Americans abroad

ANTHONY BURTON enjoys a rich seam of music history

set, lavishly annotated and with
high standards of performance and
recording. On a solo piano disc, the
artistic director of the project,
Donald Berman, shows great stylistic
flexibility, both between pieces
and within Tamar Diesendruck’s
multifarious Sound Reasoning in the
Tower of Babel.

The other discs feature voices,
strings and winds. Among the
highlights are a tantalising fragment
(in a chamber arrangement) from
Roger Sessions’s operatic masterwork
Montezuma, Elliott Carter’s
luminous orchestrations of two
early songs, Stephen Hartke’s piano
quartet Beyond Words (a restrained
Tallis-based meditation on 9/11) and

David Lang’s coruscating Vent for
flute and piano. But if you have even
a passing interest in 20th-century
music, you’ll want to explore this rich

The Elaris Duo have planned their
duo virtuoso disc as a history of
the development of the violin
cello duet. Unfortunately, that
means mostly hors d’oeuvres – an
arrangement of Mozart, a snippet
of Boccherini, a probably spurious
Haydn movement, a Beethoven piece
originally written for wind, and even
an arrangement of Halvorsen’s free
transcription of Handel – before
the main course of Kodály’s
magnificent Duo, very well and
dramatically played. The recording,
in an empty concert hall, takes a bit
of getting used to (**). The

The collection of ROMANTIC
treasures by violinist Sergiu
Schwartz and pianist Alec Chien
also has a recording that initially
seems unhelpful, though for the
opposite reason: a slightly close,
almost domestic acoustic. The two
are persuasive in Dvořák’s lovely
Four Romantic Pieces, the eloquent
Saint-Saëns First Sonata, and a
couple of Debussy transcriptions.
But Schwartz’s intonation isn’t
always spot-on in Richard Strauss’s
early Sonata, and Chien is a bit loose
in the ‘Scotch snap’ rhythms in its
finale. And why make a cut in this
movement, and reverse the order of
the last two Dvořák pieces? (***)

Another violin-and-piano team,
Soojin Kim and Jeremy Denk, pairs
FAURÉ’s wonderful First Sonata
with the lush chamber Concerto by
his contemporary CHAUSSON, the
latter accompanied by the promising
Jupiter Quartet. Kim spins a fine
thread of beautifully pure and well-
tuned tone, but his playing seems
all too clean: surely the music of
this period cries out for some
Romantic glides and swoops? The
recording, close on the piano and
sometimes relegating Kim to the
background, doesn’t help (**). GEORGE ANTHEIL’s first two string
quartets were written in Paris in the
1920s, and they’re very much of
their time and place, with their
elegant and sudden switches
tonics and tempos. Quartet No. 3,
written in Hollywood in the ‘40s,
is bolder: a mixture of Prokojiev
and Milhaud with what sounds like
an English folk melody thrown in.
The excellent young Del Sol Quartet,
well recorded, plays these and a couple
of shorter pieces with devoted attention
to detail and a nice light touch
(**). Anthony Burton

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