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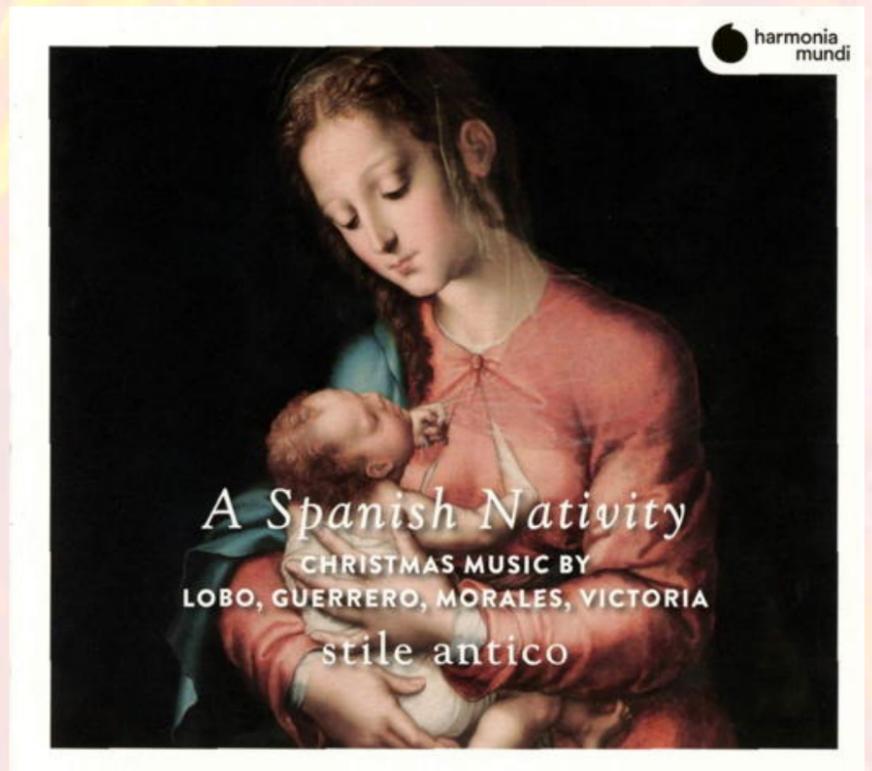
A Spanish Nativity – Issue 131, 1 December 2019

Gerald Fenech: Tomas Luis de Victoria (1548-1611), Francisco Guerrero (1528-1599), Alonso Lobo (1555-1617), Mateo Flecha (c1481-c1553), Pedro Rimonte (1565-1627) and Cristobal de Morales (c1500-1553). A fine crop of composers indeed, but what do they have in common? There is a goldmine of Christmas music written during the so-called 'Siglo de Oro' — the Golden Age of the Spanish Renaissance, and the eminent names above are regarded as, maybe, the finest among a myriad of others of this era.

This disc explores the many riches of that period by presenting a remarkably varied programme of sumptuous polyphony mixed with the irresistible dance-like carols in the Spanish language 'villancico' tradition.

There is also a piquant 'ensalada' thrown in for good measure. The centre-piece of the show is Lobo's 'Missa Beata Dei Genetrix Maria' (Holy Mary, Mother of God), published in 1602, when the composer was 'maestro di cappella' at Toledo Cathedral. Like so many Masses of the period, it is a so-called 'parody Mass', borrowing its main musical ideas from an existing motet, in this case, one by Guerrero (Lobo's teacher) which bears the same title and which is also on this recording.

The Mass is one of Lobo's finest, and, with its soaring melodies and lavish sonority, it is highly appropriate to be included in this Christmas programme. [READ MORE ...](#)



'Flawless performances by Stile Antico, added to some impressive sonics and eye-catching presentation ...'



'... she succeeds brilliantly with some magical playing full of "joie de vivre" and silhouetted tone painting.'

impassioned interpretation. On this count, she succeeds brilliantly with some magical playing full of 'joie de vivre' and silhouetted tone painting. Truly, one can almost scent the music, especially in 'Spring' and 'Summer'. [READ MORE ...](#)

Gerald Fenech: Finding a new recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* on your desk awaiting review is a daunting task indeed, if only for the reason of what more can be written or said on this piece. I cannot be absolutely sure but it might be the most recorded work of all time concerning the violin repertoire. At present there are well over fifty versions available, and all great violinists have put it on record some time or another.

The issue under review has many positives going for it, not least the fresh and natural approach to the music. In her booklet notes, Leila Schayegh joyously describes what the natural four seasons mean to her and how she tried to give a visual impression through her

Giuseppe Pennisi: In my recent review of [Alessandro Melani's *L'Empio Punito*](#) (*Classical Music Daily*, 5 October 2019), I emphasized the importance of the Roman Baroque School in George Frederic Handel's formative years. This new Brilliant Classics recording shows clearly how this influence lasted for several years, maybe forever. The CD sets side-by-side Handel and a then famous (but now hardly known) cellist, Andrea Caporale. The record does not deal with Handel's early compositions but with his best London years. At that time, Frederick, Prince of Wales had discovered a real love for what was then the lowest of the string instruments: the cello. He had opted to learn the cello as a part of musical education.



'... a precious CD from which to learn little known aspects of baroque music ...'

Within this context, Handel invited to London one of the best and most appreciated Italian cellists, Andrea Caporale, and adapted for cello and harpsichord arias from some of his own most successful operas — *Parnaso in festa per gli sponsali of Teti and Peleo*; *Deidamia*. In parallel, the now almost forgotten Caporale had a vast production of his own compositions, mostly sonatas. Romabarocca Ensemble, created and led by Lorenzo Tozzi, had a great idea in producing this CD; the recording is dedicated to His Royal Highness Prince Charles, Prince of Wales.

The CD has two principal merits: the discovery of a nearly forgotten repertory and the appreciation of splendid and technically demanding cello sonatas. Caporale's cello sonatas have previously been recorded only a very few times; these recordings are now difficult to find. I retrieved one of them from the web; it sounded quite boring and lacked the musical cello enamel. This very enamel makes the beauty of the Romabarocca Ensemble performance. The round sonorities are also due to the careful mastering of the sound engineer, Alessandro Panetta.

Handel's operas have been recorded several times, especially in 2009 on the occasion of the composer's 250th anniversary when, *inter alia*, a CD box set was released with six operas performed by Alan Curtis and his Complesso Barocco. However, to the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that adaptations for cello and harpsichord (as desired by the Prince of Wales) have been played and recorded. [READ MORE ...](#)



Patrick Maxwell: The music of John Dowland, although composed around the same time as Tallis and Byrd, has a unique feature in its historic popularity when first performed in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The contemporary desire for melancholia in many forms, contrasted with spritely refrains, is expertly displayed in his music, which captured the public imagination in the seventeenth century and has an enduring impact in musical history to this day. The distinctly secular nature of these pieces gave them to the public at the time, and the falling fourth evident in many works was a popular feature of the lachrymose music.

'... the exquisite word-painting comes through brilliantly ...'

Mariana Flores and Hopkinson Smith displays the importance of musical conversation and craftsmanship that is necessary to fulfill Dowland's graceful suspensions and modal progressions. Dowland's recent popularity is necessary; it is facile to neglect his music given how popular it was; Byrd and others have the advantage of their enduring church music, which demands performance through its liturgical significance and sheer majesty.

The most famous of the pieces begins the recording — with 'Flow my tears' tenderly produced, and at a sensible speed that allows for full relishing of the sonority that a plaintive A minor gives. This is repeated in the solemn 'I saw my lady weep', swiftly changed in the nervous 'Can she excuse my wrongs'. Throughout this, the exquisite word-painting comes through brilliantly, and Argentinian singer Mariana Flores notes how she took special care to make sure her English accurately represented the composer's intentions and their musical intonation. [READ MORE ...](#)

Patrick Maxwell: The piano works of Frédéric Chopin stand in the middle of the two sections of the 'Bible' for the instrument: Bach's Preludes and Fugues and Beethoven's thirty-two Sonatas. Chopin's Preludes and Études are short works, and most of his compositions make up small, seemingly unconnected pieces, each of which shows a genius that captured the Parisian imagination almost two hundred years ago and still does today. The startling virtuosity, although often mixed with exterior simplicity, requires each phrase and piece to have its own life, and its own expressive value.



'Hirèche manages to give an impeccable portrait of Chopin, through a mixture of the multiple skills required to give an effervescent yet intimate feel to the music.'

The French pianist Ali Hirèche has produced a meticulous recording that shows off his virtuosic playing at its best. Each of the pieces is delicately played, but with an ever-present vitality that is essential to their appreciation. Seen as revolutionary when first composed, the Études require skill to achieve a coherent, well-phrased sound that fully exposes both the sonorous harmonies and powerful melodies. The fourth piece from the first collection, Op 10, is emphatically played, the constant *brillante* theme creating a well-rounded sound.

The unique individualism of all these pieces, short expressions that were, in truth, composed simply as studies, requires an interpretation that gives an overall mood to each piece, and does not disrupt the overall flow. Hirèche manages to give an impeccable portrait of Chopin, through a mixture of the multiple skills required to give an effervescent yet intimate feel to the music. The pieces were seen in their time as revolutionary, but *les Etudes sont la somme de ces résistances* — as French poet Camille Bourniquel is quoted as saying in the sleeve notes. [READ MORE ...](#)



Lucas Ball: I can't help but feel the need to compare and contrast what James Brawn does with other artists' recordings of these sonatas, and it is very interesting listening to the different approaches available. They play in different acoustic settings to James Brawn, their tempi can be subtly different to his and their apparent approach to grace notes can be rather different. It is his approach to grace notes and ornaments that seems to set Brawn aside from other interpreters.

In the *Adagio con molta espressione* (the second movement of Sonata No 11 in B flat Major, Op 22), James Brawn treats the grace notes in the score in such a way that they are 'equal' to 'essential' ones. Curiously enough, Brawn plays the ornaments elsewhere as we might expect. This includes the right hand

acciaccaturas and trills in the theme at the beginning of the A flat Sonata. Brawn also plays grace notes in a conventional way in the Sonata in E flat, Op 7. [READ MORE ...](#)

'... the sort of technical control and agility that you get from many world class artists.'

Geoff Pearce: The Dvořák concerto is another of the most beloved of the repertoire. The performance here is superb, both as far as the soloist is concerned, and also the very fine Bohuslav Martinu Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Gerado Edelstein. Czech orchestras have this music in their blood. This orchestra has a distinctive sound, and the wind and brass have their own special colours. The soloist, when she enters, is authoritative, warm and very sure footed, and reveals what a remarkable artist she is. She is sparkingly virtuosic when required, and warm and lyrical, playing with great tenderness and love. She also hits each note in the wide leaps impeccably — near enough is never good enough. For me, this is the best performance, both by soloist and orchestra, and also for overall musical satisfaction. I would buy this disc for this performance alone. The opening of the second movement — a very tricky moment to negotiate, particularly with second oboe (providing the counterpoint to the clarinet theme) and clarinet — I have never heard better.

In the last movement, the changes of mood, from dazzlingly virtuosic to a somewhat wistful and tender lyricism, are a total delight and very impressive.

This is a very fine set, and one I personally would recommend, especially for the Dvořák.

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'The soloist, when she enters, is authoritative, warm and very sure footed, and reveals what a remarkable artist she is.'

CLASSICAL MUSIC NEWS — MARISS JANSONS (1943-2019)

Latvian conductor Mariss Jansons was born in Riga on 14 January 1943, where his Jewish singer mother, Iraida Jansons, was in hiding from the Nazis. He studied violin with his father, conductor Arvīds Jansons, who became assistant to Yevgeny Mravinsky at the Leningrad Philharmonic.

Mariss Jansons studied piano and conducting at the Leningrad Conservatory, then studied in Vienna with Hans Swarowsky and in Salzburg with Herbert von Karajan.

He was associate conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic from 1973, and music director of the Oslo Philharmonic from 1979 until 2000. From 1992 he was principal guest conductor of the London Philharmonic, and also worked as a guest conductor with the London Symphony Orchestra. From 1997 until 2004 he was music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. From 2002 until 2015 he was chief conductor of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.



Mariss Jansons (1943-2019)

He was chief conductor of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra from 2003 until his death from heart disease at his home in St Petersburg on 30 November 2019, aged seventy-six.

We also mark the passing of Juan Orrego-Salas, Colin Mawby, Cecilia Seghizzi, Stephen Cleobury and Rémy Stricker.

In other news, Tapiola Sinfonietta receives the 2019 Diapason d'Or for its disc of Saint-Saëns piano concertos; the South London boys' choir Libera releases its Christmas album; five films to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth will be screened in cinemas from December 2019; and Orchestre National de Lille is the only French orchestra planning to tour the UK in 2020.

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PROFILE – ONA JARMALAVIČIŪTĒ IN CONVERSATION WITH ELIZABETH RAUM

Canadian oboist and composer Elizabeth Raum (born 1945) has a career in music that spans over forty-five years. She had worked as principal oboe with the Atlantic Symphony Orchestra and Regina Symphony Orchestra, but her main career path unfolded with composing music. As one of the most eminent Canadian composers of today, Raum has commissions coming from such performing groups as the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, St Lawrence String Quartet, Symphony Nova Scotia and the Calgary Philharmonic. Her music is played all over the world in concerts and festivals throughout Canada, the US, Europe and Asia. Writing for varied media and in remarkably diverse styles, her creative heritage includes four operas, over eighty chamber pieces, eighteen vocal works, choral works including an oratorio, several ballets, concerti and major orchestral works. Her biggest awards include the Commemorative Medal for the Centennial of Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan Order of Merit, and an Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters from Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In my conversation with Elizabeth Raum, themes of creativity as a process are presented. Raum breaks down her daily creative routine and shares thoughts about the meaning of her work.



Elizabeth Raum

Ona Jarmalavičiūtė: *What are your thoughts about the structuring of the creative process?*

Elizabeth Raum: When I start writing, I'm not really sure what I do. I think I visualize the performer. (I always write better for someone I know, and I usually ask for a tape of that person's playing.) If the piece is for orchestra, I write the notes imagining the sounds of the instruments, although the manuscript is more as if I were writing for the piano. I often write on a small score of around 4 staves rather than the full sized score for the first draft. But I

like to be able to play most of it on the piano to some extent, although I'm not a very good pianist. I do need to hear the progressions aloud. I can't really do it in my head (unless the piece is quite simple).

I think you could call my system 'stream of consciousness' writing. In other words, I just keep writing one note after another for the first draft and often, I'm not even sure if it goes together nicely. The next day when I play it back, it becomes clear, and I can change what doesn't fit, or I get ideas about where I seemed to be trying to go the day before. So much of it is the subconscious transferring itself to the conscious while eliminating whatever doesn't work, and developing things that seem to have someplace special to go. While I'm doing all of this, I'm thinking in terms of instruments, and I'll write down the instrument or combination I'm 'hearing' as I write. Keep in mind that I've played in orchestras for around forty years with the brass behind me, the woodwinds around me, and the strings in front of me, so I have an innate feel for what an orchestra sounds like. (I play oboe.) I also am able to check with my friends who play the other instruments what is comfortable for their instruments or how I can rewrite things to make them comfortable.

Now that I work with the computer, I find it's streamlined my writing considerably. I still write as described above, but now if I feel there has to be some measures inserted, I don't have to physically cut and paste them as I used to. I do it on my Finale program. Also, I can hear the music played back by the computer, so it's easier to stand back and listen to what I've written. And I can put the notes right into the score and then extract parts so that's quicker, too. I think the best thing about the computer is that it's enabled me to write much more than I used to be able to write. Before, the very task of writing all those notes with a pencil, then writing them again to the final version, then inking in the notes, and finally copying parts took four times as long as working with the computer, and I've reached the point where I know the program so well that I don't have to think about the physical process of putting in the notes. It can go right from my mind to the screen!

When the piece is finished, I have to get it ready for publication which I do myself now that there are notation programs. I used to have a copyist but often he got paid more to write out the parts than I did to write the piece! Now with the notation programs, it's much easier. Regarding publication, I have two main publishers I send my music to for brass works but a lot of my music goes to the Canadian Music Centre which acts as a distribution centre. They take care of distribution and I receive a percent of the sales.

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A DIFFERENT KIND OF MINIMALISM — ERVIN NYIREGYHÁZI

A P Virag: Towards the end of his life the great composer Franz Liszt was writing a book on harmony — for the future. The book is sadly lost, but Liszt's late works exist and are a very clear indicator of his ideas and intentions.

Liszt's late compositions have often been considered in relation to the music of Béla Bartók, and I detect a relationship between Liszt's last symphonic poem (*From the Cradle to the Grave*) and certain works of Arvo Pärt. Liszt did indeed throw his lance far into the future.

But, really, composers have not been lining up to take up Liszt suggestions, except in a few such cases.

The single most important exception is Ervin Nyiregyházi (1903-1987), who, thanks to his supreme dedication to the memory of Franz Liszt, is by far the most devoted to those ideals.

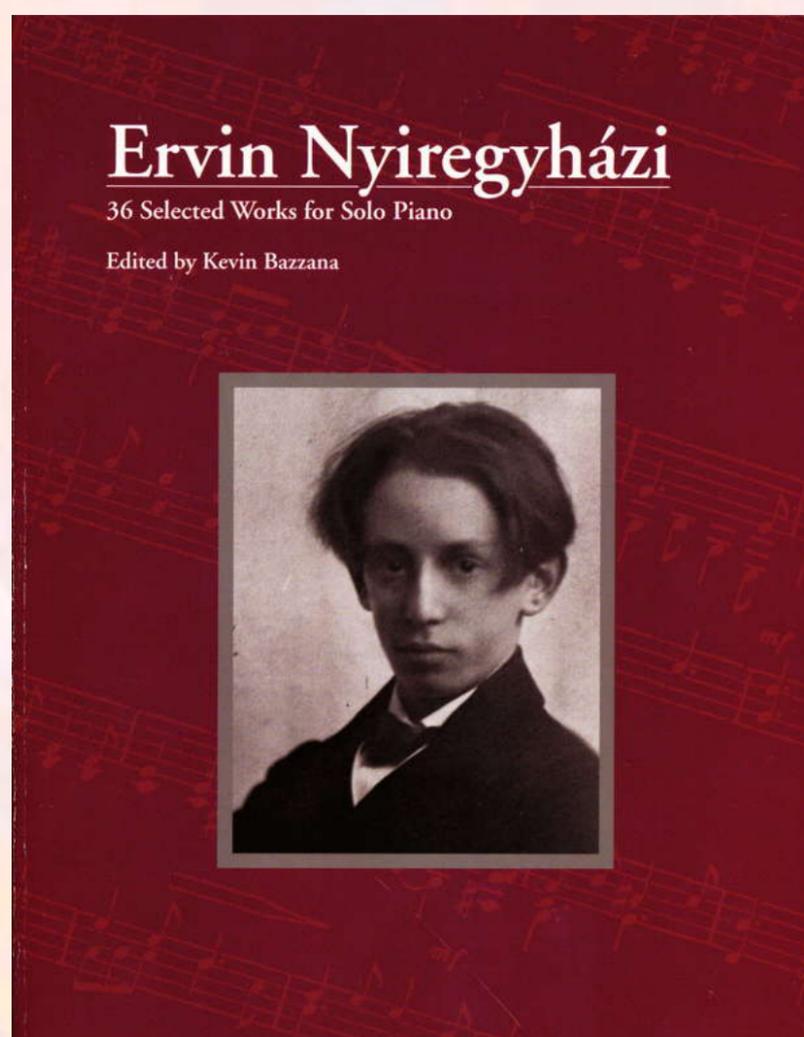
Kevin Bazzana writes in the preface to this edition:

The overriding influence on Nyiregyházi's music was the idiosyncratic, experimental late style of Liszt.

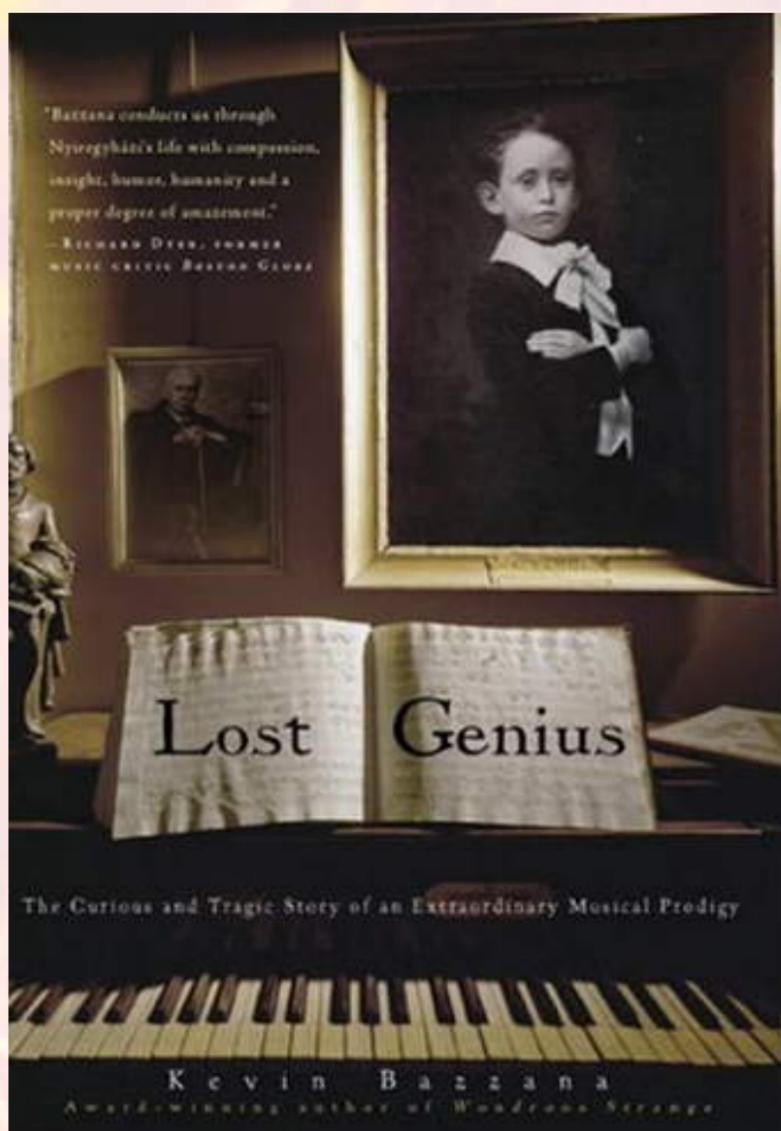
Further, Ervin Nyiregyházi has very clearly understood Liszt's ideas, absorbed them and transmuted them through his own personality. This is not mere impersonation.

For those interested in Nyiregyházi's personality and life story, I highly recommend the book by Kevin Bazzana: *Lost Genius: The Curious and Tragic Story of an Extraordinary Musical Prodigy* (2007). However, so much is dismal, depraved and unpleasant in the biography that I also recommend taking a shower after each bout of reading.

Nyiregyházi's life was more sewer-water-drenched than even that of Charles Bukowski.



Ervin Nyiregyházi: *36 Selected Works for Solo Piano*, edited by Kevin Bazzana, published by Carl Fischer (2019)



Kevin Bazzana: *Lost Genius: The Curious and Tragic Story of an Extraordinary Musical Prodigy*.
© Carroll & Graf, 2007

Nyiregyházi began life as an amazing child prodigy. A book entitled, in translation, *The Psychology of a Musical Prodigy* by G Révész — according to the information I have: German edition: 1916, English edition: 1925, see:

archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.218386 — was even written about him at the time. He performed with great success, and then vanished into career stagnation, financial indigence, cultural extinction, blind anonymity, moral self destruction and a Bowery level street life. In the 1970s, after decades of degrading obscurity, he was heard performing and subsequently a few recordings and performances resulted in a strange after-twilight glow. People have been trying to understand him, his piano playing and his life for a long time. But his compositions have remained out of reach, since only a handful were ever published.

Thus, while a significant number — perhaps all — of Nyiregyházi's piano performance recordings have been released, we have had to wait until 2019 for a collection of his compositions (which number in the hundreds) to be published. Here, thanks to Kevin Bazzana, we have a sampling of works to begin consideration. [READ MORE ...](#)

IN-DEPTH – THE BALLETS RUSSES

George Colerick: By 1903, Isadora Duncan was famous in the west for her revolutionary if idiosyncratic approach to dance, and in locations remote from the ballet stage. The young Russian choreographer Michael Fokine could not follow her total disregard for tradition, but admired her naturalistic approach, such as refusing to dance on *pointe*. In the St Petersburg ballet, his creations were moving away from rigidities of classical style, but there was strong opposition to some of his changes in court circles. This was the capital where French fashions had dominated among the rich. Over six decades Russia's internationally famous nineteenth century choreographer had been the Frenchman Marius Petipa, through to Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* (1890) and Glazunov's *Raymonda* (1898). Fokine was to be his successor and assembled the most famous-to-be dance team there, including Pavlova, Karsavina and Nijinsky; all four would eventually migrate to Paris.



A 1911 photograph taken by Nicolas Besobrasov at Beausoleil (Monte Carlo) of a group of supporters and members of the Ballets Russes in 1911. In front, Alexandra Vassilieva, and behind, from left to right: Botkine(?), Pavel Koribut-Kubitovitch, Tamara Karsavina, Vaslav Nijinsky, Igor Stravinsky. Alexandre Benois, Sergei Diaghilev and K Harris

He became interested in a circle which grew around two men who had met as undergraduates and were editing a forward-looking magazine *The World of Art*: Serge Diaghilev and Alexander Benois, painter and future scene designer. Diaghilev was multi-talented, but gave up his ambitions to be a composer when Rimsky-Korsakoff told him he lacked talent. He was first taken on as an administrator by the Imperial Theatre; but would not compromise on a new approach to Delibes' ballet *Sylvia*, and was sacked. His destiny was to become a world-famous impresario, aristocratic in manner but able to pick the best collaborators.

Fokine was being obstructed, so his chance came when Diaghilev took a company in 1907, firstly for opera, on tour to Paris. He joined it to create by 1909 the ballet on Chopin's music now known as *Les Sylphides*, but Diaghilev sensed that the audience were ready for greater innovation. The *Polovtsian Dances* from the opera *Prince Igor* were given astounding choreography to music of a kind of previously unknown, so vital and exotic. *Cleopatra* did not use the familiar personalised history, but was first in a plan to display the beauties of all great civilisations, an early kind of multi-culturalism. Its theme was based on an 'Asian' notion that a man would willingly suffer death for one night of voluptuous pleasure. Its ballet was a compilation from several Russian composers. Then came the aural and visual delights of *Scheherazade* based on tales from the *Arabian nights*. In that time, before cinema had introduced sound, Rimsky-Korsakov's sensuous confection seemed to illustrate the unknown, the ultimate Oriental fantasy.

A Russian court painter, Leon Bakst's decor was able to evoke parallel responses, conceptions which are no less astonishing even in today's jaded post-modernist phase. He made original use of veils and harem pantaloons in place of the tutu, and his two works, *Scheherazade* and *Cleopatra*, had Parisians shopping for exotic home decorations. The original episodes of *Scheherazade* were not related to sex, but Fokine's version was carnal and violent. Rimsky-Korsakov, recently deceased, might have objected to this interpretation in a different medium, and his widow did so in vain. Two other new ballets on music from the earlier nineteenth century succeeded without controversy: *Carnaval* by Schumann and *The Spectre of the Rose* with a score which Weber had once used to make the waltz 'respectable'. [READ MORE ...](#)

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George Colerick also writes about Franz Schubert in the year 1823. [READ THIS ARTICLE ...](#)

ENSEMBLE – SPECIAL MOMENTS

Adam J Sacks: Beating out nine other top flight international ensembles, including the LSO and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, the Hong Kong Philharmonic has become the first Asian ensemble to receive *Gramophone's* Orchestra of the Year award. Fresh off receiving this Oscar of the Classical World, at a special moment in the history of Hong Kong, the orchestra turned to an evening of romantic timelessness. On 8 November 2019, the eve of the thirtieth anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the orchestra let out that greatest of all musical sighs: the Prelude to Wagner's *Tristan*.

Yet it was in the intimacy of three of Schubert's Lieder where the subtlety of the orchestra shone through. In particular settings also made at historical turning points, Max Reger's *Im Abendbrot* of 1914 and Britten's *Die Forelle* of 1942, emphasize how easily the boundary between song and hymn can be traversed. This was aided in particular by the shimmering melisma's of guest soprano Renée Fleming.

She may very well have established herself as the premiere interpreter of the follow-up piece, Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*. A quietly harrowing piece of American social realism based on the writings of James Agee, it is a musical observation of small-town life, of street cars and children. The harried tempos of the orchestra and jumpy leaps in the clarinet capture an atmosphere that mixes fever dream with the desire for time to stand still. Delivered with force and conviction, the simple fragility of the emptiness is gutting, and Fleming drew well upon reserves of power to muscle the deep wave of strings at the finale.

For a follow-up concert on 22 November 2019 the orchestra featured the Hong Kong premiere of a new commissioned work, Chan Kai-Young's *Spiraling Dreamscape*. Drawing upon the tonal nature of the Cantonese language to produce actual words out of the orchestra, the effect is both elusive for the non-speaker and a dissertation-like intellectual exercise. It does however point to a tantalizing direction forward for East meets West classical fusion, one that draws upon the angular pitches of a distinctly ancient string tradition.

That evening, the orchestra did well prove its versatility serving as a staging ground for the Philip Glass Double Piano Concerto with accompanying stylings by the Labèque Sisters. Glass uses the pianos as an accordion-like extension of the orchestra and punctuates Gershwin-like melodies with rather idiosyncratic percussive elements, but the interplay of the cello was achieved most impressively.

The sound waves that resemble an acoustic version of a synthesizer perfectly match a kind of millennial angst. Both the times outside the concert hall and the dress, habitus and interaction of the two perennially young stars of the piano do much to underscore.

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David Mitchell: On 2 November 2019, Australia played host to one of the world's foremost Wagner singers. The Swedish dramatic soprano Nina Stemme visited Hobart, Tasmania for one night only for a concert with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra at Federation Concert Hall. She was supported by fellow Swede, baritone John Lundgren, who sang Wotan to her Brünnhilde, and conductor Marko Letonja, the inaugural Conductor Laureate of the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra.

The concert was an all-Wagner program, with generous orchestral and sung extracts from three operas: *Die Walküre*, *Götterdämmerung*, and *Der Fliegende Holländer*.

The first half of the concert was extracts from *Die Walküre*. The audience first heard Stemme offstage singing Brünnhilde's war-cry before she emerged to greet Wotan. Her voice was clear, powerful and expressive. She demonstrated calm control even in the most demanding passages. Stemme is not only a great singer, she is also a great actress. She transcended the limited nature of a concert performance, acting the scenes, supported by the dramatic lighting by stage designer Bengt Gomér. Every time she was on stage her presence dominated but she showed great generosity towards and rapport with Lundgren. Part One of the concert concluded with Wotan's Farewell and a delicate performance of the Magic Fire Music.

In Part II, after a solo offering by Lundgren, Stemme returned to sing Brünnhilde's Immolation scene from *Götterdämmerung*. She demonstrated the tonal sureness and dramatic qualities that have assured she is currently Brünnhilde's greatest exponent.

The second half concluded with Stemme's magisterial performance. But it had begun by focusing on Lundgren. The orchestra opened with the overture from *Der Fliegende Holländer*, then Lundgren sang the Dutchman's Act I monologue. Lundgren performed this role at Bayreuth in 2018. His voice is rich and his performance commanding. As well as his clear and resonant baritone, he demonstrated a dramatic sureness, that show he is making the Dutchman role his own.

Under the baton of Marko Letonja the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra acquitted itself well. This was an expanded Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra. To achieve Wagnerian proportions, the orchestra needed to import players from the mainland. Young students from the Australian National Academy of Music supplemented the Tasmanian orchestra. They all played beautifully as a single unit with a full-bodied, confident sound. The too-well-known Ride of the Valkyries sounded fresh. [READ MORE ...](#)

Mike Wheeler: Britten's cantata *St Nicolas* was ground-breaking when it was written, in 1948, for the way it brought together professional and amateur musicians, instrumentalists as well as singers. How does it hold up today? Well, some aspects of Eric Crozier's libretto haven't worn well, at least for this reviewer, but Britten's music sounds as fresh as ever.

The Matlock-based Derbyshire Singers, conducted by Lynne Clark, got off to a good start — Derby Cathedral, Derby, UK, 16 November 2019 — projecting uncertainty in their appeal to Nicolas to show them 'the simple man within the saint'. Their restlessness was compounded by Morven Brice's unfaltering negotiation of the solo violin part's corkscrew contours, with steadily pulsing support from her Derbyshire Sinfonia colleagues. Tenor Andrew Henley was commanding in the title role though, placed in the pulpit as opposed to the front of the pews, he was at something of a disadvantage in the Cathedral's tricky acoustic.

'The Birth of Nicolas' is always good fun, with Britten in his best cheeky-schoolboy mode, and it got plenty of bounce and swing here, with the percussion players, and the piano duettists Eleanor and Amanda Kornas, relishing their sound effects to accompany Nicolas' bathtime.

In 'Nicolas devotes himself to God' Andrew Henley captured the saint's unease as he searches for his life path, and the calm of his eventual resolution was palpable. His journey to Palestine, with its storm at sea, is the occasion for more vivid story-telling. The men of the choir did not always project the text with ideal clarity, but there was bright, vivid singing from Cantamus Training Choir up in the gallery. Quite a few proud mums in the audience turned round to beam in their direction. There was a fine sense of ceremony as Nicolas was made bishop.

Stravinsky's influence on 'Nicolas from Prison' was pointed up by some deft orchestral playing, and the jaunty gallows humour of 'Nicolas and the Pickled Boys' was delivered with gusto, counterpointed by the mothers plaintively calling for their lost sons.

In 'His Piety and his Marvellous Works' Britten divides the chorus into seven smaller groups to tell some of the legends surrounding Nicolas, and here there was an occasional lack of confidence, but the final number, as Nicolas meets his death, was delivered securely, with the underpinning plainsong melody firmly in place.

The four Derby Cathedral choristers — Thomas Hygate (the young Nicolas) and Patrick Cain, Jonathan Dixon and Rafe Travis (the Pickled Boys) — gave good value.

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Giuseppe Pennisi: Over the last three weeks, there have been as many as five operatic world premieres in Rome because of the combination of the end of Teatro dell'Opera's 2018-2019 'season' and of the annual festival organized by Nuova Consonanza, one of Italy's most important contemporary and experimental music associations. I attended three of the five: the debut of *Un romano a Marte* on 22 November at the Teatro Nazionale — Teatro dell'Opera's smaller house — and a double bill at the Teatro Palladium on 15 November 2019.

Un romano a Marte (A Roman on Mars) by Vittorio Montalti, to a libretto by Giuliano Compagno, won Teatro dell'Opera's composition award a few years ago, and the production is part of the program promoted by Rome Capital. It was a highly awaited debut: the Teatro Nazionale was full of young composers plus contemporary music critics from other Italian cities. It is an opera in one act for an actor, three singers, a medium-sized orchestra and live electronics. It is necessary to give merit to Teatro dell'Opera for setting up a very respectable production by inviting a conductor of international rank, John Axelrod, and entrusting the direction to Fabio Cherstich who, through the project 'Opera Camion', brought opera to the outskirts of both the Italian capital and Palermo. Gianluigi Toccafondo's scenes, costumes and lighting are attractive. The production also provides an opportunity for young singers from the Teatro dell'Opera finishing school to be on stage.

The single act has no plot. It takes its cue from the theatrical fiasco in Milan of the play *Un Marziano a Roma* by Ennio Flaiano to evocate the confrontation between Milan and Rome in the period between the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. It pays homage to the Eternal City through the figure of that multifaceted intellectual who was Ennio Flaiano. The idea of a homage to Rome at a time when it was one of the real centers of European culture — not only Italian — is both the merit and the limit of the work. Without a dramaturgy, it is made of fragments of texts, singing and live electronics. It is difficult to understand for those who have not lived through or studied those years. After the beginning, at the Teatro Lirico in Milan on 23 November 1960, the opera, lasting just over an hour, takes a dreamlike trend. The most interesting parts are the orchestral abandonments full of rhythm and with strong timbre accents: The score is reminiscent of the way of composing between the 1950s and 1960s. There were good performers: Domingo Pellicola as Ennio Flaiano, Rafaela Albuquerque as Ilaria Occhini and Timofei Baranov as Kunt the Martian, and there was applause as the end.

The first opera of the double bill is *In mappa compescere risum* (A spoonful of rice) on a libretto by Isabella Ducrot, who drew it from a novella inspired by one of her many trips to Asia, particularly Bhutan. The short opera was written by four young composers: Caio de Azevedo (Brazil), Hao Wu (China), Ivan Gostev (Russia) and Maskim Liakh (Belorussia). They are all about twenty-five years old and are students of Moritz Eggert at the Munich Musikhochschule. I remember a similar operation at the Berlin Staatsoper Magazine in 2005 — *Seven Attempted Escapes from Silence* — where there were seven young composers, and each of the seven scenes had a different stage director, while singers and mimes did not change. The opera was successful and was revived for three seasons. One of the elements of the success was the libretto by Jonathan Safran Froer, whose recorded voice connected the various scenes and styles of composition. The libretto of *In mappa compescere risum* is basically weak: the emotion felt by two Western tourists in front of the frugal meal of children initiated into the 'Buddhist ecclesiastical career'. The music is elegant and minimalist and the four composers have fused their styles well, but the singing/declamation by a soprano (Eleonora Clapps), a tenor (Maurizio Maiorana) and a baritone (Simone Spera) — has little to do with the music played by the Conservatory of Palermo directed by Fabio Correnti. The scenes are largely projections of Ducrot's travel photos. In short, an affair for family and friends only. They did applaud, though.

L'asino magico di Tessaglia (The magic donkey from Tessaglia), with libretto and music by Marcello Panni, is a pantomime for actors, puppets, mimes and small orchestra. The work is taken from a novella by Lucian of Samosata (in the translation by Luigi Settembrini). Panni has already approached this twice — once in the 1990s in Germany and more recently in Palermo, for a children's show. In this version there is the imagery of the children's show — puppets, Chinese shadows, captivating and elegant stage projections — but erotic-scabrous aspects are added.

The staging and direction are by Fabrizio Lupo. The two narrative voices — Maurizio Maiorana and Nicola Franco — read the text with a strong Palermitan flexion. The music, performed by the ensemble of the Palermo Conservatory, is full of panache, joy, irony and rhythm. It was a real success, which deserves to be replicated, and which could have been performed on its own.

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