Phil's Classical Reviews

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Haydn / Rachmaninov / Prokofiev
Lukas Vondracek, piano
TwoPianists

No one denies that 26-year old Czech native Lukáš Vondráček is a power pianist. The only dissention centers on whether or not his effusions of youthful enthusiasm are appropriate to the music. Robert Battey in the Washington *Post*, while praising his biting articulation of thirds and his wide dynamic range in the Prokofiev Seventh Sonata (heard on the present CD), criticized his penchant for to underlining and over-phrasing, citing the way Vondracek's attempts to shape the obsessive three-note left-hand motif "sapped energy from the performance." Rorianne Schrade, herself a pianist of some distinction, said of his 2010 Carnegie Hall performance of Haydn's Sonata No. 50 in C Major (also on this CD): "Occasionally the staccato releases of his hands seemed mannered, to the point where one felt it distracting to watch, so I decided just to listen, and what I heard never failed to hold me."

Whatever Vondráček does, he is a spellbinder. I, for one, am certainly content to bear with this pianist's occasional indiscretions for the sake of the sheer exuberance and excitement he creates. Why wait until he gets older and more cautious? Enjoy him today! And actually, in Prokofiev Sonata No. 7, Op. 83, one of the three "War Sonatas," risk-taking is certainly justified in the outer movements. In the opening Allegro *inquieto* (unquiet, or agitated), Vondráček runs gleefully through a pianistic minefield of nervous rhythms and violent, cluster-like chords. He is more restrained, effectively so, in the intimately beautiful slow movement, Andante *caloroso* (warm), marked by some of Prokofiev's loveliest and most deeply sentimental music. The finale, marked *Precipitato*, explores under Vondráček's fingers, with pungent triads punctuating the headlong impetus of the music, taxing the pianist's dexterity to the limit, and finally exploding in a thunderous cascade of octaves at the

Chopin: 3 Sonatas, 4 Ballades, 4 Scherzos
Vassily Primakov, piano
LP Classics (2-CD set)

That "Touch" that fans love to cite as regards pianist Vassily Primakov is very much in evidence in this latest release from LP (for "Lavrova-Primakov") Classics. We find his exquisite sensitivity at work here in his carefully crafted dynamic shadings, smooth modulations, chaste use of pedals, and penchant for holding back on climaxes for greater effect in places where other performers milk them for all they are worth. The result is an intelligent and expressive tribute to one of music history's most original figures.

There's a lot of music packed into this 2-CD program (155 minutes in all), but structured and paced so carefully we are not aware of any tedium in the passage of time. Primakov presents us three of Chopin's power genres, his Sonatas, Scherzos, and Ballades. In the process of being mesmerized by Primakov's artistry, we discover interesting things about the heart and mind of Frédéric Chopin.

Take Sonata No. 1 in C minor. To call it "neglected" is an understatement. In comparison with the great popularity of Sonatas 2 and 3, it is listed only twice in the "Muze" apart from the other sonatas. The usual explanation is that it is unduly severe in form because the 18 year old composer was still learning his craft. But that doesn't explain why the second theme group of the opening movement is in the same key as the first and the recap begins in the remote key of B-flat minor, so that modulation, the usual basis of sonata-allegro form is missing,. Further, the slow movement is set in 5/4 time, with a secondary accent in the third beat of each bar. All of which, plus the general discursiveness and subtleties of mood and dynamic shading, points to a quest for greater expressiveness. If the composer of Sonata No. 1 isn't yet the Chopin we all know and love, he is well on his way, and Primakov's interpretation makes this clearer than I

very end, calculated to bring an audience to its feet.

The Haydn, on the other hand, requires the utmost in refinement, discretion and restraint from the performer. Vondráček shows these qualities admirably in the opening movement, as he carefully shapes the contours of what might pass for a delightful opera buffa overture. He shows himself to good advantage in the various deft articulations called for in the music. The slow movement, an Adagio, is revealed as one of Haydn's tenderest and most intimate. Battey, in the review cited above, found that the finale was "marred by too many precious hesitations," but that is precisely what Haydn calls for. The dazzling display of virtuosity in the Allegro molto is punctuated by some of the composer's most outrageous musical jokes in the form of deliberate wrong notes, chords that fracture and fall apart, and absurdly cautious pauses, all of which add up to some very delicious fun.

Mediating between these two very different musical worlds is Rachmaninoff's Variations on a Theme by Corelli, in which romantic fervor is tempered by the form itself. Theme and variations are based on melodic variation, in which a musical idea is repeated in altered form or accompanied in a different manner, ending with a coda. At a certain point in the proceedings you always have a variation in the minor key (in the present instance, a *very* striking one). Rachmaninov's choice of theme was a good one: the melody *La Folia* made famous in the 18th century by Arcangelo Corelli. The object is keen point-making, a skill at which Vondráček is superb. In music that varies in character between quiet meditation and Mussorgskyan passion, our artist never lets the intensity or the listener's attention flag

"American Anthem," string quartet music by Barber, Hanson, and Thompson
The Ying string Quartet
Dorian Sono Luminus

The Ying Quartet started as a family quartet and kept the same personnel until first violin Ayano Ninomiya joined the ensemble in the 2010-2011 season. Together with the three remaining Yings – second violinist Janet, violist Phillip, and cellist David – they continue to present music served up with their

have ever heard it done before.

That doesn't leave much time to talk about the more familiar 2nd ("Funeral March") and 3rd Sonatas. Suffice it to say that Primakov works towards the slow movements in both as the point of greatest interest. In Sonata 2, a stormy opening contrasts with a gently lyrical second theme in the first movement. Likewise, the virtuosic beginning of the scherzo contrasts with the more relaxed melody of its central section. But it is in the celebrated *Marche funèbre* that Primakov scores his major points, as he treats the slow funeral cortege with great dignity so as to cast the stone-melting warmth of the central episode in finer focus. We then return to the funeral march with a sense of purpose and even triumph, rather than unremitting tragedy.

The last movement, a whirlwind of parallel octaves, is, despite the nonsense you may have heard about "the wind howling around forgotten graves," really little more than 100 seconds' worth of sheer virtuosity without music. And the slow movement of Sonata 3 has a Nocturne-like serenity and wonderfully expressive warmth in Primakov's hands.

The Ballades and the Scherzos I will leave you to discover for yourself, with the cautionary advice that they are self-contained stories without specific programs, so that each listener is left to his own imaginings. Though the Ballades are by name and derivation a semi-literary genre, the advice applies equally to the Scherzos. The word means "joke" in Italian, but Chopin's four Scherzos are always more than that. Amid the immense virtuosity required to realize these works in performance, Chopin - and Primakov - always make room for moments of human intimacy, as welcome as they are unexpected.

Bartok: String Quartets 1, 3, 5
Euclid String Quartet
Artek

This release by the Euclid String Quartet of Quartets 1, 3, and 5 by Béla Bartók is a real winner. It completes the cycle begun three years ago with Quartets 2, 4, and 6 (Artek AR-0053-2). In this instance, slow makes perfect in terms of a solid sense of ensemble and demon articulation, phrasing and point-making. This quartet, consisting of violins Jameson Cooper and

trademark verve. That includes a luminously beautiful sound, flawless in tone, perfect in intonation and balance. To cultivate so much perfection and still engage their audiences and home listeners – and believe me, *they do*! – is no mean achievement.

"American Anthem," their latest album, includes works for string quartet by Samuel Barber, Howard Hanson, and Randall Thompson. The Barber is the best-known, if for no other reason than the fact that one of its movements – the central Adagio – has long had a life of its own in a transcription performed all over the world. As the Yings show us, it's important to take in the complete closely-integrated and meticulously-designed work. That takes in the tense, rhythmically driven opening movement with its chorale-like second theme and a terse reprise of music from that movement in the short, pithy finale. The famous Adagio is beautifully conceived and executed by the Yings, building smoothly and inexorable to its stunning climax and then slowly fading away.

The program also includes the original finale Barber wrote for the quartet's premiere in 1936 and later replaced. From the first hearing, one can understand why: a very busy finale that opens new discussions is precisely what the work did not need at that point, even though it ends with a bravura cello passage in the coda. The composer must have realized that he needed to wrap things up quickly after the high point of the Adagio.

Two other Barber jewels are present on this disc: the lightly invigorating Serenade, Op. 1 and the sublimely beautiful setting of Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*. The vocal part, which is closely integrated with the noticeably vocal quality of the strings, is stunningly realized by baritone Randall Scarlata, climaxing with the words "Ah, love, let us be true to one another," that will not fail to give you goose bumps when you hear it.

Howard Hanson's sole String Quartet, Op. 23 is just as symphonically conceived as Barber's "Dover Beach" is vocal. Hanson's plainspoken emotion, heard through his typically rugged rhythms and racing scalar melodies, comes through brilliantly in this performance. If this isn't an American classic, it should be. It is followed by a fine account of Hanson's majestically expressive Concerto da Camera, in which pianist Adam Neiman makes his presence felt.

Finally, Randall Thompson's choral *Alleluia*, a well-loved work that develops along similar lines to Barber's Adagio, is given by the Yings in their own arrangement for string quartet. It makes a fitting conclusion to a great album (which, by the way, is presented here as two separate discs, a 24 bit, 96 kHz conventional CD and a Blu-ray surround version, for the price of one.

Jacob Murphy, violist Luis Vargas, and cellist Si-Yan Darren Li, inject a lot of personality and presence into the music on this new release. Additionally, Cooper's excellent booklet annotation makes these works, central to an understanding and appreciation of Bartók, more accessible to the first-time listener.

That's important because Bartók's quartets tend to be incredibly dense with musical information, and in the classics, as elsewhere, one doesn't often have a second chance to make an impression. That goes for beleaguered music reviewers as much as anyone else. Looking back, I was surprised to discover how seldom I've listened to these formidable works over the years. And Bartók *does* take repeated listening for one to get familiar with his distinctive style. Fortunately, the Bartók Six are, together with the Late Beethoven, the Mount Everest of the art of the performing quartet, and there has been no shortage of aspirants to scale them.

Enter the Euclid Quartet. From the quietly subdued, melancholy canon that opens the initial movement of Quarter 1, it is apparent that they are out for nothing less than perfection. As Bartók is a true modernist in every sense, that is more of a virtue than it would have been for a romantic composer. Sighing, falling intervals, parallel movement, and much use of the "Magyar" rhythm (short-long, emphasis on the first syllable, after a common Hungarian speech pattern) make it clear Bartók is a composer for whom emotion is generated through nuances of style and form.

The intensive application of technique continues in Quartet 3 with *sul ponticello* bowing (high on the bridge near the crossing), creating a strange, glassy sound in the opening movement that is filled with the sounds of the night for which Bartók was famous. Rapid changes of meter, glissandi in similar and contrary motion and *col legno* bowing (with the wooden back of the bow) keep the performers on their toes.

Finally, we get to Quartet 5, the biggest Billy Goat Gruff of them all in terms of virtuosity and the need for precise, zestful execution. The performers need a constant awareness of the fascinating symmetry of form that prevails throughout the work's 5 movements. Pizzicato drumming in the opening movement, soft trills that are passed among the four strings as a prelude to more music of the night in the second, and unusual ostinato and metrical changes in the third, all contribute to defining the composer's sonic world.

The fourth movement is even more exquisitely detailed with its use of *pizzicati* combined with *glissandi* (a sound quality that must be heard to be appreciated), *ricochet* bowing in which the bow is thrown across the strings to create multiple repetitive bounces, and more use of *col legno*. In the finale, amid really breakneck execution, we are given a delightful change of pace near the end by way of a slow, comical imitation of a barrel organ with a missing key in the accompaniment!

Brahms / Robert & Clara Schumann: Works for Violin and Piano
Jennifer Pike, violin; Tom Poster, piano
Chandos Records

British violinist Jennifer Pike, at just 23 years of age, shows remarkably assured technical prowess and a deep understanding of the music she plays in a demanding program of works by Johannes Brahms and Robert and Clara Schumann. Demanding not just in terms of shaping the contours of three disparate works, but particularly in bringing out the unique character of each. In achieving these ends, she works in such close partnership with pianist Tom Poster, a fellow Briton who likewise studied at the Guildhall School of Music, that they seem at times to be one person, breathing together and instinctively anticipating each other's moves.

That pays a particularly handsome dividend in Brahms' Sonata No. 1 in G major, the so-called "Rain Sonata" from the fact that it uses thematic materials in the head motif in Brahms' eponymously named song "*Regenlied,*" Rain Song, and also his "*Nachklang*," Remembrance, in all three movements. From the lift-off at the beginning of the opening movement through the softly expressive passage that follows it and then the sudden outburst of the Vivace section that ensues like a painful, emotionally charged memory, Pike and Poster take the various thematic, rhythmic, and mood changes with consummate assuredness. That goes on throughout the entire work, which is remarkable for Brahms' rare use of cyclic form to give unity to a very emotional work that might otherwise seem fragmented.

Incidentally, Brahms wrote this sonata partly in memory of his godson Felix Schumann, the last child of Robert and Clara, who had died of tuberculosis at the age of 24, a fact that has received surprisingly scant attention from annotators and critics. Its significance was not lost on Clara Schumann, who found the allusions to loss and remembrance in two of Brahms' most tenderly beautiful songs to be overwhelming.

There follows Robert Schumann's Sonata No. 1 for Piano and Violin, Op. 105, a work filled with restless romantic fervor in the opening, a middle movement that combines the functions of slow movement and

Vincent d'Indy Orchestral Works 5
Rumon Gamba, Iceland Symphony Orchestra
Chandos Records

This new Chandos CD, Vol. 5 in a series of the orchestral works of French composer Vincent d'Indy (1851-1931), gives us our best chance yet to evaluate the composer's works. Thanks to the continuing efforts of Rumon Gamba and an excellent Iceland Symphony, home audiophiles are getting the opportunity to hear many of the works in this series for the first time.

That observation happily does not apply to d'Indy's Symphony on a French Mountain Air, which is also known as the *Symphonie cévenole* from the Cévennes, a ruggedly beautiful region of the Massif Central in which the composer was born and to which he returned for inspiration. Sometimes known as "d'Indy's greatest hit," it is characterized by its pervasive mood of nostalgia, its harmonic richness, and frequent use of authentic folk melodies from the region. Under Gamba's direction, the work begins softly and slowly, almost *too* slowly, though thing pick up considerably from that point with a double-dotted string passage of rising excitement that soon involves enthusiastic participation by the flutes, piccolo, harp, and especially the piano, played with distinction by Louis Lortie. An evocative melody first heard on the cor anglais recurs in the other movements: a dreamily lovely slow movement and an exciting finale. The performance here is more than respectable, with smashing climaxes atoning for somewhat slow pacing in the introductory passages.

While the comment about "d'Indy's greatest hit" isn't entirely dispelled by the other works on the program, there is certainly color, brilliance, and a profusion of deeply Wagnerian harmonies to be found here. The Prelude to Act 1 of the opera Fervaal is the least eventful, being primarily a mood setter for the opera to follow, albeit tinged with *Rheingold*-like harmonies. There is a love theme, plus music associated with the heroine's death (rather un-dramatically, by freezing). *Saugefleurie* (Sage Flower) is the name of the elfin sprite in d'Indy's symphonic poem of that name that falls in love with a mortal prince, whom she spies in full regalia on the hunt with his companions. There is a greater variety of incidents here: besides the hunting-horn fanfares, we have a theme of longing associated

scherzo in its alternation of lithe melody and elfin dance, and a finale in which the emotional expression seems at times to be almost brutal. It had never really attracted me. Until just recently, that is. The present performance made it comprehensible to me as never before.

Finally, we have Clara Schumann's Three Romances, Op. 22. They are all very accessible and direct in their expression, ranging from gently melancholic to joyous. My favorite is the last, with its flowing melody in the violin over rippling arpeggios in the piano.

Weber: Music for Fortepiano
Duncan Cumming, Christopher Hogwood
Centaur Records

American pianist Duncan Cumming takes a change of pace, assisted by famed English early music specialist Christopher Hogwood on the duo-piano pieces, performing on an historical instrument from the latter's personal collection. The instrument in question is a fortepiano by Joseph Brodmann (Vienna, 1815). Though an advanced model for its day, it may take some re-adjustment on the modern listener's part to hear the program of music by Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826) as his contemporaries heard it.

On the plus side, the keyboard is so well laid-out that one can hear the individual registers clearly throughout its range. On the negative side, this instrument does not have the depth and compass of sound that we are used to in a modern grand piano. There is no information about the type of hammer coverings used, although felt was not introduced in piano design until a later time. Here, the sound has a hard edge whenever individual notes or chords are struck smartly.

The music itself is a fair sampling of Weber's keyboard style. The composer moved in a milieu in which the pianist/composer was expected, above all, to impress the audience with his skill as an executant, often to the detriment of more basic musical issues. The earliest work on the program, Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 2, reveals the 13 year old prodigy primarily more intent on displaying his technique and his stretch on the keyboard (a tenth, no less) than in developing the thematic variations themselves. Granted, the theme is square-shouldered, but other composers have done with Saugefleurie's unrequited love for the prince, a fate similar to that of the Little Mermaid in Hans Christian Anderson's famous tale. In fact, this under-sung d'Indy work begs comparison with Alexander Zemlinsky's better-known symphonic fantasia The Mermaid (*Die Seejungfrau*).

I'm less sanguine about the Suite from *Médée,* taken from incidental music for a play on the legend of Jason and Medea. Despite imaginative scoring, the music, which should have evoked a feeling of doom in the tragic story, lacks distinction, leading us to believe, once more, that the composer was a one-trick pony.

Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto (1844), "Italian" Symphony (1834)
Zsolt Kalló, violin; Nicholas McGegan, conductor
Capella Savaria
Centaur Records

Felix Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor and "Italian" Symphony in A major are two of the most familiar items in the standard recorded repertoire, with 236 and 152 listings, respectively, in Arkivmusic.com and no sign of failing popularity in the concert hall. With so much competition, the Capella Savaria under conductor Nicholas McGegan and artistic director/ violinist Zsolt Kalló need to come up with something different in order to be in the running. They have.

The Capella, Hungary's premier period instrument orchestra, present unfamiliar views of Mendelssohn's two venerable warhorses: the First Version (1844) of the Concerto and the Second Version (1834) of the Symphony. In the case of the Concerto, the difference is less striking than you might think. In revising this work for Ferdinand David a year after its premiere, the composer basically left the music as it was, making changes such as the placement of the theme in various registers, altering the tempo and harmony slightly and making some character indications. In the earlier version heard here, we already have the familiar delicious theme in the solo violin following closely on the heels on the orchestral introduction and quickly taking center stage, and we have all the subsequent movements taken *attacca* without a pause, two distinctive features that add zest to the proceedings and have made this work eternally

more with equally unpromising material.

Duncan Cumming gets better music to work with, and better opportunity to show what he can do with it, in Piano Sonata No. 1 in C, Op. 24, which is probably Weber's best piano work. The opening Allegro is filled with incidents, including an unexpected *fortissimo* marking the transition at the end of the development. The Adagio, featuring an arioso over a pulsating ostinato in the left hand, reminds us that Weber was primarily an operatic composer. A fast, very busy, and totally un-danceable Minuetto with a Trio in waltz time is characterized by frantic right-hand leaps and cross-rhythms. The concluding Rondo in perpetual motion was Weber's favorite finger-loosener (as it was for Franz Liszt, also). The present performance makes me want to hear this work on a modern grand piano to gauge its full sonority.

Hogwood joins Cumming at the keyboard in Six Pieces for Piano Duet, Op. 10, a work that sounds as if it must have been tremendously fun to play. The most memorable pieces are 3, a set of variations with clipped grace-notes and offbeat accents in the Vivace variation; and 4, a snappy Polish *Masurik* (Mazurka) in very fast triple time. Then, just when we have virtually written off Weber as a master of the flashy and the superficial, comes another deeply-moving Adagio over a dotted accompaniment to give us the lie.

popular. The Capella Savaria tune their instruments at A=430Hz, giving the music a bright sound. That lends an edge to the violin's opening theme, which is already placed high, though there is a very attractive warmth to the sound of the cantabile melody as Kalló plays it in the Andante. The fleet-footed finale, an elfin scherzo in Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream" vein, weaves its familiar charm once again in the present performance.

The difference is more noticeable in the Second Version (1834) of the "Italian" Symphony, in which Mendelssohn tinkered around with Movements 2-4 and then, dissatisfied, laid it aside for the rest of his life (which only goes to show how badly composers can misjudge their own works). The stirring Allegro Vivace opening remains the same. But the changes are immediately apparent in the Andante, in which the orchestration is brightened and the flutes introduce a mood of rising joyous expectation as the pilgrims in the familiar "religious procession" view their object in sight, rather than simply allowing the procession to fade into the distance. Likewise, flutes and brass add more character to the "Mountaineer's Song" in the third movement. And Mendelssohn augments the orchestral accompaniment to the Saltarello theme in the vigorous finale, in which the members of the Capella play with contagious enthusiasm. Even in a crowded field, there is always room for an "Italian" of this caliber.

Moeran: Cello Concerto, Serenade,
Lonely Waters, Wythorne's Shadow – Guy Johnston, cello
JoAnn Falletta, Ulster Orchestra
Naxos

Anglo-Irish composer Ernest John Moeran (1894-1950) is represented by some of his finest works in this commendable new CD program with American JoAnn Falletta conducting an excellent Ulster Orchestra. The Cello Concerto (1945) is one of his best. It is an unusually soft-spoken work, lyrical and meditative in mood, in which

Debussy: 4-Hand Piano Music
Jeanne-Pierre Armengaud and Olivier Chauzu, duo-pianists
Naxos

French pianists Armengaud and Chauzu, alternating *primo* and *secondo* roles on a Steinway, give colorful, invigorating performances of four choice works of Claude Debussy for piano four-hands. Two of them, Petite Suite (1888-1889) and *Six Épigraphes antiques* (1914-1915) are familiar from their orchestral versions as well, and *Marche ecossaise* (1890), is not exactly unknown. And there is a

Rachmaninov: Symphony No. 3, Symphonic Dances
Leonard Slatkin, Detroit SO
Naxos

One doesn't often get the chance to report good news from Detroit these days. So it gives me pleasure to proclaim that The Detroit Symphony Orchestra is back! On the evidence of this newly-released pairing of two of Rachmaninov's lushest and most imaginatively scored works, I hear strong participation from every family and chair of the orchestra, an indication that the DSO players have put the

the solo cello is heard almost continuously throughout the three movements. The cello melodies, eloquently phrased by soloist Guy Johnston, are spontaneous and flowing, while the orchestration is characterized by its transparency and restraint, allowing the cello to be heard distinctly at all times. (Audiophiles, turn your volume up a tad for best results.)

Only in the finale, a bracing Allegretto that ends in what sounds very much like an Irish jig, does Moran let things rip a bit. Even here we have a quiet love-song by the solo cello to vary the mood. This fine work has suffered unjust neglect, probably due to the shortage of outrageous fireworks that one expects of a concerto. Perhaps this new recording will make more friends for it?

Most listeners will find Moeran's Serenade in G (1948) more to their liking for reason of its immediate accessibility. With its penchant for including folk melodies of the British Isles and reminiscences of golden by-gone days (for which, read *Elizabethan*), this genre was very popular among English composers in the first half of the 20th century. One thinks of Ralph Vaughn Williams' English Folk Song Suite and the Capriol Suite by Moeran's close friend Peter Warlock, to both of which the present serenade stands ready comparison. It is in 8 movements: Prologue, Air, Intermezzo, Galop, Minuet, Rigadoon, Forlana, and Epilogue. Falletta leads the Ulster Orchestra smartly through its paces in the succession of quick-paced, sprightly dances. Only in the Intermezzo and Forlana do we have more emotional material to contrast with the general impression of lightness.

Two earlier works from 1931, Lonely Waters and Whythorne's Shadow (the latter, derived from an Elizabethan madrigal) show further evidence of Moeran's range as a composer. The former, a work of eloquent sadness based on variants of a nostalgic Norfolk melody, ends in verses sung in folk

real "sleeper" at the end of the program. Of that, more to follow….

Of course, the rich repertoire of four hand piano music is well worth hearing for its own delightful sake. (Where else in the concert hall are you likely to hear such a range of orchestral colors and textures, outside of a symphony orchestra itself?) But when we're talking about the French composers the genre is especially interesting because they often employed the four hands version of a work as a step leading to the orchestral as it permitted them to hear instrumental timbres so well.

Even in the earliest works on this program, we hear Debussy as something more than simply a late romantic. Already we have his prejudice against repeating himself in a straightforward manner as he keeps the music continuously evolving through subtle changes in his repeated material. In Petite Suite, ostinatos, washes of color, and deftly struck accents against the musical line add to the color and rhythmic excitement of the first and second movements, *En bateau* (in a boat) and *Cortège* (wedding procession), while *Menuet* rings with echoes of the 18th century and rhythms of a subtly Spanish flavor. The concluding movement, *Ballet*, is alive with a vigorous Waltz in fast 3/8 time, bringing things to a scintillating conclusion.

The rousing and ingeniously varied *Marche ecossaise*, head here in its original version, is likewise easy for the first-time listener to like. But the *Épigraphes antiques* may be more of an acquired taste. It seems more astringent, more economically phrased, compared with his earlier work. Some of this doubtless reflects Debussy's quest for an idiom to express the archaic character of six pieces inspired by the incidental music he wrote to accompany a reading of poems by Pierre Louÿs evoking the ancient world. In the present performance, Armengaud and Chauzu realize the composer's world of understated allusion and evocations of wind, soft rainfall and other elements.

trauma of the six-month strike (Oct 2010 to April 2011) behind them sufficiently to resume doing what an orchestra does best: enchanting our ears with ravishingly beautiful music. Under the baton of Leonard Slatkin, the string have a beautiful bloom and layered texture, the woodwinds are chattering happily again, and the percussion comes through when required with a sound that is absolutely cavernous.

On the program are Rachmaninov's last two works: Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 44, and Symphonic Dances, Op. 45. The popularity of both in the age of digital recording has compensated for their earlier neglect due to the curious antipathy of the critics when they were first premiered. Today, one can only wonder what those savants had in mind. "Diffuseness," "excessive length," and "over-elaboration of detail" were the comments most often heard. After the reception of the Third Symphony, Rachmaninov took no chances: hoping to deflect criticism, he titled his last work "Symphonic Dances" rather than Symphony No. 4 although it develops along similar lines.

Well, as the present account by Slatkin and the DSO reveals, Rachmaninov was indeed a "Maximalist," if we can coin such a term. His lush romanticism, both exuberantly lyrical and profoundly melancholy, can be experienced from the muted Russian theme at the very opening of the Third Symphony to the stunning outburst from the whole orchestra that follows it, the eloquent dialogs of the woodwinds in the section that follows *that*, and then the achingly beautiful warmth of the golden mellow string passage that follows it. And just think: we're not midway through the first movement!

The riches continue in Symphonic Dances: shifting harmonies, the stirring, driving, pounding rhythms in the outer movements that recall Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, and the focus on individual instrumental tone colors throughout the score, including, *very* effectively, his first and only use of an alto saxophone

style by soprano Rebekah Coffey: “So I'll go down to some lonely waters, / Go down where no one they shall me find, / Where the pretty little small birds do change their voices / And every moment blow blustering wild.”	The most memorable *Epigraph*, the one that offers the most in terms of activity, is *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*, with its musical imagery of an exotic dancer rhythmically underscoring her movements with tiny finger-tip cymbals. The surprise here is Debussy’s *Premiere Suite d’orchestre,* recently rediscovered in 2008. In four movements – Fête, *Ballet*, *Rêve*, *Cortège et Bacchanale* – it is so full of color, life, and expressive warmth and rhythm that we should expect to hear recordings of the orchestral version in the future.	in the opening movement. The middle movement, often described as a ghostly waltz in a dimly-lit ballroom, comes across movingly in the present recording. This work was Rachmaninov’s tribute to the Russia he loved and was never to see again, including evocations of church bells, folk songs and liturgical chants. In the finale, he quotes both the *Dies irae* (his personal motto) and the gloriously uplifting chant “Blessed be the Lord” from his All-Night Vigil a quarter-century earlier. For those who were inclined to listen, it must have seemed, as indeed it was, the composer’s bittersweet farewell to composition, and perhaps life itself.