

composer's deep personal struggles.

This recording is a mature and challenging project and is extraordinarily well done.

A new recording by young Italian pianist **Alessio Bax, Scriabin, Mussorgsky (Signum Classics SIGCD426)** brings yet another Scriabin piano sonata to the marketplace. The *Sonata No.3 Op.23* is a considerably earlier work than its successor, with 16 years between them. The flowing impressionism of the 4th and 5th sonatas is only moderately evident in the slow movement of the 3rd sonata while the rest of the work is fairly classical in structure. Alessio Bax plays this work with a great deal of affection and his opening liner notes explain his fondness for the piece.



Bax is young, powerful and a capable interpreter with a natural instinct for drawing out the beauty of a melodic line. This is obvious in the Etude in C sharp Minor Op.2 No.1. The *Prelude for the left hand alone, Op.9 No.1* is as beautiful as it is amazing to contemplate. One should like to see it in performance.

If we needed to be more impressed, we might reserve judgement until hearing Bax's performance of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, but the decision would be a foregone conclusion. Each of these little vignettes is superbly played. *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks* and *The Market Place* sparkle with energy and the *Great Gate of Kiev* towers over the *Pictures* in pianistic grandeur.

Contemporary music has long used unconventional sound sources, among them the "prepared" piano. This usually involves some physical change in the mechanism or tuning of the instrument. Digital technology has, however, opened new opportunities to take this approach much further. The possibilities are limited only by imagination.

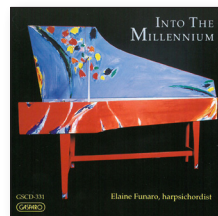
On **Beyond 12 – Reinventing the Piano (MicroFest Records MF3)** pianist **Aron Kallay** performs works commissioned from eight American composers. They were given two ground rules to follow in composing their works. First, retune the 88-note keyboard to represent just a single octave. Second, remap the keyboard so that high/low or left/right can be interchangeable and pitches can be in any order.



What has emerged is a body of works playable on a digitally conceived model that uses software to reconfigure a traditional digital keyboard to meet these requirements. The eight composers are mostly professional musicians and academics with a strong inclination for technology in their music writing.

It's surprising to hear how much of this music has a strong tonal centre and uses familiar rhythmic patterns to drive it forward. Also intriguing is the way the ear quickly adjusts to the very small differences of pitch between adjacent notes. It's as if the brain resets and quickly begins to make melodic and harmonic sense out of this unconventional music model. This is a truly fascinating disc and worth hearing for both pleasure and debate.

American harpsichordist **Elaine Funaro** has made a career of championing new music for the harpsichord. In 1996 she recorded **Into The Millennium – The Harpsichord in the 20th Century (Gasparo GSCD-331)**. Twenty years later the recording is as exciting as it was when first committed to DAT in the beautiful and cavernous Duke University Chapel (North Carolina).



Two tracks deserve special mention. The *Postlude* of Dan Locklair's dance suite *The Breakers Pound* will lift you right out of your seat. The raw energy coming from such a traditionally non-dynamic instrument is indescribable. It has the feel of Khachaturian's *Sabre Dance*. Also, Tom Harris' *Jubilate Deo* is extraordinary for the way it builds tension with increasing stacks of harmonies. It's wonderful to see this older recording reissued.

Also among Elaine Funaro's recently reissued recordings is **Giovanni Benedetto Platti "il grande" Sonatas for Clavicembalo (Wildboar WLBR 9901)**. Here, the repertoire is material from the early 18th century. Funaro plays two modern instruments, a harpsichord and a forte-piano, copies of originals from that period. The fortepiano in particular, produces an unusual and pleasant timbre not often heard in recordings.



Funaro has audio and video samples of her work at funaroharpsichord.com.

VOCAL

Baldassarre Galuppi – Il filosofo di campagna

Zanetti; Baldan; Unsal; Cinciripi; Torriani; Antonini; Mezzaro; Boschin; Ensemble Barocco della Filarmonica del Veneto; Fabrizio da Ros Bongiovanni AB 20030

▶ *Opera buffa* dates from the beginning of the 18th century. It was essentially a Neapolitan art form; it was farcical and light-weight. By the late 1740s it had metamorphosed into the *dramma giocoso* which was still comic but had more plausible situations with semi-serious parts and a more realistic psychology. These works were usually Venetian and they included librettos by Carlo Goldoni, set to music by Baldassarre Galuppi – as is the case here. In this opera



Eugenia wants to marry the young nobleman Rinaldo but her father, Don Tritemio, insists that she marry the wealthy farmer Nardo, the philosopher, instead. Things end happily, of course: Eugenia marries Rinaldo and her maid Lesbina marries Nardo, while Don Tritemio makes do with Nardo's niece Lena.

The DVD gives us a live performance from the Teatro Comunale in Belluno, which took place in October 2012. The director, Carlo Torriani, makes a clear distinction between the more rounded characters like the young lovers and those who are conceived more farcically: the crusty father and especially the notary, who is affected by interminable bouts of sneezing. I suspect that it is the latter which will prove most difficult to take in subsequent rehearsals or reviewings. The conductor, Fabrizio da Ros, presents the music with loving care and the work is well sung. I especially enjoyed the soprano Giorgia Cinciripi, who sings Lesbina.

Hans de Groot

**Vivaldi – Sacred Music 4
Claire de Sévigné; Maria Soulis; Aradia Ensemble; Kevin Mallon
Naxos 8.573324**

▶ Since 2004, Toronto's Aradia Ensemble has returned every few years to record another offering of Vivaldi's sacred music for voice and instrumental ensemble. With seven years since the third volume was released, this, the fourth, is most welcome. The majority of Vivaldi's vocal music was written during his time as teacher and music director at the Ospedale della Pietà, which accounts for the wealth of repertoire for female soloists. And some of the young women there must have been extraordinary singers, as demonstrated in this recording by the gloriously dramatic performance of *In turbato mare irato* by soprano Claire de Sévigné. And though the motet *Vestro principi divino* is somewhat more warm and sedate, it ends with more demanding and athletic runs in the *Alleluia*. In this, and the very operatic motet *Invicte, bellate*, mezzo Maria Soulis is alternately reflective and valiant, with marvellous tonal quality. The crisp execution of *In exitu Israel, Laudate Dominum*



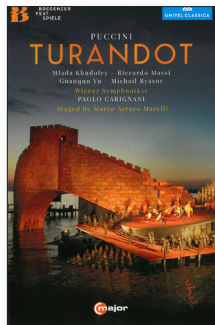
and *Laetatus sum* by the choral ensemble is splendid. To contrast her earlier motet, de Sévigné delivers *O qui coeli terraeque serenitas* in all its sweetness of calm repose. The core of Aradia, its excellent instrumental ensemble led by Kevin Mallon, is, as always, impeccable in performance.

Dianne Wells

Puccini – Turandot
Khudoley; Massi; Yu; Ryssov; Wiener
Symphoniker; Paolo Carignani
C major 731408

Puccini – Turandot
Dessi; Malagnini; Canzian; Chikviladze; La
Guardia; Teatro Carlo Felice; Donato
Renzetti
Dynamic 33764

► Puccini's last, unfinished opera is arguably his greatest, certainly the most innovative, harmonically adventurous and a score of genius. It is also a grand opera well suited for lavish, extravagant productions. Fortunately, two marvellous video recordings have just arrived and both fulfill their promise. I state categorically that both are excellent in their own way and I do not prefer one to the other.



The newest is from the Bregenz Festival, July 2015 (bregenzfestspiele.com). Not many may have heard of Bregenz, a sleepy old town at the Western end of Austria on the shores of Lake Constance (Bodensee), but their festival rivals Salzburg with the highest artistic standards. The giant open-air amphitheatre includes an incredible stage set (designed by M.A. Marelli) right in the lake with something like the Great Wall of China towering 100 feet forming the backdrop to a circular stage, a revolving cylinder accessed by ramps snaking around it like a Chinese dragon. Over this is

a huge circular disc equipped with myriad LED crystals forming computer generated multi-coloured images to suit the mood of the moment. It really has to be seen to be believed and I must say it's a lot more comfortable to see it on DVD in home comfort than being there freezing in the rain. (I've been in Vorarlberg and even in summer the weather is unpredictable.) The orchestra cannot be seen and nor can the conductor, the dynamic Paolo Carignani who gave Toronto a thrilling *Tosca* some time ago. The overall, somewhat modernized show is a sound and light extravaganza with dancers, pantomimes and circus acts to dazzle the eye, but the opera comes through musically superb with spacious acoustics and some top singing artists plus two choruses, not to mention the Wiener Symphoniker giving it orchestral support. Young Italian tenor Riccardo Massi (Prince Kalaf) copes well with the power and the high notes; he is best in show. Young, up-and-coming Chinese soprano Guanqun Yu gives a heartrending performance as Liu, the little servant girl who sacrifices herself for love. For the pinnacle role of the Ice Princess expectations are high and Callas or Sutherland both being gone, Mlada Khudoley, Russian dramatic soprano from the Mariinsky struggles heroically, suitably hateful most of the time, but relaxes beautifully to a glorious finale, an outburst of joy seldom witnessed in opera theatres.

We now enter Puccini territory, because the next production is from Genoa, the heart of Liguria, the region where Puccini and most of the cast comes from. The Opera House in Genoa is a grandiose affair and the stage is very large and very high in order to accommodate the monumental set, a multi-level Chinese palace with staircases on either side. Ingeniously the set can easily adapt,

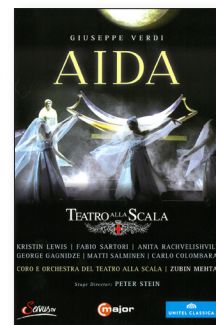


alternately being grandiose or intimate, using lighting effects giving it different moods and gorgeous colours. Yet it remains entirely traditional, just as Puccini envisaged it. Being an Italian production, it is done with the emphasis on the music and the quality of the singers, which is superb. The leading lady Daniela Dessi, one of the top sopranos in Italy today, is a sensitive, even anguished and entirely believable Turandot. The primo tenore Mario Malagnini, a compassionate and tender Kalaf with tremendous vocal power even in the high tessitura, makes a strong impression. The young Roberta Canzian steals some of Signora Dessi's glory with her brave and impassioned, beautiful performance as Liu. Right down to the lowliest choristers the singing is first class, but the three Chinese ministers deserve a special mention for their amusing, colourful and superbly choreographed trios that comment on the action with a rather cruel, even sadistic humour. And the one who controls it all is Donato Renzetti, an old hand in Italian opera who, with oriental rhythms and shimmering textures, makes everything come alive and throb with excitement.

Janos Gardonyi

Verdi – Aida
Lewis; Sartori; Rachvelishvili; Gagnidze;
Salminen; Colombara; Coro e Orchestra del
Teatro alla Scala; Zubin Mehta
C major 732208

► To revive *Aida* in 2015 at that holy temple of Italian opera, La Scala of Milan, puts much at stake. Times are difficult economically yet expectations are high, the audience sceptical, often giving great artists a rough time, (Carlos Kleiber once was booed in the pit!), but success for a young singer in La Scala could



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