

GRAMOPHONE *Collector*

NEW FROM NEOS

Richard Whitehouse assesses the present output of a young German contemporary music label

During the nine years of its existence, the Munich-based NEOS label has released some 250 discs which survey a broad range of music from the past 70 years – taking in experimental and cross-genre projects in addition to the more mainstream modernist trends. In all cases, stylish presentation and expertly translated booklet-notes can be taken as given, thus encouraging deeper exploration of such diverse composers as those under consideration here.

One of the label's ongoing series focuses on performances from the Musica Viva concerts held in Munich for seven decades, with Vols 23 and 24 devoted to **Helmut Lachenmann**, whose 80th birthday fell last year. His *...zwei Gefühle...*, *Musik mit Leonardo* (1992) draws on a paraphrase of the artist's own words (spoken by the composer) in a piece whose evoking of the danger and excitement in exploring the unknown typifies Lachenmann's own thinking. *Schreiben* (2004) finds him investigating the structural properties of orchestral timbre and texture in deftly understated term. Both receive assured readings from the Bavarian Radio Symphony (under Peter Eötvös and Susanna Mälkki). *Ausklänge* (1985) – Lachenmann's piano concerto *malgré-lui* whose solo part, indebted as much to the pyrotechnics of Charlemagne Palestine as to the European avant-garde, is bracingly dispatched by Pierre-Laurent Aimard, while Jonathan Nott marshals the combative orchestral writing with his customary assurance.

In the almost half-century since his death, **Bernd Alois Zimmermann** (1918–70) has gained a measure of recognition denied him during his lifetime. Although his solo piano music stops short of his full maturity, it does offer a plausible overview of his formative years – from the pithy vignettes of *Extemporale* and robust charm of the folksong permeated *Capriccio* (both 1946), through respectively capricious and introspective studies comprising the two-volume *Enchiridion* (1949 and '52) to the stark yet never merely arid miniatures of *Konfigurationen* (1956). It might be easy to overlook in the context of Zimmermann's radical later works, but this is distinctive, characterful music, to which Andreas

Skouras responds with unflinching poise and charisma.

Often relegated to the 'easy to admire, difficult to love' category,

Charles Wuorinen (b1938) has amassed a sizeable output in a variety of media whose intellectual rigour does not preclude engaging or playful qualities – as in the sinewy contrapuntal texture of *Harpsichord Divisions* (1968) or the teasing sense of discontinuity of *The Long and the Short* (1969). The emotional trajectory of *Violin Variations* (1972) places audibly greater emphasis on high-flown rhetoric, while *Heart*

Shadow (2005) alights on an expressive subtlety common to many of Wuorinen's more recent works. Anna and Andreas Skouras are the dedicated violinist and keyboardist in this rewarding music, combining in *Six Pieces* (1977) for a cycle whose initially disjunctive contrasts quickly reveal a powerfully cumulative momentum no less typical of this composer.

The music of **Martin Schlumpf** (b1947) offers a more quizzical take on the concept of musical narrative. In the five works here, all written during 2011–14, allusions to Romantic chamber music are often in evidence: Schumann's *Märchenbilder* in the temporal punning of the piano trio *Spiegelbilder*; Brahms's Clarinet Quintet in the pivoting between formal clarity and expressive fantasy of the clarinet quintet *The Five Points*; and Clara Schumann's Piano Trio in the trio for alto saxophone, cello and piano *Pandora's Promise* – its disjunctive ideas imbued with an oblique resolution. Solo accordion gets caught up in a risqué scenario in *Push and Pull*, while *Puzzle* has bass clarinet integrating diverse rhythmic shards over a subtle electronic backdrop. Committed readings from such artists as the excellent Galatea Quartet, and a



Helmut Lachenmann is among the composers featured in Neos's new releases

pleasurable discovery.









Not least because the focus here is on solo piano, the output of Marcus **Antonius Wesselmann** (b1965) is a tougher proposition – its prodigious technical range and often relentless if rarely literal rhythmic profile resulting in avowedly maximalist music. Hence the confrontational overlay of metres in *SOLO 5* (1999) or teasingly inexact formal repetitions in *SOLO 6* (2000). The 'moto blues' of *SOLO 7* (2001) leavens this austerity with a syncopated vitality redolent of Kapustin, while the 11 'combinatorial etudes' that comprise *SOLO 9* (2003) recall Ligeti in their conjuring up of intricate textures out of harmonically simple cells. Moritz Eggert, a notable composer in his own right, renders some transcendental pianism with unsparing conviction.

Previous releases suggested **Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf** (b1962) as among the leading German composers of his generation, but *Humanized Void* (2007) fails in its intention of representing the collapse of bourgeois musical culture in the Second World War – specifically the Holocaust. At over half an hour, this piece fails to sustain any longer-term impact as it lurches between portentous gestures which lack memorability. Just 10 minutes long, *Void* –

kol ischa asirit (2012) is far more successful in outlining a vision of human degradation by juxtaposing remorseless repetition with an unyielding harmonic backdrop. As directed by Roland Kluttig and Rupert Huber, the performances lack nothing in conviction, while the tape piece *Void – mal d'archive* (2003) evokes the spatial properties of Berlin's Jewish Museum in unnerving terms.

Time was when **Thomas Kessler** (b1937) composed impeccably avant-garde works, which makes such a piece as *said the shotgun to the head* (2003) the more arresting. Saul Williams is notably erudite among 'slam' poets – his sprawling text akin to Allen Ginsberg in existential fervour yet eschewing the latter's tendency to self-pity. Set in the context of a rap choir and orchestra dominated by strings and percussion, the music yields a subtlety that complements the panache of its main performer. If *Utopia II* (2011) is rather less provocative, the combining of voices and instruments with live electronics results in a sonic mesh that intriguingly sets in relief its 'utopian' texts. In both works, Jonathan Stockhammer directs the Cologne Radio Symphony with unfailing assurance – making this disc an unexpected highlight of the present selection. **G**

THE RECORDINGS

	Lachenmann ...zwei Gefühle..., etc Bavarian RSO / Eötvös, Málkki NEOS © NEOS11424
	Lachenmann Ausklang Aimard; Bavarian RSO / Nott NEOS © NEOS11423
	BA Zimmermann Solo Piano Works Skouras NEOS © NEOS11026
	Wuorinen Chamber Works A & A Skouras NEOS © NEOS11123
	Schlumpf The Five Points, etc Galatea Qt et al NEOS © NEOS11519
	Wesselmann Piano Works Eggert NEOS © NEOS11508
	Mahnkopf Humanized Void, etc Kluttig, Huber NEOS © NEOS11417
	Kessler said the shotgun to the head Cologne RSO / Stockhammer NEOS © NEOS11511

excitement. A fine clarinet solo in the dusky coda, too, if not quite as raptly poetic as some rivals (the Boston SO/Davis, Swedish RSO/Mikko Franck and Neeme Järvi's Gothenburg SO remake, to name but three).

As for the Seventh, captured live some four and a half years earlier than the rest, I appreciate its thoughtful sensitivity, seamlessly judged transitions and abundance of scrupulously observant detail. On the downside, though, those hard-working Hallé violins are a tad lacking in tonal clout, especially in and around the symphony's refulgent apex (try from fig Y, 19'05"), and the performance as a whole oddly fails to ignite, falling some way short of the craggy strength, elemental force and electrical charge so evident in front-runners such as Koussevitzky, Bernstein (Sony), Maazel (Decca), Mravinsky, Davis (in Boston and live in London), Berglund (in Helsinki), Vänskä and Segerstam (Ondine). Still, this CD is worth hearing for the Fifth alone, and anyone following Elder's Sibelius cycle will need no further incentive to purchase. **Andrew Achenbach**

Tchaikovsky

Serenade for Strings, Op 48.

Souvenir de Florence, Op 70

The Russian Virtuosi of Europe / Yuri Zhislin
Orchid © ORC100052 (65' • DDD)

Tchaikovsky

Méditation, Op 42 No 1^a. Sérénade mélancolique, Op 26^a. Souvenir de Florence, Op 70^b. Variations on a Roccoco Theme, Op 33^a

Jan Vogler vc

^bMoritzburg Festival Ensemble; ^aFrankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra / Andrés Orozco-Estrada
Sony Classical © 88875 11429-2 (73' • DDD)



Tchaikovsky adored the city of Florence, returning there throughout his lifetime, paying tribute in his sextet *Souvenir de Florence*. He paid homage to his other great love – Mozart – in the beautiful, jewel-like Serenade for Strings. 'I am violently in love with this work and cannot wait for it to be played,' he wrote to Nadezhda von Meck. They're frequent partners on disc, with *Souvenir* in a string-orchestra arrangement over which I harbour doubts. The Russian Virtuosi of Europe, a young ensemble formed in 2004, present these two gems on their

debut disc. Meanwhile, cellist Jan Vogler teams up with colleagues – the Moritzburg Festival Ensemble – to present the *Souvenir* in sextet form, a lively partner to Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations*.

I much prefer the sextet version of *Souvenir*, where the abrasiveness of one-to-a-part gives the work more vigour than the bright sheen of multiple strings. Vogler and friends deliver an exciting account, heightened by lean, wiry strings. The ebullient *Allegro con spirito* launches with gusto, while the *Adagio cantabile* sings. Vogler's ensemble perform with great panache – not quite with the authority of the Borodin Quartet (Elatus, 1/94) – but a tremendously enjoyable performance.

Some chamber orchestra versions sound like a glossy Ferrari roaring down the autostrada. The RVE offer something of a 'halfway house' – just 18 strings, which means the excessively souped-up sound of a full symphony orchestra's string section is avoided. This is a pleasant performance, the gentle pizzicato accompaniment to the *Adagio cantabile* a feather bed for a lovely violin solo (presumably ensemble director Yuri Zhislin). They catch the bustling central section of the third movement well.

Tchaikovsky's Serenade is a joyous work, but wistful too, especially if you know Balanchine's ballet. One immediately notices the RVE's firm, resonant sound, in a brisk, businesslike performance, cleanly articulated. The Waltz trips along delicately, not smothered in French polish, and it's good to hear the *Élégie* truly start *pianissimo*; it flows a little too swiftly though – there's pathos in this music. They don't always match the panache of the Vienna Chamber Orchestra but this is a promising debut disc.

Vogler's Sony disc centres on a spruce account of the *Rococo Variations*, where he combines Wilhelm Fitzenhagen's version with the original, introducing the final variation (cut by Fitzenhagen) as Var 3b. His playing is agile and graceful, but the Frankfurt Radio Symphony are a little more earthbound than ideal. *Concertante* works pinched from the violin repertoire complete the programme.

Mark Pullinger

Selected comparisons – coupled as above:

Vienna CO, Entremont (10/91) (NAXO) 8 550404

Concertgebouw CO, Boni (PENT) PTC5186 009

Souvenir de Florence – selected comparison:

Borodin Qt, Yurov, Milman (1/94) (ELAT) 2564 61774-2

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