

## CD REVIEWS

# A Hungarian master stirs the senses and the mind

Imagine a simple triad, its three notes sounded in succession, irregular in rhythm, as though their individual sounds were activated by a gentle breeze. Attracted by this sonic electromagnetic plate, other seemingly random pitches begin to agglomerate.

At the end of scarcely two and a half minutes of music, you feel that you have experienced something profoundly beautiful, but also that your perceptions have been enhanced through the simple act of listening to it.

The piece is called “Fugitive

Thoughts About the Alberti Bass,” drawn from a series that might best be described as a composer’s notebook, kept over a period of decades. Collectively titled “Games,” it is the work of György Kurtág, widely considered the most important Hungarian composer since Béla Bartók. “Fugitive Thoughts” and another 42 pieces for solo piano or piano duet were recorded by Hungarian Radio between 1955 and 2001 and re-engineered and released by Budapest Music Center to mark Kurtág’s 90th birthday, on Feb. 19.

When I met Kurtág nearly 45 years ago at the Liszt Academy in Budapest, he was a strikingly tall man, his pleasant countenance and easy, deferential manner giving no hint of the passionate intensity that burned within.

The respect of his colleagues was unanimous and his pupils regarded him with a blend of dread, because of the near-impossibility of meeting his lofty standards, and adulation for all he had to impart.

Some YouTube clips convey something of the rare alchemy that results when Kurtág and his brilliantly talented wife of nearly 70 years, Márta Kinsker, play the piano together.

The longest piece recorded here is 3 minutes 19 seconds, but the vast majority last less than a minute.

These highly condensed morsels seem to contain all of music, or perhaps human imagination itself, reduced to some elemental minimum. And within each is the expressive wealth we might expect from an entire symphony or opera.

Listening to them has an uncanny effect. It as though, walk-

ing through a forest, you notice a tiny seed pod and pick it up. Suddenly you become aware that what you hold between your thumb and index finger is the genome for expressing life’s experience.

— Patrick Rucker

L’Orfeo Baroque Orchestra had not recorded any music by Johann Sebastian Bach before this new release of cantatas for solo soprano.

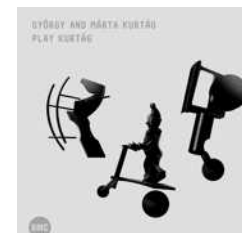
Under violinist and leader Michi Gaigg, this historically informed performance ensemble has focused on accompanying opera, performing regularly in several theaters in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland.

The lightness and fluidity of these performances, technically impeccable without revealing any of the considerable effort behind that perfection, make one hope that more Bach sacred works will be on the group’s studio docket.

Soprano Dorothee Mielsds’ intonation is impeccable across the flexible range of her voice, and she has the lightness of tone for her limpid sound to hang in the air, almost evanescing into the undulating texture of the instruments on an impossibly long held note in the first aria of “Ich bin in mir vergnügt” (BWV 204).

While she does not sing in a truly straight tone, which can become grating on the ear, the vibrato is controlled enough so that each pitch of the vocal part is clear, even in the faster runs.

At the same time she has a dramatic ability to surprise, which makes the recitatives of the same cantata full of unexpected detours. Gaigg and her



**GYÖRGY AND MÁRTA KURTÁG PLAY KURTÁG**  
Budapest Music Center  
Records



**J.S. BACH: CANTATAS FOR SOLO SOPRANO**  
Dorothee Mielsds,  
Michi Gaigg  
Carus

musicians turn on a dime to move with her as Bach paints each little contour of BWV 204’s text, a moral cantata about the joys of humble self-contentment.

L’Orfeo, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, gives a lithe performance of Bach’s often florid parts, with a rarefied sound from just 10 string players.

Soprano Dorothee Mielsds’ tone is impeccable in her interpretation of cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach.

The mellow transverse flute has a beautiful solo outing in BWV 204, and the oboe gives mournful voice to the sighing soul in the first aria of “Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut” (BWV 199).

The realization of the continuo parts is shared among lute, harpsichord and organ to subtle and varied effect.

An excellent booklet essay by Bach scholar Klaus Hofmann describes the rediscovery, by Bach scholar Michael Maul, of the last piece recorded on this disc, an aria Bach created for the 51st birthday of Duke Wilhelm Ernst von Sachsen-Weimar in 1713.

The music can be used for all 12 verses of the dedicatory poem, each of which begins with a German translation of the Duke’s motto, “Everything with God and nothing without him.” Mielsds sings just four verses, with slight variations of instrumentation on each one.

— Charles T. Downey  
style@washpost.com

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