

same thing in trusting this revival of *Il Signor Bruschino* to a young theatre group, Teatro Sotteraneo, with no previous experience in opera. The directors of the group are all in their 20s and full of ideas, energy and fun.

The scene for this one-act *farsa giocosa* is a modern-day theme park complete with Coke machines, popcorn, balloons and silly hats. Tourists of all ages wander in and out snapping photos and are invited to join in the even sillier plot where everyone lies except the poor put-upon protagonist, Bruschino. In fact they confuse him so much that he ends up wondering who he is and there is typical Rossinian mayhem, except for the wonderful music and the singing. The polished cast are mainly young people such as the soprano, Maria Aleida, spectacular in her high register, and her suitor, David Algret, a fine tenor. The principal baritones: Roberto de Candia (Signor Bruschino) and Carlo Lepore, the guardian of the bride, who arrives on a Segway, singing his cavatina riding on it up and down the stage, are a bit older and undoubtedly best in show. In charge of it all is the conductor Daniele Rustioni who is barely out of his teens, just like the composer.

Janos Gardonyi

Verdi – Macbeth

Zeljko Lucic; Anna Netrebko; René Pape; Joseph Calleja; Metropolitan Opera; Fabio Luisi
Deutsche Grammophon 073 5222

► For me the most sublime moment in *Macbeth* is the *Gran concertato* just after the murder of King Duncan when out of the anguished a cappella chorus the orchestra finally joins in with a melody direct from heaven (and how beautifully did Sinopoli do it!), but that was nothing compared to the intense joy and outburst of the Met audience following *Vieni! T'affretta*, Anna Netrebko's first salvo as Lady Macbeth. And that *Sleepwalking Scene*! Oh my! It was an inspired decision to revive *Macbeth* for the 2014 season with Netrebko as the lead soprano. The woman had never sung the role before, her voice more suited to the lyrical and coloratura repertory or so people thought. But they didn't know Netrebko! After 2007, when she sang a few bel canto roles at the Met, she went back to Europe scoring triumph upon triumph in the most challenging prima donna roles: Manon in Berlin, Anna Bolena in Vienna, Donna Anna at La Scala. Nevertheless, here she is, Lady Macbeth in New York, seductive in her silk chiffon dress, packing the house again to capacity, her voice extending to a high D flat and also extending the Met's sagging profits.



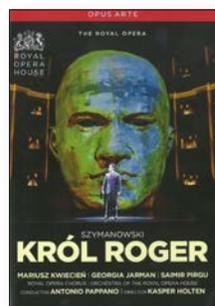
Fortunately, the rest of the cast is not outclassed by Netrebko's radiance. The great basso René Pape (Banquo) is a distinguished credit to a rather short role (as he gets killed quickly) and so is the tenor, Joseph Calleja (Macduff), but at least he survives. Serbian baritone Zeljko Lucic (Macbeth) is a fine character actor with a strong voice, but no match for the great Italian baritones (e.g. Leo Nucci or Renato Bruson) of yesteryear. Exciting yet sensitively refined conducting by new Met principal conductor Fabio Luisi amply compensates for the still unsurpassed legendary Sinopoli reading.

Janos Gardonyi

Szymanowski – Król Roger
Kwiecień; Jarman; Pirgu; Chorus and Orchestra of the Royal Opera House; Antonio Pappano
Opus Arte OA 1151 D

► It took almost a century from its premiere in Warsaw in 1926 for *Król Roger* (King Roger) to reach the stage of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in London. Belated though it is, this debut is nothing short of a triumph. It is by far the finest production of this modernist opera that I have seen. The great strength of Szymanowski's music is its exuberant, ecstatic orchestral colour, making it more neo-romantic than modernist. Mariusz Kwiecień, whose portrayal of King Roger may be a career-defining moment, put it like this: "To compose this music, you must be either on drugs or mad." Think Ravel, Scriabin, Bartók, but also Górecki. In the past, infrequent as they were, many productions of the opera faltered on stage because of its halting rhythms. The work jumps from bacchanal celebration to a standstill oratorio within its slim, 90-minute timeframe. Director Kasper Holten brilliantly unites the two polar opposites, with some help from the gorgeous set designed by Steffen Aarving. Among the many charms of this work are wonderful choral passages and showcase arias for the female protagonist, Queen Roxana, masterfully delivered by Georgja Jarman. Saimir Pirgu as the Shepherd is beguiling and free. All the cast benefit from having a native Polish speaker (Kwiecień) on hand – the language coaching is well beyond the typical, cringe-inducing sound imitation that plagues the productions of many Czech, Polish and Russian operas in the West. Antonio Pappano not only conducts the work, he breathes Szymanowski's music. This production will likely propel *King Roger* into the sphere of interest of the major opera houses in the world. Bravi!

Robert Tomas



Cloud Light – Songs of Norbert Palej
Bogdanowicz; McGillivray; Wilford; Woodley; Philcox
Centrediscs CMCCD 22315

► The song or chanson or lied died with Benjamin Britten – or that is the impression you might have gotten by visiting your neighbourhood record store or any concert hall. While Brahms, Strauss, Schubert and Mahler song cycles are everywhere, very little in that genre seems to have originated since the middle of the 20th century. It is more that the song itself has changed, rather than disappeared. Pianist Steven Philcox and tenor Lawrence Wilford, directors of the Canadian Art Song Project, summed it up succinctly in the liner notes to this recording: "...the experimentation of the 20th century avant-garde rejected the intimacy that is inherent to the genre..." Enter Norbert Palej (Pah-Lay), a Polish-born composer, still in his 30s, currently teaching at the University of Toronto. He restores to the song what for centuries was its golden measure: the intricate relationship between poetry and music, the latter being an emotional outgrowth of the former. All cycles included on this disc evoke an earlier era, with respect for the text and an intimacy of interpretation. *Cloud Light*, not written for any specific voice, invites comparisons with *les nuits d'été* by Berlioz. Most surprisingly, despite being an homage to the 19th- and early 20th-century tradition of song, the work sounds utterly contemporary and modern. It is as if after 50 years in the wilderness, the genre is coming back into its own. A welcome return!

Robert Tomas



Sacred Reflections of Canada – A Canadian Mass
Canadian Chamber Choir; Julia Davids
Independent (canadianchamberchoir.ca)

► The working style of the Canadian Chamber Choir is unique; with members spread across the country, they convene at least twice a year for short projects after learning their parts at home. A rehearsal period of a few days is hosted by a school, choir or community and the choir then returns the favour by providing workshops before they embark on tour. Their mandate, therefore, is not just to perform, but to build community by educating and engaging as many singers as possible on each tour while introducing the works of established as well as emerging Canadian composers.

