

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

Winter, 2024



Sonatas for Violin and Piano. Beethoven: No. 9 in A-flat Major; Prokofiev: No. 2 in D Minor, Op. 94a Martha Argerich, piano; Maria Solozobova, violin (Antes Edition)

Argentine-born pianist Martha Argerich has been a headliner and has received the accolades of audiences and critics for so many years she needs no introduction. She teams here with Maria Solozobova, a Moscow native who lives in Switzerland, in a live Prokofiev/Beethoven recital that will knock your socks off. The performances of both ladies are so infused with demon execution and insightful point-making, speaking to us with one mind and voice, that this recording must qualify as an early front-runner for end of the year honors.

The Prokofiev is up first, in the form of his Violin Sonata No. 2 in D Minor, Op. 94a of 1943, a transformation at the behest of no less a figure than violinist David Oistrakh of the composer's recently completed flute sonata. Perhaps its origin may serve to account for the wealth of lovely, innocent-sounding melodies we encounter in this work, beginning with a deliciously sad melody in the opening Moderato, followed by music in a mood of conflict and agitation, making for a perfect contrast.

The second movement is a Scherzo whose spikey textures and alert, breakneck tempo and verve are effectively contrasted by a poignant interlude. The third, Andante, is slow, melancholy, reflective but not sad, a distinction that Argerich and Solozobova are at pains to make clear to us.



"Diaries Schumann," Kinderszenen, Davidsbündlertänze  
Tiffany Poon, pianist  
(Pentatone)

Tiffany Poon (b.Hong Kong, 1999) began her piano studies at age four and moved at the age of nine to New York City, where she continued her studies at the Juilliard School Pre-College Division and later the Columbia University / Juilliard School Exchange Program where her teachers were Amanuel Ax and Joseph Kalichstein. With all her education, she has reached her maturity with a mind of her own in the way she approaches the classical masters, which compliments her technical proficiency as a pianist. The present Pentatone Music release entitled "Diaries Schumann" reflects these traits very clearly.

The all-Robert Schumann program opens with the ever-popular *Kinderszenen*, Scenes from childhood. The first piece, "From Distant Lands and Peoples" (*Von fremden Ländern und Menschen*) opens quietly and introspectively, with our artist cultivating a true pianissimo. The next captures the awe with which a young child attends to a "Curious Story," while the third, *Hasche-Mann* seems to depict a (very) fast "tag" game that we would call "Blind Man's Buff." The fourth, *Bittendes Kind*, is a pleading child, perhaps begging for a sweet treat.

The vicissitudes of childhood continue with *Glückes genug* (Lucky Enough) whose mirthful mood leads us to imagine the child's pleading has been successful. The up-tempo mood of *Wichtige Begebenheit* signifies an important event, perhaps



Chopin: Preludes, Op 28 + Gabunia:  
Children's Pieces for Adults  
Ketevan Sepashvili pianist  
(Ars Produktion)

Ketevan Sepashvili, native of the Republic of Georgia, shows off her remarkable keyboard prowess as well as interpretive insight in "Moments." The album is a pairing of two diverse works that may have more in common that we might realize: Chopin's 24 Preludes for Piano, Op. 28, and Children's Pieces for Adults by her fellow countryman Nodar Gabunia (b. Tblisi, 1933, d. Amsterdam, 2000).

The Gabunia, up first in the program, evoking the world of childhood in the tradition of composers from Schumann to Bartok, consists of eight character pieces that place as much emphasis on the artist's interpretive ability as they do on her technique. The first, *Zanzalakiani Ghighini*, imagines the child awakening to the sound of bells, sophisticated technique used to evoke the world of childlike innocence. *Mraschi* (March), the second, is highly rhythmical and syncopated. The third, *Satschidau* (In a Ring) is characterized by fast, tumbling rhythms.

*Pastorali* (Pastoral) is delicate and songlike, with a quick dancelike middle section. *Datscherobana* (a game of "catch" or "tag") is sparkling and highly rhythmic, while *Serenada* (serenade) is marked by its broad rhythms and mysterious final notes. *Tschoriknebi*, concluding decisively, pictures a pair of gossiping old women. And *Walsi* (Waltz) ends the cycle on a quiet, questioning note.

<p>The finale, taken attacca, lives up to its marking of Allegro con brio, striding in with a wonderful pick-up like a rousing Russian folk dance. Later, a flavorful drone is added to give more flavor to the proceedings, in which powerfully accented measures make for a rousing finish.</p> <p>Beethoven's Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 47, invites, and receives, the kind of close partnership that Argerich and Solozobova invest in this moody performance. A big, zestful pick-up after a brief, sighing intro makes for a very effective contrast in the opening Adagio sostenuto. The next movement, Andante, is a delicious set of variations in moods of sadness and elation, with gracious, slow, and delicately poignant bell-like accents. The vigorous finale, a Presto, begins with a dramatic cadence in the piano that sounds an unmistakable call to adventure, tempered by a quiet interlude that adds flavor to a movement in which sadness and restraint contend with the general brio and excitement.</p> <p>Don't just take my word for it: the "wow" of a finish our artists invest in their fresh account of a Beethoven favorite is met by enthusiastic applause from a live 2021 audience at the Tonhalle Zürich.</p>	<p>soldiers on parade? <i>Träumerei</i> (Dreaming) is exceptionally rich in mood and color, the deep point of the collection. And <i>Am Kamin</i> (By the Fireside) captures yet another experience of deep contentment.</p> <p>By contrast, <i>Ritter vom Steckenpferd</i> (Hobby-Horse Knight) is a wild escapade, before <i>Fast zu Ernst</i> (Almost Too Serious), recounting a narrow escape, and <i>Fürchtenmachen</i> (perhaps a nightmare?) strike very different moods. The Scenes from Childhood conclude with <i>Kind am Einschlummern</i>, a depiction in the tenderest of broken rhythms of our child in peaceful slumber. Finally, in <i>Der Dichter spricht</i> (The Poet Speaks) the voice seems to be that of the composer addressing his listeners, telling them that the new music of the day must speak directly to us if it is to have a personal feeling, a message Tiffany Poon takes to heart.</p> <p><i>Arabeske</i> follows, 6 ½ minutes of musical frenzy with sensational swirling figurations at its very opening that Ms. Poon takes less energetically than we usually hear it, as if to imply that it is something more than just a display piece, a credo in keeping with her approach to Schumann in general.</p> <p>We arrive, finally, at <i>Davidsbündlertänze</i>, which translates "Dances of the League of David." That was Schumann's fanciful name for an association of kindred spirits, composers banded together to slay the Goliaths of convention and prepare for the glorious triumph of the new music that he envisioned. Ostensibly based on a mazurka by his future wife Clara Wieck, the 18 pieces that constitute this far-ranging work are as much song or meditation as they are dance. Because of frequent changes in mood and hand-positions, this highly diverse work is difficult to perform as convincingly as Tiffany Poon does here, and it doesn't get as much attention in piano recitals as the composer's more famous <i>Carnaval</i>.</p> <p>The suite opens <i>Lebhaft</i> (lively) and proves true to its name in Poon's interpretation. <i>Innig</i> delivers on its promise to explore innermost thoughts and feelings. <i>Etwas hahnbüchen</i> (somewhat clumsy) comes across here with Schumann's humorous intent as a lively allusion to the opening dance, while <i>Ungeduldig</i>, with its stirring middle section, is as restless and impatient as marked. <i>Einfach</i> (Simply) adds a note of quiet lyricism, and <i>Sehr rasch und in sich hinein</i> manages to be both very quick and</p>	<p>The more familiar 24 Preludes of Polish composer Frédéric Chopin benefit from the deft variety of techniques that Sepashvili applies. Nr. 1, <i>Agitato</i>, short, pithy, and clangorous, is followed by Nr. 2, <i>Lento</i>, with its quiet, meditative mood and steady tread, making for a very effective contrast. Nr. 3, a joyous <i>Vivace</i> that ends suddenly, is likewise followed by Nr. 4, a quiet, almost tragic <i>Largo</i>, further establishing the pattern of vivid contrasts that Chopin employs in this far-ranging opus that places so much emphasis on the performer's interpretive skills.</p> <p>Nr. 5, <i>Molto Allegro</i>, quickly flowing and full-bodied, is immediately followed by another contrasted prelude, <i>Lento Assai</i>, which is slow, with insistent accompaniment that seems to recall some painful memory. Nr. 7, <i>Andantino</i>, receives a steady interpretation, somewhat slower than we might have expected, while Nr. 8, a rippling <i>Molto Agitato</i>, lives up to its name, becoming ever more insistent before reaching an unexpectedly quiet finish.</p> <p>Nr. 9, <i>Largo</i>, is given a compelling interpretation, like the evocation of yet another painful memory, while Nr. 10, <i>Molto Allegro</i>, is a very fast finger exercise with a duration of just 0:37. It is followed by an equally brief <i>Vivace</i> (0:42) that lives up to its billing, and then another fast prelude, <i>Presto</i>, which ends quietly on a very decisive final chord. It, in turn, is contrasted by Nr. 13, a <i>Lento</i> that is remarkably soft, with purling accents, and then an <i>Allegro</i>, seething and restless with a duration of just 0:33. That brings us to the famous Nr. 15, marked <i>Sostenuto</i>, the lovely "Raindrop" Prelude with its unexpected mood of heightened intensity midway through.</p> <p>Then we are given another stunning contrast in Nr. 16, <i>Presto Con Fuoco</i>, a veritable whirlwind affirming its description "with fire." The by-now expected contrast materializes in the form of Nr. 17, a purling <i>Allegretto</i> whose lovely spell is cut off by an unexpected ending. Nr. 18, <i>Molto Allegro</i>, is fast, with a dramatic ending. Nr. 19, marked <i>Vivace</i>, is surprisingly gentle and caressing, while Nr. 20, <i>Largo</i>, is solemn and passionate.</p> <p>Nr. 21, <i>Cantabile</i> (Songlike) has a remarkably soaring bridge passage between sections, and Nr. 22, marked <i>Molto Agitato</i>, is distinguished by its thunderous opening and very decisive finish, all that in a duration of only 0:52. Nr.</p>
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	<p>inward, just as Schumann specifies, conflicting moods that aren't as easy to realize as Poon does here.</p> <p>And so it goes, alternating restless pieces that build in intensity in an impossibly short space of time (<i>Wild und Lustig</i>) with dreamy lyrical pieces (<i>Wie aus der ferne</i>, as from a distance) with even an overriding allusion by Schumann to a <i>Polterabend</i>, a traditional German custom on the eve of a wedding in which old pieces of crockery were smashed for good luck!</p>	<p>23, <i>Moderato</i>, the only prelude so marked, is in moderate time, with a crystalline affect like flowing water. In the concluding Prelude Nr. 24, an <i>Allegro Appassionato</i>, surging and rippling with intense passion, Chopin leaves no doubt that this is indeed the finish of his Opus 28 set.</p> <p>With performances as deeply insightful as they are technically accomplished, this album makes a first-rate calling card for Georgian artist Ketevan Sepashvili.</p>
<div data-bbox="167 579 537 947" data-label="Image"> </div> <p>"From Partita to Visions," Bach: Partita No. 2; Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition; Liszt: Mephisto Waltz; Prokofiev: Visions Fugitives - Anastasia Voltchok, piano (Centaur)</p> <p>A supremely accomplished pianist of Russian and Ukrainian descent, Anastasia Voltchok was born into a family of musicians and was enrolled in the Gnessin School in Moscow at age four, and later at the Moscow Conservatory College. Further studies in Switzerland and the U.S, culminated in a Doctorate in Musical Arts from the University of Maryland.</p> <p>All that musical education and training is not in the least excessive, considering this artist's zest for exploring some of the greatest and most challenging works in the piano literature. Of which we find an abundance in the present album, which is apparently her first on the Centaur label.</p> <p>Voltchok leads off the program with Bach's Partita No. 2, the Sinfonia of which she carries off with clangorous chords that seem portentous of what is to follow. This opening is followed by a generous flow of pure lyricism and alert transitions between sections. A stately Allemande is followed by a flowing Courante. Then we are given a Sarabande: quiet, slow, and delicately poignant, the very heart of the matter. A</p>	<div data-bbox="639 575 1003 942" data-label="Image"> </div> <p>Schubert: String Quartet, "Death and the Maiden" + Beethoven: Quartet No. 14 in C# minor, Op. 131 – Sacconi Quartet (Orchid Classics)</p> <p>From the United Kingdom come the four members of the Sacconi Quartet, consisting of violinists Ben Hancox and Hannah Dawson, violist Robin Ashwell, and cellist Cara Berridge. They derive their name from the 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian luthier and violin restorer Simone Fernando Sacconi whose book <i>The Secrets of Stradivari</i> is considered an indispensable reference for violin makers (which is what a "luthier" is, in case you wondered).</p> <p>The program they have set forth for themselves in their latest release on the Orchid Classics label consists of revealing performances of string quartets by Schubert and Beethoven that serve to define their artistic goals as a performing foursome. With a combined duration of 80:07, these performances are in no hurry when it comes to revealing the full expressive beauty in two works that helped define the quartet genre itself.</p> <p>First up is Franz Schubert's Quartet No. 12, "Death and the Maiden," after the composer's poignant song of the same title. It unfolds in the customary four movements. The first, Allegro, has a</p>	<div data-bbox="1105 579 1479 947" data-label="Image"> </div> <p>Dvořák: Violin Concerto; Romance, Mazurek – Mikhail Pochekin, violin; Daniel Raitskin conducts Slovak Philharmonic (Hänssler Klassik)</p> <p>Violinist Mikhail Pochekin was born in Moscow (1990) into a family of musicians, his father being a violin maker and his mother a noted music teacher. He has also performed on occasion with his violinist/violist brother Ivan. A lover of chamber music as much as he is of the concerto repertoire, the 33 year-old artist has performed widely in Western and Eastern Europe: in Moscow, Kiev, Kronberg and Landschut (Deu), Kazan (Rus), Salzburg, and Madrid. He has shown a particular fondness for the music of Czech composer Antonin Dvořák.</p> <p>Says Pochekin, "I can feel an unbelievable humanity and generosity in his works," a sentiment he clearly communicates to the listener in the present accounts of Dvořák's complete works for solo violin. found on the present program, where it is superbly realized with the assistance of the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Daniel Raitskin.</p> <p>The composer's Violin Concerto in A Minor, Opus 53, leads off the program, and one can sense immediately why this work, which unfolds with a noticeable quasi-</p>

<p>brisk Rondeaux is succeeded by a very energetic Capriccio. An unusual choice for a finale, Voltchok's deliberate pacing in the second half puts it over superbly.</p> <p>Mozart is up next. In his Duport Variations, Voltchok isn't intimidated by the unusually bright sound characteristic of its opening, nor by the very up-tempo marking for the finale. In between, she gives an intelligent and highly engaging interpretation of a work we too seldom get to enjoy. The requisite minor-key variation and peppy finale both make good impressions here.</p> <p>Voltchok next gives us an altogether brilliant account of Modest Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition. The plangent, sonorous Promenade theme, first heard in the "Gnomus" tableau, takes on a variety of forms and affects as we move through the Pictures, from a poignant reflection on vanished glory in The Old Castle to its stunningly triumphant re-emergence in the Great Gate at Kiev tableau at the very end, interleaved with a quiet interlude honoring fallen heroes that are bring remembered. In between, we are given tableaux in an imposing variety of moods and affects, from comic (a Ballet of Chicks emerging from their shells, the Tuilleries tableau with cascades evocative of splashing fountains, the bustling activity of Market Place at Limoges) to the powerful accents set against the eeriness of the Catacombes and the awesome syncopations that accompany the ride of the dreadful witch Baba Yaga in Hut on Fowl's Legs. Voltchok puts across all this varied panorama with color and dispatch.</p> <p>Franz Liszt, up next, is honored by Voltchok in a vivacious account of Mephisto Waltz (a.k.a. Dance at the Village Inn) in which jarring dissonances at the very outset characterize the unsettling presence of the very disturbing villain of Goethe's <i>Faust</i>. Later, a quiet, tender reverie effectively evokes a contrasting mood, or perhaps a lament for the loss of innocence Goethe's hero experiences from having (literally) sold his soul. In this character piece by Liszt, the moods seem to "shape-shift." At the end, the boisterous accents of the opening return in an irresistible rush, a frenzy that Voltchok captures superbly.</p> <p>That brings us to a selection of excerpts from Sergei Prokofiev's Visions Fugitives. Voltchok gives us nine of these "fugitive visions," beginning with I: <i>Lentamento</i>, a</p>	<p>strident opening in which Schubert's predilection for restlessly searching and probing, even in the quiet moments, sets the mood for a work that is characterized by dissonance, a sense of urgency, and a searing intensity. These traits persist, surprisingly, in the next movement, <i>Andante con moto</i>, in a self-conscious reckoning with fate that undercuts the usual associations of gentleness and sweetness that we associate with a slow movement. We have the feeling that something lovely is being slowly and insidiously undone by an envious fate.</p> <p>The third movement, a Scherzo, is filled with nervous energy and relentless drive, while a horn melody introduces a quiet, mysterious interlude. The fourth, a <i>Presto</i>, is as quick as marked, with a driving intensity and fast, galloping rhythm that are curiously at odds with its inherent lyricism.</p> <p>While the romantic elements tend to predominate in the Schubert quartet, its companion on this program, Beethoven's "Late" Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131, really shines forth, at least in this performance, as an apotheosis of the Classical Era. Its classicism is emphasized by the fact that Beethoven laid it out in seven movements instead of the customary four, an unusual procedure that actually makes it easier for a first-time listener to comprehend.</p> <p>The opening movement, an Adagio, strikes a poignant, but not maudlin, mood. The second movement follows <i>attacca</i> from the first, a procedure employed throughout this particular quartet. Marked <i>Allegro molto vivace</i>, it takes our breath away in the present performance by the Sacconi Quartet as it follows a trajectory of intense questioning, seeking resolution.</p> <p>Following an extraordinarily brief <i>Allegro moderato</i> (0:46), the long and languid fourth movement, marked <i>Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile</i>, is just as leisurely and songlike as indicated, and is in fact the very heart of the work. One of its many incidents includes a striking melody heard in the cello. This 14-minute movement leaves us with the feeling we have witnessed the expression of something wonderfully beautiful and eloquent.</p> <p>The fifth movement, <i>Presto</i>, has a very brisk tempo and a notably quick sign-off at the end. The sixth, surprisingly brief at 2:13 for its marking <i>Adagio quasi un poco andante</i>, is poignant but not despairing. It</p>	<p>concertant feeling, is such a favorite of Pochekin. Song and dance elements both occur in abundance in this work, beginning with the opening movement, <i>Allegro ma non troppo</i>. Here, the orchestra creates a rousing presence instead of the expected quiet, slow opening. Not your typical orchestral introduction, it is followed soon by the soloist. Astringent sounds, rife with incidents and inuendoes, immediately engage our attention, giving way to the solo violin's better-focused if nonetheless stirring voice.</p> <p>At the end of this rousing movement, we have a superbly crafted 13-bar transition (shades of Felix Mendelssohn) connecting it to the sweetly reflective slow movement. Marked <i>Adagio ma non troppo</i>, this lovely, gracious, superbly nuanced movement is clearly the heart of the work. Heightened intensity several minutes into this movement is tamed by passages of tenderest serenity in the violin part, which leads the way with a softly persuasive melody, and the movement closes in a mood of deepest serenity.</p> <p>In the finale, <i>Allegro giocoso</i>, violin and orchestra join forces in a very nationalist Czech finale. This hybrid of sonata-rondo form contains no less than four folk tunes of Furiant and Dumka varieties, lively versus contemplative in spirit, included in the mix. All of which occurs so naturally, and is so splendidly realized by Pochekin, Raiskin and the orchestra, that listeners may be disinclined to credit the hard work that made such disarming an impression of naturalness possible.</p> <p>The composer's other two works for violin and orchestra complete the program in a very satisfying manner. Romance in F minor, Op. 11, marked <i>Andante con moto</i>, is a work of great expressive beauty, sad and wistful but far from tragic. Self-contained in the manner of a tone poem for violin and orchestra, its orchestration provides lots of space in which the violin can negotiate, allowing it to be heard to best effect.</p> <p>Mikhail Pochekin is not slow to realize the deep beauties of the Romance. Nor is he loath to follow Dvořák's lead in the Rousing <i>Mazurek</i> (Mazurka) in E minor, Op. 49, with its rousing melody, like a call to the dance, and its decisive final measures. If Pochekin takes care to include sure-fire encores such as these two in his travelling portfolio and perform them with the spirit he invests</p>
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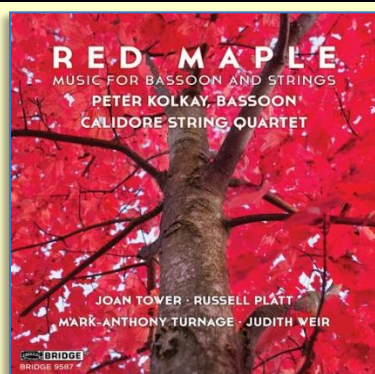


brief, quiet meditation that promises more delectables to come. II. *Andante* is utterly brilliant, and IV. *Aimato* positively tumbling in its athleticism. VIII. *Commodo*, alert and engaging, is one of the highlights of the set.

There follow: IX. *Allegro tranquillo*, brilliant and shimmering; X. *Ridicolosamente*, very alert and as impudent as its name would imply, with a contrasted slow, reflective, passage at the end, and XI. *Con Vivacita*, characterized by its leaping figurations. XIV. *Feroce* lives up to its billing in its driving, “ferocious” energy. XVIII. *Con un dolce lentazza* is luminous and portentous, culminating in a startling rush at the very end. Great fun!

sets us up for the finale, an *Allegro* that marches in without a preface, decisively concluding a 40-minute work that has been packed with compelling events. More to the point, the Sacconi Quartet have (correctly) given the impression of this work as one that unfolds as a single 40-minute opus in seven closely unified sections rather than a long-limbed exercise in seven movements. Adding to the sense of unity is the fact that a slow, melancholy theme that Richard Wagner once declared was the saddest thought ever expressed in music, first heard in Section 1, is reprised in Section 7, speeded up, with a different contour and character that give this work a real sense of finality.

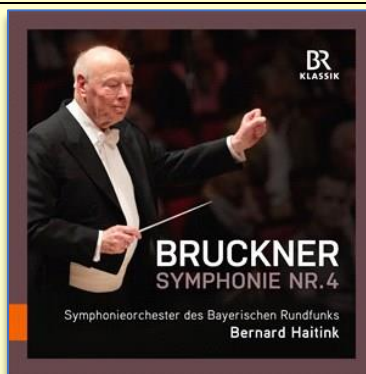
in them, he will surely have a long and satisfying career



“Red Maple,” Music for Bassoon and Strings – Peter Kolkay, bassoon With the Calidore String Quartet (Bridge Records)

Young and already celebrated bassonist Peter Kolkay, a native of Naperville, IL, received a Master’s degree from the Eastman School of Music where he was a student of John Hunt and a Doctorate from Yale University where he studied with the great American bassoonist Frank Morelli. He currently serves as associate professor of bassoon in the Blair School of Music at Vanderbilt University. Besides his academic achievements, he is a keen champion of new works for his chosen instrument that explore its expressive range and versatility, as he demonstrates in his new album “Red Maple.”

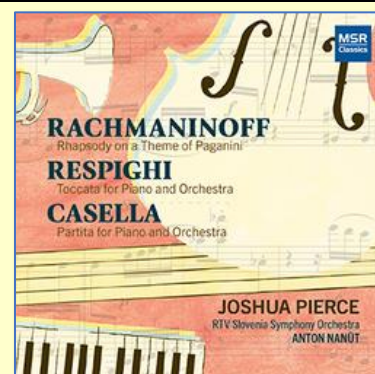
The title of this album is taken from a work for bassoon and string orchestra that U.S. composer Joan Tower wrote for Peter Kolkay, and for which he performed the world premiere with the South Carolina Philharmonic in October, 2013. He also premiered the version for bassoon and string quartet (2015) which is heard on the present Bridge Records release. With



Bruckner: Symphony No. 4 in E-flat, “Romantic” – Bernard Haitink conducts Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (BR Klassik)

Another outstanding release in a splendid Bruckner series by the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (*Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks*) finds it in fine mettle under Dutch conductor Bernard Haitink, whose long-standing collaboration with the orchestra, covering more than sixty years, was cut short by his death in October, 2021.

As a work in which a bewildering number of elements need to be brought together to make for a satisfying performance, this account of Anton Bruckner’s Fourth may serve as fitting tribute to the prowess of Bernard Haitink. It is in the usual four movements. The first, marked *Bewegt, nicht zu schnell* (flowing not too fast) starts off with a very quiet and poignant horn call, seeming to come from a far distance. The music builds to a crescendo, the first of many in a work that comes across as emotionally charged, even in the quietest moments. We are given a furious climax



Rachmaninoff: Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini + Respighi: Toccata for Piano & Orchestra; Casella: Partita for Piano & Orchestra – Joshua Pierce, piano; Anton Nanüt, RTV Slovenia SO (MSR Classics)

Do I like Joshua Pierce or what? I’ve been pleased to review his previous recordings of concertos on this website on no fewer than six occasions (Apr 2010, Jan 2016, May 2016, Dec 2018, Feb 2020, and Oct 2021), with orchestras conducted by Anglo-American conductor Kirk Trevor or the late Slovenian maestro Anton Nanüt (1932-2017), and my pleasure grows upon each new acquaintance with his work.

His latest release on the MSR label opens with less-familiar but nonetheless intriguing works by Italian composers Alfredo Casella (1883-1947) and Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936). Casella’s Partita for Piano and Orchestra, in three movements, opens in a raucous Sinfonia with edgy brass, followed by a Passacaglia in twelve variations with a creepy opening and an astringent sound. Gradually increasing in intensity, It is followed, by way of welcome relief, by a Burlesca with enaging melodies for piano and orchestra, and just a tad of dissonance

<p>superb assistance from the Calidor String Quartet (Jeffrey Myers and Ryan Meehan, violins; Jeremy Berry, viola; and Estelle Choi, cello), Kolkay is in his best form exploring his instrument's deep accents, its dark and piercing tone, and the ways Tower employs these attributes to build up an intriguing work with lots of drama.</p> <p>Next up, Quintet for Bassoon and String Quartet (1996-1997) by Russell Platt, is in two movements: "Slow" and "Still Slow-Cadenza-Fast," allowing performers plenty of opportunity for expressive nuance. The first movement is filled with hauntingly beautiful tones, and the latter opens quietly and sighingly, followed by a pickup in cadence with many changes and surprises in store for the listener.</p> <p>Massarosa for Bassoon and String Quartet (2018) by Mark-Anthony Turnage is in three movements that live up to their billing: 1) Very Tender and Expressive, 2) Intermezzo, and 3) Very Slow and Serene. The first is in a gentle but troubled mood, the second slow and rollicking, somewhat agitated but playful, ending quietly. The third movement is serene and poetic, opening vistas and posing questions as it progresses, with a yawning cadence at the end. (I was reminded of a description of the bassoon's evocative affect by a character in English novelist E. M. Forster's <i>Howard's End</i> (1910) as possessing "the most romantic voice of any instrument.")</p> <p><i>Wake Your Wild Voice</i> for Bassoon with Cello in a single movement (2008) by Judith Weir concludes the program with an exploration of cavernous vistas lighted by flavorful timbres from the bassoon and string quartet. A very romantic and insouciant work in nine and a half minutes, it features an uptick in excitement several minutes before the end, making for a satisfying conclusion to an intriguing program..</p>	<p>about 8:30 into the movement, and then a reprise of the horn call at the end.</p> <p>The second movement, marked <i>Andante quasi allegretto</i>, has a damasked sound quality at the very opening which helps convey a mood of mystery that gradually increases as the movement progresses at a waking pace. Solemn strings, beautifully shaded, help deepen the mystery in a movement in which Bruckner calls for the conductor to bring the percussion into bold focus at the very end, and Haitink obliges with a master's hand.</p> <p>The third movement is a scherzo, again marked <i>Bewegt</i>, that opens with a fanfare, mounting in excitement. Then we are given a quiet, rustic interlude for contrast.</p> <p>The finale, once more marked <i>Bewegt</i> (How Bruckner loves that word!) and <i>doch nicht zu schnell</i> (but not too fast) opens quietly, in a quasi-somnolent mood, which is followed by mounting orchestral intensity of the sort we have witnessed earlier in this work. In the course of this movement, we experience a sense of yearning for release, which the skilled hand of maestro Haitink helps bring about, giving us the feeling that the monumental work (68:06 in the present account) is ending, and that the large-scale edifice is reaching a satisfying conclusion.</p> <p>At about 15:31, a stunning outburst from brass and full orchestra signal that the catharsis is approaching. With Haitink's spuerb mastery in matters of dynamics and pacing, we are plunged into a cool interlude, marked by the presence of slow, quiet, poignant woodwinds at about 16:38, preparing us in turn for the magnificent climax at the very end.</p> <p>In the final analysis, we must ask ourselves whether the Bruckner Fourth has too many contrasted features in the way of extremes in tempo and dynamics. Bruckner himself was occasionally wont to consider the work, which nevertheless marked his breakthrough as a symphonist, to be "wearisome" and "too restless." Bernard Haitink shows us, on the contrary, that given the right pacing and emphasis, this work can emerge as a thing of beauty.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Asa fitting tribute to</p>	<p>in the way of sighing lower strings at the end to remind us where we've been.</p> <p>Respighi follows, with a Toccata for Piano and Orchestra that has a powerfully strident opening which is almost a turn-off in turns of what we'd expect from the composer of "Ancient Airs and Dances." Our initial impression is assuaged by gracious melodies, alternating with moments of highest intensity in the way of plangent, searching music. In a work characterized by drive and intrigue, solid orchestral support enhances the sonority of Pierce's piano in an effort to put across a work that will probably be in search of champions for the foreseeable future.</p> <p>There's no such problem in the case of Rachmaninoff's ever-popular Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. The work begins with a rush <i>in medias res</i> (Latin for "in the soup"). Pierce opens up in a spikey piano tone served up with dazzling virtuosity, in a work in which overtly passionate and darkly introspective passages often occur in close proximity. In this account, Pierce shows his mastery of a variety of tempi and phrasings, from quick and liquid to slow but with deliberately subdued passion, as in Rachaninoff's quoting of the liturgical chant for the dead, <i>the Dies Irae</i>, at a key moment in the exposition.</p> <p>Elsewhere, these awesome moments are contrasted by galloping rhythms and high dynamic levels, which make a stunning affect, superbly enhanced in the present performance by very effective pauses between sections of differing velocity and emotional impact. At about 11:00 into the score, the tempo slows very effectively to accomodate a trenchant oboe passage that is one of the deep points in this particular performance. Then we have a very slow but highly effective build-up to a cantabile section with poignant accents.</p> <p>At length, we arrive, around the 14:00 mark, at <i>that</i> moment, the heart-melting entry of the famous cantabile section that seldom fails to make a stunning effect on isteners (as it does here). Then fast, high-energy passages, beginning about 16:30, pick up the pace, carrying us through to the very end, which occurs, all passion spent, with a highly effective step-off where we might've expected a grand climax. Pierce and Nanüt manage all these moments with a professionalism that inspires the greatest confidence in the listener.</p>
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Once, many years ago (or so it seems) I observed of Johannes Brahms' two piano concertos that "The pianist must be able to handle Brahms' high-energy rhythms without losing sight of the pervasive lyricism in both these works. His tone must be secure, his phrasing ready to change from legato to staccato in the twinkling of an eye." Years later, the crack still goes, and of course it applies to lady pianists like Andrea Kauten, who grew up with Hungarian parents in Allschwil in the Swiss Canton of Basel-Land, as well as it does the men. In addition, any pianist who assays the Brahms concertos, each of which clocks in at around 52 minutes' playing time in the present performances, must possess a great deal of stamina, a close rapport with the conductor and orchestra, and a feeling for the abundant lyricism in both works.

That certainly sounds like the necessary requirements for Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15, a work that originally had its keel laid down as a symphony before Brahms decided fortuitously to re-cast it for piano and orchestra. That original intention still resonates in the big symphonic sound that opens this concerto *Maestoso*. The sonics in the present recording do seem a trifle lacking in substance, in the very opening measures, a balance that is soon rectified upon the entrance of the soloist.

The pianist soon strikes a contemplative mood, with a contrast alternating between the big main theme and the accompanying passagework, reflective and purling, in the piano part. The brief but effective entrance of the French horn about 9:40 into the movement was perhaps Brahms' personal tribute to his father, whose instrument it was. The intensity of this movement rises noticeably several minutes later, with the string sound increasing in substance and bite as the movement progresses. This is tempered by a soft, reflective passage in the piano ca. 12:50, a mood which Kauten manages beautifully.

The second movement, *Adagio*, is given a breathlessly beautiful opening progressing in slow steps. The deeply meditative mood of this slow movement is reinforced by the pianist, who makes her points quietly, delicately, and decisively. Credit her also with a superb realization of the mid-movement cadenza.



Brahms: The Piano Concertos  
Andrea Kauten, pianist  
Württembergische Philharmonie  
Reutlingen, dir. Timo Handschuh  
(Solo Musica, 2-CD)

The finale, a Rondo marked *Allegro non troppo*, opens *attacca* in a rousing "take no prisoners" mood, and then a summons from the brass leads into a florid passage for the piano. This, in turn, is succeeded by a *Mysterioso* section for the orchestra at about the 6:00 point. The beautifully crystalline piano texture in the cadenza makes a fine impression here. In this finale, the piano part is fully integrated with the orchestra, making for an impression of decisiveness and finality.

In the last analysis, we are left with the feeling of having witnessed a work of music that captures all the vicissitudes of a human life with its emotions and struggles, ending in a mood of radiant triumph.

I almost said "we shall never hear its like again," but that would be slighting the superb account Andrea Kauten and the Württemberg Philharmonie of Reutlingen, under the direction of Timo Handschuh, give us of Brahms' other heavy-hitter, Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 83. Like its predecessor, this wide-ranging work gives us the feeling of a symphony for piano and orchestra, an impression that is reinforced by the fact that it is cast in four movements instead of the usual three.

Somehow, the Second Concerto does not seem as compelling in this performance as the First, perhaps because of the fact that it is a much later work by more than 20 years and dates from a time in Brahms' life when his experiences had taught him the wisdom of discretion. Certainly, it seems

more circumspect and introspective in mood than its predecessor, and the present performance captures its essential difference. The opening movement, *Allegro non troppo*, builds in intensity as it makes a really telling appearance, en route to reaching an impressive climax, aided by a rich woodwind presence. The piano makes a delayed entrance several minutes into the score, marked by florid rhapsodizing. With a theme that seems quite capable of being enlarged, the music builds in intensity, spaced by quiet moments colored by the woodwinds. Basically, the piano adds spice to what the orchestra is doing, with quiet moments well-spaced by solitude.

The quiet mood persists in the opening of the slow movement, *Andante – piu adagio*, and then the piano takes the lead with a persuasive and incredibly beautiful melody that Brahms lifted from his song "*Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*" (Ever softer were my slumbers). First stated by a solo cello, its color is slowly deepened by the lower strings and colored by the distinctive sound of a reed, all before the piano makes one of the best-prepared entrances in all of music. Florid and supremely lovely piano passages, colored with a marvelous backdrop of woodwinds, lead into a question and response session between piano and orchestra before all ends quietly.

The finale, marked *Allegretto grazioso*, reflects the diversity of elements in the work, in which the pianist is sometimes called upon to match the power and immensity of the orchestra and at other times engage in chamber music-like dialogue with other players, particularly among the woodwinds, a dual role that Andrea Kauten seems to find very congenial. A sensational trumpet call alerts us that we are winding down towards the final cadence in a long, but unusually economic, concerto that permits the soloist plenty of opportunity for point-making.

I have run out of space without mentioning Brahms' Six Pieces for Solo Piano, Op. 118, that fills our CD2, but don't you ignore them! Under Kauten's hands, they reveal themselves to be some of the composer's pithiest and most lyrical short pieces. Listen to No. 2, Intermezzo in A Major, where Kauten divines the subtle difference between exquisite sadness and *schmalz*, and you will hear what I mean.

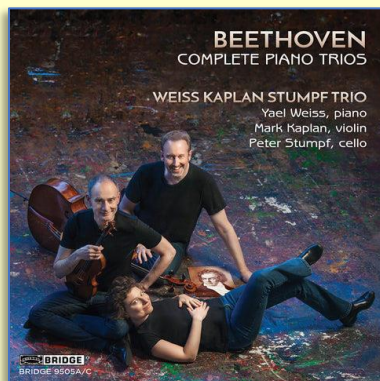


These accounts by pianist Yael Weiss, violinist Mark Kaplan, and cellist Peter Stumpf get to the heart of Beethoven's six piano trios, including their historical significance and the problems in how to present them as a satisfying, whole body of work. Concerning the last-named, there was the question of marketability. After debating whether or not to release these six major works (plus two sets of equally challenging variations) as three separate CD's, they made the wise decision to come out with the three-CD set we have here, chock full of 230 minutes of great music, presented in exalted performances that tell us a lot about Beethoven and the impact he had on the music of his era.

In his own day, Beethoven must have faced a similar conundrum: namely, what was his intended audience? This new music was clearly beyond the capabilities of the inspired amateur enthusiasts on whom composers and publishers typically relied in determining the sales potential of new works of music. The technical difficulties included the way in which Beethoven established the role of the cello as a substantial middle voice in its own right rather than merely doubling the piano's bass line as was the common practice of his day. There was also the way he used the upper ranges of all three instruments, resulting in an effect of sheer exultation that had typically been found only in the context of a symphony orchestra. Clearly, Beethoven's new music was pitched toward professionals, rather than amateur musicians.

We sense this right from the beginning of the program, in the so-called "Ghost" Trio in D major, Opus 70, No. 1, with its conflicts of delicate versus rousing music and between fast-moving passages and slower, quieter ones, in the opening movement, *Allegro vivace e con brio*. Here, curious pauses and quiet accents, beginning around the 6:00 mark, add to a growing sense of mystery that is later contrasted by rattling chords in the piano.

If that were not enough to give this work its famous nickname of "Ghost" Trio, then listen to the deeply expressive Largo with its haunting, ghostly theme set against quietly dissonant accents, with a notable "echo" effect at the very end. The finale, an engaging Presto, makes full use of the



Beethoven: Complete Piano Trios  
performed by Yael Weiss, piano; Mark Kaplan, violin; Peter Stumpf, cello  
(Bridge Records, 3-CD set)

dynamic contrasts that are a special feature of this particular work.

It is followed by an engaging account of the so-called "Kakadu" Variations, Op. 121A, which was the very last of Beethoven's works for trio to be published. With its solemn introduction followed by a set of lightweight variations that is distinguished by a noticeable pickup in the way of galloping tempi, the spirited performance by Weiss, Kaplan, and Stumpf gives us a clear indication why this seemingly trivial work has remained so popular.

Disc A concludes with the Piano Trio in E-flat major, Op. 1, No. 1. After a lively Allegro distinguished by a contrast between bright, sparkling music and slower material, we are given a quiet, slow, romantic Adagio cantabile that is the heart of the matter, marked by the role of the cello in shaping this movement. A nimble Scherzo that must have been awfully fun for our artists to execute is followed by a Presto finale with a perky opening in which the piano sets the mood, and an even greater pickup in tempo as the other instruments check in and have their say. What a great way for Beethoven to have concluded his first published work!

Disc B opens with Trio Op. 1, No. 2 in G major, beginning with an Adagio, quietly sighing but obviously on a symphonic scale, which is succeeded by an Allegro vivace section with rippling melodies and a jaunty succession of musical ideas. The slow movement, Andante con espressione, is characterized by much tenderess, quiet dynamics, and sighing figurations in the

strings over very effective accompaniment by the piano. Here was chamber music with the affective power of a symphony! A bright and jaunty Scherzo is followed by a fast Presto finale marked by a playful *rallentando*, gradually decreasing in speed.

The familiar "Archduke" Trio in B-flat, Op. 97 follows next, opening *Allegro moderato*. Here, the piano drives matters along in notably mellifluous, rippling phrases, with sighing accompaniment in the strings. The second movement, *Scherzo: Allegro* is playfulness on a grand scale, marked by considerable independence of voices. The third, *Andante cantabile*, is the emotional heart of the work, while the energetic finale, *Allegro moderato*, ends matters on a decidedly happy note.

Disc C begins with Trio in C minor, Op. 1, No. 3, which sets the stage for Beethoven the master of the unexpected, as its quiet, mysterious opening is followed by a frenzied, rapid-fire Allegro. The slow movement, Andante cantabile, contains a great variety of imaginative variations in tempo and dynamics. The Menuetto quasi allegro, a free handing of the dance, is followed by a Finale marked *Prestissimo* (and no fooling) with a rousing opening and exhilarating flourishes.

14 Variations in E-flat, Op. 44 comes across as a lot of fun to perform, as its perky theme provides scope for a lot of choice variations. As our artists show us, there's lots of room to be creative in its varied moods (What a shame this work isn't better known).

Finally, we are given a glowing account of the Trio in E-flat, Op. 70, No. 2. The mysteriously subdued opening movement, Poco sostenuto, whets our curiosity for the Allegro ma non troppo which follows, beginning almost unobtrusively before it really swings into action. The following Allegretto opens in the tempo of a minuet before becoming more vigorous, with a decisive finish. The third movement, Allegretto ma non troppo, is lightly tripping, with contrasting moods that are well realized here and some use of variation technique. The Finale, taken *attaca*, is lively and sparkling in mood, proceeding at a broad tempo. It will be seen that there is no slow movement here, a departure from tradition that Beethoven would soon follow in his seventh and Eighth Symphonies.



Mari Kodama was born in 1967 in Osaka, Japan, daughter of a pianist mother and banker father. As her father was frequently posted abroad by his bank, she had the experience of growing up in Germany, France, Switzerland and England, and began studies at the Paris Conservatoire at age 14. She's no stranger to this column, as I've been pleased to review several releases in her acclaimed Beethoven cycle for Pentatone Music<sup>i</sup>.

Together with her younger sister Momo, Mari takes obvious delight in their debut album together. For this occasion, they have chosen music from the three famous ballets. Could one ask for more? When you have just two pianos, the atmosphere is much more intimate, bringing a different quality to the music.

Keeping these issues in mind, as well as the thought that the composers who made the transcriptions were all men of music with minds of their own, the Kodamas set to work at realizing these suites from Tchaikovsky's three great ballets on their own terms as keyboard artists. It wasn't easy, but the results speak for themselves. In vivid colors and textures spread over a broad canvas.

The Sleeping Beauty Suite opens, in Sergei Rachmaninov's transcription, with a rousing introduction (hardly conducive to sleeping, no matter how beautiful one may be), followed by the delicate measures of The Lilac Fairy (*La Fée des Lilas*) with a superb osinato underlying the theme. A glorious Adagio comes next, and then the famous Valse, marked here by a mood of rising intensity leading into a full-bodied climax, replicating the full



Tchaikovsky: Ballet Suites  
from Nutcracker, Sleeping Beauty. Swan  
Lake, Suite for Piano Duo  
Mari and Momo Kodama, pianists  
(Pentatone)

range of the orchestral score. Other highlights from the transcription include *Le Chat botté* (Puss in Boots), Panorama, and the famous Waltz we all know and love.

Suite from the Nutcracker ballet follows next, in the transcription by Anton Arensky. The quiet, intriguing Overture is followed by a rippling Marche. The nine items in this suite for 2 pianos include *Danse de la Fée-Dragée* (Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy) in a very mysterious mood, a delicate *Valse des Fleurs* (Waltz of the Flowers) and the final Pas de Deux, a Grand Adagio that concludes the suite on a high point of warmth and enchantment. Along the way, we get a number of familiar Nutcracker dances, including the rousing Trepak (*Danse russe*). I do wish Arensky had thought to include a transcription of the Tableau at the end of Act I, Forest of Fir Trees in Winter, which would have made a sensational effect arranged for two pianos!

Swan Lake is up next, in the piano duo transcription by Eduard Leontyevich Langer (1835-1905). It opens, as does the ballet, with the Scene and its familiar evocation of the enchanted setting itself, which is followed by Dances of the Swans (*Dances des cygnes*) with a nice feeling for the underlying pulse of the music. Scene is preceded by a luxurious assemblage of arpeggios and flourishes, evocative of the enchantment and love we find in the story.

Could we ask for more? If so, Mari and Momo Kodama provide it in a fine account of an insightful Suite for Piano Duo, consisting of three selections from the Nutcracker ballet: *Danse russe*, *Danse espagnole*, and *Danse napolitaine*, as transcribed by the then-18 year old Claude Debussy. The transcription of *Danse russe* with a slow, quiet, mysterious opening before the excitement really commences, makes for interesting comparison with the Russian Dance (Trepak) setting of Anton Arensky, cited earlier. This is simply *not* the same dance, and the Kodama sisters are quick to divine its unique, special quality.

<sup>i</sup> See Phil's Reviews for October, 2013 and October, 2020.