

# RECORDINGS

## IN REVIEW



J A Y N O R D L I N G E R

At any moment, there is a crop of young pianists, eager to show what they have. And as we get older, I think, our concept of “young” slides upward. Yuja Wang was born in 1987 and is therefore still in the under-thirty category. She has recorded the Ravel piano concertos with the Tonhalle Orchestra of Zurich, led by its chief conductor, Lionel Bringuier (Deutsche Grammophon 0023931-02). Bringuier is a touch older than Wang, born in 1986. I first reviewed him in 2007, when he was twenty. I wrote, “It’s always risky to say that someone, in any field, is can’t-miss, but it’s not so risky in this case.” It was not.

The two Ravel piano concertos are the one in G major, for your standard two hands, and the one in D major, for the left hand alone. They are obviously a familiar pairing. But on LPs and CDs, they have often needed a filler, usually an additional French piece. When Alicia de Larrocha recorded the concertos in the mid-1970s, she added Fauré’s Fantasy in G for piano and orchestra. Wang, too, adds Fauré, but not the Fantasy and not a piano and orchestra piece at all: she plays the Ballade in F-sharp major. It so happens that Fauré made a piano and orchestra version of this piece, but Wang elects to go solo.

Leaving Fauré aside for a moment, Wang is virtually made for Ravel. Among her qualities are nimbleness, clarity, agility, and color. Much of what she plays sounds like Ravel, or Debussy, even when it shouldn't: the Liszt Sonata, for example. She seldom makes a fat, lush sound, going deep into the keys. But that is seldom called for in Ravel or Debussy. On her new CD, she begins with the G-major concerto, to which she imparts a nice sense of jazz. This reminds me that she is quite good in the big Gershwin pieces: *Rhapsody in Blue* and the Concerto in F. In Ravel's middle movement, she is wisely matter-of-fact, or straightforward. And from both her and the orchestra, the music builds beautifully and excitingly. This movement ends with a famous long trill. I like it slower and sultrier than Wang plays it, but she is entitled to her choice. And the last movement, a kind of toccata, Wang hammers elegantly, just as Ravel wants. Again, she is virtually made for this music. She next turns to the Fauré Ballade, which she plays competently, needless to say. But one can imagine more seamlessness or fluidity in it. At the same time, the piece expresses its uncomplicated charm. Wang ends her CD with the left-hand concerto, in which she is superb. Bringuier and the Tonhalle Orchestra do their part, too. The concerto has what it needs, including beauty, bite, sensuality, glitter, blues, a sense of architecture – and, from the soloist, staggering virtuosity. By the way, I had a thought when I was a kid: Do pianists cheat when they record the left-hand concerto in a studio? That is, do they bring the right hand in, when two hands would be an advantage? Who would know? The conductor, orchestra, and engineers would, so I imagine the pianist's pride and vanity would prevent cheating.

In any field, there are people who are special targets of envy and resentment. Yuja Wang is one such target, and we might guess at the reasons: she is young and indecently talented; she enjoys tremendous PR and fame; and on the stage she tends to dress as skimpily as possible. Her latest CD cover is comparatively tame, but it does allow for bare arms and midriff.

Lang Lang is a target of envy and resentment too. This pianist, like Yuja Wang, was born in China, though five years earlier: in 1982. He too is young, indecently talented, and famous, and though he does not dress provocatively, he has an array of mannerisms that drive many people crazy, understandably. He walks on

and off the stage like a proud peacock. He gives the audience a strange, one-armed salute, reminiscent of Callas's. At the keyboard, he preens and mugs. But as I often say, music is an aural art, so no fair lookin'. And if you can't stand to look, you can always look away. That's one advantage of recordings (audio recordings): there is nothing physical either to disgust or delight.

Recently, Lang Lang recorded Tchaikovsky's *Seasons* and the four scherzos of Chopin (Sony Classical 88875117582). That album is titled *Lang Lang in Paris*, and the cover shows the pianist with the Eiffel Tower in the background. This is just marketing. It's not enough these days, evidently, to record *The Seasons* and the four scherzos just because you want to. You have to bring Paris into it, or reach for some other gimmick. In October 2015, Lang Lang played these very works – *The Seasons* and the scherzos – in Carnegie Hall. Especially in the scherzos, he was free, spontaneous, and fascinating. In the studio, however, some musicians clam up, or tighten up. The late pianist Artur Schnabel, for example, always played more freely on the stage than in the studio. He was conscious of making something for posterity, and he was conscious of correctness. Those old enough will tell you that Schnabel was far more exciting on the stage than on records. With Lang Lang, you don't have to worry so much about restraint or shyness in the studio. Still, his scherzos on CD are soberer than they were in Carnegie Hall. They are not as amusing, wacky, and wild. But they are far from models of sobriety (thank heaven). And Lang Lang is the kind of pianist never to play something the same way twice. A lot depends on his mood, his whim, or how he got out of bed. The late de Larrocha never listened to her recordings – because, as she explained, “I wouldn't play the piece that way now.”

Lang Lang is a jarringly inconsistent pianist, capable of great heights and appalling lows. My line is, “Lang Lang never plays badly – his fingers can do whatever his mind directs. It's just that he sometimes *thinks* badly.” In any case, I believe he is a natural for the Chopin scherzos. The word *scherzo* means “joke,” and Lang Lang gets it. He knows he is not playing holy music, such as the B-Minor Mass (Bach). He is not reverential. In fact, in his hands, Chopin's scherzos often sound like cartoon music. And this reminds me that Lang Lang got interested in the piano when, age two and a half, he saw a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon: the cat and mouse

were playing around with a Liszt *Hungarian Rhapsody*. In Lang Lang's hands, the scherzos sound like cat-and-mouse games. Moreover, he makes me hear things I have never noticed before, in these very familiar pieces. And I should not overlook his extraordinary technique, the looseness of hands and arms – the absence of tightness – that enables him to do almost anything. “It’s just technique,” people say. That is true to a degree: musicality must be sovereign over technique, or technique must be the servant of musicality. But if you want to be a pianist, and want to play repertoire such as the scherzos, technique is not nothing. “Everyone has technique these days!” you also hear. That is not true. Like musicality, technique is found in some more than others.

After that October recital in Carnegie Hall, I said that I was withdrawing from the Lang Lang Wars. We have warred over this kid ever since he arrived on the scene about fifteen years ago. He has his partisans, such as Christoph Eschenbach, the pianist and conductor, and he has his foes, who seem to include most critics. I myself have been both partisan and foe – Lang Lang's inconsistency will do that to a person. But I'm glad that Lang Lang exists, and plays. You probably would not want to take his interpretations to a desert island, and you would not want students to imitate him. But there ought to be room for this splendid peacock, and there is.

Daniil Trifonov was born in Russia in 1991. He is already one of the most sought-after pianists on the scene, wanted for recitals, concerto appearances, and recordings. His latest CD is all-Rachmaninoff, or centered on Rachmaninoff (Deutsche Grammophon 00289 479 4970). I will explain what I mean in due course. The major work on the CD is the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, for piano and orchestra. Playing with Trifonov is the Philadelphia Orchestra, led by its music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin (who is a youngish conductor, born in 1975). Can you hear music so familiar, even hackneyed, again? Yes, you can, especially when it is performed like this. In the *Rhapsody*, the pianist is required to be limpid, debonair, impish, elegant, swashbuckling, demonic, and, of course, virtuosic. The pianist should also be rhapsodic, this being a rhapsody, after all. Trifonov meets every requirement. To single out just one of the twenty-four variations, no. 12 is wonderfully slinky. And the transition into no. 18, the famous variation in D-flat major, is perfectly judged. This is as much

Nézet-Séguin's doing as Trifonov's. In this variation, the musicians take a nice tempo, and Trifonov plays with a helpful matter-of-factness. He does not lose the music in goo. He and Nézet-Séguin shape it beautifully. In short, this is a great recording – a great recording of a work that certainly “needed” no additional recording, but has one that should stand for a very long time.

The rest of the disc is devoted to solo piano music. First, Trifonov plays Rachmaninoff's *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*. He plays them with intelligence and feeling. They are beautifully considered but not studied, if I may put it that way. And the pianist lends them the right amount of majesty or pomp. His is a contained grandeur, or an elegant grandeur, not easy to pull off, and totally Rachmaninoff-like. The next piece is called *Rachmaniana*, a suite in five movements. Trifonov wrote it when he was a teenager, studying at the Cleveland Institute of Music. He was homesick, and said so in this music. It is dreamy, moody, fidgety, nostalgic, and yearning. Trifonov titled it *Rachmaniana* because it's in the style of Rachmaninoff and evocative of him. But there is a streak of Debussy too, I think. All pianists noodle at the keyboard, and some of them write this noodling down. Trifonov did so. The last movement of his suite hints at the *Warsaw Concerto*, that Rachmaninoff-conscious piece written for a movie in the 1940s. Personally, I can only applaud Trifonov for rolling his own (as I put it) – for composing his own music. Until the twentieth century, there was no split between the composer and the performer. Musicians did both. May Trifonov keep composing, as the spirit moves him. He ends his Rachmaninoff CD with the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*. In this work, Rachmaninoff blends the baroque, the classical, and the Romantic. So does Trifonov in his playing. Rachmaninoff liked the theme-and-variations form, Trifonov is quoted as saying in the CD booklet, for its “marriage of structure with fantasy.” That is exactly right. And Trifonov's playing reflects precisely this marriage. Undoubtedly, Trifonov would be very good at Brahms's variations: those on themes of Handel and Paganini. For all I know, he already is.

One of the constants of musical life is “The Last Romantic.” We are always having Last Romantics, but there is obviously never a last: the Romantic spirit is unkillable – though people and armies have tried – and Romantics, we will always have with us. Trifonov

is one. Though still a young pianist, he is mature. He is in no great need of seasoning, but seasoned now.

Well on his way is Conrad Tao, born in Illinois in 1994. I first reviewed him in 2013, when he was eighteen. He is definitely a pianist who rolls his own. On his program that night was a four-movement work of his called *vestiges*. (Lowercase letters are virtually de rigueur in today's music.) I described the movements as "beautiful and intelligent" and said, "I would be pleased to see them on any other pianist's program. They are more than one pianist's private scribbles." Whether others have played these pieces, I don't know. Tao's latest album is called *Pictures* (Warner Classics 0825646056941). As stands to reason, the centerpiece of this disc is the Mussorgsky *Pictures at an Exhibition*. But there are five other pieces as well, including one by Tao.

The disc begins with a little piece by David Lang, an American composer born in 1957. It is "cage" from *memory pieces*, a suite in eight movements. (I told you about the lowercase letters.) This movement was written in memory of the late composer John Cage. To my ears, it is tinged with minimalism, and also tinged with the New Age. Next on the disc comes a piece by Toru Takemitsu, the late Japanese composer. It is *Les Yeux clos ii*, which takes its lead from *Les Yeux clos*, the 1890 painting by Odilon Redon. The Takemitsu piece strikes me as one of that composer's watercolors. And Tao reproduces it nicely. Yet he has a habit of jabbing certain notes – pounding them – that deserve less aggressive treatment. He goes on to Elliott Carter, the American composer who died in 2012, just shy of 104. In his ninety-seventh and ninety-eighth years, he wrote two piano pieces: *Intermittences* and *Caténaires*. They are not autumnal at all. On the contrary, they are youthful and showy. Here, Tao plays them with complete command. Then he gets to a work of his own. It is *A Walk (for Emilio)*. The man in question is Emilio del Rosario, whom Tao describes, in his program notes, as "my first 'serious' piano teacher." He died in 2010. In this piece, Tao imagines spending time with his teacher today, talking things over on a leisurely walk. Like the David Lang piece, Tao's is a little minimalistic, a little New Agey. It is orderly, pretty, and unhappy. It is simple – "daringly simple," as critics like to say. It is personal and intense. It is also a bit cockeyed, askew – even mad. How about Tao's playing of it? Far be it from me to tell

a composer how to play his own piece, but I am puzzled by these jabbings, these poundings – these socked notes out of nowhere. But I trust that Tao knows what he’s doing, certainly on this *Walk*.

He knows what he’s doing in *Pictures at an Exhibition*, too. That begins with the opening Promenade, which is hard to get right: it should be clarion, but not too much so, and smoothly pianistic, but not too much so. Tao gets it just right. The subsequent Promenades are all different, and, like the first, just right. Tao plays the entire work with musical and technical command. Electricity comes through your speakers (or earbuds or whatever you are using). The run-up to the Great Gate of Kiev is stunning. The Great Gate itself is often bombastic or too small – from Tao, it is neither. His recording makes you fall in love with *Pictures* all over again. It reminds you of the greatness of the work. Tao is not jaded. He hasn’t heard the work all his life, or if he has, that life has not been so long. By the way, I’ve always found *Pictures* more interesting in its original version, the piano version, than in its orchestrations, including Ravel’s marvelous one. *Pictures* has the feel of a piano piece, which indeed it is.

Tao ends his disc with a cooldown or calmdown: another movement from Lang’s *memory pieces*, “wed.” It is lovely, simple, and pop-like. There is mystery about it, and a gentleness. It’s one of those pieces that people find profound and touching. As for Tao, he is a seriously interesting and gifted young man. Curiously, the cover of his CD shows him facing a wall, with his head against it. This could be a news photo accompanying an article about mental illness or addiction or something. I’m sure the cover is meant to be “edgy” and “downtown.” Many people, in many fields, strive for cool, but none more than people in the classical-music business.

Let’s leave the youngsters and finish with an old-timer, Daniel Barenboim, who was once a hotshot himself. He has recorded the two Brahms piano concertos with the Staatskapelle Berlin under Gustavo Dudamel (Deutsche Grammophon 00289 479 4899). Dudamel is the Venezuelan conductor, born in 1981. Barenboim, you remember, was born in Argentina in 1942. He has been the conductor of the Staatskapelle Berlin since 1992 – indeed, he is its “conductor for life.” So on this recording, he has what must be the odd experience of acting as soloist with one’s orchestra and ceding

the podium to someone else. The concertos were recorded live over a period of three days in September 2014. What does “live” mean in our present era? Recordings can be fashioned out of several live performances, and further doctored in the studio. “Live” can mean rather un-live. But I was pleased to see, or hear, that there are clinkers left in these Brahms performances. (“Clinkers” is an old-fashioned way of saying “missed notes.”) This suggests a certain fidelity.

Barenboim is one of the great inconsistent musicians, the kind who can give you whiplash. He can do this both at the keyboard and on the podium. He can play or conduct like a god. And he can play or conduct more like a dog. It’s like the two musicians are not even related to each other. I could tell many stories, but will confine myself to just one. On a Monday night in Carnegie Hall, Barenboim played two concertos with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under James Levine. Those concertos were the Beethoven G major and the Schoenberg. And he played them pretty badly. The audience was excited, though, and he sat down for an encore. I paused at the back of the hall, mainly to be able to report what the encore was. It was a Schubert impromptu, the one in A flat, D. 935, no. 2. “It was heavenly, golden, sublime,” I wrote. “I have never heard better Schubert playing, from anyone. It was as though Backhaus had come back to play for us once more. You simply never know, at least where Barenboim is concerned.”

The first Brahms concerto is the one in D minor, op. 15. Naturally, the new Barenboim-Dudamel CD begins with it. When Barenboim comes in, he toys with the rhythm. I think these passages work better when straighter, but Barenboim obviously disagrees – or did in this particular concert, at that particular moment. The rest of the first movement is essentially warm, feeling, and Brahmsian. It is also masculine, virile. At times, it is downright Rubinstein-esque (Barenboim is a great admirer of the late pianist). Barenboim exudes a kind of animal power. In the second movement, the Adagio, I like a *religioso* quality: I regard this movement as hymnlike. In Barenboim’s hands, it is more of a fantasy, and a wandering one: a little slow, a little flabby, a little self-indulgent. Still, Barenboim makes his choices, and they are justifiable. In the third movement, the Rondo, Barenboim is less

justified, I think. He does some beautiful playing, particularly in the F-major section toward the end. But much of his playing in this movement is absurdly drawn out, flabby beyond reason, un-rondo-like. I'm afraid I found it unlistenable.

The second concerto is the one in B flat, op. 83. Barenboim is thoughtful in the first movement, but also stiff and ungainly. What's more, his playing lacks richness and heft – which is very un-Barenboim. The second movement, that D-minor storm, is perfectly competent. There is even some nobility in it. But it does not really have its Brahmsian power and sweep. It's a little bloodless, frankly, which, again, is very, very un-Barenboim. The third movement, the Andante, is the prize of the disc. It is delicate without being fragile. It is beautifully judged and executed. As for the closing movement – a rondo, though not in name – it is pleasant, if a little cautious. It also features some odd accentuation. Barenboim is possibly trying to make the music more dancelike or “ethnic.” Rudolf Serkin did this sort of thing in his later years, not necessarily to the advantage of the music.

When it comes to live recordings, producers face a question: Do you leave the applause in? I have a view on this. If you are going for something timeless, I think you should leave the applause out. Applause jolts a listener out of a musical state of mind. If you're emphasizing that the concert is an occasion – a moment in time – you should leave the applause in. On the Barenboim-Dudamel CD, the applause is left in, which is right.