

# GRAMOPHONE

## ISOUNDS OF AMERICA

*A special eight-page section focusing on recent recordings from the US and Canada*

### Bielawa · Jacobsen · Kernis

'My Outstretched Hand'

**Bielawa** My Outstretched Hand<sup>a</sup> **C Jacobsen**

If I Were Not Me **Kernis** Remembering the Sea

**San Francisco Girls Chorus; <sup>a</sup>Trinity Youth Chorus;**

**The Knights / Eric Jacobsen**

Supertrain © STRO14 (51' • DDD • T/t)



The three works here were all composed in 2016.

As in the previous release of music by Lisa Bielawa to have come my way, the made-for-TV opera *Vireo* (Orange Mountain Music, 7/19), the performers for her cantata *My Outstretched Hand* span the United States: from California to New York, the base for the Trinity Youth Chorus (who also took part in *Vireo*) and The Knights chamber orchestra. Bielawa's cantata sets self-revelatory texts from 1901 by the then 19-year-old Mary MacLane which traverse a remarkable range of moods and attitudes, from youthful defiance to something decidedly less confident, even imploring.

The two choirs cope well with the complex vocal writing – at one point they have a kind of 'Socratic dialogue' – though occasionally there are intonational infelicities. These are more problematic in Aaron Jay Kernis's wonderful triptych *Remembering the Sea* (*Souvenir de la mer*), his heartfelt response to the Paris and San Bernardino massacres of 2015. The specially commissioned text by Kai Hoffman-Krull is interleaved with quotes from Whitman (*Leaves of Grass*, of course) to devastating effect and the San Francisco Girls Chorus shape the music beautifully under Eric Jacobsen's direction, but some of the very high writing – as at the work's final climax – is audibly beyond them.

Eric Jacobsen's brother Colin composed *If I Were Not Me*, a thoughtful diptych (a scherzo and passacaglia, more or less) to two texts by Lydia Davis. It is nicely sung but Jacobsen's treatment of the second, 'Head, Heart', is no equal for the heart-stopping pathos of the words. There is a fundamental simplicity and directness to

these lines, particularly 'I want them back, says heart', that I am not sure any music could adequately express, but Jacobsen's polystylistics border on the trivial. A final word about The Knights: excellent accompanists, they are the element that binds all three performances together.

**Guy Rickards**

### Chopin

'Late Masterpieces'

Piano Sonata No 3, Op 58. Barcarolle, Op 60.

Berceuse, Op 57. Three Mazurkas, Op 56.

Polonaise-fantaisie, Op 61. Scherzo No 4, Op 54

**Sandro Russo** *pf*

Steinway & Sons © STNS30125 (77' • DDD)



For a pianist who usually takes great chances in concert, Sandro Russo's square phrasing in Chopin's Fourth Scherzo's Trio and slightly inhibited approach to the outer sections' rapid runs and dotted rhythms suggests that he might be studio-shy. Yet perhaps the microphone's unforgiving presence factors into Russo's concentrated delineation of the Berceuse's two-part right-hand writing. Op 56's first and third Mazurkas abound with colourful inner-voice activity, although Russo's fast traversal of the C major No 2 undermines the music's earthy swagger.

The *Polonaise-fantaisie* is memorable for Russo's flexible phrasing and organic transitions from one episode to the next. The pianist's astutely paced and dynamically charged final pages compensate for his somewhat rambling introspective stretches and not-so-carefully gauged trilled chords. What starts off as a decent, regulation model Chopin Barcarolle gradually turns poetic and heartfelt midway, and, thankfully, Russo resists today's common temptation to speed up the big chordal passage prior to the coda.

Russo yields little to other comparably imaginative and characterful renditions of the B minor Sonata's *Allegro maestoso*, and his essentially line-orientated pianism is

exactly what Chopin's knotty polyphony requires. The Scherzo is on the sober side, yet crisply and purposefully articulated. While Russo begins the *Largo* with sustained steadiness, his little expressive ritards and caesuras in the central episode cause my attention to wander. By contrast, the understated nobility of Russo's finale generates a satisfying cumulative narrative, and one will notice Russo's particular attention to the accents and rests that often catch pianists unaware. Unlike many recent Steinway & Sons releases stemming from the company's Spirio reproducing piano files, this disc captures Russo in the flesh, so to speak, with producer Joseph Patrych's Steinway regulated to tip-top standards by Kenneth Farnum, Jr. **Jed Distler**

### Holst

The Planets, Op 32<sup>a</sup>.

The Perfect Fool - Ballet Music

**Kansas City Symphony<sup>a</sup> Chorus**

**and Orchestra / Michael Stern**

Reference Recordings © RR146SACD

(61' • DDD/DSD)



*The Planets* has received dozens of recordings since its earliest accounts in the

1920s under the composer's baton. And no wonder: the seven-movement work (Pluto was discovered in 1930, some 15 years after Holst wrote his suite, and of course no longer has planetary status anyway) is both a vibrantly atmospheric depiction of astrological marvels and a visionary orchestral showpiece.

The Kansas City Symphony seize the day, and night, on their new recording under music director Michael Stern. Some performances of *The Planets* focus more on the score's colourful surfaces than on its dramatic mysteries and jubilation but Stern's concept pays close attention to every alluring aspect of Holst's achievement. The vivid and often asymmetrical rhythmic elements are highlighted to a lucid degree, even as the mesmerising textures are beautifully etched.