

the Neaves skim surfaces. Clean, correct score reading throughout; sound is clear, close, and nicely balanced. **Adrian Corleonis**

**RUTINI** *Divertimenti per cimbalo à 4 mani*: Rondò I, II, III: See CLEMENTI.

**SAARIAHO** *Tocar*<sup>1</sup>. *Cloud Trio*<sup>2</sup>. *Light and Matter*<sup>3</sup>. *Aure*<sup>4</sup>. *Graal Théâtre*<sup>5</sup> • Jennifer Koh (vn); <sup>2</sup>Hsin-Yun Huang (va); <sup>3,4</sup>Anssi Karttunen, <sup>2</sup>Wilhemina Smith (vc); <sup>1,3</sup>Nicolas Hodges (pn); <sup>5</sup>Conner Gray Covington, cond; <sup>5</sup>Curtis 20/21 Ens • CEDILLE 183 (68:06)

The music of Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho seems to always invite the listener to seek ever-deeper listening strategies through its very elusiveness. This is true, certainly, of the first piece here, *Tocar* of 2010. The title comes from the Spanish for “to touch”; it is not a toccata in the traditional sense, though. The initial lyrical violin line, almost bending in the wind, implies a different aspect of touch, almost a stroking. The composer describes the two instruments as moving independently but “keeping an eye on each other.” As the piece continues, the “magnetism” (Saariaho’s term) between the two increases until a unison is achieved. Koh and Hodges (as fine a pianist in contemporary repertoire as one can find) play with such confidence and such awareness of the piece’s trajectory that the result is mesmeric storytelling; it is as if Koh is whispering secrets in our ears. While Da Camera of Houston on Ondine offer an alternate version for flute and harp, there is direct competition from the group Meta4, again on Ondine, on a disc reviewed none too positively by Lynn René Bayley in *Fanfare* 37:3. Jennifer Koh’s sound is more appealing than Minna Pensola’s from Meta4, for sure, and frankly there is the feeling of being in safer hands.

Again, there is competition for the performance of the 2009 *Cloud Trio* from two Scandinavian sources: BIS and, once more, Ondine. This piece, for string trio, was written high in the French Alps, the altitude of which formed the spark for Saariaho’s appreciation of clouds, many different types, but all coming under the same word. Taking that idea as inspiration for this piece, Saariaho creates a matrix of shifting sonorities. This performance honors the direction *sempre energico* for the third movement, its textures raw and invigorating. Intriguingly, there are Romantic lines aching to get out in the final *Tranquillo ma sempre molto espressivo*. Koh’s command of her violin is impeccable, being particularly impressive in the very highest echelons of her register. Hsin-Yun Huang and Wilhemina Smith are absolute equals, resulting in chamber music of the first order. The last movement is like experiencing a tapestry in sound.

Again, there is competition. The BIS offering, performed by the Trio Aristos, should be seen as supplemental, as opposed to creating an either/or choice, because of its couplings: music by Nørgård, Sørensen, and Hellstenius. The recording is as fine as one would expect from BIS (close and detailed); but there is more atmosphere in Koh and friends’ performance, while the BIS sounds just that bit too clinical. Over at Ondine, on a disc of Saariaho trios, we find the Zebra Trio, including Anssi Karttunen as cellist (who features elsewhere on Koh’s album, but not in this piece). The Zebra Trio’s performance is warm, expressive, and intense; but there is just that extra touch of technical expertise to Koh’s contributions on the present album. It is a close thing; given that this just over 15-minute piece is the only overlap, there is a persuasive case to be made for owning both.

The most recent work here is *Light and Matter* (2014). This is a painting in sound of a city park as it changes with the light (the park in question is Morningside Park, New York). Deliberately limiting her musical material, Saariaho explores light and shade via the medium of piano trio. The purity of unison offers an aspect of the music’s white light; Hodges’s piano playing is certainly variegated, beautifully sensitive to the musical surface, offering the most beautiful droplets of sound. This is the world premiere recording of *Light and Matter*, and as such holds considerable documentary value.

Although originally scored for violin and viola, the 2011 piece *Aure* is heard here in a version for violin and cello; this is its first recording in this form. The work is inspired by a line from Anne Frank’s diary: “Why us, why the star?”; in turn, musically, it references Dutilleux’s *Mémoire des ombres* and was intended as a 95th birthday tribute for that composer. Koh and Karttunen display superhuman control of their instruments in the passages of near-inaudible whisperings. The performance of the original violin and viola version by members of Meta4 (Antti Tikkanen and Atte Kilpeläinen), on their second volume of Saariaho on Ondine, gives us if anything a more fragile



piece. Two different slants on the same object is no bad thing.

Finally, there comes the violin concerto *Graal Théâtre* (with its title taken from Roubaud). Although written for Gidon Kremer, the piece was also the reason Koh and Saariaho met initially, to prepare for one of Koh's performances. The score is hugely difficult, the percussion of the first movement offering a ritualistic setting for the crippling demands Saariaho loads on her soloist. Koh is equal to these and more; she realizes the sheer beauty of Saariaho's writing while never letting the expressive intensity slip. Conner Grey Covington ensures that the Curtis Ensemble 20/21 sticks with the soloist like glue. The second (and last) movement holds huge variety; there is also the feeling of a little more freedom for the orchestra, something the Curtis Ensemble makes the most of. Koh seems tireless in terms of both concentration and accuracy. The recording information gives just one date for the recording of this piece (October 31, 2016). If so, this is a remarkable achievement; what a tiring day that must have been. Saariaho's scoring is positively luminous at times, something viscerally caught here.

While Kremer's recording is of huge importance, Koh's reading acknowledges the collaborative aspect to a huge degree. And another overlap suggestion: There is a fine reading by Jon Storgårds on Ondine that couples the concerto with Saariaho's *Solar* and *Lichtbogen*. If you can find the shelf space....

In summary, then, an essential purchase. Saariaho's light continues to shine brightly. **Colin Clarke**

**SAINT-SAËNS Piano Concertos Nos. 1, 2, 4** • Louis Lortie (pn); Edward Gardner, cond; BBC P • CHANDOS 20031 (70:58)

There have been many great recordings of the Saint-Saëns piano concertos over the years, particularly of No. 2. Rather than drag out Arthur Rubinstein, Moura Lympny, Jean-Philippe Collard, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Stephen Hough, and all the rest for detailed comparison, let me just say that Louis Lortie, Edward Gardner, and the BBC Philharmonic's new recording is terrific.

Saint-Saëns's Second has been described as a journey from Bach to Offenbach. It often sounds like three different pieces, but in the hands of these musicians the concerto has a grand Romantic sweep from beginning to end. Listen to the dreamily gentle piano in the first movement's final recapitulation, followed by the orchestra's punchy chords, and you will discover how distinctive this performance is. In the second movement Scherzo, Lortie's pianism is joyous, but with enough sinew to retain Romantic gravitas. (He reminds me more of Rubinstein than Lympny in this respect.) As expected, the finale is fiery and hard-hitting—not adjectives often used of Saint-Saëns. In his booklet note Roger Nichols, always a perceptive writer, suggests this movement was a tongue-in-cheek tribute to the "masculine pianism" of Anton Rubinstein, who commissioned the work and conducted the first performance. (The premiere was almost scuttled by the composer's lack of preparation of the solo part.)

A grand approach also works beautifully for Concerto No. 1, the most straightforward of Saint-Saëns's five piano concertos. The ground is prepared by horn solos of Brahmsian mellowness, and once Lortie begins in earnest his authority is clear. The busy third movement is dazzling but always grounded. The less frequently played Fourth Concerto is regarded as formally the most unusual of the set because of its two-movement structure. Again, Lortie and Gardner are musically and expressively cohesive. One of the joys of these performances is the balance achieved by Gardner (and the Chandos engineers) in passages where the piano plays decorative arpeggios: The orchestra never hangs fire but supports the piano dynamically, avoiding any inkling that musical progress has stalled to make room for virtuosity.

In terms of sound, the orchestra is closer than is usual with this company: a sensible decision. The disc represents yet another feather in Gardner's cap, and Lortie is at the top of his considerable game. I look forward to hearing their interpretations of Piano Concertos Nos. 3 and 5. Having said all that, another new recording of the Second Concerto has appeared, coupled with No. 5, which may mean a complete set is on the way from Warner. The pianist there is Bertrand Chamayou, whose recent Ravel collection was a revelation. I have not yet heard his Saint-Saëns—I suspect it will be more in the style of Thibaudet—but Chamayou's disc has been getting raves, so it may be worth waiting for. There is nothing to stop us from collecting both. **Phillip Scott**