Phil's Classical Reviews

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Bach: Goldberg Variations, BWV 988 Burkard Schliessmann, pianist (Divine Art)

If we didn't know better, we might have imagined that Johan Sebastian Bach wrote his great Goldberg Variations with the foreknowledge that it would be performed several centuries later on by an artist with the temperament and patience of Burkard Schliessmann. Certainly, our German contemporary comes well equipped for the task, being a dedicated musical scholar as well as possessing the mature keyboard technique needed for the Goldbergs. As I remarked of this artist some time ago, he is the last sort of pianist you would expect to just play the notes as written, and without comment. That is important because Bach's approach to the Variations, while exhaustive, was not perfectly intuitive.

Nor was it intended to be. As he did in his Well-Tempered Klavier, Bach was working from a theory of harmony that was well in advance of the music of his day, with clear guideposts as to what the future held in store. The Goldbergs consist of thirty variations on an Aria da capo that is essentially a slow Sarabande. It is an emotionally moving, highly ornamented melody in three-quarter time with a descending arpeggio midway through that always gives me goose bumps, as often as I've heard it. These variations are also unusual in that they are built on the bass line of the aria, rather than its melody, a procedure that yields high dividends harmonically.



Liszt: Rhapsodies Nos 6, 13; Transcendental Etudes; Schubert transcriptions- Sophia Agronovich, pianist (Centaur)

Sophia Agronovich, a native of Ukraine, has pursued a very active career in a relatively short period, with engagements in the US, Canada, Europe and Israel, The present release of rhapsodies, etudes, and transcriptions by Franz Liszt is her tenth album beginning in 2010, and her seventh for Centaur. More than merely being prolific, she's very good, too. In particular, this Liszt album begins to answer the nagging question of what, specifically, made this composer's piano works and the technique needed to encompass them Was this merely "transcendental"? promotional buzz, or does the term have real meaning?

Unfortunately, Liszt (1811-1886) died quite a few years before quality sound recording was available to him, so we will never know for sure just what was uniquely wonderful about how he played his piano works, though we have clues from recordings by his pupils. The way Agronovich "takes it big" in her present Liszt recital may begin to provide some real answers.

Agronovich's performance style, which *Audiophile* described as "interpretation that dares to be different," is evident from the very beginning of the present album in her performances of Hungarian Rhapsodies Nos. 6 in D-flat Major and 13 in A Minor. The opening of the former is both quiet and rhapsodic. The excitement picks up as an



Schubert: "Unfinished' and "Great C Major" Symphonies – René Jacobs conducts B'Rock Orchestra (Pentatone)

René Jacobs and his B'Rock Orchestra of Ghent, Belgium are heard from in the last installment of a well-received cycle of the Symphonies of Franz Schubert, the "Unfinished" in B Minor and the "Great" Symphony in C Major. Both performances are spacious, well-paced, and conform pretty much to our expectations in terms of interpretation. Jacobs shows a nice feeling for tempo, balance and movement in both works, and so there is little to ruffle the feathers of purists. Accounts of both symphonies are rendered affectionately, with moments of fire in all the right places.

One might carp at B'Rock's use of period instruments instead of modern ones, but the sound they produce is transparent and the climaxes in both symphonies come across as well as we might desire. Both conductor and orchestra share a nice feeling for the textures of each of these great works.

The only real opening to intrude a note of controversy here is in the inclusion of two short selections from Schubert's *Mein Traum*, an autobiographical writing that deals with his mother's death and his strained relatrionship, later reconciled, with his father. (This is not to be confused with a poem of the same title by Heinrich Heine that Schubert set as one of his best songs.) Jacobs argues plausibly, though not to my complete satisfaction, that Schubert put

The variations themselves occur in groups of three, with the third being an imposing canon in which the melody in one hand is imitated by the other in a succession of ever-increasing intervals, from a canon at the unison (Var. 3) to a canon at the ninth (Var. 27). Of particular interest is the way the variations in the second position in each group of three (Nos. 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, 26, and 29) may be taken to constitute what Baroque scholar Ralph Kirkpatrick described as "arabesques." Performing them requires feats of prestidigitation, involving much handcrossing and considerable freedom and flexibility of arms, hands, and fingers.

Starting off with a stately French Ouverture in dotted rhythms, there is a lot of musical treasure to be absorbed in the Goldberg Variations in terms of harmonic theory, technical challenges for the performer and sheer auditory pleasure for the listener. The latter may rightly sense there is a compeling drama unfolding here, without knowing exaxctly how or why. We leave that to a skilled interpretive artist of the calibre of Burkard Schiessann. Suffice it to say these variations never fail to intrigue, in many ways.

For many, the emotional deep point of the Goldbergs will be Variation 25, which famed harpsichordist Wanda Landowska described as the "black pearl" of the set. Its message of solace and consolation for a weary world is as much in need as ever in our time. Another is the repeat of the Aria da capo at the very end, a moment that always bring a lump to my throat. As Schliessmann rightly surmises, the notes are the same as we heard at the beginning, but there's a difference. They are sadder, softer, wiser. We feel we have been on a long journey.

introspective mood gives way to alternating fast and slow sections, emphasized by the big bass response in Agronovich's playing.

The A Minor Rhapsody features strong, vibrant chords at the slow, passionate opening, and then the music builds gradually in tempo and feeling, with a pulse-quickening transition to the final section that will blow you away!

There follow three Liszt transcriptions of popular lieder by Franz Schubert. First, Ständchen (Serenade), a personal favorite of mine, in which a hauntingly beautiful melody is heard in various guises, building to a brief climax at the end. Then follows Der Erlkönig (The Fairy King) to a text involving a doomed race against death and the supernatural, expressed in ominous. heavily-laden chords set against poignant. pleading measures, and a lyrical inner section. It all culminates in a pregnant pause and then a very decisive finish, corresponding to the words of the song, "Das kind war tot" (The child was dead). Finally, we have a happier song transcription for relief: Die Forelle (The Trout), with its lilting, rippling measures making a real splash (pun intended) in contrast to more incisive phrasing in the second section.

We conclude with two Transcendantal Etudes. First No. 9, *Ricordanza* (Italian for "Rememberance") enchants us with its rippling figurations. Then No. 4, *Mazeppa*, makes a lasting impression, concluding the program with surging, pent-up emotions, a big, actually frightening, keyboard sound and urgent galloping measures, falling silent at the very end, all of this recalling the martyrdom on horseback of Mazeppa, the Cossack hero of the title.

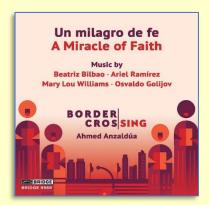
At a timing of 50:50, the album may seem a little short-measure, but then you will probably want to encore it immediately!

aside the dream-inspired "Unfinished" Symphony owing to the impasse in his relationship with his father, and that the Great C Major Symphony, with its sublime dimensions and stirring emotions that rise to the surface from time to time, served as the personal liberation for Schubert.

That is a plausible reason why the B-Minor Symphony remained unfinished, although it might just as likely have been overcome by events, together with a number of unfinished sonatas, quartets, and projects in other genres. The culprit was Schubert's over-stressed work life (which may in fact have contributed to his early demise at 31 years of age).

At any rate, I have always found the "Unfinished" B-Minor Symphony to be one of the most soul-satisfying of all Schubert's major works because of the way the second movement seems to offer solace and consolation for the inflamed and eversmoldering emotions unleashed in the first. The performance by Jacobs and the B'Rock Orchestra does not fail to meet our expectations in that regard.

The "Great" C Major (so-called because Schubert earlier wrote a shorter and less-imposing symphony in the same key) is another matter. I don't feel that anyone will ever come up with a perfectly satisfying account of this massive work (61 minutes in the present performance) although Jacobs' judicious pacing makes it more palatable than many that I have heard, and the climaxes ring out with a real feeling of rightness.



Un milagro de fe, A Miracle of Faith Ahmed Anzaldúa directs Border CrosSing (Bridge Records)

Un milagro de fe (A Miracle of Faith) marks an auspicious debut by the choral ensemble Border CrosSing under its Mexican-Egyptian director Ahmed Anzaldúa. The association-laden name "Border Crossing" is significant in more ways than one. This album crosses national and ethnic borders with an immediate appeal, supported by energizing rhythms and vivid vocal timbres.

More than that, it is based on a tradition that enshrines the soul of oppressed native peoples in the Americas following the Spanish conquest. It expresses a vivid, sometimes painful, eloquence arising from that experience. It is music embodying the need for transcendence, reaching out across cultural borders. That spirit is not lost in realizations by composers of our own time, as brought to life again by a unique choral organization with its home base in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. There, Border CrosSing is active in reaching out to a diverse audience through its multi-lingual concert series, educational programs in public schools, and collaborations with major musical organizations in the area.

The program opens with *Fiesta de San Juan* by Beatriz Bilbao, exciting, visceral music combining sensuous choral textures, bold and passionate, with a bewildering variety of percussive sounds and high-profile rhythms that can be positively deafening if you're not prepared for them. It is followed by music that reveals the influence of this boldly compelling music of the people on other choral works attesting to their faith. First, we have Ariel Ramirez's Misa Criolla, an utterly timeless work made famous in a 1988 recording by José Carreras. Then we are given Mary Lou Williams' *St. Martin de Porres*, celebrating a freed African slave who became a saint with a message of healing for all people, and two selections from Osvaldo Golijov's *La Pasión según San Marcos* (The Passion according to Saint Mark): *Eucaristia* (Eucharist, the commemoration of The Last Supper) and *Demos gracias al Señor* (Let us give thanks to the Lord).

All these works combine rich, persuasive choral sounds and vocal solos that either leap out with an urgency to be heard or appeal with to you with soft persuasion. The percussive backdrop from a variety of instruments, including the *bombo criollo*, a family of Latin American drums, held against the body or on a stand. Hand-struck drums with a sound like soft heartbeats add to a rich and compelling mix, reaching out, as I've said, well beyond cultural borders.



Summer Night Concert 2022 - The Vienna Philharmonic with Andris Nelsons and Gautier Capuçon (Sony Classical)

Conductor Andris Nelsons, a native of Riga, Latvia, and Gautier Capuçon, a cellist from Chambéry, France, have been associated with the Vienna Philharmonic since 2010 and 2015 respectively. Both make auspicious debuts in a Vienna tradition, the annual Summer Night Concert (Sommernachts Konzert), held on the grounds of the Schönbrunn Palace Park.

This year's program is a curious mixture of very serious music (Disc 1) and breezy popular classics that we all know and love (Disc 2). We begin with Beethoven's Lenore 3 Overture, a work of considerable emotional and dynamic range that gives the orchestra a good workout and tests the limits of recording in the acoustic environment of the glass-enclosed amphitheater shown on the album cover. Andris Nelsons paces this work with consummate skill, holding back until the final dash to the finish, thus making its thrilling conclusion all the more effective. (We have no doubt that the hero of the opera arrives in the nick of time!)

On Disc 1 we also have three works by neglected or contemporary composers: "Separation Waltz" by Ukrainian composer Mykola Lysenko (1842-1912), a very moody Tango by Latvian composer Arturs Maskats (b.1957), and The High Pass, an exalted, uplifting, and deeply passionate work for cello and orchestra by another Ukrainian, Myroslav Skoryk (1938-2020) that gives Capuçon a good opportunity to show his range and style. Capuçon also impresses in Camille Saint-Saëns' great Cello Concerto No. 1, Op. 33. (Curiously, the press material I was sent neglected to list the composer's name, but his familiar fingerprints are all over the score!)

The second half of any good summer pops concert should send the audience home in good spirits, and this concert does not fail. We Are given Rossini's scintillating overture to *La Gazza Ladra* (The Thieving Magpie), Georges Enescu's unfailingly infectious Roumanian Rhapsody No.1, Bedrich Smetana's folk-flavored Overture to the Bartered Bride, Antonin Dvorak's Slavonic Dance in E Minor, Op. 72, and the waltz *Wiener Blut* (Vienna Blood or Viennese Spirit) by Johann Strauss II. Not a bad collection of tunes for summer concertgoers to carry home in their heads!



Brahms + Berg: Violin Concertos
Christian Tetzlaff, violin; Robin Ticciati conducts Deutsches
Symphonie-Orchester Berlin (Ondine)

For violinist Christian Tetzlaff, a native of Hamburg who now resides in Berlin, the present pairing of concertos by Johannes Brahms and Alban Berg is a crowning moment in a distiguished career. As Tetzlaff sees it, a seemingly incongrous pairing of both concertos on the same album actually makes more sense than we might have thought. "Both works," he maintains, "concern existential human states of being."

The connection between the two concertos, for Tetzlaff, lies in the problem of *pain*. For this artist, the Brahms concerto "dares to address very dangerous, abysmal and profound states of the soul.... An enormous contrast between ecstasy and total lonely isolation is in evidence." The prevailing moods are so powerful, they reveal the advantage of the compact disc over a live concert, as any violinist might experience extreme fatigue from attempting both the Brahms and the Berg concertos on the same evening.

Brahms' Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 77 is easily the better-known and more popular of the two for its sheer romantic-era loveliness. The present richly nuanced account by Tetzlaff and the Deutsches SO of Berlin under Robin Ticciati plays to its strengths while striking an ideal balance between soloist and orchestra. A gorgeous cadenza and decisive finish distinguish an opening movement of unusual length (20:38 out of the total duration of 35:53) that is so carefully paced that our attention never flags.

The justly famous Adagio movement features the solo violin heard over a tastefully discrete backdrop created by bassoon, horn, and other instruments. The moment when the violin breaks into a heartbreakingly lovely solo is one of the great moments in the entire literature, and Tetzlaff realizes it with consummate skill. The finale, *Allegro giocoso ma non troppo vivace*, is characterized by a take-no-prisoners mood at the very opening, a hearty orchestral sound that challenges but does not overwhelm the soloist, and a section in march tempo near the very end. .A careful balance of forces and a beautifully damasked overall texture pay superb dividends in this movement.

This was my first acquaintance with Alban Berg's 1935 Violin Concerto, which exhibits both a lightening of texture and a cheerless mood in comparison with the Brahms. Berg's freer use of 12-tone technique than we typically find in his mentor Arnold



Tod, Trauer, Trost (Death, Sorrow, Consolation) – Elena Margolina, pianist; Boris Hait, speaker (Ars Produktion)

Tod, Trauer, Trost (Death, Sorrow, Consolation) is an album with a compelling reason for existance. Pianist Elena Margolina and speaker Boris Hait, the artists heard in this program, are both natives of Lviv, Ukraine, a city just 70 kilometers from the Polish border whose location in the western part of the country has not spared it from occasional Russian missile attacks, to say nothing of a daily influx of refugees from the areas hardest hit by Putin's unprovoked war of aggression. The sorrow occasioned by the deaths of those dear to us is a universal human experience, but it is felt most keenly and immediately in a period of war. For war is most clearly perceived then as a time of darkness and a disease of the human soul.

The present program contains Hait's intelligent readings of poetry and excerpts from various literary texts, supported by Margolina's sensitive performances of piano pieces from Bach and Mozart to the present day. They are interpersed with Hait's readings or else heard softly underneath them as a perfect synthesis of lierature and music. All in the service of the underlying message of Death, Sorrow, and Consolation.

The literary texts, mostly in German with several exceptions in Hait's native Ukrainian, are exceptionally well chosen, starting with Vladimir Nabokov's *Die Wiege schaukelt über einem Abgrund aus* (The cradle swings out over an abyss), followed by the Alessandro Marcello / J. S. Bach Adagio from the Oboe Concerto, BWV 974. We later hear Margolina playing Alexander Siloti's arrangement of Bach's Andante from the Violin Sonata, BWV 1003, and the Sarabande from his French Suite, BWV 812, heard in support of Rainer Maria Rilke's poignant lyric poem *Herbst* (Autumn).

Later on, we hear a dramatic reading of an excerpt from Leo Tolstoy's great story, The Death of Ivan Ilyitch, and then Mikhail Glinka's Nocturne, *La Separation* in surprisingly close proximity to a meditation over a grave from the comic masterwork Tales of Baron von Münchhausen. Further on, we hear an excerpt (in German) from the French children's classic The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wenn Du bei Nacht in den Himmel schaust* (When you look at the sky at night. it will be as if all the stars are laughing because I live on one of them).

Schoenberg pays off in terms of more accessible music, even in a work marked, as this one is, by deep sadness.

The opening movement is terse, poignant, with soloist and orchestra crowding each other, until the violin develops its own space and unique voice. And what a voice that is, undercut by tragedy. We might have expected as much of this composer who served 1915-1918 in the army of Austira-Hungary in a war that wrought devastation on a whole generation of European youth.

The present work was in fact dedicated "to the Memory of an Angel," the 18-year old daughter of Alma Mahler and Walter Gropius, a fact which deepens the mood of quiet, pensive grieving in the opening movement, giving way in the second to probing, conflict-laden emotions, as powerful as in a symphony. The work ends in the thoughtful interaction of soloist and orchestra and a mood of profound world-weartiness. We have been given a great performance of a work that needs to be heard more often.

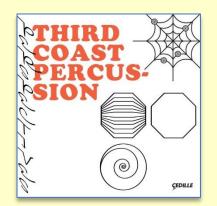
Other music selections, performed with delicacy and breadth of feeling by Margolina, include Christoph Willibald Gluck's Melody from *Orpheus und Eurydike* (also known as "Dance of the Blesssed Spirits"), the Bach / Siloti Praeludium from BWV 855a and his immortal Air from Orchestral Suite No. 3, BWV 1068, Frédéric Chopin's misty Nocturne Op.15, No.2, and Mozart's Adagio from the Piano Sonata, K332. All serve to enhance and deepen the significance of a literary program dealing with the human experience of loss, sorrow, and consolation.



"Florence Price, Virtuoso and Poet" – Alan Morrison, organist, Schweitzer Memorial Organ, Spivey Hall (ACA Digital)

On the Albert Schweitzer Memorial Organ at Spivey Hall on the campus of Clayton State University in Morrow, Georgia, acclaimed organist Alan Morrison gives us an eloquent and long overdue tribute to Florence Price, an all-but forgotten figure in American music, Born in 1887 in Little Rock, Arkansas and educated at the New England Conservatory of Music, Price moved to Chicago, where she was part of the seething musical ferment (which is still at high tide today) from 1927 until her death in 1953. She wrote music in all genres and is noted for being the first African-American woman to have a composition played by a major symphony orchestra.

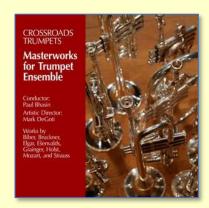
Price is credited with writing some 300 works of music (and counting: a number of her manuscripts were discovered in her abandoned summer home as recently as 2009). She was not only prolific, she was good, too. It is therefore timely that as



"Perspectives" - Danny Elfman, Philip Glass, Jlin, Flutronix & Third Coast Percussion (Cedille)

Third Coast Percussion, an ensemble whose members are Sean Connors, Robert Dillon, Peter Martin and David Skidmore, has done it again! I was high on their previous Cedille release "Archetypes" with Sergio and Clarice Assad (*Phil's Reviews*, Summer 2021). But this new album "Perspectives" takes us even further into a world where the guys in the percussion have a life and a vibrant repertoire all their own, and not just as a section of an orchestra.

And exciting that repertoire is, too, as this new release bears out. We begin with two leading composers of the new music of our day, Danny Elfman and Philip Glass. Elfman's Percussion Quartet meshes pure bell-like tones, dynamics and rhythms, just varied enough to escape monotony and keep us constantly engaged with the music. Movement 3 is notable for its syncopated rythms, while 4 employs a



"Masterworks for Trumpet Ensemble,"
Music of four centuries presented by
Crossroads Trumpets
(ACA Digital)

"Masterworks for Trumpet Ensemble" is the title of a lovingly executed program by an ensemble composed of eight trumpets plus organ, percussion and tympani. They come from various backgrounds: opera and ballet orchestras, freelance musicians, and university professors. Paul Bhasin directs the present performance by the ensemble who take their name from their meeting place at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, in the state frequently referred to with affection as "The Crossroads of America."

There's a lot of variety in the arrangements heard in this program. Not all of these pieces are rousing fanfares, as you might have expected. Quite a few of the items are quiet, contemplative pieces calling for exceptionally smooth blends in the inspired arrangements, mostly by trumpeter and artistic director Mark DeGoti. The program begins with the Overture to *La Clemenza di*

important a figure in the American Guild of Organists as Alan Morrison should step in to champion her music.

The program Morrison presents here covers her range as a composer for organ. The selections include a lithe, intriguing sonata in all but name in 4 movements: Introduction: Maestoso, Andantino, and Finale: Allegro. We are also given some stand-alone movements and character pieces: Adoration, Cantilena, Allegretto, Festal March. Offertory. Little Pastorale. Hour Glass, and Passacaglia & Fugue, the last-named showing that she was no stranger to received forms going as far back as the Baroque. And she used all the registration available to her with a freedom and imagination we find reminiscent of the French Organ School of the 19th-20th Centuries.

She also had a little something extra in her organ music that gives it a particularly attractive quality: *rhythm*. As she herself explained it, rhythm was part of her heritage: "In all types of Negro music, rhythm is of preeminent importance... All phases of truly Negro activity—whether work or play, singing or praying—are more than apt to take on a rhythmic quality." It is so naturally a part of her organ music that it makes its presence felt without calling undue attention to itself. Alan Morrison is not slow to recognize this trait in an all-butforgotten composer whose time has come at last.

steady beat utilizing sounds of wood blocks, hand drums, chimes and gongs.

Metamorphosis No. 1 by Glass takes us on another jaunt into the brave new world of percussion with its quiet, mysterious opening and its employment of what seem to be tubular bells, marimba, and hand drums, plus changes in dynamics to create a space all its own in which a mood of slow, quiet mystery that descends on us about 7:00 does not dispell, but rather adds to, the essential tension in the music.

Up next is "Jlin," the name by which composer and producer Jerrilynn Patton goes professionally. Her work Perspective is in seven movements, entitled Paradigm, Obscure, Derivative, Fourth Perspective, Dissonance, Duality, and Embryo. It provides the crew of TCP with a real workout in the way of engaging rhythms and backbeats, cascading phrases, slow tones and wailing sounds. The last movement, Embryo, is fast and decisive.

The final work on the program meshes the talents of Third Coast Percussion, with those of Flutronix, comprised of flutists Nathalie Joachim and Allison Loggins-Hull in Rubix, a really inspired "jam session" in three parts entitled Go, Play, and Still. When these guys and gals get together, they are truly agents provocateurs for a new type of repertoire that frees them from the constraint of just being functionaries in a symphony orchestra. The first movement is frenetic, with rasping percussive effects to set it off. The second features low, deep. slowly drawn flute sounds set against a variety of pure tones, chimes, and rousing riffs. The third combines mysterious, howling, dissonant voices, soft percussive sounds, trills, and strange desolate outcries, conjuring up a sense of mystery based on a wailing from out of the depths.

In all these works, there's a lot going on in the way of exciting and intriguing music. As a plus, all these recordings happen to be world premieres. *Tito* (The Mercy of Titus) by Mozart. Despite the fact that the opera itself is a serious one (*opera seria*) the overture appears to be in Mozart's best *opera buffa* (comic opera) style. It makes for a good curtain-raiser to open the program.

It is followed by a solemn *Os Justi* (Mouth of the Righteous), the setting of a sacred motet by Anton Bruckner based on an old Gregorian introit. Then we have a jaunty March from the Second Suite in F Major by Gustav Holst, a rather misty, atmospheric Colonial Song by Percy Grainger, and an intricate Sonata à 7 (i.e., in seven parts) by the German Baroque composer Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber.

Next,we are given Overture to *The Magic Flute* by Mozart. Like the Overture to *La Clemenza di Tito*, it was written in the very last year of Mozart's tragically shortened life, though you might not guess that fact from the way fresh, intriguing musical ideas seem to pop out at you at every turn. Mark DeGoti gives us a particularly inspired arrangement of this item in the program. It is followed by a setting of Stars by our contemporary Latvian composer Ēriks Ešenvalds (b.1977), which is described by its author as celebrating "a state of permanent ecstasy."

The two last numbers on the program are heard in arrangements by Kyle Lane, freelance trumpeter and general manager of the Charleston Symphony Orchestra. First, we are given "Nimrod," from the Enigma Variations by Sir Edward Elgar, a tribute to a friend who was addicted to the pleasures of the hunt. A piece of quiet, smoldering beauty, it is sometimes played in Britain at funerals and other memorial occasions. In keeping with the spirit of ever-fresh variety, the program closes with Vienna Philharmonic Fanfare by Richard Strauss. It has been a short enough program that die-hard trumpet enthusiasts will want to play it all again as an encore.