

US REVIEWS

Pinkas's golden Fauré • Verdehr Trio's new Americana • Richter in Kiev

BACH • CHOPIN

PINKHAM • SRIABIN

Bach Toccata in C minor, BWV 911

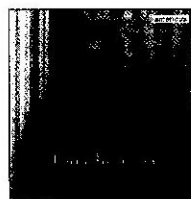
Chopin Three Preludes from Op 28 – Nos 15, 16, 17. Scherzo No 4, Op 53. Nocturne in D flat, Op 27 No 2 **Pinkham** Piano Preludes

Scriabin Sonata No 5, Op 53

Jonathan Bass *pf*

Americus © AMR20001015 (72 minutes: DDD)

Superbly played Bach and Chopin with haunting music by Pinkham



This enterprising recital by Jonathan Bass, on the faculty of the Boston Conservatory since 1993, contains superb Bach and Chopin and the world première recording of 12 absorbing Preludes by

American composer Daniel Pinkham (b1923).

Pinkham's Preludes, the last six dedicated to Sally Pinkas (who premièred the first six, and has herself recently recorded the complete set for Arsis), range reflectively for more than 25 minutes through a wide variety of speeds and lengths beginning with a breathless *Agitato* of half-a-minute and ending with a variegated *Con moto* of almost three. Given the composer's longtime association with the New England Conservatory, his use of an abstracted Brahmsian tonality that generally resolves itself in emotionally gentle, conservative and thoroughly accessible harmonies comes as no surprise. This quiet music is not conventionally memorable, but its combined sense of purpose and formal integrity, with Bass's elegant playing providing eloquent continuity, results in a surprisingly moving experience.

Bass's commanding playing is particularly in evidence in the Bach, Chopin and Pinkham. He has technique to burn but prefers to drive the music with colour and a striking ability to connect inner harmonic details without seeming academic. And while Scriabin's Sonata has received more incandescent readings, Bass's performance stresses the vision and contemplation it shares with the other music on the programme.

Steven Ledbetter's highly articulate liner notes make good reading for sophisticated listeners, and the spectacular HDCD recording (uncredited on either the insert booklet or the label's website) provides unforced, viscerally beautiful piano sound.

Laurence Vittes

DVOŘÁK

'Dvořák Day Concert'

Burleigh Deep River^a **Dvořák** Prague

Exposition Fanfare^a. Violin Sonata in G, B183^b. Humoresque in G flat, B187 No 7

(arr Kreisler)^b. Symphony No 9 in E minor,

'From the New World', B178^a

^bJosef Suk *vn* ^bLincoln Mayorga *pf*

^aDvořák Festival Orchestra of New York / Steven Richman

Music & Arts © CD1078 (70 minutes: DDD)

Recorded live at St George's Church, Stuyvesant Square, New York on September 13, 1997

Symphony No 9 – selected comparisons:

Concertgebouw, C Davis (8/93) (PHIL) 438 347-2PM2

Chicago SO, Reiner (8/95) (RCA) 09026 62587-2

Concertgebouw, Harnoncourt (7/00) (TEL) 3984 25254-2

Budapest Fest Orch, Fischer (PHIL) 464 640-2PH

A motley collection of works but one played with verve and vitality



It's often the case that recordings of performances originating from ceremonial events are of interest only to those who were in attendance. Happily, the quality of this all-Dvořák programme is such that the disc deserves a wider audience.

These performances stem in part from a 1997 concert marking the dedication of a statue of Antonin Dvořák in New York's Stuyvesant Square. The site is across the street from the apartment at 327 East 17th street (torn down in 1941), where the composer wrote the *New World* Symphony as well as the Violin Sonata – the two major works on this disc. The occasional, somewhat uncharacteristic *Fanfare* for the 1891 Prague Exposition makes a worthy curtain raiser with its Purcellian drums and brass fanfares. Having Dvořák's great-grandson Josef Suk perform the Violin Sonata no doubt made the occasion memorable. Despite being recorded in St George's Church, the acoustic sounds quite dry, with Suk's timbre emerging wiry and undernourished. Even so, the violinist plays the charming Sonata with such fluent grace and just the right amount of idiomatic affection that the wispy tone is soon overlooked, with the *Scherzo*'s piquant wit neatly conveyed. Suk's encore of Kreisler's arrangement of the *Humoresque* is similarly tender yet unsentimental at a flowing pace, with some artful grace notes. A real curio is Dvořák student Harry T Burleigh's rather inflated arrangement of the spiritual *Deep River*, which so impressed Dvořák and, clearly, provided some inspiration for the *Largo* movement of the Symphony.

The performance of the Symphony itself was a true festival event, drawing players from the MET Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, New York City Opera as well as the Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra. Steven Richman provides sympathetic direction and judges tempi well; timpani attacks have great bite and presence, though at times there is a lack of focus to the orchestral image and the ensemble sounds light in the strings. Richman handles the ebb and flow of the *Largo*'s long paragraphs skillfully, with a powerful, well-placed climax. The *Scherzo* is alert and rhythmic with nimble, nicely pointed woodwinds, and the finale comes off best of all, with forceful brass and an energised coda.

For those who fancy the rather motley programme, this disc can be recommended.

Yet worthy as Richman's reading is, competition in the Symphony is formidable. Leading rivals include Fritz Reiner's fiery Chicago Symphony account, and Sir Colin Davis's refined Concertgebouw reading. Of more recent vintage, there is Harnoncourt's quirky but interesting performance, also with the fabled Dutch orchestra and, especially Iván Fischer's gleaming, pungently idiomatic account with the Budapest Festival Orchestra on Philips, one of the finest of recent years.

Lawrence A Johnson

FAURÉ

13 Nocturnes

Sally Pinkas *pf*

Musica Omnia © MO0109 (73 minutes: DDD)

Bonus discussion disc included

Selected comparison:

Stott (4/95) (HYPER) CDA66911/4

Beautifully phrased performances, graced with exquisite tone



Fauré's Nocturnes span his creative life, from the charming, Chopinesque salon pieces of his early years to the restless, questioning works of his maturity. Listening to Sally Pinkas' traversal straight through, one is made very aware of the gradual rise in emotional temperature, though rather less of the music's increasing starkness of texture – an odd divergence that Kathryn Stott charts quite effectively. Yet Pinkas really revels in the opulent fabric of the first few nocturnes, finding a wider variety of colour and shading than Stott. Listen, for example, to the pianist's careful weighting of voices – one shyly shadowing the other – in the central section of the First Nocturne (beginning around 2'11"). Pinkas has a natural feeling for *rubato*, too, and while she occasionally exaggerates what should be a gentle *ritard*, the sense of fluidity is consistently conveyed. She captures the song-like character of No 4 beautifully, making her instrument sing even in ornamental runs. The central section of No 6 is delicately ecstatic, like a seraph strumming a celestial harp. And the fidgety sequences of No 9, which can seem to meander, are sensitively shaped into expressive phrases.

Pinkas' exquisite tone deserves special mention, as it never becomes hard or edgy in the way Stott's sometimes does, and the engineer has put enough air around the instrument to make the upper registers shimmer. In fact, this is one of the best-sounding piano recordings I've heard in some time. In addition to her thoughtful booklet notes, Pinkas gives an animated and jargon-free 18-minute introduction to Fauré's Nocturnes (with helpful musical examples) on a second, complimentary disc. Now may we please have her Barcarolles? **Andrew Farach-Colton**