



In Brief...

Raff Piano Music, Vol 3: Album lyrique, Op 17; Cinq Eglogues, Op 105; Impromptu-Valse, Op 94; Fantaisie-Polonaise, Op 106

Tra Nguyen (pf)
Grand Piano GP634, 77 minutes

British-Vietnamese pianist Tra Nguyen continues her journey through the piano music of Joachim Raff with this disc of premiere recordings, dominated by the *Album lyrique* of 1845. The five volumes that make up this work sum up the appeal and charm of this composer. Volume 1 comprises three *Rêveries*; Nguyen keeps them moving nicely. The longing gestures of the *Ballade* (Volume 2) are also effective. One does, though, get the feeling that ideas are not always fleshed out by the composer before he moves on to the next task and, despite Nguyen's unwavering advocacy, the work does seem overlong. The Chopinesque decorations of the *First Nocturne* (Volume 3) are charming, though, while the virtuoso *Scherzo* of Volume 4 is also impressive. The work leads to the 10-minute, granitic *Introduction et Fugue* of Volume 5.

The gentler *Eglogues* benefit from Nguyen's subtle touch, but there is surprising virtuosity here, too: the *Impromptu-Valse* absolutely sparkles under her fingers, while the *Fantaisie-Polonaise* is an effective marriage of Liszt and Raff. A stimulating disc. CC

AMM Two London Concerts
John Tilbury (pf), **Eddie Prévost** (percussion)
Matchless Recordings MRCD85, 78 minutes

Formed in 1965, AMM remains committed to an aesthetic of total improvisation. Past members and guest players have included Cornelius Cardew, Keith Rowe, Evan Parker and Christian Wolff, though the basic line-up since 2005 has been the duo of co-founder Eddie Prévost and pianist John Tilbury (perhaps better known as an outstanding performer of composers such as Cage and Feldman), who joined AMM in 1980.

Two London Concerts begins with Tilbury's arm striking the keyboard, an

action he repeats several times during the opening minutes. Such overt drama is uncharacteristic, since much of the subsequent musical dialogue is intensely quiet, scraps of sound that hang in the silence. Tilbury is a spare improviser, adhering to a spartan beauty, while Prévost generates an astonishing variety of shimmering percussive timbres, some so strange they almost confound language – can metal yelp, or a sigh shine? GL

Here
MooV (Colin Riley, piano/electronics/producer; Elisabeth Nygård, voice; Natalie Rozario, cello; Pete Wilson, bass; Rob Millett, percussion)
Squeaky Kate Music ISMN 8-32929-00006-5, 56 minutes

I reviewed Colin Riley's *Skin and Wire* album back in January/February 2012. *Here*, his new disc, is voice-led, featuring Elisabeth Nygård (sometimes multi-tracked), who adopts a breathy, close-miked sound pioneered some 50 years ago by Astrud Gilberto. Lyrics are fragmentary and rarely comprehensible; the backing group is minimalist, mildly avant-garde and/or faintly gamelan-inspired. None of the 13 tracks is fast or otherwise exciting and the total effect is of a drug-inspired 1970s film soundtrack. The pianist, vocalist and cellist are credited as composers, but to me it all sounds like a good (but not great) improvisation class. Rewarding to create, no doubt, but nothing here tempted me to listen again. MR

Zelenski Piano Quartet, Op 61
Zarebski Piano Quintet, Op 34
Jonathan Plowright (pf),
Szymanowski Quartet
Hyperion CDA67905, 72 minutes

The combination of Hyperion's state-of-the-art recording, an inspired repertoire choice and committed, musicianly performances makes this disc a winner. Both composers featured here are deserving of further exposure (try also the excellent CPO disc of Zarebski solo piano works played by Marian Mika). The

Prague and Paris-educated Wladislaw Zelenski (1857-1921) is remembered, if at all, for his operas. His Piano Quartet is darkly Romantic and the players display a clear rapport, with Plowright careful never to obfuscate textures; the highlight is the gorgeously sustained, rapt *Romance*, which contrasts with the angular, playful *Intermezzo*.

The short-lived Liszt pupil Julius Zarebski (1854-85) was a virtuoso whose music is notably intense, especially in its use of counterpoint. Mystery infuses the *Quintet's Adagio* (featuring some lovely cello playing from Marcin Sieniawski), in which the demonstration standard recording really comes into its own. A fascinating disc, lovingly produced. CC

Brahms Ballades, Op 10; Klavierstücke, Op 76; Variations on a Theme of Paganini, Op 35; Brahms/Cziffra/Bax Hungarian Dance No 5
Alessio Bax (pf)
Signum SIGCD309, 75 minutes

Italian pianist Alessio Bax, winner of the 2000 Leeds International Piano Competition, is a player of refreshing depth. In an age of the hyper-virtuoso, Bax presents a Brahms recital that aims to show the contrasting sides of the composer's piano music, from the autumnally ruminative to the overtly virtuosic. The former is beautifully demonstrated by the *Op 10 Ballades*, each chord carefully weighted and coloured. Signum's recording faithfully captures the burnished quality of Bax's sound. Even when playing staccato, he maintains a full tone, and in his hands the *Fourth Ballade* becomes a full-scale tone-poem. The *Op 76* pieces seem a logical continuation, and here Bax reveals great awareness of the part writing.

The two books of *Paganini Variations* pose few, if any, technical challenges for this pianist. Yet it is the reflective variations that truly resonate (the tender and intimate 11th Variation of Book 1, for example) and Bax revels, too, in the more exploratory second book. CC

