

New Classical Recordings on Vinyl

Fresh Approaches to an Old Tradition

Stephen Estep

When it comes to classical offerings on vinyl, reissues of classics from RCA, Decca, and other big labels tend to take center stage. Several times TAS has covered some of the independent labels that do superb new recordings—Chasing the Dragon, Reference Recordings, Tacet, and Yarlung, for instance—but as I started poking around the Internet I found several labels that are also issuing new recordings of classical music on LP that have often flown under our radar. This behemoth of an article is meant to bring some worthwhile new recordings to your attention and play catch-up with labels we haven't mentioned in a few years. I've tried to pick what's interesting and noteworthy as well as still in print or available from the usual secondhand places online.

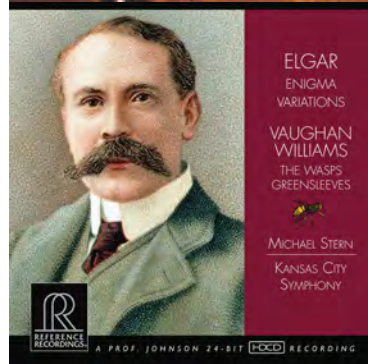
As you might imagine, most vinyl these days involves at least one digital step. When Reference Recordings wanted to start pressing LPs again, which they did in 2011 after a 16-year hiatus, they not only had to figure out an entirely new supply chain (for one, their preferred JVC Japan pressing plant had gone out of business and their mothers and stampers had been scrapped), but also a way to create new masters. The lathe they used in conjunction with “Prof.” Keith O. Johnson’s one-of-a-kind tape recorder had been retired, and he himself had gone digital after helping develop HDCD. Needless to say, digital masters have taken the place of tape for them and most other labels.

Reference’s 2-LP 45rpm vinyl release of Mozart’s Piano Concertos 21 and 24 with Eugene Istomin and the Seattle Symphony under Gerard Schwarz is on our Super LP List, but it doesn’t appear we’ve ever actually reviewed it. The sound is just *easy*: everything is relaxed and transparent with the perfect amount of reverb. The piano’s low-middle range—important to the instrument’s dialogs with itself in the slow movement of the 21st—has the subtlest bit of spice; the left-hand accompaniment parts in the third movement sing out. The playing is gorgeous, and the phrasing is elegant and understated, adding to that sense of ease. The opening of the 24th is sinewy and tragic, its *sturm und drang* foreshadowing the greater Romantic-era turbulence of the coming decades. Istomin and Schwarz take a slower-than-average pace, increasing the tension. The only sonic flaw is that the upper strings are recessed and sound underpowered.



John Webber at the Neumann VMS-80 cutting lathe at Chasing the Dragon Records.

PHOTO BY ANDREW QUINT



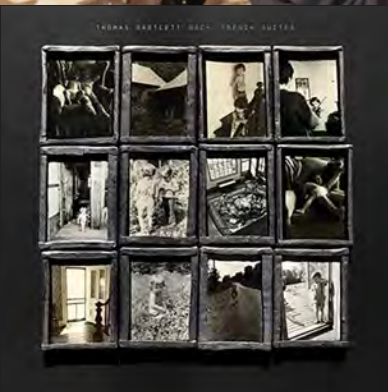
Better balanced is Reference’s 2013 release with the suite from *The Wasps* and the *Fantasia on Greensleeves* by Vaughan Williams and Elgar’s *Enigma Variations*. Again, the sound is effortless, and the Kansas City Symphony under Michael Stern glows. Vaughan Williams wrote *The Wasps* fresh from his orchestration studies with Ravel, and his work paid off. The colors are luxurious and festive, and the tunes are catchy. The Elgar is given a warm, forward-moving reading with just a touch of reticence; “Nimrod” is of-

ten played more passionately and darkly, but Elgar did write these variations as tributes to dear friends rather than depictions of tragedies, so Stern’s approach is hardly inappropriate.

The Grand Piano label has one entry on wax, *Glass Essentials: An 80th Anniversary Tribute*, with selections from Nicolas Horvath’s series of Philip Glass’ piano music: four etudes, some soundtrack selections, *Music in Fifths*, and Glass’ arrangement of “The Sound of Silence” by Simon & Garfunkel. Horvath comes



"Prof." Keith O. Johnson at a recording session.



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barreling out of the gate with the Etude No. 6, a blistering, tumultuous piece that is the most heart-on-sleeve I've heard yet from Glass. Even in the slower pieces, Horvath maintains an emotional edge. This is survival-of-the-fittest minimalism, full of teeth, flesh, and blood. Sometimes the sound is too bright and inconsistent across the piano's range, but mostly it is fine. The label hopes to put out a second volume soon.

New on Nonesuch is *Reich/Richter* with George Jackson conducting the Ensemble Intercontemporain in music from Steve Reich's project with visual artist Gerhard Richter. The Boulez Hall's reverberation comes through nicely, and all of Reich's details are clear. Over his

trademark pulsations are laid melodies that range from uneasy to tongue-in-cheek, as in the straightforward major scale that appears and quickly vanishes. The washes of sound created by long held notes evoke synthesizers. The tension between serenity and anxiety, possibly in light of the impending lockdowns in March 2020, is palpable. The only drawback to the recording is the fade-out at the end of Side 1. Nonesuch has also issued their blockbuster 1992 recording of Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Psalms* on vinyl. Even though it seems to have been cut from a 16/44.1 digital master, the LP has more separation between the string sections and an unmuddied low end compared to the CD. The counterpoint is much clearer and the texture is noticeably less constricted.

Octave Records is the house label for PS Audio, the renowned equipment manufacturer. Their sole classical release is a new 4-LP recording of Bach's Cello Suites with Zuill Bailey. Octave touts their DSD mastering, though they do have a PCM step in the process. CEO Paul McGowan told me they have two ways of doing the conversion: one is with Pyramix, with "almost indistinguishable" results, and the other is with a custom program called Zephiiir which Paul avers is "completely transparent" to his ears. I have no philosophical problems with digital steps and sources as long as the end product sounds good, and, boy, this one does. Bailey plays with vivacity and humor, spiriting the suites out of a museum showcase for a night on the dance floor. Revelry, not reverence, is the watchword, though he is never crass. It's a double-edged sword, though, as his rubato, aggressive attacks (see the Courante from Suite 5), and dynamic contrasts are sometimes distractingly willful. In movements like the Allemande of the C Minor Suite, he tends to cut his phrases into gnomic snippets. It's like reading a collection of proverbs when what I really want is a story. Also, grunts, sniffs, and vocalizations come through with disconcerting realism. If you can handle that, though, you'll get to enjoy one of the best-sounding cello recordings ever made.

MUSIC

Not to pile onto Octave Records, but an unfortunate choice with the Bailey LP's packaging sparks questions about quality control in the industry. Someone somewhere decided to use abnormally lightweight stock for the gatefold jacket and then put two hefty LPs in each pocket. Needless to say, the sleeve had some serious poke-throughs when it arrived. Almost every LP I get that is sealed in loose-fitting clear sleeves arrives with similar damage; standard shrink wrap has never let that happen, in my experience. One company used PVC sleeves to seal records, and they outgassed through the cardboard and ruined the vinyl. I'd been saving my copy for a special occasion and just about cried when I found the music was marred by whooshes. Why is PVC still on shelves anywhere? Throw it away! The industry as a whole needs to get its act together regarding packaging; we're spending too much money on new releases for these nuisances to be so pervasive.

Back to the music. Klaus Jäckle recorded an all-analog disc of Spanish guitar music for Clearaudio/Loving Music, with his arrangements of five Albeniz works and shorter pieces by Gaspar Sanz, Fernando Sor, Miguel Llobet, Joaquín Malats, and an anonymous "Romanza d'Amore." Jäckle phrases the melodies well, though his repeated accompanying chords can sound blocky; they need the same sense of breathing. His approach is direct and sometimes insistent rather than sunny and romantic. But "Rumores de la Caleta" and the Llobet pieces have some nice

shading of tone, and "Cordoba" features some impressive mandolin-like tremolo. The sonic focus is on presenting the guitar as clearly as possible.

Pentatone made their name with surround sound issues and reissues, but they ventured into vinyl with violinist Julia Fischer's recordings. I reviewed her Bach Sonatas and Partitas in Issue 283 (King International in Japan also issued that set in 45rpm). Pentatone was kind enough to send me the 2-LP *Russian Violin Concertos* (Khachaturian, Glazunov, and Prokofiev) on which Yakov Kreizberg conducts the Russian National Orchestra. In the first movement of Khachaturian's wonderful, colorful concerto, Fischer sounds glib and a

bit rushed; she does have a lighter tone than many, too. She and the orchestra shine in the Andante, though, with sensuous phrasing and lovely rubato. The string section gets utterly sexy with their dusky sighs, and the passion in the movement's climax is palpable. In Glazunov's ravishing romantic concerto, the engineers' work pays off, as the orchestra gets a rich, spacious aural presentation. Kreizberg and Fischer bring out the early music harmonies in the jubilant finale like I've never heard. Prokofiev's First Concerto is polished but brawny in the first movement, a compelling contrast with the more ethereal Shlomo Mintz recording that still sits atop my Prokofiev pile. The second has plenty of higher

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frequency fireworks, but don't miss those husky tuba solos. For the Khachaturian, I'll stick with David Oistrakh's classic, but the Glazunov and Prokofiev are at risk of having their grooves worn out.

For something on the lighter yet lower side, check out *The London Double Bass Sound* by Cala Records. It's a fun album of light classics and rock tunes and features famed bassist Gary Karr as soloist. His rich tone is on full display in pieces like Paganini's *Moses Fantasy* and Bloch's "Prayer." 50s easy listening shows up in an arrangement of Cole Porter's "I Love You, Samantha"; the basses may not quite ascend to the schmaltzy heights of the 101 Strings, but they form an admittedly lush choir. A harp provides

the accompaniment on "Ol' Man River," letting the basses handle the melody. As much fun as the players might have had recording it, a cover of "Wannabe" by the Spice Girls with drums and electric bass is simultaneously one of the funniest and most godawful things I've heard in a long time. It sets the tone for the novelty-filled B side, which really limits the appeal of a double bass orchestra album. Other albums in Cala's London String Sound series might get more spins. In *Latin Cello*, an orchestra of 24 cellos plus a few other guest instruments covers more of the sound spectrum. There are favorites like "La Cumparasa," "El Condor Pasa," and "Begin the Beguine." The hall's reverb is a little much, and that snare

drum needs to go, but the musicianship is outstanding and the sound is authoritative. Fans of lounge music and exotica would appreciate Cala's work.

Cue up CPO's release of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* without looking too closely at the cover and you'll be in for a surprise. It's the "Dresden version" with wind instruments added to the orchestra, as would likely have been done if the Dresden orchestra had performed it. What does that mean? Well, "Spring" has a lot more bird-like sounds, especially from the whistling recorder; the mournful bassoon in the Largo is quite witty. The storms of "Summer" have a little more heft, and the winds of "Autumn" are brisker. Speaking of briskness, the tempos from violinist-director Federico Guglielmo and L'Arte dell'Arco do not dawdle. Don't come for the relaxed tempos but for the different sounds they bring to this warhorse. Every CPO recording I can think of has superior sonics, and this one is no exception.

Another German label, Audite, has released two LPs with selections from their SACD series of Grieg's symphonic works; they use Direct Metal Mastering, not often seen these days. Volume 1 has the *Peer Gynt Suite No. 1* and the always-welcome *Symphonic Dances*. This is one of those LPs where you feel like you can turn the volume up forever and it will still be inviting because the sound is so smooth; it's one of the best presentations of a string section to come my way. The orchestra has such a lovely sheen and the playing is highly polished.



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Yet another German label, Berliner Meister Schallplatten, specializes in all-analog, direct-to-disc LPs. They released 17 albums from 2012 to 2018—pop, jazz, classical, tango, and more. The label tells me that there are more releases planned. Meta4, a Finnish group, recorded Jean Sibelius' only mature string quartet, *Voces Intimae* (Intimate Voices, or Inner Voices), for the label. The composition is, as you might expect from the title, full of suggestions, whispers, and conversations that flow for a while or dissipate into thoughtful silence. It must be astoundingly difficult to interpret it coherently, but Meta4 does it on the spot, no edits, barefoot, all standing except the cellist. Their general tone is bright, helping to keep the music from slumping into mere fuzzy platitudes. *Voces Intimae*

won't rouse anyone to battle, or even have them humming the tunes as they leave the hall, but it's perfect for the stillness of night, for contemplation. The clarity and balance in the sound can't be beat.

Chandos has three LPs available, and they sent me two. Their fine sonic tradition continues, combining clarity with plenty of hall presence. *Verdi & Variations* has some unusual offerings: Marc-Olivier Dupin's retro *Fantasia on Arias from La Traviata* for violin and orchestra (1995), Antonio Pasculli's *Grand Concerto on Themes from the Sicilian Vespers* for oboe and orchestra, and conductor Yuri Turovsky's arrangement for strings of Verdi's sole chamber piece, his string quartet from 1873. Quartet transcriptions like this usually don't ring quite right because, if the composer had written the same music for an orchestra, the textures and scoring would be fuller. It works here, though, and the playing is warm and affectionate. Though the quartet is romantic, the material almost sounds classical sometimes. The Dupin and Pasculli are stereotypical romantic showpieces for their instruments; both are brilliantly played, especially the Pasculli. Philippe Magnan is a terrific oboist. Another special release has Butterworth's *Banks of Green Willow* and the world premiere recording of Vaughan Williams' Symphony No. 2, *London*, in its original version from 1913; it has about 20 more minutes of music. I'll confess I'm ill-equipped to compare this version to the other three revisions, but the serenity, expansive majesty, and superb orchestration have made for several enjoyable hearings.

Wayne Garcia reviewed Chasing the Dragon's *Vivaldi in Venice* in Issue 290, and it ended up on our Super LP List; I can attest to its brilliance and liveliness. Their latest release is Mendelssohn's Octet in a vibrant performance from the Locrian Ensemble and Jack Liebeck; Robert Harley covered it in some detail in Issue 335. It's bound to gain a place on audiophile shelves for the opportunity to compare 33rpm and 45rpm and "normal" vs. half-



speed mastering. Side 4 contains 'Two Guitars' recorded several different ways: with AKG C12 valve mics to digital, DPA 4006A transistor mics to digital, C12s to 30 IPS

tape, a pair of Blumlein valve mics, and a Neumann binaural head.

Tacet has made a splash with their all-tube recordings, including their famed *Orelab* release that plays Ravel's *Bohème* and *La Valse* from the center outwards. Last September, they reissued their Beethoven symphony cycle in a box set; several of the individual volumes had been out of print. Accentus, Berliner Philharmoniker, Brilliant, Erato, MDG, and Music on Vinyl all have releases out but didn't respond to requests. The big labels like Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, and Warner have also been putting out new recordings as well as good-quality reissues. Ravel's piano concertos with Yuja Wang on DG is a stunner.

There is one shadow being cast over all this: demand has led to a drop in quality and serious delays. Pentatone and 2L both told me they would consider issuing more LPs only if pressing plants get quality control and lead time

Author and musician Ted Gioia has called for labels to invest in R&D again and develop a "Super Vinyl" formula for LPs.

sorted out. Another label mentioned a nickel shortage because of the war in Ukraine. Others note that the industry, due to retirement and death, is losing the people who had the most experience working with vinyl and the equipment. Author and musician Ted Gioia has called for labels to invest in R&D again and develop a "Super Vinyl" formula for LPs, rather than relying on tech companies to invent the future of recorded music. T Bone Burnett isn't waiting for them: he's working on his own durable formulation of lacquer printed or painted onto aluminum discs. After looking at the wealth of LPs available at the moment, I can only hope that the future brings us both greater quantity and (even) better quality. **tas**