

GRAMOPHONE

ISOUNDS OF AMERICA

A special eight-page section focusing on recent recordings from the US and Canada

Barber • Rachmaninov

Barber Cello Sonata, Op 6

Rachmaninov Cello Sonata, Op 19

Jonah Kim *vc* Sean Kennard *pf*

Delos © DE3574 (53' • DDD)



Sergey Rachmaninov and Samuel Barber were both twenty-somethings when they composed their only sonatas for cello and piano. These are works of young firebrands, full of emotional urgency and heightened instrumental challenges, which are met to striking effect in the performances offered on this new recording by the cellist Jonah Kim and pianist Sean Kennard.

All the hallmarks of Rachmaninov's mature style are present in his Sonata for piano and violoncello, Op 19, from brooding lyricism and propulsive fervour to virtuoso flights. It may be telling that piano comes before cello in the work's title, since Rachmaninov, with his seemingly superhuman technique, was at the keyboard for the premiere in Moscow in 1901. So rich is the piano-writing that the danger of the cello being swallowed whole could be a significant concern. But Kim and Kennard balance their efforts judiciously, with the cellist contributing poetic vibrancy and depth amid his colleague's exceptional agility, nuance and power.

Barber wrote his Sonata – titled, also tellingly, for violoncello and piano, Op 6 – towards the end of his studies at the Curtis Institute of Music. Like Rachmaninov, the American composer was the pianist at the work's premiere, in 1933 in New York. Its three movements abound in open-hearted gestures, alternately impassioned, noble and reflective, with Brahms at times gazing over Barber's shoulder. With his pulsating vibrato and intense expressivity, Kim asserts the cello's eloquent personality throughout the varied atmospheres. Kennard brings utmost clarity and shapeliness to Barber's

pianistic utterances, which confirm that this composer was also a player of lofty accomplishment. **Donald Rosenberg**

Liang

Inheritance

Susan Narucki, Kirsten Ashley Wiest *sops*

Hillary Jean Young *sng* Josué Cerón *bar*

UCSD Ensemble / Steven Schick

Albany © TROY1819 (51' • DDD • T)



Before the rise of Silicon Valley and Dionne Warwick's 1968 hit 'Do you know the way to San Jose', California was known for its Winchester Mystery House, a gaudy, sprawling mansion built by a munitions heiress to accommodate in its 160 rooms and 40 staircases the ghosts of America's gun culture and to expurgate her sins.

This opera in 10 scenes is constructed so that Susan Narucki's great set piece, Sarah Winchester's narrative of dread, hope, and madness 'Once, in New Haven, as I held my daughter to my breast', emerges not so much out of the story, which is so appropriately disembodied as to be non-existent beyond the basic contours of Winchester's life, but from the depths of accountability amplified by personal grief. In this and the following even more hair-raising scene, Narucki forces her character to experience almost impossible contrasts of beauty and pain.

While Lei Liang's opera must obviously be seen to be fully experienced, especially given the press of current events, so sensitively and imaginatively does he mix and match his kaleidoscopic sonic palette to Matt Donovan's freely evocative, numerology-obsessed libretto, the quartet of voices, the curious ensemble and the electronics that the highly charged narrative makes a deep impression even without the stagecraft. The recording captures the drama, layering the voices with the ideally captured instrumental riffs so that it's all perfectly clear and precise without being

surgical. Unless Sarah had something to do with it, it was sheer coincidence that *Inheritance* was premiered in the same year as *Winchester* starring Helen Mirren was released. **Laurence Vittes**

Runestad

'Sing, Wearing the Sky'

Alleluia. Fear not, dear friend. I will lift mine eyes. Let my love be heard. Live the questions. Ner ner. Proud music of the storm. The Secret of the Sea. Sing, wearing the sky. We can mend the sky

Kantorei / Joel Rinsema

Naxos American Classics © 8 559892

(65' • DDD • T)



Each of these 10 works by Jake Runestad, written between 2006 and

2018, has a similar reverence for texts that touch deeply but gently on human issues and benefit from his imaginatively varied toolkit of resources. That he writes well for singers is enthusiastically proved by the all-volunteer Denver-based Kantorei choral ensemble and eight instrumentalists, and some full-blooded recordings.

In the title-track, *Sing, wearing the sky*, to a text by the 14th-century Sufi mystic Lalla, Runestad captures what he describes as 'the metaphor of dancing while feeling free or naked' with sensuous Indian abandon leading to incongruously homespun Americana, sung gloriously throughout by mezzo-soprano Kali Paguirigan, vividly scored with an exhilarating violin solo and an upsurge of energy ending in a superb climax.

The Secret of the Sea, to texts by Whitman, Longfellow, Hilda Doolittle and the Inuit shaman Uvavnuq, and inspired by the Sydney Opera House, where it was premiered, arises out of an Impressionistic haze and seduces with another memorable piano melody. Some heavy-duty choral work recalling *Nezsky* and Orff, intense and fragile at the same time, further charges Runestad's musical moodscape.