

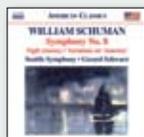
US REVIEWS

The *Smithsonian Chamber Players* revisit Schoenberg; *Gerard Schwarz* ends his William Schuman series; and an excellent CD for young children

MUSIC US CHOICE

A triumphant finale

Howard Goldstein is delighted by the final volume of Naxos's Schuman series



SCHUMAN

Symphony No. 8; Night Journey
Seattle Symphony/Gerard Schwarz
Naxos 8.559651 65:04 mins

In the final instalment of its survey of William Schuman's symphonies, Naxos may have saved the best for last; Symphony No. 8, written in 1962 for the opening of Lincoln Center (of which he was president at the time), might arguably be the best of the bunch. Schuman's general style is most assuredly not easy listening; dark, dense, and dissonant. However, the presence of harps, piano, and bells (heard in the invocative opening chords) gives

this work a unique timbral brilliance that enriches the usual Schuman fingerprints of long, angular, lamenting melodies, frenetically syncopated brass flourishes, and near-Ivesian levels of textural complexity. After two relatively sombre movements, the lighthearted finale comes as a deserved treat in the spirit of Haydn and Mozart, but as if they were raised on the streets of the Bronx. The Seattle Symphony and Gerard Schwarz fearlessly scale every virtuosic peak, and offer as well a gritty rendition of *Night Journey*, a 1947 ballet for Martha Graham, and a delightfully droll *Variations on 'America'*, Ives's early organ piece that became something of a pops chestnut in Schuman's orchestration.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



SCHUMAN

Symphony No. 6; Prayer in a Time of War etc
Seattle Symphony/Schwarz
Naxos 8.559625 60:51 mins



ZAIMONT

Chroma - Northern Lights; Symphony No. 2 etc
Slovak National SO/Trevor
Naxos 8.559619 52:56 mins



FETLER

Violin Concerto No. 2
Aaron Berofsky (violin); Ann Arbor SO/Arie Lipsky
Naxos 8.559606 66:43 mins



SCHOENBERG

Verklärte Nacht etc
Smithsonian Chamb Plyrs
Dorian DSL-90909 51:32 mins
plus DVD 159 mins



DVOŘÁK • SCHUMANN

Schumann: Piano Concerto
Moscow PO/Kenneth Klein
MSR MS1291 71:02 mins



WHAT GREAT MUSIC!

Albéniz, Coreia, Grieg etc
GIA Pub CD-826 42:10 mins
Available www.giamusic.com

SCHUMAN's Sixth Symphony, a 28-minute work in six unbroken sections that form a rough arch, is so uncompromising in tone that it offended patrons of the Dallas Symphony, who had commissioned the work in 1949, and they advised the symphony board to withhold payment! They might have been more pleased with the chant-like *Prayer in a Time of War*, or the *New England Triptych*, his most popular work, based on Revolutionary War era hymn tunes (★★★★).

The four works featured on the JUDITH LANG ZAIMONT disc have programmatic titles, yet seem more concerned with demonstrating self-sufficient musical virtues. Thus *Ghosts* (for string orchestra) refers not to spooky spirits, but six dead and living composers whose styles Zaimont references. Among them is Britten, whose gently dissonant lyricism and energetic textures permeate much of the music (★★★★).

PAUL FETLER's music has strong echoes of Bartók and Shostakovich, reflecting his East European childhood, but this longtime Minnesota resident also demonstrates a personal brand of 'progressive lyricism'. His richly orchestrated, rhapsodic Violin Concerto No. 2 offers a formidable showcase for soloist Aaron Berofsky and the Ann Arbor Symphony under Arie Lipsky. The three Whitman settings capture the awe, anger, and fragility of the selected poems, but in this live performance Thomas H Blaske's narration is heard over loudspeakers and suffers from soggy diction (★★★★).

Having already recorded SCHOENBERG's *Verklärte Nacht* on original instruments, the Smithsonian Chamber Players return to that work on modern ones, pairing it with an exuberant, richly detailed performance of Chamber Symphony No. 1. The accompanying DVD presents filmed performances as well as 30-minute introductions to each work hosted by the group's director, Kenneth Slowik. Brimming with musical analysis and contextual detail, they could easily serve as college level music lectures. One entrancing moment occurs when Slowik explains Wagner's influence on Schoenberg by playing excerpts from *Tristan* on Schoenberg's own harmonium and thereby instantly transports the viewer to the feverishly erotic atmosphere of pre-World War I Vienna (★★★★).

MSR's odd pairing of DVOŘÁK's Symphony No. 8 with SCHUMANN's Piano Concerto reminds us of the talents of pianist Gerald Robbins (a Van Cliburn and Tchaikovsky competition winner) and conductor Kenneth Klein (notable for valuable recordings of American music with the New York Virtuosi Chamber Symphony). There are some good moments in the Symphony, especially the refreshingly brisk first movement, but the Concerto suffers from poor recording and a tendency towards heaviness in the tutti sections (★★★).

Finally, a marvellous book and CD for young children, based on the premise that complexity and wide emotional range do more to develop musical aptitude than a diet of folk songs and third-rate pop. WHAT GREAT MUSIC! includes chamber music by Debussy, selections from *Pulcinella* and Albéniz's *Iberia*, even a bit of Armenian *dudek*, accompanied by charming illustrations of animals either playing or transformed into musical instruments. If only the loony lobsters playing Britten's 'Playful Pizzicato' were not holding bows in their claws! (★★★★)
Howard Goldstein