

Phil's Classical Reviews

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Stravinsky: *Le Sacre du Printemps* – Krzysztof Urbanski, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra (Alpha Classics)

Krzysztof Urbanski leads the NDR Elbphilharmonie of Hamburg in an outstanding account of Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (The Rite of Spring). This orchestra, which was founded as far back in the postwar era as 1945, has taken a step forward into European prominence under Urbanski's dynamic leadership, with strong playing from every chair. That's a particularly good thing in the present instance, as Stravinsky's ballet, which premiered in Paris more than a century ago (29 May, 1913) and instantly stamped its composer as the *enfant terrible* of the musical world, remains as thorny and problematical as ever.

Even the most casual first-time listener gets the definite impression that Rite of Spring is a different kind of animal in its primeval savagery from the classical ballet. Beats, previously of limited importance in classical music, are of primary interest here. Polyrythms and polytonality are essential features of a score in which terse, sharply edged accents and ostinato sequences take the place of melodies in any sense of the word. How Stravinsky's first-night audience responded to this monstrosity of changing shapes and constantly displaced accents is a well-documented matter of history, and you can look it up. The amazing thing, after more than a century's familiarity with Rite of Spring, is that it seems as strange and compelling a phenomenon as ever, as it certainly does in the present performance by Urbanski and the Elbphilharmonie. We get the impression, even today, that the musical world has not caught up with it.

The main outlines of the story seem simple enough. In the Russia of prehistoric times, a young maiden is chosen by her peers for the honor of being a human sacrifice in order to propitiate the gods of spring. The Village Elder is summoned and arrives with his cortège, and the maidens do a round dance, "*Cercles Mysterieux des Adolescentes*." They "glorify" the Chosen One, and she proceeds to dance herself into a frenzy that leads to her death, even as the awesome spirits of the Ancestors



Beethoven: Piano Concertos Nos. 2, 4
Lars Vogt, Northern Sinfonia (Ondine)

Lars Vogt was born in 1970 in the small German town of Düren. He has come a long way since then, as pianist, conductor, teacher, and soloist with many of the world's great orchestras. Currently Music Director of the prestigious Royal Northern Sinfonia residing at the Sage, Gateshead, UK, he conducts the orchestra in the final two items in a Beethoven concerto cycle that will surely set a mark for others to aim at for some time to come. Conducting from the keyboard in close proximity to the orchestra, he delivers stirring, dynamic performances of two works that tell us a lot about Beethoven as man and composer.

One thing you notice about Vogt's Beethoven is his absolute mastery over the sequences of notes, even approximating actual glissandi, that come across with crystal-clear purity, sometimes in bold relief and at other times like the enchanted tinkling of little bells. The composer employs them in many places in both the 2nd and 4th concerti, particularly in the slow movements, to symbolize joy, quiet happiness, or simply the resolution to maintain one's integrity in disquieting times.

In a conversation with Friederike Westerhaus, Lars Vogt provides a lot of insight into his interpretations of these two concerti and the difficulties the interpretive artist has to contend with. In Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Vogt cites some passages that "are really feared among pianists," in particular the moment at the conclusion of the exposition-recapitulation in the first movement when "wild runs" in the right hand are opposed to the thematic rhythm in the left. Then "things turn around" and the left hand takes over those sensational runs from the right. Vogt terms it "a little bit like tongue twisters [or] so to speak, like finger twisters."

In Concerto No. 4 in G major, Vogt's analysis focuses first on the Adagio, a logical choice as this movement is radiantly beautiful, "a meditative religioso of magnificent harmony and simplicity, naturalness." Curiously, it is of relatively short duration (4:40), especially when

gather round in silent witness.

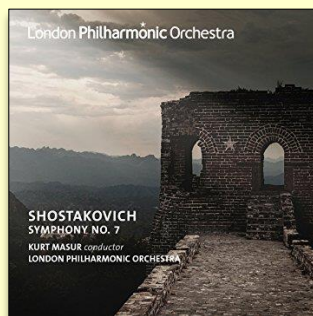
The story might seem clear enough were the music more obviously descriptive. That this is not what the movie industry would term “Mickey Mouse music” is demonstrated by the fact that Leopold Stokowski, working with the Disney animators in the 1940 film *Fantasia*, rearranged Stravinsky’s score to fit a scenario about the evolution of life on this planet, even going so far as to use music from Mysterious Circles of the Adolescents and the Sacrificial Dance for the scene of a fight to the death between two dinosaurs! Even the cooler music of the “Glorification of the Chose One,” which is sometimes cited as a moment of lyrical repose before all gather for the sacrifice, is not terribly euphonic or soothing but actually foreboding and anxiety-provoking, *increasing*, not decreasing, the tension.

There is no indication as to the exact number of musicians employed here, though Stravinsky’s score calls for a massive orchestra (including no fewer than *eight* horns!) Urbanski marshals his forces wisely for maximum effect, and he allows no slackening of either the tension or our interest in the music, even in the Introduction to Part II, which is where that would be most likely to occur. Most of all, his Rite of Spring is the most plausible account I have heard of this work, as it possesses an inner “glue” that other conductors’ accounts have not demonstrated. As a bonus, Alpha Classics has included in the package a Blu-Ray video disc of a *Sacre du Printemps* concert filmed in February, 2017 in the Elbphilharmonie Hamburg.

contrasted to the opening movement, *Allegro non troppo* (18:47), which begins with a quiet, extended introduction by the orchestra into which the piano enters softly and almost unobtrusively, as if we were walking in on the pianist in a profound meditation - small seeds from which great ideas will emerge in the course of the movement.

The music gradually builds in intensity toward a sensational forte in which the piano soloist seems to be galloping together in tandem with the orchestra, an irresistible surging of vital energy and joy. As Vogt sees and interprets it, the effect is more as if two different worlds were colliding, with a creative energy that carries through all the way to the end. And, yes, there’s a cadenza, one of the Beethoven’s best, in which Vogt does an impressive job slipping in from the surrounding movement and slipping back in again without the tiresome necessity of a general pause – an effect that gives this particular cadenza a lot of ear appeal.

The finales in both concerti are beautifully staged riots – a Haydnesque whimsy with a dancelike Hungarian section in the middle (“a little crazy”) in No. 2, and a Pastoral-like expression of liberation and joyousness in No. 4 which the booklet interview likens to balls being playfully tossed back and forth between soloist and orchestra. Simply stunning!



Shostakovich: Symphony No. 7, “Leningrad”
Kurt Masur, London Philharmonic (LPO)

In a truly outstanding recording made at the Southbank Centre’s Royal Festival Hall, London on 13 December, 2003, the London Philharmonic Orchestra give what has to be one of their best performances ever. Under the baton of Kurt Masur, who led the LPO as Chief Conductor seven years, 2000-2007, and was associated with it 25 years in all, we have a performance of plausibility, scope, and feeling, in a work in which the peaceful pursuits that dignify life and make it bearable are contrasted with the inhuman bestiality of war.

Shostakovich’s Seventh, the “Leningrad” Symphony, is not a war symphony in the programmatic sense. Instead,



Prokofiev: Romeo and Juliet, complete Ballet
Marin Alsop, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (Naxos)

Marin Alsop, music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, has come out with an account of the complete *Romeo and Juliet* ballet (1935-1936) of Sergei Prokofiev that exceeds even her earlier albums of that composer’s Fourth and Fifth Symphonies (see *Classical Reviews* (1/2014; 8/2012)). She has a sure grasp of the elements that make this work great, including the abundant lyricism that flows out of every page in the score (Prokofiev’s termed it a “new simplicity”). The way in which themes are carried forth throughout the ballet not only enriched the character development but gave the music a depth of emotion that was unprecedented, in Prokofiev and in ballet itself.

it is a work of contrasts – warm versus severe tones, sharp spikey rhythms and textures versus more evenly flowing ones, consonant versus dissonant sounds – in other words, war and peace. Though Shostakovich was later to reveal that much of it was actually written before the Nazi invasion of Russia in September, 1941, its early audiences were quick to relate it to the stirring events of what we call World War II, and Russians the “Great Patriotic War.” That included the brutal siege of Leningrad, Shostakovich’s own beloved city, which was to lose *one-half* of its pre-war population of 2 million before the siege was lifted. Despite official pressure to leave the city and be re-located to a safe retreat, Shostakovich remained there for a number of months, volunteering as a fire marshal, in which capacity he witnessed the devastation and the human toll of the bombings first-hand.

No symphony ever had as sensational a genesis, which included the smuggling of the score on microfilm out of Russia by way of Teheran and Cairo and its subsequent performances in the U.S. by such famous maestros as Koussevitsky, Ormandy, Stokowski and Rodzinski. Toscanini gave it its first radio broadcast July 19, 1942 (It had been given its first public performance in Moscow on March 5.) It was premiered in the UK in June of that year by Henry Wood and the London Philharmonic and, as we hear in the present account, retains a special spot in its repertoire to this day. No symphony had ever been heard by so many people in its first year of existence.

The key to understanding the massive work (70:33 in this performance) with its carryover and transformation of themes, lies in the first movement in which music suggestive of a city in its normal peaceful pursuits – Shostakovich’s Leningrad – is subjected to disruptive counterpoint from the insistent tapping of the snare drum, which increases in intensity between about 6:00 and 15:44 in the present account. The steady, confident music of the main thematic material lets us know that, if this be a contest of war versus city, the smart money will be on Leningrad. The disruptive element does its very worst in the scherzo, an Allegretto in which screeching woodwinds in their highest registers, pounding percussion and corrosive brass threaten to rend the fabric of the symphony. A central episode tries vainly to raise our spirits, but the movement ends in weariness.

The slow movement, Adagio, is not without hints of sorrow, reflected in its stark opening chord-sequence. But Shostakovich shows his feelings of compassion – including compassion on the strife-weary listener – by adding warmth to the strings and writing shapely, graceful solos in the outer sections for flute and viola. The finale, Allegro non troppo, follows without a break, and the mood is gradually transformed from sombreness to alacrity by a jaunty, determined march. Shostakovich was often quoted as saying “I never thought about exultant finales.... What exultation could there be?” In the context of this symphony, the Hollywood-style upswing of the ending sounds rather like a triumphant mood. Human qualities will indeed

In the face of official condemnation of his music and the natural time it took the musical establishment to sift and weigh the merits of an ample score (144 minutes’ total duration in the present performance), Prokofiev wasn’t sitting still. A wily propagandist, he made no fewer than three suites for orchestra and a set of 10 Piano Pieces to help promote the ballet, even as he awaited new stagings in 1939-40. He knew this work would occupy a major place in his legacy, and he put everything he had into it. It remains his most popular staged work.

The music of the ballet reveals character and emotion in large, luminous ways. It creates indelible portraits of Shakespeare’s “star-crossed” lovers without neglecting the larger canvas of the vitality, the surging life in the streets and the general merrymaking characteristic of a small Italian city (much to the delight, needless to say, of every choreographer and *corps de ballet* that have assayed it over the years). One significant number early in Act I is The Duke’s Command, in which he decrees banishment for the next offender who breaks the peace in Verona. In the Ball at the Capulets that occupies a central place in Act I, the belligerent Dance of the Knights reflects the uneasy mood of the truce between the feuding families. The subtitle “Montagues and Capulets” would seem to indicate that Prokofiev and his librettists conceived the fête as an intended gesture of reconciliation between the families, though the severe formality and the martial mood of *this* particular dance indicates the friendly feeling is more alleged than real.

The great, compelling music that audiences know and love concerns, naturally, the love affair of the title characters in Act I: The Young Juliet, Juliet’s Variation, Balcony Scene, Romeo’s Variation and Love Dance. Much of this music is streamed throughout the ballet. In Act III, Juliet, troubled by thoughts of the fearful spectres that may greet her eyes when the sleeping potion she will take to avoid marriage with Count Paris wears off and she awakens in the Tomb of the Capulets, plucks up her courage with remembrances of music associated with Romeo in Act I. In Act III, after he has killed Juliet’s fire-eating cousin Tybalt in a duel, Romeo is haunted by music from Act I recalling the Duke’s decree of banishment, a fate hardly preferable to death for a native of an Italian city-state in those times. And there are many other examples of musical themes carried forth and deepened in significance and impact in the course of the ballet.

Some of the most effective music in the score occurs at the end of Act II when Romeo challenges Tybalt and kills him to avenge the death of Mercutio. The death of Tybalt (No. 9, Finale) conveys the agony of sudden, violent death as viscerally as anything in all of music.

There’s a wealth of vivid detail in this score, of which I’ve only briefly touched. Also conveys it all to us with a masterful hand, and without sacrificing any of the sweep and flow of the score, and the orchestra responds with alacrity. Credit also producer/engineer Tim Handley, a long-established pro in the recording industry, with top-

triumph in time over the mindless, inhuman obscenity that is a war, but we are changed, and made stronger, in contending with it.

notch support of all their efforts.

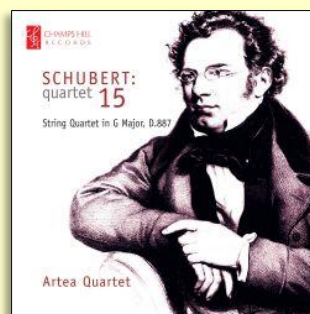


Beethoven: Symphony No. 9, "Choral"
Rafael Kubelik, Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks (Pentatone)

Rafael Kubelik, conducting the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, of which he was then chief conductor, gives another stunning Beethoven performance, recorded May 1, 1975 in the Herkulesaal of the Residenz, Munich. This time, it is one of the pre-eminent accounts I have heard of No. 9 in D Minor, known as the "Choral" Symphony from its revolutionary, innovative ending. Kubelik bestows on it his finest traits as a conductor, which include his ability to broaden and lighten textures and tempi without calling attention to these procedures. At a duration of 69:48, his Ninth is on the longish side compared with the accounts of some other maestros, but his unhurried pacing is so superb there are no tedious moments whatsoever.

Writing a symphony of humongous length and then concluding it with a choral setting (a procedure too many other composers have since followed) entailed a calculated risk. Following three purely instrumental movements by a finale with chorus involved intruding the human voice into the realm of absolute music. Beethoven made this innovation more palatable, and in fact almost natural, by quoting the main themes from Movements 1-3 in what is in effect a preamble to the "Ode to Joy," and then commenting on each theme in the lower strings, thereby providing some continuity. In the present CD program, this preamble occurs on Track 4, and the "Ode" proper follows without a break on Track 5. Both together constitute the Fourth and final movement.

The opening movement begins in a manner reminiscent of Haydn's Creation, with fragments of theme and harmony that gradually evolve and coalesce with stunning impact into waves of increasing intensity. The Scherzo, marked *Molto vivace*, is driven relentlessly forward, with the brass spurring the orchestra onward with urgent commentary from the sidelines. Long, overarching ties (They even *look* exciting in the printed score) span the restlessly surging secondary theme until a brief "prequel" to the "Ode to Joy" melody occurs in



Schubert: String Quartet in G, D887
Artea Quartet (Champs Hill)

The members of the Artea Quartet – violinists Thomas Gould and Rhys Watkins, violist Benjamin Roskams, and cellist Ashok Klouda – met in 2001 when they were all students at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Still young men, they have built up an enviable reputation in the intervening years. The current release of Franz Schubert's String Quartet in G Major, D887, is probably their most ambitious recording project to date. The sobering thought that Schubert was about the same age as they themselves when he composed it, and also the fact that he had less than two years to live and was aware of his declining health and what it meant, seems to inform the dark mood at the opening of this work, which persists for some time afterward.

If the members of the Artea Quartet are in awe of the prevailing darkness in this long-limbed, brooding work, it does effect the bold way in which they approach it. They are not afraid to take an unusually slow tempo at the beginning of the opening movement and elsewhere, no doubt reasoning that it requires some breadth in which to expand and develop (with a total time of 53:41, this is the longest account of the G Major I have ever encountered.) It was probably inspired by nothing less than a hearing of Beethoven's great Quartet, Op. 130, which it resembles in its dramatic contrasts and its large-scale tonal organization. It remained unpublished during Schubert's lifetime, and would probably have been little-understood in any event.

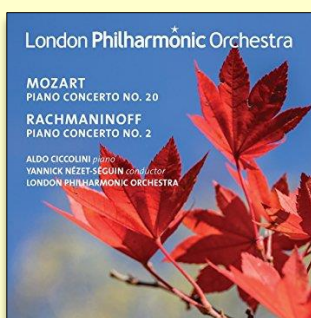
In the opening movement, forte declarations burst upon us in waves separated by near-silences. Tremolandos in the accompaniment to the melody, taking on a glimmering aspect, give this movement a real orchestral sound, to say nothing of its mood of world-weariness, amounting virtually to a death wish. This is a lengthy movement (21:25 in the present account), but we aren't aware of weariness because the music is so gripping. The ending of this movement recalls its opening, and leaves the tonality still tantalizingly uncertain.

The slow movement, *Andante un poco moto*, is richly

the songlike Trio. The slow movement, *Adagio Molto*, taken more like an Andante here, is for me the emotional heart and soul of the symphony, drifting unhurriedly towards a sensational forte that catches our attention in no uncertain terms!

And then we have the final movement – and what a finale it is! Whatever we may think of the literary merits of Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” (and I personally find parts of it rather banal, both in the German original and its English translation), it is highly singable as an anthem and in fact invites audience participation. Its theme is the Brotherhood of All Mankind (you know, the sentiment that reigns supreme in today’s world. Just ask Donald Trump!) I have heard better accounts by the SATB vocal quartet than we have in the present recording, but the choral participation is all that we could possibly ask for.

With this release, Pentatone’s multi-channel SACD Remastered Classics Series comes to a conclusion. We now have all of the Beethoven Symphonies under the baton of Rafael Kubelik except No. 3, the “Eroica,” which is not currently part of Pentatone’s release planning schedule.



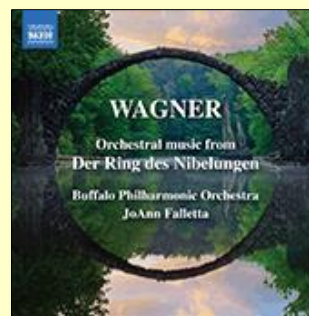
Mozart: Piano Concerto Nos. 20; Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 2 - Aldo Ciccolini, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO)

Normally, you don’t get Mozart and Rachmaninoff piano concertos on the same CD. The glue that gives this program its plausibility is the presence of the late Italian pianist Aldo Ciccolini (1925-1915) in these May 2009 and October 2011 performances with the London Philharmonic under Yannick Nézet-Séguin. Readers who are adept at doing math in their heads will be astonished at how late in life Ciccolini remained active as a concert performer, and especially how firm his tone, rhythm, and dynamic shadings were in his mid-80’s. (Is there something about the Italians?) At any rate, you will listen long and hard to these live performances by the native of Naples without detecting the slightest fraying in what must have been a formidable technique and a remarkable concert presence.

Mozart’s 20th Concerto is in D minor, the dark key he used sparingly for occasions such as the Requiem and the dramatic encounter with the ghost of the

detailed. It opens with an elegiac melody in the cello. It is not exactly carefree, as the darkness of the opening movement still persists. A second strain recalls the *Heiliger Dankgesang* (Holy Song of Thanksgiving) of Beethoven’s Op. 132 Quartet. The Scherzo, a marvel of scurrying swiftness and lightness, features the stunning contrast of an aggressive motif in driving triplet rhythms in the outer sections with the lovely melody in the Trio of a *ländler* (an Austrian folk dance). Shared between cello and first violin, it seems to evoke a gentle yearning for a past or unrealized happiness. A moment of tonal magic occurs when the key shifts at the double bar from G Major to a radiant, other-worldly B Major.

The finale is powerful and complex, an ostensible dance of death in relentless 6/8 time, based on the usually cheerful rhythms of the tarantella, which here take on an urgent, desperate character. The Artea Quartet preserve the tension all the way to the amazing conclusion in which Schubert’s long-range tonal scheme is finally resolved in a cloudless G Major.



Wagner: Orchestral Music from The Ring JoAnn Falletta, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra (Naxos)

JoAnn Falletta, at the helm of the Buffalo Philharmonic, takes her orchestra through another splendid program. This time, it’s orchestral music from Wagner’s tetralogy of music dramas, The Ring of the Nibelungs. The familiar excerpts have lost none of their fabled persuasive power and glorious color under her baton. On the menu we have Entry of the Gods into Valhalla (*Das Rheingold*), The Ride of the Valkyries and Wotan’s Farewell and Magic Fire Music (*Die Walküre*), Forest Murmurs (*Siegfried*), and Siegfried’s Rhine Journey, Siegfried’s Death and Funeral Music, and Brünnhilde’s Immolation Scene (*Götterdämmerung*, The Twilight of the Gods).

This sort of program is by far the best way for the home listener to experience Wagner’s Ring. In a 4-hour music drama, there’s almost as much “filler” as there is in your standard soap opera or regency romance. Without the visual element to pique one’s interest that you have in

Commendatore in *Don Giovanni*, music that depicts dire emotional extremes. It opens without introduction, in a restless, turbulent mood in the strings in which the piano participates even as it attempts to offer solace. Against ominous rumblings in the bass, agitated syncopations in the strings, and one of Mozart's most sensational orchestral fortes, the stark beauty of the piano theme stands out in Ciccolini's handling of it.

The second movement is a Romanza, and it exhibits the song-like quality the term suggested to Mozart's contemporaries. Here, a gracious aristocratic melody floats over gently throbbing support from the strings. It does not lose its composure when the mood of that support changes to a minor-key eruption, which is quelled by end of the movement, finishing in a perfectly executed arpeggio by the soloist. The Rondo finale features a "Mannheim Rocket," an ascending string of eighth notes followed by a quarter-note in the piano. Violent orchestral tutti, reminiscent of the dark, restless mood of the opening, are dispelled by soloist and orchestra, and the work resolves itself properly in the very consonant key of D major. A chuckling bassoon and further commentary by the horns and trumpets playfully debunk the idea of a stereotypical "happy ending."

Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 2 in C minor begins with a crescendo of low, widely spaced piano chords, a striking moment in which the pianist has the stage all to himself. Ciccolini adds anacrusis, or "lift-offs," to each of these chords, giving them greater character. The effect is like the slow swaying and tolling of a gigantic bell. The long, dark-colored theme in the piano sets the prevailing mood. The soloist then rises to the occasion with the second subject, voiced in expressive curves of melody. After having fought its way through what seems to be a gigantic orchestra, the piano exhibits an unusual rapport with it as they journey together without haste through a changing landscape in which light and shade, sadness and pessimism are mingled and the music expresses a continual yearning towards greater clarity and light.

The mood of deep poetic reverie tinged with sadness is most pronounced in the second movement, Adagio sostenuto, by a poignant theme that will haunt your dreams for some time to come. The piano is continually employed in this concerto, to an extent unusual in the repertoire. It interacts with other instruments, notably the flute, oboe, violas, and clarinets, deepening its own melancholy thoughts in the process. In the finale, pianist and orchestra rouse themselves to ever-greater heights to meet the successive challenges in a work that ends, ecstatically and triumphantly, in a stunning fortissimo, punctuated by the composer's familiar four-note motto that scans with his own name: RACH-man-i-noff. So ends one of the finest performances I have ever heard of this very familiar but always-welcome work.

the opera house, listening at home to a complete opera can be boring, and Wagner is no exception. On the other hand, his undeniable gift for really gorgeous orchestral color and bold scenic characterization, which reached its apex in *The Ring*, makes these selections ideal for listening as tone poems in home or concert hall. Falletta's conducting in the present program shapes the bold design of Wagner's music, its rich, complex progressive harmony, and its tremendously moving climaxes.

The overriding theme of the tetralogy is Siegfried's quest for redemption through eternal love. Like many another operatic hero, he dies in his effort to achieve it. This romantic element accounts for the lush exuberance of the music as much as it does the dark undertones that help to symbolize the pain, sorrow, and sense of impending tragedy that is also present in these dramas.

Falletta brings all these musical elements, and more, into bold relief. We have the Entrance of the Gods: stately, measured, processional, with only a hint of the eventual tragedy. The depth of feeling in Wotan's farewell to his daughter Brünnhilde and the flickering of the flames in the Magic Fire Music come across very effectively here. Some of the best moments in the program occur in the musical evocations of nature: the twittering and singing of the birds in *Forest Murmurs*, for instance, and the lusty breezes that impel Siegfried's boat on its way to adventure in the *Rhine Journey*. In many of these moments, the superb playing of the woodwinds and brass make an indelible impression. The stunning use of the percussion in Siegfried's Funeral Music is really hair-raising. And Falletta knows how to use the string section, particularly the lower strings, to mold the firm contours of the music.

Complimenting inspired performances by Falletta and the Buffalo Philharmonic, we have excellent technical support from producer/engineer Tim Handley, an old hand at this sort of thing. At Naxos' budget price, this offering is a terrific bargain.



Chopin + Liszt Recital
Sophia Agranovich, piano
(Centaur)

Pianist Sophia Agranovich, born in Ukraine and adopted by the USA, gives another recital that shows us why she is so much in demand as a performer and teacher. On the menu are some of the most technically demanding (and rewarding) works of Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt, all rendered with Sophia's customarily infectious verve.

Up first is Chopin's magnificent Nocturne in C Minor, Op. 48, No. 1, filled with a mixture of tragedy and poetry, an other-worldly moonlit apparition presented in earthly terms. That includes a solemn funeral march, followed by a chorale suggestive of angelic harps. The Polonaise-Fantasia in A-flat Major, Op. 61, combines the heroic march-like style of a polonaise with the delicacy of a nocturne, where powerful chords in the left hand must never be allowed to overpower the poetry, the delicacy or the poignancy of the melody.

This artist, by the way, has an unusually strong left hand, an asset that comes into play frequently in the Liszt portion of the program. It begins with the sheer poetry of three Petrarch Sonnets, Numbers 47, "Benedetto sia 'l giorno" (Blest be the day) 104, "Pace non trovo" (I find no peace), and 123, "I vidi in terra angelici costumi" (I saw on earth angelic grace). The expression in these pieces ranges from noble passion, frenzy and despair to the calm acceptance of an unrealizable happiness and the poet's gratitude that he has been vouchsafed a vision of ideal love, even if it be unrequited.

Après un Lecture de Dante: Fantasia quasi Sonata, otherwise known as the "Dante" Sonata, is one of the most difficult of all major works for the piano, requiring frequent re-positionings to accommodate the many changes in tempi, texture, and harmonic structure. It is about half the length of Liszt's famous Sonata in B Minor, which it resembles in having a radiant central episode, here a chorale expressing the Heavenly joy of the blessed souls. The contrasts with the despair of the souls in Hell in the opening section and the incredible final section depicting Satanic torments make this one of the most emotionally and physically demanding works in the literature. I have personally under-rated it in



Bartók: Concertos 1 & 2 for Violin and Orchestra
Christian Tetzlaff, Hannu Lintu, Finnish RSO
(Ondine)

In what surely must be one of his finest performances, German violinist Christian Tetzlaff gives all he has in the violin concertos of Béla Bartók. Not only does he give the famous Concerto No. 2, Sz 112, a performance commensurate with the very best accounts anywhere, but he gives Concerto No. 1, Sz 36, the first really convincing performance I have heard of a work that was never performed during the composer's lifetime and was not published until 1956. Add the total involvement of the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra under Hannu Lintu, and you have a CD of exceptional merit.

Concerto No. 2, first up in the program, must have created quite a sensation when it premiered in 1938. It is a violin concerto in which the orchestra plays just as important a role as the soloist, including some stunning participation by the percussion. The orchestration is as imaginative and varied as anything in Bartók – and that includes the Concerto for Orchestra (1945). With all its manic gear-shifts, strangely beautiful harmonies, and compelling rhythms, it is easily one of the great violin concertos of the 20th century.

This concerto has a large orchestra, fiendishly scored for maximum effect. Besides the usual strings, it consists of pairs of woodwinds, four horns, three trombones, and a large percussion section that includes tympani, bass drum, side drum, cymbals, triangle, gong, celesta and harp. Who else but Bartók would have accompanied the serenely lyrical melody for the solo violin in the slow movement, marked *Andante tranquillo*, with percussion that includes, first, tympani that make an all-but intrusive presence, and then the steady rhythmic tapping of the side drum? Another unusual feature of this work is Bartók's tongue-in-cheek nod to 12-tone serialism in the second theme of the opening movement. As he allegedly told Yehudi Menuhin, he wanted to show that one could use all 12 twelve tones of the chromatic scale and still remain essentially tonal (Take *that*, Schoenberg!)

That all these elements – including sudden fortes that leap maniacally from the orchestra – could coexist in a work such as this and not distort the impression that this is indeed a violin concerto and a surprisingly lyrical one,

the past, frankly because I had never heard it performed with the conviction it receives here.

After the gut-wrenching rigors of the Dante Sonata, it's time for a real "holiday for pianists" to conclude the program. Agranovich finds just the right vehicle to end the affair on an up-beat in Liszt's wonderful Hungarian Rhapsody No. 14 in F Minor, which you may know from the version for piano and orchestra, known as the Hungarian Fantasia. There's a lot of variety and bold musical substance brimming over in this heady brew, and Agranovich obviously enjoys every moment!

is one of the wonders of the Bartók Second Concerto.

Concerto No. 1, composed in 1908, is filled with the 27-year-old composer's ardor for his fellow student, the violinist Stefi Geyer, who was evidently a great beauty as well as a remarkable talent. That the work was neither premiered nor published in Bartók's lifetime is no disparagement of its artistic merit, but rather was due to its being so very personal a work. It is, in fact, as much a reflection of Bartók's maturity in 1908 as was the 2nd Concerto thirty years later. It is in two contrasting movements, *Andante sostenuto* and *Allegro giocoso*. A lovely four-note rising figure (D-F#-A-C#) in the violin is a leitmotif associated with Stefi, and it is given additional warmth in the middle of the opening movement by the presence of the cor anglais. A performance of conviction and great beauty by Tetzlaff qualifies as the first account of this work I have come across that makes it seem a worthy album-mate for the 2nd Concerto.