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# American Record Guide

INDEPENDENT CRITICS REVIEWING CLASSICAL RECORDINGS AND MUSIC IN CONCERT



*Summer Festivals  
2004*

Overview:  
CARL NIELSEN



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equal praise for Neri's Sparafucile as he offers his services to the Rigoletto of Giuseppe Tadda and his heart-breaking rendition of Fiesco's 'Lacerato Spirito' (*Simon Boccanegra*).

The most extensive excerpts—almost half of the program—are from *Mefistofele*. They include the 'Ave, Signor' from the Prologue and several scenes from Acts 1 and 2 where Neri is joined by the Faust of Gianni Poggi (whose sometimes hard-edged singing reminds me of Mario del Monaco). Both perform well, but their singing is not as beautiful and accomplished as, for example, Ghiaurov and Pavarotti in the complete Decca recording of this opera.

The sound is good enough; even the orchestral accompaniments are heard reasonably well. No texts, no timings. Lovers of the operas mentioned will want this fine disc. It's too bad Neri never made it to these shores; I would have walked miles to hear him.

MOSES

### In This Life

Luba Tcheresky, s  
Original Cast 6068—77 minutes

Octogenarian Luba Tcheresky was a protegee of Lotte Lehmann, a close associate of Vernon Duke, and participated in master classes with Maria Callas. She enjoyed an active career in the opera, singing with the Zurich and Dusseldorf Opera, but always remained just this side of international renown. She lives in New York on the Upper West Side, and if you want, you can call her at home and order this recording from her directly. Her telephone number is on the back of the jewel case. You might not want to, though.

Now who am I to tell you to pass this up? It's not as if I ever spent much free time with Lehmann and Duke. The problem is, the 26 selections on this release come from almost as many sources as there are selections. The quality varies dramatically, from noisy homemade acetates dating from the early 1950s to reasonably acceptable tapes made for Radio Liberty around 1970. But the Luba of 1970 is not the Luba of the 1950s, when she was in her prime. To hear her in her prime, we must put up with archival quality sound, which, with its background noise and distortion at climaxes,

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sounds like shellacs from the early electrical era. Further, the changes in perspective from one song to the next are positively dizzying.

The booklet includes a slightly wacky but charming bio, which I suspect may have been written by Ms Tcheresky herself. There are texts and translations, but they are primarily arranged over-under, while the line-by-line translation of the 'Tatiana's Letter Scene' from *Eugene Onegin* defies reading.

A quick perusal of the Internet found references to the still active Ms Tcheresky: quoted by *Psychology Today* (on the topic of her youthful vigor), giving the deputy commissioner of New York's homeless services agency hell (for making the Upper West Side a dumping ground for homeless people), and a pencil sketch by Lehmann of Ms Tcheresky playing Scrabble. Ms Tcheresky is one feisty lady. But this recording is perhaps a better value for her friends and associates than the general public.

BOYER

### Famous Bases of the Past, Vol 2

Reizen (*Onegin*), Luise (*Don Pasquale*), Weber (*Tannhäuser*), Bacaloni (*Don Giovanni*), Vaghi (*Ernani*), Alsen (*Magic Flute*), Frick (*Barber of Baghdad*), Böhme (*Merry Wives*), Neroni (*Salvator Rosa*), Neri (*Mefistofele*), Greindl (*Lohengrin*), Tajo (*Barber*), Corena (*Gioconda*), Christoff (*Boris*), Bruscantini (*Elisir*), Petrov (*Mozzetta*), Rossi Lemeni (*Mefistofele*), Petri (*Boccanegra*), Arie (*Sonnambula*), Siepi (*Vespri*)  
Preiser 89943—78 minutes

This release includes material from complete Cetra, Urania, and Westminster recordings, and some of it has never before appeared on CD. It's a good grab-bag with something for every taste. I like everything, but my favorites would have to include Neri's malevolent, vocally awesome *Mefistofele*—one of the best ever to judge by his two complete recordings; four great black-voice German artists; Bruscantini's witty *Dulcamara* (he's really a baritone); Corena as a villain and doing a good job of it, too; the two powerful Russians; and the superb singing of Christoff, Siepi, and the little-known Neroni. No texts and translations, as usual with Preiser.

MARK

# The Newest Music

### FUSSELL: *The Astronaut's Tale*

Jack Larson, narr; William Hite, t; Judith Kellock, s; James Maddalena, bar  
Monadnock Festival Ensemble/ James Bolle  
Albany 616—55 minutes

### McCLELLAND: *The Revenge of Hamish+*

William Appling Singers & Orchestra/ Appling  
Albany 614—72 minutes

### MARONEY: *Fluxations*

Ned Rothenberg, bass cl, alto sax; Dave Ballou, tpt; Denman Maroney, hyperpiano; Mark Dresser, db; Kevein Norton, drums, vibraphone  
New World 80607—47 minutes

### MARGOSHES: *Fame Suite; Dream Symphony; Ballade; This is Forever; In Search of Hidden Treasure*

Steve Margoshes, p; György Geiger, tpt; Budapest Symphony/ Laszlo Kovacs  
Albany 598—72 minutes

### SAMAMA: *En Hollande; Clarinet Quintet; Sextet*

Nienke Oostenrijk, s; Daniel Quartet; Valerius Ensemble  
Donemus 106—80 minutes

### BROWN: *Blue Minor; Liguria; Acadia; Figures in a Landscape; Memory Palace*

Elizabeth Brown, fl, shakuhachi; Jo-Ann Sternberg, cl; Curt Macomber, Joanna Jenner, v; Betty Hauck, va; Greg Hesselink, Joshua Gordon, vc; Margaret Kampmeier, Susan Walters, p  
Albany 627—57 minutes

### WHITE: *Reliquary; Small World; Chansons D'Amour; Learning to See*

Geoffrey Burleson, p; Larry Puskun, cl; Nancy Zeltsman, marimba; Joanna Kurkovic, Joseph Lin, v; New Millennium Ensemble  
Albany 626—55 minutes

### REISE: *Duo Rhythmikosmos; Rhythmic Gardens; Trio Rhythmikosmos*

Gregory Fulkerson, Erica Kiesewetter, v; Charles Abramovic, Carmeron Grant; Jonathan Spitz, Jerome Lowenthal, p  
Centaur 2598—63 minutes

### BEVELANDER: *Castle Music; Syntheticisms 2, 5, 6; Saxophone Sonata; Symphony of Distant Visions*

Brian Bevelander, Nicola Melville, p; John Sampson, sax; Michael Udow, perc; University of Michigan Percussion Ensemble, Nova Ensemble/ Michael Udow, Jason Lim  
Equilibrium 47—79 minutes

### O'BRIEN: *Embarking for Cythera; The Clouds of Magellan; Fancies & Goodnights; Black Fugatos; In the Country of Last Things*

Kathryn Lukas, fl, picc; Eli Eban, cl; Bruce Bransby, db; Bridget Parker, s; Indiana University New Music Ensemble/ David Dzubay  
Indiana University 11—74 minutes

### PALMER: *Koan; Still; Satori*

Taruhisa Fakudo, shakuhachi; John Palmer, hpsi; Neue Kammer Trio; Comet Ensemble Tokyo/ Kunitaka Kokaii  
Sargasso 28049—57 minutes

### Soir, dit-elle

Works by Lionel Power, Ivan Moody, Gavin Bryars, Andrew Smith, Oleh Harkavyy  
Trio Mediaeval—ECM 1847—63 minutes

### CRESHEVSKY: *Canti di Malavita; Jacob's Ladder; Vol-au-vent; Hoodlum Priest; Novella; Ossi di Morte; Jubilate; Born Again*

Thomas Buckner, voice; Marco Oppedissamo, g  
Mutable 17516—56 minutes  
(109 West 27th Street, 7th Flr, New York, NY 10001)

### HOWE: *Mosaic; Cacophony 2; Timbre Study 6; Luminescence; Freeze*

Capstone 8719—60 minutes

For this issue I thought it would be nice to consider the current batch of newest music discs in an ascending order, ending on a high note. First there are two discs I suggest you don't waste your time with. Then there are two of those awkward crossover discs—not really classical music. Third, there are five discs of pleasing and accomplished classical new music. Finally, there are four new discs of ear-bending, enthralling new music.

I find little to redeem composer Charles Fussell and librettist Jack Larson's sci-fi chamber opera *The Astronaut's Tale*. As Fussell explains: "The story traces a young man's life from his first experience of loss, his dog killed by a car, the appearance of a mysterious Ein-

stein-like guide, his youthful desire to become an astronaut, marriage, and the fulfillment of his ambition." It often seems like an homage to science, but the composer says it explores today's confrontation between science and religion; the story's ending explains why.

The music and text take themselves too seriously for what they are. Fussell's melody-driven tonal musical language is blatantly romantic. At its worst moments, it reminds me of Broadway musicals or the Philip Schneider disc I reviewed a couple of issues back. At its best, it reminds me of works by Shen and Macchia I reviewed in the same issue.

Larson's libretto (spoken and sung) is often in rhyming verse, which, in the vernacular, sounds like Dr Seuss minus the humorous charm. The libretto's obsession with the banal technological aspects of everyday life, such as ATMs and credit cards, combined with pseudo-philosophizing about science and religion comes off as patronizing.

Melancholic American-romantic choral music in the tradition of Randall Thomson and Daniel Pinkham fills most of William McClelland's new disc. Either piano or orchestra accompanies the chorus when they don't sing a cappella. Most of the pieces sound innocuous. Yet the 'Ballad of Don and Dan' is downright puerile, with its rock-music drum beat and bluesy piano riffs. It goes on and on—a boon only for fans of rock opera. One could, of course, skip this 11-minute blemish and enjoy the remainder of McClelland's pieces, but the choral writing is rather generic. If you collect choral music, you might want this; the performances by the William Appling Singers are tight, polished, sensitive, impeccable. Yet, if contemporary music is your bag, I suspect you can give this one a miss.

Now we cross over into the crossover styles. Remember the Steve Margoshes work, *A Glass of Paint* that I reviewed last issue? Well, he's at it again. I'm afraid I cannot recommend this either. The *The Romantic Suite from Fame* is gushy romantic symphonic pop. Its sickly sweet sentimentality would fit right into a cuddly family scene from any generic Hollywood movie or made-for-TV movie. But then it sounds like music you would hear when the actors come up to the stage to get their awards at the Oscars—no—better yet—awards for acting in daytime soaps. Listening a bit longer, I can picture some romantic comedy where a young woman is shaking off her moping bed-ridden mood by getting up to go shopping, to make her favorite pancakes, so the world will be happy again—go, girl! Get motivated! This is far afield from the new music most of us are looking for.

A six-part work, *Fluxations* fills Denman

Maroney's new disc. It's mostly composed, but partly improvised, jazz-classical fusion, played by an acoustic jazz combo. Harmonically it's neither particularly novel nor challenging, often floating just above the relative simplicity of 1970s progressive rock. Its rhythms are a bit more engaging: funky syncopation, mild polymeters, and Nancarrow-esque mensural canons just barely sustain my hungry ears. All that said, it reminds me more of 1970s progressive rock and jazz-rock fusion than of anything else. The jarring and somewhat novel-sounding "hyperpiano", played by Denman Maroney, shines as the brightest spark here. I would have liked to have heard more of it. The startling timbres and quirky playing bring both Harry Partch and Thelonius Monk to mind. Pick up this disc only if you are a fan of intelligent contemporary jazz or any of the individual players. If seeking rhythmic or metric exploration, look into the work of Carter or Nancarrow instead.

Of the pleasing and accomplished discs in the current batch, I'm most skeptical of Leo Samama's. There's nothing offensive here, just too much of the same melancholic modal tonality (Phrygian mostly). It turns stale after a while. Samama's style, which remains as consistent as smooth peanut butter, bears resemblance to Britten's early quartets, Ravel's *Madagascar Songs*, and Gorecki's *Symphony No. 3 (Symphony of Sorrowful Songs)*. I enjoy the opening work, *En Hollande* for soprano and string quartet, largely because of Nienke Oostenrijk's light and silky soprano voice—move over Dawn Upshaw. But there's only so much bleak melancholy a listener can bear. So by the time the clarinet quintet rolls around, let alone the sextet that follows it, the mood becomes downright depressing. I wish Samama would cheer up. Then we could enjoy the polished craftsmanship and emotional sensitivity his music already has without needing a dose of Prozac to go with it.

Not sure what to make of Elizabeth Brown's new disc: it often seems lost in some time warp. *Blue Minor* flaunts an unabashedly conservative romantic style. And when I say "conservative", I mean even by 19th Century standards. Much of this work—from moment to moment at least—is a pastiche of Brahms's chamber music. If you've listened to all of Brahms's chamber music one too many times—hasn't happened for me yet—and yearn for more music like it, you might think your prayers are answered in Brown's *Blue Minor*. But no, she slips in occasional special effects, such as a mannered slow beating synchronized vibrato, just to remind you that you're not really listening to 19th Century Viennese chamber music. Perhaps these spe-

cial effects are supposed to be a surreal twist? Other works on the disc collude in this warped stylistic surrealism. The earliest work, *The Memory Palace* (1990), walks a straighter line: its plaintive lush atmosphere evokes memories of Schwantner's and Tower's chamber music, as well as Diane Thome's *Palaces of Memory* reviewed last issue.

Barbara White's disc is a brighter shade than Brown's but some of it reminds me of Brown's *Memory Palace*. White's palette mixes mild instrumental sound effects, boogie-woogie rhythms, klezmer clarinet, and quotation, with tonal and atonal pitch vocabularies. It's not so much post-modern collage as a synthesized pluralism. For instance, when her *Learning to See* quotes Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, no stylistic seam emerges. Think of how Berg quoted the Tristan Prelude in his *Lyric Suite* and you'd get the idea. White revels in clever negotiations of diverse styles and genres. Her *Chanson D'Amour*, for two violins, deftly engages the compositional devices of the 14th Century composer Guillaume de Machaut, such as palindrome, hocket, and isorhythm. The moods of White's works tend toward the light, crisp, and dry. All is performed with polished, spirited expertise and recorded nicely. White's music is sometimes stimulating, often delightful, always intelligent. Yet I sense no deep aesthetic challenges in it.

Reise's music is accessible and dreamy, not ground-breaking, not particularly mind-expanding, but meaty enough to hold my interest. In slow passages, the dark quasi-tonality of the piano work *Rhythmic Garlands* reminds me of Ives's *Concord Sonata*; the fast passages remind me of Prokofiev's sonatas and Busoni's Toccata: major-minor conflicts and piercing dissonances placed in a propulsive rhythmic tonality. Reise explains his own approach to rhythm as follows: As a solution to the problem of atonal music sounding like "random breathing" he has turned to "rhythmic cadences". In the rhythmic cadence, "the pitches themselves are irrelevant but because of the rhythmic structure, the listener still 'believes in the phrases', developing a sense of expectation". He explains that the term "rhythmic garlands" comes from the South Indian *ragamalika* (garland of ragas). Given Reise's knowledge and systematic view of rhythm, it surprises me that his music doesn't sound more rhythmically novel than it does. Perhaps that "sense of expectation" is just too predictable. Reise's is moderate, respectable, intelligent modern music nicely performed and recorded.

Eugene O'Brien's disc, produced by Indiana University School of Music, is a mixed bag.

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The first work, and the oldest on the disc, *Embarking for Cytheria* (1978) impresses the most. It is mostly dissonant but is pitch-centric and harmonically static, has little or no rhythmic drive, and is neither maximal nor minimal (though there are lulling moments of repose that verge on John Adams's lush pulse-minimalism). Harmonic arpeggiations and melody tend to fuse and build into moments of coalescing climax. Constant timbral fluctuations color the sparkling velvet surface. It reminds me of several works by Boulez as well as the slow movement of Wuorinen's *New York Notes*. At first O'Brien's *Black Fugatos* (1983) reminds me of the controlled aleatoric passages in several Lutoslawski's works and of Berio's *Corale*, but over time its flurrying slow harmonic transformations lead elsewhere. The remaining works unfortunately go downhill. *The Clouds of Magellan* (1995) and *In the Country of Last Things* (1999) sound like warmed-over Jacob Druckman. O'Brien has his own particular flair, though; even these more recent works should not be dismissed. Congratulations to Indiana University School of Music for first-rate performances and production.

Bevelander's disc is a mix of music for instruments and electronic tape. Its atmospheric atonality fills the air with brittle chords and chromatic riffs based on semitones and tritones (the most dissonant intervals). Often these riffs derive from the octatonic scale, the harmonic and melodic structure favored by Joan Tower, not to mention Messiaen and Stravinsky. In *Castle Music* (1982), sinister ostinatos fade in and out, dreaming of some imaginary meeting between Messiaen and George Crumb. *Syntheticisms No. 2*, for piano and electronic tape, bears resemblance to Stockhausen's *Kontakte* and is not without its own sense of humor.

One problem I have with Bevelander's work is that it relies too much on modern music's stock gestures, such as sinister ostinatos and those accelerating wood-block hits—do we really need to hear those again? This second-hand gestural language is most egregious in the disappointing *Symphony of Distant Visions* for orchestra and pre-recorded tape (2000). This, the most recent work here, unfortunately reverts to what has now become the conventional bombastic rhetoric of contemporary American orchestral music. But five of the six works on the disc don't suffer from this malady. Fans of Crumb's music who are interested in music for instruments and electronic tape may want to give this a listen. Don't expect a revelation, though.

We now enter the realm of ear-bending and enthralling new music. John Palmer

explores the connection between Zen and music. The results are marvelous. We all know that John Cage explored Zen ideas in music. Two of the works carry on in this spirit: *Still*, for bass flute, viola, and 6- and 12-string guitar, offers a lot of empty silent space, which, as the liner notes explain, corresponds to the Chinese term *ma*, which refers to "empty spaces in artistic composition in both the spatial and temporal sense". *Still* also explores instrumental noises in the manner of Lachenmann, as well as the Kawamoto and Hoffmann works I reviewed last issue. *Ma*—if we may now use this handy term—also pervade *Satori* for solo harpsichord. Perhaps it's an homage to Cage and Feldman, or perhaps it fills a gap they left.

What impresses me most on Palmer's disc is *Koan*, for shakuhachi and chamber ensemble. Combining the shakuhachi with Western instruments recalls Takemitsu's *November Steps*. *Koan*'s slow, breathy pulsations bring Tristan Murail's music to mind. Its pitch motion conjures aural images of Scelsi's ominous semitones and Tenney's *Critical Band*. Most of all, enjoy the soaring, surging, swooping timbral fluctuations of the shakuhachi. These make me think of the best moments in Ferneyhough's works for solo wind instruments, such as *Cassandra's Dream Song*. The high point of Palmer's disc is the frenetic duet—or is it a duel?—between the shakuhachi and the flute in *Koan*. When you find the time, relax; take off your shoes; take off your wristwatch; think of Zen; and soak your ears in the lush timbral landscape of John Palmer's music.

Fans of the Hilliard Ensemble and the now disbanded Anonymous 4 should take note of this new release by the Trio Mediaeval. Because of their exquisite singing, this disc is a catch even if you simply want a nice recording of the *Alma Redemptoris Mater* Mass by Lionel Power, the early 15th Century Englishman who pioneered the use of the sweeter harmonies that distinguish Renaissance from Medieval vocal ensemble music. One problem, though. Call me a curmudgeon if you wish, but I frown on having the separate movements of the Powers mass interspersed with 21st Century works, even if those works set appropriate liturgical texts in a quasi-medieval style. The 21st Century works themselves are a pleasure to hear. As a group, they take Powers's style as a point of departure and spread out in various directions. Oleh Harkavyi's 'Kyrie' fuses the styles of Aquitanian florid organum, Notre Dame conductus, and Ars Nova motets. Gavin Bryars's 'Ave Regina' verges on Renaissance polyphony sometimes. Andrew Smith's 'Regina Caeli' reminds me of the Stephen Hartke disc I reviewed favorably in this column two issues ago. This is a pleasure from start to finish.

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The two electro-acoustic discs in the current batch are both enthralling but for completely different reasons. The works of Noah Creshevsky and Hubert Howe (both based in New York City) inhabit opposite extremes of the electro-acoustic music continuum—and do so with unabashed pride. Creshevsky's is made from sampled sounds, continuing the *musique concrète* tradition, but into uncharted territory. Howe's is made by filtering sound that is purely electronic in origin. While Creshevsky's music is cosmopolitan and streetwise post-modern expression, Howe's is hermetically dignified research in sound.

I do not exaggerate when I say that I have never heard anything like Creshevsky's music before—though I can hear the ghost of Berio lurking in there. This music is uncompromising. It has a robust sense of humor. All of it involves radical crosscutting between diverse sound samples. The edges between samples are deliberately crisp. There's very little layering or blending. Its vertical transparency balances its horizontal density.

The ingredients are a recipe for chaos, but Creshevsky cooks them to taste. How? Despite all of the sampling, the crosscutting has a quasi-regular rhythmic structure. This way he is able to weave together several strands of sampled music (ranging from sitar to banjo and from Beethoven to bel canto) while maintaining their stylistic identities. A segment from each strand of sampled sounds falls on a different beat; the ear connects the dots. It might strike some as gimmicky, but after listening to it several times I'll maintain that Creshevsky's sound art is carefully crafted and sensitively musical. The adjacent samples are well chosen to draw out connections between them. Creshevsky calls his style *hyperrealism*. I'd call it hyper-sampling. Whatever you call it, if you're up for an aural adventure, here's your ticket.

Howe's disc is full of sophisticated, elegant electro-acoustic music. No gimmicks, no histrionics, no rhetoric: we as listeners can jump right into the mental space of Howe's pure exploration of sound. Various systematic filtering processes create smooth contours of changing timbre and overtone presence. These contours are subtle and slow-moving. Like James Tenney, Alvin Lucier, and Iannis Xenakis, Howe uses these dynamic processes to control long-range form. The results are sometimes meditative, sometimes ravishing, often intellectually stimulating. I admire the precision, finesse, and dignified grandeur that permeate his music. The liner notes explain the techniques, historical background, and philosophy behind the works in a lucid, non-nonsense fashion.

MAILMAN

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