

assured handling of the finale, including the carefully graduated ascent to the final peroration, suggests a conductor fully at home in the composer's idiom.

A factor preventing this release being a stronger contender among the more than 100 recordings of the symphony now available, however, is that the engineering – in a recording pieced together from rehearsals, a concert and a later patch session – has a slightly veiled quality that detracts from the impact of the performance. I compared a number of passages with Karl's Böhm's version for Decca (10/74) and was struck by the greater transparency and sparkle of the sound, despite the recording dating from 50 years earlier. In a competitive field, my pick for a modern version of the Fourth remains Christian Thielemann's recording with the Staatskapelle Dresden, a spacious but commanding reading with playing of extraordinary eloquence and a first-class recording to match. **Christian Hoskins**

Selected comparison:

Staatskapelle Dresden, Thielemann Profil PH16064 (8/17)

Debussy • Dukas • Cras

'Mer(s)'

Debussy La mer **Dukas** L'apprenti sorcier

Cras Journal de bord

Appassionato / Mathieu Herzog

Appassionato, Le Label (APPO01 • 58')

Recorded live at La Seine Musicale, Paris,

June 9, 2023



The concept behind Mathieu Herzog's Appassionato would seem to me to be one of chamber music (and the mindset implicit in that) transcending the number of players involved – a free and flexible approach with infinite possibilities. And now with their own label comes artistic freedom, too. The title, 'Mer(s)', made me smile. Alongside Debussy – whose musical portraiture of the ocean is the first *Mer* to come to mind – is set alongside a very close relative in musical terms from a composer completely unknown to me: Jean Cras. Who he? A pretty much forgotten Frenchman (20th century) whose relationship with the sea was entirely professional. He was a career naval officer. His orchestral work *Journal de bord* is quite a piece and a significant head start for this album.

But first to the Debussy, which seems to me to rejoice in the chamber-music sensibility of both performers and music. The overriding sense here is one of a

soloistic character where inner parts really catch the ear (and the light) and rhythmic flexibility is all. I hesitate to use the word 'fluidity' (for obvious reasons) but you have only to listen to the passage for *divisi* cellos in the first tableau to know exactly what I mean. I think it is the middle tableau, 'Jeux de vagues', where the philosophy of both conductor and players really comes into its own. It is, in a word, scintillating: wonderfully rhythmic with crystal clarity throughout the texture and with such freedom as to make even the portamento in the strings naturally sway and swing.

The inky squalls of the final tableau are again heightened by rhythm and cross-rhythm all creating an urgency that today's super-size symphony orchestras sometimes struggle with. The climax of the piece with its big cornet-led chorale is impassioned without being portentous.

And so to the album's real selling-point – the exhumation of Jean Cras's *Journal de bord* (1927) which, like the Debussy (whose influence almost goes without saying), is in three panels with their own time-stamp and implied location. The rapture and wonder of the piece, though, is entirely Cras's own. The grandeur and reach of the first movement is truly oceanic – the tunes are lush and the orchestration rich. There is a flute- and clarinet-led pastorale (second movement), sensuous and becalmed, and the jubilant finale is tinged with the Eastern influence encountered on Cras's travels. A welcome discovery.

So where does Dukas's *L'apprenti sorcier* fit in? Ah, water. Flooding. The spell that goes wrong. Who needs an excuse to add it anyway? Herzog and his players romp through it, rejoicing in the chaos for the orgiastic dance that it is. I especially enjoyed the excessively grumpy contrabassoon and those flashing piccolo-bright woodwinds. The trick of the piece is that it feels out of control and yet not. And it does. Super disc.

Edward Seckerson

Firsova

Piano Concerto

Yefim Bronfman *pf*

Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra / Jakub Hrůša

RCO Live (D • 18')



Elena Firsova's 18-minute, three-movement Piano Concerto – not to

be confused with her Piano Concerto No 1 of 1985, which also goes by the title of Chamber Concerto No 3 – was composed in 2022 and premiered in Amsterdam in June that year by the performers on this first recording. Typically for her, the music is for the most part gently poetic on the surface and its elaboration meditative and rhapsodic. Yet everything rests on a core of careful, concise craftsmanship, in which each note earns its expressive and structural place. The preludial first two movements are balanced by a finale that is almost double their combined length. The full orchestral accompaniment, with triple wind and four percussionists, is used with discretion yet purpose.

Like Firsova's Double Concerto for violin and cello of 2015, the Piano Concerto takes as its starting point the three-note motif of Beethoven's 'Muss es sein', first heard in the solo piano's misty opening bars. The reference is a token of what she has described as a meditation on Death, a topic that doubtless gained poignant extra resonance (though I have not found any statement to confirm the connection with the Concerto) when her composer-husband Dmitri Smirnov died in the first wave of covid. If that speculation is correct, it may also explain the insinuation of two waltzes from the finale of Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony into the second and third movements. Elsewhere, it is possible to pick up affinities with Scriabin and Berg, but only by stepping outside the compelling flow of Firsova's own invention.

Bronfman has been introducing the concerto in Philadelphia, New York, Berlin and elsewhere, and performances in 2024 are scheduled in Gothenburg and Liverpool. Such powerful advocacy is no more than the piece deserves. This may not be earth-shattering, demonstrative or glamorous music in the way one might normally expect from a contemporary concerto but it is consummately artistic and has important things to say.

As for this EP release, it comes with no information whatsoever on the work. Maybe an enterprising label will now pick it up and couple it with its above-mentioned twin, the Double Concerto, and its predecessor, the Chamber Concerto No 3. **David Fanning**

J & M Haydn

J Haydn Violin Concerto in G, HobVIIa:4^a

M Haydn Concerto in C for Viola and Harpsichord, P55 MH41^b

Ryo Terakado ^avn/^bva **Pearls in Baroque** Chamber Orchestra / **Noriko Amano** *hpd* Challenge Classics (CC72983 • 51')



‘Slender pieces of modest charm’ is how Richard Wigmore describes the violin

concertos in his indispensable *Faber Pocket Guide to Haydn* – the G major (No 4) ‘slenderest of all’. It’s thought to date from the composer’s years with Count Morzin, which places it chronologically alongside the very earliest symphonies, and is perhaps the least technically challenging of the three surviving violin concertos. All the same, its modest charm can be sweetly engaging. Ryo Terakado – Bolivian-born Japanese leader of a number of major period-instrument ensembles – is a pleasing enough soloist with the Pearls in Baroque Chamber Orchestra (about whom the booklet is silent), augmenting his plain line with embellishments, octave displacements and his own cadenzas. Noriko Amano’s harpsichord is a prominent contributor to the sound picture, with the microphones held back to lend a generous resonance to the sound of the band of single strings as recorded in a Haarlem church. The overall impression, though, is of caution when compared with other invariably livelier recordings: Giuliano Carmignola, Simon Standage or Elizabeth Wallfisch, for example, all with their harpsichordist integrated more intimately within the orchestral sound, or Midori Seiler without harpsichord.

The rarity here, though – and perhaps the album’s main attraction – is a concerto for viola and harpsichord by the younger Haydn, Johann Michael. This likely dates from around the same time but Michael’s musical language included a stronger strain of singing lyricism than his big brother would regularly admit until some years later. It is an expansive work – more than half an hour long, in comparison to the violin concerto’s 20 minutes or so – and maintains interest over its span not only through the interplay of the two soloists but also via Haydn’s harmonic imagination, underpinning his melodic gift. Joseph’s well-known work may not be a contender in this recording but Terakado and Amano set the standard in Michael’s double concerto.

David Threasher

J Haydn – selected comparisons:

Standage, *English Concert*, Pinnock

Archiv 427 316-2AH (5/89)

E Wallfisch, OAE

Erato 561800-2 (11/92)

Carmignola, *Champs-Élysées Orch*

Archiv 477 8774AH (5/12)

Seiler, *Conc Köln*

Berlin Classics 0300550BC

Hellstenius

Public Behaviour^a. Together^b

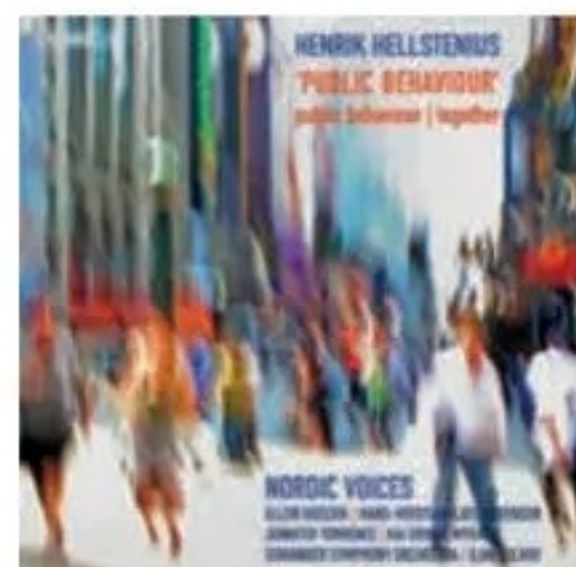
^aHans-Kristian Kjos Sørensen, ^bJennifer Torrence

perc/voice ^bEllen Ugelvik pf^{ab} Nordic Voices /

^bKai Grinde Myrann; ^aStavanger Symphony

Orchestra / Ilan Volkov

BIS (BIS2665) • 54' • T



Looking for something to blow the musical cobwebs away? Try Henrik

Hellstenius. For the past three decades, the Norwegian composer has developed a bold, dynamic musical language that delves deep into the dark underbelly of the human condition. *As if the Law is Everything* (on the 2021 LAWO album ‘Past & Presence’) explored the rules that regulate human behaviour, while the following year *Places of Sounds and Words* (also LAWO) reflected on domestic abuse and environments of fear.

Both are recommended, as are the two works included on this new release: *Public Behaviour* for percussion, six solo singers and orchestra, and *Together* for six singers, piano, sampler and percussion. The focus lies here on the often complex and fractious nature of human relationships. Both works are scored for vocal ensemble (excellently sung by Nordic Voices) rather than solo voice, enabling Hellstenius to treat the text and its sounds in more polyphonic, polymorphous and multilayered ways.

In the opening movement of *Public Behaviour*, Hellstenius fragments each phrase by splitting the words between each voice. These detached enunciations are heard against a shimmering harmonic gesture on clarinet, harp, piano and vibraphone, splashed on to the sonic canvas, suggesting the composer’s indebtedness to spectralism (Hellstenius studied composition with Gérard Grisey during the early 1990s). Such spectral qualities are nevertheless transformed into something more profoundly and disturbingly human in Hellstenius’s music. At times it exudes a raw, almost pungent quality despite its surface complexity. These emotions bubble under the surface in some of the movements in *Public Behaviour*, such as ‘Falling Apart’ and ‘Politeness and Anger’ – the latter combining extreme reactions and outbursts to darkly comical effect – before culminating in the unhinged cacophony of hysterical shrieks and cries in the final movement, ‘The Square’.

Together, which is scored for a smaller group, is a more intimate work, containing

some meditative moments. Both demonstrate Hellstenius’s ability to articulate in musical terms what Nietzsche called the ‘Human, All Too Human’ condition. As Simon Cummings writes in an excellent set of booklet notes, Hellstenius’s music manages to express ‘the anxieties, desires and uncertainties that lurk within each of us and guide, shape, distort and determine our relationship with everyone else’. Potent, powerful stuff.

Pwyll ap Siôn

Kraus

‘Overtures’

Aeneas i Cartago – Overture to the Prologue; Act 1, Overture; Act 5, Introduction. Äfventyraren – Overture. Cantata for the Birthday of Gustav III – Overture. Fiskarena – Overture. Funeral Cantata for Gustav II – Part 1, Introduction; Part 2, Introduction. Olympie – Overture. Proserpin – Overture. Soliman II – Overture

Theresia / Claudio Astronio

CPO (CPO555 579-2 • 68’)



German composer Joseph Martin Kraus was born the same year as Mozart,

trained in Mannheim and worked at the culturally flourishing court of Gustav III in Stockholm from 1778 until his death from tuberculosis at the age of 36. His modern-day reputation as one of the best composers of the high Classical period not to have been either Haydn or Mozart is deserved, and indeed supported by the opinions of Gluck (‘a man of great style’) and Haydn (‘one of the greatest geniuses I have met’).

Today he is best known for his symphonies (wonderfully recorded by Concerto Köln in the early 1990s), which reveal a strong creative personality allied to a sound command of the medium. His Mannheim apprenticeship shows in a tendency to let the music’s momentum be driven more by orchestral textures than by melodic discourse, but his ability to create a sense of brooding atmosphere through rich and weighty harmonies, sombre wind colourings and eloquent use of *Sturm und Drang* techniques is outstanding.

No doubt this is what Gluck was talking about, and it is certainly a quality useful to an opera composer, especially if, like Kraus, you are a Gluckist keen to use the overture to anticipate the mood and events of the forthcoming drama. Kraus’s operatic output has yet to be explored in