

those operas. So too, Rubinstein's Ivan is not so terrible, the music being only intermittently menacing and even then not so much. It is only near the end of this 23-minute work that anything really sinister happens, and the savage tortures and executions Ivan inflicted on many thousands of men, women, and children are little reflected in this music. If hardly a realistic depiction of its subject, the piece is nonetheless stirring, colorful, and worth hearing, although the composer's tendency to repeat the same figure too many times is once again in evidence. The work met with approval even from Rubinstein's customary antagonists among the Mighty Handful, although it does not have a pronounced Russian-nationalist character. Balakirev conducted the premiere, and Borodin praised the piece as free from the influence of Mendelssohn, hitherto a strong element in Rubinstein's style. Golovchin's performance is sonorous and well played, but the rival version, by Robert Stankovsky and the Slovak State Philharmonic (originally on Marco Polo but reissued on Naxos), is more urgent, vivid, and strongly accented. Moreover, the closer perspective of the Naxos recording yields greater transparency and allows string detail to register more tellingly.

Historically, Anton Rubinstein was an important figure in the development of Russian music. If he was not a composer of the front rank, his music does offer substantial pleasures. Notwithstanding a few reservations, I can recommend this disc as offering a worthwhile sampling of his orchestral program music in capable and well-recorded performances. **Daniel Morrison**

RUBINSTEIN Piano Concerto No. 5, Op. 94. *Caprice russe*, Op. 102. *Der Thurm zu Babel*, Op. 80: Overture • Grigorios Zamparas (pn); Jon Ceander Mitchell, cond; Bohuslav Martinů PO • CENTAUR 3204 (74:55)

The fifth and last of Anton Rubinstein's piano concertos was composed in 1874. Dedicated to the French pianist and composer Charles-Valentin Alkan (misspelled "Arkan" in Centaur's notes), it is by far the longest of Rubinstein's works in this genre, comparable in duration if not stature to the concertos of Brahms. The first movement alone lasts over 22 minutes in this performance, with a total timing of 50 minutes. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that Rubinstein chose the same key for this work, E \flat -Major, as did Beethoven for his "Emperor" Concerto. That lengthy first movement is a grand, expansive, often rhapsodic statement, although as is usual with Rubinstein, there is too much repetition. The slow movement strikes me as rather perfunctory, but the brilliant, exuberant finale, at 17 minutes nearly as long as the first movement, offers considerable pleasure. **The performance by Grigorios Zamparas is straightforward, crisp, fluent, and technically proficient.** He does not quite match the brilliance, forcefulness, and spontaneity that pianists such as Joseph Banowetz and Marc-André Hamelin have brought to other Rubinstein concertos, although **he does contribute some pretty impressive rapid passagework.** Hamelin, however, has not recorded this concerto, and the Banowetz reading, on Marco Polo, is currently available only as an MP3 download. I have not heard it, but the Marco Polo catalog is gradually being transferred to Naxos, so Banowetz may eventually be available again on CD. On the other hand, the Centaur recording, although a bit dry and unreverberant, is better focused and balanced and more realistic than the Marco Polo series, and the piano sound is solid and well defined. Peaks have plenty of impact and are free from strain or harshness. No other recordings of this concerto are currently available.

The *Caprice russe*, an appealing 20-minute fantasy for piano and orchestra on three folk or folk-like themes, was written in 1878. Zamparas once again offers a straightforward and proficient performance, perhaps lacking a degree of the flamboyance that Rubinstein's music seems to demand. The only other recording of this piece in the catalog is that of Banowetz, also coupled with his performance of the Fifth Concerto and therefore available only as an MP3. Rubinstein's "sacred opera" *Der Thurm zu Babel* (The Tower of Babel), one of several he wrote on biblical themes and to German librettos, dates from 1869. Its brief overture is deliberate and brooding but uneventful. No other recordings of the overture and none of the opera itself are available.

Under Jon Ceander Mitchell, the Bohuslav Martinů Philharmonic shows itself to be a capable and proficient ensemble, although lacking the tonal opulence of some more famous orchestras. The violins, at least as recorded here, can sometimes seem thin and steely, but the winds are reliable, more so than in the Slovak orchestra used in the Banowetz recordings of the first four concertos. (A

different Slovak orchestra performs in the Fifth Concerto.)

In the absence of any current competition on CD, I can recommend these accomplished and well-recorded performances to anyone interested in Rubinstein's music. **Daniel Morrison**

SAINT-SAËNS Piano Quartet in B♭. Piano Quintet in a. Barcarolle in F • Fine Arts Qrt; Cristina Ortiz (pn) • NAXOS 8.572904 (71:12)

Saint-Saëns's Piano Quartet in B♭ may be the most unusual 19th-century chamber work of its type, partly because it was written not for an established chamber trio (or quartet) to play, but for the composer himself—a noted piano virtuoso—and three front-rank soloists. The premiere was given by Saint-Saëns at the keyboard, Pablo de Sarasate on violin, famed cellist Léon Jacquart, and violist Alfred Turban, who was then the leader of the Paris Opéra Orchestra. Undoubtedly, the most unusual aspect of the quartet is that there is no real slow movement. Even though the second movement is marked *Andante maestoso ma con moto*, the *Andante* designation is misleading. The piano enters playing in double time, fairly fast passages, while the strings play half and whole notes, then the strings double the tempo while the piano plays more slowly. The effect of this tension-and-release is tremendously interesting, and in a sense unique among works of this vintage. Even more innovative is the third movement, a brisk scherzo in the minor that bears a slight resemblance to *Danse macabre*. Here, there are quirky passages where both strings and piano run through dazzling chromatic passages that border on atonality (they do this to an even greater degree in the last movement), and there are surprising “breaks” for both the piano and the strings where the motion seems to stop dead, only to be kicked back into gear by a staccato thump. In short, it's a heck of a piece, and both Ortiz and the Fine Arts Quartet play it with exactly the right balance of tension and brio. I was literally stunned to discover at ArkivMusic that there seem to be only six other recordings of this work in the catalog at present, of which high marks go to the version by the Nash Ensemble on Hyperion (almost a given...are there *any* bad Nash Ensemble recordings?) and the recording by Ames Piano Quartet on Solo Luminus, but that one's in an eight-CD set. Perhaps the high virtuosic demands of this piece make it more difficult to program than many more popular works in the same genre.

The *Barcarolle* in F is a lovely piece, stylistically closer to Chopin's or Mendelssohn's than to the somewhat strange barcarolles of Alkan (which I'm not positive that Saint-Saëns knew about anyway), yet because it was written for an ensemble and not just for solo piano there is more complexity in the writing. This *Barcarolle* actually develops, with extended solo and polyphonic passages for the strings, eventually becoming a somewhat complex web in which the various instruments—the piano included—participate in the ongoing musical conversation. I found it curious to discover that the viola part was originally written for a harmonium! I can only imagine how this curious-sounding instrument might fit into the complex texture that Saint-Saëns has wrought here. Although only nine minutes long, this is a fully formed work with multiple themes and a real sense of progression in its musical journey.

The earlier Piano Quintet in A Minor (1854-55) is a different animal from the quartet, more of an ensemble piece for strings with extended solo piano writing. Indeed, as the work moves along, the piano's role comes more to the fore, almost making it a mini-concerto for that instrument. By the time one reaches the scherzo, one is again reminded of the composer's brilliance in handling this form, imparting far more interesting themes, harmonic changes, and development than even in many of Beethoven's scherzos. This movement is almost an entire miniature world in itself, so captivating and imaginative is its form: Note, for instance, the highly original string writing, with its numerous chromatic leaps, tremolos, and other devices which consistently add color and texture to the ongoing structure. And then comes yet another surprise: the relaxed, tranquil opening of the last movement, almost like a passacaglia in feeling with counterpoint played by the strings against each other rather than presenting a unison front. This tranquil opening then develops, slowly but surely, like the opening of the petals of a flower into a bloom of exquisite beauty. When the music becomes louder, it does not do so with stentorian force, but presents its forcefulness as a logical outgrowth of the gentle opening, occasionally falling back in volume as Saint-Saëns continues to add surprising yet logical touches to the development section. Considering how orchestrators from Joseph Joachim to