US RELEASES

Stephanie Sant’Ambrogio makes her solo debut on CD; Louis Karchin’s opera Romulus exudes bright humour; plus a Pulitzer Prize collection

Twin passions

Howard Goldstein is impressed by Stephanie Sant’Ambrogio’s violin and viola album

GOING SOLO

Unaccompanied works for violin and viola by Telemann, Vieuxtemps, Ysaÿe, Kreisler, Schulhoff, Porter and Piazzolla Stephanie Sant’Ambrogio MSR Classics MS 5977 70:20 mins Available at arkivmusic.com/bbcmusic

The dizzying array of styles on violin/viola player Stephanie Sant’Ambrogio’s closely recorded disc of unaccompanied works seems a natural result of the many musical hats she’s worn: orchestral player (Cleveland), concertmaster (San Antonio), chamber musician, and university professor (Reno).

She comes close to the unique sound of Piazzolla’s violinists in her transcriptions of his Tango Etudes, and realises the Mahlerian underpinnings of Schulhoff’s Sonata. She makes a persuasive case for James Winn’s take on a traditional Scottish pibroch. But, in Ysaÿe’s Fourth Sonata and Kreisler’s Recitativo and Scherzo-Caprice, there’s poorly tuned high register double stops and mechanical phrasing. Switching to viola, however, her exuberance and sheer delight in performance increase almost a hundredfold. Vieuxtemps’s fluzzy Capriccio, Read Thomas’s mournful Incantation, even Porter’s meandering Suite emerge with gorgeous tone, perfect intonation, and passionate spontaneity.

Performance ★★★★★

Recording ★★★★★

KARCHIN

Romulus

Katrina Thurman, Steven Ebel, Thomas Meglioranza, Wilbur Pauley; Washington Square Ensemble/Karchin Naxos 8.669030 71:25 mins Available at arkivmusic.com/bbcmusic

Comic opera has rather languished lately, not least because so much modern music appears purpose-built to banish humour. In Romulus, though, Philadelphia-born Louis Karchin sets a genial vignette by Alexandre Dumas père, of Three Musketeers fame, about two young-fogey professors, their long-suffering housekeeper and a baby dumped on their doorstep. His music, though modernistic in jagged rhythms and free-ranging tonality, is bright, and he aims for a Straussian flowing line. The play’s wordy, though, with much action offstage, so the humour rests heavily on characterisation and dialogue. Setting dialogue straight leaves less scope for musical wit than does verse, and the character Mayor Babenhausen demands a greater range of colour and expression than Karchin’s style can presently muster. But that said, it’s fun, with excellent young performers, and distinctly promising. Michael Scott Rohan

Performance ★★★★★

Recording ★★★★★

THE PULITZER PROJECT

Copland: Appalachian Spring; W Schuman: A Free Song; Sowerby: The Canticle of the Sun

Grant Park Orchestra & Chorus/ Carlos Kalmar Cedille CDR 90000 125 74 mins Available at arkivmusic.com/bbcmusic

William Schuman’s A Free Song won the first ever music Pulitzer in 1943, yet this appears to be its premiere recording. It’s in two parts, the first gauntly setting grim lines (‘faces ghastly, swollen, purple’) from Walt Whitman’s civil war poem Drum Taps, the second strenuously attempting a heroic note (‘We hear Liberty!’). It probably stirred World War II audiences, but its impact now is thinner – it’s certainly not Schuman’s finest music.

Appalachian Spring is of course Copland, but it’s irritating to find the shorter suite for full orchestra recorded here, not the original ballet for 13 instruments, which won the 1945 Pulitzer. Still, it’s a freshly played, strongly-featured interpretation. 1946 was won by Leo Sowerby’s The Canticle of the Sun, and this half-hour setting of a poem by St Francis gets a splendid performance, the choir in particular never flagging in the constantly active, on-the-boil music that Sowerby gives them. Terry Blain

Performance ★★★★★

Recording ★★★★★

ECHOES

Works by Harbison, Jones, Kernis, Schiff, Schwarz, Sheng & Stock

Seattle Symphony/Gerard Schwarz Naxos 8.559679 53:41 mins Available at arkivmusic.com/bbcmusic

This collection applies the principle of basing new works on old ones in such diverse ways that it doesn’t hang together at all. David Schiff’s Infernal Dance dedicates the excitement of Stravinsky’s Infernal Dance with a rock beat and jazz rhythms. Bright Sheng’s Black Swan is a straightforward orchestration of Brahms’s Intermezzo in A Op. 118 No. 2, while David Stock’s Plenty of Horns spins a little fantasia out of Jeremiah Clarke’s so-called Trumpet Voluntary, and John Harbison’s Rubes is a creative big band arrangement of Thelonious Monk’s Ruby, My Dear. Aaron Jay Kernis’s Musica Celestis is his already familiar string orchestra transcription of a quartet movement of his own, and Gerard Schwarz’s Concerto for Brass Quintet is an unconvincing arrangement of movements from a Handel concerto grosso. With routine-sounding performances and pallid recordings, it’s all less than thrilling. Anthony Burton

Performance ★★★

Recording ★★★

BBC MUSIC MAGAZINE 89