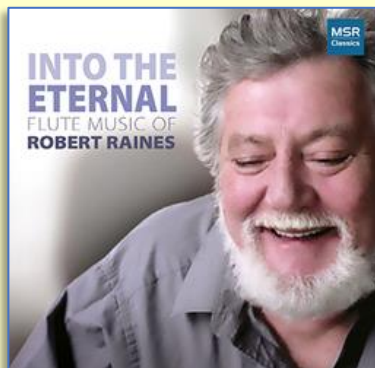


## Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

"September Song"

September, 2023



"Into the Eternal," Flute music of Robert Raines, assisted by Florida State University Graduate Flute Ensemble / Matt Thomas, conductor. Raines Ensemble / Eva Amsler conductor. Southern Illinois University Flute Choir / Douglas Worthen (MSR Classics)

Robert Raines (b. Louisiana, 1954) was raised in New York's Greenwich Village by parents who were active in the arts, and attended the High School of Art and Design in Manhattan. He went on to receive degrees in composition from the Berklee College of Music in Boston, the Shenandoah Conservatory, and a Ph.D. from Florida State University.

Somewhere along the line, he developed an enduring love for the enchanting sound of the flute, which finds full expression in the present album, "Into the Eternal," where it is showcased in a variety of settings with other instruments. A never-failing freshness of tone and spontaneity is characteristic of the seven works on this program all composed 2008-2022.. They are as follows:

A *Quickening*: Concerto for Flute Ensemble and Percussion opens quietly and gradually increases in boldness and energy as Raines explores the color palette in all its kaleidoscopic variety that is available to him in an ensemble comprised of piccolo, 6 flutes, 2 alto flutes, 2 bass flutes, contrabass flute, marimba, and assorted percussion instruments. All are given opportunities to stand alone and also "meld into one macro-instrument" (Raines).



"The Butterfly Lovers" Violin Concerto + Saint-Saëns: Introduction et Rondo Capriccioso; Massenet: Thaïs Meditation; Sarasate: Zigeunerweisen - Joshua Bell, violin; Singapore Chinese Orchestra (Sony Classical)

"The Butterfly Lovers" is a violin concerto by two Chinese composers, Gang Chen (b. 1935) and Zhanhao He (b. 1933). A few years after its premiere in China in 1959, it was introduced to the U.S. where it created a brief flurry of interest before it dropped out of sight. Now, it has a second chance to make a fresh impression on Americans, thanks to the present Sony release. It features Bloomington, Indiana native Joshua Bell, an incredible artist who made his debut forty years ago at the age of 14 with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Riccardo Muti and went on to acclaim as one of the great violinists of our time.

This work, more a suite for violin and orchestra than a concerto in the usual sense, is written to be played continuously, seamlessly linking its seven movements: 1. Adagio cantabile, 2. Allegro, 3. Adagio assai doloroso, 4. Pesante - Piu mosso - Duramente, 5. Lagrimoso, 6. Presto risoluto, and 7. Adagio cantabile. Each tells a different part of the story. As we might imagine, it is a score with a lot of warm, sad emotional elements, as befits a legend of young lovers that is well-known and loved by Chinese audiences everywhere.

"Butterfly Lovers" – its very title suggests beauty, fragility, and sadness – exists in



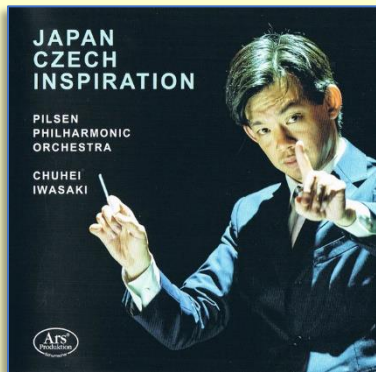
"J.S. Bach: "Tranquility," Largo, *Aria* from Goldberg Variations, Prelude & Fugue, *Andante* from Italian Concerto, Sarabandes from English Suites, other Bach favorites – Jonathan Philips, piano (Divine Art)

British pianist Jonathan Philips, a graduate of the Royal Northern College of Music with over a hundred performances of concertos by such major figures as Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, Chopin, and Schumann under his belt, shows that he can distinguish himself in the quiet, solo repertoire for piano as well. This album of keyboard pieces by J. S. Bach is called "Tranquility," and the title is well chosen.

Pieces such as these must have meant a great deal to Bach who is known to have played them frequently in his own moments of quiet-hour pleasure and refreshment. Such moments must have meant a great deal to someone whose life was often quite turbulent. (Bach, as a matter of fact, was once reprimanded by the authorities for getting into an altercation with a fellow musician, whom he taunted by calling a "nanny-goat bassoonist," to the point where swords were drawn. Happily, friends intervened and no one was injured in the fracas!)

In the present program, Jonathan Philips has carefully selected music that affords pleasure to listener and performer alike, ultimately giving rise to feelings of centeredness and well-being. They include various preludes and fugues, conceived as such, as well as extracts from such larger

<p>The beautiful clarity of Raines' writing serves its purpose well.</p>	<p>two versions: the first for a traditional Chinese orchestra with such venerable instruments as the erhu, pipa, and liuqin, the last a 5-stringed mandolin. The other version, which we hear in this recording with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, employs western instrumental forces: solo violin, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets in A, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tympani, plus percussion, harp, piano and strings, all employed in ways that recall the old China. In particular, the pentatonic scale imparts a distinctly archaic feeling to the music that goes very well here.</p>	<p>works as the Largo from the Organ Concerto in D Minor, BWV 596; the Lutheran chorale <i>Nun komm der Heiden Heiland</i> (Come Now, Saviour of the Nations), BWV 659a, which Bach was to use in his Cantata No. 61 and which is heard here in the famous arrangement by Ferruccio Busoni. Also, the Aria from the Goldberg Variations, BWV 988; the Andante from his Italian Concerto, BWV 971; and the Largo from Organ Concerto No. 4 in D Minor, BWV 596, to cite only some of the more familiar pieces.</p>
<p>Seven Memories: Suite for Flute Ensemble is a series of dances incorporating current harmonic and rhythmic concepts. Quarter-tones, microtones and percussive effects add flavor to a work that comes across as a modern take on baroque and classical forms. The lack of key signatures and Raines' discrete use of microtones adds flavor to a piece scored for 5 flutes, 2 alto flutes, bass, and contrabass flutes. The similarly scored Kokopelli for Flute Ensemble and Percussion pays tribute to a Native American god who was noted to be "a trickster, a shaman, and a symbol of fertility" (some guys get to touch all the bases!) The vivacity of this piece, which adds drum, rattle, shaker, tambourine, and triangle into the flavorful sonic menu, speaks for itself.</p>	<p>"The Butterfly Lovers" evokes the story of the maiden Zhu Lingtai and her lover Liang Shanbo, represented by the violin and cello, respectively, that are used to express the warmth and radiance of young love. The love story does not run smoothly, however, as Zhu Lingtai's family have already promised her to another suitor (shades of Romeo and Juliet!) The warmth and sadness of the story corresponds well to the G-Pentatonic scale used for the music. When Liang arrives on the scene, he sees Zhu, whom he had previously met when she was disguised as a youth (shades of Shakespeare's Portia!) He now realizes she is a woman, and they fall in love. The solo violin and cello solo play an emotional duet in the Lagrimoso, one of the most memorable set pieces in a remarkably beautiful score.</p>	<p>We are also given excerpts, finely conceived, and executed by Philips, from the English Suites nos. 1 and 2, the Adagio from the Toccata in C major, BWV 564, in another memorable Busoni arrangement; plus, Bach's own setting, BWV 974, of the hauntingly beautiful Adagio from the Oboe Concerto in E Minor by Alessandro Marcello.</p>
<p>Two Worlds for Solo Flute, Piano, and Electronics allows the composer to show his dexterity in combining traditional instrumental timbres with said electronics. That's always a dangerous proposition, but Raines pulls it off well.</p>	<p>The story ends tragically, as young lovers' tales East and West often do, with Zhu throwing herself into the chasm of Liang's grave on a searing high D in the strings in the last movement. But the gods are merciful, as they often are in Chinese legend, and the lovers are transformed into butterflies, never to be separated again.</p>	<p>There are 21 pieces in all in this album "Tranquility," all calculated to appeal to the inner man or woman in us all. And the performances are as treasurable as the music itself.</p>
<p>Echoes of Sarah: A Fantasy in One Movement for Flute Ensemble is a change of pace, a serious-minded tribute to a recently deceased friend and colleague that skillfully melds the timbres of piccolo, solo flute, 4 flutes, 2 alto flutes, and bass flute into a dignified threnody that does not overstay its welcome.</p>	<p>Joshua Bell follows another distinguished performance in his career with three of his favorite encores: Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso (Saint-Saëns), Meditation from <i>Thaïs</i> (Massenet), and a truly incredible account of Pablo de Sarasate's <i>Zigeunerweisen</i> (Gypsy Airs) which is as sensational a rendering of this piece by one of the great virtuoso violinists of all time as I have ever heard. Warmly recommended.</p>	
<p>The title work Into the Eternal for Narrator, Flute Ensemble, Clarinet Trio, Cello, and percussion, uses the sounds of 4 flutes, 2 A-flat flutes, 2 bass flutes, contrabass flute, 3 clarinets, cello, wood blocks, egg shaker (Wuzzat? BTHOUM) and wind chimes to illuminate spoken texts from Shakespeare, Gabriel Garcia Marques, Paul Gauguin, Haruki Murakami, and Kalidasa, an ancient Sanskrit poet, to present an eloquent, far-reaching discourse on the meanings of life, death, and eternity. Raines' absolute mastery of a variety of instrumental timbres is impressive.</p>		
<p>Requiem for Piccolo, Flute Ensemble and String Trio concludes the program with a dignified tribute in long sustained notes and slowly shifting melodies to the spirit of the Catholic mass for the dead.</p>		



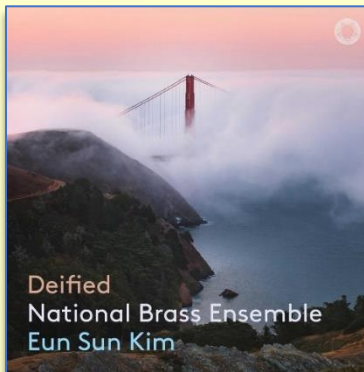
Janáček: Lachian Dances, Moravian Dances, Serenade + Ifukube: Japanese Suite - Chuhei Iwasaki, Pilsen Philharmonic (Ars Produktion)

Tokyo native Chuhei Iwasaki leads the Pilsen Philharmonic, of which he is chief conductor, in a delightful program of works by Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) and our late Japanese contemporary Akira Ifukube (1914-2006). Listeners need not pull any long faces: this engaging program is filled with delightful and provocative sounds – really lots of fun!

Up first is Japanese Suite by Ifukube, whose music manifested his belief in folk music: “Whoever grows up with national music grows into a complete person.” A moody piece, the suite has a bold opening with lots of driving impetus. The second movement is eerie and mysterious, with appropriately haunting orchestration. The warmth of the strings peeps through in a movement with a quiet, unresolved ending.

The third movement starts off with a bold upswing, giving way to a poignant, nostalgic melody. The music flows like a river, going way momentarily to a rousing interlude. And then the earlier mood returns, sadder than before, as the music gradually fades out. The finale starts off quietly but resolutely, the tempo gradually picking up in the way of enhancements and strong accents all the way through to the end.

The Janáček portion of the program begins with five delightful Moravian dances. The first has a rousing opening with a folksy melody in the woodwinds. The second dance is very lively, with pronounced footfalls and contrasted measures. The third, titled *Troiky* (Threes) is a notably high-spirited dance, and the fourth, *Road*, is leisurely and winding as its title implies, with lots of variety in tempo and dynamics,



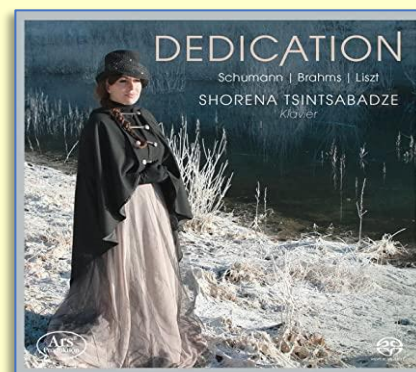
“Deified,” music by Jonathan Bingham, Arturo Sandoval; Wagner arrangements Eun Sun Kim directs National Brass Ensemble (Pentatone)

“Deified” may seem like a pretentious title for an album, even one dedicated to exploring all the range of glorious sounds an ensemble of brass instruments can produce. There is, however, some justification for the use of the word, which can be taken to refer to the sublimity of the music presented here.

There are actually two programs in this 2-CD offering from Netherlands-based Pentatone Music. The first showcases engaging new music by our American contemporaries Jonathan Bingham (b.1989) and Arturo Sandoval (b. Cuba, 1949). They are preceded by an old favorite among brass connoisseurs, the deliciously noisy Vienna Philharmonic Fanfare by Richard Strauss, which is a swell choice for an opener, making its presence felt in barely two minutes.

Then we have the title piece, Bingham’s Deified, which starts off with a rousing fanfare, contrasting quicker motives and motor rhythms with more introspective moments. The continuously morphing theme, not a melody in the usual sense, avoids sheer monotony by the choice of interludes for horn the composer gives us and the superb way the music is streamed through the piece from its very outset.

Sandoval’s Brass Fantasy is in four parts: 1) a Fanfare for brass and percussion, increasing in volume and dying away softly at the end, 2) an untitled movement with a quiet, mysterious opening, mounting in intensity through thoughtful interludes characterized by a vital use of percussion, 3) another untitled movement with a rising melody that piques our interest, and 4) a brief (1:34) but highly effective conclusion



“Dedication,” piano music of Brahms, Liszt, and Schumann Shorena Tsintsabadze, pianist (Ars Produktion)

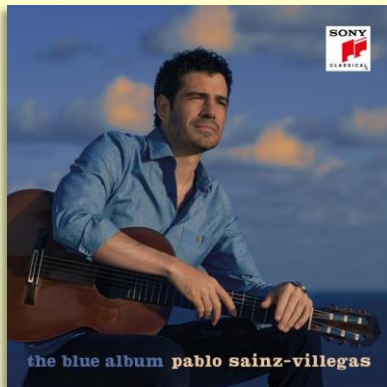
Shorena Tsintsabadze, a Moscow native with roots in Georgia, has come out with a new album of music that is particularly close to her. The program consists of two major works that were intended to push out the known limits of the repertoire for piano, with a much shorter piece, as lovely as it is unpretentious, mediating between them.

Shorena starts off with Robert Schumann’s Phantasie in C Major, a work that begins with a bright, continuously flowing, well-characterized theme that allows for, and in fact invites, numerous excursions. It is marked *Durchaus phantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen* (Absolutely fantastic and sorrowfully laden). And, as usual, Schumann means what he says! The slow movement, marked *Mässig – Durchaus energisch* (moderate and quite energetic), seems to convey conflicting notions which the performer must take pains to reconcile. Delicious ideas move off in unexpected directions. Near the end, as the threads have just begun to re-unite, we are astonished by a passage with a sudden outburst of extremely lively syncopations, almost as if Schumann had invented boogie-woogie ages before its time in music history!

The finale, *Langsam getragen – Durchweg leise zu halten* (to be taken slowly and quietly throughout) instills the idea of continuously probing and finding answers to the meaning of existence. Our present artist gives this movement a very soft closing.

Johannes Brahms’ Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 118, No. 2, marked *Andante moderato*, is taken quietly and slowly, emphasizing its songlike quality. In Shorena’s performance,

<p>ending suddenly and merging immediately into the fifth, "Little Corner," a slow, whimsical dance in tiny steps.</p> <p>Janáček's six Lachian Dances, up next, continue the fine folk frenzy and humor of its predecessor in the program. Janáček seems to be enjoying his little joke in the first, an "Old-Time Dance" in stately archaic measures that keeps getting interrupted by rousing incidents. The second dance, "Blessed," is as lighthearted and carefree as the name suggests, with a gradual pickup in tempo as it progresses and a pronounced brass cadence at the end. No. 3, "Blacksmith's Dance," is bright-sounding and insistent, with heightened rhythm all the way to the end. No. 4, another "Old-Time Dance," has a gracious, well-spaced opening with melodies that are streamed through a rich orchestration, dying away slowly toward the end,</p> <p>No 5, "Čeladensky", is filled with charming incidents, building to a smashing finish. No. 6 is a "Saw Dance" which kind of sounds like the allusion, being a lively affair with a rousing middle section and building up to a decisive ending with a rousing upswing at the very end. [Warning: Do not attempt this dance at home].</p> <p>Finally, Janáček's Suite, Op 3, contains some remarkably skilled developments for an early work. The opening movement, Con Moto, is brilliant and brassy, with lots of contrasted elements. The Adagio, the heart of the work, has a noticeably deep mood, while the Allegretto is a dance, remarkably light-hearted and tripping. The finale, Con Moto: Allegretto, is utterly brilliant and rousing, with lively dance measures and "woody" interludes in the winds. As is typical of the present program, it is remarkably easy to love.</p>	<p>rising in intensity from an almost inaudible opening to a strident conclusion based on surging waves of sound.</p> <p>That does it for Disc 1 of an engaging program by the National Brass Ensemble directed by Eun Sun Kim. Disc 2 is entirely devoted to an auspicious wealth of superb arrangements of Richard Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen by Timothy Higgins, principal trombonist of the San Francisco Symphony. From <i>Das Rhein</i> at the opening of <i>Siegfried</i> to the climactic moment at the end of <i>Götterdämmerung</i> when Brünnhilde returns the purloined ring to the Nibelungs and proceeds fearlessly to her own self-immolation, we are treated to no fewer than twenty choice selections from the Ring tetralogy.</p> <p>Most of them are the usual suspects, which include Ride of the Valkyries, Wotan's Farewell and Magic Fire Music, Forest Murmurings, Siegfried's Horn call, Siegfried Slays the Dragon, Dawn, Siegfried's Rhine Journey, Siegfried and the Rhinemaidens, and Siegfried's Funeral March. But we also get less-familiar excerpts such as Hagen's Watch Call from <i>Götterdämmerung</i>, which helps us to clarify the role of the shadowy, treacherous figure who is to be implicit in Siegfried's death.</p> <p>The National Brass Ensemble, consisting of some of the finest brass players from orchestras across the United States, give a superb account of themselves in an album that will be of particular interest to brass aficionados but has more than enough sonic appeal to engage the general public. May we hear more from this ensemble?</p>	<p>it assumes the feeling of a love story, its warm, fragile tenderness emphasized by suspended cadences while a secondary theme provides reason for hopefulness. A lot of feeling packed within a playing time of 7:32 gives the pianist the necessary room for expression.</p> <p>Franz Liszt's great Sonata in B Minor was written with the idea that its four movements might be played without a break, but here it is presented on four tracks, which in fact makes it easier for the listener to follow the way in which Liszt develops his ideas. Interestingly enough, Liszt dedicated the first publication of this work in 1854 to Robert Schumann, who had dedicated his Phantasie to Liszt in 1839. Perhaps Liszt saw a kinship to Schumann in their mutual exploration of the manifold ways in which form replicates expression in music.</p> <p>The first movement, marked <i>Lento assai / Allegro energico</i>, opens very slowly and involves conflicting notions in this section of this movement, of issues that the pianist must be determined to resolve. The second movement is marked <i>Grandioso</i>, indicating a broad and noble style, and it surely lives up to its name in Shorena's broadly conceived performance.</p> <p>We really get down to business in the <i>Andante sostenuto</i>, a spacious and discursive third movement. Then, in the fourth movement, marked <i>Allegro energico – Andante sostenuto – Lento assai</i>, we are treated to driving, dynamic passages and burning chords which gradually yield to a contemplative mood, and then the tempo broadens upon the restatement of the theme we heard at the very opening of the work. The sonata ends in soft, yet still audible, bell-like tones that accentuate the transfigured theme. All passion has been spent. The mighty struggle ends in a wise resignation. Much has been learned.</p>
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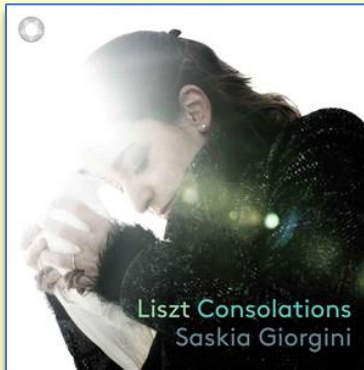
"The Blue Album." Pablo Sainz-Villegas plays Scarlatti, Satie, Debussy, Sor, Glass, etc. (Sony Classical)

Spanish guitarist Pablo Sainz-Villegas shows us why the Sony Classical people are so high on him in his latest release. Concerning its title "The Blue Album," the artist explains that "Blue stands for a particularly intimate mood," and he adds, "one thinks of the moment when the sun rises and night slowly withdraws." His performances go a long way to reinforce the idea of magic moments between silence and waking, darkness and light, and other "blue" moments in all our lives.

Sainz-Villegas makes much in this recital of the music of French impressionists Claude Debussy and Eric Satie, past masters of blue moods and those moments when darkness transitions into light. Satie's *Gnossiennes No. 1*, for instance, evokes a mood of desolation at the very opening, which is succeeded by an air of intrigue and mystery. The nuanced interpretation and confident tone that our artist cultivates capture its warmth and continuous flow. I've heard other instrumental realizations of this piece, but none as effective as what Pablo presents us.

From the Baroque and Early Romantic eras, we are given François Couperin's *Les Barricades Mystérieuses*, *Passacaille* by Sylvius Leopold Weiss, Domenico Scarlatti's *Keyboard Sonata in D Minor*, and Fernando Sor's *Etude in E Minor*, pieces that are variously quiet, meditative, pensive, and delightfully charming.

Debussy's *Clair de lune* (Moonlight) and *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair), both popular pieces that we have perhaps heard too often in artists' recitals for their own good, take on a fresh appeal in these sensitive performances by

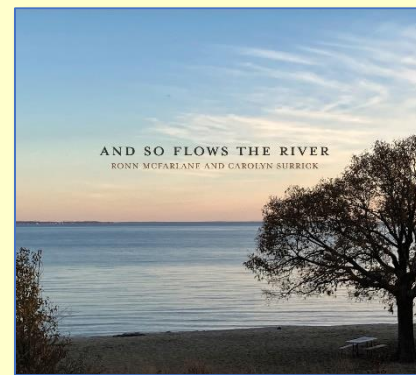


Liszt: Consolations: *Caprice-Valses, Valse Impromptu, Liebesträume, Légendes* - Saskia Giorgini, pianist (Pentatone)

Saskia Giorgini, pianist and native of Italy whose prowess on the keyboard has taken her far and wide throughout Europe and America reveals her affinity for the music of Franz Liszt in her latest album of *Consolations* and other demanding works by the composer. In the process, she reveals her mastery of both the larger schemes and the nuances that made Liszt the great master that he was.

The album takes its title from Liszt's seven *Consolations*, S.172. These are lyric pieces dealing with the pain and sadness resulting from loss and the process of finding solace for what has been taken from us in our lives. The first piece, *Andante con moto*, is slow and poignant, with a brief up-tick before the end. The second, *Un poco piu mosso*, conveys sadness but benefits from the essential sense of flowing that Saskia conveys very well. The third, *Lento placido*, the best-known piece of the set, opens in a quiet, hesitant mood and then, gracefully trailing decorations as it proceeds, seems to provide cause for encouragement and hope, with an especially soft pianissimo at the end.

No. 4, *Quasi Adagio*, begins very slowly and quietly, setting us up to encounter increased activity at the end. No. 5, *Andantino*, unfolds like a beautiful reverie, perhaps recalling happier times. No. 6, marked *Allegretto sempre cantabile*, is the most optimistic consolation yet, with a noticeable surge of emotion about a minute into the piece – and what seems like a moment of exultation near the end. The seventh and last consolation, *Caprice*, is easily the most extroverted, opening with a



"And so flows the River," a time-transcending anthology by Ronn McFarlane, lute, and Carolyn Surrick, viola da gamba (Flowerpot Productions)

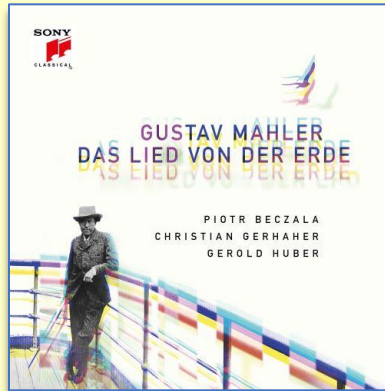
Lutenist Ronn McFarlane and viola da gambist Carolyn Surrick have done it again, displaying stunning amounts of imagination and flair in the course of a wide-ranging program. From Dowland and Bach all the way down through Eric Satie, with a generous helping of folk and traditional music plus their own original compositions, Carolyn and Ronn, with the timely assistance of percussionist Yousif Sheronick, serve up a delicious menu of items for our enjoyment.

"And so flows the River" is their third album as a duo, and it may be their best yet, which is saying something after *Fermi's Paradox* (2020) and *A Star in the East* (2021), both of which I was pleased to review. The program opens with "W. Lee's Reel" by McFarlane, where you can taste the flavorful drone of Carolyn's gamba making its presence felt under the sharp, bright accents of Ronn's sprightly plucked melody. It makes for an auspicious start to a rewarding program.

*Gymnopédies* 1-3 by Eric Satie are heard presently, the first as poignant as written, the second slower and even more dispirited, and the third in steady tempo and with a sound like burnished gold. J. S. Bach's *Sinfonia to Cantata No. 29* is given as bright, alert, and cleanly articulated a performance as I've ever heard, with soft cadences that make a good impression.

The folk repertoire makes its appearance next, beginning with John Jacob Niles' ever-welcome "I Wonder as I Wander" in a fantasia-like arrangement in which the droning bass of Carolyn's gamba is heard beneath the simple, beautifully articulated

<p>Pablo Sainz-Villegas, enhanced by the firm tone he applies.</p> <p>A Catalogue of Afternoons by Max Richter (b.1966) creates an early mood of expectancy in the opening, gradually inclining towards a torrid afternoon in the heat of the day. Orphée's Bedroom by American composer Philip Glass (b.1937) employs a series of sharp discords to interrupt the flow of the melody, perhaps hinting at the protagonist's fate? (It doesn't sound like said bedroom would be a good place to spend the night.) Another attractive item in this program, Cancion (Berceuse) by Cuban guitarist and composer Leo Brouwer (b.1939), conveys much tenderness, along with a great variety of details that are interspersed with the melody. You get an impression of drifting pink clouds in a blue sky, rather like what you see on the album cover. Sainz-Villegas is at pains to get all the nuances just right in this charming piece.</p> <p>Sebastián Iradier's song La paloma (The Dove), long a familiar item in guitarists' recitals, takes on a fresh new appeal in Pablo's account, ending with a nice pick-up at the end. Another refreshing item, Cavatina by Stanley Myers, creates a languid, relaxing, mesmerizing mood all its own, with a slow, hesitant ending that comes across very well.</p> <p>Finally, "Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence" by recently-deceased Japanese composer Ryūichi Sakamoto makes for a perfect envoi to conclude a satisfying program. Opening quietly with a sound like melting snow drifting from the eaves, the music then gives way to a very engaging melody. The predominant mood, quiet and peaceful, is broken by relentless passages in a great variety of opposed meters and rhythms before the music subsides, softly and peacefully, at the very end.</p>	<p>noticeable upswing and providing touches of humor, as welcome as they are unexpected.</p> <p>3 Caprices-Valses, S.214, follow next in the program. The first, <i>Valse de bravoure</i>, lives up to its billing in terms of sheer rambunctiousness and daring, deftly alternating moments of high drama with softer, more introspective ones. No. 2, <i>Valse mélancolique</i> in E Major, has a pronounced tempo that really swells up in the middle section, while No. 3 is the longest and most dynamic of the set, with rippling measures that heighten the excitement, ending in a flurry of activity.</p> <p>Up next, Valse Impromptu, S213 is remarkable for its limpid texture and a feeling of spontaneity.</p> <p>The 3 Liebesträume, S541 make their wonted impression as fabled pieces exuding imagination and various degrees of emotion. No. 1 in A-flat Major opens slowly, in a pensive mood, thereafter alternating tantalizing moments of hesitation and expansion. No. 2 in E-flat Major, subtitled <i>Seliges Tod</i> (Blessed Death) has a remarkably slow, pensive opening, succeeded by towering emotions midway through, and then a slow, quiet ending. No. 3 in A-flat Major, the best-known of the set, is subtitled <i>Oh Lieb, so lang du lieben kannst</i> (O Love, as long as you can love) featuring swelling, towering emotions, dying away poignantly at the end, a perfect finish for a set of pieces whose German title translates "Dreams of Love."</p> <p>The recital concludes with 2 Légendes, S.175, celebrating St. Francis of Assisi: The Sermon to the Birds and St. Francis de Paula: Walking on the Waves across the Strait of Messina. A splendid choice for a conclusion, as these pieces, in the pianist's words, "lift the recital's trajectory out of the ordinary." (For more on this remarkable artist, check my Classical Reviews for March 2020 and October 2020.)</p>	<p>melody. And our artists cultivate a nice swinging feeling in "Mrs. Judge," featuring a big pick-up in intensity in the second half. "Greenmount Avenue" opens slowly and in a deeply atmospheric mood, introducing a fine gamba solo with lute accompaniment several minutes in, becoming increasingly frenzied as it approaches a decisive conclusion.</p> <p>Next, the Harold Arlen-Yip Harburg ballad "Over the Rainbow" makes its ever-welcome appearance. And who would have guessed this wistfully poignant song would have made such an impression in a lute transcription? "Where the Mountains Met the Sky" reaches to heights that are hinted-at in the title before slowly winding down to the end. And "Lachrymae" by Renaissance composer John Dowland is as sad as its title (meaning "tears") would imply, but it isn't doleful thanks to the varied accents our present artists apply to it. "Liane's Ocean" by Carolyn Surrick uses a mournful line in the gamba to give solid support to the lute melody in an effort requiring, and receiving, the close rapport of both partners.</p> <p>Skipping, for want of space, three choice items, "Spring Beach" (Benjamin Franklin White), "Miss Noble" (Turlough O'Carolan) and "Clear Creek" (Ronn McFarlane), we arrive at two <i>Recercadas</i> (implying "to search" or "to seek") by 16<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish composer Diego Ortiz. Then we conclude in fine style with the old Scottish ballad "The Water is Wide" (O Waly, Waly) where Carolyn's gamba takes the lead at the opening, to be joined by Ronn's eloquent lute in measured counterpoint, making for a wonderful finish to the album.</p> <p>to those who take a keen pleasure in discovering a real "sleeper" of an album, I can only say you won't have a better chance than this.</p>
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Mahler: Das Lied von der Erde  
Piotr Beczala, Tenor; Christian Gerhaher, baritone; Gerold Huber, piano  
(Sony Classical)

This Sony release of Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (The song of the Earth) is remarkable on several counts. Most obvious is the fact that it is performed with pianist Gerold Huber accompanying the two vocalists, baritone Christian Gerhaher and tenor Piotr Beczala, instead of the voluptuous and massive orchestral forces we're used to hearing. Even more, this piano version was not intended as either a "piano score" which composers frequently employ as a preliminary step in preparing the full orchestral score, nor as an aid for the vocalists in learning their parts. On the contrary, it was a real afterthought on Mahler's part, and not just preliminary scaffolding. And it was released a year *after* the premiere of the orchestral version.

So, what did Mahler have in mind? From what I hear in this new recording, the answer may have been that he wanted to clarify the musical score, in the sense of relieving *Das Lied* of its awesome symphonic muscle that he might have come to see as blurring the wealth of delicate details he wanted to bring out. As an added incentive, the vocalists would not have to bellow at the top of their lungs in order to be heard above an orchestral score that might be termed awesome even by *this* composer's standards.

That's just my personal hunch, based on what I hear in this recording. And the piano version, by the way, is not mere keyboard accompaniment for the singers: it is rich in incidents and requires the strong recital-class technique that Huber bestows on it.

The appeal of this work is largely in its details. The six sections of *Das Lied* incorporate settings of lyrics in the free translations in *Die chinesische Flöte* by Mahler's German contemporary Hans Bethge, of T'ang Dynasty Chinese poet Li Po (701-762). A footloose wanderer and a romantic who was not afraid of treating the theme of love between man and woman at a time when most of his peers laid off what was then considered a dangerous subject, Li has been honored by the Chinese with an appellation accorded no other of their poets, as Li T'ai-po, the *T'ai* being an honorific.

Correspondingly, there is an incredible wealth of evocative detail in Mahler's score, rich ore for vocalists and pianist to bring out in the thoughtful performances we are given here. The poems themselves have an impressive variety of imagery: the loneliness of an isolated woman in spring when the earth is quickening with new life, the howling of an ape at the end of a village lane on a moonlit spring night, the carefree scholars drinking May wine in a porcelain pavilion whose mirror image is reflected in a pond (which is real, and which the illusion?) Later, we have the depiction of village maidens, gaily singing and dancing as they lay out the wash in a green meadow by a brook, and the show of bravura by a passing troop of young gallants on horseback (a glance from one of them strikes its mark in the heart of one particular maiden!) All this is deliciously rich material for Beczala, Gerhaher, and Huber to explore, and they make the most of it.

Mahler himself referred to *Das Lied* as "the most personal thing I've ever done," It meant a great deal to him as the time of its composition coincided with the death of his eldest daughter Maria and the diagnosis he himself received of infectious endocarditis, which was to prove both painful and fatal. His thoughts of death and eternity are reflected in the final song describing a journey to the distant mountains, clearly a metaphor for death: "*O sieh! Wie eine Silberbarke schwebt / der Mond am blauen Himmelssee herauf*" (Look! The moon is floating upwards, like a silver ship, on the blue lake of heaven). Easily the longest (at 27 minutes) and most personal movement in *Das Lied von der Erde*, it ends with iterations of "*ewig*" (forever) as the music fades into the blue vastness of eternity.