

Classical Music Reviews



Yolanda Kondonassis: *American Harp*. Azica.

Yolanda Kondonassis is one of the world's foremost harpists; her harp is no shrinking violet, confined to effete flourishes, but can be quite spiky when the piece calls for it. Like the flute, the harp is rather monochromatic, even if the *chroma* (color) itself is pleasing enough. Kondonassis, however, gets more gradients out of her instrument than most, and conveys the character of each of these very-different pieces persuasively. Hannah Lash's *Stalk* was inspired by a nightmare that trapped the composer "in a garden of beautiful white flowers" with a fragrant but dangerous beauty. Its hallucinogens are countered by Lowell Liebermann's *Music for Harp*, a dreamy, meandering 17-minute fantasia with a mild tinge of exoticism and a lively, dance-like middle section. Norman Dello Joio's Bagatelles, three short pieces, were written in 1969 for a harp competition. The reflective outer movements frame an inner allegro that's rambunctious and even a bit jazzy. The vista in John Cage's *In a Landscape* is Far-Eastern, calmly spinning out spare, repetitive, evenly flowing lines that highlight nuances in the harp's different registers. Elliott Carter's *Bariolage* is thorny, bristling with sharp staccatos and an arsenal of special effects. Azica's sonics are vivid yet natural, presenting the harp's luminous overtones with exceptional purity. SE

Further Listening: Salzedo's *Harp* (Kondonassis/Telarc)



Andres Segovia Archive. Roberto Moronn Perez, guitar. Reference Recordings.

These pieces were dedicated to or commissioned by the great Spanish guitarist Andres Segovia; after his death they were published in *The Segovia Archive* Series. Most have never been recorded or even performed by Segovia. Six Spanish composers are included: Arregui, Sanjuan, Cassado, Donostia, Pahissa, and Mompou. (A second album from the Series is to be of French composers.) The pieces are short, most under five minutes, and rather subdued in mood; my one wish is for a few fiery or ferocious numbers. As it is, you get 70 minutes of enjoyable guitar music ranging from mellifluous to melancholy. The stereotypical Spanish rhythms are mostly absent, but the ethnic harmonies are subtly fused to a more European approach. Perez has a highly polished sound, and you can tell he's spent a lot of time cultivating a rich variety of tone. It's like listening to a great violinist—Michael Rabin, for example—who knows just when to change colors in a phrase, or more tellingly, on a single note. Sonics are superb, with Perez's guitar radiating into The Holy Trinity Church in Hertfordshire with an ideal balance of clarity and reverberance. SE

Further Listening: *The Art of Segovia* (DG)



Strauss: *Elektra*. Vienna Philharmonic, Solti. Speakers Corner (2 LPs).

Decca's early-stereo *Salome* is an audiophile landmark; no surprise it made the "TAS Top 40 Best-Sounding Recordings" in our July/August issue. *Elektra*—Strauss' follow-up, another lurid, blood-drenched parable of lust and revenge—is even more daring, stretching harmonies to extremes of discordance and intensity never-before-heard in an opera house. Made five years after *Salome* with the same stellar musicians (headlined by conductor Georg Solti and soprano Birgit Nilsson), venue, and production team (John Culshaw and Gordon Parry), Decca's recording again captured every shading of torment, pitch-black irony, and exultant ferocity in a riveting performance. As good as the original release is, the Speakers Corner reissue benefits from both superb re-mastering that improves on the technical means available in 1966 (see Rob Pennock's detailed report on re-mastering Golden Age Deccas in Issue 229) as well as superior vinyl (pressed by Pallas in Germany) that noticeably lowers the noise threshold. The resulting sound is so much better it startled me when I compared the recordings; details are clearer (low strings more sharply articulated and potent), singers and orchestra more present and more vividly arrayed on a larger, airier soundstage. A very good recording is now spectacular, bringing Strauss' theatrical extravaganza to even fuller life. Mark Lehman

Further Listening: Birtwistle: *The Minotaur* (Blu-ray Disc)