SKY *Symphony in Three Movements*[1] • Jascha Horenstein, cond; O Natl de la RTF • PRISTINE 535 (71:59) Live: [1]12/19/61, [2]5/4/53

The big news here is the nine-minute *Sinfonia Partita* by Marcel Mihalovici. That may seem an eccentric observation, but there are three justifications. First, while these performances of the Bartók and Stravinsky have been released before (although not in stereo, as here), this is apparently the first release of the Mihalovici. Second, the gripping performance captures Horenstein—to my ears, an uneven conductor—at his best. Third, and most important, it's a magnificent work by a composer who has remained almost completely in the shadows.

Mihalovici (1898–1985) was born in Bucharest; but under the influence of Enescu, he spent much of his life in Paris (Viorel Cosma and Ruxandra Arzoiu, writing in *Grove*, describe him as a "French composer of Romanian origin"). During his long life he produced a hefty catalog of works, including numerous operas and ballets, ranging in inspiration from Euripides to Racine to Maupassant to Beckett. I think it's fair to say, though, that his music hasn't been widely embraced. The *Fanfare* Archive points to only four prior releases (one reviewed twice), all collections—and three of those five reviews don't even mention him once past the headnote. Until now, the only piece by him that I can remember hearing is the delightful set of bagatelles included on Luiza Borac's magnificent *Inspirations and Dreams* set (see *Fanfare* 41:3)—a low-key work that hardly prepares you for the grit of the *Sinfonia Partita*. An undiluted example of what we might call the dark side of Neoclassicism, the *Sinfonia Partita* may remind you of Bloch's First Concerto Grosso or the more vehement parts of Bartók's Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta. Paul Snook described Mihalovici's clarinet concerto *Musique nocturne* as "a darkly glinting quarter hour of moonlit meditation"—in the *Sinfonia Partita*, that meditation is replaced by angry despair. Given the concentrated strength of this work, it's hard to believe that there aren't other major discoveries awaiting some exploratory musician.

As for the two more familiar works: As I said in my review of the Music & Arts collection that included them (28:3), the Stravinsky gets a riveting performance, notable for its superb balances, its tough rhythms, its artful negotiation of the interplay between orchestral groupings, and (most of all) its unrelenting confrontation with the music's violence. Unfortunately, as I hear it, the Bartók is a different matter: Although it stems from the same concert, it barely holds together. (For a more positive perspective, you might want to check out William Zagorski's review in 28:5). Both sound vastly better than they did on the mono Music & Arts collection. A minor glitch means that early copies of the CD may have the orchestra misidentified, but given the complexity of name-changes in what was then l'Orchestre National de la RTF, that's hardly worth stewing about. All in all, an important release. **Peter J. Rabinowitz**

BARTÓK 2 Elegies: See LOURIÉ.

BATES *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* • Michael Christie, cond; Edward Parks (*Steve Jobs*); Sasha Cooke (*Laurene Powell Jobs*); Garrett Sorenson (*Steve "Woz" Wozniak*); Wei Wu (*Kōbun Chino Otogawa*); Santa Fe Op Ch & O • PENTATONE 5186690 (2 CDS: 154:15) Live: Santa Fe 7/22/2017

The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs checks all of the boxes for contemporary opera: an iconic figure depicted as a misunderstood antihero—check. A "hip" classical-meets-pop musical idiom—check. A blatantly obvious moral that may just resonate with today's audiences—check. But for all of its timeliness and media hype, Mason Bates's opera is another spectacle in the ever-growing firmament of operatic works cashing in on the relevancy fetish that has gripped the musical arts.

To be clear, writing an opera dramatizing the plights and triumphs of a real-life figure is risky business, especially if one can gain insight by reading a biography on the subject, but in the right hands, it is possible. Case in point: John Adams's *Doctor Atomic*, because the dramatic arc and the musical characterization are clearly defined.

Unlike that masterpiece of contemporary opera, though, *(R)evolution* adds no new perspectives to what we already know about Steve Jobs, nor is it done in a particularly compelling way; the lackluster music is not helped by Mark Campbell's hammy libretto, and thus the opera as a whole has no dramatic thrust whatsoever. Granted, it doesn't have a conventional narrative structure (I'd say it's more like *Citizen Kane* in its nonlinearity), but that staticity is all the more reason

to create characters who are not mere archetypes—the amoral antihero (Jobs), the ethical friend and business partner (Woz), the redeeming wife-muse (Laurene), and the aphoristic spiritual guru (Kōbun Otogawa). The penultimate scene is particularly cringeworthy—in the manner of an 11:00 number, Jobs's widow Laurene turns to the audience to deliver the opera's message: Do what Steve Jobs 2.0 (her words, not mine) would do, and put down your iPhones and enjoy what life has to offer. At that point, I realized I could have saved myself 90 minutes and learned the same thing by reading a clickbait think piece.

I will admit that I think Bates's trademark mixture of acoustic and electronic sound is appropriate for a story about a human being who revolutionized our relationship with technology. The beeps and boops and sterile rhythmicity of the sound palette are only logical for characterizing the double-edged sword of Jobs's invention: It's something new and exciting, but dangerous in its depersonalization. All in all, though, there isn't much music of substance in this opera, except in the opera's sixth scene, when Jobs and his girlfriend see an LSD-inspired vision of the world around them come to life as an orchestra—and of course the music has substance, because it's a quotation from Bach.

Bates's music for this opera is my least favorite kind—it's boring, shapeless, and amateurish, and it uses the same noncommittal, homogeneous sound palette that has come to characterize the music of Heggie, Muhly, and countless others: ambient pop music and clichés of film music, combined with second-hand Minimalism and electronica. It's new enough to be considered hip, but not so modern as to offend the seasoned music lovers who think music died after Brahms. By pleasing everybody, it pleases nobody

I know that this is Mason Bates's debut opera, and except on rare occasions, a misfire is par for the course, but I would have expected more from somebody who has won the championship of the Santa Fe Opera and of towering musicians like Michael Tilson Thomas and Riccardo Muti (and how he's risen to that level is a mystery to me). It's not enough to say that somebody's life is very operatic, and that it should thus be an opera—it needs a fresh, individual angle from the creators, meticulously and idiomatically executed; cardboard cutouts preaching a moral you might find inside of a fortune cookie simply will not cut it.

Good singers, good recording, mediocre opera. Read the biography instead. **Andrew Desiderio**

BAUSZNERN Quintet. *Eight Chamber Songs*[1]. String Trio • Berlonia Ens; [1]Maria Bengtsson (sop) • MDG 948 2071-6 (SACD: 78:16)

This second volume devoted to the chamber music of the forgotten German composer Waldemar Edler von Bausznern (1866–1931)—whose name alone would seem to place him in the rarified company of Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf and Johann Nepomuk Hummel—isn't quite the delightful surprise that the Berlonia Ensemble's first Bausznern album was. In that collection (948 1826-2) we were introduced to a composer of less than exceptional gifts whose music nonetheless possessed a fair amount of *fin de siècle* charm, due in part to the Hungarian elements he absorbed growing up in Budapest with his great-uncle Guido after his father died; its professional polish was largely the result of his studies in Berlin with Woldemar Bargiel, the half-brother of Clara Schumann.

The major work here—at least in terms of length—is the Quintet in F Major for piano, violin, clarinet, horn, and cello, finished in 1898. While only 13 and a half minutes, the opening movement—marked "with gentle motion"—is nonetheless a bit of a slog, with plenty of busy chit-chat among all the voices to no real point. At about 6:30 the conversation seems to be wrapping up, but then continues for another seven minutes, most of them bubbly but aimless. While program annotator Michael Wittmann suggests that the second movement—a scherzo marked "lively and cheerful"—is "a grotesque march and in its grim humor anticipates similar 20th century scherzos by the likes of Shostakovich," in truth it's only the *polite* humor of a late-19th-century Berlin drawing room. The slow movement is genuinely lovely but much too short (5:48), while the 10-minute rondo-finale again feels like a run-on sentence with little that seems either fresh or interesting.

In the *Acht Kammergesänge* from 1906 the melodic profile rises considerably, but only because these are German, French, and Italian songs "from earlier centuries," many of which have the feel of Brahms's numerous folk song settings. The arrangements themselves tend to be slightly musty