Copland • Ravel • Stravinsky

Copland Appalachian Spring - Suite
Ravel Daphnis et Chloe - Suite No 2
Stravinsky The Firebird - Suite (1919 version)
Park Avenue Chamber Symphony Orchestra / David Bernard
Recursive Classics ® RC206145 (64 • DDD)

You have to hand it to New York’s Park Avenue Chamber Symphony and their intrepid leader David Bernard for sheer pluck and pure chutzpah, as they once again record repertoire warhorses that are more than sufficiently represented in the catalogue by world-class orchestras. As it happens, the three ubiquitous ballet suites featured on their latest release represent some of the organisation’s best work.

In Stravinsky’s Firebird Suite, one cannot help but be impressed by the rhythmic discipline and the colourful allure in the brass and woodwinds. The introduction is dark and lugubrious yet texturally clear, giving no indication that the Firebird is about to make a sparkling and incisive entrance! If the finale’s climax is underplayed, the small string section’s intonation is more focused and secure compared to their relatively shaky work throughout an earlier Stravinsky/Bartók release (A/16). On the other hand, they cannot really project the sweep and sustaining power needed to fully do justice to the lyrical sections of the ‘Pantomime’ and the opening part of the ‘Danse générale’ from Ravel’s Daphnis et Chloé Suite No 2.

Copland’s Appalachian Spring Suite plays to the ensemble’s strengths and limitations. The threadbare string sonorities cast a convincingly fragile and vulnerable light on the opening slow section’s long note values, complemented by the fuller-throated flute and clarinet. The subsequent Allegro movement’s jagged attacks and releases don’t match the confident precision one expects, yet still manage to convey great style and character. This applies as well to ‘Solo Dance of the Bride’.

I can quibble about occasionally skewed balances (a prominent harp here, a backward violin pizzicato there), yet the sound generally reflects what one might hear from a choice concert-hall seat. On the whole, this disc amounts to the Park Avenue Chamber Symphony’s finest release to date. Jed Distler

D’Haene

Music with Silent Attakes
Reigakusha Gagaku Ensemble;
Ensemble Modern / Kasper De Roo
Ravello ® RR8006 (42 • DDD)

Gagaku, the music of the Imperial Japanese Court, has exerted a fascination on Western composers for many decades, not least Britten, Cowell, Messiaen and La Monte Young. Western audiences have been slower to warm to it but cultural gaps are a two-way phenomenon: I recall the fascinated befuddlement of Ono Gagaku Kai at the rapturous reception accorded them at the 1985 Proms.

The Belgian composer Frederic D’Haene (#1961) studied with (among others) Globokar, Pousseur and Rzewski (to whom he was assistant in the 1990s) and first encountered gagaku in 1986. D’Haene became intrigued with the idea of integrating elements from widely disparate types of music in a style he terms ‘parasophonology’ and Music with Silent Attakes (2003-06; the final word’s apostrophisation on the cover is spurious) is a very fine example of this. It is scored for 14 gagaku players accompanied by a chamber orchestra of 15. An ‘aike’ is the chord cluster produced by the Japanese reed instrument, the shō, of which there are three featured in the work, and silences form crucial structural markers in the two large, complex gagaku movements, ‘Haya yo byoushi’ and ‘Haya roku byoushi’. These each run for a quarter of an hour and are framed and separated by three much briefer ‘Netori’ sections, acting as prelude, interlude and postlude.

One of the compositional bases of D’Haene’s score is an alternation of drones on E and B. These may be a perfect fifth apart but there is nothing remotely tonal in the music built over the top. D’Haene has constructed with estimable precision a work where both ensembles accompany and counterpoint each other, achieving a remarkably satisfying synthesis that transcends how dissonant or alien the musical language may seem. The performance, recorded in Frankfurt in 2015, sounds immaculate, as does Ravello’s recording.

Guy Richards

Krouse

Armenian Requiem, Op 66
Shoushik Barsoumian sopr Gairineh Avakian mez
Yeghishe Manucharyan ten Vladimir Chernov bar
Ruben Harutyunyan duct Jens Lindemann,
Bobby Rodriguez gts Christoph Bull org
VEM Quartet, Tzitzatan Children’s Choir;
Lark Master Singers; UCLA Philharmonia /
Neal Stulberg
Naxos American Classics ® ® 85598467 (96 • DDD)
Texts and translations available from naxos.com

Ian Krouse’s powerful Armenian Requiem, commissioned by Vatsche Barsoumian’s Lark Music Society, draws on traditional liturgical chant and poetry to make a powerful case for redemption through music. Climaxing unconventionally at the beginning of the second half and not the end, Krouse’s sprawling tapestry of 21st-century colours, sonorities and textures, infused with his knowledge of Armenia’s deep and rich musical history, is a timeless and timely pan-religious call to ‘fight against oppression’, as Barsoumian writes in his booklet note, ‘not with arms and violence, but with immortal song’.

Part 1 begins with the formal strength of Creation followed by a bitter lullaby...