



MUSIC REVIEW: Best Classical CDs of 2018, by Keith Powers

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

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Selling recordings has never been a strength of classical music. In fact, now it's not strength of any kind of music. But classical music ensembles have found a way — with limited pressings, direct sales from web sites, recording live performances, touring and selling disks like the entrepreneurs they are — to make the economics of recording feasible.

And listeners benefit. Chosen mainly from artists in the greater Boston area — with a bit of Iceland, and elsewhere, thrown in — from the hundreds of recordings that have crossed the transom this year, these few truly stand out.

Don't call this a "best-of" — such scope would be beyond this listener. These recordings were heard, and appreciated.

Craig Morris, trumpet

Philip Glass: Three Pieces in the Shape of a Square

Bridge Records (bridgerecords.com)

Philip Glass disdains the description "minimalist" for his music, and with this stunning recording you can see why. Not that it's not minimalist — with repetitive structures, or at least a basis in recurrence — but that in Craig Morris's instrument, it's much more than that.

Three main compositions fill this recording from the former principal trumpet at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. "Melodies" from the mid-'90s has a dozen short pieces written for sax, as incidental music for a Jean Genet play. "Gradus" and "Piece in the Shape of a Square" are 1960s Glass, earliest work with pre-determined rhythmic patterns that the performer must wrestle with. Morris makes this music sound like a vocal recital. Beautiful, distinctive, compelling. Grammy nominated, by the way — great recognition for such a unique disk.

Nordic Affect

H e (a) r

SONO Luminus (sonoluminus.com)

Violin, viola, cello and harpsichord — and voice. All of the four instrumentalists are vocalists as well, “focused on sound,” as the opening lyrics of this two-disc journey into musical space inform us. Gorgeous music that might be called new-age if it weren’t so simultaneously detailed and delicate, interspersed with English-language spoken word.

The title makes word-play out of “hear,” “here,” and “her” — the quartet is all female, and so are the composers (Anna Thorvaldsdottir perhaps the best known to American audiences). The “focus on sound” shows up in the careful listening that the performers exhibit, turning almost every note into a small sculpture that needs to be examined from all sides. Deeply moving music, some of it excruciatingly sad.

Arlene Sierra, Vol. 3**Butterflies Remember a Mountain**

Bridge Records (bridgerecords.com)

American composer’s collection series on Bridge continues with some chamber settings. From the opening piano trio, “Butterflies Remember a Mountain,” these spare, elegant works draw in the listener. Like the best music, recognizable structures float by — Debussy, Webern. Like the best music, it sounds like an original voice too. Boston-area audiences heard a single work of Sierra’s last season — she was the BSO’s token female composer in 2017–18. This voice needs to be heard, regularly, repeatedly.

Ana Glig, piano**Reminiscences**

Sound Dynamics Associates (facebook.com/PianistAG/)

Lots of Grieg. Some beautiful rarities from Davitashvili and Taktakishvili. A nice short work from

contemporary composer Francis Snyder. And 10 miniatures from Gya Kancheil, whose work speaks lyrical volumes. Terrific solo disc from Cape Cod-based pianist.

Chen Yi/Boston Modern Orchestra Project

Concertos for String Instruments

BMOP sound (bmopsound.org)

Every year BMOPsound produces more than one disc that merits attention; Charles Fussell's "Cymbeline" could easily have been the choice here from this year's batch, or Leon Kirchner's "Music for Orchestra." But Chen Yi's music merits all the attention it can get — it brings us closer to whatever world harmony might be, not just some east-meets-west pastiche. Four works here, all concerto-type pieces for string soloist and ensemble. Of particular note: "Fiddle Suite for Huqin" (a family of simple stringed instruments, with the erhu best known in the west), with soloist Wang Guowei. Snaky, melodic and haunting.

Pedroia String Quartet

Quadrants, Vol. 2

Parma/Navona (navonarecords.com)

Quartet with two principals from the Cape Symphony Orchestra brings half a dozen works by new composers. Smart, electric writing, with many highlights; Katherine Price's chorale-like "Hymnody" sets a strong mood, and Peter Deutsch's "Departure" — a well developed, four-movement quartet, direct and simple, is highlighted by its third movement cello introduction (Jacques Lee Wood).

Lorelei Ensemble

Impermanence

SONO Luminus (sonoluminus.com)

American composer Peter Gilbert's liquid settings from his cycle "Tsukimi" form the core of this double disk recording. Condensed texts from the Japanese Heian period (800–1200 A.D.), in the

haiku tradition, Gilbert explores “moon viewing” (“Tsukimi,” translated).

Interspersed comes music from other early periods — DuFay, the Codex Calixtinus, the Turin Codex — and some Takemitsu. Some of the sound-worlds, not just the contemporary ones, are exotic to the extreme — abstract tone poems, belying often straightforwardly religious ideas. All of it performed with heightened artistry by director Beth Willer’s ensemble.

Boston Symphony Orchestra

Shostakovich: Symphonies 4 and 11: “The Year 1905”

Deutsche Grammophon (deutschegrammophon.com)

One of the multiple Grammy nominees in this list. Unlike its two immediate successors in the BSO/DG Shostakovich series, it may not win. But followers of the BSO/Andris Nelsons exploration of Shostakovich’s orchestral music should not miss this. Another deliciously ambient recording, where you can easily imagine yourself in Symphony Hall just from the sound.

Blue Heron

The Lost Music of Canterbury (5 CDs)

(blueheron.org)

No Grammy nomination for this historic recording? Shame. But winning the “British Grammy” (the Gramophone Award) this fall makes up for that. Recognition in European early-music circles still carries more weight than any stateside award anyway. This is a gorgeously performed recording from the Peterhouse Partbooks, sixteenth-century music restored (the tenor part was missing) by Nick Sandon, and prepared here by Blue Heron’s leader Scott Metcalfe. Put any of these five disks on the CD player, and it will stay there.

Gloria Cheng, piano

Garlands for Steven Stucky

Bridge Records (bridgerecords.com)

Steven Stucky wrote dramatic, textural music. He wrote about music — his “Lutoslawski and His

Music” (1982, ASCAP award for music writing) helped parse that composer’s work. And he touched people. This beautiful remembrance disk is as much a treasure for the music — 33 compositions, by Harbison, Weir, Hillborg, Dean, Salonen, Lash, Chen Yi, Mackey, Stucky himself and others — as the stories about him as a composer, teacher and friend in the program notes. Stucky died in 2016, only 66; this disc is more than just a remembrance, is a vital celebration. Many thanks to Gloria Cheng for making this disk happen, and touring behind it.

Neave Trio

Celebrating Piazzolla

Azica Records (azica.com)

One of the great felicities in contemporary classical music is the fervent embrace of the compositions of Astor Piazzolla. Nearly every measure Piazzolla wrote has inviting atmospheres and sensual appeal. It simply feels good.

Neave Trio — Anna Williams, violin; Mikhail Veselov, cello; Eri Nakamura, piano — explore the portraits of “Las cuatro estaciones portenas,” and then are joined by mezzo Carla Jablonski for a series of nightclubby songs, highlighted by “El titere,” with lyrics by Jorge Luis Borges. Highly recommended recording, both for the compositions and the committed playing.

Handel & Haydn Society

Haydn, Symphonies 49, 87; Mozart, Sinfonia Concertante

Coro (thesixteen.com)

H&H has had many identities over its two centuries. Under current director Harry Christophers, it sticks closely to its first namesake, the father of the symphony (and the string quartet, for that matter). These Haydn symphonies (including 87, the last of the Paris symphonies, a highlight) have the polish and verve that makes H&H stand out from early music practitioners. Mozart’s Sinfonia Concertante (soloists Aisslinn Nosky, violin and Max Mandel, viola) an added bonus.

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