

palate cleansers between the concertos. Sound is excellent.

With this disc, Shelest and Jarvi have recorded all Rubinstein's numbered piano concertos; just one CD remains for the *Fantasy* and *Concertpiece* to survey everything Rubinstein wrote for piano and orchestra. I look forward to the final volume.

WRIGHT

RZEWSKI: *North American Ballads; 4 Piano Pieces; Squares*
Matthew Weissman
Albany 1943 [2CD] 115 minutes

Frederic Rzewski (1938-2021) looms large in the 20th Century piano repertory with his works' grandiose, Lisztian prowess, avant-garde eclecticism, and leftist political bent, often expressed with the interaction of high art with vernacular music. The massive set of variations *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* (1976) is often regarded as the crowning jewel of his oeuvre and is a regular Everest for enterprising pianists (though there is far from a consensus in our pages; see index). For this release (evidently his first), pianist Matthew Weissman avoids that warhorse in favor of some Rzewski pieces not recorded as often—though no less technically daunting.

The set of *Four Pieces* (1977) is a seriously underrated entry in Rzewski's catalog and one of his best works. A modern piano sonata in all but name, it is held together by a cyclic theme inspired by Andean folk music (though also reminding me of Paul Simon). The theme is taken thru several dramatic tonal and non-tonal transformations across the four pieces, culminating in shimmering, radiant chords, with the durations and number of repetitions left to the performer to decide. This considerable degree of artistic freedom justifies the two different interpretations of Piece No. 4 that appear on this album.

The anti-war *Squares*, written in 1978 for Paul Jacobs, eschews any semblance of vernacular in favor of hard-edged modernism and breakneck technical athletics, such as fast-moving, agitated Schoenbergian tone rows in 'Squalls' and even faster scalar passages played a second apart in 'Hyenas'. The more subdued 'Noctamble' introduces challenges of a different flavor, with complex, contrapuntal variations spread across three staves. 'Sideshow' closes the piece

with a jazzy ostinato with constant meter changes. The technical fireworks are astonishing—though it is a colder and more austere piece than the others. Jacobs must have thought so too, since it didn't deliver on his request for a piece with American popular music. Rzewski answered with another piece that earned more praise from Jacobs and many other pianists since—the *North American Ballads*. Rzewski published *Squares* and the *Ballads* together and evidently considered them companion pieces.

Though the *Ballads* are a hit with pianists, they are rarely recorded together—and when they are, it is usually only Nos. 1-4. In fact, I didn't know that the other two (5+6) even existed until now (they were composed later). This is the first time all 6 appear together. Each of the *Ballads* is a set of almost Ivesian free variations on a popular or folk song—often predictably leftist, including labor and protest songs. 'Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues' (No. 4) is the most striking and popular of the original four—it depicts mill machines with thundering force, from which a blues tune slowly forms and emerges. The rarer No. 6, 'The Housewife's Lament', takes a feminist stance to illuminate the toils of a housewife's daily life. In comparison to the other ballads, this one felt a bit straightforward and conventional, though still worth hearing.

The odd one here, though, is No. 5, 'It Makes a Long Time Man Feel Bad'. It is a massive set of variations running over 20 minutes, nearly buckling under its own breadth. It nearly spoiled the bunch for me—though not because of the length or slow pacing. In the last third of the ballad, extra-musical sound effects and improvisations culminate in a chain rattling to signify the song's origins from a black chain-gang—a crude and disingenuous decision on the part of Rzewski that undermines the entire ballad. Rob Haskins's take on *The People United* resonates here as well: "...postcolonial perniciousness masquerading as postmodern politics" (M/J 2013). His music often has a fundamental and engaging tension between populist themes and specialist delivery, but this ballad shows the limits of such tension and breaks the spell entirely.

My disappointment with Ballad No. 5 notwithstanding, this is one I will probably keep. It's worth having the other ballads in one place, as well as a new recording of

Squares (the only other one is by the composer). Weissman gives gutsy, colorful performances but doesn't quite match the control and mastery of Ralph van Raat in the *Four Pieces* (Naxos 559759, J/F 2015) and the composer in the others (Nonesuch 79623, N/D 2002). But I can't nitpick too much when these pieces are so thorny and demanding—Weissman is never less than convincing. Albany's sound is good. Although the bit of twang in the Fagioli piano's sound distracted me at first, the more I hear it the more it seems to suit the music. Extensive notes about the pieces.

FARO

SACCHINI: *L'Abbandono delle Ricchezze di Santo Filippo Neri*
Concerto de Bassus/ Franz Hauk
Naxos 574526 [2CD] 116:25

Antonio Sacchini (1730-1786), having been educated in Naples, was active in Rome, Venice, London, and Paris, where his operas did very well. His musical style is a Neapolitan balance between dramatic sensibility and melodic invention. His opera, *Oedipe a Colonie* was still being performed in Paris in 1844 (Mar/Apr 2006 & Jan/Feb 2007).

This oratorio about the founding father of sacred dramas in the style of opera was first performed in Rome at Lent in 1765 at the Jesuit Collegium Germanicum et Hungaricum. The anonymous author of the libretto used the story of Saint Philip's adolescent struggles between the allegorical characters of "Poverty" and the enticements of "Splendor" and the tricky arguments of "Deceit." Saint Philip and Poverty are sopranos (probably originally castratos), Splendor is a tenor, and Deceit a bass. As in the *opera seria*, this oratorio is a series of arias and connecting recitatives that delineate the characters (sometimes Deceit seems to hint at the style of *opera buffa*).

Of the performers, the most adept at interpreting Sacchini's music are Yeree Suh (an excellent Saint Philip) and Ketevan Chuntishvili (an effective advocate for Poverty). The male voices are acceptable; Daniel Ochoa (Deceit) is more comfortable with Sacchini's style than Markus Schfer (Splendor). While the performance of the singers and instrumentalists of the *Concerto de Bassus* is stylish, it sounds as if Franz Hauk could have used more rehearsal time

for a more effective performance of this work. As with many Naxos releases the booklet is minimal, though the introductory essay is informative and the English summary useful. A libretto is available from the Naxos website, but only has the original Italian text and a German translation.

BREWER

SAINT-SAENS: *Violin Concerto 3;*
GLAZOUNOV: *Concerto*
Rudolf Koelman, v; Schaffhausen Sinfonietta/
Paul Haug—Channel 72951—46 minutes

New recordings of the once popular Saint-Saens concerto have been reviewed in ARG just twice over the last 20 years—this is the first new recording in about a decade. Violinist Koelman is a strong advocate for the piece, his performance straddling the heroic and monumental Arthur Grumiaux from 1957 (Naxos) and the fiery and brilliant Jean-Jacques Kantorow (BIS 1470, M/J 2007). Grumiaux holds forth majestically for 28 minutes whereas Kantorow sizzles and sears for a breathless 25. Koelman splits the difference at 27 minutes, in a performance that's both dazzling and big-boned. He digs deep into the big double stops of the outer movements and plays accurately and sweetly the long stretches of silvery passagework. He confidently nails the stratospheric unprepared high notes in the finale where Grumiaux's highest notes are lost beneath the orchestra.

The orchestra does a fine job—Saint-Saens's careful orchestration never gets in the way of the soloist. Koelman easily outclasses the slapdash and underprepared Ruggiero Ricci (Vox 5084, N/D 1993) and soporific Cho-Liang Lin (CBS 46506), who dawdles for an uninspired 30-plus minutes.

The short Glazounov concerto is his most popular and, unlike the Saint-Saens, gets recorded a lot—I've managed to collect 7 of them without even trying. Koelman claims to have learned this concerto—whatever that means—from Jascha Heifetz, who "learned" it from Leopold Auer, the concerto's first performer in 1905. Heifetz performed it under the composer in 1914 and first recorded it 20 years later in 1934. That recording is available on Naxos and sounds quite good, Heifetz's violin displaying that chewy, thick tone you really don't hear from violinists anymore. Milstein's 1957 stereo recording with the Pittsburgh Symphony