Suite. I like the searching quality of the first movement’s sparsely scored sections but I perceive no correlation between manifestations of winter’s end as described by the composer’s annotations and what the music actually sounds like. Sisler’s skilful combination of three themes over the course of the final movement holds interest until the coda’s strettto, where the textures turn muddy and indistinct. Because of the overall sameness of mood from work to work, I wouldn’t recommend hearing both suites in one sitting. It’s not clear if Michael Koening’s performances were recorded in consultation with or in the presence of the composer but his excellent articulation and assiduous registrations help to make the best case for this repertoire. Jed Dieter

Steffens

Two Cells in Sevilla, or Don Quixote is Hungry*

Five Songs on Hölderlin, Op 95*

Sonja Brzauskas, née Talia Morgulis pt

Members of the Greenbrier Consortium / David Kirk

Navona © NV6744 (3V - DDD)

Libretto and German texts available from navona.com

The German composer Walter Steffens (b1934) has written in many styles and genres, from the intimate to the extravagant, and embraced everything from art songs, chamber music and orchestral works to opera. Among the extensive list of creations he has based on paintings is Guernica, a powerful orchestral depiction of Picasso’s masterpiece.

On this new disc, two recent works in the vocal sphere reveal how flexible Steffens can be according to the dictates of the respective texts. A post-Romantic sensibility in Five Songs on Hölderlin (2008) is reflected in expressive melodic lines wedded to rich harmonies. The verses aren’t printed in the CD booklet but they can be read – only in German – on the Navona Records website. Mezzo-soprano Sonja Brzauskas and pianist Tali Morgulis shape the songs with elegant commitment.

Steffens switches gears in Two Cells in Sevilla, or Don Quixote is Hungry (2016), a one-act chamber opera in which the imprisoned protagonists hope to be fed more acceptable food by weaving exciting tales for the love-starved female cook. The prisoners turn out to be Miguel de Cervantes (creator of Don Quixote) and Tirso de Molina (Don Juan), who run into some competition when a servant reads a Falstaff letter penned by a foreigner named Shakespeare.

The libretto, by Marc Béla Steffens (the composer’s son), possesses dashes of wit and colour that are embodied in the lively instrumental contributions but not always in the astute vocal writing. The music, full of Expressionist gestures, rarely smiles. Members of the Houston-based Greenbrier Consortium, nevertheless, give their all as led by David Kirk. Donald Rosenberg

‘Mélancholie’

Bartók Two Elegies, Op 88 Sz41

Lourié Preludes & Fragiles, Op 1

Schumann Piano Sonata No 1, Op 11

Zhenni Li / Steimway & Sons © STN30097 (6V - DDD)

Zhenni Li’s new Steinway release is a bolt from the blue. Li holds bachelor and master’s degrees from Juilliard, where she worked with Seymour Lipkin and Joseph Kalichstein. She continued postgraduate studies with Peter Frankl at Yale and with Stéphane Lemelin at McGill. Her beautiful sound is captured in full dimension and depth in this expertly engineered recording.

Li leaves no detail of Schumann’s F sharp minor Sonata unattended. The minute scrutiny brought to every element of the score would, in other hands, fragment and shatter the piece. Yet somehow, by dint of passionate identification and sheer force of will, Li pulls it off. Her extravagant and pervasive rubato, which occasionally risks derailing everything she sets in motion, strikes nonetheless as so heartfelt and intrinsic to her emotional response to the music as to be indisposable. There are moments when you wish for more than just a few consecutive measures of steady pulse, but then Li’s torrents of voluptuous sound sweep away any reservation. I am unprepared to venture how this interpretative approach might fare when applied to any other Romantic sonata, but the mercurial landscape of Schumann’s Op 11 is able to encompass it, and Li emerges, if not triumphant, at least thoroughly persuasive.

Translating the titles of Bartók’s Op 88 as either the Latinate ‘elegy’ or the Middle English-derived ‘dirge’ is misleading. The original Hungarian iráts is something closer to ‘keening at graveside’. In any case, Bartók’s precise notation of these folk-inspired works seems the antithesis of the folksy Scriabin-esque melange of Li’s conception. Arthur Lourié’s 1910 Preludes, on the other hand, strike just the right note of elusive piquancy.

Li impresses as an artist of tremendous conviction, who fascinates even as she provokes. Time will tell. Patrick Rucker