

Phil's Classical Reviews

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"Bright Shining New Faces"

April, 2014



"Pace, mio Dio," Italian Opera Arias
Dinara Alieva, soprano
Delos

In her debut album, "Pace, mio Dio," Azerbaijani soprano Dinara Alieva lends her gorgeous voice to a choice selection of Italian arias. With the support of the Czech National Symphony Orchestra under Marcello Rota, she indulges the listener with well-loved arias by Verdi, Puccini, Catalani, Cilea, and Leoncavallo. Her voice has conviction and sensual beauty to spare, and she possesses the ideal temperament to convey the wide range of opera's greatest heroines.

We begin with Violetta, the courtesan-heroine of Verdi's *La Traviata* in two contrasted moods: "*E strano!... Sempre libera*" in which she reflects on the madness of daring to love Alfredo, the product of a respectable family, and "*Addio del passato*," her third act aria in which she bids farewell to life and love as, dying of consumption, she summons her courage to meet her lover for the last time. It is followed by: "*Vissi d'arte*" from Puccini's *Tosca*, as the heroine of the title angrily defends her reputation from the scandalous accusations of the scheming Baron Scarpia.

I'd listened dry-eyed up to this point in the program, but the floodgates broke by the time I got to "*O mio babbino caro*" from *Gianni Schicchi*. It's a funny thing, but Lauretta, the heroine of Puccini's one-act comic opera, is neither dying for love nor defending her honor against unjust accusation, but merely trying to wheedle her skinflint of a father. The heart-melting beauty of the aria itself is what moved me, not the situation. My hanky didn't get much of a chance to dry from that point onward, as Alieva follows this aria with Cio-cio-san's "*Un bel di vedremo*" from *Madame Butterfly*, where the heroine, who has sacrificed honor and family for a man we know will be ultimately faithless, waits patiently and pitifully for his return.

And so it goes, in a program of choice arias that includes "*Ebben? Ne andro lontana*" from Catalani's *La Wally*, "*Io son l'umile ancella*" from Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur*, "*Qual fiamma avea nel guardo*" from Leoncavallo's



"Power Players," Russian Opera Arias
Ildar Abdrazakov, bass
Delos

Curiously, Ildar Abdrazakov (pronounced *ahb-drah-ZHA-koff*) didn't start out singing the great basso roles in Russian opera. Early-on, his elegantly smooth bass-baritone voice made him more of a natural for the Franco-Italian repertoire in which he then specialized. Over the years, his voice has gradually deepened to the point where it carries the greatest authority. He displays it in the Russian repertoire he explores in "Power Players." At the same time, his voice retains the beautiful cantabile quality that first gained him fame and recognition.

Fortunately, too, the Russian opera has been kinder to basses than has been the case in the west, where they have mostly been relegated to the supporting roles, especially villains. In the Russian repertoire, they have often been the power brokers: legendary heroes, tsars, defenders of Mother Russia against her ancient foes. On this album, we have him in unforgettable portraits of heroes of legend as the title characters in Borodin's *Prince Igor*, Rachmaninoff's *Aleko*, and Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, typically vowing to avenge a humiliating defeat and win back a beloved sweetheart who has been taken captive by the victors.

In *A Life for the Tsar* (Glinka), he does a magnificent job portraying the peasant Ivan Susanin, who has disguised himself as the young Tsar to draw his enemies away. As his foes close in on him, he wonders what daylight will bring. He has gladly sacrificed his own life, and now he wonders whether it will be in vain. A darkly brooding cantilena gives way to a remarkably expressive aria that allows Abdrazakov ample opportunity to display his beautifully smooth cantilena.

And so it goes, through a very rich repertoire drawn from operas by Tchaikovsky, Rubinstein, Prokofiev, and Rimsky-Korsakov, culminating in the grand Coronation Scene from Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, in which

Pagliacci, and Leonora's "Pace, pace! Mio Dio!" as she prays for the deliverance that can only come with death in Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*. Plus four other jewels in a well-filled diadem.



Mozart: Opera and Concert Arias
Karina Gauvin, soprano
Robert Labadie, Les Violons du Roi
ATMA Classique

Karina Gauvin, a native of the Montreal suburb of Repentigny, Quebec, is well on her way to super-stardom as an opera and concert singer. I notice that most of her fellow townsmen who have gained fame in the world outside Repentigny have been hockey players. Well, Gauvin's sensational voice would qualify her as a one-woman power play in any concert venue. Here, she sings a daunting program of Mozart arias and gives us the impression that she still has plenty in reserve.

The selections include many that we might expect in a Mozart recital: Aminta's peaceful and richly ornamented "Aer tranquillo" (Calm air and peaceful days) from *Il Re Pastore*, Susanna's love song to her espoused Figaro "Deh Vieni, non tardar" (Oh come, don't be late) from *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Pamina's quietly resolute "Ach, Ich fühl's" (Ah, I feel it, It has disappeared forever) from *The Magic Flute*. We are also given Vitella's pathetic aria "Non piu di fiori" (No more flowers) from *La Clemenza di Tito*, plus Fiordiligi's anguished but resolute "Come Scogliam immoto resta" (Like a rock, we stand immobile) and Despina's scornful "In uomini! In soldati!" (In men? In soldiers you hope for fidelity?) both from *Così fan tutte*. The most demanding and also the best-known of several concert arias in the program – arias that Mozart wrote as display pieces for famous singers of his day - is "Misera dove son."

In Mozart's day, they didn't make the fine distinction between different types of sopranos that we do today, such as coloratura, soubrette, mezzo, lyric and dramatic. If you billed yourself as a soprano, you were expected to incorporate it all in your tessitura. That makes what Gauvin has to offer all the more precious. In the concert aria "Non temer, amato bene" (Fear nothing, my beloved) for instance, the writing calls for vocal agility in a brilliant register, long-held notes, and a secure mastery of trill. In Susanna's afore-mentioned "Deh vieni, non tardar" the singer's voice drops down to a low A, emphasizing the sensual passion underlying the heroine's impatience. In

Constantine Orbelian and the Kaunas City Symphony Orchestra of Lithuania with the Kaunas State Choir lend yeoman support. If you acquire no other recording of Russian music in 2014, get *this one!*



Sarasate Transcriptions
Tianwa Yang, violin; Markus Hadulla, piano
Naxos

Peking native Tianwa Yang, assisted by German-born pianist Markus Hadulla, gives accounts of rare and delectable transcriptions and arrangements by the Spanish composer Pablo Sarasate (1844-1908) that reflect her penchant for the zestful virtuosity that only this kind of music can provide. In his day the top of the class among violinists (rivalled only by Joseph Joachim and Leopold Auer), Sarasate differed from the multitude of virtuosos in that his compositions, written for his own private use, were not only absolutely stunning show-pieces but, as Yang shows us in the present program, they were works of real musical substance as well.

Sarasate's standards were high. (He famously declined to play Brahms' great Violin Concerto on the grounds that it had only real melody, and *that* was given to the oboe!) Virtuosity applied to legitimately musical ends raised his transcriptions of other composers far above the level of merely flashy showmanship, brilliant though they are. Following the opening selection, a very idiomatic original piece titled "Guitarre," Op 45, No. 2, the only piece in this entire treasure trove that Sarasate designated with an opus number (he presumably withheld the others from publication for the very good reason that he didn't want to share them with other violinists), we have a selection of Chopin transcriptions consisting of three waltzes and two nocturnes. There is a nice contrast between the quick, effervescent Waltz in F, Op. 34/3 and the slower, more deliberately paced and deeply moving Waltz in A minor, Op. 34/2. Both are designated "Valse brillante," but what a difference in affect! The bewitching Nocturne in E-flat, Op. 9/2 soars to glorious heights with seeming effortlessness. We next have a splendid arrangement of *Souvenirs de Faust* that captures the soul of Charles Gounod's opera, including the gloriously sweeping "Ainsi que la brise légère" (as light as the breeze) from the Scene at the Ball and a rousing account of the Soldiers' Chorus.

We next have four French baroque composers, the most significant of whom is Jean-Marie Leclair, whose

Vitella's "Non piu di fiori," the voice descends to a coloratura's low G – clearly a job for a soprano with an expanded range. Gauvin passes the test with flying colors.



"Evocation," Albeniz, Debussy, Schumann
Kim Barbier, piano
Oehms Records

Kim Barbier, born in Paris of French and Vietnamese parents, reveals a remarkable sound and a presence all her own in her album, "Evocation." The title is taken from the first piece in Book I of *Espana*, Spanish composer Isaac Albeniz' luminous collection of music celebrating the soul of Spain, but it might serve as well for all of the piano pieces Barbier has selected for what appears to be her first solo recital on record. All of them transcend the merely colorful or pictorial in evoking the essence of their subjects, a matter calling for the deepest insight from both composer and performing artist.

More than in other types of keyboard music, these evocative pieces by Albeniz, Debussy and Schumann require the temperament to perform with brilliance and insight, taking it to the top when the music requires, and the delicacy and precision to bring out the finer details when that is called for. Mlle Barbier has the requisite insight plus technique to do it all in a manner that doesn't call attention to itself. That is a rare enough quality in so young a pianist.

Debussy is first up in the program, represented by "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum" from The Children's Corner Suite and *La Puerta del Vino* from Book II of the Preludes for Piano. The first, infused with Debussy's characteristic irony, evokes a child at practice on morning lessons on the piano, but with music more engaging and zestful than young children are usually given for breakfast. The latter evokes the ancient "Wine Gate" of the Alhambra, with a nostalgia for vanished glories that transcends the picture postcard that inspired it.

Albeniz is next, with a "Triana" that captures the spirit of the gypsy quarter of old Seville and an "Evocation" that uses the rhythms of the *Jota navarese* and a key signature (A-flat minor) with seven flats that creates resolution problems that echo the conflict of Moorish and Spanish elements in the Spanish psyche. "El Corpus Christi en Sevilla" captures the sights and sounds of the bustling religious procession, with a quiet moment of ecstatic fervor near the end (the Elevation of the Host?)

Tambourin: Presto, Op. 9/3 gets faster and more subtly varied upon every return of the rollicking subject, which is underscored by a rustic sounding drone in the bass. Handel is represented by the famous Largo, "Ombra mai fu" from Xerxes, in a transcription that gives the aria plenty of room to breathe and Yang lots of room to spin out its enchanting melody, and Bach by the famous Air from Orchestral Suite No.3. In the latter, Yang creates a lot of excitement by taking the melody two octaves higher on each repetition, juxtaposing the bloom of the G string with the flute-like elegance of the E string, a favorite Sarasate device.

La fée d'amour (The Love Fairy) by the almost forgotten Joachim Raff (1822-1882) concludes the program, giving Hadulla the opportunity to essay the frequent changes in tempo and texture, and Yang the chance to display the supple, secure left hand that was also a Sarasate trademark.



Beethoven, Debussy and Strauss: Violin Sonatas
Liv Migdal, violin; Marian Migdal, piano
Ars Produktion (Hybrid SACD, DSD)

What an absolute gem this recital is! Liv Migdal, born 1988 in Herne, Germany, shows her prowess on the violin in a program of works by Beethoven, Debussy, and Richard Strauss that have been carefully chosen for their warmth of feeling and their wealth of delectable details. In this recital, she is joined by her father, Marian Migdal, who was an award winning pianist of some note as a young man in the 1970's. These performances have a lot going for them. Liv's tone is slender and supple, like a beautiful young sapling, in the earlier works in the program, and it becomes more substantial without losing any of its expressive beauty in the more emotionally charged Strauss sonata.

Beethoven's Sonata in A, major Opus 30, No. 1 is a mild surprise, as it is not performed as often as the composer's more famous sonatas, but its choice to open the program becomes apparent when you realize its subtlety. Sheer virtuosity is not the issue here as much as elegant expression and the ability to discern fine details in the music. In the opening movement, we already have the pattern of violin and piano parts being so skillfully interleaved that it is hard to speak of primary and secondary themes, melody and accompaniment. The Adagio, *Molto espressione*, gives Liv a great opportunity to display her lovely cantilena, and the

Finally, we arrive at Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, a day in the life of a young child, experienced as a child would experience it: listening to stories of other lands and people, playing Blind Man's Bluff with his playmates, wheedling his nurse for an extra treat, riding on his hobby horse with wild abandon, lost in a mid-day reverie (the famous *Traümerei*, "dreaming), experiencing what may very well be a nightmare (*Fast zu Ernst*), and finally falling into peaceful slumber in his bed at night.



"Homage to Schubert"
Benjamin Hochman, pianist
Avie Records

Benjamin Hochman, a native of Jerusalem who studied in the U.S. with Claude Frank and Richard Goode, currently teaches at Bard College and the Longy School of Music and resides in New York with his wife, violinist Jennifer Koh. In a larger sense, he belongs to the world by virtue of his wonderfully insightful and beautifully sensitive performances, of which two sonatas by Franz Schubert bear witness on the present "Homage to Schubert."

The two works are a study in contrasts. Sonata in A major, D664 is justly famous as one of his easiest to love. Its lyricism flows with deceptive ease and naturalness in Hochman's interpretation. Tenderness and melancholy seem to co-exist as if it were the most natural thing in the world, so that momentary outbursts in the development sections of the opening movement and the finale do not alter the overall impression of gentleness and untroubled lyricism. Though the A major sonata sounds as if it just sat down one fine day and wrote itself, it requires much subtlety of the performer in terms of phrasing, small changes in dynamics and frequent repositionings.

That goes double for the Sonata in D major, D850, which is regarded as one of Schubert's most difficult. Its Allegro opening movement is not qualified, as was customary with Schubert, by any such marking as *moderato* or *ma non troppo*, and impresses the listener as rather unrestrained. Outbursts, such as the sudden stormy turn taken in the midst of the Rondo finale, count for more here than they did in the A major sonata because it is a work of greater gravity. Hochman has rightly described the driving forces of this work as being its "frequent and sudden modulations, subtle melodic coloration and deep emotional range," qualities that require as much of the performer in interpretive as in technical terms. Hochman,

finale surprises us with a set of variations instead of the usual Beethoven rondo. Again, it requires the close partnership of both Migdals to bring it off.

The Debussy Sonata in G minor, another good choice for this particular program, offers a wealth of detail, expressed in an idiom that belies its classical design. It is in three movements, the middle one being marked *Fantastique et léger* (fantastic and light), and the Migdals take the composer at his word. Throughout this work, Liv is afforded plenty of opportunity for expressive cantilena, something that is still required in the more turbulent finale, marked *Très animé* and here executed with all the spirited animation Debussy requires.

Richard Strauss' Sonata in E-flat, Op. 18 is filled with the ardor of the youthful composer, in love at the time with a singer who was soon to become his wife. Though not considered a milestone in chamber music, it is prized for its lyrical beauty and the virtuoso demands it makes of both violinist and pianist. It is an intricate work, with no fewer than four themes in the opening movement, anticipating the future direction Strauss would take as a composer of operas and tone poems. The second movement marked *Improvisation: Andante cantabile* requires a semi-improvisational approach by both partners and florid syncopations and arabesques of the violinist. In the finale, exuberant, explosive execution by both instruments is the order of the day.

I note in passing that "Migdal" is a Hebrew word for "tower," and also that this is Liv Migdal's debut CD. At age 25, she has obviously been brought along slowly and carefully in her career, so that she is not likely to experience the burn-out that has destroyed so many youthful talents. Her singing tone is a positive joy to listen to, and I have the feeling that this artist will be lighting up concert halls with it for years to come.



Ravel: Arrangements for Wind Quintet
The Orlando Quintet
Brilliant Classics

The Netherlands-based Orlando Quintet, consisting of Marieke Schneemann (flute), Pauline Oostenrijk (oboe), Lars Wouters van den Oudenweijer (clarinet), Bram van Sambeek (bassoon), and Ron Schaaper (horn) play thoughtful arrangements of works by French composer Maurice Ravel. And these young Dutch masters play them with such style and flair that a listener not well-

happily, possesses plenty of both.

The middle of the program is given to tributes to Schubert by two modern composers. We first have György Kurtág's brutally economic *Homage à Schubert* of barely a minute's duration, followed by Jörg Widmann's *Idyll and Abyss: Six Schubert Reminiscences*, in which the innocence of the most straightforward Schubertian moments in the Allegretto and Scherzando is compromised by flurries of "wrong" notes and splintered chords. I don't "get" either of these guys. We will never know what Franz Schubert might have thought of such "tributes," as he died in 1828.



Brahms: Quartets 1-3; Quintet, Op. 111
Chiara String Quartet; Roger Tapping, viola
Azica Records

The internationally performing Chiara String Quartet, currently in their 14th year of existence, is the Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The members are Rebecca Fischer and Hye Yung Julie Yoon, violins; Jonah Sirota, viola; and Gregory Beaver, cello. Earlier in their career as a quartet, they began playing in bars and other unusual venues under the catchy tagline "chamber music in any chamber," earning themselves a loyal following while introducing many listeners to the joys of this kind of intimate music-making.

When they began work on the present Brahms recording project with veteran producer Judith Sherman and her assistant Jeanne Velonis in October 2011 at the Troy Saving Bank Music Hall in Troy, N.Y., they knew they wanted to do something special to take their music to a higher level. After listening to the early edits and finding them disappointing, they decided to start again from scratch, this time without the scores. Hence the title "Brahms by Heart. They found that this approach gave them a greater sense of freedom and spontaneity and brought them closer together, and that sheet music had become a distraction to performance instead of an aid. They vow to continue this centuries-old but only lately rediscovered practice in their further explorations into other composers' music, particularly Beethoven.

I didn't say "Beethoven" by accident, for his presence looms over these Brahms quartets, especially the two published as Opus 51. That is particularly noticeable in Quartet No. 1 in C minor, where the opening chord is identical in pitch and range to that of Beethoven's Opus 74, and in the way the first violin sings a quiet aria over the

acquainted with Ravel might fail to recognize them as having been arranged from originals for string quartet, orchestra, and piano.

If you are a performing wind quintet, you have to come to terms very soon with the fact that not much great music has been written specifically for your combination of instruments. The reason lies not in the ensemble, for aficionados know that these particular five woodwinds can make a great variety of sensually beautiful sounds to enchant the ear. Rather, it is a reflection of the fact that the commissions haven't been as numerous as those for concerto, symphony or opera. So, you turn to arrangements. Those heard on this disc, of Ravel's String Quartet and *Ma Mère l'Oye* (Mother Goose Suite) by Mark Popkin and Sonatine by Wayne Peterson, are all inspired solutions to the problem of transposing music from an original setting to one using instruments with quite different means of sound production.

The String Quartet as might be expected, posed the most serious challenge of all, as the diaphanous passages and smoothly layered timbres do not translate easily from a family of strings to a more diverse collection of winds, to say nothing of the smartly plucked pizzicati that give the second movement, marked *Assez vif, très rythmé*, its unique character. This arrangement fares particularly well, as the Orlando players are really adept at making said pizzicati sound natural to their medium, and the nicely layered way they interact in the slow movement, *Très lent*, is the utmost in charm applied to a specific task, with the dark sound of the bassoon serving as an ideal mediator. The finale, marked *Vif et agité* (quick and agitated) shows the most skeptical listener how quickly and precisely woodwinds can articulate helter-skelter passages written for strings.

The Mother Goose Suite. Originally written for piano four-hands and later orchestrated as a ballet, might be expected to pose fewer problems for the arranger, as there is already a lot of delicious woodwind writing in the orchestral version. But even here, a single flute must replicate what a duet of flutes achieves in *The Princess of the Pagodas* (*Impératrice des pagodes*). The timing of these five musicians in the slow movement, depicting the meeting of Beauty and the Beast in a darkly lit ballroom, is absolutely superb. That is in keeping with Ravel's marking *Mouvement de valse modérée*, in the manner of a waltz in moderate time, but never breaking out into the full-blown dance.

The Sonatine, Ravel's tribute to the age of Couperin and Rameau, has always seemed (to my ears) cold and unmoving in the original piano version. As the Orlando players perform it, it seems a natural for their type of ensemble. That's a tribute to arranger and performers, as the winds must account for a variety of techniques usually associated with piano in the way of arpeggios, polyrhythms, and rapid ostinatos in awkward intervals, and still make it sound like something all their own. They do it, too.

rest of the group, recalling the Cavatina in Beethoven's late Quartet, Opus 130. Other similarities abound, as if Brahms' were consciously using Beethoven as both a model and a challenge to take his own work to greater heights. Certainly, the resemblances are there, but the stirring intensity and moodiness of the Opus 51 quartets is all Brahms' own. Clara Schumann used to chide Brahms for the way he "chiseled" his music, working away at this detail or that, so that a typical movement might undergo a sea-change from its beginning to its end in the emotional effect it weaves over the listener.

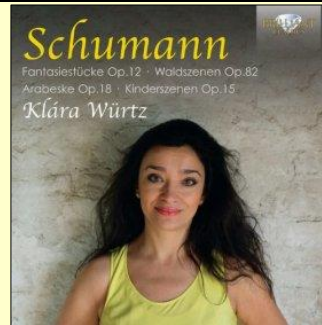
Not surprisingly, the Opus 51 quartets are more difficult for performers to realize and listeners to absorb than the later Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 67, where Brahms is the more assured master of his craft. But even there, we are given balm in the lovely Romanza: Poco Adagio in Quartet No. 1 and the increased lyricism and infusion of dance-like elements in the Andante moderato and the Quasi Minuetto movements of No. 2 in A minor.

That lyrical impulse abounds in Quartet No. 3. The rousing, rollicking "hunting" character of the opening in 6/8 meter sets the tone for the work, where the extraordinarily beautiful music in the Andante alternates with strong unison passages and dramatic chords to create a lasting effect. The movement comes to rest in a sort of sublime "holy space," followed by a plagal cadence in case we missed the point. More beauty yet, and more naturally spontaneous music making awaits us in String Quintet No. 2 in G major, Op. 111, where the Chiara members are joined by the distinguished viola of Roger Tapping. This quintet, which shows the influence of Hungarian dance music in its second and final movements, has sometimes been nicknamed the "Prater" in reference to Vienna's famous amusement park. Certainly, there is more pure happiness here than one expects in a "serious" work!



Chausson: Poème + Grieg, Franck: Sonatas
Callum Smart, violin; Gordon Back, piano
Orchard Classics

Callum Smart, native of Tunbridge Wells who made quite a splash when he won the strings category of the 2010 BBC Young Musicians Competition at the age of 13, is currently pursuing studies at Chetham's School of Music in Manchester even as he begins his professional career as a concert artist. While the path of music history is littered with young violin prodigies who have fallen by the wayside, I get the feeling this is not going to happen with



Schumann: Fantasiestücke, Waldszenen, Arabeske,
Kinderszenen - Klára Würtz, piano
Brilliant Classics

Klára Würtz, native of Budapest, Hungary who now resides in the Netherlands, gives out with beautiful sounding accounts of some of the best-known and best-loved pieces of Robert Schumann. In this album, Schumann is revealed as the ultimate romantic, one who in the larger sense never outgrew memories of his childhood, to which he returned time and again for inspiration and emotional sustenance.

Though we are told, for example, that Schumann added titles for the individual pieces in *Kinderszenen* (Scenes from Childhood) after he had completed this collection which had originally been merely titled *Leichte Stücke* (Easy Pieces), and that these titles were "nothing more than delicate hints for execution and interpretation," the explanation simply won't do. As Klára Würtz deftly unfolds the work before the listener, Schumann's opus details a day in the life of a young child, filled with excitement (listen to *Hasche-Mann*, Blind Man's Bluff, or *Wichtige Begebenheit*, Important Event, perhaps a parade with soldiers marching). But there are also fearful happenings such as: *Fast zu Ernst* (Almost too serious) and *Fürchtenmachen* (Frightening, perhaps a nightmare). And there is a sense of childhood wonder at the vastness of things in *Von fremden Ländern und Menschen* (Of Foreign Lands and People). Here, sound and meaning correlate in a very satisfying way.

The correlations are less clear in *Waldszenen* (Forrest Scenes), despite Würtz's wonderfully fluid playing and her sure grasp of tempi and rhythmic values. Many of Schumann's descriptive titles are no more than colorful guideposts rather than labels that strike us at a deeper level. *Verrufene Stelle* (Haunted Places) does have a sinister substratum underlying its surface beauty. *Einsame Blumen* (Lonely Flowers) on the other hand, might reflect Schumann's intention to create a musical equivalent of the sentiment expressed in Gray's Elegy: "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air," but the result seems merely pretty, rather than poignant.

Schumann is at his very best in the *Fantasiestücke* (Fantasy Pieces), Op. 12, and Würtz is right on top of the composer's wild rhythms and dauntless mood swings. From the deep, dreamy evocation of dusk in

this young artist. His career has been carefully guided thus far, with concert engagements mostly restricted to the United Kingdom. His technique is just too fluid and secure, allowing him to make his points in a natural-sounding way without forcing the issue. And the tonal beauties that he coaxes out of the 1698 Antonio Stradivari instrument that he plays in the present recording are simply ravishing,

This is Smart's first commercial recording, and it's a beauty. The program of major works by Grieg, Chausson and Franck focuses on works that aren't flashy in the ordinary sense but make their appeal through their impressive sonorities and solid musical values. In Edvard Grieg's Sonata No. 2 in G major, Op.13, he handles the frequent changes in texture and mood in the Allegretto and the teasing sudden twists and turns in the Allegro *animato* finale so effortlessly that he seems to take them *en passant* (to borrow the language of Chess) rather than aiming at them deliberately. There is color, mood, and deeply passionate nationalism in Grieg's writing, and Smart brings it out optimally.

The glorious *Poème* by French composer Ernest Chausson, heard here in its alternate version with piano accompaniment, is very moody and rhapsodic. With its rising and falling tensions, dark tone colors and advanced harmonic style, it calls for a very close rapport between violin and piano. The music has an irresistible forward movement all the way to the very end. Intricate double-stopping at several points and a high trill at the end demand a lot of the violinist and will give the unwary listener goose bumps.

Cesar Franck's Sonata in A major is a challenging work for a young artist because of its varied textures and the way the notes for piano and violin are intricately connected. It requires an advanced vision of the design and meaning of the work that are rarely met in a performer as young as Callum Smart. Its four movements give it an uncommon breadth, symphonic in scope. The main melody of the opening movement recurs in different guises in all the succeeding movements, lending the work a marvelously coherent cyclic unity. That unity must seem to occur naturally, as it does here. The cantabile writing and the way the relative emphasis is passed between instruments call for a very close partnership between performers. In this regard, Smart is fortunate to have Gordon Back, who has been one of the mentors helping to guide his career, as his partner. Together they realize the simple, unforced majesty and the beautifully wrought proportions of one of music's greatest masterworks in any genre.

Des Abends (In the Evenings) to the turbulent frenzy and finger-breaking syncopations of *Traumes Wirren* (Tangled Dreams), she has her finger of the pulse of all the pieces in an unforgettable collection.



"Les Amis," Music of Debussy and Caplet
Elizabeth Hainen, harp, and friends
Avie Records

Elizabeth Hainen, Toledo, Ohio native and currently one of the world's most travelled harpists, brings her down to earth sound and her ability to blend optimally with any size ensemble to work in an inspired program of music by André Caplet and Claude Debussy.

She is capably assisted in the orchestral works by the IRIS Orchestra under Michael Stern, beginning with the misty *Danse sacrée* and *Danse profane* by Debussy and including two stirring dances by Caplet, *À la française* and *À l'espagnole*, pulse-quickening pieces that belie their modest descriptions as *divertissements*. Hainen has the stage all to herself in her own solo arrangement of Debussy's *Petite Suite*. The gently swaying "En Bateau" (Boating) and a joyously flowing "Cortège" (Wedding Procession) are followed by an intricate "Menuet" and a dazzling "Ballet," all calculated to show the artist's prowess and the infinite variety of sound of which her instrument is capable.

In the Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp (1916-1917), Debussy's last completed work, Hainen is joined by flutist Jeffrey Khaner and violist Roberto Diaz. Their remarkable cohesion is perhaps a reflection of the fact that all are present or former first chairs with the Philadelphia Orchestra and teach at the Curtis Institute of Music, of which Diaz is currently president. The ideal, gorgeous blend they achieve is noticeable throughout the sonata and particularly in the highly animated finale: three top-notch artists allied in one common goal.

Hainen scores impressively in Caplet's *Conte fantastique* (Fantastic Tale), inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*. One cannot imagine a more effective orchestral setting of Poe's eerie tale of the prince who defies fate by holding a ball in his palace during a time of plague, only to discover that the "ghastly specter," Death itself, is an uninvited guest. Caplet, who often arranged and conducted the music of his friend Debussy, is shown to have been an inspired composer in his own right in a work that holds us



Debussy: Arabesques, Preludes, Book I, Estampes, Claire de Lune – Nino Gvetadze, piano
Orchid Classics

Nino Gvetadze, a native of Tbilisi (formerly Tiflis), Georgia who completed her piano studies in the Netherlands, shows her penchant for color, timbre, and mood in a well-selected program devoted entirely to Debussy. More than just a “mere” colorist, she approaches Debussy’s subtle palette of tone colors as an entrée into the depths of the composer’s music. Wherever we listen, her performances shimmer with excitement and movement. Her pedaling seems instinctive, her rubato secure enough that it serves her purpose without calling attention to itself.

After warming up with lucid performances of the Two Arabesques, Gvetadze proceeds to an exploration of the many-splendored wonders of the Preludes, Book I. The first three, *Danseuses de Delphes*, *Voiles*, and *Le Vent dans la Plaine* (Temple Dancers of Delphi, Veils, The Wind on the Plain) are related in their textures, which are often enticingly subtle, and the fact that revolve around the key of B-flat. “*Les sons et les parfums tourment dans l’air du soir*” (sounds and fragrances swirl in the evening air) has a seductively nocturnal atmosphere that is recreated, even more effectively, in *La Soiree dans Grenade* (Evening in Grenada), also heard in this program, where the pulsating rhythms of the Habanera convey an effective sense of mood and locale.

Les Collines d’Anacapri (the hills of Anacapri) and *Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest* (what the west wind saw) evoke the outdoors: a pleasant ramble over the hills on a sunny day and a conjuring-up of the turbulent force of the wind, with a threat of showers, respectively. In *Des pas sur la neige* (footsteps in the snow), the tempo is slow and labored, the harmonies suggesting sadness and isolation. *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (the girl with the flaxen hair), by contrast, is pure enchantment and innocent lyricism, as befits the poem that had inspired an earlier song by Debussy. *La danse de Puck*, *La sérénade interrompue* (Interrupted serenade) and *Minstrels* all reveal the lighter side of Debussy’s imagination. *La cathédrale engloutie* (The Submerged Cathedral) is a weightier work that recalls the Breton legend of a holy edifice that was engulfed by the sea. It rises above the waves one day a year to the sound of bells tolling and monks chanting – effects that bring out the deepest sonorities in Gvetadze’s Steinway.

Besides the afore-mentioned *Soiree dans Grenade*,

spellbound through its 16-minute length. The music grows ever more feverish, culminating with chromatic passages, harmonics, sweeping glissandi, and slow, ominous chords for the harp, and then an urgent rapping on the instrument’s soundboard announces the arrival of the unbidden intruder. In terms of mounting terror, this work deserves a place alongside Dukas’ Sorcerer’s Apprentice, Saint-Saëns’ *Danse macabre*, and Mussorgsky’s *Night on Bare Mountain* in the annals of the uncanny.



Rachmaninoff + Medtner: Piano Works
Vadym Kholodenko, pianist
Delos

Vadym Kholodenko, Gold Medal winner at the 2013 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, follows up his success with a splendid solo album debut of works by Rachmaninoff and Medtner. His stylish, deeply felt performances are especially welcome in the Medtner part of the program, as he is by far the most neglected of the three 20th century Russian composer-pianists (Scriabin is the third) who pushed the limits of what the piano could do. Now, a generation of émigrés from the former Soviet Union has begun to make the balance less lop-sided.

Kholodenko, a native of Kiev, Ukraine, shows a fine understanding of Nikolai Medtner’s intricate rhythms and inventive harmonies, the last-named being placed low in the keyboard, giving a darkly brooding quality to his music. Medtner’s Sonata in E minor, op. 25, No. 2 makes for an attractive introduction to this composer, despite the fact that the work has been described as “fearsomely difficult” and exhausting to play, requiring much from both pianist and listener. But the payback is worth it. It falls into two parts: an introduction in sonata form and a fantasy capped by a shadowy coda. It is subtitled “Winter Wind,” and Kholodenko is at pains to bring out all the impressionistic qualities that it suggests in the way of shrieking blasts, alternating with swirling eddies and soft breezes.

The latter part of the program is more immediately attractive, being a selection of Rachmaninoff transcriptions that might all serve as choice encores. They include a rather no-nonsense transcription of the Prelude, Gavotte and Gigue from Bach’s Violin Partita No. 3, a freer one of Schubert’s song “*Wohin?*” in which we can enjoy the sounding of a tumbling brooklet in the

Debussy's Estampes (wood prints) also include *Pagodes* (Pagodas), with its pentatonic scales that suggest shimmering image of oriental temples reflected in water, and *Jardins sous la pluie* (Gardens in the rain), in which the approach of a rainstorm is made to seem more imminently menacing as the piece progresses. Finally, *Claire de Lune* (Moonlight) from Suite Bergamasque once more reveals its chromatic beauty, pellucid but ominously troubling, in Gvetadze's sensitive rendering.

accompaniment, and the elfin Scherzo from Mendelssohn's music for A Midsummer Night's Dream, a showpiece that surmounts all difficulties of transcribing from orchestra to piano. We are given a marvelous transcription of Tchaikovsky's "Lullaby," gently rocking but with darker undertones, a scintillating Polka by "the Rach" himself, and two favorite Fritz Kreisler encores freely transcribed without losing any of the pathos and humor of the original, "*Liebesleid*" and "*Liebesfreud*" (Love's Sorrow and Love's Joy). Both afford Kholodenko the opportunity to strut his stuff.