



Brahms, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Bruch, Mendelssohn: Violin Concertos – Nathan Milstein (Urania) 2-CD slimline

These Nathan Milstein recordings have been treasured by lovers of the violin for decades. It's good to have them together once again in a well-filled 2-CD program and in great sounding remasterings by the Italian label Urania Arts. For my money, the sound has the presence and warmth of the original LP recordings, a fact which should endear them to long-time vinyl collectors, many of whom (perhaps perversely?) find these qualities lacking in modern digital recording.

In a well-filled 2-CD set we are given *the* five major romantic violin concertos (Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky and Bruch 1). They reveal Nathan Milstein at the peak of his artistry, and also EMI/Capitol engineering skill at its best. The violinist recorded all these works in the 1950's with William Steinberg and the Pittsburgh SO (also in their heyday). You can still find these performances available on CD in the FDS (Full Dimensional Sound) series. On the present Urania release, only the Beethoven and Tchaikovsky were made with Steinberg. For the sake of variety, and also in order to fit all five concertos onto two compact discs (at 155 minutes versus 161), the reissue producers have opted for the 1959-1960 recordings made with the Philharmonia Orchestra for the other works, with Anatole Fistoulari conducting the Brahms and Leon Barzin the Mendelssohn and Bruch. All are top-class efforts.

All these recordings show Milstein at the top of his art. Audiophiles whose memories go back to that era will remember the artist for his aristocratic bearing and the infinite care, amounting to an obsession, to get his fingering just right in order to articulate each note perfectly. That said, the amazing thing about his playing was his natural ability to get right to the emotional heart of a given work with a minimum of fuss or ostentation. There was never anyone quite like him.



Copland: Appalachian Spring, Rodeo, Billy the Kid, El Salon Mexico – Leonard Bernstein, New York Philharmonic (Urania) 2-CD slimline

Normally, you would think that the music of Aaron Copland would be just the thing that Leonard Bernstein would have had with his Wheaties for breakfast. Well, yes and no. Lenny did share in common with Copland a lot of the same traits as a composer: a varied color palette with very effective blue moods, a love of spiky rhythms and non-stop excitement that they both loved to spring on the listener with stunning suddenness, and the ability to speak to the hearts of their audience. But that applies basically to the music of Copland's "populist" period. The latter-day Copland left Bernstein behind, as we shall see shortly.

About two-thirds of the program consists of the populist Copland, particularly Billy the Kid (1938), Rodeo (1942) and Appalachian Spring (1943-1944). It begins with the miniature ballet El Salon Mexico (1933-1936) in which the composer used fragments of popular Mexican tunes kaleidoscopically shuffled, tense versus relaxed rhythms, and jaunty syncopations to good effect to create the atmosphere of a popular dance café. Appalachian Spring, up next, is probably Copland's best-loved work, contrasting moments of dreamlike peace and quiet ecstasy with those of rapture and high drama as the composer's newly married homesteaders are given visions of the trials, pain, and exultation of the new life that awaits them. The best remembered melodies from the ballet are quotations from old hymn books: "Simple Gifts" and "Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones," which are developed and varied here with superb mastery.

That last comment about the "old hymn books" is significant, as Copland's weak point as a composer seems to have been his inability to compose striking original melodies. In his way-out-west ballets Billy the Kid and Rodeo, he borrowed liberally from collections of western tunes and cowboy songs provided him for that purpose by the choreographers, Lincoln Kirstein

For the sake of brevity, I'd like to focus only on Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, with Barzin and the Philharmonia. Here, Milstein shows how close a rapport he could establish with a conductor and orchestra and still retain his individuality and unique sense of beauty. With its symphonic heft and penchant for juxtaposing the lyrical and the dramatic, the Bruch is the sort of meat on which Milstein liked to feed.

In the opening movement, following a quiet, mysterious *Vorspiel*, which is actually a prelude to the second movement, Milstein immediately makes his presence felt in the sure way he takes the cadenza and the two melodies, one strong and the other very melodic. In the Adagio, he handles an embarrassment of flowing themes with natural feeling, while for the finale he ratchets up his virtuosity for a plethora of double stops in dance-like tempo that gets faster and more energetic as we approach the finish line. Simply terrific!



Bizet: Carmen, L'Arlesienne Suites
Neville Marriner, Academy of St. Martin's
(Pentatone Remastered Classics SACD, DSD)

Neville Marriner leads the London Symphony Orchestra in performances of Georges Bizet's Suites from Carmen and L'Arlesienne that bring a measure of freshness here and there to two venerable items in the orchestral repertoire. The orchestral sound is quite substantial and the occasional solos, especially by the flute, are warm and welcome in these recordings made in June, 1978 at Walthamstow Town Hall, London. If you haven't heard them for years, there's a reason.

The recordings were made in quadraphonic sound and released by Philips in 4-channel stereo at a time when few home listeners had quad systems and most record companies were only issuing 2-channel stereo LPs. That was the reality of the market. The quad LP soon went the way of the Edsel. The present recordings would have remained in limbo if PentaTone had not obtained the license to reissue them on hybrid SACD on its line of Remastered Classics. In remastering these multi-channel recordings, they were fortunate to have had at their disposal the original testing and tuning tapes. The analog machines were directly connected to state-of-the-art DSD analog to digital converters, bypassing any mixing consoles that might have altered, if only slightly, the original sound.

and Martha Graham respectively. In the former, we hear the likes of "Old Chisholm Trail," "Old Paint," and "The Dying Cowboy," though never quoted literally. In the Four Dance Episodes from Rodeo, the strains of the slow waltz in "Saturday Night Nocturne" are contrasted brilliantly by the raw excitement and outrageous hijinks of "Hoe-Down." And the excitement of the orchestrated gun battle in Billy the Kid, with the gun shots realized by the tympani, is unmatched by any other recording I have ever heard of this ballet.

These elements, which play to Copland's strengths as a composer, are abundantly present in the infinite variety of his suite for small orchestra Music for the Theatre (1958) in which layered sounds, blues and jazzy rhythms, dance and burlesque, are orchestrated with his usual brilliance to create the moods of the urban landscape by night. But even here, the inclusion of popular elements masks the fact that Copland was moving in new directions. Like Stravinsky before him, he composed "Three Famous Ballets We All Know and Love," and then proceeded to move in modernist directions – including 12-tone serialism – that left his audience behind.

That tendency bore its full bitter fruit in Connotations for Orchestra (1962), a work that left its audience in shell-shocked silence at its premiere at the inauguration of New York's Lincoln Center. Its attempts at dance and pastoral moods seem faint-hearted and dispirited, largely due to Copland's use of a serial technique which, like the "method acting" of the same period, tended to result in a sacrifice of individuality to the rigorous demands of the style. Leonard Bernstein, who conducted the premiere, was unduly criticized for the work's failure. Actually, he does a fine job marshaling the orchestra's resources and pacing the development of music that he did not in fact like. The fault was simply Copland's. How really bad is Connotations? Well, my own pet name for it is "Music for a Cold War."



Beethoven: Piano Sonatas, Vol. 5
Sequeira Costa, piano
(Claudio Records)

Portuguese pianist Sequeira Costa, now in his eighties, has long been prized by connoisseurs, particularly for his Chopin and Rachmaninoff. Surprisingly for an artist of his stature, his recordings are as difficult to find as it is to discover information about the pianist himself.

From the opening numbers, *Les Toréadors* and Prelude, in Carmen Suite No. 1, we are aware of a full-bodied sound, evident particularly in the ominous beat of the drum. The melifluous sound of the flute glides its way sensuously through the Intermezzo (which serves as a bridge to Act 3 in the opera), to be succeeded by other woodwinds that take up the enchanting melody. The Habanera, sung in the opera by the heroine as “*L’amour est un oiseau rebelle*” (Love is a wild bird) and the (in)famous *Toréador* Song come across here, if only to make us want to hear the original song lyrics, which of course do not occur in the suite.

Suite No. 2 opens with the March of the Smuglers (*Marche des contrabandiers*), soft-sounding at first but nonetheless spirited, and concludes with a *Danse bohème* (gypsy dance) that becomes gradually wilder and unconstrained, ending in a flurry of crashing cymbals and drums.

The two suites to *L’Arlésienne* (The Woman of Arles) are taken from the incidental music to a play based on Alphonse Daudet’s novella about the tragic tale of a young man who falls hopelessly in love with the lady of the title and then commits suicide by hurling himself from a high window when he discovers she is already betrothed to another. Most of the music in Suites 1 and 2 - the stirring Prelude based on the Christmas tune “March of the Three Kings” (*Marcho dei rei*), the enchanting Carillon with its flute melody rising above the strings, the lively rustic Minuet, and the touchingly beautiful Adagietto, to cite a few examples – evokes the sun-drenched land of Provence and the courtly manners of its people. The sole exception is the Intermezzo (often eliminated in performances of the *L’Arlésienne* suites) that conjures up an ominous mood foreshadowing the death of the youth in the final act.



Brahms: Symphony 4 + Schubert: “Unfinished” Symphony, Beethoven: Lenore Overture 3 – Paul Kletzki, Lucerne Festival Orchestra (Audite)

Audite Musikproduktion of Stuttgart, long a leader in reissuing historical recordings, has just come out with one of the oldest in its catalog, and it was worth waiting for. In this 7 September 1946 concert Paul Kletzki conducts the Luzerne Festival Orchestra in performances so full of exalted feeling that one wishes they could have occurred a decade later when the recording technology was more advanced. But then,

Surely, there ought to be more fanfare as he closes in on the final releases in his earlier-recorded cycle of Beethoven sonatas. Volume 5 contains a lot of attractive music. That’s important because not all of the Beethoven sonatas are as accessible to the average listener and quite a few were primarily written as experimental works that push the envelope in terms of style and technique. That is not to say that these elements are lacking in any respect in the four sonatas offered on this program, but engaging ideas and musical substance predominate.

Sequeira Costa begins with Sonata No. 12 in A-flat, Op. 26, sometimes known as the “Funeral March,” although the appellation applies only to the slow movement, marked “*Marcia funèbre sulla morte d’un Eroe*” and clearly a forerunner of the similarly titled movement in Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony. It is also written in a newer and freer style with none of its four movements in sonata form. It opens with a theme-and-variation movement, in which Costa has opportunity to display one of his most remarkable traits as a pianist, his ability to take serious passages with a softer, gentler sound than is usually the case with other artists. His style is relaxed and gracious (words we don’t often associate with Beethoven interpreters), particularly when the hands are spaced apart. In the “Funeral March” movement, the drum and trumpet sounds are muffled, increasing the solemnity. The final movement trickles in without a break with its cascading scales and brilliant finger work that give Costa another chance to employ his virtuosity in the service of the music.

Sonata No. 13 in E-flat, Op. 27, No. 1 was subtitled “*quasi una fantasia*,” a description that could equally well describe its predecessor and its successor on this album, as Beethoven jettisoned sonata form in all three in favor of freer design. Here, themes seem deceptively to flow continuously in a free association, although their interconnectedness is quite clear in a thoughtful reading such as Costa gives us here, where melodic fragments flit ghost-like from one section to another. Costa has a nice feeling for the specific gravity of this work, from an opening movement that seems too light for a sonata to a fast and lively scherzo in all but name, an all-too-short Adagio filled with elegiac poetry, and finally a rambunctious finale that suddenly picks up speed and exuberance as it nears the finish.

The opus-mate of the above sonata is the much more famous Sonata No 14 in C-sharp minor, known to posterity as the “Moonlight,” although the description refers only to the opening Adagio sostenuto with its insistent triplet rhythm. Has Costa heard this opening too often? Or does it only seem, if not perfunctory, at least not as compelling as others have taken it because he knows the center of gravity will shift dramatically to the finale, Presto agitato, with a short scherzo-like Allegretto as intermediary. Costa takes the transition between these two movements *attacca*, and plunges into the finale with its sharply struck *sforzandi* punctuating the prevailing fury.

the performances themselves might not have been as compelling as they are here.

The time is significant. Occurring less than a year after the end of the war, just as normal life had begun to return again for Kletzki's listeners, the depth of feeling in these interpretations is remarkable. It must have stirred and awakened many experiences for people who had been starved for six years for the kind of deeply moving reflection and consolation that one can receive from a live performance of great music. You forget about the limitations of the then-available recording media surprisingly quickly when listening to Kletzki leading a festival orchestra in performances of Brahms' Fourth Symphony, Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony, and Beethoven's Lenore Overture No. 3 that would have been hard to match by any permanent year-round orchestra.

For the recording sessions, a contemporary account in the *Luzerner Neusten Nachrichten* relates that pieces of equipment weighing 300 kg and wax discs weighing 2500 kg were brought in and "towers of apparatuses, boxes, and cables" were assembled. Furthermore, the positioning of the double basses and cellos was critical. They could not be placed too near the microphones, as "their natural sonorities exceeded the capability of the wax cylinders and the amplitudes created by the sound tended to oscillate too widely, creating interference." (*Wax cylinders?* Not likely; the media used were certainly acetate discs, each with a duration of about 4 minutes.) It was a tedious process, with four hours of session work typically yielding just 12 minutes of music.

Sound frustrating, trying to record a symphony in the bad old days before audio tape and vinyl records? For sure, the sounds of the lower strings at the opening of Schubert's "Unfinished" are barely audible, and the moment when the immortal songlike theme is first introduced by the cellos doesn't have all the clarity it should. But Kletzki is at his best building up both movements, typically by tweaking and gurning small increments of time, so that subtle accelerations during the build-ups enhance the sense of drama. When climaxes occur they are overwhelming. And time has not decayed in the least the beautiful song of the oboe in the Andante movement,

The hand of the master is equally evident in Brahms' Fourth, where he shapes the contours of the music to perfection, emphasizing both the architectural strength and the expressive beauty of this work. In Beethoven's Lenore 3, he builds the music through its various stages until the final climax, when the sense of triumph and feeling of excitement are overpowering. Audite's engineers have done a fine job cleaning up the acetate masters, but credit Paul Kletzki for infusing the program with a high sense of drama and conviction in the first place.

Finally, we arrive at Sonata No. 26 in E-flat, Op. 81a, the gateway to the deeply moving rhetoric and sublime beauty of the Late Sonatas. It was written in the wake of Napoleon's cruelly unnecessary bombardment of Vienna in 1809, when Beethoven missed many of his close friends who had fled the city. The music reflects both his sorrow and his recollection of happier times, particularly the "horn-fifths" motif associated with love of the out-of-doors and the hunt. Technically and emotionally, it is one of the composer's most difficult works, especially for the sighing motif that scans with "*le-be-wohl*" (farewell) in the opening movement, the intense dynamic outbursts in the Andante espressivo, and the fortissimo closing of the finale – all of which Costa handles with consummate artistry.



Schubert: String Quartets Nos. 10, 13, "Rosamunde"
Quartetto Italiano
(Pentatone Remastered Classics SACD, DSD)

These recordings were made by the Quartetto Italiano, consisting of founding members Paolo Borciani and Elisa Pegreff, violins; Piero Farulli, viola; and Franco Rossi, cello, at their favorite venue, La Chaix de Fonds, Switzerland in January, 1976. They were then at their peak of excellence, having been in existence since 1945, following the end of the war. Originally, the recordings were released by Philips in quadrasonic stereo in anticipation of a market that never developed as expected. At the time other companies were still releasing LP records in 2-channel stereo, and surround sound was as yet unheard-of. Without the advent of the hybrid SACD, they might have languished in the vaults indefinitely and not been licensed to Pentatone Music for re-release on its Remastered Classics Series.

This is an intriguing program. Franz Schubert's Quartet No. 13 in A minor, D.804 leads off, and immediately we are confronted with some surprises that are made more evident by the incisive performance by the Italiano. For one thing, the form is unusual for its day. Schubert had learned enough about sonata form from his predecessors Haydn and Mozart to know that he could depart from it when he deemed it necessary for the sake of greater expressiveness. He felt free to discard all that old Theme 1-Theme 2-development-recapitulation drag in the opening movement in favor of a freer form utilizing theme-and-variations and placing greater emphasis on the interaction between voices.



“Munch conducts Debussy, Poulenc, Barber, Honegger, Vaughn Williams” – Charles Munch, Boston Symphony Orchestra (Urania) 2-CD slimline

Unexpected treasures await the listener in this collection of recordings by legendary maestro Charles Munch. The Frenchman, who is best-remembered in this country for his tenure with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was a man of unusually wide musical sympathies. All but one of the recordings heard here were done with the BSO, 1955-1961. The sole exception is the recording of Arthur Honegger’s Symphony No. 2 in D for Strings and Trumpet, which dates from October 1942 and was a world premiere with the Paris Conservatory Orchestra.

The Debussy works for chorus and orchestra heard here are The Blessed Damosel (*La demoiselle élue*) in a French translation of the poem by the pre-Raphaelite poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian (*Le martyr de Saint Sebastien*) after the “musical mystery play” by Italian poet Gabriele d’Annunzio. In the former, made with soprano Victoria de Los Angeles and the Radcliffe Choral Society, we are immediately struck by the luminous Wagnerian harmonies employed by the young French romantic who was still in search of his mature style.

Le martyr, featuring the distinguished voices of soprano Phyllis Curtin and contraltos Catherine Akos and Florence Kopleff, with outstanding support by the New England Conservatory Chorus under Lorna Cooke de Varon, has a great variety of evocative sounds and textures that lets us know that Debussy has arrived as an Expressionist composer (*not* Impressionist, a term he despised).

Poulenc’s Gloria, here given its world premiere performance (21 January, 1961), is filled with deep feeling, reinforced by the ample resources of the Boston Symphony and the ecstatic participation of the Pro Musica Chorus. This is my all-time favorite of the recordings I have heard.

Ralph Vaughn Williams’ Symphony No. 8 in D minor, heard here in a live 1958 performance that sounds more vital and spontaneous than any studio recording might have been, is in four movements: Fantasia, Scherzo alla Marcia, Cavatina, and Toccata. Richly layered and sumptuously scored, it reflects in part the

The result is that the quartet begins to “feel” more like a symphony and less like chamber music.

The next thing you notice is the rich abundance of melody, even by Schubert’s usual standard. The work derives its nickname from the use of the melody of the first Intermezzo of the composer’s incidental music to *Rosamunde* in the slow movement, a gently elegaic Andante that is the emotional center of the work. Schubert further underscored this basic mood by borrowing the melody of his song “*Schöne Welt, wo bist Du?*” (Beautiful world, where are you?). Even the Allegro of the finale is qualified by *moderato*, so as not to dispell the beautifully sad, muted tone of the work.

Finally, there is a discernable edginess to much of this music, particularly in the opening movement. The home key of A minor, an unusual and uncongenial choice for a work for strings, adds to the edgy feeling. We often get the feeling that one or both of the violins are out of tune, a deception resulting from the deliberately strange harmonics Schubert employs.

In contrast to this mature quartet of 1824, we have Schubert’s less problematic Quartet No. 10 in E-flat, D.87 of 1813, when the composer was in his teens. We are so busy being beguiled by its mixture of playfulness and tenderness that we don’t question its form, which is basically that which the composer received from Haydn and Mozart. Of particular interest is the 2-note lift-off to the melody of the Scherzo, marked *Prestissimo*. It scans to the words “hee-haw” – almost like a prequel to a similar theme in Mendelssohn’s as-yet unwritten Overture to A Midsummer Night’s Dream! By way of contrast, the following Adagio is imbued with a dreamy, Mozartean quality. Not bad work for a 16-year old to have written.



Sarasate: Carmen Fantasy, Zigeunerweisen, Spanish Dances – Ruggiero Ricci, violin (Idis Classics)

Ruggiero Ricci was one of the great violinists of a generation for which sheer virtuosity was an important element of the artist’s makeup. Though widely thought to be an Italian, Ricci (who is, happily, still among us at this writing) is actually an Italian American from the Bay Area of California. He was in his maturity as a master of the bow when these studio recordings were made. Now, thanks to excellent remasterings made in Milan under the auspices of the Instituto Discografico Italiano

composer's researches into the *Stile antico* of the Italian composers of the 16th century, served up by a 20th century mind that has its characteristic traits of humor and darkness. This was no slavish reverence of the old masters. Nevertheless, had Frescobaldi, Gabrieli, and Palestrina come back to life, they would have recognized a kindred spirit. Under Munch's baton, the lovely and moving Cavatina reveals itself to be the heart of an imaginatively scored work, while the brassy Toccata, scored with seemingly all the gongs and 'phones known to man, makes for a rousing finale.

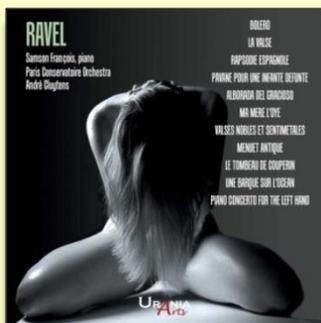
Honegger's Symphony No. 2, premiered in Paris in 1942, seems to embody the hope and determined resolve of a nation still in the depths of the Nazi occupation in its layered string sounds, the rising curve of its three-movement form, and, in the *Vivace non troppo* finale, motor rhythms (recalling the love of dynamism Honegger showed in Pacific 231). Then we have the entry of the trumpet at the very end. The last-named comes across as rather thin, without the sensational full-bodied sound the trumpet needs to have at this point (perhaps a limitation of the recording technology). This is the only blemish in an otherwise great recording. The last item, Samuel Barber's eternally popular Adagio for Strings, with the inspiring sound of its gloriously rising arc based on successive half-steps, ends the program on a more satisfying note.

(from whence "Idis"), we can experience Ricci's artistry in something like the sound quality of the original recordings.

We begin with 1959 recordings of Pablo de Sarasate's Carmen: Fantasie de Concert and Zigeunerweisen (Gypsy Airs), in which Ricci is more than capably supported by Pierino Gamba and the London Symphony Orchestra. Here the violinist is at the top of his form, displaying an utterly dazzling technique in the service of music that goes right to the listener's heart. All the great lyric melodies from Bizet's opera seem to be present in Sarasate's Carmen Fantasy, including the well-loved "Habanera," and they are masterfully arranged for greatest impact. This eternally popular showpiece, and also the Zigeunerweisen that follows it on this program, allow Ricci to display his full range of artistry, from small, almost pointillistic effects to large, stopped chords and a truly big tone that does full justice to two great composers.

The magic continues in a program of dances and character pieces that Ricci recorded in 1961 in partnership with Brooks Smith, one of the finest and most discrete accompanists of his generation. They consist of 8 Spanish Dances which Sarasate published in pairs as Opp. 21-23 and 26, plus Introduction and Tarantella, Op. 43; Caprice Basque, Op. 24; and Serenade Andalouse, Op. 28. In all these works in which Sarasate helped popularize the "Spanish idiom," he struck a rare balance between virtuoso display and real musical substance, a balance which Ricci certainly brings out in the course of these wow recordings.

The sound of these lovingly prepared remasterings is remarkably like that of those fondly-remembered LP records of yesteryear – better, in fact, because there is no surface noise or vinyl scratches to distract us. And really, all nostalgia aside, are you, gentle reader, in the same condition you were in 1959?



Ravel: Orchestral Works
André Cluytens, Paris Conservatoire
Orchestra
(Urania) 2-CD slimline

Under André Cluytens' baton and with outstanding playing by all the members of the Paris Conservatory Orchestra, these 1959-1962 recordings come alive in splendid remasterings by the Italian label, Urania Records. The engineers do a great job of recapturing the warm, full EMI sound of that period when the stereo medium was new and filled with infinite possibilities. (For the record, EMI's first commercial recording to have been made in stereo was that of Sergei Tanayev's Suite de concert for Violin and Orchestra, with David Oistrakh the soloist and the Philharmonia conducted by Nicolai Malko, Feb. 1956). The present 2-CD set reveals Cluytens at the top of his craft as a masterful interpreter of Maurice Ravel. This is Ravel as good as I've ever auditioned, and I've heard the best over the years from Charles Munch, Jean Martinon, and Yan Pascal Tortelier.

To begin, Ravel was a masterful orchestrator who understood, as did few others, the capabilities of all the instruments of the orchestra and how to use them for maximum effect. In this double CD set, we have his arrangements of his own piano pieces (*Valses nobles et sentimentales*, *Menuet Antique*, *Pavane pour une Infante défunte*, *Une Barque sur l'océan*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*). As Cluytens is keenly aware, Ravel used the woodwinds to carry his melodies, and not merely to heighten or decorate them as other composers might have done. In Bolero,

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a work that became so immensely popular that Ravel affected to despise it, we have the acrid melody of oboe and cor anglais over a backdrop of hypnotic percussion and wailing bass clarinets, wending its way in a snakelike dance to which Ravel did not permit the slightest variation in tempo when he conducted it. Neither does Cluytens, until the piece winds up in a blaring miasma of sounds. Rapsodie Espagnole opens with an opulent evocation of nocturnal languor in *Prélude à la nuit*, followed by the mesmerizing rhythms and bold colors of two Spanish dances, a Malagueña and a Habanera, and then a scintillating Feria, the evocation of a Spanish feast-day.

La Valse, which Ravel termed a “choreographic poem (*poème chorégraphique*) has often been interpreted as a picture of a decaying regime in its principal theme based on Austrian waltzes of the pre-WWI era, with its heady rhythm, *echt*-romantic ethos, and even a few discrete oom-pahs. But not all is superficial glitter, as we hear in the second section, a sad, thoughtful variant that seems to be a backward glance at the vanished glory of an era that was – at least in Cluytens’ interpretation. Pavane for a Dead Princess, inspired by a Velasquez painting of a little *infanta* at play in the court of 16th century Spain, is likewise infused with a mood of pensive nostalgia, which creeps in unobtrusively under the stately rhythm of a courtly dance. *Alborada del gracioso*, usually translated as “morning song of a fool” or court jester, is a riot of color and rhythm, ending, as does Bolero, in the musical equivalent of a train derailment. *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (In memory of Couperin) is presented here in Ravel’s orchestration that eliminated the Fugue and Toccata in his keyboard version, so that the subsequent movements after the Prélude (Menuet, Forlane, Rigaudon) come across as a very sprightly suite of baroque dances.

Mother Goose Suite (*Ma Mère l’Oye*) was intended as a ballet and reveals the full range of Ravel’s color palette and mastery of texture and movement – from the gloomy Pavane in The Sleeping Beauty of the Wood to the scintillating oriental rhythms of The Empress of the Pagodas and the brooding intensity of Conversations of Beauty and the Beast, in which the deep, impassioned sound of the contrabassoon, representing the Prince who has been cast by witchcraft into the loathsome form of the Beast, hints at a dark, troubled past and perhaps murderous desires. The sixth tableau, The Enchanted Garden (*Le jardin féerique*) rivals the sunrise music (*lever du jour*) in Scene 3 of Daphnis and Chloe (not heard here) as the most intricately and fantastically scored pages in all of music – a canvas that the master hand of an André Cluytens is required to keep in perspective.

Finally, we have Cluytens’ great 1959 recording of Piano Concerto in D minor for the Left Hand, a late work that Ravel wrote to a commission from Paul Wittgenstein. The latter was an Austrian concert pianist who had lost his right arm in the war, but fortunately, being a man of means, was able to solicit works for piano, left hand, from a number of famous composers. Ravel’s concerto, the best and best-known of them all, compensates brilliantly for the initial limitation of the use of left hand only by its powerful, orchestration, ending in driving, marching rhythms, and by the incredible scope of its piano writing. The artist in the present recording, Samson François, ranges over the keyboard, using all its resources in a manner that makes us marvel that the work was written for an artist with one hand missing. A grand way to end the program!



Beethoven: The Late Quartets No’s 12-16
Budapest String Quartet
Library of Congress recordings 1941-1960
(Bridge Records) 3-CD set

These live recordings were made by the Budapest String Quartet in performance at the Library of Congress on various occasions between 1941 and 1960. This is the classic foursome of Joseph Roisman, Violin 1, Alexander Schneider, Violin 2, Boris Kroyt, Viola, and Mischa Schneider, Cello that long-time listeners will remember from that era. The solo exception is the presence of Edgar Ortenberg as Violin 2 in a December 1945 performance of Opus 132, at a time when “Sasha” Schneider, as he was called by the others, was on leave pursuing other activities. The recordings were made in the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress. This CD reissue of Beethoven’s five Late Quartets was produced by Becky and David Starobin of Bridge Records and Anne McLean of the Library’s Music Division, with Adam Abeshouse in charge of restoration and remastering. I reviewed the set upon its initial release in 1997, so long ago that I forget what I said at the time and don’t even have a surviving paper copy to crib from. So, this review is strictly from scratch!

The present recordings were culled from numerous cycles of the Beethoven quartets the BSQ gave over the course of its 22-year residency at the Library. That they were performed on the set of Stradivarius instruments in the Library’s collection, to which the members of the quartet had access over a long period, meant that they had ample time to adjust themselves to the sound qualities of the Strads, including their characteristically rich tone. The age of the recordings, and the fact they were made for archive purposes and not commercial release, accounts for their rugged sound quality, particularly noticeable in unisons and fortes, harshness that the remastering engineer was not able to soften without altering the tonal richness of these very aggressive performances. After a while your ears make the appropriate adjustments so that, while you aren’t able to tune out

the harshness completely, you learn to ignore it for the sake of the matchless performances.

When you do that, you will hear some very interesting things from an ensemble who were notable risk-takers, an essential quality when tackling the Late Quartets. They assay these works with utter abandon. As critic Harris Goldsmith observes in the booklet notes, “the group plays with remarkably good intonation and with a *punctilio* that borders on the supernatural.” Goldsmith was thinking specifically of Quartet No. 13 in B-flat, Op. 130, and particularly its original finale the *Grosse Fugue* (Great Fugue), in which he describes the Budapest’s performance as “an amazingly reckless (and wreckless) revel.” But the comment could be applied elsewhere throughout this epoch-making set of masterworks. As we know, Beethoven pulled the Great Fugue, with its dramatically leaping notes and cross-rhythms, out of Op. 130 and published it separately as Op. 133. That was a sage decision, as the 16-minute fugue would have completely distorted the quartet by moving its center from the eloquent, sad, and deeply moving Cavatina. Other movements in this work, so remarkably coherent and satisfying despite its apparent sprawl, reveal Beethoven’s love of the dance, notable in the third movement, a Scherzoso marked *Andante con moto, ma non troppo*, and the *Alla danza tedesca* (in the manner of a German dance) that follows it. If there is an intended farewell to life in Op. 130, may we not also see in these movements a farewell to dancing, a social activity that Beethoven had enjoyed immensely in his youth but which had been denied him for some years by his increasing deafness?

Even today, the Late Quartets leave us breathless in the way they ring up changes in tempo, texture, dynamics and mood with startling suddenness. That the Budapest Quartet take these changes within the line and without even the slightest pause makes them seem all the more remarkable. They are also keenly aware of the composer’s audaciousness in altering the received tradition of first-movement or sonata-allegro form, making these works play, in effect, like symphonic poems rather than chamber music in the usual sense. These formal innovations must have startled his classically-educated contemporaries, much as present-day Republicans are wont to be alarmed when Donald Trump goes off-task in his campaign speeches. But, as we have seen, there was method in his madness. Quartets No. 15 in A minor, 13 in B-flat major, and 14 in C-sharp minor (the last-named in a uncongenial key for a body of strings) fall into five, six, and seven movements, respectively, giving them a deceptively sprawling impression. But Beethoven knew what he was doing. Unorthodox as they may seem at first hearing, each possesses a remarkable sense of self-contained unity.

There are many moments that delight and move us throughout this set. In Quartet No. 12 in E-flat major, Op. 127, the slow movement, *marked Adagio ma non troppo e molto cantabile*, has a solemnly beautiful, songlike melody at its core. And in Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132, the frolicsome Movement 2: *Allegro ma non tanto* is followed by a remarkable 17-minute “*Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenden an die Gottheit*” (Holy Song of Thanksgiving from a Convalescent to God) which the Budapest Quartet take through its unhurried progress from darkness to light with the deep understanding that comes of having performed the Late Quartets in their entirety, by their own estimate, “some sixty times.” And while the finale of Quartet No. 16 in F major, Op. 135, the most tersely-structured of the set, may be playful and witty in its question-and-answer phrases which scan in German with “*Muss es sein? Es muss sein*” (Must it be? It must be), it may also be Beethoven’s way coming to peace with fate. At the very end, the Budapest Quartet take these phrases with remarkably upbeat vigor, letting us know that if this constitutes an acceptance of fate, it is decidedly positive.

Postscript. By the way, you will notice the unusual seating of the Budapest String Quartet on the booklet cover, with the violist and cellist in the center. That was to facilitate communication between Boris Kroyt and Mischa Schneider (L-R) as they mined the rich ore of inner voices that are so important to quartet literature in general – and absolutely vital to the Late Beethoven!