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Classical CDs Weekly: Schoenberg, Shostakovich, Maria Camahort Quintet

An epic cantata, an iconic Soviet symphony and some Spanish chamber music

by [Graham Rickson](#) [1] Saturday, 15 August 2015

Schoenberg: *Gurre-Lieder* Gürzenich-Orchester Köln/Markus Stenz (Hyperion)

Schoenberg's vast *Gurre-Lieder* began life in 1900 as a modest song cycle for soprano, tenor and piano, its texts drawn from Danish poetry. He suspended work on the piece in 1903, returning to it in 1910 – by which time his musical style had radically changed. As had the scale of the piece, which ideally needs between 300 and 400 performers, six vocal soloists and over 100 minutes. Not forgetting the ratchet and some iron chains. The extravagant forces are used with admirable restraint, and performances remain an expensive rarity. Schoenberg was dismayed by the cantata's positive reception when it was first performed in 1913 and refused to face the audience – understandably irked that it was received more positively than his more radical later music. Economics dictate that most modern recordings are made live. Not here – this radiant new *Gurre-Lieder* was recorded over four days in June 2014. The gains are immense; Markus Stenz's theatrical nous never lets things sprawl, and the playing and singing are faultless. Crucially, no-one ever sounds on the point of collapse, and the closing chorus blazes.

Schoenberg's prelude, seven minutes of delectable minimalist twinkling, is extraordinary. Brandon Jovanovich's and Barbara Haveman excel as Waldemar and Tove, and there's a wonderful cameo from Claudia Mahnke as the Wood Dove at the close of Part One. Part Three's rattling coffin lids are judged to perfection, and there's a nice turn from Thomas Bauer as the Peasant. Stenz's male chorus, often a weak link, are heroic. The final melodrama's modernism is startling, taking us from early Mahler to expressionist, mature Schoenberg. It's some of the spookiest music ever composed. Johannes Martin Kränzle's *sprechtstimme* is neatly handled, before the unexpectedly radiant final minutes. All judged to perfection, and Hyperion's sound has impact, warmth and plenty of detail. Essential listening if you've a weakness for [late-romantic blockbusters](#) [4], and this recording, along with Chailly's, is among the best.

Shostakovich: *Symphony No. 10, Passacaglia from Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* Boston Symphony Orchestra/Andris Nelsons (DG)

[Birmingham](#) [5]'s loss is Boston's huge gain, and this shattering disc is the first of Andris Nelsons' DG projects, a series of live recordings of Shostakovich's mature symphonies, subtitled "Under Stalin's Shadow". Particularly apposite in this case, as Nelsons' opener is the *Passacaglia* from Act II of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, the opera which incurred Stalin's wrath in 1936. This is terrifying, visceral music, its violence and raw

dissonance anticipating the language of Shostakovich's Symphony No.4, shelved in the aftermath of Stalin's assault. The Boston Symphony Orchestra's discography might suggest that they're a sleek, well-groomed outfit, but their playing here is weighty, raw and uncompromising. DG's close balance is exactly what this music needs. Lower strings, bassoons and bass clarinet are startling, and they're equally good in the post-war 10th Symphony. The lugubrious opening unfolds with stoic inevitability, the slow clarinet melody heartbreaking. It gets better still, with a harrowing central climax and a desolate piccolo duet at the close.

Nelsons gets the violent anger too, and the ensuing Allegro's demonic energy throws up shockwaves. But it's the moments of repose which haunt – the wonderfully calm music after the Allegretto's enigmatic horn call is breathtaking. As is the slow introduction to the last movement, its woodwind solos an evocative sequence of lonely voices. And if there's a more emotionally charged account of the movement's bustling Allegro, I've not heard it; Shostakovich, in Nelsons' words, telling Stalin “You are dead but I am still alive! I am still here!” This is exceptional stuff, and DG were right to include the audience applause. This team perform the work at the [Proms](#) [6] on 23 August, so start queuing for returns now.

Maria Camahort Quintet: Iberian Colours (Convivium Records)

Catalan composer Federico Mompou is one of classical music's best-kept secrets – if you've not sampled his restrained, elegant piano output, you should snap up Arcadi Volodos's brilliant [Sony anthology](#) [7]. Guitarist Maria Camahort presents us with three short Mompou pieces, in arrangements which expand the originals' scope without diluting their essence. The Catalan popular songs which Mompou transcribed are now sung. There's some loss of intimacy but you imagine that the composer would have approved.

Camahort's disc emphasises the debt owed by Spanish classical composers to traditional music. Familiar names include Enrique Granados, whose *Danza Oriental* sounds gorgeous as a duet for violin and guitar, and Falla, represented by a touching guitar solo dedicated to Debussy's memory. Camahort's ensemble includes cello, percussion and two vocalists, deployed with notable restraint. Especially beguiling are guitar, violin and soprano transcriptions of a pair of songs by one Eduard Toldrà, sweetly sung by soprano Laura Ruhí-Vidal. Two movements from Feliu Gasull's *Suite for Cello and Guitar* were new to me, along with a striking *Lullaby* in an idiomatic quintet arrangement. Camahort's own Lorca settings have a stark, improvisatory feel, both brilliantly sung by Violeta Garcia. This is a seriously impressive CD, far more probing and affecting than the colourful sleeve art might suggest. Perfect holiday listening, in other words. The production values are impeccable, with Camahort's notes a model of scholarly accessibility.

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