

CD REVIEWS

ARVO PÄRT: *Da pacem Domine*¹; *Lamentate*². ¹The Hilliard Ensemble, ²Alexei Lubimov (pno), SWR Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra c. Andrey Boreyko. ECM New Series 476 3048.

Released to mark the composer's 70th birthday and featuring two world première recordings, this new ECM Pärt disc also marks the tenth New Series recording devoted exclusively to the Estonian composer.

The opening work, *Da pacem Domine*, a brief prayer for peace composed in 2004 which takes the 9th-century Gregorian antiphon as its musical *fons et origo*, sees the Hilliard Ensemble returning to the Austrian monastery of St Gerold, the location for previous ECM New Series recordings including the best-selling *Officium* and *Mnemosyne*. Augmented by the soprano Sarah Leonard, this engaging a cappella setting possesses the same statuesque beauty, contrapuntal elegance and measured unfolding as *Pari intervallo*, one of the first fruits of Pärt's tintinnabuli style composed some 30 years earlier.

For those with even a slight knowledge of Pärt's music, the major work on the new disc, *Lamentate*, will come as a huge surprise. While the composer's stylistic fingerprints are everywhere in evidence – motivic repetition, imposing ostinatos, pregnant caesuras – the sheer scale of *Lamentate* (the composer's most substantial instrumental piece, at just under 40 minutes), its non-religious inspiration, and, crucially, its return to the overtly subjective, agonistic world of Pärt's *Credo* (1968), mark it out as being one of the most revelatory, idiosyncratic and personal works within the Pärtian oeuvre.

Commissioned for the opening event in the Tate and Egg Live series, and premièred at London's Tate Modern on 7 February 2003, *Lamentate* was inspired by Anish Kapoor's gargantuan sculpture 'Marsyas', then showing in Tate Modern's vast Turbine Hall. In realizing the installation, Kapoor used the entire length of the Hall's cathedral-like space, measuring 155 metres long, 23 metres wide and 35 metres high. The sculpture's uniformly dark red colour, coupled with the fleshy quality of its PVC membrane, were both highly suggestive of a flayed object made of stretched skin.

One of Kapoor's stated aims in creating his installations is to make them look as if they have

been imported from another world. Marsyas, named after the satyr who was flayed alive by Apollo for daring to challenge the lyre-playing god to a musical contest, certainly had a profoundly unnerving effect on Pärt, as the composer reveals in the CD booklet notes. 'My first impression was that I, as a living being, was standing before my own body and was dead – as in a time-warp perspective, at once in the future and the present.'

It is not just the return to a more subjective utterance that links *Lamentate* to *Credo*. Most obviously, there is the scoring for solo piano and orchestra. But there are also strong musical connexions between the two works, notably in the juxtaposition of two seemingly irreconcilable types of musical material.¹ Pärt himself characterizes the two opposing strands of musical material which permeate *Lamentate* as being 'brutal, overwhelming' on the one hand, and 'intimate, fragile' on the other.

Encompassing some incredibly dramatic writing, the first strand of material is heard at the very opening of the work – threatening, low rumblings in the percussion section followed immediately by a bleak, sombre brass chorale which is almost Mahlerian in its intensity. The second strand is much more typically Pärtian – introspective, self-communing, with pointillistic drops of colour leaping out of a much-reduced orchestral palette.

As in *Credo*, the entire musical and metaphorical thrust of *Lamentate* lies in the inherent conflict between, and ultimate resolution of, these two disputatious layers. The work's construction fascinatingly mirrors that of Kapoor's installation: just as it was impossible to view the entire 'Marsyas' sculpture from any one position – the viewer having to construct an image of the whole from any number of different perspectives – so each of the ten discrete sections of *Lamentate* provides its own unique window onto the work as a whole. In the extraordinarily powerful *Fragile e conciliante* conclusion the final vestiges of the conflict are gradually peeled away and discarded and this lament 'for the living', as the composer describes it, is ultimately transformed into an act of contrition.

¹ See Peter Quinn, 'Out with the Old and in with the New: Pärt's *Credo*' in *Tempo* No.211 January 2000), pp.16–20 (Ed.).

In this genuinely important addition to the Pärt discography – as affecting as it is unanticipated – the Russian pianist Alexei Lubimov carries off the central solo piano role quite brilliantly and, making his ECM debut, the young Russian conductor Andrey Boreyko ably directs the renowned Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Peter Quinn

ELLIOTT CARTER: Violin Concerto¹; *Four Lauds*; *Holiday Overture*². Rolf Schulte (vln). Odense Symphony Orchestra, c. ¹Justin Brown, ²Donald Palma. Bridge 9177.

The Bridge Carter series is one of the best recording projects around, but it has to be said that this disc (vol.6) represents something of a missed opportunity. This is partly because Rolf Schulte's 1992 recording of the second of the *Four Lauds* – *Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi* – has already been included in vol. 2, and also because a better pairing for the Violin Concerto (1990) would have been the as-yet unrecorded Cello Concerto (2001). As for the *Holiday Overture* (1944, rev.1961), hearing this competent but overblown example of mid-20th century American triumphalism never fails to make me rejoice that Carter gave up writing in this style: and it sounds more than ever incongruous tacked on to a sequence of much later works.

The Violin Concerto was first recorded in 1991 by its commissioner and co-dedicatee, Ole Böhn, with Oliver Knussen conducting the London Sinfonietta, on a Virgin classics disc which includes the Concerto for Orchestra and the *Three Occasions*. Those memorable performances remain indispensable, if you can still acquire them, but this new account of the concerto has many strengths. Schulte commands the solo part's brittle struggle for smoothness, and he and the conductor are at one in alertly delineating every stage of a drama rooted in mood-swings between agitation and exuberance, elegy and celebration. One even catches echoes of the Piano Concerto's uncompromising depiction of the individual *versus* a (comparatively) undifferentiated mass: and although generic allusions to Mendelssohnian scherzo-writing in the finale create what, for Carter, is relative stylistic anonymity, the design of the whole work is revealed as admirably clear-cut and expressively compelling.

I'm not convinced that the retrospective assembly of the separate pieces that comprise

Four Lauds makes for an effective four-movement design, but the strongest items – the tellingly terse and eloquent *Statement* – *Remembering Aaron*, and the volatile, spectacularly showy *Fantasy* – *Remembering Roger* (both 1999), are brilliantly projected by Schulte in close-up but never oppressively artificial sound. Only *Rhapsodic Musings* (2000), a tribute to the long-term leader of the Juilliard Quartet, Robert Mann, seems routine in its marshalling of characteristic gestures and figures from the capacious Carterian reservoir of violin writing down the years. For the same reason, you could also regard it as a touchingly valedictory survey of the results of Carter's deep regard for, and assured technical grasp of an instrument for which – especially in the five quartets and the Duo – he has written some of his finest music.

Arnold Whittall

MARK-ANTHONY TURNAGE: *Scherzoid*; *Evening Songs*; *When I Woke*; *Yet Another Set To*. Gerald Finley (bar), Christian Lindberg (trb), LPO c. Jonathan Nott, Vladimir Jurowski and Marin Alsop. LPO – 0007.

TURNAGE: *This Silence*; *True Life Stories*; *Slide Stride*; *Two Baudelaire Songs*; *Eulogy*; *Cantilena*. The Nash Ensemble. Onyx 4005.

Mark-Anthony Turnage's close links with the CBSO, BBCSO and, most recently, the LPO have all provided him with excellent opportunities to experiment with colour and technique, and develop his style. This invaluable experience would count for little if the resulting pieces were unexceptional. However, over the last couple of decades Turnage has produced a string of distinctive orchestral works, and some recent examples are presented on a new release from the LPO's own label.

Scherzoid (2004) is a fireball of energy, inspired by Beethoven's Scherzos. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* also springs to mind, along with a twist of Bernstein's urban choreography. Most importantly, from its very first bar, the piece sounds like Turnage and what ensues is one of his brightest, most enjoyable orchestral pieces for many years, bursting with vivid, bracing sonorities and energizing, punchy rhythms. Jonathan Nott makes an ideal guide, encouraging the players to relax in the simmering Trio sections, without losing momentum, and always concentrating on the musical argument; he never treats *Scherzoid* as an empty orchestral showpiece, a fate it might easily suffer in less fastidious hands.

Evening Songs (1998) sees Turnage in more reflective mood, especially in the delicate concluding movement, 'Still Sleeping': the wistful melancholy which informs so much of his chamber writing spills over into this richly scored Nocturne. In contrast, a sense of over-familiarity plagues *Yet Another Set To* (2005), a virtuoso vehicle for the talents of Christian Lindberg. Aside from the charming Baroque intimacy of the central movement (where chaste strings deftly accompany the muted soloist), there is little here to advance the listener's understanding of Turnage's art. Christian Lindberg's playing is hard to match for sheer brilliance, but, to my ears, this showcase ultimately failed to display anything new.

The other soloist on the disc, baritone Gerald Finley, always brings out the best in Turnage, and their continuing collaboration has resulted in many of the composer's finest scores, including his settings of Dylan Thomas, *When I Woke* (2002). Turnage's reverence for the poet's words results in some of his most self-effacing writing, insisting on the supremacy of the texts to such an extent that the first setting is almost over before a single instrument joins the impassioned vocal line.

The playing of the LPO throughout these works is exemplary, revealing how quickly this orchestra has assimilated Turnage's unique idiom. The recordings, all taken from live performances, are sometimes wanting in balance and clarity, but they do not detract from what is overall a most welcome release.

For those gluttoned by the many large-scale, jazz-inflected orchestral works Turnage has produced over the years (and *Scherzoid* proves there is always room for more when the results are so fresh and invigorating), there is a significant body of chamber music to explore. A 1995 NMC disc by the Nash Ensemble (NMC D024M), followed by a 2001 release (Black Box BBM1065), indicated the depth and subtlety of his pieces in this genre, and the players have now released a third collection on the ONYX label, which confirms these favourable first impressions.

The highlights include *This Silence* (1993), a beautifully rapt and concentrated, elegiac octet, and *Eulogy* (2003) for viola and ensemble, which shows Turnage at his most naturally eloquent and directly expressive. Several works in the programme are associated with bereavement or remembrance, and their lamenting tugs with an aching authenticity.

One small quibble about this otherwise excellent disc – the pauses between pieces are brutally short, damagingly so in the case of the

resonant and poignant ending of *This Silence*; its dying sonorities have not had time to fully dispel before the disorientating sounds of solo piano from *True Life Stories* (1999) cut in. This minor irritation aside, the CD can be thoroughly recommended. The Nash Ensemble contribute alert and responsive playing throughout, and the intimacy of the chamber medium clearly befits Turnage's more introspective moods: here is his most personal and affecting voice, as distinct from those big, public displays built around outsized talents. Such monuments to specific musicians may not last much beyond the lifespan of their subjects; yet Turnage's chamber music looks increasingly likely to form his most enduring legacy.

Paul Conway

BERNARD STEVENS: *Fantasia on 'Giles Farnaby's Dreame'*, op. 22¹; *Five Inventions*, op. 14¹; *Theme & Variations*, op. 2¹; *Ballad No. 1*, op. 17¹; *Ballad No. 2*, op. 42¹; *Sonata in one movement*, op. 25¹; *A Birthday Song*³; *Fugato*²; *Invention*²; *Fugue à 3*²; *Fantasia on 'The Irish Ho-Hoane'*, op. 13³; *Barcarolle*²; *Haymakers' Dance*²; *The Mirror (Canon)*²; *Square Dance*²; *Aria*²; *Introduction & Allegro*, op. 29³; *2 Dances*, op. 33³; *Fuga alla sarabanda*²; *Nocturne on a note-row of Ronald Stevenson*, op. 51²; *Elegiac Fugue on the name 'Geraldine'*²; *Concertante for 2 pianos*, op. 55³. ¹Florian Uhlig (pno), ²Michael Finnissy (pno), ³Isabel Beyer & Harvey Dagul (pno duet). Dutton CDLX 7160 (2-CD set).

Although his music is still all too infrequently heard in the concert hall, Bernard Stevens (1916–83) was one of the finest British composers of the 20th century. His two symphonies will bear comparison with those of any of his contemporary compatriots, outdoing most for compositional rigour, while his concertos rank with the best. Although he is most familiar as an orchestral composer, in addition to his other career as a teacher he was also a fine pianist and – given the relatively modest volume of his overall output – left a sizeable body of music for his instrument. Indeed, the two discs that here collect his output for two and four hands are both well filled, together running for over 131 minutes.

Listening to Stevens's earliest acknowledged compositions – i.e. those with opus numbers – one could be forgiven for thinking that he emerged fully formed as a composer out of nowhere in the early 1940s. The Violin Concerto, written in 1942–3 for Max Rostal, is in my view the finest by an Englishman after Elgar's but, although on a smaller scale, the Theme &

Variations for piano (1941) is scarcely less remarkable an Opus 2 than the Concerto was an Opus 4. Composed for Eiluned Davies, it shows the then 25-year-old composer as a master of both the miniature – the work is described as being a Theme, 17 variations and Finale – and the large-scale, since those 17 variations dovetail and are interdependent, selectively treating individual details of the theme as much as the whole, in a way not unlike the symphonic. The work is capped by a passacaglia finale which introduces a new-sounding theme (really a subtle variant of the original bass line) before combining it with the principal theme in a brilliant close. Stevens followed this with a set of Five Inventions, written in 1950 for either harpsichord or piano, which perhaps accounts for a slightly more brittle sound to the music than in other pieces. The brief *Allegro* first leaps off the page as a lively Hindemithian study, giving way to the first of two *Adagios* which both highlight Stevens's gift for melody. The central *Allegretto* is jocose and dance-like, and the set concludes with an invigorating syncopated *Presto*.

It was only natural that Stevens would essay a sonata, but before doing so he tackled two looser single-span works. The first *Ballad* (1953) is a remarkably affecting piece, where the lyrical impulse of the opening (Stevens related this work, and the Second, to Scottish folk ballad) metamorphoses into the dramatic with irresistible logic. Here, as with the lovely *Fantasia on 'Giles Farnaby's Dreame'* (1953) and the Theme & Variations, one hears just how thoughtful a composer Stevens was, and this facet of his art is prominent, too, in the more concise but no less forceful Second *Ballad* (1969). But the 15 minutes of the single-span Sonata of 1954 are the apex of his solo piano output. What impresses so much here is the scale of the conception, simultaneously expansive yet concise. The musical argument is cogent and rigorous, yet Stevens decks it out in coruscating piano writing with plenty of rhetorical-sounding gestures that one realizes are part-and-parcel of an integrated and subtle design. What a shame he never revisited the form.

Jeremy Filsell recorded the Sonata and the *Farnaby's Dreame Fantasia* (along with the Aria – of which more below) back in 1994 for Guild, fine accounts coupled with a selection of piano works by Stevens's teacher, Herbert Howells. Splendid as those performances remain, I find Florian Uhlig's new accounts for Dutton even more attuned to the composer's wavelength, delivered with yet more passion and verve and with considerable attention to detail. Uhlig's way with the lyrical flow of the lines is superb yet there is no

loss of power in the more dramatic or lively passages. Dutton's brilliantly engineered – yet very natural – sound is a big plus.

There is no real competition between the Guild and Dutton releases, owing to the wide repertoire differences (the Howells works are otherwise mostly unavailable). Those with Filsell's disc should not think twice about adding the new set to their shelves, not least for the fully filled bonus disc with Stevens's piano duet & two-piano works as well as a host of marvellous lesser fare. The veteran piano-duo team of Isabel Beyer and Harvey Dagul add to their already splendid discography with a magnificent rendition of Stevens's last completed work, the *Concertante* for 2 pianos (1982), which I recommend unreservedly. But they also perform the delightful *Fantasia on 'The Irish Ho-Hoane'* (1949), *Introduction & Allegro* (1957), *Two Dances* (1962) and the briefer *Birthday Song* (1963). In his copious booklet notes, Calum MacDonald discusses the etymology of 'Ho-Hoane', the title of the tune that Stevens found in the Fitzwilliam Virginals Book as well as its musical subtleties. A model in some ways for the *Farnaby's Dreame Fantasia* that would follow just four years later, this *Fantasia on 'The Irish Ho-Hoane'* is modest in dimension – not unlike the *Introduction & Allegro*, a more cogent and serious-minded piece that has nothing to do with Elgar. The *Allegro* portion would later be reworked for orchestra as *Choriamb*, while the first of the *Two Dances* re-used material from Stevens's splendid orchestral *Dance Suite*.

While the *Dances* were premiered by Beyer and Dagul, the *Introduction & Allegro* was composed for Mary and Geraldine Peppin, for whom Stevens also wrote the graceful *Birthday Song*, which opens the second disc. In between the duo works, Michael Finnissy performs small groups of Stevens's minor pieces, early studies from the mid-1930s – such as the *Fugato*, *Invention* and *Fugue à 3* – as well as occasional trifles such as the *Barcarolle*, *Haymaker's Dance*, *The Mirror* and *Square Dance* (from around 1952). However, Finnissy also plays the wonderful *Aria* (1957–60), the same as that set down by Filsell though two other versions exist. It is a wonderful miniature (though there is nothing short-winded or small in its scale of thought), a description that applies to the final group that Finnissy presents: the curious *Fuga alla sarabanda* (1980) and *Nocturne on a note-row of Ronald Stevenson* (1979), further essays in melding dodecaphonic process with tonality that Stevens perfected better than anyone, and the beautiful *Elegiac Fugue on the name 'Geraldine'* (1981), dedicated to the memory of Geraldine Peppin.



NI 5753

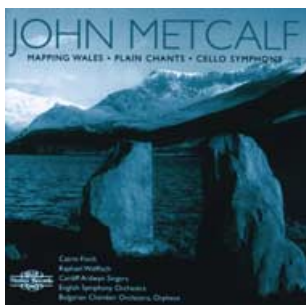


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John Metcalf

Mapping Wales • Plain Chants • Cello Symphony

Catrin Finch, harp
Cardiff Ardwyn Singers
Raphael Wallfisch, cello

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Finnissy's view of Stevens's pianism in these smaller pieces is distinctively different in feel to Uhlig's in the larger works – but in a curious way completely complementary. What shines through is Finnissy's great affection for his former teacher, a personal connexion Uhlig does not have (though he did study at the R.C.M.). Yet the great respect that Uhlig, Beyer and Dagul audibly have for Stevens's music informs their interpretations with an authority that is equally persuasive. With Tony Faulkner's terrific sound, this is a winning combination.

Guy Rickards

JOHN METCALF: *Mapping Wales; Plain Chants; Cello Symphony*. Raphael Wallfisch (vlc), Catrin Finch (hp), Cardiff Ardwyn Singers, English Symphony Orchestra, Bulgarian Chamber Orchestra, Orpheus c. Helena Braithwaite, William Boughton and Raicho Christov. Nimbus NI 5746.

Highlights of John Metcalf's chamber music featured in a valuable 1997 LORELT release (LNT111), and a Nimbus disc now usefully brings together some of his recent large-scale works, including the substantial Cello Symphony. This was premièred at Llandaff Cathedral at the 2004 Vale of Glamorgan Festival, an event captured on this CD in an admirably spacious and natural recording. Raphael Wallfisch brings lyrical, deeply expressive playing to the radiant solo line, and the inclusion of harp, wordless male voices and organ to the orchestra firmly roots the piece in Metcalf's native Wales. The Cello Symphony is in one flowing movement, divided into three sections. The absence of 'chromatic' notes in this piece (and the other two works featured on the disc) may confirm your faith in tonality, or leave you yearning for some dissonance to spice up the harmonies. I really enjoyed the Cello Symphony's frequently ecstatic beauty and caught a touch of Sibelius's Seventh Symphony in its long-breathed paragraphs, brass-led transitions and wide arching figures. The committed and passionate performance helps enormously to engage the listener throughout.

Mapping Wales started out as a piece for solo piano, entitled *Endless Song*. Metcalf then developed the work for harp and string quartet, further expanding it for harp and string orchestra, which is the version recorded on the Nimbus release. It takes the form of a set of variations in search of a theme – the 'Endless Song', which only emerges in full splendour at the end. The composer discovers much variety of expression,

despite his reduced forces and restricted notes, and the modal harmonies breathe a timeless, archaic air in tune with the Celtic inspiration behind the piece. The choral work *Plain Chants* benefits from excellent singing by the Ardwyn Singers of Cardiff and their conductor Helena Braithwaite. In this work, Metcalf shows something of John Tavener's gift for building memorable chorales from the sketchiest of plainsong-like fragments.

The Nimbus CD is a very welcome addition to the catalogue. I hope it heralds further releases devoted to John Metcalf. At present, unhappily none of his five operas is represented on disc. The world première of his latest contribution to the genre – a comic opera, *A Chair in Love*, written in collaboration with Quebec playwright Larry Tremblay, formed the centrepiece of the 2005 Swansea Festival. The witty libretto, based on a cartoon film, tells a singular story about a film director named Truman who falls in love with his chair, provoking the jealousy of his dog.

Metcalf's bold decision to score the whole opera for conductor-less wind quintet (at 80 minutes, it is allegedly one of the longest pieces for woodwind ever written) was repaid by fine playing from the Canadian Ensemble Pentaedre. The choice of instruments brought to mind the 'Glynebourne Wind Serenades' of Jonathan Dove, Nigel Osborne, Robert Saxton and Jonathan Harvey, as well as the incidental music to nostalgic Oliver Postgate children's programmes such as *Ivor the Engine*: the latter an appropriate association for such a surreal, comic-strip plot. The players, integral to the staging, occupied a variety of locations, subtly shifting the music between background to foreground in the process.

Of the four singers, Charlotte Ellett tackled the challenging role of the Chair with elegance, whilst Pierre-Étienne Bergeron cleverly conveyed the strangely human dilemma in this story. The star performer, though, was bass Michael Douglas Jones as the dog. His Papageno-like rapport with the audience brought the evening's biggest laughs and deepest emotions.

The music grew from perky single lines, sending up traditional operatic traditions, into intensely expressive tuttis as the initially cartoon-like characters deepened with the story's exploration of their feelings. The opera headed towards deeper waters as in the scene, incorporating psychedelic video footage on a large screen, where the chair assumes the form of an electric chair, but this was for the most part a wry, charming entertainment which drew a genuinely warm response from the audience. It

deserves to find a place in the repertoire, albeit a quirky, remote corner from where it may pounce and delight mainstream-sated opera-goers.

Paul Conway

KOECHLIN: *Quatre Poèmes de Edmond Haraucourt*, op.7¹; *Vers la Plage Lointaine (Nocturne)*, op. 43 no.2; *Poèmes d'Automne*, op.13¹; *La jeune Tarentine*, op.23 no.1¹; *Mélodies*, op.17 nos. 2 & 3¹; *Études antiques*, op.46 nos.2, 3 & 4; *Le sommeil de Canope*, op.36 no.1¹; *Chant funèbre à la mémoire des jeunes femmes défuntes*, op. 37^{1.2}. FAURÉ orch. KOECHLIN: *Chanson de Mélisande*¹. ¹Juliane Banse (sop), ²SWR Vokalensemble Stuttgart, Radio-Sinfonieorchester Stuttgart des SWR c. Heinz Holliger. Hänssler Classic CD 93.159 (2-CD set).

'On one of the nights of Islam called the Night of Nights', writes Borges, describing the discovery of one volume of an encyclopedia of another world in his fable 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius',

the secret doors of heaven open wide and the water in the jars becomes sweeter; if those doors opened, I would not feel what I felt that afternoon.

It seemed to me I was having something of that same experience as I listened to these CDs. (Koechlin, composer of *Les Heures Persanes*, would have relished the comparison, not least because so many of the pieces here are nocturnes.) I've been fascinated by this endlessly surprising composer since my teens, ever since the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Antal Dorati recorded *Les Bandar-Log* in the mid-1960s. But there is much in his huge output that I (and everyone else) have yet to hear, and which remain tantalizing titles in a work-catalogue until expert performance and recording can give them life and reality.

Heinz Holliger's 'Koechlin project' with Hänssler Classic has so far brought us mature and monumental symphonic poems, the repertoire for which Koechlin is perhaps best known – *La course de Printemps*, *Le Buisson ardent* (both on CD93.045), *Le Docteur Fabricius* (on CD93.106, coupled with the star-spangled nocturne that is *Vers la route étoilée*). Yet this new double CD set, presenting a generous selection from the vocal works, both songs and cantatas, which chiefly absorbed Koechlin's energies in his earliest period from the 1890s onward, seems an even more striking achievement. Some of the songs have been recorded before, of course – but only with piano, whereas the composer intended them, from the outset, as works with an orchestral accompaniment: and in this form, as these discs prove, they aspire to the condition of a lustrous vocal symphonism.

Koechlin's spellbinding orchestration of Fauré's *Chanson de Mélisande* apart, everything on these two discs is a first recording, and a revelation. It's like discovering half-a-dozen Ravel *Shéhérazades* at once, establishing the young Koechlin as master of an individual Impressionism, and an instinctive genius of French song, up there with Debussy, Ravel, Duparc and Fauré. (In fact he did set five of Tristan Klingsor's *Shéhérazade* poems in 1914–16.) The strong connexion between Fauré and Koechlin appears all the clearer in the light of the latter's *Chant funèbre à la mémoire des jeunes femmes défuntés* for chorus, organ and orchestra, the most substantial work on the discs, inspired by a poem of Edmond Haraucourt but setting portions of the Requiem Mass. This deeply moving, sensuously mystical work seems to occupy a position mid-way between Fauré's Requiem and Holst's 'Neptune' from *The Planets*.

Mostly the songs are slow, still, ecstatically contemplative, extended in their development. One or two begin with loud tuttis, but thereafter eschew mere rhetoric. One or two – they are early works, after all, though some were orchestrated many years after their composition – betray a distant influence of Wagner. But on the whole the sound-world is wholly Koechlin's own. Not for nothing was he one of the 20th century's greatest authorities on orchestration: the scoring of each piece is of miraculous subtlety, resonance and plangency, whether he uses a full orchestra (hear the rainbow-melding chord colours of the little symphonic poem *Vers la plage lointaine*, a slow-turning kaleidoscope of a piece – the 'imagined vision of a night in Oceania' dedicated to the memory of Pierre Loti) or just a few instruments. as in the utterly ravishing *Le jeune Tarentine*, the first of the *Deux Poèmes d'André Chenier* composed in 1900–02 and orchestrated over 40 years later. With *Le Sommeil de Canope*, first of a set of six *Méodies* to words by Albert Samain, we find ourselves in the world of Koechlin the admirer of Hellenistic classicism (another strong link with Fauré) who composed a set of *Chansons de Bilitis* quite independent of Debussy's; and three short movements from the orchestral suite *Études antiques* further explore this aspect of the composer. (There are two further movements, which I hope will appear in a future volume of this series.)

Juliane Banse, who has distinguished herself in recent years in less unfamiliar repertoire, appears an ideal interpreter for Koechlin's soaring, refulgent vocal lines. Holliger seems to direct the Stuttgart Radio Orchestra into prodigies of tonal refinement.

Calum MacDonald

HOVHANESS: Symphonies Nos. 4, 20 and 53; *Prayer of St Gregory*; 'Return and Rebuild the Desolate Places'. John Wallace (tpt), Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama Wind Orchestra c. Keith Brion. Naxos American Classics 8.559207.

HOVHANESS: Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra; Piano Concerto *Lousadzak*; Three Pieces for Two Pianos. Martin Berkofsky, Atakan Sari (pfs), Globalis Symphony Orchestra c. Konstantin Krimets. Black Box BBM 1103.

PERSICHETTI: Symphonies Nos. 3, 4 and 7. Albany Symphony Orchestra c. David Alna Miller. Albany TROY 771/772 (2 CDs for the price of one).

The Hovhaness releases listed above do re-visit pieces previously recorded, some of them in the LP era, but the new recordings by the veteran Hovhaness champion Keith Brion of three of the composer's eight wind symphonies cast a brilliantly clear light on yet another facet of his vast output. No. 20, *Three Journeys to a Holy Mountain*, dates from the late 1960s when Hovhaness was greatly pre-occupied with oriental experimentalism. He is able to create remarkable symphonic diversity for what was a high school band commission. Once again the sound-world of canons, hymns, fugues and ceremonial marches abounds but the music is relentlessly inventive and colourful. Instruments such as chimes and percussion are given central roles. The brief Symphony No. 53, *Star Dawn* (1983), is totally different: shimmering vibraphones suggesting a journey through space. The much earlier Fourth Symphony (1958) achieves unusual sounds with bass clarinet and contra bassoon, and very unusual rhythmic effects. This disc is a very good buy indeed at Naxos's budget price, and it is good to know that more Hovhaness wind music recordings are projected in this series.

Admittedly, Hovhaness did often re-cycle musical material, yet it is simply amazing just how many pieces up to the late 1970s (by which time he had written nearly 300 works) are truly one-offs. Despite a steady accretion to his discography over the past few years, there are still huge tracts of terrain unexplored and many treasures undoubtedly await discovery. The 1954 Concerto for 2 Pianos and Orchestra does not feature amongst his dozen or so 'numbered' concertos, and indeed is not even in the official published list of his music. It is, again, totally different from other, better-known pieces from the same period such as the Concertos Nos. 7 and 8 and spends much time spinning endless garlands of unresolved (and unusually dissonant) piano

arpeggios. The rather cavernous acoustic of the venues and the slightly tentative quality of the orchestral playing – most noticeable in the very well known Piano Concerto *Lousadzak* (1944) – keep this recording out of the top drawer but if nothing else the release earns its keep with the three pieces for 2 pianos, each of which is strikingly original in its own way. This is especially true of the static and ornamental *Mihr* (1945), which impressed John Cage so much that he arranged for its publication. *Ko-ola-u* (1962), written in Hawaii, introduces a melody that was to become much better-known in his popular work for orchestra and tape, *And God Created Great Whales*.

Like Hovhaness, Vincent Persichetti (1915–87) was a prolific composer for student ensembles but his nine numbered symphonies are made of sterner stuff. The three symphonies recorded here by Albany all date from the 1950s, and two were commissioned by Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Persichetti's music, although brilliantly crafted and often animated, never really fully escaped from the shadow of William Schuman and Roy Harris, but ironically it is the early Third Symphony (the first two having been withdrawn by the composer) of 1950

which shows the real strength of character. On this CD it enjoys its first outing in over 50 years. The dark opening movement, especially, captures the mood of post-war America and the looming shadows of McCarthyism. Serious, prolonged symphonic thought did not come easily to Persichetti in his later works, although the Ninth – *Janiculum* (1971), another Ormandy commission – is a notable exception. The Seventh (1958) is an adaptation of a series of liturgical essays for church use but works well as a suite. The Fourth (1954) enjoyed considerable popularity for a time, and was also recorded on early LP. Persichetti's reputation as a teacher and educator gradually overtook his status as a composer, which today resides largely in a series of very eloquent but epigrammatic works for winds, piano, chamber groups and organ. His magnum opus, a 70-minute oratorio *The Creation* (1970), is unlikely to enjoy an early revival because of its technical demands, but this double CD of three less familiar symphonies is a most welcome addition to recorded canon of American music. The music is treated to the usual very high standards of preparation, performance and recording we have always enjoyed from David Alan Miller and the Albany Symphony. Very warmly recommended.

Bret Johnson



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Thomas Adès *Powder Her Face*

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London Symphony Orchestra

Thomas Adès conductor

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"Mary Plazas' fearsomely predatory Duchess is one of the best things she's done." *The Guardian*

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TIGRAN MANSURIAN: String Quartet No. 1; String Quartet No. 2; *Testament*. Rosamunde Quartett. ECM New Series 476 3052.

This third ECM release of music by the pre-eminent Armenian composer Tigran Mansurian – all world première recordings – features his first two string quartets plus the recent *Testament* (2004), a five-minute Lento dedicated to ECM label head and producer, Manfred Eicher. Having destroyed several early attempts in the string quartet genre, Mansurian then composed two in quick succession in the mid-1980s. These first two string quartets (a third was completed in 1992) are both instrumental requiems, written in response to the deaths of two close friends.

Formally, the two quartets display close similarities: each is cast in three movements, with the rather subdued outer movements framing a slightly more agitated central one. One of the most fascinating aspects of Mansurian's music is how he constructs entire movements out of tiny motivic cells, and how the rhythmic shapes, melodic lines and, ultimately, the resulting harmonic language are so intimately bound up with the intonation of his native language.

Rather like the Silvestrov of *Silent Songs*, the self-imposed constraints of Mansurian's tonal language seem at once both instantly recognizable and wholly inscrutable. The rhythmic subtleties, motivic repetitions and contrapuntal intricacies of String Quartet No.1, and its first movement in particular, seem to eschew completely any sense of goal-directed harmonic motion, existing instead in the same kind of temporal stasis such as one experiences when listening to a 12th-century melismatic *organum* by Perotin. The quartet's emotional journey follows a distinctive curve, from a whispered keening, to an impassioned lament, to a final eulogizing resignation.

String Quartet No.2 displays the twin influences of Komitas (1869–1935), the most revered figure in Armenian music, and the stylized harmonic language of medieval Armenian sacred music. If the Armenian elements are buried slightly deeper – the manner in which Armenian speech-patterns shaped rhythm and melody in the first quartet is certainly not as overt here – there is the same fluidity of line and innate need for understatement. Unlike the first quartet, there is no transfiguring finale in String Quartet No.2, closing instead with an austere pizzicato chorale which seems to stare death straight in the face.

The Munich-based Rosamunde Quartet give superlative performances of this rapt, *sotto voce*

music, the stunning recorded sound and beautifully produced CD booklet serving to confirm the ECM benchmark of excellence.

Peter Quinn

LEFANU: String Quartet No. 2; Concertino for clarinet and string orchestra¹; *Cancion de la luna*²; *Catena*. ¹Fiona Cross (cl), ²Nicholas Clapton (counter-ten), Goldberg Ensemble c. Malcolm Layfield. Naxos 8.557389

'Reflections'. LEFANU: *Lament*; *A Travelling Spirit*; *Soliloquy*; *Mira Clas Tenebras*. ELIZABETH MACONCHY: *Reflections*; *Miniature*; *Morning, Noon and Night*. Okeanos. Metier MSV CD92064

I hope these two recent CDs featuring works by Nicola Lefanu will be the first of many releases devoted to her music. She has written some 60 works and her output continues to fruit and expand (a Piano Trio and *Amores* for solo horn and strings are both substantial works dating from 2003); the quality of her ideas and her continual resourcefulness in varying and developing them would lend distinction to a whole series devoted to her music.

Taking pride of place on the Naxos disc is her String Quartet No. 2 (1996), a cogently argued one-movement structure demanding a comprehensive technique from its performers. Driving Bartókian rhythms sound like a fond tribute to the unquenchable vitality in the quartets of Elizabeth Maconchy, the composer's mother, to whose memory, together with that of her father, the piece is dedicated. Lefanu's quartet also contains moments of tender nostalgia, however, and ends in elegiac calm. The Goldberg soloists reveal the emotional subtext of this essentially intimate work, never treating it as a mere showcase for technical virtuosity.

The Concertino for clarinet and string orchestra is a re-composition of Lefanu's clarinet quintet, *Invisible Places*, written in 1986. Made up of 16 short movements, it is inspired, like the original version, by Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*. The composer creates an exotic series of varied tableaux from her main material. The source of inspiration is not hard to decipher: frequently recurring tutti pizzicato strumming figures conjure up images of water lapping the sides of gondolas. In this performance, Fiona Cross gives a vibrant reading, alert to the many subtleties of the score, whilst Malcolm Layfield shapes the multi-sectional form into a convincing whole.

Cancion de la luna for countertenor and string quartet (1993) derives from Lefanu's opera *Blood*

Wedding. Nicholas Clapton negotiates the wide-ranging solo part with an ease born of familiarity, having sung the part of the Moon in the original opera. *Catena*, for 11 solo strings, was written in 1999 in the high Pyrenees and it was the sight of the mountains, changing with every shift of the light, which inspired the piece. At some 20 minutes, it is the most expansive item on the Naxos disc and demonstrates LeFanu's skill in building and sustaining large structures. Sheerly beautiful and passionate, its riches are characteristically understated and implicit, the brilliance of the writing always at the service of the musical argument, rather than drawing attention to itself.

On a recent release on the Metier label, featuring chamber works by Lefanu and Elizabeth Maconchy, the most substantial work on the programme is Lefanu's *Mira Clas Tenebras*, a fifteen-minute Nocturne for mezzo, viola, cor anglais/oboe d'amore and harp which consists of songs of darkness, sleep, dreams and dawn. Night is a key source of inspiration for the composer, featuring in the titles of many of her recent works. In the case of *Mira Clas Tenebras*, eloquent solos for the instrumentalists are sprinkled throughout the piece like nightlights, illuminating the expressive vocal line. The use of quarter-tones adds an appropriately exotic flavour. Three bell-like chords on the harp act as an *idée fixe*, perhaps representing the dawn, appearing at the end of the second and sixth songs and initiate the intricate harp solo's shadowy introduction to the concluding song, 'Tenebras'.

Other Lefanu works featured on this well-filled disc include her fluent *Soliloquy* (1965) for solo oboe, persuasively interpreted by Jinny Shaw; *A Travelling Spirit*, turning the unusual but satisfying combination of soprano and recorder to expressive account; and the moving *Lament* (1988) for oboe, clarinet, viola and cello. The work was not written 'in memoriam', but was inspired by two simultaneous anniversaries: the 70th birthday of Nelson Mandela, then still imprisoned, and the bicentenary of Australia, bringing with it reflections on the beginning of the end of Aboriginal population with the arrival of the English in 1788. Hence, there is a lingering, deep melancholy about the work, which does not achieve any catharsis but uses its dark instrumentation and frequent dying falls to reflect an inconsolable lamentation.

LeFanu's six operas punctuate her output like the unison figures interspersed throughout the Second String Quartet. Her new one-act chamber opera, entitled *Light Passing*, was premièred at the National Centre for Early Music at York on 28

October 2004. The composer created a quasi-medieval sound-world to reflect the subject of John Edmonds' libretto – the deathbed reflections of Pope Clement VI, a challenging leading role, movingly realized by bass baritone Nicholas Folwell. The score, for seven solo singers, chorus and six-strong ensemble, seasoned 14th-century polyphony, monody and plainchant with a contemporary sensibility established by an impressive array of percussion instruments. Ensemble 10/10, under the direction of Clark Rundell, brought out the piquant timbres in the writing, but the essentially static dramatic situation meant that the 70-minute opera processed with the implacable tread of a religious ritual. Not always visually compelling, the substance of the evening was anchored in the music and I hope the work will soon appear on CD, where its many subtleties of characterization and wide-ranging sonorities can be fully appreciated.

Nicola Lefanu assumed the role of Director in a recent production at the University of York. As a curtain-raiser for Elizabeth Maconchy's centenary, which falls in 2007, the University's Music Department presented *The Strangers*, one of a trilogy of one-act operas by Maconchy – the other two being *The Sofa* (1957) and *The Departure* (1961) – on 16 November. Maconchy telescopes the action, based on Thomas Hardy's own dramatization of one of his 'Wessex tales', to take place on a single night, incorporating poems by Hardy and William Barnes. The students all acquitted themselves very well, but two soloists stood out: both Alex Hargreaves as the Shepherd and Jake Kirner as the Second Stranger (the Hangman) had a genuine operatic flair and sense of the dramatic.

The most overwhelming aspect of the evening, however, was the sheer quality of the music. At times reminiscent of the best of Vaughan Williams and Britten, but with a distinctive accent all her own, Maconchy's mastery of vocal lines and orchestra was immediately apparent. The opening storm music, powerful and terrifying enough to enhance any Hammer Horror film, permeates the entire opera until it is ultimately transformed into a bucolic, lurching waltz. A beautiful aria in the form of a lullaby, 'An Angel at the Door', sung by Anna Wilson as The Shepherd's Wife supported by a gently pulsing bass and accompanied by a keening oboe solo, was one of the highlights, along with the beautiful aria for the First Stranger (Timothy Sommers) and the vivid hangman's song, the centrepiece of the whole work. It is unbelievable that an opera as well crafted as this should be so

rarely performed and I trust this excellent production will be the catalyst for further staging of Maconchy's dramatic works and the spearhead of a revival of interest in her music for all genres.

A small selection of her chamber work on the new Metier disc provides a timely reminder of Maconchy's particular skills in the field of intimate music-making. *Reflections* (1960) for viola, clarinet, oboe and harp finds the composer at her most relaxed and good-humoured. The opening material, fertile enough to engender and sustain the material of the ensuing four-movement work, is both memorable and mysterious. The atmospheric *Lento* is a reminder of how easily she is able to conjure up entire worlds in a matter of minutes and one of the many pleasures throughout this immensely attractive work is the superbly idiomatic, inventive writing for each instrument. *Morning, Noon and Night* (1974) is a *tour de force* for solo harp, Maconchy sometimes making the instrument sound like an entire ensemble, such is the brilliance of the writing. Yet, the listener is never aware of any self-conscious cleverness; the composer's craft is always firmly at the service of the music. 'Miniature' (1987) for solo oboe is a sparkling masterpiece: one of the last things she wrote, it finds genuine eloquence in a tiny fragment. Okeanos approach these scores with imagination and wit rooted in firm a secure technique.

It is fortunate that Elizabeth Maconchy's important series of 13 string quartets has rarely been out of the catalogue and are still available on a 3-CD set on the Forum label (FRC 9301). Now some enterprising recording companies need to explore her significant large-scale achievements, such as the Piano Concerto (1928), *The Land Suite* (1929), Viola Concerto (1937), Symphony (1950), Concerto for double string orchestra (1953), *Serenata Concertante* for violin and orchestra (1962), *Varizioni Concertanti* (1965), *Ariadne* for soprano and orchestra (1970), *Epyllion* for cello and strings (1975), *Creatures* for unaccompanied chorus (1979), *Music for Strings* (1983) and *Life Story* for strings (1985). There is so much valuable music waiting to appear on disc and in the concert halls before we can even start to appreciate the range of her distinguished musical legacy.

Paul Conway

Judith Weir's third opera *Blond Eckbert* is the latest in NMC's 'Ancora' series of re-issues, and an extremely welcome one. It is also timely, with a newly-scored chamber version of the opera being premièred at the Linbury Studio in June this year. This recording is of the original 1994 ENO production, conducted by Sian Edwards, with Nicholas Folwell in the title role.

Blond Eckbert is based on a 1796 novella by Ludwig Tieck; Weir's own libretto is a model of adaptation, elegantly concise and thoroughly re-imagined as a theatrical work. The story is a proto-Freudian narrative of incest and insanity, pervaded by Gothic *Angst*. Although it is told in the idiom of *Volksmärchen*, Weir warns us, through Eckbert's wife, Berthe: 'however strange it may sound, do not take my story for a fairy tale.'

The plot is simple, but bizarre and elliptical. Eckbert and Berthe's quiet life is disturbed by the arrival of their friend Walther. In an extended aria – eloquently delivered by Anne-Marie Owens – Berthe sings of her early life, but Walther's reaction arouses the couple's suspicion. Hunting in the forest the next day, Eckbert kills Walther. Eckbert heads for the city, where he encounters a series of *Doppelgänger* connecting Walther to Berthe's past; the opera ends with Eckbert sinking towards death, haunted by the revelation that he is Berthe's half-brother.

The music moves from a pastoral tone in Act One, with echoes of Mahler and Weber, into darker territory in Act Two, becoming denser, more dissonant, almost Expressionist. The most compelling moment comes when Eckbert, wandering alone in the city, recognizes one *Doppelgänger*; the encounter – and the shivering music which accompanies it – could have come straight from a Hitchcock horror film. Typically for Weir the vocal lines are direct, often doubled in the orchestra or shadowed in a kind of organum, but always enabling lucid projection. There is not a word too many in the libretto, and not a word lost in the singers' performance.

Purely as a listening experience, *Blond Eckbert* works well. Since much of the opera is narrated as back-story, and the drama is predominantly psychological, it is more satisfying than, say, Weir's *A Night at the Chinese Opera* (also on NMC), where the visual aspect is more greatly missed.

This recording is a reminder of Judith Weir's powers as an opera composer and confirms her as probably the only contemporary composer with the dramatic instinct to be a successful librettist. It makes a persuasive case for *Blond Eckbert* as Weir's masterpiece and quite possibly the best opera in English of the past two decades.

Bernard Hughes

JUDITH WEIR: *Blond Eckbert*. Nicholas Folwell (bar), Anne-Marie Owens (mezzo-sop), Christopher Ventris (ten), Nerys Jones (sop), Orchestra and Chorus of English National Opera c. Sian Edwards. NMC D106.

BARRETT: *Kraftfelt: ... fetters...; Prince Prospero's Party; Exploratio Invisibilis*. (Electro-acoustic compositions). Aurora ACD 5037.

De La CRUZ: Piano Concerto No 1^{1,2}; *La Luz del Aire*^{3,5}; *Latir Isleño*¹; *Soledad* for strings^{4,5}. ¹Guillermo González (pno), ²Helsinki PO c. Leif Segerstam, ³Proyecto Gerhard, ⁴Czech Virtuosi c. ⁵José de Eusebio. Col Legno WWE 1CD 20242.

GRIGORIEVA: *Con misterio*¹; *On Leaving*. SUMERA: *Pantomime; The Child of Dracula and Zombie*. ¹Tui Hirv (sop), Hortus Musicus c. Andres Mustonen. Eesti Radio ERCD045.

HUBICKI: *From the Isles of the Sea*^{1,5}; Piano Sonata⁵; *Full Fathom Five*^{2,5}; Theme and Variations, for string quartet⁷; *Irish Fantasy*⁵; *Lonely Mere and Rigaudon*^{3,5}; *Svolgimento*^{4,5}; *Golandon Suite*^{5,6}. ¹Daniel Pailthorpe (fl), ²Annemarie Sand (mezzo), ³Robert Max (vlc), ⁴Michael Bochmann (vln), ⁵James Kirby (pno), ⁶Frederick Stocken (pno), ⁷Bochmann Quartet. Chandos CHAN 10322.

MAXWELL: String Sextet *From Tree to Tree*¹⁻⁶; Three Pieces for solo clarinet⁷; *Pelagos* for string trio^{1,3,5}; *Songlines and Cadences*^{7,8}. BAINBRIDGE: *Music for Mel and Nora*^{9,10}. BIRTWISTLE 9 *Orpheus Elegies*^{9,11,12}. SUNGJI HONG Sonata da Chiesa I *The Annunciation*^{9,13}. SAXTON *...from a distant shore...*⁹. ¹Clio Gould (vln), ²Hannah Perowne (vln), ³Catherine Bullock (vla), ⁴Rose Redgrave (vla), ⁵Jonathan Ayling (vlc), ⁶Susie Winkworth (vlc), ⁷Nicholas Rodwell (cl), ⁸Hugh Webb (hp), ⁹Melinda Maxwell (ob), ¹⁰Michael Dussek (pno), ¹¹Helen Tunstall (hp), ¹²Andrew Watts (counter-ten), ¹³Richard Benjafield (perc). Dutton CDLX 7139.

PAREDES: *Uy U T'an*¹; *Cotidales*^{1,2}; *Ah Paaxo'ob*³; *Can Silim Tun*^{1,4}. ¹Arditti String Quartet, ²Ian Pace (pno), ³Ensemble Modern c. Stefan Asbury, ⁴Die Neue Vokalsolisten Stuttgart. Mode 149.

REHNQVIST: *On a Distant Shore*¹⁻³; *Beginning*⁵; *Arktis Arktis!*^{1,4}; *I Himmelen*⁶. ¹Martin Fröst (cl), ²Swedish CO c. ³Petter Sundkvist, ⁴John Storgårds, ⁵Kungsbacka Piano Trio, ⁶Adolf Fredrik's Girls Choir c. Bo Johansson. BIS CD-1396.

THOMPSON: *New Nation Rising: A 21st Century Symphony*. Maria Awa, Mark De-Lisser, Nicholas Sherwood, Jennifer Moore, Georgina Clarke (voc), Nolan Weekes (rapper), Justin Pickett (drums), Westminster Voices, Dhol Academy, RPO c. Shirley J Thompson. RPO SP001.

TOWER: *In Memory*¹; *Big Sky*²; *Wild Purple*³; *No Longer Very Clear*⁴; *Island Prelude*⁵. ¹Tokyo String Quartet. ²Chee Yun (vln), André Emelianoff (vlc), Joan Tower (pno), ³Paul Neubauer (vla), ⁴Ursula Oppens, Melvin Chen (pnos), ⁵Richard Woodhams (ob). Naxos 8.559215.

UNSUK CHIN: *Acrostatic-Wordplay*^{1,4}; *Fantaisie mécanique*⁵; *Xi*⁶; Double Concerto^{2,3,7}. ¹Piia Komsa (sop), ²Dimitri Vassilakis (pno), ³Samuel Favre (perc), Ensemble Intercontemporain c. ⁴Kazushi Ono, ⁵Patrick Davin, ⁶David Robertson, ⁷Stefan Asbury. Deutsche Grammophon 00289 477 5118.

ZWILICH: Violin Concerto¹; *Rituals*². ¹Pamela Frank (vn), Saarbrücken RSO c. Michael Stern, ²Nexus, Irish CO c. Michael Stern. Naxos 8.559268.

There is a loose theme amongst the composers listed above, six of whom either now reside in countries not of their birth or whose works on these new discs have connexions to foreign locations. Natasha Barrett was born in Norwich in 1962 but now lives in Norway. Electronic and electro-acoustic composition have fascinated her since being a student at Birmingham University and her works in these fields have gained both prizes and the attention of record labels,² including Aurora, which has devoted an entire disc to three recent works. The first, *...fetters...* (2002) relates to her critically acclaimed theatre-piece AGORA and was originally entitled *...the fetters of a dream...*. Built from extracts from the Icelandic Eddas (spoken in Old Norse by Magnus Rindhal), the soprano voice of Kristin Norderval and 'environmental recordings from Smithfield market in London's East End', elements from Barrett's native and adopted cultures are meshed together in a vibrant collage, its fetters those of the physical property of matter escaping from one enclosed space (Britain?) into another (Norway?). The theme of enclosure recurs in *Prince Prospero's Party* (2003), a 'sonification' (the composer's term) not of Shakespeare but Poe's *The Mask of the Red Death*. Either tale might have accounted for the surreal element – *The Tempest* perhaps more logically the unexplained use of Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* – but Poe's influence dictates its mix of the trivial and the fantastic.

Exploratio Invisibilis is by some way the most ambitious and elaborate offering, a near-30 minute 'voyage through an energy-filled landscape of implication, sound and silence'. As the title suggests, it is an inner journey of discovery expressed in sonic landscapes filled with external imagery, both synthesized and near-musique concrète in the use of thunder and rainstorms. Barrett suggests that some of the greatest journeys are 'fictional adventures' occurring only in the imagination. Her own

² See also Euridice EUCD 26, containing two percussion pieces, *Ras* (1999) and *Diabolus*.

imagination is certainly fecund but its soundscape also has a certain reticence, like the best works of art, holding back some of its secrets for repeated listenings. The composer makes much in the booklet of the ambisonics and sound spatialization – more indeed than do her works themselves – she even provides a 5.1 diagram of the ideal layout. Because of the sound-picture's richness and the fact that many listeners may not have such advanced equipment, Aurora have provided two discs: a DVD-audio for optimum sound and a 'specially remixed stereo CD version' which still gives a remarkably faithful reproduction of the composer's expressive (if not technical) vision.

Electro-acoustic music has also been prominent in the career of Madrid-born Zuleima de la Cruz (b. 1958), likewise computer music which she studied at Stanford University. A regular 'electro-acoustic manager' with the award-winning Sax-Ensemble in Spain since 1993, she is active on the governing bodies of several music associations and festivals, is a professor of electro-acoustic music in Madrid and, like Natasha Barrett, is an award-winning composer. The four works featured on Col Legno's new disc – the only one commercially available in the UK at present – features orchestral and instrumental

works, all structured according to the golden mean, the mathematical ratio of 0.618. This ratio governs much of the musical fabric, from the placing of principal climaxes or focal points – 61.8% of the way through each movement – to incidental details of individual lines. Largest of all is her First Piano Concerto, *Atlántico* (2000), inspired by 'the ocean that connects the shore cultures [of her native Spain] and that laps the coasts of the Canaries', where she has family ties. Commissioned for the Festival de Música de Canarias, it was premièred there in 2001 by Guillermo González and the visiting Helsinki Philharmonic under Leif Segerstam; their barnstorming performance is reproduced here. The concerto makes use of folk music connexions – particularly the Canarian *tango herreño*, obsessively used in the opening *Andante* – although there is little by way of explicitly Iberian atmosphere. The central *Lento espressivo* is very effective, centring on the strings and soloist after which the concluding full-orchestral *Allegro deciso* steals out with gathering energy, synthesizing what has gone before.

Latir Isleño (1998), also played here by González, is part of a cycle of piano pieces collectively entitled *En Torno al Sur* ('Turning to the South'). Based more overtly on a Canarian

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folksong, it charts an evocative if robust course through eight-and-a-half minutes and is much less structured than the concerto, the composer allowing herself a freer rein, though still within the golden mean. *La Luz del Aire* ('The Light of the Air', 2000) is a small-orchestral tone poem (for want of a better term) derived 'from the composer's imagined observation of the different types of lights that the air can contain, from a subtle, tenuous glow to a brilliant and even violent glare'. Scored for wind quartet, brass trio, percussion (including piano) and string quartet, *La Luz del Aire* – atmospherically rendered by Proyecto Gerhard (who have since changed their name to Proyecto Guerrero) – depicts light as a physical, tangible element with mass and density, yet utterly mutable in quality. Roughly half-way through, though, is a passage of ethereal delicacy that reminded me at some distance of Saariaho's early *Lichtbogen*. Finest of all, however, is *Soledad* ('Solitude', 1998), a string-orchestral fantasy based on the Easter Week celebrations in Cuenca, with its procession of the Virgin of the Sorrows, and the hymn *Stabat Mater*. In this instrumental *tour-de-force*, De la Cruz's experience in electro-acoustic music is applied to the purely acoustic with compelling results in this riveting performance by the Czech Virtuosi, a group I have not encountered before and about whom nothing is said in the booklet. The recordings were made at various times between January 1998 and June 2001 in a variety of locations in Gran Canaria and Brno, so the aural perspective shifts from piece to piece, most markedly with *La Luz del Aire*, which has a slightly claustrophobic quality. But everything is clear and the disc, if for the more adventurous listener, is well worth investigating.

It is interesting to compare the music of Spaniard de la Cruz with that of her close contemporary, Mexican-born London-resident Hilda Paredes (b. 1957). A graduate of the Guildhall School, City of London and Manchester Universities (at which latter she has taught), she too has embraced the syntax of the avant-garde in her works (even if she is perhaps not quite at the leading edge), under the influence of Maxwell Davies and Richard Rodney Bennett, though without de la Cruz's interest in the electro-acoustic. Paredes's output (for which she too has won several awards) includes orchestral, chamber and many instrumental pieces, music theatre miniatures for the Royal Opera House's Garden Venture and two chamber operas, *The Seventh Seed* (1991; recorded by Mode records, mode60) and *El Palacio Imaginado* (2003).

Many of Paredes's works bear Mayan rather

than Spanish titles, a reflection of her emotional attachment to Mexico's far south (according to Richard Toop's notes, Paredes's father could speak Mayan). One of these is *Uy U T'an* ('Listen how they talk'), composed for string quartet and played here magisterially by the Arditti: a fascinating take on the genre's dialogue basis, though at first hearing very effect-driven, perhaps due to the composer's attempt to portray the characters of the instruments (perhaps the players also) in her music. At times she seems to overcompensate for the severity of the quartet medium as such and the colouristic aspects of the writing become a distraction from the musical argument. Something similar occurs, to lesser extent, in the piano quintet *Cotidales* (2001), where Ian Pace joins the Ardittis. The Spanish title evokes the motion of tidal currents and the work is constructed in a series of broad tutti sections interspersed with solos and duos but struck me as a touch too contrived.

The third and most satisfying work on Mode's disc is *Ah Paxoo'ob* (2001), which Paredes has described as 'a concerto for ensemble' (of 20 players). Where some composers have found a release in the very restriction of tonal palette when composing for piano or string quartet, she audibly responded with greater freedom and joie-de-vivre in writing for this small orchestra of winds, percussion and strings. *Ah Paxoo'ob* (the title means, apparently, 'those who play music') almost sounds like the work of a different composer, so rich is its sound-world after *Uy U T'an* and *Cotidales*. Something of the same vibrancy can be heard in the cantata *Can Silim Tan* for vocal and string quartets (1999), a rich depiction of two Mayan spells the composer found in an old codex. The first, 'To Invoke the Deer', is slower-paced and sensuous whereas 'To Bewitch the Spiders' is harsher and more direct (but with nothing of *Revueltas* – particularly *Sensemaya* – in either). Mode's sound is very clear, if rather clinical and at times over-bright, but this is a finely produced disc that is well worth investigating.

Galina Grigorieva (b 1962) hails from Simferopol in the Crimea, but after graduating from the Conservatory in Odessa she continued her studies first in St Petersburg with Yuri Falik and later in Tallinn – she had meantime married an Estonian – with Lepo Sumera. Despite her Ukrainian birth she has become sufficiently identified with Estonian music to be included in a splendid series of recordings from Estonian (Eesti) Radio on a disc performed by the brilliant early music ensemble Hortus Musicus, under their founder Andres Mustonen, who have

encouraged contemporary composers to write for their ensemble (it comprises 45 voices and ten instrumentalists). Grigorieva has obliged with two substantial works, the five-movement fantasy *On Leaving* (1999) and the cantata *Con misterio* (2001). *On Leaving* was inspired by religious texts from the *Canon to Jesus Christ Our Lord and the Virgin Mary*, specifically the chapters on the 'Hour of Leaving of Orthodox Souls' and 'On Burying Lay People' and its five sections – which play continuously – have a restrained elegiac quality that both contradicts the quasi-medieval feel of the music and underlines it. If it sounds a touch like a reconstruction of some ancient ritual, Grigorieva's music possesses its own originality and quiet, ethereal beauty.³

Con misterio is utterly different, its four movements setting 20th-century Russian texts, though its expressive focus derives from a quote of the Metropolitan Antonius Surozhski contemplating the Crucifixion, part of which runs:

What is my place amidst this fickle crowd?... We must learn to co-suffer, not only to experience. We do not dare pity the crucified Christ or the Virgin Mary. What we can do is suffer together with them ... Each on their own and all together, thus we must suffer.

Containing a more varied tonal palette than *On Leaving* – not least for its use of voices and instruments together – *Con misterio* is a deeply atmospheric meditation, very much in the line of the meditative strain in contemporary Baltic State composition. Rather more quirky are the two fillers, by Grigorieva's erstwhile teacher Sumera, both of which showcase his playful sense of humour. *Pantomime* is an almost theatrical mélange of short episodes that cry out for balletic collaboration. *The Child of Dracula and Zombie* is more outlandish still, a kaleidoscopic send-up of melodramatic clichés. The performances by Hortus Musicus are quite magical and catch the varying moods of the works splendidly. There is some fine playing from within the ensemble, not least flautist Neeme Punder, who doubles at times on ocarina, recorder and crumhorn; Tonis Kuurme, on recorder and crumhorn; and violists Andres Mustonen (who doubles on recorder) and Peeter Klaas. Those looking for something different should track this disc down.

Despite her Polish name, Margaret Hubicki is British, having been born Margaret Mullins in

1915. (I am indebted to Frederick Stocken's brief but highly informative notes for the biographical detail that follows.) A pupil of Benjamin Dale at the Royal Academy of Music, she attracted attention just before the outbreak of the Second World War when both Wood and Sargent performed her *Irish Fantasy* (1935, orch. 1938: the version given here is the piano original). In 1940 she married Canadian violinist Bohdan Hubicki, but the marriage was tragically cut short after three months when Bohdan was killed in an air raid which left her severely injured. She is best known as a teacher, mostly at the RAM until her retirement 20 years ago (her students included James Galway, John Tavener, Jeremy Menuhin and Annie Lennox, later of the Eurythmics) and at the Menuhin School, but she was also involved in music therapy in hospitals and for dyslexics, and received an MBE in 1985 for her celebrated notation-tutor 'Colour Staff'.⁴

As might be expected, Hubicki's music sits firmly within the English pastoral tradition. At its finest, as in the first three sections of the *Irish Fantasy* or the first half of *Lonely Mere and Rigaudon* (also written in 1935 and the only work previously issued on disc⁵), her music – if not deeply original in idiom – has a truly affecting poetic quality and it seems astonishing that it has remained unsung for so long. Her limitations are revealed in the slightly note-spun finales to these two works, which do not move at the same level of inspiration. There are some parallels with the music of Dorothy Howell (cf *Tempo* 234) and it is instructive to compare their piano sonatas. Hubicki's dates from 1934 and, if not as closely argued as those of Tippett or Truscott, is the more robust and exciting piece, with a firmer structure than Howell's slightly brittle work. This can be felt also in the *Theme and Variations* for string quartet (1939), played with commendable authority by the Bochmann Quartet. This piece, and *Svolgimento* (lit. 'unfolding') of the same year, were written for her future husband to play, the latter intended for a sonata that would never take shape. It, like the *Golandon Suite* for piano duet⁶ (1957), however, has genuine charm, as does *From the Isles of the Seas* for flute and piano, a

⁴ While this issue was in the press, Margaret Hubicki died aged 90 in January – Ed.

⁵ On ASV CDQS6245, played by Catherine Wilmers and Simon Marlow. Her output appears to be relatively modest, though I note on the Incorporated Society of Musicians website that her 'Three Summer Sketches' were published under the name Katherine Lovell. At this time I can throw no further light on the matter.

⁶ The title derives from the first names of its dedicatees, Gola and Don Martin-Smith.

³ The work exists in two versions: this purely instrumental one being the first with a second, scored for tenor, solo flute and choir having been prepared for the Estonian Philharmonic Choir and premiered by them under Paul Hillier's direction in 2002. They recorded this, with tenor Tiit Kogerman and flautist Neeme Punder, on Harmonia Mundi HMU90 7331.

beautiful tone picture of the Western Isles. The performers are also all former students of Hubicki's and play with the commitment and affection one would expect, captured in splendid sound by Chandos.

Dutton celebrate the accomplished triple career (oboist, teacher and composer) of Melinda Maxwell with a programme comprising works written by her in which she does not play, and works written for her in which she does. *Music for Mel and Nora* was written by Simon Bainbridge in 1979 for Maxwell and an American oboist, Nora Post, and is a vigorous study in virtuosity for oboe and piano in which the two instruments gradually separate in character yet remain in harmony, with an almost mellifluous, fast-flowing motion even more *svolgimento* than Hubicki's violin piece. 'Postcards' are how Sir Harrison Birtwistle describes his *Orpheus Elegies*, a set of 26 miniatures for oboe, counter-tenor and harp based on Rilke's 'Sonnets to Orpheus', though not all use the voice. Any number can be played in whatever sequence, and here we have just nine: Nos 1, 3, 2, 17 (setting the text of Sonnet IV), 5, 4, 8, 20 (setting Sonnet V) and 19. This beautiful – if slightly uneasy – set finds Maxwell in radiant form ably accompanied by Helen Tunstall; Andrew Watts provides a strong counter-tenor.

The Korean Sungji Hong (b. 1973) met Maxwell at the Royal Academy of Music; each recognized a kindred spirit and Sungji designed her *Sonata da Chiesa I* (2001) for Maxwell, to a commission for this CD. Inspired by Fra Angelico's *The Annunciation*, the oboe line is a complex of 'fast passages with complex rhythms, sudden changes from high to low register ... multiphonics and quarter-tones' requiring all the considerable dexterity of Maxwell and percussionist Richard Benjafield to achieve. Robert Saxton's ... *from a distant shore* ... (2001) is an unaccompanied evocation of 'the first documented song of freedom in Western literature', that of Moses' sister Miriam after the escape from Egypt and the passage of the Red Sea. The three sections describe the women's thanksgiving, an intense dance of joy and heartfelt hymn of praise.

Maxwell the composer is represented by four works which punctuate the programme. The brief string sextet *From Tree to Tree* (1998) is based on a poem by Richard Long describing a walk in the county of Avon. By use of distances in miles, Maxwell generated the numbers to derive a note-row, but the result is genuinely melodic. The *Three Pieces for solo clarinet* (1994), by contrast, are made of sterner stuff, the single line expressing the instrument's diversity of timbre.

Yet the triptych is more than the sum of its parts: the manner and opposed musics of 'Raw and Bold' flows through the remaining movements ('Fluent & Striking' and 'Tender & Defiant'), first in opposition then fused into something new. Movement is an important element for Maxwell's music and comes to the fore in the string trio *Pelagos* (1995), inspired by a wooden sculpture by Barbara Hepworth, and *Songlines and Cadences* for clarinet and harp (1999). Both works show how Maxwell's strengths as a composer in smaller forms can succeed on a larger scale. If the mirror forms of *Pelagos* are perhaps a touch contrived in echoing Hepworth's curves and spirals, *Songlines and Cadences* shows a purpose apparently unfettered by some specific external reference (at least none has been revealed). It is compellingly played by Nicholas Rodwell and Hugh Webb. Dutton's sound is of demonstration class and enhances a splendid disc.

By a curious coincidence, the title of Saxton's piece is echoed in that of Karin Rehnqvist's *Clarinet Concerto On a Distant Shore* (2002), which opens a new BIS release. Cast, unusually, in five movements (unusual for so relatively short a work – it plays for under 18 minutes) it packs a good deal of expressive as well as instrumental incident into each. In the booklet, Rehnqvist has stated that the piece is 'a metaphorical representation of society: the individual at the centre of the collective, the individual emerging from the collective, and the individual against the collective'. Starting literally in 'The Dark' (the first movement), without conductor, the music gradually emerges from the depths of solo clarinet and low strings into 'The Light', where the soloist engages the high strings. The third movement ('The Wild') is brief indeed; a vivid whirl of colour succeeded by 'The Singing', the most complex span of the five. The concerto, scored for clarinet solo, two orchestral clarinets, strings and timpani, concludes with 'The Call', where the soloist – here Martin Fröst in superb form, ably accompanied by the Swedish Chamber Orchestra under Petter Sundkvist – rails against the dying of the light.

Those who have encountered Rehnqvist's very individual music before, most likely from the twice recorded *Puksånger-lockrop* ('Timpanum Songs-Herding Calls'),⁷ will be aware of its twin basis in avant-garde and folk techniques, something which led me once to comment how it is 'simultaneously radically new and very old', a remark Per Broman quotes in the booklet. *On a*

⁷ On BIS CD-996 and Phono Suecia PSCD 85.

Distant Shore shows how far Rehnqvist has progressed in integrating these seeming irreconcilables into a more unified musical language. Kulning – the Dalecarlian folk technique used so dramatically in her earlier pieces – is still part of the mix, but now primarily as but one element of her language, although it reappears in the brief motet *I himmelen* ('In Heaven's Hall', 1998), beautifully sung by the Adolf Fredrik's Girls Choir under Bo Johansson, to delightful colouristic effect. Folk influences are absent from the piano trio *Beginning* (2003), jointly commissioned by the BBC and Royal Philharmonic Society for the vibrant Kungsbacka Trio, the performers here. Rehnqvist has given an almost programmatic description of the work as being 'about Creation', 'a wrestling with musical material that appears to assume a life of its own'. Whether the three movements are the outcome of her struggle, or merely a depiction of it, *Beginning* (the title refers to the work's key point, the very start from which everything derives) is a strong addition to the repertoire for this intractable medium; Kungsbacka's performance is a model for any aspiring ensemble.

The largest piece, however, is *Arktis Arktis!* (2000–1), an orchestral suite-cum-tone poem recording her impressions of the Arctic Ocean after she took part in a Swedish polar expedition in 1999. Rehnqvist is not the first Swedish composer to portray the top of the world after seeing it first-hand – think of Nystroem's *Ishavet*⁸ – and she has provided an unusually detailed account of the experiences behind the music. In essence, the long stark opening section, 'Breaking the Ice', describes 'the panoramic views, the horizons, the quivering effect when hot and cold air meet', though little quivers in this strong musical discourse. 'Between Sea and Sky' was inspired by the tundra of the sub-polar regions, its flora and fauna and the intense 'shimmering, glimmering light'. 'Interlude in dark' describes how meteorological depressions hemmed in the explorers, grey-blinding them with fog, the barometric pressure causing fatigue and headaches. It is a disturbing, alarming movement whose catharsis comes with the final 'Yearning', in part a recapitulation for the work though this is no symphony or sonata structure. John Storgårds draws a compelling account from the splendid Swedish Chamber Orchestra. Great BIS sound, as usual.

Shirley J Thompson is a British composer from London's East End, but her cultural background (her parents hailed from Jamaica) and its impact

on her music are as different as could be from that of, say, Natasha Barrett. Thompson has worked very successfully in music for contemporary dance, theatre and television and runs a music fusion ensemble. *New Nation Rising: A 21st Century Symphony* started life as the *Newham Symphony*, commissioned to inaugurate the opening of the Stratford Cultural Quarter in 2002. In its five movements, the fourth of which can be performed either purely orchestrally or with rap and pop-style singers (both versions are presented on this disc), Thompson attempted to portray East London across a thousand years, starting in 1066. Such an ambitious project with such a diverse stylistic hinterland might be thought inimical to truly symphonic composition: so, alas, it proves. The first movement, 'Marshes, Hamlets and Roaming Cows' is a bland pastoral prelude, with resonances of Hovhaness rather than Vaughan Williams. There is more urgency about the ensuing scherzo 'Location, Location, Location' (Newham in the 19th century) but neither movement possesses much (or any) development. 'War Zone' brings the timeline up to the 1940s, starts more promisingly but soon runs out of steam, getting mired in the same directionless drift that characterized the previous movements. Trying hard to avoid the shadow of 'Mars, the Bringer of War', the music ends up sounding like a poor imitation of Holst. The use of popular tunes – a fairground melody in the second span, 'We'll meet again' in 'War Zone' – sound more kitsch than evocative in context, and the quotation of 'I'm forever blowing bubbles' (the signature tune of the supporters of West Ham United FC) at the start of the fourth movement, 'New Nation Rising', is simply jarring. Here, Thompson gives full rein to her style of music fusion, with rap and pop music to reflect 'the spirit of Newham and London as it is today', setting a text of her own devising. For all its laudable sentiments, the result is dismally vapid, the prominence of Justin Pickett's drum kit doing nothing to inject pace into the stupefying harmonic stasis. The concluding *London Symphony Anthem* fails to provide the uplifting peroration she was aiming for. The alternative versions to the last two movements undermine the work's conviction, rounding out a rather dispiriting experience.

Joan Tower (b. 1938) is, with her close contemporary and compatriot Ellen Taaffe Zwilich (b. 1939), the best known woman composer from the United States (although in recent years Libby Larsen and Jennifer Higdon have attracted much acclaim). Both are as serious creative artists as Shirley Thompson but possess a

⁸ Or indeed, from the opposite Pole, Maxwell Davies's *Antarctic Symphony*.

surer compositional technique and expressive vision. Both are more familiar for their orchestral works, at least outside America, so Naxos's issue of a programme of five chamber and instrumental pieces by Tower is most welcome. The overriding impressions they leave on first hearing are of earnestness and solid musicianship, but if ever there was a disc that demanded patience and repeated listening this is it. *In Memory* (2001) is the dominant work here, a single-span string quartet of slow-burning intensity (redolent of some of Shostakovich's later quartets) that started out as a memorial to a friend, Margaret Shafer – whose friends and family members supported the recording – but was overtaken by the calamity of 9/11. Here is the kind of multi-layered compositional thinking so markedly absent from *New Nation Rising*, resulting in a personal and deeply moving utterance. It is strongly played by the Tokyo String Quartet, who close the programme with oboist Richard Woodhams in the surprisingly languorous *Island Prelude*. In her brief booklet notes, the composer remarks that she thought the latter should have a 'setting as a tropical island somewhere in the Bahamas'.

Geography plays a part also in *Big Sky* for piano trio, though I found the result less compelling or

convincing than the two quartet-based works. Tower had wide-open vistas in mind, including 'a Montana-like sky', but here neither the music nor the instrumental combination seems large enough to project such a vision. In *Wild Purple*, by contrast, a single unaccompanied viola achieves everything and more that she had as target. Violas, Hindemith notwithstanding, are not *per se* wild beasts but Tower has sensed and uncovered a seething and passionate side to the instrument that almost no other composer has quite revealed – and full marks to Paul Neubauer's electrifying account of it. Even more than *In Memory*, this is the high point of the programme, which is completed by a collection of four piano pieces, *No Longer Very Clear*, whose individual titles are based on lines from a poem of the same name by John Ashbery. Played here, for reasons unexplained, by two pianists – Ursula Oppens (in the first two movements, *Holding a Daisy* and *Or Like a...an Engine*) and Melvin Chen (in *Vast Antique Cubes* and *Throbbing Still*) – the set does not quite convince as a cogent design, partly because the finale is twice the length of any of the other movements and overbalances the whole. As an independent item it is a touch over-emphatic, though still viable; the first three would not be. The performances, recorded in two days in

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January 2004, are all very fine and committed and the sound good without being spectacular.

With Ellen Taaffe Zwilich we return to orchestral music, undoubtedly her forte. She too has won an impressive array of honours for her works, amongst which the Violin Concerto (1998) recorded here must rank as one of the finest. Zwilich, a violinist herself, has commented how the 'soul of the violin shines through in the repertoire it has inspired', and it is that soul that informs almost every bar of this haunting score. Even the rather severe introduction, which is somewhat at variance with the expressive dynamic of the work as a whole, exhibits this same profound accord with the nature of the instrument. Its centrepiece is a fantasia built from the first phrase of Bach's great Chaconne for solo violin – or rather developments and transformations of the phrase – in a wonderfully satisfying edifice that says all it needs to say in under seven-and-a-half minutes. Yet the two outer spans are no less compelling and there are fireworks aplenty in the fast finale. Superbly played by Pamela Frank with the Saarbrücken Radio Symphony Orchestra under Michael Stern and in vivid sound, the Violin Concerto deserves the widest currency: it is a wonderful work.

Its companion is another concerto-like piece, but one which blurs some of the conventional distinctions between genres. Composed in 2003 for the IRIS Chamber Orchestra (again under Michael Stern) and the world-famous NEXUS percussion ensemble, *Rituals* is a four-movement essay about the nature of percussion playing in the west, aware of the waves of exotica that have penetrated our consciousness over the past century-and-a-half, without vainly trying to mimic them. As such, the work inhabits a formal limbo: neither wholehearted concerto (and it is a moot point whether the orchestra accompanies the percussionists or vice versa), nor tone poem, nor symphony, the work is best heard as a suite with elements of all of these. In the end, the formal question matters little against the vibrancy of the writing which, if not as consistently inspired as in the Violin Concerto, is still well worth getting to know. The sound for *Rituals* is, alas, a touch two-dimensional compared with that for the Violin Concerto and would have benefited from more depth to the acoustical picture. That is a small quibble, however.

I will finish, slightly out of alphabetical sequence but in track with the emigration theme, with the first disc commercially available devoted to last year's Grawemeyer Prize winner, Unsuk Chin (b. 1961). (Women composers have fared

well with this prize of late: Joan Tower is a former recipient, as is Saariaho). Although she had some notable performances in the 1980s, it is only after breaking a self-imposed compositional pause in 1991 that Chin has achieved wider acclaim, firstly with her breakthrough piece, *Acrostic-Wordplay* (completed in 1993), and most recently with the Violin Concerto (2001) that so impressed the Grawemeyer adjudicators. It is not hard to see why her music has such appeal: attractively scored, full of quirky yet challenging ideas, with expressive focus and a real lyrical impulse – particularly in the Violin Concerto, still to be recorded but this is surely only a matter of time.

The four works DG has issued include *Acrostic-Wordplay* and the latest of her three concertos to date,⁹ the Double Concerto for prepared piano, percussion and ensemble (2002). The former remains her most-played work and has attracted the attention recently of some high-profile performers, Sir Simon Rattle not least. Like the more recent *snags & Snarls* (given its UK première at this year's Proms¹⁰), *Acrostic-Wordplay* sets texts from Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories, in this case *Through the Looking-Glass*, as well as from Michael Ende's *The Never-Ending Story*. Unfortunately, DG have not reproduced these in the booklet so one cannot fully appreciate the full wit of Chin's writing but enough should shine through in these seven scintillating miniatures (listen to the fifth and sixth movements, 'Domifare S' and the alphabetical 'The Game of Chance', to hear what I mean). The Double Concerto is larger and altogether more earnest, as one might expect from a work written for the Ensemble Intercontemporain. Cast in a single span, this is a kaleidoscope of effects overlaying a free-wheeling structure with some closely-argued motivic development. The work uses the idea of metamorphosis, a recurrent feature of Chin's music, to meld the initially antagonistic stances of the soloists and ensemble into a coherent, unified whole. Chin aimed to write something 'highly coloured in character and expression, free-flowing and agile, sometimes unfolding in completely unexpected directions'; she has entirely succeeded.

Even more compelling, though, are the two companion pieces here, the *Fantaisie mécanique* (1994) for five instruments – trumpet, trombone, piano and percussion – and the electro-acoustic *Xi* (1997–8). *Fantaisie mécanique* plays continuously but is formed from six smaller sections: Intrada

⁹ The first being the Piano Concerto No. 1 (1997). Chin is working on a Cello Concerto currently for a première next year.

¹⁰ See *Tempo* Vol.60 No.235, pp.68–69, for a review – Ed.

(which introduces the work's principal four-note cell) with a set of 3 variations, 'Aria with Intervals of a Fourth', a reprise of the Intrada, 'Little Study for Keyboards', 'Episode with metallic Elements' and Finale. Starting out from a fast, toccata-like exposition, the piece hurtles through a tonal landscape bursting with off-shoots and side-alleys, but Chin charts a secure course. In *Xi*, a larger ensemble and electronics (Chin studied electronic music thoroughly during her 3-year compositional silence after completing her studies with Ligeti) is deployed over a longer

timespan to brilliant and beguiling effect – eventually. This is a slow-burner of a work, not difficult to enter into, but the full richness of its soundworld only reveals itself with repeated listenings. The performances are electrifying throughout, unsurprisingly, with Piia Komsu relishing the vocal lines in *Acrostic-Wordplay* and Dimitri Vassilakis and Samuel Favre nimble in the Double Concerto. DG's sound is nicely balanced, despite the works having been recorded at different times across a five-year period in different locations with different conductors.

Guy Rickards