



## Sibelius, others: Trios. Sibelius Piano Trio. Yarlung (2 CDs).

Though renowned for his symphonic works, Sibelius wrote a lot of chamber music too, much of it early in his career, that remains little known. This includes several piano trios from the 1880s that the young composer (an accomplished violinist) wrote to play with his brother and sister. They sound nothing like his mature masterpieces but are nevertheless charming, expertly made, and brimming over with dandy tunes, inventive but always idiomatic and transparent instrumental textures, and a youthful, high-spirited delight in music-making.

*Korppoo* Trio is the most ambitious and expansive of the three Sibelius trios on Yarlung's program, coming in at 26 minutes, its fluent, melodic opening allegro interrupted on occasion by stabbing, rather Beethovenian assertions and even a clean-lined fugato at one point, though the overall form is classic in outline and clear as a bell. The second movement unfolds elaborate episodes that delve into Romantic pathos and fantasy, with striking use of high birdcalls and glassy harmonics in the violin (presumably to show off the young composer-violinist's prowess on his instrument). A *vivace* rondo finale dances gaily along, bringing the trio to an exhilarating conclusion. *Hafträsk* Trio is warmer, more relaxed, and closer to Grieg, while the concise *Lovisa* Trio puts two light-hearted and celebratory allegros around a more emotive andante. All three works, especially as played *con amore* here by the superb Sibel-

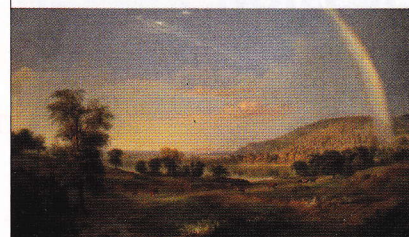
ius Piano Trio, will be immediately appealing to any lover of chamber music, as they most certainly are to yours truly.

The SPT fills out its program with four new works by currently active composers, three of them first recordings of commissions by the group. Each is roughly a quarter-hour long, though they vary widely in style and mood and hence give the players a chance to display their versatility and wide-ranging musicianship. Diego Schissi's clever and engaging *Nene* uses soothing harmonies, delicate instrumental interplay, and intricate rhythms that bounce merrily along to create an air of insouciant activity; slower sections offset the predominant busily repeating figurations with meditative calm. David Lefkowitz's *Ruminations* is a rhapsody that explores exotic melisma and nasal, at times acrid timbres (with the strings mimicking Middle Eastern winds and ouds, the piano strummed like a plucked lyre) to convey effusions both ecstatic and lamenting. More intense still, and more violent, is Kaija Saariaho's *Je sens un deuxième coeur* ("I feel a second heart"), a programmatic depiction of the inner turmoil of a pregnant woman who survives a vicious attack and discovers, to her relief, that her unborn child's heart is still beating. Finally, there's Lotta Wennäkoski's *Pääärme*, another angry fantasia, this one without the consoling resolution of Saariaho's, driven along by a rapid mechanical pulse beneath widely disjunct piano punctuations and screechy strings that stutter, twist, and howl in torment. Not comforting stuff, but definitely enough noise to keep the wolves away.

The Sibelius Trio plays with absolute technical security and impeccable tonal polish, traversing this large expanse of musical territory without missing a step. Yarlung's recording is, as usual, the epitome of sonic realism. The two-disc CD release is supplemented by downloads in several hi-res formats. **Mark Lehman**

**Further Listening:** Imbrie, Shifrin, Powell: Piano Trios (Music & Arts)

## AMERICAN ROMANTICS



Premiere Recordings of Turn of the Century Works for String Orchestra  
GOWANUS ARTS ENSEMBLE & REUBEN BLUNDELL, CONDUCTOR

## American Romantics. Gowanus Arts Ensemble. New Focus Recordings.

Before Charles Ives and Aaron Copland, it's not much of an exaggeration to maintain that American classical music was mostly a pale imitation of European models. "American" composers were either transplanted from the continent (usually Germany) or natives who had studied overseas with such pedagogues as Carl Reinecke, Josef Rheinberger, and, later, Nadia Boulanger. All the music performed on *American Romantics* is benignly competent and not infrequently charming. It's also, variously, derivative (Horatio Parker's *Scherzo*), trivial (*Pleasant Memories* by Paul Miersch), patronizing (*Omaha Indian Love Song* by Carl Busch), sentimental (Ludwig Bonvin's *Christmas Night's Dream*), or simply generic (*Air* by Arthur Foote). This isn't great art, not by a long shot, but perhaps that's the point. It represents the launching pad for truly American music: students of the composers featured on this CD include, in addition to Ives, Roy Harris, Roger Sessions, Robert Russell Bennett, and Alan Hovhaness. Reuben Blundell and the Gowanus Arts Ensemble, a group of ten strings, give capable performances that are aptly scaled and sensitively shaped. The string sound is warm and richly textured, with a wide soundstage and good imaging. A must-have program for aficionados of American classical music. **Andrew Quint**

**Further Listening:** *Twilight of the Romantics* (Cedille)