

GRAMOPHONE *Collector*

FROM LATVIA WITH LOVE

Andrew Mellor greets a series of recordings issued by Skani, the Latvian Music Information Centre's label, celebrating its 10th anniversary



An album of music by Rihards Dubra includes his *Petite symphonie*, in which Ilze Reine and Aigars Reinis play the organ of Riga Cathedral, each also doubling percussion

The pulse quickens when new releases arrive from Skani. The imprint of the Latvian Music Information Centre is marking 10 years by accelerating releases without compromising quality. In the label's boutique-like physical distinctiveness, as well as its central mission, it's hard not to make comparison with Dacapo's vital ambassadorial work for Danish music.

I would recommend all five releases here while levying some reservations against the double disc of organ music by **Rihards Dubra**. Fans of the composer will not be disappointed and his block-like aesthetic suits the instrument (he holds a church position in Riga). Neo-Baroque preludes and fugues mingle with mystical works that employ the language familiar from Dubra's orchestral music, the scope of which I sometimes find limited and the means under-resourced. Despite some gauche gestures, there is an urge behind all the music here, with the highlight Dubra's *Petite symphonie* for two organists (each doubling percussion) at one instrument. This French-tinged piece ranges more widely and taps the splendour of the colossal Walcker organ

in Riga Cathedral, under the hands and feet of Ilze Reine and Aigars Reinis.

Agris Engelmanis might well prove my musical discovery of the year – an eccentric lone wolf of an artist (there is a wonderful interview with him in the booklet, as well as one of his poems) who shunned Riga and cleaved instead to the city of Liepāja, whose impressive symphony orchestra and Great Amber Concert Hall are becoming closely associated with Skani. The trauma of Engelmanis's childhood clearly informs his *Diaphonies 1-3* – stripped back, three-movement suites for orchestra and solo piano, each tight as a nut, whose ferocious but latent power comes momentarily to head on pin-points, the orchestra appearing to shred itself into silence. *Musica Alba* is similarly sparse but a little less tense, while *Music for Symphony Orchestra* is more gregarious still and was played at the Great Amber's opening a decade ago (the live recording here). None of this music has been recorded elsewhere and some of it has never been played until now. It deserves to be heard.

Vilnis Šmidbergs has been a central feature in Latvian music life, his 80th

birthday being widely celebrated in 2024. His music won't waste your time, offering a new slant on Latvia's penchant for intense lamentation, sometimes concealing it with lightness. That much is apparent from the arcadian fantasy of the Trio Sonata for flute, violin and piano, an extraordinarily well-wrought piece. Šmidbergs's tight *Piano Variations* goes to

THE RECORDINGS



Dubra Music for Organ
Reinis, Reine
Skani ② LMIC168



Engelmanis Musica Alba
Liepāja SO / Lakstīgala
Skani LMIC156



Šmidbergs Chamber Music
Meija, Geka, Cāļite
Skani LMIC170



The White Birds
String Trio Baltia
Skani LMIC171



Echoes of Latvia
Zariņa, Egliņa
Skani LMIC169

more overtly dark places and becomes mightily heavy towards its end; it is impressively played by Iveta Cālīte but the recorded sound here needed more depth. The composer's Violin Sonata No 1, beautifully played by Magdalēna Geka (who also takes on the Viola Sonata) is compelling: its opening *Largo* obsessing over a circling motif that twists up; its third-movement *Andante* resembling a classic Baltic lament before a song of optimism rings out.

Loving performances of those works suggest Skani's chronicling of Latvian music is more than procedural. String Trio Baltia's album **The White Birds** only confirms the point. It takes its title from Gundega Šmite's four-movement survey of four Baltic bird types, a gently enchanting and gimmick-free piece. *Castillo Interior*, commissioned by Sol Gabetta on the theme of Teresa of Ávila, is classic Pēteris Vasks in its mining of light from darkness. We have heard from Gundaris Pone on Skani before (see *American Portraits* etc, 10/24) and this performance of his epic *Gran duo funebre* for viola and cello gets to the heart of a piece that doesn't mourn so much as ask the big questions (it was decorated with multiple state prizes). Closing the disc is Tālvāldis Ķeniņš's Trio, written in 1989 on his first return to Latvia for 40 years (after emigration to Canada), and which dredges up strong feelings paralleled in the performances.

Laura Zariņa has previously recorded Ķeniņš's impressive Violin Concerto for Skani. Her duo recital with pianist Agnese Egliņa, **Echoes of Latvia**, alternates violin-piano works by Lūcija Garūta (1902-77; don't miss Skani's album of her part-songs recorded by the Latvian Radio Choir – take Malcolm Riley's word for it if not mine, 11/23) around works for the same (or violin solo) scoring by current female composers. As an album, it is beautifully conceived, paced and played. But of course, it's also more than that: a reminder of Garūta's lyrical gift and the rightful placing of it as a precursor to the women who followed, who also need to be heard. Their voices differ even if many are lined with that distinctive Latvian mysticism that fuels such affecting music. I was drawn in particular to the first and last of them: Renāte Stivriņa's *Waves Come and Waves Go* and Selga Mence's *Between the Lake and the Sea*. **G**

PHOTOGRAPHY: JĀNIS PORIETIS

as a glance at the original demonstrates, the composer never over-egging the pudding. The main theme of the opening *Allègrement* is a beguiling tune, gently echoed throughout. The expressive slow movement takes us to a remote key, before a whirling dervish of a finale delivered with panache by harpist Emmanuel Ceysson and the Quatuor Voce. Their leader, Sarah Dayan, gives particular pleasure in the poised descent in the gentle winding-down of the first movement.

The four sets of *Images* reflect the pure blend of voices within, for example in the hushed sonorities of 'Clair de lune sur l'étang du parc', all beautifully captured in the warm acoustic of the Salle Colonne (Paris), a church conversion, so apt for this music. Most of the *Images* carry descriptive titles but in the third suite, the composer trades images for particular locations in Morocco and Tunisia that the booklet writer Carl Swanson describes as the composer's 'emotional response to the subject in hand', for as far as is known Tournier never travelled outside France. The players make light of the terpsichorean twists in a dance at a fete at Sedjenane, a paean to flamenco in 'Lolita la danseuse' and a Russian peasant dance, 'La danse de moujik'. Suite No 4 for solo harp carries the pictorial theme a step further with an impressionistic study of snow falling in a remote village ('Cloches sous la neige'), with Ceysson bringing to life the intricacies of the scoring in a magical performance. 'La volière magique', a picturesque study of children gazing in wonderment into an aviary, is likewise imbued by him and his players with the same delicacy and precision.

It was an inspired idea to cast Véronique Gens in the four songs, where she brings her operatic experience to a highly charged fleeting vision of the beloved in 'Elle est venue, elle a souri', a voluptuous tone to a study of insomnia ('Insomnie'), a seductive air to 'La lettre du jardinier', softly embodying the idea of 'fleurs flottantes' (soft-bodied wisteria) and heartbreak to 'Rêverie de Bouddha', where life it seems is nothing but a dream – perhaps the inspiration behind the striking cover image by Juliette Stive, after Dalí. Beautifully recorded and beautifully performed, this is a very desirable recording.

Adrian Edwards

'On a Ground'

Anonymous Greensleeves to a Ground. Tollet's Ground **JS Bach** Harpsichord Concerto in F minor, BWV1056 – *Largo*. Prelude in C major, BWV846 **JS Bach/Gounod** Ave Maria **Carr An**

Italian Ground **Farinel** Faronells Ground (Folia) **Gluck** Dance of the Blessed Spirits and Melody **Hannibal** Dreams. Sunset Dance. Twilight on a Ground. Waves on a Ground **A Marcello** Oboe Concerto in D minor – *Adagio* **D Ortiz** Eight Recercadas **Satie** Trois Gymnopédies

Michala Petri rec **Marie Nishiyama** hp
OUR Recordings (8 226927 • 75')



There's something grounding about the ground bass. Its reassuring

repetition can be meditative and mesmeric. It provides a solid footing for the most florid harmonic and melodic material, which one can read against its foundations, registering with renewed pleasure every variation. No wonder it's one of the oldest musical formulas in existence. Here, doyenne of the recorder Michala Petri and Japanese baroque harpist Marie Nishiyama present their own variation on the recorder-and-harp recital, with a century-spanning programme recorded just prior to Covid lockdown in the serenity of the Chichibu Muse Park, Tokyo.

Unlike, say, Stefan Temmingh and Margret Koell's edgier 'Sound Stories' (Accent), 'On a Ground' is predominantly given over to music, from the Renaissance to our own time, that is attractive, direct and, dare one say, eminently relaxing. The tensions are generated through contrast alone – in dynamics, tempo, pitch and register (Petri of course plays a range of recorders) and timbre – rather than stylistic extremes. The works by Carr, Farinel and Ortiz, grounded as they are in earlier styles, therefore sing in both sympathy and counterpoint with the Bach and Marcello arrangements as much as with Satie's three *Gymnopédies*.

Paradoxically, perhaps, it's in guitarist and lutenist Lars Hannibal's four contemporary works, originally written for guitar and recorder, where this combination of instruments and performers comes into its own. The instruments get equal billing, and as we move gently through the impressionistic *Dreams* and *Sunset Dance* and the more 'grounded' *Twilight on a Ground* and *Waves on a Ground*, we're able better to savour the evocative, delicately rendered individual colours with which Petri and Nishiyama fill their collective sound palette.

A gorgeous release, accessible to the neophyte yet with ample artistry and aesthetic sophistication to attract the aficionado.

William Yeoman