



Sterndale Bennett

Sextet, Chamber Trio et al
Villiers Quartet
NAXOS 8571379



Schumann's English drinking mate serves up a trio of treats

Sheffield-born William Sterndale Bennett (1816-1875) was a prodigy championed by Mendelssohn who became a friend (and regular drinking companion) of Schumann. Sadly, a split career as composer, educator and administrator limited his output and today his works are infrequently heard (if at all) in the concert hall. A pity, as this Naxos disc shows his chamber music to be tautly constructed and memorable.

All three works here are a young man's fancies, the earliest being an elegant, Haydnesque never-performed-in-his-lifetime String Quartet written when he was only 15. It's a sunny work, its catchy themes clearly argued. Eight years on, the charming Chamber Trio shows a relaxed and sure-footed grasp of structure with a real ear for melody. The warm opening *Andante tranquillo* is the standout movement, at times prefiguring Brahms and even Wagner while the pizzicato *Serenade* is delightful.

The most substantial work here is the ambitious Sextet, for string quartet, piano and bass. A brooding work in F Sharp Minor, its moody opening *Allegro* holds the attention over its nearly a quarter hour span. A Schubertian *Scherzo* and lyrical *Andante* precede a well-argued and stormy finale whose performance could perhaps benefit from a little more fire in its belly.

The Villiers Quartet, Jeremy Young (piano) and Leon Bosch (bass) give mostly sympathetic performances, the natural recording decent, if a little cavernous. It would be fascinating to hear these works on period forces. **Clive Paget**



Saariaho

Graal Théâtre, Cloud Trio et al
Jennifer Koh v, Curtis 20/21
Ensemble/Conner Gray Covington
CEDILLE CDR90000183



Dazzling Saariaho performed with splendour by Jennifer Koh

Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho has been based in Paris since 1982 when she began her work at the Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music (IRCAM). She has been the recipient of multiple awards, most recently receiving the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in Contemporary Music.

On this new recording, a collaboration with Chicago-based violinist Jennifer Koh, Saariaho returns to an old love. Violin was the first instrument she started learning at age six. In her memory it remains redolent of wood, rosin and the tobacco smoke of her teacher, a lovely metaphor for the sensory and ephemeral quality of these string-based works. The largest is *Graal Théâtre* (1994), a two-movement violin concerto (originally written for Gidon Kremer), and *Cloud Trio* (2009), a four-movement work for violin, viola and cello. Shorter chamber works include *Toxar* (2010) for violin and piano, and the single-movement piano trio *Light and Matter* (2014), inspired by the constantly changing light on a tree-filled park during daylight hours.

This is string writing of the highest order, stretching the textural capabilities of the violin and recorded with rich and sympathetic resonance (check the glorious cello in *Cloud Trio*). Koh is superb, her sensitively virtuosic playing indicative of a deep and instinctive connection with Saariaho's writing. Magnificent. **Lisa MacKinney**



Rachel Scott and Duo Agostino



Consonance

Music by Bach et al
Rachel Scott vc, Duo Agostino guitars
BACH IN THE DARK BITD003



Threesome delivers a charming and entertaining take on Bach after hours

Cellist Rachel Scott and husband and wife guitarists Duo Agostino have worked together for years as part of Sydney's highly successful *Bach in the Dark* concerts and now they have released a recording of Bach arrangements and Australian compositions, with some folk and klezmer tidbits thrown in, most of which made up the programs for their sold-out recitals.

At its heart are three "constructs" of Bach works by Richard Charlton, the third member of Sydney Guitar Trio, which he co-founded with Raffaele and Janet Agostino. The ubiquitous *Prelude* from the First Cello Suite is here given a little twist with one guitar taking the melody while the cello improvises along with the other guitar. There is also a fine arrangement by Janet Agostino of Bach's uplifting Sonata for Viola da Gamba and Harpsichord in D.

English classical guitarist Vincent Lindsey-Clark's arrangements of three folk tunes – the Brazilian children's song *Terezinha de Jesus*, *The Ashgrove* from Wales and a lovely arrangement of the Geordie classic *When The Boat Comes In* ("Dance To Your Daddy") – make a charming diversion from the more serious fare. *Adoration* is a moving tribute to guitarist-composer Phillip Houghton who died in 2017. It was originally written for Duo Agostino and Houghton himself later adapted it for cello and guitar.

Adelaide-based Graeme Koehn composed *To His Servant Bach* for string orchestra and made an arrangement for guitar quartet. It quotes from Bach's *Morning Star* Cantata in reference to the story that, after being completely blind following eye surgery, Bach briefly regained his sight before he died. The project may have been called *Bach in the Dark*, but in fact there is plenty of sunlight here. The warmth of the combination of cello and two guitars proves to be soothing and irresistible. Prepare to be seduced by this intimately recorded collaboration of friends and fellow artists. **Steve Moffatt**