



cello—are in traditionally designated keys (F-sharp minor, B-flat, and so on). The key of *Meditation* for solo piano isn't specified, but it's only a bit more tonally free than the other pieces.

The problem, as with so many backwards-looking compositions written nowadays, is that the music isn't up to the standards of the traditions it invokes. Harmonies are conventional, rhythms regular and predictable, phrases four-square, textures mostly simple melody-plus-accompaniment. The expressive range is also restricted: allegros are politely cheerful, andantes sentimental (most persuasively in the piano sonata's slow movement). It all sounds like Victorian-era salon productions of the most placid, genteel sort: sincere, unassuming, eager to please and reassure, but entirely lacking the rigorous craft, boldness, imagination, and emotional power of its models (from Haydn and Schubert to Chopin and Dvorak, with occasional somewhat more modern influences). Why should we listen to pale, naive imitations of the real stuff?

Neither the devoted but not-quite-professional performers nor the thin, boxy sonics flatter this music. It would no doubt make a better impression performed by more polished players in an acoustically-refined setting. But—and I speak as an amateur composer who has learned over decades of struggle—only stringent and sustained self-critical examination by the composer herself will make possible genuinely worthwhile achievements. As Chaucer lamented: "The lyf so short, the craft so longe to learne".

LEHMAN

RUDERS: *Offred Suite; Tundra; Symphony 3*
Susanna Phillips, s; Odense Symphony/ Scott Yoo
Bridge 9382—52 minutes

I did not know that Poul Ruders had made an opera out of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Charles Parsons reviewed the entire opera, sung in Danish (Marco Polo 8224165, M/J 2001); he described it as an overwhelming theater experience, profoundly moving and profoundly disturbing.

A brief overview, since the plot is available in his review, the notes, and undoubtedly online: America was taken over in 2002 by fundamentalist Protestants after nationwide disasters. Jews, feminists, homosexuals, and nearly all non-Protestants lived under threat of imprisonment in a labor camp or execution. Women in general became chattel, and ones deemed to be living wrong were forced to be Handmaids, surrogate mothers for high-ranking infertile couples. Offred (Of-fred, for she was handmaid to The Commander, Fred) is the Handmaid at the center of this story.

Through the resistance movement, she was offered a chance to be smuggled into Canada, but we are left not knowing her fate or whether the prospect of freedom was true or a cruel lie. She dictated her story on tape at a safe house, and the tape was discovered 200 years in the future.

The five arias in the *Offred Suite* use texts taken from that tape, and the suite was constructed to form a synopsis of the opera. They are sung in English, the original language. The music is brutal and profound; just this little of it has whetted my appetite to read the book or see the film and to get the Danish recording. Susanna Phillips is appropriately expressive for the role, if her diction is lacking. Texts are in the booklet.

"Tundra" is a five-minute homage to Sibelius, stacking dissonant tones on top of each other; it's dark and says what it needs to say and no more. *Symphony No. 3, Dream Catcher*, was composed in 2005-06; it was commissioned by the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation and dedicated to his and Natalie Koussevitzky's memories. Ruders said, "In my symphony...things evolve in a far less benign way (as opposed to a dream-catcher keeping out bad dreams)...what really happens behind the scenes in the symphony is the tale of Beauty devoured by the Beast, a symphonic journey with a less-than-happy ending, open to all sorts of individual, metaphorical interpretations." It begins as violently as the *Handmaid* music, but calms to a slower section where the strings are given surreal but beautiful chords; the style, though not the harmonies, are reminiscent of Messiaen's 'Garden of Love's Sleep'. Agony infiltrates the serenity from time to time. It marks a return to the turmoil, but at the very end comes a tiny measure of stillness, marred by ominous growls and the tolling of a bell. Not for the faint of heart, this release. The sound is outstanding. Notes in English.

ESTEP

SAHL & SALZMAN: *Civilization and Its Discontents*

Karl Patrick Krause (Carlos Arachnid), Candice Earley (Jill Goodheart), William Parry (Derek Dude), Paul Binotto (Jeremy Jive); Michael Sahl, keyboards; Cleve Pozar, perc

Label 7089—44 minutes

Civilization and Its Discontents (1977) is a music theater collaboration between Michael Sahl and Eric Salzman. It was an off-Broadway show initially produced at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York, recorded by NPR, and then released as a Nonesuch LP in 1981, of which this is a reissue.

The piece takes place as a show at the fic-

tional Club Bide-a-Wee hosted by the aptly named Carlos Arachnid. The show (a metaphorical one) involves 29-year-old struggling actress Jill Goodheart and her encounters with boyfriend-fellow actor Derek Dude and hopeful lover and producer Jeremy Jive, who is doing his best to seduce Jill in her apartment. Faustian figure Carlos appears and shows them the Light: control your egos and you will live happily ever after.

This takes its place in a tradition of topical art-musicals that include works of Kurt Weill, Gershwin, Bernstein, and many others. More recently one might include John Adams, though his attempt at this genre (*I Was Looking at the Ceiling*) was pretty dismal next to the composers just mentioned.

This project does not try to compete with the world of commercial Broadway hacks like Andrew Lloyd Webber (thank God). Instead, the music is challenging, rambunctious, and only somewhat tonal in the traditional sense. To be sure, ample virtuosity is required of the performers, none of whom sport operatic voices. That's a good thing, as is the piece's resolutely unpretentious atmosphere. Anyone who knows the New York artistic scene will identify with the goings-on in the text (which is not offered, and really doesn't need to be). Mr Sahl is an outstanding pianist and handles his score with exciting virtuosity. This has been revived recently in Europe, and is a load of skillful fun. It really isn't very dated, and has held up very well. If you missed it back then, this is a good opportunity to make its acquaintance.

GIMBEL

SAINT-SAENS: *Piano Concerto 2;*
TAO: *Fanfare ProMusica; 4 Elements*
Conrad Tao; ProMusica Chamber Orchestra/
Timothy Russell

Summit 582—56 minutes

Conrad Tao was born in 1994. The liner notes proclaim that Harris Goldsmith (who's written for ARG for decades) has called him "the most exciting prodigy to ever come my way". But not based on this recording.

The solo introduction to the Saint-Saens is ponderous and without forward flow. Then the orchestra (founded in 1978 by Timothy Russell and based in Columbus OH) enters with sour strings and muffled sound. There is no rhetoric or grand swagger, certainly not in the orchestra. Even Tao's cadenza is labored. The orchestra's rhythms in II (allegro scherzando) lack snap and character, and Tao's rhythms are very plain. In III neither Tao nor Russell gives the tarantella rhythms any character. What's a Saint-Saens piano concerto without radiance and brilliance!

Tao is a composer too, an eight-time consecutive winner of the ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composers award, according to the liner notes. At seven minutes, his 'Fanfare' is more like an overture. Premiered in 2008, it's tonal in the same manner as Copland's 'Fanfare for the Common Man'. It seems clever, colorful, bright, and energetic, and uses the full orchestra; but the ensemble's sour tone is only emphasized in the dreadful acoustics of Columbus's Southern Theater, where there isn't an ounce of overtones to enhance the sound, and where a two-beat pause at an andante tempo leads to totally dead space—not even an ounce of ambience—sounding like a bad edit.

The Four Elements, a 25-minute piano concerto premiered in 2007, shows the cleverness of a 13- or 14-year-old prodigy, but I hope to never hear it again. It is another fully tonal work, and the opening movement, 'Earth', has a basic motif treated to a multiplicity of styles—classical, jazz, pseudo-oriental (Tao was born in Urbana IL). II is 'Water'—rain-drop patterns. 'Air' is quieter, and the finale, 'Fire', is lively.

I'm sorry: I refuse to patronize anyone, even a 14-year-old. If he chooses to mix with the big boys, he'll be judged with the big boys. I find the concerto boring, especially in this performance, where, amazingly, Tao is as rhythmic dull as the conductor.

The engineering of the piano is fine, but the orchestra, in need of every bit of flattery it can get, is given none in this acoustic. Russell retires at the end of this season.

FRENCH

SALONEN: *Violin Concerto; Nyx*
Leila Josefowicz; Finnish Radio Symphony/ Esa-Pekka Salonen
DG 17521—48 minutes

Esa-Pekka Salonen's Violin Concerto (2009) won the Grawemeyer Prize for 2012. The half-hour work is in four movements: a manically glistening moto perpetuo, a somber interlude, a slashing scherzo, and a very long, slow finale with mournful passion and transcendent coda. Salonen's language is a vastly expanded spectralist tonality, not especially dissonant but wrapped with engaging ambiguity and thoughtful enigma. The violin writing is hyper-virtuosic. It was written for Ms Josefowicz, and she handles it frighteningly effortlessly. The work is a major statement. It will likely not appeal to the casual listener seeking frivolous diversion, but it offers ample rewards for anyone open to a darkly romantic, harmonically advanced palette. Whether or not this will take its place among the pantheon of 21st Century