Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club July, 2023

Scriabin: Piano Sonatas 2, 3, 4 Fantaisie; Poèmes, Morceaux, Vers la flamme
Yoojung Kim, pianist
(Bridge)

Korean American pianist Yoojung Kim has performed in concert venues in the United States, London, Vienna, Prague, Budapest and Seoul, South Korea. A student of Nikolai Demidenko and Ruth Nye at the Yehudi Menuhin School, she went on to undergraduate study at the Royal College of Music, and holds degrees in piano performance and collaborative piano from the Manhattan School of Music and from NYU Steinhardt, where she is currently a member of the Artist Faculty in Piano Studies.

So much for credentials. The resumés of performing artists everywhere have a way of sounding oh. so impressive! The proof is in the playing, and here Kim gets highest marks for poetry and interpretive insights, qualities that are particularly critical when the subject is Russian pianist, composer, and musical symbolist Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915). She understands Scriabin to a degree that I am pleased to find remarkable among current pianists, and her feeling for color and expressiveness brings out the very best in an often-illusive composer.

The program opens with Fantaisie in B minor, Op. 28, dark-hued and extravagant in its gestures. It is also notable for its advanced chromatic harmonies in the pursuit of ever-more brilliant color. The

Bruch & Korngold: Violin Concertos + Chausson: Poème. Arabella Steinbacher, violin. Lawrence Foster, Orquestra Gulbenkian (Pentatone)

In a re-issue of its 2013 release, Pentatone gives us a second chance to enjoy these outstanding performances by Arabella Steinbacher of Violin Concertos by Max Bruch and Erich Wolfgang Korngold plus the ever-popular Poème by French composer Ernest Chausson. As I missed the opportunity to review this album ten years ago, its present re-release affords me the special pleasure to enjoy it now.

Korngold (1897-1957), born to Jewish parents in Brünn, Austria-Hungary (now Brno, Czech Republic) relocated in the U.S. after the rise of the Nazi regime and became the most successful of Hollywood film composers. His Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35, has a lot going for it, beginning with the burnished golden sound and the wealth of tender sentiments in the opening, Moderato Nobile. A moment of towering intensity with a rising passage for the horns and a splendid violin flourish add further distinction to this movement. The slow movement, Romance, is memorable for a hauntingly beautiful violin melody plus harmonics.

The Finale opens with a sensational outburst from the orchestra plus brilliant violin passagework and skittish, galloping figurations for the violin. Strong rhythmic support from the orchestra leads to a big climax six minutes into the movement and

"Solo Cello," Bach: Suite No. 3 + Cassado, Handel, Hindemith, Marais, Schnittke – Nina Kotova, cellist
(Delos Productions)

Nina Kotova, Russian-born cellist who has recently taught in the United States as an Artist in Residence at the University of Texas, shows her own abundant prowess as a performing artist in a wide-ranging program of works for solo cello.

She begins with *Couplets des Folies d'Espagne*, a brilliant set of varations on *La Folia*, the Spanish (or Portuguese) dance that has been used by many composers as the basis for variations from the 16th century on up to the present day. This set of variations by French composer Marin Marais (1656-1728) shows us what a rich source of musical ideas in a time-honored classical style of contrasted tempi and major and minor modulations is afforded by a venerable old melody that was originally intended as a frenzied dance to ward off the ravages of the plague.

Paul Hindemith's Sonata for Solo Cello unfolds in five movements: 1) a very active *Lebhaft, sehr markiert* (lively, very marked tempo), 2) *Mäßig schnell, Gemächlich* (moderately quick, amiable), 3) *Langsam* (slow or unhurried), 4) *Lebhafte, viertel* (lively, and in quarter time) and 5) *Mäßig schnell* (rather quick), in this instance highly dramatic, sorrowful, and searching, with double stops. A well-packed little bundle in just nine minutes!

main thing to understand about Scriabin is that harmony and counterpoint go together in his music. In order to divine the contour of any work of his, you must keep these two concerns in mind. Otherwise, you are likely to view his music as little more than incontinent rhapsodizing (as too many critics have done).

Kim carries this understanding over into her performances of the Sonata-Fantasy in G-sharp minor, Op. 19; and Sonatas No. 3 in F-sharp minor, Op. 23, and No. 4 in F-sharp major. Notice the preponderance of rarely used keys that are potentially rich in harmonic possibilities: F-sharp major has one sharp and six flats in its signature. F-sharp minor, a key notably employed in sonatas by Schumann and Brahms, has four flats and three sharps, and G-sharp minor has four flats. Keys such as these held a possibility for harmonic riches that would naturally have appealed to a restless spirit such as Scriabin.

For lack of space, I'm going to focus on Sonata No. 3, which opens with an aptly-named movement titled *Drammatico* which the composer compared to the soul's being immersed in "an abyss of suffering and strife," and a short but significant one titled *Allegretto,* in which it finds "illusory and transient respite" (Scriabin). A true romantic composer would have ratcheted up the emotion at this point, but what Scriabin does here is intense bur quiet, an *Andante* that constitutes a poetic reverie with effective use of really soft dynamics. The finale, *Presto con fuoco* ("with fire") contains real fireworks, with a meditative moment in the middle before the fire resumes. Kim gives a riveting but engaging interpretation of this sonata, which ends with really decisive chords.

We are then treated to Deux Poèmes, Op. 32; Deux Morceaux, Op. 57, and Deux Poèmes, Op. 63, music with various degrees of languid mediation, softly enigmatic beauty, and even a true pianissimo in the last morceau of Op. 32 which Kim executes with consummate skill. We conclude with *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72, Beginning slowly, almost inaudibly, and ending in great urgency, with flickering tremolos, and a sharply struck crescendo before the music burns itself out.

then fireworks for both violin and orchestra through to the end. Arabella Steinbacher's fine account of this work, added to other recordings by the likes of Heifetz, Perlman, and Gil Shaham, may help to move the Korngold Concerto into the upper echelon of the violin repertoire at last. The main impediment thus far is that, despite a real preponderance of riches, it seems to lack the one big melody that you can take to bed with you and have it haunt your dreams!

Chausson's Poème, up next, opens very quietly, with no hint of the big dynamic range it will entail. The ear-catching entrance of the violin with an enchanting melody, plus the splendid rapport of soloist and orchestra, helps convey an array of soaring melodies. Along with its organ-like harmonies and a César Franck-like principle of organic development, Poème is distinguished in the present recording by a towering climax, the best I can remember hearing on record.

Sving the best for last, Violin Concerto No. 1 in G Minor by Max Bruch opens slowly with a secure tone maintained by Steinbacher and the orchestra as the volume rises gradually in stages. Fluid movement leads to a sensational climax. An Adagio taken *attaca* from the preceding Allegretto moderato, a procedure Bruch follows in this work, is one of the most compelling slow movements in the entire repertoire as it softly and eloquently displays variations on a simple, memorable theme. A soaring climax, and then we are led, once again *attaca,* into the Finale, with its beautifully connected iterations of the theme.

This finale opens gloriously with a full statement of the melody. We are treated to some terrific rapport between Steinbacher and the orchestra, and then a quietly poetic and introspective moment for the soloist, folllowed by double-stops in dancelike tempi just before driving on to the finish line. This qualifies as one of the best Bruch First Concertos I've ever heard on record. Considering the competition (Heifetz, Milstein, Perlman, Shaham) *that's* saying a lot!)

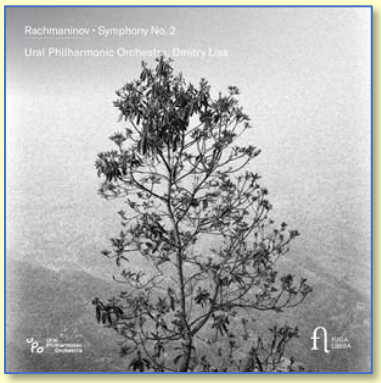
Klingende Buchstaben (Sounding Letters) by our late contemporary Alfred Schnittke, packs a lot of intensity into less than four minutes. In a searching, haunted mood, it is not the most amiable work in the repertoire but, as Kotova demonstrates, it is hard to ignore.

J.S. Bach is up next with his Suite No. 3 in C Major for Solo Cello. As Kotova shows us, Bach found the French suite genre quite congenial in terms of what he had to say in the way of mood, exression, and harmony. Here, a far-reaching Prelude sets the stage, followed by a rambunctious Allemande whose rhythms Kotova really seems to relish. The Courante is swiftly flowing, as its name would imply, but also curiously probing.

The Sarabande, typically a slow dance, is also deeply passionate without being a heart-on-sleeve affair. Bourées 1 and 2, representatives of a dance genre in quick duple time starting with a quarter-bar pickup, are nicely contrasted in terms of mood and expression. Lastly, the Gigue ("Jig" to you) is a lively romp, its delight enchanced by Kotova's discretely tapping on her instrument's sound case.

George Frideric Handel's Passacaglia, marked *maestoso*, is characterized by an emotionally charged opening with well-struck pizzicati. There's a lot of variety and contrast in this piece, typically in triple metre with a bass-ostinato, and Kotova really throws herself into it., emphasizing its well laid-out preportions and the variety of bowing techniques and types of attack necessary to realize it.

Lastly, we are treated to Suite per Violoncello Solo by Spanish cellist and composer Gaspar Cassadó (1897-1966). Kotova, who is likewise making a name for herself in both of these musical disciplines, relishes its passionately probing Preludio, its Sardona, a dance marked *Allegro giusto*, and its concluding Intermezzo, characterized by sections marked *Lento ma non troppo* and *Allegro marcato* – and just as impressive in its buildup of concentrated energy as the markings would imply.



Rachmaninov: Symphony No. 2
Dmitry Liss, Ural Philharmonic Orchestra
(Fuga Libera)

Prokofiev: Piano Concerto No. 2, Symphony No. 2
Dmitry Liss, Ural Philharmonic Orchestra
Andrei Korobeinikov, piano
(Fuga Libera)

Shostakovich: Symphony No. 10
Dmitry Liss, Ural Philharmonic Orchestra
(Fuga Libera)

Where in the world is Yekaterinburg? It's a strategically located city of 1.5 million people that serves as a leading industrial, cultural and scietific research center and a transportation hub, situated in the Urals between European Russia and Asia. Significantly for these Classical Reviews, it is also home to the Ural Philharmonic Orchestra, a musical organization that has made good on its promise of excellence under the direction of artistic director and chief conductor Dmitry Liss. The three albums recently released on the Belgian label Fuga Libera give us a good indication of where the Ural Philharmonic is at this stage in its history.

Symphony No. 2 in E Minor by Sergei Rachmaninov is highly lyrical and passionate, fillled with the desires and longings that we associate with its composer. Surprisingly, it is overwhelmingly monothematic, a fact that lends it both unity and credibility as it reflects Rachmaninoff's own inner conflicts and moods and his deep desire for happiness. The opening movement, Allegro Moderato, is prefaced by a lengthy Largo introduction. An unhurried exposition of the themes we will witness coming to fruition as the symphony's four movements unfold, all of which grow out of a leitmotif introduced by the basses, is an intriguing characteristic of this movement. At 57 minutes' playing time, the symphony develops by organic procedures, and it requires the time and attention Liss and the Ural Philharmonic are wiling to devote to it.

A sudden crescendo at about 3:23 in the scherzo movement, Allegro Molto, followed later by a stunning climax at 5:29 heralding a breakneck race across limitless steppes, shakes us out of whatever comfortable torpor we might have experienced in the opening movement and lets us know we are in for a long workng-out of themes and harmonies. The slow movement, Adagio, is characterized by a rising violin melody and rapturous clarinet solo that strikes us as a love song – truly the emotional deep point of the symphony. Cascading sounds, evoking the pealing of bells at the climax of the finale, help create the feeling of a big symphony that has come to its conclusion.

With the distinguished participation of pianist Andrei Korobeinikov, Liss and the orchestra give a compelling account of Sergei Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 2 in G Minor. You will notice I said "compelling," rather than "lovable" or "affectionate." That would be too much to hope for in a concerto that has the scope and seriousness of a symphony in four movements. Truth to tell, its frenzied temperament and jarring, modernistic sound made it difficult for audiences to appreciate, and many famous concert pianists have been loath to take it up. It is the more remarkable that the present Fuga Libera release has been preceded for no fewer than 53 other recordings, beginning with Jorge Bolet in 1953. Apparently, while you don't get to be famous for championing this formidable concerto, the challenge it poses for keyboard artists has proven irresistible,

The first movement, Andantino-Allegretto, opens quietly in swaying motion, making it hard to grasp what direction it will take. Succeeding peaks and troughs of intensity assume a nightmatrish aspect. Its basic mood is that of a slow, unquiet meditation. Percussive tones predominate in the piano part. Hitherto held in abeyance, the brass swell up near the end of the movement before it ends quietly in a fade to silence. The Scherzo, marked Vivace, is a rousing affair in tumbling rhythms. The third movement, Intermezzo, is the most remarkable of all. Featuring a march reminiscent of the one in Love for Three Oranges, it has a remarkably operatic mood. The finale, Allegro tempestoso (and how!) opens quietly and mysteriously before the movement builds to a smashing climactic finish.

Prokofiev's Symphony No. 2 in D Minor, in two movements, is, if anything, even more difficult for audiences and performers to grasp than is the concerto. The opening movement, Allegro *ben articolato*, generates lots of driving force and anger, as winds and brass fairly jump out at the listener, even impeding the rhythm like sand under the wheels of a big, strident theme that moves with the force of a juggernaut. The second and final movement takes the form of a theme and variations with big dynamic contrasts from opening to finish. A quiet middle section serves to increase the tension of a long movement (25:46) that is as dificult to perform as it is challenging.

Lastly, Symphony No. 10 in E Minor, Op. 93, by Dmitri Shostakovich is given a sensitive performance by Liss and the Ural Philharmonic, stressing both its eloquence and its impertinence. Significantly, this work, which premiered in December,1953, was the fruit of a thaw creative artists had begun to experience in Russia in the nine months since the death of Joseph Stalin. For Shostakovich, many of whose works were banned in the Stalinist era as "formalist," the spirit of relative liberalization in the arts was welcome, and he wasted no time in completing work on the Tenth Symphony, sketches of which went back as far as 1946. Both supporters and hard-core Stalinist detractors seem to have recognized that it was a new departure for its composer. In an intense three-day discussion in a crowded auditorium at the Moscow House of Artists in the Spring of 1954, the debate ended in his favor. Aram Khachaturian described the symphony as a work of expressive power and "optimistic tragedy," praise which now seems more than justified.

The opening movement, Moderato, long and patiently crafted at a timing of 21:46, opens so softly that home listeners may be moved to check their volume settings. It is succeeded by a moment of towering intensity about three and a half minutes into the movement (In the present account, Liss and the orchestra do a good job with dynamic modulations). The emotional intensity scales great heights in the middle of the movement. Then, from about 16:00 on, we have a slow dying off of volume and intensity, with peaks of resistance.

The second movement, Allegro, is the briefest (4:26) and is taken at breakneck speed, with wicked accents from side drums and kettledrums, swirling activity in the woodwinds, and strident brass. Galloping rhythms prove particularly effective in the quiet moments when they are least expected. The third movement, Allegretto, gives the impression something is formenting, but at this point we don't know just what it is. A soft, poignant mood in the trumpet is taken up by the higher strings while an ominous build-up in the lower strings seems prophetic of things to come. Later on, a gradual increase in tempo, rhythm and dynamics is followed by towering, irresistible climaxes, and then a soft dying away of the orchestra at the end.

The finale, Andante, opens with an even softer introduction, featuring the cool sounds of the flutes. Is this a mistake, we wonder? And then, as if to answer our question, the tempo picks up amid swirling rhythms, eventually giving way to strongly accented, galloping metres. The music builds to a peak of high intensity at about 8:40. It is succeeded by a period of quietly brooding music, indicating a slow build-up of intensity in this movement on its way to the finish. Horn calls and galloping rhythms contain the promise of a really sensational ending, and we are not disappointed.

Brahms: Cello Sonatas, Opp. 38, 99; Six Lieder – Uri Vardi, cello;
Christopher Taylor, piano
(Centaur Records)

Between them, cellist Uri Vardi and pianist Christopher Taylor bring many decades of experience to the recording studio, especially when the subject is Brahms. The mutual rapport between these two artists provides the critical element in these recordings of Brahms' Sonatas for Cello and Piano, Nos. 1 in E Minor, Op. 38, and 2 in F Major, Op. 99. Note that these are not merely cello sonatas with piano accompaniment, but true sonatas for both instruments requiring artistic maturity and the closest mutual rapport between the two performers in order to bring about richly satisfying accounts of two of the greatest works in the repertoire.

"Resilience," Sonatas by Shostakovich, Szpilman, Weinberg, and Prokofiev
Yulianna Avdeeva, pianist
(Pentatone)

Yulianna Avdeeva, Russian pianist who studied at the Gnessin Special School of Music in her native Moscow and the Zürich University of the Arts in Switzerland, gives a program calculated to display the range of her artistry and a repertoire for which she has a particular yen.

She begins with Polish Jewish composer and pianist Władysław Szpilman (1911-2000) who survived the occupation of Warsaw by the Nazis and internment in a concentration camp and (as we see from his dates) lived to a great age. Perhaps one key to his longevity may be heard in his gently wafting, whimsical Mazurek, and in

"Passion," music of Bach, Dohnányi, Enescu, Françaix, Sibelius, Tòszeghi
The Leipzig String Trio
(Ars Produktion)

The Leipzig String Trio is comprised of violinist Adrian Iliescu, violist Atilla Aldemir and cellist Rodin Moldovan. Natives of Romania and Turkey and winners of numerous international prizes and awards as individuals, they happily came together as a trio, giving their first performance in 2019. Their sound is strong and distinctive, both individually and as an ensemble. We get a good impression of this ensemble in "Passion," a wide-ranging program of works by six diverse composers.

Hungarian composer Erno Dohnányi, up first, is given a glowing account of his rich and harmonically flavorful Serenade in C

We sense that rapport immediately in the opening movement, Allegro non troppo, of Op. 38, with its ceanly articulated accents and outbursts from the cello set against a firm, steady line in the piano. As elsewhere in these recordings, good sound definition, especially in the quietest moments, is an essential in the recording, and that is just what we are gven. The middle movement, Allegretto quasi menuetto, is utterly charming in the eloquent performance by Vardi and Taylor, with good choices of tempi and a clean, well-defined sound. The final movement, Allegro, is marked by well-struck cadences, a beautifully executed pickup in tempo around the 3:00 mark, and a noticeable increase in excitement as we near the finish line.

Op. 99, in four movements, requires even greater care from its executants, and it receives just that. The opening Allegro vivace, sets bold stentorian declamation in the piano part against smoldering intensity allied with noticeable wamth in the cello, ending decisively. The slow movement, Adagio affetuoso, opens with an extremely warm, measured melody in the cello set against a quietly incisive piano part. A nuanced performance is required of both instruments. At one point they trade off roles of melody and accompaniment. Around four minutes into the movement, there is a wonderful moment when walking pizzicati in the cello are heard to sensational effect against a firm piano line. The final movement, marked Allegro molto, continues the intuitive partnership we witnessed in nos.1-3, with subtle changes within the line as the sonata builds to a very satisfying end.

Between the two major works, we are given beautiful arrangements for cello and piano by Norbert Salter of six of Brahms' best-known and best-loved songs. They are: *Minnelied* (Love song), in which the call of a wild bird is equated with the rapture of human love, *Feldeinsamkeit* (Alone in a Meadow), *Wie Melodien zieht es mir* (Like a melody, it flows quietly through my mind), *Sapphische Ode* (Ode of Sappho), *Wiegenlied* (Cradle Song), and *Liebestreu* (True Love). The songs are well-chosen to fit the timbre and register of the cello, which corresponds to large portions of both the contralto and baritone human singing voices. As such, these arrangements would have seemed natural to Brahms, who was one of the greatest song composers of them all.

the combined sadness plus energy of his Suite. The latter opens with an untitled movement, beginning slowly and building in zest and momentum all the way to the end. The second, entitled "Machine at Rest," is quiet, sad, and slow, conjuring (for me at least) a deserted ballroom. The third, Toccatina, is lively, infectious, machine-like in its vital impetus.

Dmitri Shostakovich is heard from in his Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 12, of 1926. It has been described as aggressively modern but with a tonal center (f minor), and as a "sonata for metronome accompanied by the piano" for its rigorous adherence to time. It occurs in six short movements: 1) Allegro, with lots of ostinato, cell-like tones, and big dynamic contrasts, 2) Meno mosso, with sad, spiraling interjections, 3) Adagio, with a quiet opening and characterized by both sadness *and* energy, 4) Allegro, marked *Poco meno mosso* indicating that it is to be played with a little less animation than we might have expected, 5) Adagio-Lento, with peaks and troughs of energy and despondency, and 6) Allegro-Meno mosso / Moderato / Allegro, a movement that lives up to the album's title "Resilience" with a big gathering of energy as it moves along.

Mieczyslaw Weinberg (1919-1996), born in Poland, emigrated to Russia, where he met Shostakovich who regarded him as one of the foremost composers of his day. All but forgotten for a long time, his music is now in the midst of being rediscovered. Avdeeva's account of his sonata No. 4 in B Minor must surely help the process.

It is in four movements (Allegro/ Allegro/ Adagio/ Allegro). The first opens in a perky manner, featuring an overwhelmingly brilliant middle section. The second Allegro movement has a nice pickup in intensity, even in the quietest moments, and a strong series of cadences at the end. The Adagio opens very quietly, in a searching mood of heart-rending tenderness, ending with the search unfulfilled. The Allegro finale opens with rising expectations and syncopated rhythms, and experiences a notable drop in intensity at about 5:30, ending in a quietly mysterious flickering.

The program closes with Piano Sonata No. 8 in B-flat Major, Op. 84 by Sergei Prokofiev. He completed the work in 1944, and it has long been known as one of his three "War Sonatas," as it in many ways reflects the urgent times in which it was conceived (Here's another reason for the major, Op. 10. This work opens with a stirring and forceful Marcia: Allegro, which serves to set the mood and style of the serenade genre. The second movement, Romanze: Adagio non troppo, quasi-Andante, is characterized by highly flavored timbres and chromatic harmonies. Next, we have a helter-skelter Scherzo, marked Vivace. The fourth movement is the high point of the Trio, a theme and variations marked Andante con Moto, distinguished by slow, flavorful melodies, sparkling harmonies, and some glorious pizzicati about five minutes in. The Rondo finale. marked vivace, is characterized by its rich, flavorful sound.

French neoclassical composer Jean Françaix, up next, is represented by a rather manic String Trio, opening with a frenetic Allegro–vivo. The next movement, Scherzo-vivo, is fast and smartly articulated, with counter-rhythms and pizzicati. The third, Andante, is slow and poignant, the heart of the Trio. The finale, Rondo: Vivo, enjoys entremely fast interplay between voices, with flavorful timbres, counter rhythms, and an engaging interplay of harmonies.

As a real change of pace, we have Johann Sebastian Bach's great Ciaccona from Violin Partita No. 2 in D Minor. This work, universally recognized as one of music's masterpieces in its original setting, reveals ever more harmonic beauties and insights in an inspired setting for string trio by András von Tòszeghi that makes a superb disposition of voices, exhilarating tempi in the faster sections, and a superb focus in the slower ones where the tension actually increases in the quieter moments. (Bach would have loved this arrangement!)

The little-known String Trio in G Minor by Finland's Jean Sibelius benefits from an inspired performance by the Leipzig String Trio that emphasizes its salient qualities: a terse opening with a real bite to it, a mostly brooding, highly dramatic symphony-like character, and a relentless drive as the work progresses, winding down to a quiet finish.

Finally, we conclude with Aubade in C Major by Romanian composer Jean Enescu. Well-articulated accents and grace notes, delicious episodes, use of dance tempi, and a slow fade at the end, all make this serenade to the dawn (which is what an *aubade* is) memorable even in a program that unfolds like a procession of high moments.

present album's title "Resilience"). The first movement, Andante dolce, opens in softly arpeggiated notes, reminiscent of a love theme in Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, a melody you couldn't forget if you tried. The second, an all-too short Andante *sognando* ("dreamlike") lives up to its name with yet another tender melody that will forever nestle inside your mind.

Continued Below

The very busy final movement, Vivace, opens with brilliant pasagework and a recollection of earlier themes. It drives on, quietly at first, with a recollection of the minor-ninth theme from the opening movement, and then with a terrific surge to a thriling and very decisive conclusion. Avdeeva, saving the best for last, gives a memorable account of herself in this justly famous work.

Beethoven: Complete Piano Concertos 1-5
Garrick Ohlsson, pianist
Sir Donald Runnicles, conductor
Grand Teton Music Festival Orchestra

Both pianist Garrick Ohlsson and conductor Sir Donald Runnicles, brought an enormous wealth of musical experience to the recording sessions for this survey of the Complete Beethoven Piano Concertos, made July 5-9, 2022 at Walk Festival Hall, Teton Village, Wyoming. Ohlsson (b.1948 White Plains, NY), a pupil and disciple of the late Claudio Arrau, has been a headliner in concert venues for some years and boasts a wide-ranging concert repertoire, in particular being one of the few artists to records all the Beethoven piano sonatas (released by Bridge Records, Volume 3 in the series having been honored with the 2008 Grammy Award for Best Instrumental Soloist Performance). Runnicles (b. 1954 Edinburgh, Scotland) has enjoyed a distinguished career conducting orchestras in Europe and North America, including the Deutsche Oper, Berlin; the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, and our own Atlanta Symphony Orchestra as Principal Guest Conductor. He is currently Music Director of the Grand Teton Music Festival, Jackson, Wyoming. (Really, if these two guys had chanced to have been born Russians, they'd be so encumbered with hero medals, they wouldn't be able to walk onstage!)

More to the point, Ohlsson's artistry is distinguished by his unusual feeling for tone color, rhythm, and bold, expressive contrasts of all kinds. All of which makes him well-suited to explore the similarities and striking contrasts in Beethoven's scores. He possesses, in addition, a particularly strong left hand, which is vital in realizing the all-important bass lines in this composer's contrapuntal writing. And Runnicles is such a meticulous craftsman that he is more than equal to the changes in tempo, texture and dynamics, both sudden and gradual, and the strongly characterized themes that made Beethoven the composer he was. Time and again, Runnicles and Ohlsson seem to be approaching this composer's music with one heart and one mind.

And let's not forget the superb engineering that went into these recordings. As veteran producer Vic Muenzer puts it, great recordings are great "because, in that moment, all the elements come together at the right time and place." I've heard of this thing happening before. Too often, alas, the result of such an auspicious union of tone, performance, and acoustics turns out to be dull perfection. I am all the happier to report that the present 3-CD offering by Reference Recordings works out to be the glorious exception. In fact, I'm pleased to hail it as an early front-runner for end-of-the-year honors in the recording industry.