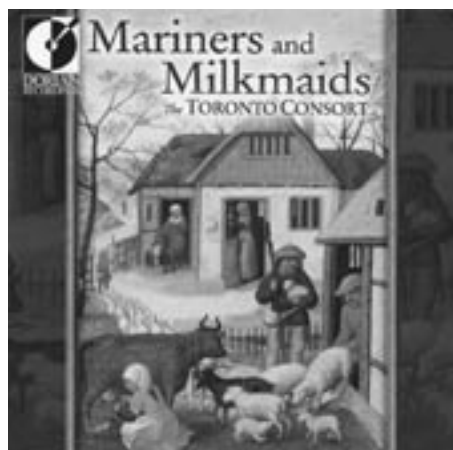


ing performers whose playing lacked freedom and feeling.

Actually, a Horowitz recording of a piano concerto was such a rare event that it was all recorded on film — rehearsal and performance. That film can be yours too. Did I mention that it's on a DVD included with the two CDs?

That's right. Don't just walk, now, run.



Mariners and Milkmaids

Toronto Consort

Dorian DOR-93247

Lessard: This 75 minute CD presents 26 pieces by this ensemble specialized in Medieval and Renaissance music. It's some music, and I can't hope to do justice to it in this space. Fortunately the booklet is full of information about the music and the period when it was played or sung. There are also notes on the artists, and the words of the songs. It's all there.

I can't say that Medieval music is to my taste, but a number of the selections brought me a good deal of pleasure. There are popular dances, folk airs, several martial songs and instrumental pieces, pretty ballads, and several comic stories told in but a few words. *The Cut-purse* which opens the disc is a fine example of these brief tales told on a catchy air. *The Country Lass* is sung by a superb voice that leaves all of the room needed to the pure beauty of the melody, with discreet piano accompaniment. A charming madrigal for mixed voices, *Sister Awake*, tells the story of the "sleeping beauties" who awaken and leave their "bed of roses" to "go A-Maying." You'll probably like *Mad Tom*, attributed to Henry Purcell, perhaps wrongly, sung

by a talented bass. William Byrd wrote *The Maiden Songs*, harpsichord variations on a popular air.

The album ends with *Greensleeves*, which has lost none of its charm and popularity after four centuries! It's sung here by a fine baritone.

Both musicians and singers are excellent, and they are well served by an impeccable recording.



Bach: The Concerto Album

Lara St. John/NY Bach Ensemble

Magnatune LC11982

Rejskind: Who is Magnatune? It's a record company of course, but that's not the whole story. This is not a physical recording, but a downloadable file. There's something here to interest both the audiophile and the music lover.

Magnatune is an on-line record company with a difference. Its motto: *We are a record company but we are not evil.* For more on the company itself, see *Gossip & News* on page 70. Unlike such services as the Apple Music Store and Musicmatch, Magnatune doesn't sell compressed files, it *gives* them away. If you're willing to lay out cash for a full fidelity version of the MP3 version you've heard, you lay out from US\$5 to \$18...your choice. You can then burn it onto CD.

I downloaded two versions of this recording. The first was in uncompressed WAV format. This should have given the best result, but on my Mac the files got converted to AIFF (the Mac's native audio format), and the resulting sound was shrill and glassy. The other version was compressed with FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec). Decompressors

for every platform are available free at <http://flac.sourceforge.net>. The total compressed package "weighs" about 300 Mb, which of course limits it to broadband connections. FLAC delivered pristine AIFF files.

Now to the recording itself. Lara St. John is a fine Canadian-born violinist who has gotten a lot of press, at least some of it for irrelevant reasons. She is tall and blonde, and her CD booklets don't always show her wearing a lot of clothes, or, on her first album, *any* clothes. But is there such a thing as bad press? At any rate, this recording well illustrates what I already knew from earlier recordings, that she is an exceptional violinist as well.

Three Bach concertos are included here, the ones with BWV numbers 1041 through 1043. This last is a double concerto, with the second violin played by her brother Scott, who is also a violinist of note. These are daunting works, because of a complexity which is mathematical as much as musical. The danger for a musician tackling Bach is making it *sound* like mathematics rather than music. St. John never comes close to falling into that trap. It is astonishing to hear her, seemingly crunching the math in a remote part of her intellect while concentrating her conscious attention to the sheer beauty of what Bach created.

And goodness these *are* beautiful pieces! Their depth of course flows from their complexity, but when they are properly played, as they are on this recording, their effect on the emotions is awesome. These are among the more familiar works from the vast Bach repertoire, and I have heard them many times, but even so I was amazed how often Bach could surprise me with twists and turns that, however unexpected, seem inevitable in context. There are some especially great moments, such as the famous Allegro from the BWV1042 or the Largo from the double concerto, but these works are composed of wall-to-wall nuggets.

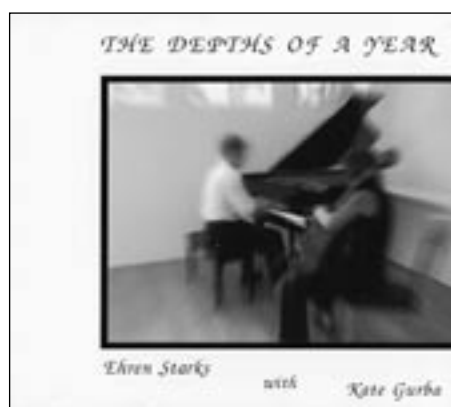
It isn't possible to describe the beauty of the music without also describing the beauty of the playing. Both St. John and the chamber ensemble accompanying her have a feel for the music, always letting its lyrical aspect come through without

diminishing the overall structure.

The sound is well-balanced and not at all forward, with a very good orchestral image. St. John's 1779 Guadagnini violin always sound smooth and natural.

The sound is rather different on the fourth work, the *G Minor Sonata BWV1001*. Unlike the concertos, recorded in New York, the sonata was recorded at Skywalker Sound in California, using a Pacific Microsonics recorder, presumably with HDCD encoding (which code is not on the recording, however). St. John is much more forward here. The sound of her violin remains quite natural, but she seems to struggle a little more than she does in the concertos, as though she is working a little too hard on the technical challenge of playing those torrents of notes that collide and flow into each other. To her credit, she *does* meet the challenge.

I began by saying that the recording is downloadable, rather than physical. But that's not entirely true, because Magnatune offers non-exclusive contracts to its musicians. The physical CD is therefore available from the musician's own site, larastjohn.com. The price including shipping is equal to Magnatune's maximum: US\$18.



The Depths of a Year

Ehren Starks/Kate Gurba
Magnatune ES6460

Rejskind: The very title suggests the musical genre. This is of course a New Age recording (from Magnatune's downloadable music stable), though that alone won't tell you much. Some New Age music is boring, and deliberately so, intended to facilitate and not interrupt, personal meditation. Some, on the other

hand, is viscerally exciting, using the textures and dynamics of both acoustic and electronic instruments to excite the passions. Mannheim Steamroller's famous *Fresh Aire* recordings are an example.

This is a purely acoustical recording. Pianist Ehren Starks plays a Yamaha grand piano (you can see it on the downloadable booklet cover), accompanied by the cello of Kate Gurba. Gurba uses her cello in several ways, playing it with her bow, but sometimes plucking it like a string bass, or even striking it to obtain percussive effects. The mood is rather introspective, but with enough melodic invention to engage the attention. I confess that originally I listened to it in MP3 form on my computer (while doing something else of course), and I found myself pausing to actually *listen*.

The piano and cello take turns carrying the melody. *The Tale of Room* opens with an obsessive rhythm by the piano, with the cello coming in with a soaring folklike melody. In *Sunset in Pensacola*, on the other hand, the piano opens solo with one of the most memorable melodies of the album, and it is only later in the piece that the cello joins in, in a rhythmic capacity. In *Bailar Tristemente* the dancelike rhythm is carried equally by the two instruments, in an innovative arrangement I liked a great deal. *Subtle Groove* is swing, with a good many effects from the cello, not all of them involving the strings.

There is a good deal of variety here, though by the end I wasn't certain there was enough of it to sustain an entire album. Like some books, it probably shouldn't be devoured at one sitting.

Brazilian Soul

Almeida, Byrd, Holland, Magnusson
Hi-Res HRM2009

Rejskind: I count exactly one Brazilian in this all-star quartet, namely the legendary guitarist Laurindo Almeida. Still, one could conceivably give Charlie Byrd honorary Brazilian citizenship, considering that, even before Almeida began his American career, Byrd was popularizing Brazilian music around the world: first the samba and then the bossa nova. Or so claims the booklet for this delightful high resolution DVD of the 1980 Concord Jazz recording.



The soul of this music is the guitar, or two guitars to be precise. Almeida had by then integrated his music into the great streams of American jazz, in various ensembles, including the one that may or may not have been named for him, the LA 4. Here he returns to his roots. Except for discreet percussion by Milt Holland and solid but subtle beat from bassist Bob Magnusson, the two guitarists dominate, and so do the famous rhythms many of us grew up with. The album begins with Ernesto Nazareth's *Carioca*, and it's hard not to be captivated.

Most of the pieces are compositions by Brazilian musicians of the first half of the 20th Century, arranged for two guitars by Almeida, with considerable aid from Byrd. Two of the pieces, *Naquele Tempo* and *Cochichando*, are by Alfredo Vianna, a flutist Almeida frequently played with in his Rio days. The great Antonio Carlos Jobim is represented with *Stone Flower*, and Byrd himself contributed *For Jeff*. Most of the arrangements were done by Almeida.

Last and least is the show tune *Don't Cry For Me Argentina*, whose lackluster rendition was possibly a concession to the marketing people. It's always a fine tune, but it sounds oddly out of place in what is a Brazilian-American fusion album.

But no matter, this is a fine performance by two great musicians. It's been captured in vivid and dynamic sound that benefits from the extra information on this DVD. I'll listen to this anytime.

