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Mozart: String Quartets, K387 & 458
The Hagen Quartet
(Myrios Classics) Hybrid SACD, DSD

The Hagen String Quartet have been in existence long enough to know their business, especially when the subject is Mozart. A family quartet originally consisting of Lukas, Angelika, Veronika, and Clemens Hagen, they all studied at the Salzburg Mozarteum, among other places. In three decades of glorious music making with only one loss in the family circle (Angelika retired and was eventually replaced by Rainer Schmidt as 2nd violin in 1987), they celebrated their 30th anniversary in 2011, and still have a lot to say about the works in their repertoire. And while their Beethoven, Schubert, and Janáček aren't exactly shabby, they often seem to give an extra glamor to performances of their fellow Salzburger, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

On tap here are two of Mozart's best known quartets from the set of six he dedicated to Franz Josef Haydn. The Hagens' account of the Quartet in G major, K.387 is equally distinguished for aristocratic poise and purposeful motion. As Haydn did in his "Russian" Quartets, Op. 33, which inspired his younger colleague, Mozart abandoned strict counterpoint in favor of a freer association of voices and connection of musical themes. The greater freedom that was thus brought about is evident from the opening bars of the Allegro vivace opening movement. The general impression the work conveys to listeners is one of lightness and relaxation, though its expressive depths are significant. In the Menuetto, for instance, the trio is notably darker in mood, which is quite the opposite of what a trio is supposed to do, and there are dark-hued moments even in the gentle Andante cantabile. The irresistible vivacity of the finale, Molto allegro, probably has most to do for the quartet's nickname, "Spring."

The "Hunt" Quartet in B-flat major, K.458, like its album mate, were the first works to be recorded by the Hagen Quartet on the matched set of Stradivarius instruments associated with Nicolo Paganini. The richness of tone



Schubert: Die Schöne Müllerin
Klemens Sander, baritone; Uta Sander, piano
(Ars Produktion)

An upcoming husband-and-wife team about whom you're going to be hearing a lot in the future give a refreshing account of Franz Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin* (The Pretty Maid of the Mill) that led me to re-evaluate it as a work of art. Baritone Klemens Sander and his pianist wife Uta obviously care deeply about this project. So much so, in fact, that the Sanders, hitherto billed as Vienna's most deliriously happy couple, experienced a bit of domestic strife on interpreting Schubert's song cycle (as Klemens puts it, "We were forced to stop a few rehearsals to protect the peace.") In the end, mutual friction produced the happy results we hear on the present release by the fine German label Ars Produktion.

One often hears it said that the composers of *lieder* (art songs) were adept at redeeming bad poetry with great music. That may be an unfair generalization, but in the case of Schubert's poet, Wilhelm Müller, the pathos often promises to go the limit. Further, *Die Schöne Müllerin* lacks the wealth of visual and aural imagery that made *Die Winterreise* (Winter Journeys), also based on a poetic cycle by Müller, a fertile field for the composer to explore. Briefly, the story deals with a miller's apprentice who becomes infatuated with the pretty daughter of his employer, to the extent of imagining a love relationship that does not in fact exist, weaving it in his imagination out of the language of flowers and the babbling of the brook. (The only words we ever hear her utter to the lovesick youth are decidedly *not* romantic: "The rain comes. Farewell. I am going home.") In the end, the youth is crushed when the flighty *müllerin* falls for a dashing huntsman in a bright green jacket. He becomes despondent, and takes his life by drowning, with only the brooklet left to assuage his sorrows and sing him a final lullaby.

Viewed in objective, modern terms, the miller's apprentice is an inexperienced "sucker," naïve enough to fall for a girl who is scarcely aware of his existence.

What can I say about the two Peer Gynt suites except that Neville Marriner and the ECO succeeded in infusing fresh new vitality into thrice-familiar material? There's lyrical beauty (Morning Mood), sensuality (Anitra's Dance), stirring action (The Abduction), sadness (Aase's Death), high spirits (Peer Gynt's return), and even a heady dose of the grotesque when the hero of the tale visits the Hall of the Mountain King and discovers that the horde of bloodthirsty trolls that comprise the royal retinue bear an uncomfortable resemblance to himself! Leppard captures all these moods to perfection, and that includes the composer's effective use of the "Grieg Motif" based on descending intervals of minor seconds and major thirds to convey sorrow and melancholy. My only disappointment here is that Leppard chose to omit the soprano voice in "Solveig's Song," something that would have added even greater expressive beauty to one of Grieg's signature moments.

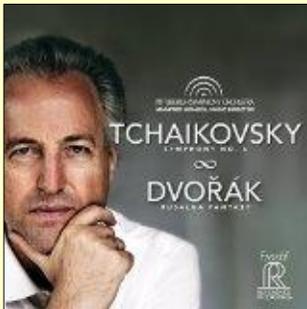
Four Norwegian Dances, Op. 35 were originally written for piano duet but are often performed, as here, in orchestral arrangements. They are informed with character and good spirits. No. 2 in A, which passes for a humorous slow movement, was hijacked by a couple of chaps named Wright and Forrest for the 1944 Broadway musical *Song of Norway*. No. 4 in D, besides concluding Op. 35 in an up-beat way with an increase in tempo and rhythm, gives you an idea of how much fun this music must be to play in its original version for two pianists!

which is also in D major, even to the extent of patterning the key, mood, and tempo marking of his finale after that of Brahms and relating its primary theme to that of the opening movement.

He did something else that was not as well received by the critics, in that he cast the scherzo movement in the form of a *Furiant*, a quick dance in triple meter with swelling tones at the beginning of the phrase that give the impression of alternating between 2/4 and 3/4 time. With its strongly accented beats, the *Furiant*, also known as a "swagger dance," was a symbol of repressed Czech nationalism, which was not popular in some Viennese circles.

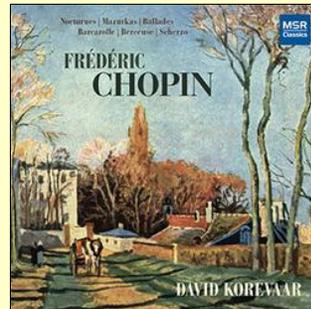
In this performance, Orozco-Estrada favors swiftly flowing movement, alert tempi and a big, fulsome sound, as befits a symphony that is usually cited for its buoyant, pastoral nature. Of course, there's more to it than just that. The opening movement, *Allegro ma non tanto*, has some limited use of fugato at one point and a stirring fortissimo on rising quarter-notes in the strings, just before the recap. And no matter how natural the transitions between sections are in Dvořák, you don't want to give the impression of a symphony that just sat down one fine day and wrote itself. Orozco-Estrada keeps things flowing throughout the entire work with a master's hand.

As compatible program fillers, we are given two of Dvořák's Slavonic Dances, Op. 72, No. 3 and Op. 46, No. 8. The former is a *Skočná* or "jump dance," and the latter another *Furiant*. Both are very lively. As a minor criticism, I might suggest that things would have been more intriguing if Orozco-Estrada had included a slower, dreamer dance such the *Dumka* of Op. 72, No. 2 in E minor, as a moment of respite between the two.



Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6, "Pathétique" + Dvořák: "Rusalka" Fantasy – Manfred Honeck, Pittsburgh Symphony (Reference Recordings SACD 5.1 & stereo)

Here's another solid winner from Honeck and the Pittsburgh! Under their Austrian music director Manfred Honeck, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra scores the highest marks for infusing vibrant new vitality into one of the most often performed and recorded of all symphonies. It's album-mate is an outstanding new symphonic fantasy by Honeck himself on a great opera



Frédéric Chopin: Piano Music
David Korevaar, piano
(MSR Classics)

American pianist David Korevaar has his own distinctive approach to the works of Frédéric Chopin, and I personally find the results very gratifying. He packs a lot of music into the present MSR release, and all of it bears his personal stamp. The selections are mostly very well-known examples of distinctive Chopin genres – ballade, scherzo, nocturne, mazurka, and

by Dvořák that has long been unjustly hampered by the language barrier. And the engineering team do themselves proud, even by Reference Recordings' usual high standards.

Under Honeck's baton, Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" Symphony reveals in the outer movements all the gloom and ultimate sense of resignation that its famous nickname implies (which is much more than the lame English word "pathetic"). In the inner movements, there is affirmation and even struggle against Fate with a capital F, which is the unspoken antagonist of the work. First, we have a curiously gay little humpbacked waltz tripping out in 5/4 time. That's an unusual time signature, but try playing it at the piano in standard 3/4 and you will be amazed how much character it loses. It is followed by the scherzo, a rousing march in common time, marked *Allegro molto vivace*, with an explosive climax that I have not heard done as effectively since Eugene Ormandy's 1960's account with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

In the final analysis, the outer movements have the last word. The opening movement, *Allegro non troppo*, begins in darkness and stillness with a slow Adagio introduction before the murk created by divided string basses parts sufficiently to allow a really poignant melody of great tenderness to be heard in the bassoon. The movement builds to a climax, and then slips away quietly into the mist. The finale is even more memorable. Marked *Adagio lamentoso – Andante*, it recalls the tender theme of the opening movement, builds to one last climax that proves an illusory flickering of hope, and then once again subsides into the mist with a sigh of resignation. The recorded sound in the last minute and a half allows us to hear the slowly descending basses and the last heartbeats of the tympani – sounds that are criminally inaudible in many other recordings but serve a vital purpose here.

Honeck, with the assistance of the young Czech composer Tomas Ille, composed the Rusalka Fantasy, heard as the companion work on this program. Based on luminous themes from Dvořák's opera *Rusalka*, it is actually a through-composed symphonic poem rather than a true fantasia. The story, which has striking parallels to Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid, tells the story of a water sprite who falls in love with a mortal, with tragic consequences.

Honeck's detailed analysis of this beautifully wrought work, based on his own performance score, helps us follow the various themes and motifs both by bar and elapsed time. We have all the familiar themes from the opera, including the foreboding music of the water goblin Vodnik, warning of the dangers of the night, the enchanting music of the water nymphs dancing by moonlight, the pungent music based on fast, alternating tones in the brass associated with the witch Ježibaba, the Prince's frantic search for Rusalka, and of course, Rusalka's poignant "Song to the Moon" that has taken on a life of its own in soprano recitals. The

barcarolle – but they sound refreshingly different here. As Korevaar states in his booklet notes, his object was to conceive a program that formed a dramatic arc charting Chopin's development as a composer who exploited the colors and textures unique to the piano as no one had done before him. He is not afraid to take slower than usual tempos on occasion, partly to avoid the miasma of broken rhythms, cross rhythms and slurs that can be a trap for the unwary pianist fresh from tackling, say, Beethoven, for whom there are no idle toss-away gestures and everything needs to be hammered squarely on the head. Chopin, by contrast, often requires considerable discretion of the pianist in terms of a delicate hand and a discernment of which textural strands are more important than others (though in the last analysis, of course, *it all counts!*)

The sensual beauty of the music is the other reason Korevaar is inclined to slow down and smell the night-blooming jasmine. The warmth of the decorative fioritura and the lyrical beauty of the two voices in the Nocturne in D-flat major, Op. 27, No. 2, speak eloquently in his interpretation. Others, such as the Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48, No. 1, tend to be more powerfully stated and have more immediate impact in their extremes of grief and joy, the latter an emotional state often longed-for, dimly remembered, or illusory. The Three Mazurkas, Op. 50, are as zestful as they are rhythmically and texturally challenging, with Mazurka No. 3 in C-sharp minor the most extended and the natural mediation between harmonic extremes.

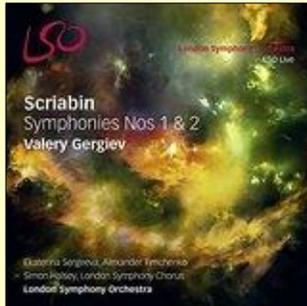
Korevaar displays a masterful hand in the Ballades, Opp. 23 and 47, particularly in No. 1 in G minor, where he captures all the tension building up through the main section, the galloping coda propelled by a double octave keyboard run to the final climax, and then – in a sensational move by Chopin that never fails to give me goose bumps, a frozen chain of spaced chords like falling icicles or a necklace of poisoned diamonds, stabbing into the listener's consciousness. Marvelous!

That leaves the Berceuse (Lullaby), Op. 57, which is actually a more difficult piece to interpret than you might imagine because of its unchanging, gently rocking rhythm and naïve melody. One might say the same for the Barcarolle in F-sharp minor, Op. 60, with its swaying, gondola-like rhythm and the requirement for simple melody such as a Venetian boatman might sing, were it not for the duet of voices that emerges in the right hand, the increasing harmonic density and the long-building climax on a third theme. It ends in a final apotheosis of something like real joy and happiness, which is rare for Chopin. Korevaar's performance ends suddenly and dramatically, as Chopin would have it.

For the program finale, we have the great scherzo No. 4, op. 54, with its quicksilver patterns of arpeggiated quavers and tremolos that we encounter in the course of a powerful and very dramatic 11-minute piece. It ends in a mood of radiant optimism – in Korevaar's words, "a momentary triumph of the sharp-side key of

last-named theme is set for solo violin (here played by PSO concertmaster Noah Bendix-Balgley). My only criticism here is that the sad, slender aria is not played to its end by the violin but is taken up all too soon by the strings and then the woodwinds and brass. The conclusion, marked *Grandioso ed Appassionato*, is just as glorious and impassioned as advertised.

E major over the downward pull of the flats.” That concludes a very satisfying program that, even with a duration of 76:53, you will soon want to hear again.



Scriabin: Symphonies 1 & 2
Valery Gergiev, London Symphony Orchestra
(LSO Live) 2-CD slimline

The fortunes of Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) have been almost as mind-boggling as the man himself. Notorious in his lifetime for his daring experiments in lush chromatic harmony as well as for his egomania (“I am the apotheosis of all creation,” or more perceptively, “the external world is the result of my subjective spiritual activity”), he was forgotten almost completely soon after his death. It is only in the past 40 years or so that he has been rediscovered, at first with more enthusiasm than comprehension, though more recent attempts have been increasingly perceptive.

Good examples of this growing awareness are these scintillating performances by Valery Gergiev, at the helm of the London Symphony in live performances recorded in 2014 at the Barbican, London by James Mallinson and Jonathan Stokes. Symphony No. 1 was Scriabin’s breakthrough in the genre, winning him both passionate admirers and detractors. Generally agreed to be in the key of E major, it is distinguished by its pulsating harmonies and unusual 6-movement form (Lento/ Allegro drammatico/ Lento/ Vivace/ Allegro/ Andante). Movements 1-2 are closely connected and 6 stands by itself as a choral finale in the manner of Beethoven’s Ninth.

As large as Scriabin’s 50-minute canvas is, it doesn’t seem long (at least in the present performance under Gergiev’s baton) because new incidents are always happening and ever more colorfully-hued harmonies are being born. The subject of the finale is the divine nature of music itself and its power to transform the world: “O marvelous image of the divine, / pure art of harmony!” This finale, which is the high point of the work, was a challenge for Scriabin, who shunned vocal music and was almost unique among all the Russian luminaries from Glinka to Shostakovich in not being a



Rachmaninov: Études-Tableaux, Moments Musicaux
Boris Giltburg, piano
(Naxos)

Where has Boris Giltburg been all my career as a reviewer? The Moscow-born Israeli pianist and winner of the 2013 Queen Elisabeth of Belgium Competition has done something I would not have previously believed possible: he has opened my ears to the sonorous beauty and dramatic sweep of Sergei Rachmaninov’s most technically demanding sets of piano music in a way that my previous acquaintance with this music had not done. What he says in his booklet annotations he more than makes good in dynamic, thoughtful performances that will stay with the listener for a long time.

Giltburg approaches the nine Études-Tableaux, Op. 39 from two directions: first, as *tableaux*, or pictures, moving in time like the cinema rather than frozen in a moment of time as in a painting; second, as *études*, each revolving around one or more specific difficulties. He adds the caution that “nowhere in piano literature does the term ‘étude’ —study—have as little meaning as when discussing Rachmaninov’s *Études tableaux*.” For Giltburg, the elements of atmosphere and storytelling in these finely drawn miniatures are so pronounced that we wait impatiently for the pianist to overcome the technical aspects so that we can savor the wealth of material underneath.

The most striking example, of course, is No. 6, which Rachmaninov himself described as “Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf.” Here, you can virtually experience the heroine’s growing terror at the wolf’s pursuit, culminating in chromatic runs and a vicious final snap as he seems to swallow her alive! But the pictorial and mood-creating elements don’t end here. No. 2, “The Sea and the Seagulls,” always more than just a simple nature scene, is imbued with a gentle sadness, leading up to “an almost heartbreaking outburst towards the

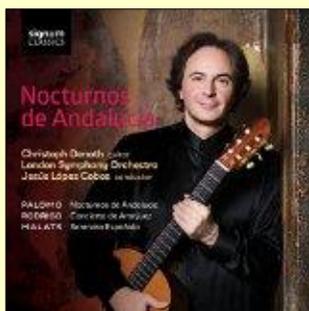
composer of romances (art songs). That he overcame this aversion with sensational results is shown in the vibrant performances of mezzo-soprano Ekaterina Sergeeva, tenor Alexander Timchenko, and the London Symphony Chorus under Alexander Halsey,

As auspicious a debut as was his first symphony, Scriabin's Symphony No. 2, usually considered to be in C minor, was inevitably somewhat of a disappointment to his admirers, and even to the composer himself, who later opined "I liked it when I wrote it, but it doesn't please me anymore." Much of his dissatisfaction centered around the finale, a stirring march that lacks the harmonic development of the other movements. A lot depends on the listener's expectations for this finale, which Scriabin came to regard as banal but which is undeniably rousing. A keen performance by Gergiev and the LSO will allow the listener plenty of opportunity to make up his/her mind either way.

Less problematical is the slow movement, an Andante that plays like a walk through a "garden of delights" in spring, complete with a glorious evocation of birdsong by the flute. A close second in listener appeal is the stormy fourth movement, marked *Tempestoso* and a scherzo in all but name, with tumultuous writing for strings, tympani and brass that serves as a very effective introduction to the finale.

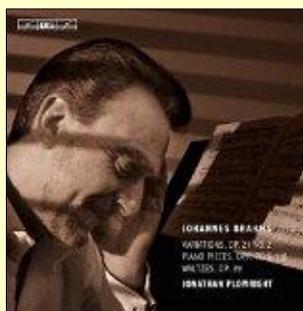
end." No. 3 evokes for Giltburg the image of a deserted village, with only a memory of strife remaining, "and, in the very last bars, shutters flapping in the wind." (For me, it recalled recent images of the abandoned town of Chernobyl – captured by hi-tech drones, as it is not safe for people to venture there). No. 9 is a somber march, "not joyous, just triumphant." (Russians know how to distinguish the difference.) And so it goes throughout the *Études Tableaux*, in moods and hues that generally explore the sadder side of existence.

Giltburg has no reservations about proclaiming the six *Moments Musicaux*, Op. 16 as purer, more absolute music than the *Études Tableaux*. Basically, that is correct, though the artist cannot resist observing how the major key section of No. 1 "feels like a fresh spring morning" after the frozen stasis of the preceding section in the minor key. And, of course, No. 5 is a *Barcarolle*, a gentle melody over an undulating accompaniment in the left hand that recalls the songs of Venetian boatmen. The greater emphasis in these fiendishly difficult pieces does seem to be on the difficulties of execution that Giltburg overcomes more successfully than anyone I've yet heard. A longing melody over triplet sixths in No. 1 finds its parallel in the syncopated melody in octaves over triplet figurations in both hands in No. 2, where it appears that the old magician's trick of a "third hand" can apply to music as well. Elsewhere, we have noble melodies, sweeping lyricism, and endings that can be either subdued or tumultuous as in No. 4. No. 6, consciously evoking memories of Chopin's "Ocean" Etude, Op. 25, sweeps across the keyboard to one of the most sonorous climaxes ever written for piano.



"*Nocturnos de Andalucía*," Music of Palomo, Rodrigo, and Malats – Christoph Denoth, guitar; Jesús López-Cobos, London Symphony Orchestra (Signum)

In his performer's notes to the present release of Spanish guitar concertos on the Signum Classics label, Christoph Denoth writes, "Andalusian music has always fascinated and inspired me: its voice of passion, melancholia, longing, and its large variety of dance rhythms speak to us in a very direct, visceral way." The Swiss-born classical guitarist is not alone in that regard. The music of Andalusia – a powerful mix of centuries of Arab, Jewish, Gypsy, and Spanish influences, has inspired musicians from other regions



Brahms: Piano Pieces, Vol. 3
Jonathan Plowright, piano
(Bis Records hybrid SACD, DSD, Surround)

I don't know what else Jonathan Plowright has in his repertoire. But if the Yorkshire native plays everything with the boldness, surety, and poetic sensitivity that he invests in his Brahms, he must really be phenomenal. As he said in a November 2014 interview in *Classical Music Magazine*, "Everything Brahms says makes perfect sense to me." Now, *that* is something that has never been entirely self-evident to musicians and critics going back to Brahms' own day. But as Plowright shows us in this latest installment in an

of Spain up to the present day. Of the three composers heard here, only Lorenzo Palomo (b. Pozoblanco, Cordoba 1938) was actually a native of the region, but Joaquin Rodrigo (1901-1999) and Joaquin Malats (1872-1912) also succumbed to its spell.

Palomo's Nocturnos de Andalucía (Andalusian Nocturnes), which was premiered in 1996 by its dedicatee Pepe Romero, is the most recent of the three luminous works on this program. It is not too early to proclaim it a truly great work of music. It is a large-scale 40-minute concerto in six sections that celebrate aspects of Andalusia. The titles (translated) are 1) Toast to the Night, 2) Shattered Smile of a Star, 3) Dance of Marialuna, 4) Gust of Wind, 5) Nocturne of Córdoba, and 6) The Flamenco Stage. A 20th century composer as well as a Spaniard steeped in his own heritage, Palomo does not feel the need to tame the discordant harmonies of indigenous music, so that they consequently come across to us in their full pungency.

Another thing you notice about this work is its rich orchestration and an unusually large ensemble for this type of work, about 80 pieces. Palomo's long experience (1981-2004) as a conductor with the Deutsche Oper of Berlin, where he currently resides, aided him in crafting an orchestration of immediate power and transparency without obscuring the softer intimate voice of the guitar. Perhaps the deep point of this far-ranging work occurs in (5) *Danza de Marialuna*, the portrait of a girl dressing herself in white in preparation for a dance with her lover. It is a typical flamenco moment, with the lightness of the music underscored by a darker thread that leads us to know this will be a tale of unrequited love.

What can I say about Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* for guitar and orchestra (1939) that you don't already know about one of the best-loved and most performed and recorded works of the past century? An altogether mellower work than the darkly passionate Palomo, it is scored for a smaller orchestra of 39 pieces, and the texture often feels like that of chamber music with the vital contributions made by flute, oboe and cello in support of the guitar's eloquence. The nimble-fingered Denoth works hard negotiating the passagework, often involving tricky counter-rhythms, in the opening. The Adagio, with its heartbreakingly beautiful melody that is usually taken as a celebration of the serene beauty of the gardens of the Royal Palace of Aranjuez (or is it love music?) comes across in all its vibrant beauty. The finale, with its lively alternation of double and triple time, is just taut enough and short enough to make the perfect ending.

Joaquin Malats' *Serenata Española*, originally a movement in an orchestral suite, is here presented by Christoph Denoth in his own subtly scored, imaginative arrangement as a work for guitar and orchestra. Though Malats was a native of Catalonia, the music evokes the richness and variety of Andalusia in a superb miniature with a duration of just 4:22.

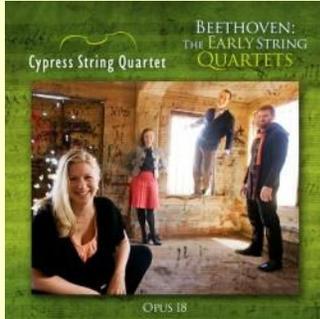
ongoing Brahms series for Bis Records, there is a certain rightness to the way the composer approaches his piano works, and this artist bears it out with performances that command our respect as well as beguile us, often in unexpected ways.

This program contains prime examples of Brahms' piano writing from various stages of his career, from early (Variations on a Hungarian Melody, Op. 21, No. 2, and the ever-popular Waltzes, Op. 39) to mid-career (Piano Pieces, Op. 76) and late (Piano Pieces, Op. 118). Even the earliest of these, the relaxed and allegedly lightweight Hungarian Variations, have their serious, introverted moments as in Vars. 9-11, all marked *dolce*, which set us up for the exuberance and breakaway spirits in the concluding Vars.12-13. The Waltzes, among the most popular of all Brahms' works, are filled with scintillating verve and harmonic richness, leading us down the garden path towards the soothing progress and unexpected decorations in Waltz No.15 in A-flat, which is justly one of the world's favorite encores, and then to the curious inconclusiveness of No.16 (Brahms *will* be Brahms).

Most of the truly great moments in the program are in the Op.76 and Op.118 sets of piano pieces, collections in which the deepest thoughts of this composer are to be found alongside more surprisingly carefree ones. In Op. 76, it is easy enough to speak of the "rhythmic intricacy," "bold harmonic language," and "terse and elliptical thematic transformations" (I crib shamelessly here from the excellent booklet annotation by Bryce Morrison). It is quite something else to describe how Brahms' procedures move us in the B-minor Capriccio of this set, where there are clouds threatening on the horizon of the carefree mood with which this piece begins. Brahms seems to tap into the mood of the Ancient Greek inscription "*Et in Arcadia ego*" in pieces such as this. In other moments, as in the Capriccio in C-sharp minor, he indulges his passion for conflicting duple and triple rhythms and dramatic syncopations. Other Capriccios and Intermezzi range from calmness to agitation and from exultation to nostalgia, sadness, and deep introspection.

Plowright handles all the various moods in these pieces with poetic insight and a skilled artistry that never makes an exhibition of itself, but is always employed in the service of the music. He applies these same artistic qualities to his traversal of Op. 118, where the effect of Brahms' harmonic progressions and contrapuntal devices is, if anything, even more difficult to decide upon in terms of mood. This is in part the result of shifting moods within the same short piece, as in the Ballade in G minor, marked *Allegro energico* and just as powerful and energetic as advertised in the outer sections, but with a positively glowing central idea. What is the dominant impression here? Or what about the concluding Intermezzo in E-flat minor, marked *largo e mesto*: just how sad (*mesto*) do you want this piece to be without seeming utterly dispirited? As he does throughout the set, Plowright

exercises discrete judgment in leaving Op. 118 in a mood of resignation but not one of desolation, which would not be the last word we wanted to hear on six great pieces of music. The pianist gets it just as Brahms requires.



Beethoven: The Early Quartets
Cypress String Quartet
(Avie Records 2-CD slimline)

Sometimes, it seems life is never so busy as when you're preparing to retire. After a wonderful 20-year run, the members of the San Francisco-based Cypress String Quartet are preparing to dissolve the ensemble in favor of other life and professional considerations. We must say it's been really great listening to them over the past two decades. (Just check my past reviews for March 2012, April 2013, January and July 2014, and January 2015 to see how high I've been on this engaging foursome consisting of Cecily Ward and Tom Stone, violins, Ethan Filner, viola, and Jennier Kloetzel, cello.)

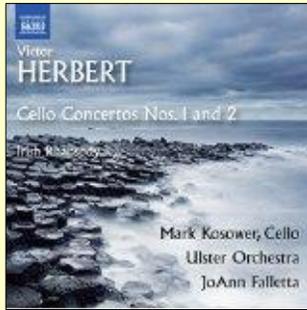
Even as I write, they are in the midst of 16 recitals in various Bay Area locations under the banner of "Beethoven in the City." Then off to Alaska for the Sitka Summer Music Festival, May 31-June 13. Back home on June 26, they will give their farewell concert in the Green Room of the San Francisco War Memorial. In the process of a very busy whirl, even by international string quartet standards, their audiences will have plenty of opportunities to say "Thanks for the memories."

If you're not able to be out on the west coast in person for these events, the next best thing is to listen to the sterling performances on this new Avie release of Beethoven's Op. 18, the "Early Quartets." Anyone who has followed their career know how important Beethoven has been to these artists. They haven't exactly been slackers in their Debussy, Dvořák or Schubert, but Beethoven has always seemed to have a special significance for them, and they have responded consistently with the best they have to give.

Opus 18 is, in a sense, an ideal way for the Cypresses to say farewell to home listeners because these quartets found Beethoven at a major crossroads in his career. It is something of a critical commonplace to describe the six works as backward-looking, rooted in the tradition of Mozart and Haydn. Well, yes and no. As with the Middle and the Late Quartets, Beethoven's writing here represents the zenith of his current maturity. In many places in Opus 18, he established his own identity as a composer and gave a clear indication of the path he would travel in the future, even as he gave a nod to his predecessors.

To begin with, Beethoven did not compose these quartets in the sequence in which they were published, but rather in 3,1,2,5,6,4 order. He deliberately arranged them for publication so that they would follow a distinct curve in terms of stylistic maturity, with No. 1 in F major the most immediately ear-catching in its appeal and No. 6 pushing the envelope in the direction of future developments. The gloomy Adagio of No. 1, marked "*affettuoso ed appassionato*," was, as the composer wrote to a friend in one of the few instances when he was ever incautious enough to tip his hand, inspired by the Tomb Scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. No. 3 in D major is basically untroubled in its lyricism, though even here Beethoven gravitated to the rare keys of B-flat minor and E-flat minor in the slow movement, allowing him to indulge his passion for dark-sounding tones, and he experimented for the first time in any major work with shifting the center of gravity to the final movement. No. 5 in A major is often cited for its Mozartean qualities, and it is certain Beethoven followed the general outline of Mozart's K.464 in the same key. But the sensational rousing fanfare that occurs at about 6:38 in the theme-and-variations movement is pure Beethoven in his most jovial mood.

Finally, who but Beethoven would have done the startling things he pulled off in No. 6 in B-flat major, including mysterious octaves in the Adagio, syncopated accents, ties that extend beyond the bar lines and the deliberate confusion between 3/4 and 6/8 in the Scherzo? That's to say nothing of the unexpected accents and silences in the Adagio, where the intimate dialog between viola and cello features a strange motif marked "*Queste note ben marcato*," indicating each note is to be phrased in a marked, decisive manner. And the finale, in which the somber opening section "*La Malinconia*" (melancholy) is succeeded without warning by the fleet-footed scamper of the Rondo section, must have raised eyebrows in Beethoven's day for its sheer daring!



Victor Herbert: Cello Concertos 1, 2
Mark Kosower, cello; JoAnn Falletta, Ulster Orchestra (Naxos)

The artists in this CD of unexpected delights by Victor Herbert are by no means shy in citing the virtues of the two cello concertos on display here. JoAnn Falletta, principal conductor of the Ulster Orchestra from 2011-2014, characterizes the Irish-born, German-trained American composer as one who “never left his native Ireland in his heart,” while cellist Mark Kosower touts his music as “singing soulfully in the best registers of the instrument and demonstrating how agile and virtuosic a cello can be.” Naxos’ own website blurb is more down-to-business: “beautiful, tuneful music that is perfect for radio and in-store play.”

Truly, this music is easy for a first-time listener to fall in love with. Concerto No. 1 in D major, Op. 8 opens with a graceful theme that provides the cellist plenty of opportunity for rumination, followed by a yearning second theme and a livelier third. Kosower relishes all three themes plus the opportunity Herbert allows to play one’s own cadenza. The Andante combines the functions of slow movement and scherzo, alternating songlike charm and perkiness. The finale is a spirited Polonaise that takes the cello way up in register and really demands a lot of the artist.

Concerto No. 2 in E minor, Op. 30 is a marginally more “serious” work, though it is imbued with many of the popular elements that found their way into Herbert’s operettas. It opens in a darker mood than its predecessor, though the gloom proves more theatrical than tragic,



Ravel: Orchestral Works, Vol. 3
Leonard Slatkin, Orchestre National de Lyon (Naxos)

During the tenure of Leonard Slatkin, who took over as music director from Jun Märkl in 2001, the Orchestre National de Lyon (FR) has continued to grow in artistic stature and number of personnel. The progress may be measured by this latest release in the complete orchestral works of Maurice Ravel. A scintillating program is comprised of Ravel’s orchestrations of the music of other composers, mostly for purposes of the ballet.

We begin with Ravel’s orchestral transcription of the colorful *Menuet pompeux* (pompous minuet) from Chabrier’s *Pièces pittoresques* for piano. With its robust material, it plays more like a rhapsody than an actual minuet. Even in its original rustic form, you couldn’t dance this minuet and keep your powdered wig securely on!

Debussy is represented by two dance-inspired piano pieces orchestrated by Ravel: *Danse* and *Sarabande* from the collection *Pour le piano*. The high rhythms and the color in the former are enhanced by Ravel, while the orchestration in the latter brings out its slow, languid, melancholy character.

Ravel orchestrated Schumann’s *Carnaval* for the ballet at Nijinsky’s request. Most of the score has been lost, and the only numbers that remain – *Préambule*, *Valse allemande*, *Paganini*, and *March of the Davidsbund* – do not have any sense of continuity, but the music is undeniably colorful and extroverted.

Finally, we come to the Mussorgsky



Rimsky-Korsakov: Symphonies 1, 3
Gerard Schwarz, Berlin Radio SO (Naxos)

Gerard Schwarz, now conductor laureate of the Seattle Symphony after his 26-year tenure as music director, is still very much a part of the international music community. He shows us that his skills at the podium are still as finely honed as ever in these performances of two much-neglected delights of the Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, in sparkling accounts with the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Really, we ought to hear these two symphonies more often, beginning with No. 1 in E minor, Op. 1, an inspired early effort by the then-17 year old naval midshipman. The proponents of the so-called New Russian School were quick to herald it as the first “truly Russian” symphony. It is actually of rather modest aims, being of 25 minutes’ duration and filled with attractive, intuitively unfolding melodies that reveal their folksong origin. The work as a whole isn’t terribly complicated, but it does have an abundance of tone color to support its melodies. In four movements marked *Largo assai* – *Allegro/Andante tranquillo*/ *Scherzo: Vivace/Allegro assai*, it shows a regard for the importance of balance and contrast between movements that other Russian Nationalists seem never to have fathomed. Not bad for a lad of seventeen!

Symphony No. 3 in C major, Op. 32 is a mature work that needs more public exposure and recognition. (In general, Rimsky’s programmatic works in the genre, such as *Antar* and *Scheherazade*, have always

rather like the music associated with the bogey-men in Babes in Toyland, to be dispersed gloriously in the final act. The Andante tranquillo has an engaging main theme and a broadly stated theme for contrast, allowing Kosower plenty of elbow room to explore the eloquent poetry and sensual beauty that are remarkable even by the standards of a Victor Herbert. The finale tests the virtuosity and agility of both cellist and conductor.

Irish Rhapsody is a smashing finish to the program. This work used to be more popular than it is today, for reasons that you will soon hear when you first listen to it. It's a shameless stringing together of such sentimental Irish favorites as "Believe me, if all those endearing young charms" and "Heart of an Irishman," all done up masterfully as a smartly structured rhapsody. (Personally, I find it delightful!)

/ Ravel Pictures at an Exhibition, one of the most vividly imaginative works in all music. All the sections of the Lyon get a chance to strut their stuff in Ravel's brilliantly scored orchestrations of Mussorgsky piano pieces that make them so memorable: the nostalgic tenor saxophone in "The Old Castle," the lumbering basses and lower brass that build up the slow crescendo / decrescendo in "Cattle," and the frantic stuttering of the cornet in "The Market Place at Limoges" (I mentally pictured a rumor spreading like wildfire).

The manner in which the "Limoges" tableau is followed immediately by a powerful chord that ushers in "Catacombs," and then by the slow, gloomy progress of "with the dead in a dead language" could not have been more dramatic. Slatkin takes the transition from the fear-inducing grotesquerie of "The Hut on Fowl's Legs" (Baba Yaga) to the grand monumentality of "The Great Gate of Kiev" without a break, building and broadening the music until it reaches a magnificent climax at the very end.

gotten more attention than his numbered symphonies.) The first movement contrasts a stirring first subject with a gentler second one, developing the material all the way to a triumphant recapitulation and a hushed ending. The Scherzo combines great rhythmic vitality and energy in an unusual (and challenging) 5/4 metre. A French horn solo introduces the not-so-slow movement, a smartly paced Andante with much delectable writing for woodwinds and strings. This movement is kept smoothly and handsomely flowing in the present performance (motion being a Schwarz specialty, as is his appreciation of Rimsky's subtle orchestral color). Schwarz shows a masterful hand and the orchestra much technical assurance in a vigorous finale that re-uses themes from the earlier movements in ways that stress the work's solid unity.