that debt is recognizable throughout the work. It is in one condensed, cyclical movement, broken into four sections so that it retains some of the character of a more traditional symphony. The work starts ominously with the timpani underpinning proceedings. The first section (*Allegro ma non troppo*) has three themes which, once heard, tend to lodge in the mind. The driving pulse reminded me of Holst's 'Mars' and of Roussel's Third Symphony but also of something else. It took me a while to realise that it sounded like the finale of Barber's own Violin Concerto. The first theme forms the basis of a second (*Vivace*) section. The augmented second theme provides the basis of the third section, which

starts as an *Andante tranquillo* and leads directly to a noble and uplifting passacaglia final section (with shades of Britten's later Passacaglia from *Peter Grimes*) which revisits all three themes and serves as a recapitulation.

This symphony is really a much more significant work than the Thompson work – although Naxos have given it second billing in this release. It has not wanted for recordings and there are, at least, twelve currently available (three in the form of download only) of which no fewer than four appear on the Naxos label, including the present performance. Previous reviews (e.g. [review](#)) suggest that, amongst these, Järvi and the DSO – again on Chandos – is one of the best. A superficial comparison with the present Naxos disc again shows Järvi's performance as fractionally faster [21:42] but, overall, only marginally different and my comments above about the comparison of the two versions of the Thompson symphony apply equally here.

The filler is a contemporary piece, dating from 2012, by yet another Adams - “a composer of acoustic and electro-acoustic music”. Apparently, Samuel Adams “took recordings of the Pacific Ocean, transformed them digitally and transcribed them for a number of instrumentsto imitate the sound. The result is a work that pushes the orchestra to its sonic limits in both a metaphorical and literal sense”. The work is scored for a large orchestra and it relies on “extended orchestral techniques”, together with the composer providing electronic processing on his laptop(!). This description need not worry those who have little time for contemporary music. The piece is not atonal and, whilst there are no actual tunes, one can occasionally recognise the emergence of a pseudo-theme. The electronic elements are not particularly evident. The work doesn't go anywhere much but there is a suggestion of gradual development in the climaxes and occasional silences suggest the existence of sections. As is so often the case with such music it goes on for too long and parts of it are like watching paint dry (albeit interesting paint). It ends suddenly and for no apparent reason. I can't help thinking that it would have been better if the composer had tried to write music rather than attempting purely to recreate sound. At any rate, this offering provides a perfectly acceptable coupling – here given what sounds to be a fine performance in what is probably its first recording.

Booklet notes are both extensive and readable and, unusually for Naxos, they provide a list of all the members of the orchestra.

Overall, then, if the coupling appeals, this is an enjoyable disc – very recommendable at bargain price.

Bob Stevenson

RECORDING OF THE MONTH

John SHEPPARD (c.1515–1558)

***Media vita* and other sacred music**

Media vita [29:58]

including *Nunc Dimittis* [1:46]

Gaude, gaude, gaude Maria [14:49]

Missa Cantate [34:58]

Westminster Cathedral Choir/Martin Baker

rec. All Hallows, Gospel Oak, London, 14-15 July 2016. DDD.

Texts and translations included

Reviewed as 24/96 download with pdf and epub booklets from hyperion-records.co.uk.

HYPERION CDA68187 [79:45]

Most of the great English composers of the Sixteenth Century had to work in troubled times. John Sheppard may have had slightly fewer changes of religious gear to contend with than Thomas Tallis, since he died on the eve of Elizabeth I's accession which brought the final shift, but he seems to have started composing around 1534, the traumatic year of Henry VIII's break with Rome. Most of his music which has been preserved consists of Latin settings from the reigns of Henry VIII and Mary I, with a very few English examples from the brief reign of the ultra-protestant Edward VI.

Ironically most of his extant music was copied in the reign of the moderate Protestant Elizabeth I when it would no longer have had liturgical significance. It may well, however, have been sung after Mattins or Evensong 'in Quires and places where they sing' where Latin was 'understood of the people', such as Christ Church, Oxford, where it is preserved in the 'Baldwin Partbooks', five extant of an original set of six.

For a comparison of Sheppard's style in Latin and English, one example of each is included on a recording from Westminster Abbey Choir directed by James O'Donnell (CDA67704 – [review](#)). Though it's entitled *Mary and Elizabeth at Westminster Abbey*, I rather think that the Sheppard settings of the evening canticles on that album date not from the reign of the latter but from a period even before the first English Prayer Book of 1549 when English was being used experimentally in the liturgy. Whatever the case, the more elaborate style on that CD of *Libera nos, salva nos I* offers a striking contrast with the English *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*. Which is not to deny that the latter has an appeal of its own, similar to the English-texted works of Tallis and Byrd.

The CD from which I reviewed that recording having disappeared at the back of the cupboard – sadly the fate of many of my CDs – I was pleased to be able to make its acquaintance again and enjoy it via a lossless download with booklet from hyperion-records.co.uk.

Contrapuntus, directed by Oliver Reed, have recently recorded for Signum a selection from the Baldwin partbooks and Sheppard's *Media Vita* closes and gives its name to *In the Midst of Life* (SIGCD408 – [review](#)). It's the antiphon to the compline canticle *Nunc Dimittis* for the latter part of Lent and it's performed there and on the new Hyperion together with that canticle. The text was raided by Archbishop Cranmer and expanded, appropriately, as one of the opening sentences for funerals.

In reviewing the Signum I compared recordings by The Tallis Scholars (Gimell - see below), The Sixteen (Coro COR16077), Stile Antico (Harmonia Mundi) and the Gabrieli Consort (DG, download only). Of these Stile Antico on an all-Sheppard recording (*Media Vita*) take the music most slowly, at 25:32 and I thought that appropriate for the nature of the words. Westminster Cathedral Choir give the music even more time to breathe and while I certainly don't intend to jettison any of the other very distinguished recordings which I have mentioned, theirs seems to me the best approach of all, with no sense that the performance is dragging.

Not least of the virtues of this new recording is that whereas all the others use professional female voices on the top line the new recording employs boy trebles who sing with a security of tone to rival – and even excel – those of Westminster Abbey down the road, King’s College, Cambridge, and Christ Church, Oxford.

Gaude, gaude, Maria also has a number of distinguished recordings to its credit including from The Sixteen (*Golden Age of English Polyphony*, with Mundy, Taverner, etc., Hyperion CDS44401/10, 10 CDs budget price – [Bargain of the Month](#) – also available separately as downloads from hyperion-records.co.uk), Christ Church, Oxford (Nimbus NI7096 – [review](#)) and St John’s, Cambridge (Chandos CHSA0401 – [review](#)). I had some reservations about the Nimbus, which in any case is tied up in a Christmas collection, but liked the Chandos, especially for the very fine 24-bit sound. Martin Baker and his Westminster Cathedral choir out-sing both and the Hyperion, in 24-bit format, also sounds excellent.

Sheppard’s *Missa Cantate* has also received several distinguished recordings, including from the Choir of St Mary’s Cathedral, Edinburgh (Delphian DCD34123: Recording of the Month – [review](#) – [review](#)) and The Sixteen (*Golden Age*, see above). Once again, however, the new recording is at least the equal of these very fine alternatives.

The elephant in the room in all this comes from The Tallis Scholars and Peter Phillips, whose recording of *In media vita* I mentioned in passing. Their recording comes on several highly recommendable collections of Sheppard’s music on Gimell. Normally given to measured tempi in Tudor music, they buck the trend here by making as strong a case for a fast 21:33 as Westminster Cathedral choir do for 29:58.

I shall not be abandoning The Tallis Scholars’ *In media vita*, especially as the various formats on which it appears also contain several other very valuable performances: on a single full-price CD with seven other works, but better value on a 2-for-1 set containing the same music plus his *Western Wynde* Mass and music by Thomas Tallis and Robert White (CDGIM210 – [Bargain of the Month](#)) or *In media vita* alone with a tempting selection from the Scholars’ distinguished catalogue on another 2-for-1 *The Essential Tallis Scholars* (GDGIM201 – [review](#) – [Tallis Scholars at 30](#)). Both of those can be obtained for £7.99 as lossless downloads with pdf booklets from Hyperion – [here](#) and [here](#).

The Scholars would be my first choice among the many distinguished recordings from mixed-voice choirs – all that I have mentioned do justice to Sheppard’s music – but there’s something very special about hearing the new Westminster Cathedral recording which makes it my first choice – especially as The Tallis Scholars have not (yet) recorded *Missa Cantate*.

Whichever option you choose, if you like Tudor music but have not yet become properly acquainted with that of John Sheppard, you really should do so. The new Hyperion is one of the best ways to begin that acquaintance – or to renew it.

Brian Wilson