

Classical (HotWax)



BACH: GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

(ZENPH RE-PERFORMANCE).

Glenn Gould, piano. Howard C. Scott, original producer. Hybrid multichannel SACD. Sony 88697-03350.

Glenn Gould's 1955 recording of the *Goldberg Variations* established the legendary pianist as a singular artistic force. Despite their sonic limitations, his *Goldbergs* have awed several generations. Until now, the best way to experience the performance was in mono, as presented on 2002's *A State of Wonder*, a set that also includes Gould's 1981 remake.

Technological legerdemain has changed that. North Carolina-based Zenph Studios has developed a software program that analyzes a recorded keyboard performance, preserves the subtleties, and produces an encoding for playback on a computer-controlled piano, which, in this case, is a nine-foot Yamaha Disklavier Pro concert grand. The robust-sounding instrument—voiced for “re-performance” by Gould's former tuner, Verne Edquist—was recorded in the flattering acoustic of Toronto's Glenn Gould Studio, a big improvement over the dry aural environment of Columbia's facility. In surround or two-channel, the sound is airy, dimensional, and tonally rich. Additionally, Sony provides a binaural stereo version for headphone listening that's extraordinarily involving. The entire project is thoroughly Gouldian, assuring that this version of Bach's masterpiece will still be the one to beat in another 50 years. **Andrew Quint**

Further Listening: Hindemith: *Sonatas (Gould)*; 32 *Short Films About Glenn Gould*



SHOSTAKOVICH: SYMPHONY NO. 5.

New York Philharmonic. Leonard Bernstein, conductor. Cisco/Columbia MS-6115 (180-gram LP).

When he completed his Fifth Symphony in 1937, Shostakovich was in such bad odor with Soviet officials that he slept with a packed suitcase by his side, in case the NKVD came to take him away in the night. Though no time was a good time to be out of favor with Stalin, the mid-1930s were particularly bad. This was the height of the “Great Terror,” the era of “show trials,” gulags, and political mass-murders brought to vivid life in Arthur Koestler's classic novel *Darkness at Noon*—and Shostakovich had very good reasons to fear for himself and his wife and child.

After his 1934 opera *Lady Macbeth of the District of Mzensk* had been declared a “bedlam of noise” in a *Pravda* editorial said to have been written by Stalin himself, his 1935 ballet *The Limpid Brook* condemned (in *Pravda*, again), and his 1936 Fourth Symphony pulled from production due to harsh criticism from the musicians of the Leningrad Philharmonic (who were rehearsing to premiere it!), the young composer could not afford another disaster. Happily, his Fifth Symphony (subtitled “A Soviet Artist's Practical Creative Reply to Just Criticism”) was a tremendous success with the public, the critics, and (most importantly) the Politburo; indeed, it remains to this day Shostakovich's most popular work.

Although contemporaneous listeners probably associated the cry of anguish, followed by the goose-stepping march, with which this great symphony begins with the grim prospect of war with

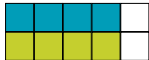
Nazi Germany (in the same way that Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, made one year later, presaged war with Germany), Shostakovich later claimed, in the controversial revisionist “memoir” *Testimony*, that the entire symphony was a coded critique of Stalin and Stalinism—the cry of anguish his own lament for the millions sent to gulags or simply “disappeared,” the goose-stepping march the tramp of the Stalinist secret police.

Be that as it may, the Fifth Symphony is one of the most powerfully moving expressions of suffering and the hope that somehow survives it in twentieth-century symphonic music. And there is no better performance (an opinion, by the way, that Shostakovich himself shared) than that of Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic, who together make this music sound as described in *Testimony*, intensifying the visceral angst, heart-wrenching anguish, and triumphant hopefulness of a work that had customarily been played in staid, stately, state-approved fashion.

I wish I could say that the sound of this 1959 Columbia is as fully thrilling as the reading, but it isn't quite. Although Cisco has done wonders with the bottom octaves (listen to the *deep* doublebass ostinatos that follow the piano's outburst in the middle of the march), string tone is—as, alas, was often the case on many Columbia symphonic recordings (but not, oddly enough, in Columbia chamber music recordings)—a bit dry and acidulous, especially in the blistering first movement. Part of this is simply the acidulousness of Shostakovich's music. Part, Columbia's multi-miking. However, after the first movement, strings and winds are better-than-average-Columbia; bass, as noted, is sensationally deep; soundstaging is shallow but broad; and the music and performance are not be missed.

Congratulations to Cisco on the excellent job it's done—and for its good taste in reissuing this great LP. Now, do yourself not just an audio but a musical favor and buy the thing! **Jonathan Valin**
Further Listening: Shostakovich: *Symphony No. 11 (Stokowski)*; Shostakovich: *String Quartet No. 8 (Borodin)*

Music Classical



NIEVE: WELCOME TO THE VOICE.

Barbara Bonney, et al., Brodsky Quartet. Pierre Mollard, Steve Nieve, Muriel Teodori, producers; Jon Jacobs, engineer. DG 477 6524.

Steve Nieve's *Welcome to the Voice* is an opera, though perhaps it would be better to call it a trope—a 21st century play on the conventions and characters of opera. But before we get into that, it might be a good idea to tell the more hard-boiled classical readers who Nieve is. Hailing from London and classically trained, Nieve has been a keyboardist for Elvis Costello since 1977; this is his first dip into classical waters as a composer. His partner in *Welcome to the Voice*—the French author-filmmaker-psychoanalyst-turned-librettist Muriel Teodori—has been Nieve's partner in life for over a decade. The unlikeliness of their relationship led them to write the piece and subtitle it “*A work about unlikely encounters.*”

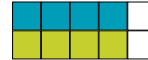
The story centers on the steelworker Dionysos, son of a Greek immigrant, whose passion for opera develops into a potent infatuation with a diva. The action takes place on the steps of an opera house. Dionysos (Sting) is visited in turn by the ghosts of Carmen (Sara Fulgoni), Butterfly (Nathalie Manfrino), and Norma (Amanda Roocroft). His best friend (Robert Wyatt) tries to convince him of the futility of his obsession. When he finally meets the object of his adoration (Barbara Bonney), he wants to embrace her, but she is

frightened by his passion. The police chief (Elvis Costello) arrives to arrest Dionysos. This leads to a wild ensemble finale. “Traditionally you’re supposed to kill off the lover at the end of an opera,” Teodori is quoted as saying. “But in this one, nobody dies. Dionysos tries to convince the diva that their love can overcome all differences. The final word of *Welcome to the Voice* is ‘yes’ and we asked everyone to sing it—the singers, the musicians, the technicians—that says it all.”

While *Welcome to the Voice* plays off characters from 19th century opera, structurally and spiritually it comes closer to early opera, which relied on small ensembles and self-contained song and dance forms. The “unlikely encounters” it celebrates are not just in its plot, but in the very musicians who’ve created it: singers and instrumentalists from different genres, together in a liberating fusion that allows them all to try something new. Vocally, the rewards are rich. Sting, in a wide-ranging part, is at once warm, lyrical, and commanding in that raw-edged emotional way of his; Bonney sings like a dream, warm and lyrical in her very different way, and blazing in the coloratura. The other ladies, particularly Manfrino and Roocroft, are outstanding. Wyatt’s fragility is touching, while Costello, as you might expect, is on fire, literally singeing his mike. Instrumentally, the Brodsky Quartet carries the load, with winds, keyboard (Nieve brilliant, of course), and percussion nicely dovetailed.

How does it stand up? It may not be profound, but there’s not a dull/false/trite note here, and the experience provides a good corrective to the pretentious bloat of a lot of contemporary “high culture” opera. The mixing-board stereo, with a bit of artificial reverb around the voices, is typical of pop/rock engineering, but very well done. **Ted Libbey**

Further Listening: Sting: *Songs From the Labrynth*; Previn: *Sally Chisum Remembers Billy the Kid*



HANDEL: IL DUELLO AMOROSO.

Andreas Scholl, countertenor.

Accademia Bizantina, Ottavio Dantone, conductor. Harmonia Mundi 901957.

Scholl’s Handel program focuses on the cantatas the 20-something composer wrote during his Italian sojourn. The texts are standard stuff of the time, fanciful excursions into an imagined Arcadian landscape, though some feature sardonic twists.

Handel adapted to the Italian style with aplomb, and these cantatas are peppered with some glorious passages. Scholl is an accomplished Handelian as well as being one of the few countertenors extant whose voice is naturally produced and technically irreproachable. He’s at his best in the solo cantata *Vedendo Amore* where he floats gorgeous high notes and infuses the text with expressive subtleties. His coloratura is stunning, with effortless, remarkably even runs. In the title number, he’s joined by sweet-voiced soprano Hélène Guilmette; the pair strikes sparks. The Accademia Bizantina provides superb support and shines in the Trio Sonata, which serves as an instrumental interlude.

The disc ends with an early version of *Mi palpita il cor*, one of Handel’s English successes. The sonics capture Scholl’s timbre truthfully and balance singer and accompaniments with proper authority. **Dan Davis**

Further Listening: Handel: Arias (Scholl); Scholl: *The Voice*

