



CAFÉ MUSIC

TRIO SOLISTI

Maria Bachmann, Violin

Alexis Gerlach, Cello

John Klibonoff, Piano

(2009 Bridge Records)

The governing title of this recording, *Café Music*, suggests music that is accessible—even fun. And so it is with the works included on it. Indeed, one might even imagine oneself in a café or a bar while listening. At the same time, the carefully chosen works resonate in a deeper way because they are also firmly rooted in classical tradition. Each piece has its basis in that genre but looks beyond it for other influences popular and otherwise. As we are sometimes reduced to the absurd in our definitions of classical music, chamber music, and jazz, so might we fall into that trap in considering the meaning of *café music*. Its historic significance is impressive and readily identifiable in the music of such composers as Beethoven, Schubert, Liszt and Brahms. Throughout Eastern Europe, in particular, the tradition of café music remains strong even today, but it prevails elsewhere in greatly varying forms. Piazzolla and Turina, for example, are closely connected to the famous *habanera* rhythm which had its origins in Africa, sailed off to Cuba, crossed the world again to Spain and the Basque regions in the late 19th century, and found its imprint in Paris with Debussy and Ravel. Of course we cannot omit the impact of the *habanera* in Argentina where it gave birth to the irreplaceable tango. The tango became such a force there that its popularity and decline followed the patterns of economic stress and recovery. In 1914, the Archbishop of Paris tried to ban the tango for its “lascivious nature” but was repudiated by the Ambassador of Argentina and sued for \$4000 by a tango teacher. Perhaps it is well to remember, too, that the music played in European cafés revealed much of the untold story of World War II. The Nazis tried, but failed, to close cafes and clubs where music symbolized resistance.

At the heart of café music lies not only popularity and the highly personal but also the virtuosic which is clearly evident in Trio Solisti’s interpretations. In his review of Trio Solisti’s January 2008 performance of Paul Schoenfield’s *Café Music* for the San Antonio Chamber Music Society, critic Mike Greenberg of *Incident Light* commented that “the musicians took care to play every gesture with ferocious conviction...” It was with this strong conviction, says violinist Maria Bachmann, that Trio Solisti took on the enormous task of identifying, studying, arranging, and refining the music on this recording.

Ástor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

Four Seasons of Buenos Aires

Otoño Porteño (Fall)

Invierno Porteño (Winter)

Primavera Porteña (Spring)

Verano Porteño (Summer)

The immediate association one makes with Piazzolla’s *Four Seasons* is Vivaldi’s composition of the same name. While much of that comparison is intentional, it does not give the whole story. A first consideration is structure. In Vivaldi’s work, each of the four seasons is treated in three movements, while in Piazzolla’s they are given one movement within which there is variation of mood and character. In other words, Piazzolla bows to the Baroque structure he loved but explores it in entirely new ways relating to his own personal invention for which he so famous, the *nuevo tango*. In that invention, Piazzolla took the tango from a popular street dance to a serious form of music. Like Bach’s gavottes and Mozart’s minuets, Piazzolla’s tangos are not meant for dancing but for complex and virtuosic interpretation at the highest level of performance. Nor should we insist on programmatic interpretation of Piazzolla’s *Four Seasons*, as we so often do with Vivaldi’s. Originally composed between 1965 and 1970 as four separate works, Piazzolla’s *Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* has had numerous treatments from its original scoring for violin, electric guitar, piano, bass and bandoneon (Piazzolla’s own instrument). Trio Solisti’s interpretation is based on the arrangement by Argentinean cellist and composer José Bragato, a member of Piazzolla’s famous Octeto Buenos Aires, who received a Grammy Award in 2002 for his arrangements of Piazzolla’s music for string quartet. Maria Bachmann, Trio Solisti’s violinist, made her own additions to Bragato’s arrangement to include the startling string techniques and sound effects that so brilliantly flavor this recording as well as additions to the musical material. Many of these techniques such as the *glissando*, or slide, are practiced in traditional classical music, but here they are personalized to express Piazzolla’s unique *nuevo tango* concepts. And seldom are they done the same way each time. The first sound heard on the recording, before any actual note of music, is something called a “cricket,” loosely described by Maria Bachmann as “playing on the wrong side of the

bridge as far back as possible and with hard—really hard—pressure.” The cello is used for the knocking sounds that imitate various percussion instruments.

Piazzolla’s *Seasons* shout with his originality and inventiveness—and with a certain national flavor. On the subject of nationalism, however, we should be careful. Piazzolla was no mere imitator of folk tradition. Like Dvořák and Bartók before him, Piazzolla took folk idioms and turned them into high art. The fascinating dissonances and abrupt tempo changes go well beyond the scope of folk music. That said, Piazzolla also effectively paints the seasons of his native country with its tumultuous spring, sultry summer, melancholy fall and dark winter. The order of the seasons, by the way, varies in the work’s many arrangements, but Trio Solisti’s makes musical sense even if does not honor Vivaldi’s order.

Piazzolla’s studies with Alberto Ginastera led him to studies in Paris with the legendary Nadia Boulanger. Piazzolla gives a wonderful account of his reluctance to admit to her that he played the bandoneon rather than the piano. He presented to her what he called his “kilos of symphonies and sonatas.” She responded that they were “well-written,” but that she could not find Piazzolla in them. Finally he played his tangos for her to which she responded, “You idiot, that’s Piazzolla!” He commented, “And I took all the music I composed, ten years of my life, and sent it to hell in two seconds.” The years of study and work, however, do not seem lost in Trio Solisti’s treatment of *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*.

Ástor Piazzolla

Le Grand Tango

Considered one of Piazzolla’s masterpieces, *Le Grand Tango* was commissioned by Mstislav Rostropovich and premiered by him in 1990. That version for cello and piano has been performed and recorded many times with great success, but the adaptation for Trio Solisti by Argentinean composer, scholar and arranger, Martin Kutnowski, sheds new light on Piazzolla’s genius. Here we have all the power and complexity of Piazzolla’s *nuevo tango* revealed in one work. It moves even closer to classical music than the *Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* but not at the expense of the tango itself in all its glories. Here we have dark moods, moments of passion and lyricism, daring harmony, and above all, the powerful rhythmic effects we associate with Piazzolla. As to “grandness,” *Le Grand Tango* is just that since it is almost twice the length of any traditional tango piece as well as Piazzolla’s explorations in the form.

Ostensibly in one movement, the work nevertheless seems to fall into three: a rhythmically strong first section with mood swings between the violent and the tender, a lyrical and poignant second section, and an almost sonata-like return in the third section to the rhythmic power of the first. Like *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*, the piece employs the colorful string effects that suggest the original instruments of Piazzolla’s Octeto Buenos Aires (violin, electric guitar, piano, cello, bass, and bandoneon). Audible knocking, the “cricket,” and non-classical glissandi pepper the work.

It is interesting to note that Piazzolla’s biographers, María Susana Azzi and Simon Collier, used *Le Grand Tango* as the title for their book. Indeed, the work seems to personify Piazzolla at his very best.

Paul Schoenfield (b. 1947)

Cafe Music

Allegro

Andante moderato

Presto

Paul Schoenfield’s remarkable *Café Music* obviously served as inspiration for the title of Trio Solisti’s recording of works that fuse the popular and the classical in a highly artistic way. Schoenfield’s statement concerning the origins of the work is telling, if not too modest in its implications: *The idea to compose Café Music first came to me in 1985 after sitting in one night for the pianist at Murray’s Restaurant in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Murray’s employs a house trio which plays entertaining dinner music in a wide variety of styles. My intention was to write a kind of a kind of high-class dinner music—music which could be played at a restaurant but might also (just barely) find its way into a concert hall.* Indeed the work did find its way into many concert halls and was premiered by members of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra in January of 1987.

Joel Sachs, chairman of The Julliard School’s Department of Music History, gives a wonderful description of Paul Schoenfield’s music: *Paul Schoenfield’s work is inspired by the whole range of musical experience—popular styles both American and foreign, vernacular and folk traditions, and historical traditions of cultivated music-making, often treated with sly twists...like Charles Ives, he enjoys the mixing of ideas that grew up in entirely different worlds, making them converse, so to speak, and delighting in the surprises that their interaction evokes.*

Sach’s description aptly fits Schoenfield’s *Café Music* with its first movement that immediately suggests the familiar and the popular but also turns unfamiliar and classical. In likewise contrasting ways, its exuberance is

edged by poignancy. Classical form governs the jazz and, in particular, the rag pulse that pervades this movement as well as the final one. Also evident are the virtuosic demands and the rhythmic playing style reflected in Piazzolla.

In the second movement, the piano gives popular underpinnings to the moving melodic lines of the violin and cello, both of which are treated to wonderful solo moments. The melody is a paraphrase of a beautiful Chassidic song drawn from Schoenfield's years spent on a kibbutz in Israel. It was this movement that caused reviewer Mike Greenberg of *Incident Light* to describe Trio Solisti's treatment of *Café Music* as "richer, deeper, and more layered," and as having "a soulful flexibility that had one foot in Tin Pan Alley and one in central European high Romanticism."

The racy virtuosity of the third movement is sheer amazement from its opening statement reflective of yet another composer who had one foot in the café, Francis Poulenc. We quickly move on from Poulenc to the multiple influences in Schoenfield's music that somehow remains uniquely his own.

Paul Schoenfield, born in Detroit, studied piano with Julius Chajes, Ozan Marsh and Rudolph Serkin. He holds an undergraduate degree from Carnegie-Mellon, a doctorate from the University of Arizona, and is currently on the faculty of the University of Michigan. He is also an avid scholar of mathematics and Hebrew, among many other interests.

Joaquin Turina (1882-1949)

Piano Trio No. 2 in B Minor, Op. 76

Lento; Allegro molto moderato

Molto vivace

Lento; Andante mosso; Allegretto

Joaquin Turina finds his place in *Café Music* through both his association with the music of the Basque regions and his own inclination towards incorporating the popular and the classical. He left his native Seville for Madrid at 20 and three years later ventured to Paris where he came under the influence of Debussy and Ravel, both of whom bowed to Spanish music. Despite his academic associations, a certain "sevillanismo" remains in his work stemming surely from his early interests. One of these was the *zarzuelas*, a form of Spanish opera infused with popular influences that included spoken words and dance. Interestingly, as a young boy, he held a passion for the accordion, a close relative to Piazzolla's bandoneon.

Despite these influences, Turina sought to transcend Spanish nationalism more so than his Spanish contemporaries Albeniz, Granados and Falla. This is reflected in his Piano Trio No. 2 of 1926 which clearly reveals the influence of Debussy, Ravel and César Franck. Falla had advised him to look to Spanish folk music for inspiration, but that advice was merely a statement of Turina's natural style, since the music of his native Seville was strongly and undeniably in his blood. Within the parameters of classical style, Turina found his own voice rich in Sevillian grace, color, and the Basque *Zortzico* rhythms clearly evident in the Piano Trio No. 2.

The first movement of the Op. 76 Piano Trio reflects classic sonata form with three sections marked Andante and three marked Lento. Contrasting themes in major and minor keys enrich the highly emotive movement resplendent with beautiful melody. The middle movement is a *jota*, a national dance of northern Spain in rapid triple time, not unlike a waltz but with a Spanish imprint. Pizzicato chords from the strings suggest the castanets which accompany the *jota*. We hear and see, if you will, Spanish couples performing the dance, underscoring Turina's interest in things visual and literary. The dance is interrupted mid-way by a reference to the first movement.

If the middle movement is dance, the last movement is song. Despite this contrast, thematic material from the earlier movement is incorporated into this final movement, lending the piece unity as well as variety. A coda borrowed from the Lento theme of the second movement completes the work.

Written in 1926, the Piano Trio was premiered at the Frankfurt International Festival of Chamber Music in 1927 and received the National Prize.

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

It Ain't Necessarily So from *Porgy and Bess*

"It Ain't Necessarily So" might seem the bon-bon in this recording, but it is still not without implications for the over-arching theme: the integration of popular and classical art forms in a unique way. This brief and delicious moment is based on, of course, the song from George and Ira Gershwin's 1935 opera, *Porgy and Bess*. It is sung by the character, Sportin' Life, a drug dealer who expresses his doubt about several biblical statements. Since then, the song has moved through many permutations including one by the great violin virtuoso, Jascha Heifetz. It was this treatment that inspired Maria Bachmann's arrangement for Trio Solisti with its moving thirds for cello and violin and, once again, the rhythmic underpinning provided by the piano. It is a notable gift to the piano trio repertoire.