

# REVIEWS

CONCERTS THIS PAGE / CDS 104 / BOOKS 113

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## THIS MONTH'S RECOMMENDED DISCS:

Our pick of the new releases



James Ehnes tackles Bartók's three string concertos

page 99



Alina Ibragimova couples Ravel and Lekeu violin sonatas

page 103



Aleksander Gabryś plays contemporary bass repertoire

page 104

## CONCERTS

### MARLBORO/ NEW YORK

Brian Wise reports on some of the summer's festival offerings in the northeastern US

Louis Spohr's Octet in E major perfectly encapsulated the rehearse-it-till-it's-seamless ethos of Marlboro Music in Vermont, which opened its 60th season over two concerts on 16 and 17 July. This unexceptional but good-natured piece from 1814 brings together a combination of instruments found nowhere else in classical music (two violas and two horns, plus a single violin, cello and bass), and it requires significant rehearsal time to pull off its unorthodox balance of strings and winds.

Marlboro is an anomaly – a festival where only a handful of the many works rehearsed each week are performed – and

the Spohr was one of three pieces on the opening-night programme. **Bella Hristova** played its busy solo violin line with finesse and vigour, while violists **Mark Holloway** and **Hanna Lee** richly blended against the pair of burbling horns. Despite careful shaping, the piece nonetheless rang somewhat hollow in the end.

The concert opened with Schumann's String Quartet in F major, lustrous in its Andante variations and sparkling in its Allegro molto vivace. Violinists **Michelle Ross** and **Ida Levin** were paired with violist **Michael Tree** and cellist **Paul Wiancko**.

Two generations must have separated these musicians, yet they seemed to unite around the music's grand arsenal of arpeggiated chords and thick pizzicatos. Finally, in Brahms's Piano Trio in B flat major, pianist Richard Goode, violinist **David McCarroll** and cellist **Andrew Janss** proved fully in sync with the music's ardent expression. The lyrical outpouring of the opening

movement was especially fine, the ebb and flow skilfully judged by all.

In Sunday afternoon's concert, the calibre of the playing remained consistently high, even if the repertoire was again hit-and-miss. The French violist **Hélène Lément** was a standout, bringing a supple, understated touch and an ear for careful blend to the viola part of Brahms's Two Songs op.91 with mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano and pianist and festival co-artistic director Mitsuko Uchida.

Next up was Shostakovich's Piano Trio in E minor, brought to life by pianist Bruno Canino, violinist **Ying Fu** and cellist **Matthew Zalkind** in a muscular account that stressed the music's visceral wildness more than its undercurrents of tension and anguish. And Mendelssohn's String Quintet op.18 – a rambling work – nonetheless received a polished reading from violinists Hristova and **Nikki Chooi**, violists **Clément** and **Vicki Powell**, and former Guarneri Quartet cellist **Peter Wiley**.

Back in New York, the Mostly Mozart Festival opened at Avery Fisher Hall on 2 August with a programme of favourites by the namesake composer, including the Sinfonia concertante in E flat major for violin and viola. Violinist **Christian Tetzlaff** and violist **Antoine Tamestit** (making an impressive festival debut) were nicely matched as soloists. From its brisk, animated opening, Tetzlaff's self-possessed showmanship and bright sound played well against Tamestit's confident and silky-toned but more controlled semiquaver passagework. Tetzlaff exaggerated some of his more theatrical gestures in a slightly jittery way, and in some of the many exposed passages his intonation wavered. The pair brought out the poignant elegance of the second movement and the jauntiness of the presto finale.

Takács Quartet: finesse that took the breath away



A frequent guest ensemble in New York these days, the **Takács Quartet** arrived at Alice Tully Hall on 7 August in fine form. In Mozart's 'Prussian' Quartet in D major K575 the musicians displayed such finesse, such careful shaping of each melodic line as it was passed from one instrument to the next, that it left me almost breathless. The cello never dominated, although András Fejér made the most of his many solos. Next came a shapely account of Mendelssohn's String Quartet no.2 in A minor op.13. This is youthful, passionate music, and the Takács's performance illuminated those qualities as well as the soulful depth that the 18-year-old Mendelssohn brought to the work.

The Takács has played Dvořák's Piano Quintet in A major with Andreas Haefliger on numerous occasions over the years. The piece is loaded with nasty little traps – spots where off-beat notes are difficult to place and play softly enough, where pitches are hard to hear. The

five-some avoided each of these pitfalls, rambunctiously exploiting the extreme tempo contrasts without over-stretching the piece beyond recognition.

Bargemusic gave a send-off to summer – at least as it is defined by the American Labor Day weekend – with an eclectic programme of contemporary music on 3 September. **Yoed Nir**, playing unaccompanied on an acoustic cello, opened with his own *Esperanza*, a piece that flowed between rock grooves and rhapsodic passages thick with double-stops, all of which he dispensed with an efficient, cool reserve. He took up a solid-body electric instrument for his *Twilight Zone*, a wistful work built on sequence of digital loops manipulated by foot pedals. While his swift manipulations were impressive, the piece was somewhat laden by its own mechanics.

Three movements from Marc Mellits's piano trio *Fruity Pebbles* featured the

cellist **Dave Eggar** with members of the American Modern Ensemble: violinist **Victoria Paterson** and pianist Olga Vinokur. Eggar and Paterson shared a quirky, theatrical stage presence that made for high-energy playing; Eggar excitedly counted off '1, 2, 3, 4' at the start of a couple movements, and the two relished the playfully hard-charging Minimalist patterns.

Robert Paterson's *Elegy*, played by Eggar and **Arash Amini**, another cellist, brought out a more pensive side, with its numerous Bach quotations. Finally, Eggar appeared with his jazz-rock trio Deoro and dispensed with classical conventions entirely. Together with bassist **Ariel de la Portilla** and percussionist Chuck Palmer, Eggar played several selections including Bob Marley's reggae ballad 'Redemption Song' and Paganini's Variations on One String, in which Eggar, on tenor violin, seemed most in his element.

## LONDON

**A strong theme of new works and modern classics ran through the second half of the BBC Proms season. Catherine Nelson reports**

The BBC Proms' usual strong showing of new works for strings began with Pascal Dusapin's String Quartet no.6 'Hinterland', for quartet and orchestra (27 July). The **Arditti Quartet** was joined by a chamber-sized BBC National Orchestra of Wales under Thierry Fischer for the work's UK premiere. Balancing soloists and orchestra in this unusual scoring was always going to be tricky, but the Arditti players make rising to a challenge into something of an art form, and Dusapin's delicate textures and searching phrases had a powerful intensity. Of particular beauty were the immeasurably long-breathed wind melodies, taken up by the string soloists, as well as the brief fragments of melody that soar from the quartet's jagged circlings. By the work's end, the foursome's driving fragments began to collapse in on themselves, overlapping and being thrown back and forth between the players with taut urgency – all told,



Perfectly judged interplay between Viktoria Mullova and Matthew Barley in Thomas Larcher's new double concerto

this was as brilliantly incisive a performance as you might expect from the Arditti.

Due to illness, I couldn't attend one of the highlights of the season, the world premiere of a double concerto by Austrian composer Thomas Larcher on 18 August, given by **Viktoria Mullova** and **Matthew Barley**. But thanks to the BBC iPlayer, I listened to the radio broadcast of it the following night, and plugged into headphones I did manage to experience something of its magical atmosphere. Concertino instruments, including electric zither and prepared piano, gave Larcher's intricate web of melodies an exotic tinge, and Mullova and Barley were adept at keeping momentum

through the quasi-improvisatory phrases, given sterling support by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Ilan Volkov. The occasional interplay between the two soloists that surged out from the ensemble sound was perfectly judged. After the frenetic activity of the first movement, the second lapses into a contemplative C major, and there were some gorgeous swoops of melody from the soloists. From the comfort of my armchair, I have to say that it all had a slightly indulgent edge at times, but if I'd been perched in the stalls perhaps the exhilaration and energy of it would have carried me along.

Dutilleux's gorgeous violin concerto, *L'arbre des songes*, with its spacious, spectral orchestral

textures, rich in percussion sounds, could have suffered in the swimmy acoustics of the Royal Albert Hall (23 August). But Valery Gergiev kept everything beautifully precise, and the London Symphony Orchestra responded with the utmost clarity to his every quiver. This was a radiant performance: **Leonidas Kavakos** underpinned the soloist's singing lyricism with just the right dramatic edge, his rich-voiced tone perfect for Dutilleux's expressive, contemplative wanderings. The duet between violin and oboe d'amore in the third movement was nothing short of enchanting, leading into a wry interlude in which the violinist is instructed to tune up over orchestral tread – which Kavakos did with ringing relish, before tackling the extreme virtuosic demands of the fourth movement, bowling the orchestra along into a vibrant climax.

Wolfgang Rihm's *Gesungene Zeit* – 'Sung Time' – inhabits a still more ethereal world. The second of his five violin concertos, it was written for **Anne-Sophie Mutter** in 1991–2, and she gave it its first Proms outing on 6 September, with Manfred Honeck and the



→ Poise: Anne-Sophie Mutter

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. It is the antithesis of the traditional concerto, with violin and orchestra spinning a long, yearning song together, and with the tiny chamber orchestra – just two violins, four violas and four cellos, with the odd wind, percussion and trumpet – always a foil to the soloist. The violin starts out in high-wire mood, and Mutter showed incredible poise in the drifting, delicate opening, maintaining her fearless and intense approach throughout, with breathtaking control of Rihm's demanding, stratospherically high solo part. It's sad to report that Rihm lost the Proms audience to some extent – ethereal is always tricky in a remote acoustic – and a seemingly interminable coughing relay marred some of the piece's quieter moments. But Mutter had everyone enthralled by the enchanting final notes, where her highest of high Bs blurred with bowed antique

cymbals. A dancing encore – the Sarabande from Bach's D minor Partita – would not have pleased the purists in its lashings of vibrato, but showed Mutter's customary elegance and depth of expressive flair.

It's hard to believe that it was only 16 years ago that Birtwistle's *Panic* caused uproar at the Last Night of the Proms, with one TV viewer branding it 'an insult to the British public'. So it was moving in the extreme to be present at the UK premiere of the composer's Violin Concerto in front of a packed audience on 7 September – presumably many of them there for Holst's *The Planets* in the second half – who appeared genuinely gripped by this compelling new work.

**Christian Tetzlaff** was the perfect advocate, performing the solo part's virtuosic heroics with phenomenal energy and persuasive conviction, and really bringing the work's inherent lyricism to the fore.

The concerto is certainly one of Birtwistle's mellow scores. Moments of brittle melody burst from the texture, and the way in which he uses sections of the orchestra as colour-blocks, so that a lashing grumble from the bass instruments earns an eerie cluster reply from the strings, brings an infectious immediacy to the whole. Layers of gliding percussion ebb back and forth with clouds of strings and sudden brass outbursts, all underpinning wild violinistic imaginings from the soloist. Lovely moments of duet arrive, with the soloist first joined by the flute, then piccolo, cello, oboe and finally bassoon, dancing high in its tessitura. The BBC Symphony Orchestra under David Robertson gave a thrilling account, though it perhaps did not match the utter rhythmic precision and certainty that Tetzlaff managed to achieve, proving himself a master of expressive eloquence.

## EDINBURGH

David Kettle reports on the summer's offerings from the festival city par excellence

Even before the annual onslaught of festival mayhem took over Edinburgh in August, there were two notable string events in July's Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival. Belgian violinist **Tcha Limberger** (23 July) performed with Dutch guitarist Lollo Meier in a concert evoking the intricate gypsy jazz of Grappelli and Reinhardt. Limberger's nimble, agile fingerwork and judicious use of portamento ensured that there was an authentically lively feeling to his beguiling numbers, none of which outstayed their welcome. His playing had an impressive vocal tone, and even when his improvisations went off in all directions, or when he chose to play entire sections in harmonics or pizzicato, he soon returned to heartfelt interpretations of the foot-tapping tunes.

Edinburgh-based jazzers Trio AAB teamed up with Indian violin duo

**Ganesh Kumaresh** (24 July) for a more mixed affair. There was a marked contrast between the two groups' styles of improvisation, and the trio's fractured, spiky lines on sax, guitar and drums sat uneasily against the two Karnatak violinists' graceful, ever-developing melodies and complex rhythmic interplay. The Indian players at times produced wonderfully nasal sounds, almost imitating an oboe, and at others rounded their tone to sound more like an alto flute, and there was a richness and flexibility to their playing that was thrilling to hear. It was a shame that when the whole group played together, the violinists' sound was lost in the cacophony of competing lines.

It was a shame, too, that once August's events kicked off, the first string concert in the Edinburgh International Festival – Singapore's **T'ang Quartet** (17 August) at the Queen's Hall – was something of a let-down. The players seemed far happier in the more rarefied sound worlds of contemporary music: their performance of Chinese composer Bright Sheng's Quartet no.3 was lively and colourful, full of detail and energy, blending Eastern inflections with a Western ruggedness to thrilling effect. Sadly, however, their Schubert Quartettsatz D703 had significant tuning

and ensemble problems, and their reading of Barber's B minor Quartet – including the famous Adagio as its dominating central movement – seemed rather cold and uninvolved.

The starry trio of pianist Steven Osborne, violinist **Antje Weithaas** and cellist **Tanja Tetzlaff** (23 August) appeared in various combinations in an all-Ravel programme, only coming together in the concert's second half for a rather extreme yet thought-provoking account of the Piano Trio. The volatile opening seemed to erupt with boundless energy, but the first movement's second subject lacked momentum. Tetzlaff gave a vividly characterised performance, but at times she seemed so eager for dramatic effect that she sacrificed beauty of tone and intonation. Weithaas produced a wonderfully clear, direct sound, transparent yet rich, in the Sonata for violin and cello that preceded the trio, and she and Tetzlaff gave a full-bodied account of this somewhat cool work. Their searing third movement was full of intense vibrato, and they brought an almost orchestral quality to the rich multiple-stops of the final movement.

Janine Jansen pulled out of her performance with the Philadelphia Orchestra





Kopelman Quartet: gloriously aristocratic readings of Russian masterworks

on 31 August, leaving **Alina Ibragimova** as the festival's only string soloist in an evening concert at the Usher Hall. But her Mendelssohn Concerto with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (26 August) was a fascinating performance, shot through with fragility and vulnerability yet still urgent and muscular. Her sound was light and transparent throughout (matching the period orchestra's sensitive reading under Vladimir Jurowski), her vibrato was sensitive and expressive, and her phrasing was eloquent. She may have played things a bit too simply in the second movement, making it sound slightly under-projected, but she made up for it with a breakneck third movement full of sparkling colours and a real sense of fun.

Back in the Queen's Hall, the members of the **Kopelman Quartet** (27 August) showed their T'ang colleagues how things should be done, with gloriously aristocratic readings of Borodin, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, all rich colours, rounded edges and glowing tones. They played very much as four individuals, whose separate voices were clearly discernable at all times, yet they breathed as one in their considered interpretations. Their Borodin was spellbinding but conservative – it was hardly a performance to challenge anyone, but with its supple rubato and warm, resonant sound it was well-nigh immaculate. There were harder edges to the group's Prokofiev Quartet no.2 and Shostakovich no.4, but it took until the third (yes, third) encore – the miniature Dance from Stravinsky's Three Pieces for String Quartet – for a brittle, grittier sound to emerge.

Amid the thousands of events that seem to take over all of Edinburgh's nooks and crannies for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, there was still plenty for string lovers,

and two series in particular stood out. The **Heath Quartet** tackled the complete Beethoven string quartets in ten late-night concerts at Greyfriars Kirk (12–26 August), giving passionate performances that combined technical accomplishment with interpretative flair, and also coped well with the very resonant acoustics of the venue. The Heath players' Quartet in D major op.18 no.3 ranged from joyful radiance to serene tranquillity, with cellist Christopher Murray injecting just the right amount of spirit into the performance (it was a shame that first violinist Oliver Heath insisted on looking so angst-ridden throughout, though). Their 'Harp' Quartet op.74 was stately and elegant, full of rustic charm and scurrying inner parts, delivered with character by second violin Cerys Jones and viola Gary Pomeroy, and they gave a



A compelling sense of discovering the music afresh from the Rhodes Piano Trio

clear-minded reading of op.135 in F major, with a gleeful second movement and a wonderfully restrained, glowing third.

Across town, the Royal Over Seas League's Princes Street headquarters was the venue for numerous concerts showcasing young artists at all hours of the day. The New Zealand-based **Lazarus Quartet** (16 August) gave a beautifully clean performance of Beethoven's Quartet in F major op.18 no.1, although the players tended to overplay the emotion in the slow movement. Their cheeky syncopations and airy textures in the scherzo made up for it, though. A late-night performance of Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* (18 August) featured Chinese-born cellist **Yelien He** and Dutch violinist **Xander van Vliet**, both of whom had big personalities, with strong playing and intense vibrato. It was a shame, though, that they were both urged along by pianist Sam Armstrong in the two serene 'louange' movements, which thus lost something of their magic. British cellist **Jun Sasaki** (19 August) had a clear, ringing tone in Bach's First Cello Suite: although he rushed the Prelude slightly, his phrasing was silky and his intonation immaculate. There were few concessions to period practice in his performance – as shown by his rich tone that occasionally bordered on heaviness – but his dance movements were sprightly and his vibrato effective, and not over-used. The **Finzi Quartet** (25 August) play on the Vuillaume 'Evangelists' set of instruments, which, while beautiful to look at, perhaps make the players' corporate sound a little samey. They were a bit too overwrought to be witty in the Haydn 'Fifths' Quartet, but far better suited to Beethoven's 'Serioso', op.95 in F minor, which they delivered in a dramatic, highly charged reading, full of restless energy.

But the string highlight of the festival, for me, was the **Rhodes Piano Trio** in Dvorák's Piano Trio in F minor op.65, at the Royal Over Seas League (23 August). Although the group was only formed in 2003 at the Royal Northern College of Music, it felt as though its members had been playing together for decades. It was impossible not to be caught up in their intense, passionate playing, full of colour and variety, and there was a compelling sense of discovering the music afresh with them. Violinist Michael Gurevich played each phrase as if his life depended on it, and cellist David Edmonds had some gloriously syrupy moments in the first movement, with powerful yet supple contributions from pianist Robert Thompson. This was thrilling, edge-of-your-seat playing, delivered with real sincerity, and best of all, the three performers actually seemed to be enjoying it themselves.