

## CD REVIEWS

SCHOENBERG: String Quartets Nos.1–4; String Quartet in D major; Presto in C major; Scherzo in F major. Aron Quartet (Ludwig Müller, Barna Kóbori, Georg Hamann, Christophe Pantillon) with Anna Maria Pammer (sop). Preiser Records PR 90572 (3-CD set).

The first thing that strikes one about these recordings is that it is good to have all Schoenberg's surviving string quartet music in one set. The second is the radiant, golden tone and coherence of sound of the quartet and the ideal recording acoustic, warm, yet not so reverberant that a single detail is lost. And the third is the technical command, rhythmic strength and ensemble-playing of the Aron Quartet.

In addition to the four originally published quartets, we have here the complete four-movement D major quartet of 1897; the Scherzo in F, also of 1897, which was the original second movement of the D major quartet (it is a good, rather Brahmsian, piece, but was replaced by the far more unusual, beautiful and introspective *Intermezzo*); and the Presto in C – the only surviving movement (presumably from before 1897) of the early quartets that, Schoenberg tells us, he destroyed. This last is an invigorating and fascinating rondo-like piece with a quasi-pentatonic main theme whose prominent C# is both piquant and disconcerting, but its tendency to rely on bridge-passages consisting of motivic liquidations ending in silences clearly demonstrates how much of the art of transition Schoenberg had still to learn.

The Schoenberg quartets, magnificent works though they are, are still not performed often enough for one to be able to judge performances against a familiar performing tradition, but private recordings made in 1936 by the Kolisch Quartet and later recordings by its reincarnation as the Pro Arte Quartet of the University of Wisconsin, have recently been reissued in a six-CD set.<sup>1</sup> The players were Viennese artists who worked closely with Schoenberg. Since the Aron Quartet, founded in 1998, is also Viennese and is the Quartet in Residence of the Arnold Schönberg Center, it seemed appropriate to compare its recordings (made at Casino Baumgarten, Vienna, between December 2002 and September 2003; the recording engineer was Wolfgang Steininger)

with the Kolisch ones, and on the other hand with recent recordings by an ensemble from a different tradition, but renowned for its performances of modern music, the Arditti String Quartet.<sup>2</sup>

The Aron Quartet CDs include some short remarks, spoken by Schoenberg himself in English and taken from the Kolisch recordings, referring to the private nature of the recordings and of his musical thoughts and thanking the performers and the personnel of the United Artists studios in Hollywood. There is another similar remark, this time in German, on the Aron CDs that cannot be found on the Kolisch CDs as reissued by Music & Arts of America, though it was part of the original 1936 recordings and can be found on their previous CD appearance, a two-CD set on Archiphon ARC-103/4 first issued in 1992.

### The D major Quartet and the early fragments

The Aron performances of the Presto in C and the Scherzo in F are incisive, bright-toned and technically assured; these two pieces are not included in either the Kolisch or the Arditti sets. The D major quartet, however, is on CD 5 of the Kolisch set, recorded in 1952 by the Pro Arte Quartet. This work is already accomplished and very beautiful, though no innocent listener could possibly guess that it is by Schoenberg; it is a mystery that it is not in every string quartet's repertory. Remembering the irony of Schoenberg's later essay, 'Folkloristic Symphonies',<sup>3</sup> it is intriguing that the main influence is that of Dvorák rather than Brahms, particularly in the first movement. This begins with a joyful pentatonic unison theme in *alla breve* time, and the rhythmic figure of a quaver upbeat and two staccato crotchets derived from its opening motif becomes a unifying background element in the whole movement. The Pro Arte Quartet play this movement with élan and freedom of tempo; the Aron Quartet's rhythmic precision and the accentuation of those two staccato crotchets are exhilarating, poised and full of contained strength. But it is the omnipresence of this motif that makes their equal accenting of the two crotchets grow ever so slightly pedantic or even lumpy as the movement goes on.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Schoenberg 2: Montaigne Auvidis, MO 782024.

<sup>3</sup> Schoenberg, A: 'Folkloristic Symphonies', in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 161–166.

<sup>1</sup> In Honor of Rudolf Kolisch: Music & Arts Programs of America, Inc., CD-1045.

The second movement is an *Intermezzo* in moderate tempo – a Brahmsian idea, but here expressing a quite individual, introspective mood – and the Aron Quartet's playing, thoughtful and *innig*, is lovely, as it is in the *Andante con moto* (where Hugo Wolf's shadow seems momentarily to fall over the music) and the unusual variation-form finale, whose restlessness hints at the later Schoenberg.

### Quartet No. 1 in D minor, op. 7

Composed eight years later, the first 'official' quartet plunges us into 45 minutes of *Sturm und Drang* (relieved at the end by a *Verklärte-Nacht*-like transfiguration) and almost unremittingly dense polyphony whose harmonic implications oscillate between tonal clarity and near-atonality, and whose form, continuous but consisting of thematically-interlocked movements, anticipates that of the first Chamber Symphony, op. 9.

In this work, the Ardittis sing passionately throughout; the Arons play with expressive tone. The Kolisch Quartet's opening is urgent (those of both the modern quartets, but especially that of the Arditti, sound more spacious without being metronomically appreciably slower), but its transparency of texture is achieved by playing down the viola and second violin parts except when one of these has an especially important theme. The Aron's texture is more balanced, yet it remains clear, and the sound is rounded; but the light and shade of the Arditti Quartet's textures are exceptional, and the intelligence of the phrasing is such that even a line that has momentarily receded into the background will remain clearly understandable; sometimes a line played softly comes into focus precisely because it has to be listened for.

The 'Viel rascher' ('much quicker') at C + 35, with stamping down-bow accents, each five-note entry returning cadentially to its starting note, is treated differently by the three quartets. The Kolisch Quartet makes the contrast with what came before ironic – almost comic. The Ardittis are savage here, the Arons more objective.

The Arons' tendency towards equality of accent, noticed in the D major quartet, is here and there manifested in a failure to find the one climactic moment of a phrase or a series of repeated motifs and in certain interactions of rhythm, metre and expression. At C + 50, for instance, over staccato quaver broken chords in the second violin and cello, the first violin and viola in major thirds play a series of three-note motifs marked 'sehr ausdrucksvoll' ('very expressive').



For the Kolisch Quartet, *sf* is a heightened form of *sf*, of what Bruno Walter, on that old rehearsal record of Mozart's 'Linzer' Symphony, memorably called 'the Viennese accent – the accent after the note'. Thus it becomes an expressive upbeat – the downbeat, with its accent indicated by a wedge, being marked by an incisive bow-accent. The Ardittis mark the first and third occurrences of the *sf* with slightly sharper attacks than the second, thus differentiating between antecedent and consequent, but maintain the essential distinction between emphasized upbeat and metrically-accented downbeat. But in the Aron performance, *sf* and accent are interpreted identically, with a sharp bow-accent for upbeat and downbeat alike.

At 5 bars before K, the Arditti's Rohan de Saram is the only one of the three cellists to observe the instruction 'abnehmen', subsuming the hairpins and accent under a gradual diminishing of intensity. And at K itself another accentual problem arises (Ex. 2). The slurred falling violin figures are motivationally related to falling pairs of crotchets elsewhere in the quartet; but here the fact that the second note is lengthened into a minim introduces a potential clash between metric and agogic accents.



Rudolf Kolisch makes a clear left-hand accent on the first beat of each bar and lightens the minims in the first three bars of K, leading expressively into the augmentation in the last bar of Ex. 2. Irvine Arditti does the same, even slightly shortening the minims in the first two bars of K. Ludwig Müller, the leader of the Aron Quartet, plays the bar of K itself similarly, but then succumbs to the temptation to equalize accents and in the next two bars plays the crotchets and minims with identical accents.

These are mere details, but they exemplify a tendency that surfaces here and there in these recordings and betrays a slight lack of sensitivity to nuances of emphasis and rhythmic-metric grammar.

### Quartet No. 2 in F sharp minor, op. 10

Quartet No. 2 is a work highly charged with cryptograms and autobiographical significance, but for the most part of much more inward and lyrical expression than No. 1, and the Aron Quartet here avoids any tendency to exaggerate accents and make them too uniform; theirs is a perfectly shaped and deeply moving performance.

The first movement begins with the mystifying direction 'start somewhat more slowly'. Fortunately, the actual heading, 'Mässig (moderato)' and

metronome mark, and the two successively faster headings and metronome marks, the third being the principal tempo of the movement, make Schoenberg's intentions clear – at least till near the end. The Kolisch Quartet starts substantially slower than the main tempo, but makes the gradations very convincing; the Arons' tempo-differences are slightly less marked, but they, too, make the initial hesitation and the move forward into the main tempo expressive and cogent. The Ardittis start a little faster, and the progression of tempi carries less expressive and structural significance.

At bar 202, after slower music, Schoenberg writes 'Erstes Zeitmass' ('first tempo'). Had he meant the principal tempo of the movement, he would surely have written 'Hauptzeitmass' ('principal tempo') as at the exposition of the second theme of the first subject (bar 12) or just 'Zeitmass' ('tempo') as in bar 159 for the recapitulation of that theme (though at 202 that might have indicated the immediately preceding 'much slower'). Both the Kolisch and the Aron Quartets assume that 'first tempo' means the tempo of bar 8, not the very first, hesitant tempo – 'start somewhat more slowly' hardly qualifying as a concrete tempo indication despite its metronome mark; but the Ardittis, taking their cue from the fact that what the viola plays at 202 (beginning in 201) is a variant of the second phrase of the theme of bar 12, interpret 'first tempo' as meaning 'principal tempo'. This changes the whole dynamic of the coda: the movement tries to pick up again, with a resumption of the theme of bar 12, only to subside almost immediately into a 'dying fall'. By contrast, in the Kolisch and Aron interpretations, beginning when ('aber ruhig') ('but calmly') is added to 'Zeitmass' at the recapitulation in bars 159 onward, the whole recapitulation and coda is part of the gradual diminishing of energy. The ambiguity is hard to resolve, but the agonizing distortions of the theme after 201, its octaves becoming diminished, coupled with Kolisch's closeness to Schoenberg, seem to favour the Kolisch-Aron interpretation.

If the Arons' way with accents has earlier on been criticized, it must be said that in this work it is exemplary, the *sf* second-beat minims at bars 59–62, for instance, leading exceptionally well into the cello line at 63.

None of the three quartets approaches Schoenberg's metronome mark of minim = 116 for the scherzo; the Kolisch tempo is about 102–104, the other two around 101–102. At the start of the trio, Kolisch plays the four semiquavers and three triplet quavers as septuplets, Arditti approximately as seven semiquavers and a semi-

quaver rest and Müller, the leader of the Aron Quartet, almost as written. All three ensembles play 'Ach, du lieber Augustin' and the cello's obsessive reiteration of B(H)-E-E | A-D-D – the musical letters of 'Mathilde' (and of 'Arnold'), the motif being derived from the tune – with just the right hint of quotation marks without excessive parody.

If the beginning of the fourth movement is where tonality finally breaks down, it is the third that is the emotional core of the work, and it is in this slow movement, a set of variations on a theme made out of motifs from the preceding movements, that the soprano makes her startling entrance. The Kolisch Quartet's singer, Clemence Gifford, is expressive, accurate, with contained intensity sustained through long lines, and the quartet's playing matches her quality. It is interesting to note how very 'flüchtig' ('fleetingly') the strings play the rising demisemiquaver motif derived from the scherzo; neither of the other quartets plays it as fast or as lightly. In the Arditti recording, Dawn Upshaw exaggerates key words, distorting her tone unnecessarily. Stefan George may have been hailed as a precursor of expressionism, but he was not an expressionist poet himself, and Schoenberg's music, despite the fragmentation of the theme, is dark and inward until the climax is reached at the terrible words 'Kill the longing, close up the wound! Take away my love, give me your happiness!' Upshaw and the Arditti players concentrate so much on each moment in the variations that continuity is lost and the intensity of the variations does not mount to the climax. Anna Maria Pammer, the Arons' soprano, is superb. She has an almost mezzo-like richness coupled with brilliance of tone, and she and the quartet achieve a continuity that allows every phrase and every detail to tell, but with a mounting intensity of feeling that makes the climax, when it comes, both terrifying and inevitable.

After this, the stylistically subtle and complex last movement, with its free-floating wisps of atonal figuration in the introduction and the words 'I breathe the air of other planets' set to an almost pure Phrygian D minor against the otherwise pervasive extreme chromaticism, presents quite different challenges to the performers; it is hard to choose between the three quartets and their singers. But the whole new recording of Quartet No. 2 by the Aron Quartet and Anna Maria Pammer is outstanding.

### Quartet No. 3, op. 30

Schoenberg's constructive reaction away from the fluidity of the expressionist period, and at the same time his well-documented desire to achieve

rapidity of surface movement without an aurally bewildering rapidity of circulation of the notes, manifested itself in the earlier 12-note works in a neo-classical use of repeated notes (the 'Morse-code style') and figures. String Quartet No. 3, the first 12-note one, must be the hardest of the five to bring off in performance. The spiky, repetitive accompaniment figuration of the first movement, the repeated two-note groups in the rondo-theme of the last and the almost incessant quaver movement and repeated notes of all but the slow movement can easily become wearying instead of nervously intense.

There are two recordings of this quartet on the Kolisch CDs, but the 1950 Dial Records recording by the Pro Arte is very much better than the private 1936 recording by the Kolisch Quartet. In the first movement, the quaver figuration is a trifle hectic and Schoenberg's markings of stressed and unstressed notes, when these go against the metre, are not always brought out quite clearly, but the lyrical melodies are clearly projected against the figuration. The Ardittis make light work of this movement: the figuration is fleet-footed but not strident, the melodies are beautifully and expressively phrased and the crotchet triplets at bar 311 are Ländler-like.

The Arons' reading of the first movement is more intense. At the same basic tempo as the Ardittis', their figuration is harder and more nervous without becoming over-insistent; when Schoenberg asks for a ritardando or a momentarily slower tempo, they slow down more, but at bar 324 they do not quite get back to Tempo I. At bar 278, where the viola has three-quaver figures of which the third, unaccented, quaver is always a double-stop, Georg Hamann allows the stress to fall on the double-stops where the Arditti viola, Garth Knox, avoids this, but in general the Arons' accentuation of the quaver groups observes Schoenberg's markings clearly.

The slow movement presents the performers with a structural question. Bars 1 to 10 and bars 11 to 20 are strongly contrasted: in the first section the two violins play slow, lyrical phrases (with subtle, divergent dynamics that bring notes from the two voices into prominence at different points), while viola and cello comment on them in equally expressive, but shorter and more quickly-moving phrases; in the second, the first violin has a long, developmental melody set against an elaborate, multi-layered accompaniment in the lower three parts. The rest of the movement then consists of variations on the whole 20-bar complex, which is sometimes slightly expanded or contracted. The question is: is the movement a Haydenesque double-variation form with two alternating themes,

or is it a set of variations on a single binary theme? The question is not academic, and its answer hinges on the viola's solo phrase in bar 10, which Schoenberg marks '(poco rit.)', the parentheses casting doubt on the answer. The Aron Quartet do not make a ritardando or any suggestion of a break here; for them, the theme is a single one. The Ardittis make a ritardando; for them, the movement is a double-variation set. In the rest of the movement, there are no such sign-posts (uncertain though the one in bar 10 may be), and the players must achieve either continuity or articulation by subtler means.

Can the composer's authority be invoked? Rudolph Kolisch, the leader of both the Kolisch and the Pro Arte Quartets, would surely have discussed such matters with Schoenberg, who was present at the 1936 recording sessions. The Kolisch Quartet's viola player, Eugen Lehner, makes a slight ritardando in bar 10; the Pro Arte Quartet takes a slightly more flowing tempo altogether (as do both the Arditti and the Aron Quartets, the former making the music flow more by not exaggerating the vibrato), and Bernard Milofsky, by 1950 the viola player, makes a more marked ritardando. This suggests that the Arditti Quartet's reading is closer to Schoenberg's concept of the form than the Aron Quartet's; but the latter's contrast within continuity has undeniable strength. In the second theme (or part of the theme), from bar 11 on, the martellato notes in the second violin and cello take on a somewhat stamping quality in the Aron performance, despite being marked *pp* and clearly subservient both to the first violin's melody and the viola's dense, motif-rich counter-melody, but the variations that follow are beautifully and characterfully played.

The Intermezzo occasions a real rarity in Arditti performances: the violist, Garth Knox, takes the treble clef to apply already to the last note of bar 12 instead of the beginning of bar 13 and plays a D instead of an E. No such mistake in the Aron recording, but despite taking the movement very slightly slower than either the Arditti or the Pro Arte Quartets, the Arons punch out the multifarious accents, marked by Schoenberg in all sorts of different ways – *sf*, *fp*, vertical and horizontal wedges – with identical sharp bow accents. It must be admitted that to demand such differences on staccato quavers in a relatively quick tempo is asking a great deal, but the Ardittis do a little better in this respect.

The fourth movement is played very well by the two modern groups, both of them achieving a certain gracefulness in the rondo theme; the Pro Arte's performance is a little hectic at times.

#### Quartet No. 4, op. 37

The last of Schoenberg's string quartets is a mature, powerful and moving work, written in America in 1936, and is the most complex and varied in style, combining a classical clarity and strength of thematic material and form with passages of harmonics, *sul ponticello* and *col legno* that hint at the return to expressionism in the late String Trio and, in the last movement, complex changes and interrelationships of rhythm and metre that are sometimes abrupt, but sometimes anticipate Elliott Carter's 'metric modulations'.

In this work the Aron Quartet for the second time in these recordings really comes into its own. The first movement is played with tremendous power and rhythmic poise. The triplets that adorn the melodies from bar 66 onwards grow naturally out of the quick triplets in bar 62 and the dynamics in the strange passage of harmonics and *sul ponticello* tremolos in bars 89–94 create clear phrases. The second movement, whose principal material is Ländler-like, but which has long and complex passages in 2–2, is played (as in the other recordings, too) just slower than Schoenberg's metronome mark suggests, but with great spirit and conviction. The quavers around bar 566 are not clearly grouped according to Schoenberg's beaming (but again that is true of both the other recordings), but Müller – like Kolisch – plays the last two bars of the movement with just the right throwaway diminuendo, where Arditti plays with too much Romantic expression.

The work is dedicated 'To the ideal patron of chamber music ELIZABETH SPRAGUE COOLIDGE and to the ideal interpreters of it THE KOLISCH QUARTET', and one might hope that the Kolisch Quartet's 1937 recording would be such an ideal interpretation, but the slow third movement reveals the danger of relying on a particular performance for interpretative authority. The Kolisch players cannot quite control and prolong their crescendo in bar 2 of the sustained unison opening (and in similar passages), so that on the first note of the third bar, which should be the peak of the preceding crescendo, they resort to a very Viennese sudden drop in intensity. This way of implying an accent is familiar from the scores of Mahler and, indeed, Beethoven; but before one rushes to the conclusion that Schoenberg would have approved, one should note that when he wants it, he clearly marks it – as in bar 699. Both the Arditti and the Aron Quartets carry the crescendo through to its culmination in the next bar. The Arons are the only one of the three groups to sustain the immensely long, intense first note of the movement without audible bow-changes, though even they cannot quite

repeat that feat when the theme returns a fourth higher at bar 664; and bar 625, with its '*rubato* (*presto*)' marking in the first violin part and stolid punctuation in the rest, makes more sense and leads better into what follows than in the other performances.

Just once in this movement the Arditti players transform a passage by their imaginative interpretation in a way that neither of the other quartets do. This is at bar 619, where the viola's repeated falling semitones, C-B, are not marked in any special way, but where Garth Knox plays them as sighs, stressing the C each time and falling away to the B, and giving them both expressive and, when the semitones are picked up in different ways by the other players, structural sense. One other small criticism of the Arons should be made. There are a couple of places – at bar 663 in the slow movement, for instance, or 257 in the first – where they make a *Luftpause* just long enough to break continuity instead of dramatizing it.

At the change from 3–4 to 2–2 in bar 430 in the second movement, Schoenberg's 'crotchet = crotchet' indication does not quite agree with his metronome mark of *minim* = 90 ('crotchet = crotchet' would yield *minim* = 81), but in the last movement the interrelated changes of metre and tempo demand precision, and here the Ardittis carry these changes out slightly more smoothly than the Arons, who, however, play the movement with even greater poise in the main theme and more rhythmic energy later on.



The Aron Quartet's performances of the Second and Fourth of Schoenberg's four originally published quartets are outstanding, matching their greatness and expressivity with strong, vivid, colourful, but also deeply expressive playing and – in the case of No. 2 – with singing that draws one into the brooding, then distraught and finally visionary world of Schoenberg's personal annexation of Stefan George's poetry. The other three quartets and the two separate movements are played with equal strength, colour and energy, but with a very slight heaviness and monotony of accent. It is interesting that sometimes the Arditti Quartet is more Viennese than the Viennese Aron Quartet, and the Arditti performance of Quartet No. 1 has all the strength of the Aron Quartet's, but with more sustainedly passionate intensity. But these are subtle and, in the end, subjective matters, and a set of recordings of all of Schoenberg's string quartet music performed with the Aron Quartet's conviction, technical mastery and golden tone and so well recorded in such an ideal acoustic would be

a prize worth possessing even if it did not include two of the greatest performances of modern chamber music on record.

Michael Graubart

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MANSURIAN: *Monodia*. Viola Concerto ('...and then I was in time again'); Violin Concerto; *Lachrymae*; *Confessing with Faith*. Kim Kashkashian (vla), Leonidas Kavakos (vln), Jan Garbarek (ss), The Hilliard Ensemble, Münchener Kammerorchester c. Christoph Poppen. ECM New Series 472 7842 (2-CD set).

Music from the former Soviet Union must be close to attaining the level of sub-genre on ECM New Series, such has been the preponderance of recent releases devoted to Knaifel, Gubaidulina and Silvestrov, not to mention the label's impressive back catalogue of Pärt, Kancheli and Schnittke. And long may it continue, when they are as brilliantly recorded, beautifully performed and lavishly produced as this latest disc of music by Tigran Mansurian, made with the full participation of the composer.

Appetite for this all-Mansurian recording had been whetted by Kim Kashkashian's 2003 release *Hayren – Music of Komitas and Mansurian*,<sup>4</sup> which presented works for viola and percussion performed by the violist with percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky. The impetus for the new 2-CD set, which features four major compositions (all première recordings with the exception of the Violin Concerto), came when Kashkashian and Jan Garbarek joined forces to perform Mansurian's music at an ECM-inspired 'Armenian Night' at the 1999 Bergen Festival.

Like many of his Soviet contemporaries, Mansurian underwent a far-reaching stylistic reorientation once he emerged from the white heat of Western modernism. (As the composer remarks in the booklet notes: 'The more techniques we were equipped with, the more pressing the problem of individual style became'.) Whilst a composer like Arvo Pärt turned to the *fons et origo* of Western music, plainchant, as a revitalizing musical source, Mansurian homed in specifically on the ancient roots of Armenian folk and church music and their deep interconnexions. It is this source, albeit transmuted by the composer's own compositional aesthetic, which gives Mansurian's music its characteristic sound.

<sup>4</sup> A major influence on Mansurian and his generation, the Armenian monk Komitas (1869–1935), born Soghomon Soghomonian, was not only the foremost composer of his time but also a distinguished ethnomusicologist and poet. The Yerevan Conservatory of Music is named in his honour.

Taking a quote from William Faulkner's 1929 novel *The Sound and the Fury* ('...and then I was in time again') as a basis for metaphysical enquiry, the Viola Concerto engages with the novel's treatment of time, specifically its audacious narrative approaches. With Kashkashian a rapt and compelling protagonist – her burnished, vital tone and superior phrasing at times achieving an almost vocal quality – the string orchestra's protean instrumental lines cast the soloist in a variety of perspectives as they liquefy and coalesce. If the processional quality of the first movement represents linear time, then the *Lento, cantando* second movement steps into circular or mythic time with the essentially unbroken song of the viola clothed in the very barest instrumental support.

The earliest work on the disc, the single-movement Violin Concerto (1981), forms the final part of a triptych based on the B-A-C-H motto, the first two parts being the Cello Concerto No. 2 and the Double Concerto for Violin and Cello (both composed in 1978). Though it is dedicated to its first performer, Oleg Kagan, Greek violinist Leonidas Kavakos makes his own mark on this charismatic – and virtuosic – work. Under artistic director and chief conductor Christoph Poppen, the Münchener Kammerorchester provides crystal-clear and finely articulated support. The orchestra has already won a clutch of awards, and it will come as no surprise if it soon has another to add to its burgeoning collection.

Composed for soprano saxophone and viola, the seven-minute *Lachrymae* possesses the austerity of a Pérotin *conductus* and, in a performance as concentrated as Kashkashian's and Garbarek's, makes for a singularly intense experience. The concluding work, *Confessing with Faith*, scored for vocal quartet (countertenor, two tenors and baritone) and viola, is a setting of seven verses by the 12th-century Armenian musician, poet and Supreme Head of the Armenian Church, St Nerses Shnorhali. The Hilliard Ensemble, singing for the first time in Armenian, makes a terrific case for this work, an impassioned plea for mercy made all the more powerful by its air of acquiescent introspection.

Peter Quinn

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WEIR: *Piano Concerto, Distance and Enchantment*, and other works. William Howard (pno), Susan Tomes (pno), The Schubert Ensemble, Domus. NMC DO90 (2-CD set).

Judith Weir is 50 this year, and whatever other celebrations are in store this double album offers a suitably substantial retrospective of piano works

and chamber compositions spanning the years 1981–2000. (The second disc was recorded in 1990 and first issued by Collins Classics in 1995: the works on the first disc were recorded in November 2002.)

Weir has long been skilled at integrating her own distinctive voice with the jostling presences of models, precursors and ‘found’ – usually folk – materials. The earliest piece here, *Music for 247 Strings* for violin and piano (1981), charts a process of divergence and convergence which works well in its own terms, though restrictions on diversity (especially of pace) seem more salient than challenges to that diversity, suggesting a classicizing manifesto which her later compositions project more effectively. Three pieces from 1988 – *The Art of Touching the Keyboard* for solo piano, *The Bagpiper’s String Trio*, and *Distance and Enchantment* for piano quartet – are more assured in the way they use jerkily active rhythmic patterns to animate the kind of resonant harmony that could easily settle down into complacent conformity with traditional tonality. Weir’s notes for the first two 1988 pieces declare that ‘there are no specific quotations’, either from ‘the whole library of piano music ... alluded to’ or from ‘Scottish bagpipe music’. But when traditional songs are more literally accessed, as in *Distance and Enchantment*, she devises some vividly dramatic confrontations. This is a style which is determined to keep melancholy and disintegration at bay, and to contrive an effective resolution, as if confronting such simple basic materials were the best way for a present-day composer to achieve self-definition and to exorcise the ghosts of anti-vernacular complexity – but without writing pallid folkish pastiche.

*Ardnamurchan Point* (1990) for two pianos is Weir at her most austere: a gradual opening-out of ‘a short fragment of a Hedridean melody’ which is possibly too schematic (‘abstract’ is Weir’s own word) to make the potentially spell-binding, chant-like rituals convincing. Here echoes of Stravinsky’s pianos and bells at the end of *The Wedding* are not to Weir’s advantage. But the ‘Schubert-sounding tinge’ she acknowledges in *I Broke Off a Golden Branch* (1991), scored for the Trout Quintet ensemble, sets up a gripping and finely sustained process in which a haunting neo-Schubertian euphony is constantly souring and darkening, torn between trying to preserve a spirit of calm and succumbing to more feverish and intricate gesticulation. The result, in two movements spanning almost 15 minutes, is an impressively uneasy equilibrium, and the fact that in the composer’s view ‘the composition as a whole moves from brightness at the beginning to

darkness at the end’ doesn’t mean that this trajectory is in any way single- or simple-minded.

The main works on the more recent disc are a Piano Concerto and Piano Trio (both from 1997) and a Piano Quartet (2000). The concerto allows for a variable number of string players, though only nine were used for the première and for this recording. Initial impressions are that the music’s expressive world is similar to that of *I Broke Off a Golden Branch*, and temptations to play ‘hunt the allusion’ – Janáček? Grainger? Milhaud? – are part of the price to be paid when the desire to constrain both feeling and formal process seems as strong as it does here. Nevertheless, hints of anxiety and regret are not hard to hear, and Weir’s skill at balancing the tension between sometimes simple surfaces and those rather different undercurrents is impressive, not least because that ‘balance’ is not intended to generate an equable neutrality of expression. One might even suspect a deconstructive rather than synthesizing spirit to be at work in the textural manoeuvres of the Piano Trio, in keeping with the image the composer applies to the finale, of ‘the western edge of the Hebrides’ where ‘white sands’ are ‘washed over and over again’ so that they are ‘completely clear of anything but the most fragmentary objects’. The contrast between a pure, smooth background and those ‘fragmentary objects’ might also have helped to generate the particularly forceful conjunctions of the Piano Quartet, whose first movement – all the more urgently abrasive for the characteristically resonant chordal writing to which it has recourse – is complemented by a folk-tune-based slow movement that becomes more intense and ‘plaintive’ (Weir’s word again) as it proceeds.

All these works are performed with abundant character and technical flair: although the later recordings are technically superior to the earlier, none is unsatisfactory, and NMC’s packaging is exemplary.

Arnold Whittall

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BABBITT: String Quartet No. 6<sup>1</sup>; *Occasional Variations* for synthesizer; String Quartet No. 2<sup>2</sup>; Composition for Guitar<sup>3</sup>. <sup>1</sup>The Sherry Quartet; <sup>2</sup>The Composers Quartet; <sup>3</sup>William Anderson (gtr). Tzadik TZ7088.

BABBITT: *Quatrains*<sup>1</sup>; *Manifold Music*<sup>2</sup>; *My Ends Are My Beginnings*<sup>3</sup>; *Soli e Duettini*<sup>4</sup>; *Swan Song No. 1*<sup>5</sup>. <sup>1</sup>Tony Arnold (sop), Charles Neidich, Ayako Oshima (cls); <sup>2</sup>Gregory D’Agostino (org); <sup>3</sup>Allen Blustine (cl); <sup>4</sup>William Anderson, Oren Fader (gtrs); <sup>5</sup>Cygnus Ensemble c. Jeffrey Milarsky. Bridge 9135.

Milton Babbitt's name is extremely well known, but his music is mostly unknown and unheard. Children at their mother's knee who have never heard his music are taught by people, most of whom also have never heard it, that it is 'unmusical' and 'mathematical'. Since many performances fail to attain simple accuracy of notes, rhythms, and dynamics, let alone any kind of understanding of what might be called its expressive content, the myth is reinforced and perpetuated. Babbitt could very easily say, as Schoenberg did, that his music isn't modern, only badly played.

The renown of Babbitt the composer is allied, for better or for worse, with that of Babbitt the theorist, Babbitt the educator, and Babbitt the writer on music, and is sometimes obscured and confused with and by those other personae. His prose is distinctive in its density and specificity and, somewhat less immediately, recognized for its charm and wit, which are abundantly manifested and immediately apparent in his equally dense and comprehensive conversation. One might consider the one-sentence program note for *Occasional Variations*, written and realized from 1968 to 1971 on the RCA Mark II Sound Synthesizer:

If these are variations for an occasion, they are also only occasionally variations of the same degree of variational explicitness, induced by the same modes of musical mutation, although the progression from the local detail to the total composition eventually clearly discloses a distinct articulation of the one-movement work into three manifestly and mutually 'parallel' sections (each itself variationally bifurcated): 'parallel' presentation of the same completely succession of twelve-tone aggregates, identical to within the traditional means of transpositional, registral, contour, timbral, and temporal variation in their non-traditional, uniquely electronic extension.

An unsympathetic scoffer might take all of that as nothing more than a lot of gobbledegook, but if one reads it a little more closely and carefully (and sympathetically) the specificity of its information certainly comes through, as well as a definite playfulness in the formulation of its thoroughly informative message. (For anyone interested in a sampling of the effect of what it's like direct from, as it were, the horse's mouth, Babbitt's reading of an essay of his, *On Having Been and Still Being an American Composer*, has been available for a while, along with a selection of his music from the 1980s, on Koch Records 3-7335-2H1.)

Babbitt's music partakes of all of those qualities. *Occasional Variations* has recently been issued on a recording of a number of Babbitt's works on Tzadik TZ7088. It might be said to sound like the

music of a giant cosmic pinball machine, replete as it is with the bleeps and blurps and snaps and crackles and pops of good old-fashioned computer-synthesized music. It also serves as an example, unmediated by imperfect performers, of what Babbitt's music should sound like. Although he certainly must have been tempted, as someone like Conlon Nancarrow was, to eliminate the middle-men performers with their faulty realizations of his difficult works, Babbitt has always welcomed, in fact revelled in, the adventure of exploring with living players, and through them with listeners, the golden realms of his musical imagination.

A selection of smaller instrumental pieces, and one for voice and instruments, written between 1978 and 2003 has recently been released on the Bridge Records disc listed above. One might have difficulty imagining what a Babbitt piece for organ might be like, but *Manifold Music* (1995) makes the answer clear: rather like a synthesizer piece with slightly softer edges. In Gregory D'Agostino's performance, it has all the verve, vitality, and elegance of the computer works, and the virtuosity to fool the listener into believing that its performance is equally automatic and effortless. *Soli e Duettini* (1989) for two guitars, performed by William Anderson and Oren Fader, intricately intertwines flurries of crystalline notes between the two parts. *My Ends Are My Beginnings* (1978), for a single clarinetist, in this case Allen Blustein, playing clarinet and bass clarinet, evokes Machaut in its title and Bach in its balancing of melodic and implied harmonic considerations. *Quatrains*, settings of four four-line poems by John Hollander for voice and two clarinets, are performed by soprano Tony Arnold and clarinetists Charles Neidich and Ayako Oshima. *Swan Song No. 1* (2003), performed by the Cygnus Ensemble conducted by Jeffrey Milarsky, for pairs of plucked (in this case guitar and mandolin), string, and wind instruments has a good deal more liveliness, energy, urgency, and squawking than one might expect from its title. All of these performances are understanding, masterly, authoritative, and persuasive in their obviously feeling that there is no need to be 'persuasive', rather than merely to play them honestly and well.

In addition to *Occasional Variations*, The Tzadik disc contains a reissue of an old recording of String Quartet No.2 (1952), an important early piece, by the Composers Quartet, and a wonderful performance of the Composition for Guitar (1984) by William Anderson. (Early in his career Babbitt chose extremely neutral and generic titles for his pieces. More recently his titles have been anything but neutral and generic, being usually puns which, like the music itself, have a number of



different meanings on several different levels. The guitar piece might seem to be a reversion to the earlier practice, but it is in fact the second title, chosen after the performer for whom it was written rejected the initial one, which was *Sheer Pluck*.) The main reason to acquire this disc, however, is the remaining work, String Quartet No.6 (1993). Babbitt has said that he wants a piece of music to be 'literally as much as possible' (shades of Mahler's statement that a symphony should include all the world) and the scope of this Quartet – musically, emotionally, intellectually – is enormous, tracing the various and varied ramifications of its opening through the 25 minutes of its length.

Babbitt has a whole set of performers devoted both to him and his music, but the Sherry Quartet, which plays this work, is uniquely and remarkably so, even in that company. The ensemble was formed by Harumi Rhodes, Aaron Boyd, James Myer Hogg, and Katherine Cherbass, who were at the time students at the Juilliard School, for the sole purpose of performing the Sixth Quartet, and it is the only work the group has played. They rehearsed and performed it repeatedly over years. Their devotion to this task and their method of approaching it calls to mind that of the director Andre Gregory and a number of actors who also over years studied, rehearsed, and refined the performance of Chekov's *Uncle Vanya* which is preserved as the movie *Vanya on 42nd Street*, and like the performance in that movie, the Sherrys' recording is staggering both in the technical control they have of this very difficult work, and in the understanding, depth, passion, and brilliance of their playing. After hearing their performance of this magnificent quartet one is left dazzled, dazed, and filled with wild surmise.

Rodney Lister

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KLEIBERG: *Lamento: Cissi Klein in memoriam*<sup>1</sup>; Symphony No. 1, *The Bell Reef*; *Kammersymphoni* (Symphony No. 2).<sup>3</sup> Trondheim Symphony Orchestra c.<sup>1</sup>Eivind Aadland, <sup>2</sup>Rolf Gupta, <sup>3</sup>Christian Eggen. Aurora ACD 5032

FLEM: Piano Concerto; *Solar Wind*; *Ultima Thule per Orchestra*.<sup>1</sup> Sergei Ouryvaev (pno), St Petersburg State Symphony Orchestra c. Alexander Kantorov; <sup>1</sup>Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra c. Terje Boye Hansen. Aurora ACD

PERSEN: *Over Kors og Krone*. Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra c. Christian Eggen. Aurora ACD 5029

NYSTEDT: *Apocalypsis Joannis*, op. 115. Mona Julsrud (soprano), James Gilchrist (tenor), Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir c. Aril Remmereit. Simax PSC 1241 (2-CD set).

Finland is making so much of the running in contemporary music that it's good to have these four releases to demonstrate that Norwegian orchestral music can boast some distinct voices of its own.

Ståle Kleiberg, born in Stavanger in 1958, is a sensitive painter of nature, a creator of atmosphere, a teller of tales. His *Lamento: Cissi Klein in memoriam*, written for the 2000–1 season of the Trondheim Symphony Orchestra, illustrates the point: a Hebrew melody (Cissi Klein was a 13-year-old Jewish girl taken from Trondheim in 1942 and sent to her death in Auschwitz) is announced at the outset on solo violin and then threaded through what the booklet annotator Jim Samson (for it is he) calls 'a series of symphonic meditations' – some of them bringing music of considerable power. Kleiberg has an acute ear for instrumental colour and sonority and for the ebb and flow of the dramatic line – the sound-world is close to that of Ragnar Söderlind, another Norwegian composer whose symphonies can have a narrative quality. Likewise, Kleiberg hues to a generally tonal line, though enhanced as required by clusters, dissonance and other such trappings of modernism. Kleiberg's First and Second Symphonies are not much different from his *Lamento*: rhapsodic, even ecstatic, textures reminiscent of the heaving seascapes of Arnold Bax, *Tintagel* in particular. Indeed, though the vigorous second movement of the First Symphony is explicitly intended to represent a shipwreck, the second movement of the *Kammersymphoni* could equally well portray the power of the waves – and unlike the superficial swirl of Debussy's *La mer*, the sense of power in Kleiberg, as in Bax, begins well below the waterline.

The ambitious (37-minute) and muscular Piano Concerto (1972) that opens the CD of music by Kjell Flem (b. 1943) instantly reveals its debts to Bartók and Prokofiev: driving rhythmic energy, crystal-clear textures, furiously virtuosic piano-writing that contributes to the relentless onward drive – occasional tranquil passages offer only brief shelter from the storm. The uneasy slow movement, 'Elegia', brings no emotional release; and the closing toccata is thrilling. I wasn't surprised to read in the booklet that Flem studied with Einar Englund, whose musical allegiances and language were very similar; I enjoy Englund's music very much (he was a personal friend, too), and so I was delighted to find his legacy living on in Norway. The slow, edgy *Solar Wind* (1989) is a

complete contrast: it's a chorale for strings, a long, slowly unfolding single line. *Ultima Thule per Orchestra* (1969–75), Flem's first orchestral work (dedicated to Englund, in fact), is a portrait of the Arctic landscape, rather in the manner of Söderlind's *Polaris* and *Rokkomborre*, both written just slightly earlier: coldly glistening stretches of sound rent asunder by sudden surges of raw orchestral power.

In this company, John Persen (b. 1941) is very much the modernist: he's no hard-core serialist, but his Lutosławskian palette of colours and gestures is wider than Kleiberg's or Flem's, with clusters, chromaticism and pungent dissonance prominent in his armoury. Persen is a Sámi (a Lapp, in other words) and takes his social responsibility seriously: *Over Kors og Krone* is a five-movement orchestral work written in 1999 and based on material from his 1985 opera *Under Kors og Krone* ('Under Cross and Crown': the prepositional pun is evident without translation) which tells of the Sámi uprising in 1852 – the same subject as the opera *Aslak Hetta* by the Finnish composer Armas Launis, premièred in Helsinki on 17 March after a 74-year wait. Unlike Launas, whose score uses Sámi tunes, both original and stylized, Persen's language is very much his own, boiling with anger and resentment, the textures shaken by explosive timpani and pierced by glissandi from strings and brass under swirling woodwinds. Drop in at any point in the score and it's very impressive, but at 73 minutes it eventually over-stays its welcome: there's no clear harmonic direction to give the piece an overall shape.<sup>5</sup>

Knut Nystedt was born in 1915 and is thus the Grand Old Man of Norwegian Music. His *Apocalypsis Joannis*, op. 155, billed a 'Symphony for Soprano and Tenor Solo, Chorus and Orchestra', was commissioned as part of the celebrations to mark his 85th birthday and suggests that old age is not even tugging at his turn-ups: the work pulses with defiant energy. Nystedt's musical language has gone through a variety of styles, from an early Norwegian nationalism, through a neo-classicism stimulated by his studies with Aaron Copland in 1947; in the 1960s he experimented with timbre and texture along the lines of Ligeti and Penderecki before fusing them in the expanded tonality of his more recent works. *Apocalypsis Joannis*, first performed on 31 August 2000 (this recording conflates that occasion and a second performance the following evening), consists – rather along the line of Havergal Brian's *Gothic*

*Symphony* – of three orchestral movements and a choral setting: in this instance, obviously, of excerpts from the Revelations of St John.

Nystedt's opening movement, which bears the inscription 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end', is a patchwork allegro almost 20 minutes in length, all dramatic gesture and angry activity, spiked by occasional islands of uneasy calm; the style is an inorganic synthesis of post-Hindemith angularity and Sallinen-like motivic repetition which doesn't build up into Sallinen's larger paragraphs. 'Pars II', a quasi-scherzo, corrects one impression – those motivic cells are derived instead from Ketil Hvoslef – and confirms another: its onward drive may well bring a rhythmic thrill when heard live, but the tendency to lapse into languor vitiates the excitement; moreover, the movement lacks contrast, both with the preceding one and internally. The heading from Revelations talks of the 'flashes of lightning, rumblings, peels of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm' when the Ark of the Covenant is seen, but the music doesn't deliver them. 'Pars III' presents 'the Word which came forth from silence': nine minutes of harmonically listless adagietto – we get the silence but not the Word.

The hour-long 'Pars IV' opens with a tenor declamation, bringing echoes of Hermann Suter's *Le Laudi di San Francesco d'Assisi*. It's soon evident – fanfares, spoken choral outbursts, solo recitatives – that, despite the occasional eruption of dramatic orchestral activity, Nystedt is approaching the text as ritual rather than quasi-opera, and the music soon loses impetus, decaying into a series of disjunct gestures vaguely reminiscent of the *Symphony of Psalms*. Some passages are exhilarating – a hell-for-leather string fugue and some of choral outbursts among them, the *a cappella* opening of the hymn which closes the work – but I'm afraid that *Apocalypsis Joannis* doesn't add up to the sum of its parts.

Excellent performances and recorded sound on the first three discs. The Nystedt is a recording of the first performance and suffers from the odd extraneous noise and some choral and instrumental strain; I wonder, too, whether tighter tempi might not have made a better case for the work.

Martin Anderson

<sup>5</sup> Not everything Persen does is as deadly serious as *Over Kors og Krone*: when he first came across Britten's Purcell Variations, his instant response was to write a work of his own in the same vein – *The Jon Persen's Guide to the Orchestra*.

TVEITT: *Baldur's Dreams* (complete)<sup>1</sup>; *Telemarkin*.<sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup>Solveig Kringelborn (sop), <sup>2</sup>Trine Øien (mezzo), <sup>1</sup>Ulf Øien (ten), <sup>1</sup>Magne Fremmerlid (bass), <sup>1,2</sup>Jon Eikemo (reciter), Stavanger Symphony Orchestra c. Ole Kristian Ruud. BIS 1337 / 1338 (2-CD set).

The reconstruction, performance and recording of Geirr Tveitt's massive score to his opera-ballet *Baldur's Dreams* must rank as one of music's major forensic triumphs. The story as briefly relayed in the sleeve notes: Composer in 1935 writes three-hour ballet with piano, singers and narrator, first heard in private home concert. Three years later full orchestral version, about half that length, performed in Germany and Norway. Full score then sent to London, believed lost in the Blitz, composer 'reconstructs' parts of the work in the 1950s from memory and surviving sketches/piano reductions. Score of this destroyed in fire at the composer's home in 1970, except for charred fragments which are sent to state archives and which when photographed and put together in late 1990s are found to be the remnants of the original 1938 full-length orchestral ballet, which had either somehow survived the London Blitz or had never been sent to England.

The work originates in the deep mysteries of the Norwegian saga of Baldur, the 'sun-god' slain by mountain giants and born out of fire. Like much saga material the fantastic and the grotesque predominate, and all we have by way of a 'plot' are the three spoken introductions (here in Norwegian, of course) before each act. The text of these has at least been translated in English in the sleeve notes but the sung texts have not been reproduced, the explanation being that the incompleteness of the material recovered, the need for musical reconstruction of some elements – superbly done by the Russian composer Alexei Rybnikov – and the use of sounds rather than words in many places would make such reproduction redundant.

The result, however, is that it is difficult to make a lot of sense out of this work or to construe any sort of action/narrative purely from listening. The music is clearly intended to be programmatic and highly visual and some of it is very spectacular. There are many ritualistic dances and the use of the large orchestra is often colourful and exquisitely delicate. Tveitt's predilection for parallel fourths and fifths lends an Oriental flavour when coupled with the high soprano tessituras. Inevitably, over an 80-minute span of music, there is some repetition and the material can lack symphonic weight. Another issue I had was with extreme recording levels: it was almost impossible to find a comfortable point where the long *pianissimo* sections could be heard without the mortal fear of a sudden thunderbolt when another ritual battle dance starts.

Some of these points probably sound carping in view of the sheer industry and painstaking work undertaken to bring this project to the fore. I am a

great enthusiast for Tveitt's music and the BIS series of recordings of his work have been glorious. Yet I think more could have been done to bring the visual aspect more alive for the listener in such a long work, such as better indexing of the discs (36 unbroken minutes of Act 3 is far too long without a single reference point), reproduction and translation of the vocal texts, and surely a better narrative. In the final analysis this is a work which preoccupied Tveitt for nearly half his life and although its length and somewhat episodic nature may exclude it from ranking amongst his finest achievements, I have no doubt that it is something to be seen as well as heard and probably works far better in a multi-media format.

Any other misgivings however were instantly dispelled by the other work, the 25-minute cantata *Telemarkin* (1974), a celebration of the beauty of the Telemark area of southern Norway set to texts by the Norwegian poetess Aslaug Vaa. This is a beautifully crafted idyll, laced with the unique vocalises of the Hardanger fiddle and an edelweiss orchestra. Forget the world's problems and float away to a world of flowers, fields, birds and dancing girls.

Bret Johnson

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NEUWIRTH: *Bålhamms Fest*. Klangforum Wien, c. Johannes Kalitske. Kairos 00 123 42KAI (2-disc set).

The nursery language of the title should put you on your guard from the start. This *Baa-Lambs' Holiday* is no *Teddy Bears' Picnic*, but the kind of drama that erupts when the Theatre of the Absurd collides with the Theatre of Cruelty. Surrealism is supposed to be *passé* in our age of late modernism, and the decision of Olga Neuwirth and her librettist Elfriede Jelinek to base their 'Musiktheater in 13 bildern' on a piece of writing by Leonora Carrington that dates from 1940 might seem more an act of excavation than of reinterpretation. Carrington didn't live with Max Ernst for nothing, and the lurid, nightmarish spirit of his paintings finds a perfect literary equivalent in this 'wild epic' (as Neuwirth calls it) in which a bourgeois family shares love and death with sheep and dogs, and humans turn (if only partly) into dogs and wolves. This must be the first musical stage work to feature sheep since Birtwistle's *Yan Tan Tethera*, and Jelinek and Neuwirth tap into the inexhaustible psychological power of fairy tales as effectively as Tony Harrison and Birtwistle reinforce the ritual resonance of folk art. Neuwirth doesn't mention *L'Enfant et les*

*Sortilèges* in her notes, but conceiving *Bählamm's Fest* as a dark parallel to Ravel's ultimately cosy fable makes a certain amount of sense, if only because Neuwirth's staggeringly resourceful musical realization is not so surreal, absurd and cruel that all hints of pathos – those finer feelings which even post-Brechtian music theatre finds it so difficult to live without – are excluded.

Neuwirth turned up Carrington's text during her search 'for material with which one oscillates continually between laughter and crying'. In practice, nevertheless, the potential for a stark opposition of comic and pathetic situations and emotional states yields to different aspirations, and Neuwirth interprets the drama's conclusion as 'a pessimistic-optimistic end, an open end with a glimmer of hope'. Musically, the final stages are indeed finely poised, exploring sustained lyricism and lament, the howls of angry, frustrated animals almost merging into the rooted, ghostly sounds of a song of farewell. Overall, it is not just a matter of moving musically between laughing or crying; violence and reflection, speaking, shouting and singing, childlike song and operatic florescence – all contribute to an 'open end' built up to through processes whose intersecting planes suggest constantly shifting, persistently incompatible moods and motivations.

Neuwirth's background in film seems to me a very mixed blessing in that the purely pictorial potential of her post-Spectral sound-world may be far more determining of form than is the pictorial music of *Wozzeck*, or even *Die Soldaten*. It could well be that she achieved a better balance between frankly mimetic impulses and more abstract sound-structures a little later in her purely instrumental *Construction in Space* (2000) (see *Tempo* 225, p.50). But, judging from a review of this world-première performance (*Opera*, October 1999, p.1173), *Bählamm's Fest* worked very well as theatre when 'produced with great surreal effect, aided by ... spooky lighting', and the imaginative economy and sonic strangeness with which it unfolds over its 95-minute length make reservations on grounds of structure alone seem irrelevant. It helps that this performance is so assured. The high-level recording is almost alarmingly immediate, and it's only a pity that Kairos short-change non-readers of German by including the libretto in that language only, and by not translating Thomas Jonigk's booklet essay, which enters boldly into the spirit of the enterprise, adding a good deal to Neuwirth's own relatively brief notes.

Arnold Whittall

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FINNISSY: *This Church*. Richard Jackson (bar), Jane Mooney (mezzo), Tony Potter, Larry Yates (narrs), Philip Adams (org), IXION, Choir of Saint Mary de Haura Church and guests, The Saint Mary de Haura Handbell Ringers c. Michael Finnissy. Metier MSV CD92069.

In recent years Michael Finnissy has written a number of quirkily uncomplicated works for voices<sup>6</sup> which appear to wrong-foot listeners who have grown to associate the impassioned ideas behind his works with a particular style or set of techniques. In *This Church*, the single 66-minute piece that makes up this disc, the Shoreham church of Saint Mary de Haura is presented with another idiosyncratic gem – a work that is both modest and expansive, intimate and epic, affectionate and questioning.

*This Church* was written to celebrate the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Saint Mary de Haura in 2003 – the work was premièred in the church in February last year – for the players of Finnissy's own Ixion ensemble, alongside two professional singers, pipe organ and the church's choir and handbell ringers. In writing for amateurs and an audience partly consisting of the local congregation, it might be expected that Finnissy would have to compromise the technical demands he often makes of his performers. And indeed this is the case: the choir is asked to sing simple shanties and chorales, whilst amongst the patchwork-quilt of styles demonstrated in the course of the piece, many are accessible to a lay audience. What isn't compromised, however, is Finnissy's personality.

The composer describes the piece as being 'like a TV-documentary', and its basic structure is a chronological trail through events and ideas that have effected either Saint Mary de Haura directly or the Christian Church more generally. The texts used start with Hildegard of Bingen and move forwards through the reformation, civil war, enlightenment, the age of imperialism, the First World War and on to the present day. The juxtaposition of dry but important archival documents with personal reflections both from within the church and from without – John Wesley's crisis of faith springs to mind – creates a rounded and moving history of the church and all the ideas it has embodied.

Sections with sung texts accompanied by music evocative of time and place – taking in plainchant, Lutheran chorale, African drumming, 1920s dance-hall and English hymn – alternate with sections in which the lengthier texts are spoken above

<sup>6</sup> Look out for EXAUDI Vocal Ensemble's forthcoming disc of recent vocal works by Finnissy.

an accompaniment of non-referential, 'abstract' music played by Ixion. The stylistic references are often more literal than one might expect from Finnissy, but the added elements and the sheer quality of writing mean that although the references stand out, they are not incongruous. The final hymn, set to a chiming accompaniment reminiscent of a film score, might be seen as quasi-liturgical kitsch, but it seems to arise naturally out of what precedes, and I found it a moving finale rather than an embarrassing artistic compromise. The composer seems to take his place in the congregation, having in the previous sections compiled a critical survey of the ever-changing meaning of that congregation. If this description of *This Church* brings to mind Britten's church parables, and *Curlew River* in particular, it should be noted that the music also bears more than a passing resemblance. In particular there are similarities between some of the baritone and flute passages (marked by Roland Sutherland's excellent control on the flute) and *Curlew River's* tenor and horn counterparts. However, whilst one could draw similarities between the two composers, it seems that they have arrived at similar results from different directions. Finnissy professes no particular affinity with Britten, and certainly there is little of *Curlew River's* mysticism here.

Like most new Metier releases, this disc comes with a few extra CD-ROM features accessible when played on a computer. Overall the disc is certainly recommended.

Shoël Stadlen

### John McCabe CD round-up

JOHN McCABE: Concerto for Piano and Wind Quintet; *Musica Notturna*; *Fauvel's Rondeaux*; *Postcards* for wind quintet. The Fibonacci Sequence. Dutton CDLX 7125.

'Old City New Image'. McCABE: String Trio; String Quartet No. 2. DAVID ELLIS: Trio for violin, viola and cello; String Quartet No. 1. Camerata Ensemble. *Campion Cameo 2027*.

McCABE: Piano Concerto No. 2; *Concertante Variations on a theme of Nicholas Maw*; *Six-Minute Symphony*; Sonata on a Motet. Tamami Honma (pno), St Christopher Chamber Orchestra c. Donatas Katkus. Dutton CDLX 7133.

'Tenebrae'. McCABE: Variations; Intermezzi; Sostenuito (Study No. 2); Capriccio (Study No. 1); Abade (Study No. 4); *Tenebrae*; Scunch (Study No. 8); Evening Harmonies (Study No. 7). Tamami Honma (pno). Metier MSV CD92071.

John McCabe's sixty-fifth birthday year has been marked by a number of CD releases on various labels. All the performances on these recordings are persuasive and serve to enhance his reputation as a composer of the highest calibre.

On a Dutton disc, the Fibonnaci Sequence display an intuitive understanding of the scores they interpret, especially the Concerto for Piano and Wind Quintet of 1969. The scope of the ideas and the technical and emotional range required to realize them places this 'chamber' piece firmly in the arena of the full-blown concerto. Also featured on the CD is *Musica Notturna* (1964) for violin, viola and piano, an early example of the composer's fascination with shadows and night. Along with the *Hartmann Variations* from the same year, it serves notice of a strong, individual voice emerging in British music.

The Camerata Ensemble present more chamber music from McCabe's early years on a *Campion Cameo* release. The String Trio (1965) is given a bold, big-boned interpretation that also embraces delicacy and poetry. McCabe's love of Haydn shines through, full of twists and turns of mood and surprises for the listener: one would never guess the playful character of the Finale's main section from its portentous opening, for example. The Second String Quartet (1972) demonstrates McCabe's predilection for multi-sectional works bound together by interrelationships that are not obvious on first hearing. The players do justice to both works, capturing their kaleidoscopic shifts of mood; their success in meeting the uncompromising technical demands of the String Trio is especially impressive.

The most recent Dutton CD is even more valuable than its predecessor in terms of programme content. The *Six-Minute Symphony* for strings (1997) is a brilliantly witty distillation of an entire symphony, brought off with something of Judith Weir's gift for discovering the epic within the small-scale. The *Concertante Variations* and the Sonata on a Motet take their inspiration from music by Nicholas Maw and Thomas Tallis, respectively. They generate considerable emotional energy: much of the best of McCabe's work is stimulated by and dedicated to fellow composers, all aided by his deep understanding of other people's music from years of interpretative experience as a pianist. Tamami Honma makes an ideal soloist, commanding and intuitive, in the multi-layered Second Piano Concerto of 1967, whilst the St Christopher Chamber Orchestra instinctively captures the McCabe sound evolving over four decades.

Honma takes centre stage in a Metier release containing important examples of McCabe's solo

piano music; no doubt in future years she will be its definitive interpreter. Already she has the measure of the towering *Tenebrae* (1993), but hers is an interpretation which will inevitably deepen with the passing of time, given the profoundly personal nature of the piece. The other works, especially the Studies, are given dedicated and detailed advocacy, resulting in fresh insights and perspectives on McCabe's style. Naturally Honma's readings complement rather than replace the composer's own incomparable recordings of the Variations and Aubade for the British Music Society (BMS424CD).

I look forward to more McCabe works from the same sources: it would be good to have the rest of the Studies for piano from Tamami Honma coupled with the substantial *Haydn Variations* of 1983 and it is hoped that Dutton will in time turn their attention to more orchestral and chamber music. There is still a long way to go before McCabe is even adequately represented on disc. While such essential compositions as the *Variations on a theme of Hartmann*, the First, Third and Fifth Symphonies, the First and Third Piano Concertos, the Oboe and Second Violin concertos, *Pilgrim* for string sextet, Cello Sonata, Oboe Quartet and Sonata for clarinet, cello and piano remain out of the current catalogue, we are still far from being able to make a thorough assessment of this prolific and prodigiously talented composer-pianist's distinctive contribution to British music over the past 45 years.

Paul Conway

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*De-coding Skin*: piano works by FELDMAN, XENAKIS, FINNISSY, NEWLAND, WILSON, WHITTY. Philip Howard (pno). The Divine Art 25021.

This is an impressive, challenging debut from British composer-pianist Philip Howard, winner of the 2003 Gaudeamus Interpreters' Competition: big pieces by Xenakis, Finnissey and Feldman rubbing shoulders with shorter works by his contemporaries Paul Newland, Max Wilson and Paul Whitty. Howard's fingerprints as a performer are clearly evident throughout: a ferocious technical ability filtered through a bold and thoughtful interpretative intellect. Most refreshingly, he seems (perhaps by dint of being a composer himself) prepared to adapt his whole approach to the demands of some very different aesthetics, lapsing neither into received ideals of pianistic beauty nor into crudely iconoclastic dogmatism.

Not surprising, then, that he should favour composers who can tax these capacities to their

limits, though it would be unfair to say that his playing delights only in extremes: in fact, his performance of Xenakis's fearsome *Evryali*, for instance, seems constantly to be struggling to penetrate *under* the furious surface to a less extroverted, more speculative and interiorized (even hesitant) musical substance beneath. One upshot of this approach is that occasional infelicities which do occur in the playing – a fluffed note, a blurred pedalling, a badly-weighted chord – are accepted if they do not interfere with larger interpretational issues: a risky strategy ultimately rewarded by performances which seem genuinely real and alive rather than pieced together in the cutting-room.

Whitty's *de-coding skin*, a fleeting firework of frenetic cellular permutation, opens the disc with Howard scattering brilliant shards of two-part invention all over the keyboard. Max Wilson's *Zeitlin (on)*, which attempts to reconfigure elements of the playing of American jazz pianist Denny Zeitlin within a formally composed discourse, is more problematic, seeming to be caught awkwardly between the two without finding its own definition of purpose. Not so Newland's *...butterfly dreaming...*, prefaced by three mysterious Chinese riddles on the nature of being and consciousness. The piece's sparse succession of delicate high chords, interrupted by single *sfz* notes, finds enigma and fascination among its repetitions and absences.

Finnissy's *Eadweard Muybridge – Edvard Munch*, from the monumental *History of Photography in Sound*, unfolds with an unmistakable eloquence in two long and gently ruminative sections, each concluded by sudden bursts of speed which seem not so much visceral or histrionic as moments of dazzling light. Finnissy's relation to his subject matter – Muybridge's freeze-frame action photographs juxtaposed with the psychologically intense self-portraits of Munch – is one of philosophical contemplation rather than description or emulation, a distilled vision to which Howard brings an equally clarified pianism, revealing the sense behind the notes even when treating the complex counterpoint with a certain degree of rhythmic flexibility.

Last and best is the performance of Feldman's *Palais de Mari*. This is an object-lesson in close-up listening and feeling, capturing marvellously the music's elegiac purity: the final ten minutes, as the harmony seems gradually to be refined and resolved into utter clarity, is a deeply moving piece of playing, a fitting conclusion to this brave and impressive display of musical intelligence and integrity.

James Weeks

JAMES WOOD: *Crying Bird, Echoing Star*. GORDON MCPHERSON: *Explore Yourself*. EDWARD DUDLEY HUGHES: *The Sibyl of Cumae*. ROWLAND SUTHERLAND: *Timeless Odyssey*. ROLF HIND: *The Horse Sacrifice*. The New Music Players: Rowland Sutherland (fls), Fiona Cross (cls), Mieko Kanno (vln), Michael Atkinson (vlc), Richard Casey (pno), Tim Palmer (perc.), Louise Mott (mezzo); Paul Sherman (db), c. Patrick Bailey and Roger Montgomery. London Independent Records LIR003

The New Music Players is one of a select group of specialist new music ensembles in Britain able to draw on a settled line-up of top-quality players. The five works on this disc, all by British composers, make up a collection of commissions by the group over the last three years, and the disc makes an interesting sample of styles current in British composition, with James Wood's refined and static version of Messiaen's sound-world contrasting with Gordon McPherson's straightforward rhythmic rowdiness and Rowland Sutherland's unashamed exoticism.

Whilst Wood's structure is lucid and convincing, the most compelling works on the disc are those by Edward Dudley Hughes and Rolf Hind. Both pieces are strongly programmatic, Hughes's a setting for mezzo-soprano and ensemble of Tom Lowenstein's ecstatic monologues, and Hind's a stark meditation on the eponymous Vedic ritual. In *The Sibyl of Cumae* Hughes weaves a beguiling web of textures and harmonies, and whilst Lowenstein's text may not be to everyone's taste, Hughes demonstrates that his relatively conservative use of the ensemble can produce impressively direct results through strong material and a keen sense of narrative. The piece focusses on ideas of memory, as seen through the tormented eyes of the immortal Sibyl, and this is portrayed atmospherically with vibraphone-led textures faintly reminiscent of Bernard Herrmann's treatment of the same theme in his score for *Vertigo*.

By contrast with the linear concerns and full scoring of *The Sibyl of Cumae*, Hind's *The Horse Sacrifice* is often static in trajectory and extremely spare in its scoring, with the composer's interest in traditional Indian music and philosophy always evident but never overbearing. The piano joins a percussion section of rattles and gongs that dominates the ritual, whilst a mournful cello portrays the plight of the horse. The piece is relatively long, consisting of four movements, and at times it seems to be meandering, but the striking opening and the exquisite last movement, hovering delicately between pathos and objectivity, which is finally and gently extinguished, make the journey

thoroughly worthwhile. Hind notes that this piece marks his return to composition after ten years without writing a note – he has meanwhile established himself as one of the best pianists in the country – and we should be grateful to the New Music Players for precipitating his return.

Shoël Stadlen

SKALKOTTAS: Piano Trio; *Eight Variations on a Greek Folk Tune* for piano trio. Works for cello and piano – *Largo; Bolero; Serenata; Sonatina; Tender Melody*. Maria Kitsopoulos (vlc), Maria Asteriadou (pno), Georgios Demertzis (vln). BIS CD-1224.

Writing in the booklet to BIS's latest release in their ever-marvellous Skalkottas series, Kostis Demertzis avers 'we should bow down and listen carefully to what this extremely individual composer has to tell us, with his combination of national elements with the worldwide dissemination of his musical philosophy'. Leaving aside the bowing down, the rest of Demertzis's assertion holds as good for this disc as for its predecessors. And if he also means that Skalkottas should be Required Listening to anyone with pretensions to musical literacy, then he has more wholehearted agreement.

This disc combines Skalkottas's two works for piano trio with the five pieces he wrote for cello and piano in the 1940s. The piano trio is one of the most daunting mediums for the modern composer, due primarily to the advances in piano manufacture which make balancing the modern piano against the two solo strings fiendishly hard to get right. This was not a difficulty that Mozart, Beethoven or Schubert had to deal with, but most 20th- and 21st-century composers have fought shy of the genre – even Hindemith (with one minor set of variations for the combination) and Holmboe, who both otherwise wrote for most genres with enviable assurance. The number of truly great modern trios is very meagre: perhaps only Ravel's, Shostakovich's Second and Martinů's Third. Skalkottas's Trio of 1936, here receiving its first-ever recording, must rank with these, although its strict dodecaphony will probably prevent it attaining the same level of exposure as these others.

Although it plays for just 22 minutes, the Trio feels like a much bigger work: it is one of Skalkottas's major chamber utterances, ranking alongside the Third and Fourth Quartets (1936, 1940 respectively, cf *Tempo 220*). One of its most striking qualities is the neo-Classical cast especially of the outer movements, a juxtaposition that would not be heard again so brazenly until

Henze's operas of the 1950s (which achieve it by different means).

Skalkottas's 'other' trio, the *Eight Variations on a Greek Folk tune* (1938) is a little better known – indeed it appeared on the first LP of the composer's music, a tremendous EMI disc in the Gulbenkian 'Music Today' series, back in 1965, coupled with the Octet and Third Quartet. Written in Skalkottas's expanded serial style which employs families of tone-rows, its idiom is less harsh and more easily grasped on first hearing compared to its predecessor. The basic structure of a series of variations getting ever slower until the fine *Adagio* sixth, whereupon the final two reverse the process, is similarly more straightforward. But Skalkottas's variation-writing is masterly and the tension between the almost diatonic folk tune and the chromatic accompaniments is superbly maintained and developed.

The same combination of extremes, handled with restraint over a significant timespan, can be heard to near-perfection in the *Largo* for cello and piano (c. 1940) – one of the composer's most-played chamber pieces, although that is not saying a great deal. Its subtle lyricism and shifting harmonic base are underlined in this performance with a rare eloquence by Maria Kitsopoulos and Maria Asteriadou, who do justice to the other cello-and-piano works here. They give a forceful, fiery account of the *Sonatina* (1949), which is framed by the delicate textures of the *Serenata* (1948–9) and gentle game of the *Tender Melody* (1948–9; its main row is extended by the repetition of the initial note first time around, then heard over and again each time starting on the next note in the series, until the first position is heard again, all over an accompaniment on an entirely different, unrelated yet curiously complementary row). However, the *Largo* and *Bolero* (1948–9) make one regret that Skalkottas never added a suitable first movement to make a full-scale Cello Sonata.

The performances of all these works, with violinist George Demertzis in the Trios, are well-prepared and clearly recorded. The nature of the genre tends to be unflattering to uneven intonation or attack, but these faults are absent here. If the conclusions to *Bolero* and the *Variations* seem a touch fierce, that is in the nature of the music itself. All but the 1936 Trio have appeared before, either on EMI or Argo LPs, but these new versions must take first place, and not just on the grounds of availability. Perhaps neither older account of the *Variations* is here surpassed, but the sound is infinitely preferable and there is much in these readings – especially the Greek lilt the players emphasize – that is winning.

Guy Rickards

LACHENMANN: Piano Music. Marino Formenti (pno). col legno WWE 1CD 2022Z.

The compositions on this disc span the best part of forty years, from *Echo Andante* (1961–2) to *Serynade* (1999). Lachenmann himself premiered *Echo Andante* at Darmstadt in 1962, and his note is characteristically forthright in declaring that 'for me it plays a role similar to that of Berg's Piano Sonata or Webern's *Passacaglia* in their respective oeuvres: looking back and bringing something to a conclusion while looking forward and breaking something open'. Immodest or not, these are the kind of comparisons that matter to Lachenmann, and the piece remains imposing and distinctive, with a greater heterogeneity than was probably thought proper at Darmstadt in those days, and a notably free sense of fantasy in the way it ranges between points, groups, and echos from the past: the composer writes of '“tonal” consonances in the form of overtone spectra'. Over its 15 and a half minutes *Echo Andante* sets out a sequence of dialogues between species of fragment. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to claim that all prospect of an acceptable compromise with relatively mainstream modernism has been ruled out, and that prospect remains alive in *Wiegenmusik* (1963), whose effect Ian Pace has summarized in terms of a 'new evolving continuum'. Only in 1970, with *Guero*, does Lachenmann appear to proclaim a radical rejection of any tendency to the traditional shaping of musical material.

With an effect that in this recording sounds well-nigh electro-acoustic, the player – in Pace's words – 'scrapes along and over the white and black keys (or both in combination), eventually progressing towards the strings', and strongly evoking the percussion instrument which gives the piece its title. No doubt it would be possible to argue that the music still refers to certain archetypal compositional orthodoxies, proceeding by similarity, difference, variation, avoiding extremes of repetition or contrast, in matters of register or dynamics. Nevertheless, *Guero* is a magnificently stark and irascible conception, far more arresting than any number of Cage-inspired experimental piano compositions that pluck casually at muffled strings. Its impact is still to be felt in the seven short movements of *Ein Kinderspiel* (1980), but here the aesthetic value of the results is more debatable, at least in those movements where asserting the instrument's extremes of register seems the only point, and simple repetitions of extremely basic concepts makes movements lasting 4 or 6 minutes seem interminable. On the other hand, three of the seven movements – the tiny 'Akiko', 'Falscher



chinese (ein wenig besoffen)', and 'Schattentanz' – are more attractive, the dance rhythms of the last positively warm-hearted, at least in Marino Formenti's unfailingly characterful performance, recorded with almost excessive immediacy and presence.

In *Serynade* (dated 1997–8 on the score and booklet listing, 1999 in the booklet notes) the defamiliarizing paradoxes of the title are explored over some 30 minutes. Is Lachenmann learning to smile? The score's initial 'capriccioso' instruction seems ironic, given the opening barrage of clusters, but more volatile flourishes are also to be heard, with other effects, including guitar-like tremolandos, as if to acknowledge, however reluctantly, that serenades – and even 'serynades' – are primarily intended to charm. The larger dialectic sets such spontaneity against a grandly intense severity, and despite the vivid characterisation there is absolutely nothing of the 'pathetic' about the music's expressive aura. Even listeners disposed to hear a spacious sorrowing in the relatively understated final stages will find it difficult to reduce this to a plea for pity or compassion. Lachenmann remains dedicated to his material, and this material is what the music means.

Arnold Whittall

BERNARD STEVENS: Piano Trio op.3; Sonata for violin and piano op.1; Trio for horn, violin and piano op.38; *Fantasia on a theme of Dowland* for violin and piano op.23; Improvisation for solo violin op.48a. The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Chamber Ensemble – Kenneth Sillito (vln), Stephen Orton (vlc), Hamish Milne (pno), Timothy Brown (hn). Albany Records TROY 572.

In the twenty-odd years since his death, Bernard Stevens's reputation has slowly but steadily risen. There have been no big media splashes, no major festivals of his music – in any case, these would be quite out of keeping with its self-effacing nature. However, a burgeoning catalogue of recordings, including his major orchestral pieces, has elicited widespread critical enthusiasm and an increasing number of converts. As Albany's magnificent new disc of five chamber works shows, Stevens's music has a habit of getting under the skin and staying there – the glowering opening of the 1942 Piano Trio is as memorable a start as I know to any 20th-century chamber work. Indeed, with each new CD release, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid the conclusion that Stevens is one of the most impressive British composers of the mid-20th-century (organizations like the BBC Proms have heroically managed to do exactly that – but

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then they seem barely interested in British composers of his generation anyway).

At a purely musical level, Stevens's work is easy to like: it is highly memorable, superbly crafted, notably unobscure in expression and, above all, profoundly musical. One feels that each piece contains not a single note more or less than is needed: everything counts, nothing is wasted, nothing is missing.

One might argue a slight lack of harmonic variety between some works, partly engendered by the skilful, though fairly pervasive use of octatonic formulations. In this and other respects, the Horn Trio of 1966 is an exception. The Brahmsian combination of horn, violin and piano – surely one of the most intractable of established chamber media – poses considerable problems of instrumental balance. Stevens's contrapuntal manner solves these by treating the three instruments as equals, while actually emphasizing their different tonal characteristics. The result is a predominantly dark and introspective essay of compelling originality.

In bright contrast to this stands the *Dowland Fantasia* of 1953, one of Stevens's happiest inspirations. This delightful and resourceful 14-minute set of variations on the Galliard *Can Shee Excuse* shows the composer as 'traditionalist' in the best sense – an artist in touch with his roots, interpreting the past in terms of the present, without strain or the self-regarding need for parody.

In some respects this exemplifies Stevens's personality: a peculiarly English combination of radical left-wing politics (he was a member of the Communist Party for two decades) and a profound sense of the past as a living tradition to be cherished and nurtured. Wilfrid Mellers once wrote of Stevens possessing a cast of mind that was religious 'in the deepest sense' and I think this is what he was driving at. It is certainly apparent in the choice of poets Stevens repeatedly set in his vocal and choral works: Donne, Blake, Morris, Tagore.

The performances of all the works on this disc are uniformly excellent, with Kenneth Sillito outstanding in the impassioned solo violin *Improvisation* of 1973. The recording is warm and spacious. This is a welcome release of five works by a composer whose claim to greatness grows with every passing year.

John Pickard

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'Frédéric Rapis: Concertos suisses pour clarinettes'. Works by HERBERT FRIES, ARMIN SCHIBLER, JEAN BINET, JEAN BALISSAT, ANDOR KOVACH and ALEXIS CHALIER. Frédéric Rapis (cl), Kammerorchester Arpeggione Hohenems c. Jean-François Antonioli. Musiques Suisses Grammont Portrait MGB CTS-M 80.

'Musik in Luzern: Kammermusik Duo Lang'. FRITZ BRUN: Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano. THÜRING BRÄM: Album 'Goodbye Seventies'. With works by MENDELSSOHN and RACHMANINOV. Brigitte Lang (vln), Yvonne Lang (pno). GALLO CD-1084.

'Rhapsodische Kammermusik aus der Schweiz'. ERNST LEVY: Quintet in C minor for 2 violins, viola, cello and double bass<sup>1</sup>. HERMANN SUTER: Sextet in C major for 2 violins, viola, 2 cellos and double bass<sup>2</sup>. FRANK MARTIN: Rhapsodie for 2 violins, 2 violas and double bass<sup>3</sup>. Florian Kellerhals, Stefan Häussler (vlms), <sup>2,3</sup>Nicolas Corti, <sup>1,3</sup>Bodo Friedrich (vlas), Imke Frank, <sup>2</sup>Matthias Kuhn (vcs), Andreas Cincera (db). Musiques Suisses MGB CD 6201.

HERMANN SUTER: Symphony in D minor. HANS JELMOLI: Three Pieces for Orchestra from the comic opera *Sein Vermächtnis*. Moscow Symphony Orchestra c. Adriano. Sterling CDS-1052-2.

Some CDs in the 'Grammont Portrait' series are devoted to a single composer, others to a performer with a penchant for new music. A recent Grammont disc featuring the French-Swiss clarinetist Frédéric Rapis is particularly rewarding. That all six concertos recorded here are for clarinet and strings is a reminder that the string orchestra is something of a Swiss speciality. This may have been primarily the work of Paul Sacher, but chamber orchestras such as Lausanne's have also played their part. Three of Rapis's chosen pieces were composed between 1950–1957, the other three between 1995–2002. There is, however, a certain sense of continuity between the two groups; stylistically, the differences are not all that radical.

Born in Upper Bavaria in 1926, Herbert Fries trained in Munich, where he taught before moving to Switzerland in 1965. His mature works, state the liner notes, give primacy to melody in the context of extended tonality. A bitter-sweet lyricism, somewhat reminiscent of Martinů, does indeed pervade his two-movement clarinet concerto, comprising an 'Elegia' and a 'Sinfonia'. The anonymous annotator suggests a link with the 1956 Hungarian uprising. Armin Schibler (d. 1986) was a prolific and versatile Swiss composer of the same generation as Fries. His three-movement Concertino, op.49, exploits a Stravinskian vein of neo-Classicism in its faster sections. Like the slow introduction, the central Adagio is strikingly expressive. Also in three movements, the *Petit Concert* of Jean Binet lasts less than six minutes in total but contains a wealth of poetic expression. The subtle harmonies have a Schoeckian flavour. Binet (1893–1960) was a Genevan pupil of Jaques-Dalcroze and attended Ernest Bloch's composition courses in New York.

The latter-day works on the disc are all dedicated to Rapin, who gave the first performance of each. Of the three composers, Andor Kovach is the most cosmopolitan: born in Transylvania in 1915, he studied composition with Kodály and Bartók in Hungary and conducting with Hans Swarowsky in Vienna. Eventually he settled in Lausanne and came to the notice of Ansermet, who conducted his Piano Concerto. His well-knit concerto for Rapin consists of two slowish movements – one headed ‘lento’ and the other ‘largo’ – followed by a vigorous tripartite Allegro. The craftsmanship is reminiscent of another Bartók pupil who moved to Switzerland, Sándor Veress.

Jean Balissat (b. 1936) first caught my attention as a musical contributor to the 1977 *Fêtes des Vignerons*. His *L'Or perdu* for reciter and string quartet, composed in 1995, was recorded on Grammont Portrait CTS-M 57 – see *Tempo* 217. Dating from the same year, *Cantabile* for clarinet and strings is the only single-movement piece in the present collection. It lasts around 12 minutes and allows Rapin to demonstrate the full range of his artistry. Alexis Chalier, finally, was born in Geneva in 1960. He trained as an oboist before attracting commissions as a composer. The Introduction and Allegro that make up his Clarinet Concertino are in the tradition of the disc's other French-Swiss music. From first to last, Rapin and the Hohenems strings under Antonioli offer distinguished performances.

With the Lang sisters' recording, the number of Gallo 'Music in Lucerne' discs has entered double figures. Mendelssohn's Violin Sonata, op.4, composed by the 14-year-old after holidaying on the Rigi, provides the Romantic bait. The very detailed CD booklet includes some of his unpublished drawings. A later tourist, Rachmaninov, is represented by the well-known *Vocalise* in the transcription for violin. The song was composed several years after the Violin Sonata in D minor of the Lucerne-born Fritz Brun, whose debt to Romanticism goes deeper than his score's incorporation of the initials of Adele Bloesch-Stöcker, the work's dedicatee. Yet if the Beethoven-Brahms legacy weighed heavily on Brun, his first violin sonata still displays imaginative freedom. Fittingly, the playing is nothing if not spirited, etching rather than water-colour.

Thüring Bräm was director of the Lucerne Conservatory from 1987 to 1999, in which year he became the first head of the Lucerne Musikhochschule. Born in 1944, he studied in his native Basle and the USA, where such influences as Webern and Boulez were leavened by Cage and the art of improvisation. *Goodbye Seventies*, completed in 1980, is just that: a valedictory set of

recollections. Framed by 'Quiet Music I' and 'Quiet Music II', the seven short movements also include two tangos and a nocturne. The penultimate 'uhrwerk/hommage à Charles Ives' pivots on a reminiscence of Ives's Fourth Symphony (Bräm was assistant conductor at the Swiss premiere). The work's most explicit reference, however, is to a chanson by the former protest leader Rudi Dutschke, whose death marked, for Bräm, 'the unheroic end of an age of great hopes'.

In his notes to 'Rhapsodic Chamber Music from Switzerland', Walter Labhart observes that the rhapsody is rare in Swiss instrumental music. Nonetheless the term fits admirably those pieces by Ernst Levy, Hermann Suter and Frank Martin which are performed on this disc. All three works involve a double bass – retuned from C to D in the case of the posthumously published Martin *Rhapsodie*. The work was composed in 1935 (the year of the Double Bass Concerto by his former teacher Joseph Lauber). Aware how harshly it would fall upon conservative ears, Frank Martin described it as 'la chose la plus méchante' that he had written so far. He justified his use of 12-note techniques with a prefatory quotation from the mathematician Leonhard Euler: 'No arrangement of sounds can please us unless we are sensitive to the laws of their arrangement'. As Martin's biographer Bernhard Billeter has remarked, individual melodies were granted more independence in the string trio which followed in 1936.

The still unpublished Quintet in C minor by Ernst Levy is, to my ears, a real discovery. A precocious pupil of Hans Huber's in Basle, he was only 21 when he composed it in 1916. But Labhart is surely right in suggesting that Levy was already perfecting formal techniques pioneered by Liszt, and even that he was here foreshadowing the Richard Strauss *Metamorphosen* for 23 solo strings. This exercise in continuous variation delights as much in the physical qualities of song and dance as in formal virtuosity.

Hermann Suter belongs to an earlier generation of composers. The String Sextet in C, though completed in the same year as Levy's Quintet, was begun before the turn of the century. In adhering to classical procedures Suter resembles Fritz Brun, who must have recognized a kindred spirit in the third movement's folk-song variations in particular. The variations succeed an acrobatic scherzo featuring time-signatures of 7/8 and 12/16. In the rondo finale, a jolly Swiss folk theme is shaken and stirred to the point of dissolution. MGB have previously issued recordings of Suter's Violin Concerto and his choral masterpiece, *Le Laudi*. Clearly his chamber music is equally deserving of

revival, and I look forward to hearing at least one of the three string quartets – coupled, perhaps, with one of Fritz Brun's.

Which 20th-century symphony has an introduction headed *Nebuloso, piuttosto moderato*? The answer is Hermann Suter's only work in that medium, now recorded for the first time on CD. The 45-minute composition is sometimes known as his 'Swiss Symphony', not only on account of the finale's folk-music material but also because of traces of dialect speech patterns: harbingers of the trombone writing in Othmar Schoeck's satirical *Kantate*, op.49. In Suter's symphony this latter element appears in a scherzo movement headed 'Capriccio militaresco, alla marcia'. (The movement also anticipates Respighi's *Gli uccelli* by quoting from Rameau's *La Poule*.) In his liner notes Adriano associates the opening movement with Switzerland's mercurial climate and its effects on her inhabitants; certainly Suter's own fiery temperament finds expression within it. The noble third movement can be readily compared to an Alpine landscape. The last page of the autograph score bears the date 20 August 1914 and the motto 'inter arma musae silent'. In a letter Suter described his Symphony as a patriotic contemplative journey. It could have no finer advocate than Adriano.

The unpublished and hitherto unrecorded Three Pieces for orchestra by Hans Jelmoli come from the archive of Zurich Central Library. Jelmoli (1877–1936) specialized in stage music, and the 1912 concert suite performed here has all the deftness and charm of his Frankfurt Conservatory teacher, Humperdinck.

Peter Palmer

MARGARET BROUWER: *Lament* for violin, clarinet, bassoon and percussion<sup>12,4,6,10</sup>; *Light* for soprano, harpsichord, flute, clarinet, violin, cello and percussion<sup>1,7,2,5,13,14,11</sup>; *Under the Summertree* for piano<sup>8</sup>; *Skyriding* for flute, violin, cello & piano<sup>3,13,14,9</sup>; *Demeter Prelude* for string quartet<sup>15</sup>. <sup>1</sup>Sandra Simon (sop), <sup>2</sup>Sean Gabriel (fl), <sup>3</sup>Alice Kogan Weinreb (fl), <sup>4</sup>Jean Kopperud (cl), <sup>5</sup>Amitai Vardi (cl), <sup>6</sup>Donald McGeen (bsn), <sup>7</sup>Jeanette Sorrell (hpschd), <sup>8</sup>Kathryn Brown (pno), <sup>9</sup>Mitsuko Morikawa (pno), <sup>10</sup>Dominic Donato (perc), <sup>11</sup>Scott Christian (perc), <sup>12</sup>Laura Frautschi (vln), <sup>13</sup>Gabriel Bolkosky (vln), <sup>14</sup>Ida Mercer (vlc), <sup>15</sup>Cavani String Quartet. New World 80606-2.

CHEN YI: *Momentum; Chinese Folk Dance Suite* for violin and orchestra<sup>1</sup>; *Dunhuang Fantasy* for organ and chamber wind ensemble<sup>3</sup>; *Romance and Dance* for 2 violins and string orchestra<sup>1,2</sup>; *Tu*. <sup>1</sup>Cho-Liang Lin (vln), <sup>2</sup>Yi-Jia

Susanne Hou (vln), <sup>3</sup>Kimberley Marshall (org), Singapore SO c. Lan Shui. BIS-CD-1352.

SADIE HARRISON: *The Light Garden* for mixed quintet<sup>1</sup>; *The Fourteenth Terrace* for clarinet and ensemble<sup>2</sup>; *Bavad Khair Baqi!* for solo violin<sup>3</sup>. Traditional Afghan Music<sup>4</sup>. <sup>1</sup>Tate Ensemble, <sup>2</sup>Andrew Spalding (cl), Lontano c. Odaline de la Martinez, <sup>3</sup>Peter Sheppard Skærved (vln), <sup>4</sup>Ensemble Bakhtar. Metier MSV CD92084.

MISATO MOCHIZUKI: *Si bleu, si calme*<sup>1</sup>; *All that is including me* for bass flute, clarinet and violin<sup>1,2,3</sup>; *Chimera; Intermezzi I* for flute & piano<sup>1,4</sup>; *La chambre claire*. <sup>1</sup>Eva Furrer (fl, bass fl), <sup>2</sup>Bernhard Zachhuber (cl), <sup>3</sup>Sophie Schafleitner (vln), <sup>4</sup>Marino Formenti (pno), Klangforum Wien c. Johannes Kalitzke. Kairos 0012402KAI

ONUTE NARBUTAITE: Symphony No. 2; *Liberatio* for 12 winds, cymbals & 4 strings; *Metabole* for chamber orchestra. Lithuanian National SO c. Robertas Fervenikas. Finlandia 0927-49597-2.

ALLA PAVLOVA: Symphony No. 1, *Farewell Russia*<sup>1,3,4</sup>; Symphony No.3<sup>2,3,5</sup>. <sup>1</sup>Leonid Lebedev (fl), Nikolay Lotakov (picc), Mikhail Shestakov (vln), Valery Brill (vlc), Mikhail Adamovich (pno); <sup>2</sup>Olga Verdernikova (vln), <sup>3</sup>Russian PO c. <sup>4</sup>Konstantin D. Krimets, <sup>5</sup>Alexander Vedernikov. Naxos 8.557157.

'APPARENZE: Collana di Nuove Musiche 1997'. Works by SILVIA DELITALA, RITA PORTERA, CATERINA DE CARLO, BEATRICE CAMPODONICO, PAOLA CIARLANTINI, JANET MAGUIRE, MARCO SANTAM BROGIO, PAOLO MINETTI, FEDERICO MONTAGNER, RINALDO BELLUCCI and BIAGIO PUTIGNANO. Maria Vittoria Vallese (sop), Pia Zanca, Fiametta Facchini, Rinaldo Bellucci (pnos), Duo Soncini-Flückiger, Italian Guitar Quartet, Ensemble Paul Klee, Fabrizio Fantini, Gianluca Calonghi (cls), Giuseppe Giannotti (ob). Radio Onda d'Urto E.FB 001.

The name of Margaret Brouwer (b. 1940 – no relation, as far as I know, of the Cuban guitarist-composer, Leo) was unknown to me before New World's 'Light' album of her chamber music landed on my doormat. Now Cleveland-based (she holds the chair of composition at the local Institute of Music), her musical career started as an orchestral violinist with the Fort Worth and Dallas Symphony Orchestras, but the urge to compose gradually overtook her and she later studied with various teachers, including Donald Erb and George Crumb. Her music is generally softly spoken, for the most part rather euphonious, fluently written for the instruments in a post-modernist tonal idiom and a little quirky in expression, if overall quite small-scale. Her compositional idols are Mozart, Beethoven, Stravinsky

and Crumb, though the works on this disc – even those that show a tendency to pastiche – sound nothing like them.

Her four-movement quartet for clarinet, bassoon, violin and percussion, *Lament* (2002), was written as a reaction to the terrible events of 11 September 2001, and displays her part-writing ability to great effect. It possesses an affecting, broadly melancholic air, yet despite the percussionist's forceful interjections in the final two movements the music does little to convey any real sense of catastrophe or tragedy. This emotional reticence can be observed again in the suite *Skyriding* (1992; the earliest item here) for flute and piano trio, again expertly written – and also featuring several turns of sonority that show what she learned from George Crumb – but lacking the excitement the title might suggest. If this piece seems more successful than *Lament* this is due to its aiming at a less lofty goal. However *Demeter Prelude* (1997) for string quartet, which concludes the disc, is the most impressive work here, a closely argued structure with echoes of Tippett's sprung rhythm. Its structure mirrors the descent to the depths and re-emergence of the ancient Persephone myth, though it works as absolute music. Sadly, Brouwer's tripartite piano piece *Under the Summer Tree* (1999) does not. It started life as a single-span sonata but is formally unconvincing as a stand-alone work. Even when expanded to include a haunting slow movement and workaday finale (added shortly after the original premiere), the work does not truly gel as a sonata, the keyboard writing in the outer movements sounding more at home in a set of studies. The movement titles, all derived from Thomas Hardy's poem 'During Wind and Rain', reinforce the music's episodic nature and place the piece more comfortably as an illustrative composition.

The cantata *Light* (2001) similarly combines Brouwer's strengths and weaknesses as a composer. The opening movement 'The Fiery Power' is a setting of a text by Hildegard of Bingen but lacks the 12th-century abbess-composer's lofty vision. The central 'Nederlandse Licht' (in which the voice is silent) is much more successful, dwelling on its Renaissance sources (including an Ockeghem motet) very evocatively but the finale, 'Atoms', again left me feeling slightly unsatisfied and as a whole *Light* fails to convince. The works are all generally very sympathetically performed, by players with connexions to the composer. However, in *Light* I found soprano Sandra Simon's voice less than ideally suited to the music. A baroque specialist, her voice is rather underpowered and her use of vibrato is overdone; her intonation is also somewhat suspect in the high

registers. New World's recording, though, is very natural and catches the essence of this thoughtful composer's quietude very well.

The events of '9/11' also inspired the Chinese-born, now American-resident, Chen Yi (b. 1953). *Tu* (2002; the Chinese word means 'burning' or 'fiery', and also 'poison') is everything Brouwer's more gentle and detached *Lament* is not: a direct, eruptive score full of rhetorical gestures and orchestral drama (it is dedicated to the fire-fighters in New York who died in the catastrophic collapse of the buildings). Much play is made of a rhythmic cell that spells out 9-1-1 and the harmonic language is more advanced than Brouwer's (as befits, perhaps, a pupil of Mario Davidovsky, amongst others). *Tu*'s immediacy of impact may in part be due to its appearing to satisfy outwardly what one might expect from such a memorial work, but there is a palpable sense of danger to much of the work. It must be said also that the virtuosity of Chen's writing – matched by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra's committed execution – is itself compelling. Nor is this a one-off: the slightly earlier *Momentum* (1998) is a gripping essay, with two huge climaxes, drawn from the 'power of ancient totems, the tension of breathing lava, – and the gesture of exaggerated dancing lines in Chinese calligraphy'. These seemingly unconnected inspirations are all suggestive of different facets of this invigorating music, the block-like chords, explosive eruptions and singular melodic writing (with many instrumental solos), powerful and elegant in equal measure.

On the evidence of BIS's fascinating disc of her music, Chen's output seems almost schizophrenic, for next to these dynamic orchestral tone poems come two works for violin and orchestra drawing explicitly on her Chinese heritage. Chen, like Brouwer, was a violinist and the *Chinese Folk Dance Suite* (2000) does have a concerto-like demeanour, as annotator Joanna C. Lee suggests. Formally, however, the design is far too rhapsodic and what we have is a series of engaging character-pictures from China, written in a simplified harmonic language. The energetic 'Lion Dance' sounds perhaps the most obviously Chinese (although there is some rather Bartókian solo writing), with exuberant percussion counterpointing the soloist, but the central 'YangKo' catches more eloquently that strangeness of sound (to Western ears) which is so much a part of Chinese folk music. The direction for orchestral players to recite syllables as part of the texture is a nice touch, too. But then so is constructing the longest movement – 'Muqam' – from the music of the repressed Uighur people of Xinjiang (ethnically Turkish, in the past they travelled east from

their ancient homelands but fared less spectacularly well than their Seljuk and Ottoman cousins who migrated west). Is a political point being made here, however gently? In *Romance and Dance* for 2 violins and orchestra (1995–8), as in the suite, Chen ‘translates’ the sounds and textures of traditional Chinese instruments into Western Classical orchestral sonorities. The *Romance* was originally written for Menuhin’s 80th birthday, but in 1998 the composer added the *Dance*, adapted from a chamber suite for string quartet and the 2-stringed folk fiddle, the *huqin*.

At the heart of the disc lies the *Dunhuang Fantasy* for organ and winds (1999), an evocation of the T’ang Dynasty of the seventh to tenth centuries and the ‘multicultural interaction’ along the Silk Road, including the pictures of mythical gods and demigods in the Mogao Grottoes. I have not encountered these paintings (it’s a shame none are reprinted in the booklet), so cannot comment on how closely Chen’s contrapuntal textures relate to them. The *Fantasy* is a darker score than either of the *concertante* violin pieces, though the writing for the organ – the work was commissioned by the American Guild of Organists – is brilliant, demanding and considerably more advanced in idiom than that for the violins in its more picturesque companions here. Much of it is also very subdued, though there is often the feeling of something latent beyond the quiet. Kimberley Marshall, who premièred the work in 2001, is the nimble-fingered soloist and delivers a powerful account of this kaleidoscopic, elusive but rewarding creation. The Singapore Symphony, under Lan Shui’s vital direction, accompany wonderfully, as they do for Cho-Liang Lin and Yi-Jua Susanne Hou in the folk-derived pieces. BIS’ sound, as ever, is clear and vivid.

The dust of Central Asia permeates Metier’s follow-up to their earlier discs of Australian-born Sadie Harrison’s music with a most imaginative release centred on her chamber trilogy *The Light Garden* (2001–2). The three works have very different *instrumentaria*: a quintet of clarinet, string trio and piano for *The Light Garden*, solo clarinet and ensemble in *The Fourteenth Terrace*, and unaccompanied violin for the final panel, *Bavad Khair Baqi!*. All three works are inspired by Afghani music and the late 15th-century Mughal dynast, warrior and poet, Babur the Conqueror (reputedly a descendant of Genghis Khan and Tamberlaine), and the tomb built for him in his pleasure garden, Bagh-e-Babur, near Kabul. Originally constructed in 15 terraces, this was destroyed by the Taliban three years ago; the trilogy therefore describes a journey through the garden with its fountains and reservoirs to the fourteenth terrace, where

Babur’s tomb was situated; the final panel focuses on the tomb itself.

To write this trilogy Harrison not only adapted certain Afghani forms into her own music, but used the structure of the garden and tomb to influence the structure of the three works. In *The Light Garden* she alternates a slow lament, where the viola evokes the sound of the indigenous ‘Pontic lyra’, with a much swifter, exuberant music for the full quintet during which the players are required to declaim the name of the garden and the pitch-names in Afghani Persian and Sargam. This vocal device recurs in all three works, suggesting it has a more fundamental role than Chen Yi’s more colouristic employment of it (rhythmically not unlike Toch’s speaking choruses of the 1930s); here, though, I feel it misfires. As a kind of punctuation or rhythmic accentuation a tabla or percussion instrument would have served better and I found Harrison’s idea curiously distracting, not least in the ‘The Fourteenth Terrace’ which is built in miniature to the proportions of an old description of Babur’s garden. In *Bavad Khair Baqi!* Harrison recapitulates material from the preceding pieces but also mirrors the principal material on some numerical relationships derived from the tomb. Such formulaic artifice might, in other hands, have led to a dreadfully dull let-down of a piece, but *Bavad Khair Baqi!* is the most impressive single panel of the trilogy and is played superbly by Peter Sheppard Skærved, its original executant. Indeed, the other two items are delivered with equal commitment and dexterity by their dedicatees also.

Harrison’s three works amount to some 40 minutes of music, and Metier have enterprisingly solved the question of what to couple them with by interspersing Harrison’s trilogy with four pieces of Afghani traditional music played by the Ensemble Bakhtar. Thus, the opening *Naghma-ye kashāl Bairami* formally relates to *The Light Garden* itself, while the others are love songs and a lullaby, adding vibrant contexts to Harrison’s works. Together the two musics complement each other, sometimes – as Harrison herself says in her notes – ‘celebrating the differences between the cultures as finding commonality’. The performances are excellent and full of life, not least Veronica Doubleday’s singing, though I wonder how authentic Afghanis will find it? Brilliant sound and production values, as usual, from David Leféber at Metier. This is quite a brave undertaking: it deserves every success.

Misato Mochizuki was born in Tokyo in 1969 and studied composition and piano there until 1992 when she decamped to Paris, studying over the next five years with Paul Méfano, Emmanuel Nunes and Tristan Murail, this last at IRCAM. She

has won a number of prizes and citations, not least for the three ensemble works on Kairos's neatly produced disc: *Si bleu, si calme* ('Of blue, of the calm', 1997) from the Darmstadt Summer Courses; *La chambre claire* ('The clear room', 1998) from UNESCO; and *Chimera* (2000) – the Audience Award from the Brussels Ars Musica Festival.

Japanese music often tends to the delicate and fragrant, but anyone expecting Oriental impressionism should look elsewhere. Mochizuki's is the most radical language of any of the composers under consideration here, manifest from the outset of *Si bleu, si calme*, which fizzes and hisses like a pressure cooker. Mochizuki never lets the lid off, however, and the way the opening's tensions are worked out and dispersed through the fabric of the music to a quiet close is artful and brilliantly controlled. (The composer – who provides the booklet notes – used electro-acoustic processes in transposition when writing down her purely instrumental lines.)

*Si bleu, si calme* is one of several compositions to derive their inspiration from 'scientific thinking about nature and its mysteries'. That last word is key to Mochizuki's aesthetic since, for all the complexities in her music and the rigour with which she applies certain techniques, the works themselves all express a sense of wonder. This combination of the reality of and marvelling at matters scientific is heard at a more straightforward level in *All that is including me* (1996), a trio for the near unique combination of bass flute, clarinet and violin inspired by 'an improvised poem by Buckminster Fuller' and the recollections of 1960s American astronauts. The 'complex rotation systems' of the firmament then found expression in the music by use of *gagaku* structures, with their ritualized forms and facets. Not surprisingly, this is the most Japanese-sounding work on the disc, indeed perhaps the only one to obviously betray the composer's Far Eastern origins.

A similar synthesis, this time myth and genetics, lies behind *Chimera*. Mochizuki writes of the workings of chemical messages and cellular responses in her note, yet what gives this work its verve is rhythmic vitality, inspired by 'techno' music, albeit refracted through its intoxicating physical effect on the body. Outwardly more segmented than the previous two works, in a way it showcases the composer's constructional abilities more thoroughly. So too, in a very different way, does *Intermezzi I* (1998), one of several pieces inspired by the writings of Roland Barthes – another is *La chambre claire* – and the start of a series of instrumental pieces (there is already a second, for unaccompanied koto). Barthes's notion of fragmented discourse is here depicted in – or translated into – a

melding of seemingly disparate elements into a coherent, logical statement at the work's virtuosic, somewhat breathless close.

*La chambre claire* is in terms of duration and expressive weight the largest work here and the most kaleidoscopic in terms of sonority. It unites several features of Mochizuki's music, heard as dominating characteristics in other pieces, but here synthesized into a dynamic idiom. The ticking percussion and repeated notes chiming through the whole like a continuo are not particularly original in concept, nor the explosive outbursts and sparsely lyrical passages that overlay them, yet the overall effect is gripping. Mochizuki writes of the work as expressing the duality of the general with the specific, 'as a cry in the midst of silence': rarely has silence been expressed so eloquently in non-silent music.

It is hard to imagine these works being more enthusiastically or ideally performed as here by Klangforum Wien. Their ensemble is superbly precise, yet their playing evinces expressive understanding as well. Johannes Kalitzke has conducted many excellent recordings in the past and this is fully up to standard. Kairos's sound is magnificent, too. At a touch under 54 minutes, some may feel this disc a little under-filled, but the balance of the programme is very satisfying.

Alla Pavlova (b. 1952) was born and educated in Moscow but spent three years (1983–6) in Sofia – working for part of the time at Bulgarian National Opera – before settling in New York in 1990. Her style, judging by the two symphonies on Naxos's recent release, is outwardly traditional. She has no use for formulaic manipulations (even on the limited, 'colouristic' scale of Chen or Harrison) or Angst-riven expressionism, adopting an engaging, at times almost saccharine, melodic style more suggestive of the 1890s than a century later. The harmonic language of course betrays that it really is 20th- rather than 19th-century music, a fact underlined by the title and inspiration of her First Symphony, *Farewell Russia* (1994), a chamber symphony for 11 players written after a painful post-Gorbachev visit to her homeland. As with Brouwer's *Lament*, any hint of the distress she observed is absent from the music, which is instead a wistful evocation of the settled, albeit oppressive, Russia of her youth. Political refugees of the displaced Communist regime may wonder (rail, even) at its quietly roseate glow, worlds away expressively from the average Westerner's view of Soviet society (encapsulated most familiarly, perhaps, in Le Carré's cold, grey, spyscapes). More extended fantasia than symphony, *Farewell Russia* plays for 26 oddly compelling minutes, not unlike one of the better Hovhaness symphonies.

It is given a fine performance by 11 members of the Russian Philharmonia Orchestra, not a pick-up band but a former television ensemble who have moved onwards and upwards. The main body is heard under chief conductor Alexander Vedernikov in the fuller textures of Pavlova's Third Symphony (2000), for which inspiration came from the monument of Jeanne d'Arc near the composer's home in New York. It is less involving than Norman Dello Joio's famous symphony on the medieval warrior-saint, being rather a 'contemplation on the mission which every human being on earth has'. Although the four-movement layout is outwardly conventional the internal processes are rather less strict than in symphonies of the romantic era, for which Pavlova's harmonic language seems so earnestly to yearn. Yet the chain of undeniably engaging melodies does describe an emotional journey, for all the apparent surface calm and lack of tension. The orchestral writing, while not particularly distinctive, is effective. Not music to turn to often, perhaps – unlike Chen Yi's – but rewarding in its own way, nonetheless.

The music of Pavlova's slightly younger Lithuanian contemporary, Onutė Narbutaitė (b. 1956), could scarcely be more different, at least in the outward face it projects to the listener. The harmonic language is decidedly more advanced

(though not formulaic) and, if more 'difficult' at first, always still intelligible and gripping. Narbutaitė's Second Symphony (1998–2001) is cast in two large movements, 'Symphony' and 'Melody', roughly of the same dimensions as Nielsen's Fifth. There any similarity ends, for her coruscating first movement is more wildly constructed and wide-ranging in its emotional frames of reference. As with Nielsen's great score, in the second span comes a release from the exertions of the first, in Narbutaitė's case an outpouring of melody inspired by the New Testament and 'contemplating on Bach'. True, it avoids the confrontational in its quietly purposeful progress but is full of incident, not least a somewhat nocturnal, rather jazz-like trumpet solo at the movement's climax. It all makes for an unusual but impressive response and the whole piece works very well – although purists might aver it does so for all the wrong reasons.

The symphony is coupled with two slightly earlier pieces, both of them having the character of instrumental studies. *Liberatio*, for a chamber ensemble of 12 winds, cymbals and four strings (1989), seems at first hearing a rather anonymous piece, owing something (at one or two removes) to earlier pioneers like Penderecki or Ligeti. The orchestral make-up certainly echoes the heady

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experimentalism of the 1960s but the actual music, for all its use of clusters, does not. Never one to raise her voice in public without good cause, *Liberatio* feels curiously polemical, a protest, although against what is left unexplained. Whether the year of its composition – one of great upheaval in Eastern Europe – accounts for this is conjectural. In *Metabole* for chamber orchestra (1992), Narbutaitė takes a more abstract line, applying the ancient notion of change to the initial, rather stern, canon and transforming it out of all recognition until it finally loses cohesion (deliberately, of course) at the ethereal close. A remarkable small-orchestral exhibition of compositional verve as much as sonority, this – like the symphony here – deserves much wider currency. The performances of all three works by the Lithuanian National Symphony Orchestra sound assured and expert, captured in a splendidly vivid recording typical of Finlandia.

It is encouraging to see recordings of orchestral music by women composers in such variety, especially succeeding works on discs – e.g. Marie Samuelsson and Sally Beamish – featured in previous editions of *Tempo*. There is a wealth still untapped, for which one need look no further than to Elisabeth Maconchy<sup>7</sup> or her daughter Nicola Lefanu, both dreadfully under-represented on disc. Yet, just as I began in the chamber-and-instrumental arena with Margaret Brouwer's disc, I will close similarly with 'Apparenze', a collection of small-scale vocal, instrumental and chamber works written in or shortly before 1997 by a variety of Italian male and female composers all of whom were completely unknown to me beforehand. The disc as a whole has the feel almost of a sampler. The average length of the 11 pieces it contains is well under six minutes; deduct Marco Santambrogio's *Enervit?* for flute, viola and harp and Paolo Minetti's *Sothiako solo per una stella nascente* for unaccompanied clarinet – 9' 00" (not the 12' 30" stated on the disc cover) and 9' 30" respectively – and this drops by a further minute. Nowhere is such brevity made a virtue more than in the *Cinque liriche brevi* for mezzo-soprano and piano (1993) by Caterina de Carlo (b.1962), a former student of Sciarrino. The cursory notes (only in Italian – no English translations provided) do not make clear who penned the texts, but the Weberian musical antecedent is clear. Some Italianate lyricism, albeit anonymous stylistically, still gleams in the distance, nonetheless.

<sup>7</sup> It is good to see that Maconchy's 13 string quartets, originally issued by Unicorn-Kanchana, have recently been re-released in a 3-CD set on Regis, which I earnestly recommend to all.

Silvia Delitala (b. 1960) also studied with Sciarrino. During its compact, four-minute time-span, her short cantata for female voice, piano and percussion, *La spiaggia de E.*, moves from whispered, unpitched speech through to *legato* song. It is an intriguing conceit which, if not wholly original, works well on its own terms. By contrast, *recitativo* for piano by Rita Portera (b. 1960) almost celebrates the absence of song in its meditative development of its three motives. *Notturmo* for flute and piano by Beatrice Campodonico (b.1958) is a brief but spellbinding study in timbre and what one might call applied dissonance. A pupil of Gentile and Donatoni, Campodonico also studied electronic composition and choral conducting; the combination of freedom of sonority and practical musicianship are both manifest in *Notturmo*'s four minutes.

One of the longest tracks on the disc, the *Introduzione e presto (a l'hongroise)* by Paolo Ciarlantini (b. 1960) comes as something of a stylistic shock after the less-is-more stamp of so many of the preceding items. Here is music unapologetically tonal, quietly atmospheric and evocative in its relatively substantial opening Introduction (accounting for over 80% of its duration), impetuous and virtuosic in the concluding 'Hungarian' presto. Federico Montagner's (b. 1956) *Un petit cadeau* is also, unsurprisingly perhaps, unaggressive in idiom, but after Ciarlantini's adroit invention, this overlong clarinet-and-piano duo seems a touch trite. The curiously titled (and inspired) *Sothiako solo per una stella nascente* by Minetti (b. 1961) is much more interesting and well-argued despite being twice the length; Fabrizio Fantino's performance is also very expressive. Gianluca Calonghi also performs *Valse*, originally written for Anthony Pay, by Rinaldo Bellucci (b. 1968); the youngest composer represented, the style adopted in this piece is perhaps the oldest, with more than a hint of the *Gymnopédies* about it. It is all very different to that of Biagio Putignano (b. 1960), another pupil of Sciarrino (and also of Donatoni and Gerard Grisey, amongst others). Yet his oboe solo *da una manoscritto di Qumran* (1995) is full of poetry for all its tonal ambiguity and micro-intervals; indeed, I suspect many listeners who would might normally fight shy of a piece sporting micro-intervals would be drawn in to its particular sound-world. Giuseppe Giannotti proves a most sympathetic advocate.

The recordings, made by Radio Onda d'Urto (given the variable quality of the sound and acoustics, presumably assembled from an archive) are harsh and bright, the tonal picture two-dimensional as in the type of rough-cut studio offerings I thought were a thing of the past. *Enervit?* In partic-

ular suffers in this respect, which is a shame because it sounds like one of the more immediately appealing (to a general audience) – or would do were the live performance, warmly applauded by a few enthusiasts, not marred by the violist's woeful intonation. The other performances are all at least adequate, though some – such as DuoSoncini-Flückiger's of Campodonico's *Notturmo*, the Italian Guitar Quartet of Ciarlantini's *Introduzione e presto* or the Ensemble Paul Klee's of Janet Maguire's *Invenzione* (cf *Tempo* 226) – are much more than that.

Guy Rickards

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CASELLA: Complete Piano Music. Lya de Barberiis (pno). Warner Fonit 0927 47043-2 (3-CD set).

Despite his cardinal importance in 20th-century Italian music, Alfredo Casella has always been a rather elusive figure on disc, and even now, faced here with his complete and quite copious solo piano output (22 individual works or sets of pieces), it's not easy to gauge just how good a composer he really was. There are striking things, without doubt, but large areas of the musical personality seem to be parasitic on better-known composers, and a fair proportion of the invention feels merely ordinary. Sometimes its modernity seems to rely on playing things very forcefully and *pesante*, though performance and recording may have something to do with that impression.

These recordings date from 1979 and may never have previously been easily available in the UK. Lya de Barberiis was a pupil of Casella (and the dedicatee of the Study in fifths which is No.5 of the op.70 Studies) and she plays her erstwhile teacher's works with affection and sure technical command. The sound is mostly acceptable but rather shallow, and the piano has a hard, not entirely sympathetic tone that suits some of the more percussive pieces but is wearisome when the music is heard in bulk. For the truth is that rather a lot of Casella's music relies on harmonically clogged, impermeable block chordal sequences, and pieces like *In modo funebre* from the *Nove Pezzi* or the *Sinfonia* from op.59 come to sound, in such an acoustic, even more of an assault of the ear than was probably the composer's intention.

The three discs more or less define three stylistic periods. First an early phase, beginning with the Pavane op.1 of 1902 and lasting until 1914. Casella spent most of this period in Paris (indeed 1902 was when he graduated from the Conservatoire) and the pieces orient themselves overwhelmingly to contemporary French models

– Debussy and Ravel above all, though the general level of craftsmanship is considerably less polished, and much of the emotional content seems experienced at second hand. There are a few striking successes, such as the Toccata op.6 of 1904 – a very spirited piece despite its debt to the outer movements of *Pour le Piano* – but not much of a defined personality. The eight pieces *À la manière de ...* (1911 and 1914) are of some interest in showing Casella as a stylistic chameleon: in fact they are more style-composition than parody, though there is sardonic humour in the Strauss pastiche (*Sinfonia molestica*) and the d'Indy imitation (*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Ascète*). We are all probably more familiar with Ravel's two *À la manière de ...* pieces, not realizing that they appeared in a joint volume with Casella's second set.

The second disc chronicles a much shorter period (1914–18) of aggressive modernism, which certainly contains some of Casella's strongest invention (eg in the Sonatina and the big 'poema musicale', *A notte alta*, later arranged for piano and orchestra), but also some feeble squibs such as *Cocktail's Dance*. Only in the third disc, covering the much longer period 1920–44, do we find what can justly be termed an integrated and fairly individual language: one with leanings to neo-classicism and also drawing sustenance from Italian folk melody, but capitalizing, too, on the percussive manner of Casella's middle period. Beginning with the abundant charm and humour of the delightful *Pezzi infantili* of 1920 (the 'Giga' of this set proves Debussy is not the only composer to have made creative use of *The Keel-Row*), this period climaxes in the masterful counterpoint of the imposing and austere *Sinfonia, Arioso e Toccata* of 1936 and concludes with the seven resourceful piano studies which were among his very last works (the separate major-thirds study is essentially an initial draft of the first of the six studies op.70 which followed it).

Ms de Barberiis is hard-driving in the faster pieces (Casella wrote several toccatas and toccata-style works) and disinclined to relax much in the slower; perhaps this is how he wanted his works played. Comparing with Sandro Ivo Bartoli's recording of the op.6 Toccata, *A notte alta*, the *Pezzi Infantili* and the *Ricercari sul nome B.A.CH.* (ASV CD DCA 1023) it's easy to see that the music benefits from a warmer and more reverberant recording and greater freedom of tempo. But of course most of the works on this Warner-Fonit set are unavailable elsewhere, including the *Sinfonia, Arioso e Toccata* which, despite its boot-faced aspects, is probably the one unqualified masterpiece in the output.

Calum MacDonald