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Classical CDs Weekly: Henze, Reicha, Shostakovich

Quirky pianism from a Bohemian in Paris, an iconic 20th century symphony, plus music from a post-war German master

by [Graham Rickson](#) | Saturday, 09 September 2017 Share |

Ripe for rediscovery: Ivan Il'ic plays Reicha

Ker Xavier

Henze: Neue Volkslieder und Hirtengesänge, Kammermusik 1958
Scharoun Ensemble Berlin/Daniel Harding, with Andrew Staples (tenor), Markus Weidmann (bassoon) and Jürgen Ruck (guitar) (Tudor)

Hans Werner Henze worked regularly with the Scharoun Ensemble [Berlin](#) from 1983 onwards, and this enchanting collection includes works performed at a memorial concert given after Henze's death in 2012. One of the best routes into Henze's music must be through Oliver Knussen's mesmerising DG set of *Undine*, surely one of the great 20th century ballet scores. Or via the two works collected here, which will floor listeners expecting harsh post-war modernism. The *Neue Volkslieder und Hirtengesänge* were based on music written in the early 1980s for a community production in Styria, Austria of an updated retelling of the *Oedipus* legend. A decade later, Henze reorganised and rescored some of the material for bassoon, guitar and string trio, the end result a ravishing 14-minute sequence of "new folk songs and pastorals", the music aiming to capture "something of the atmosphere, of the mood of this melancholy landscape..." Almost a miniature concerto for bassoon and guitar, it's a gravely beautiful piece, the lightness of several of the dances never quite strong enough to dispel the shadows. Gorgeous solo playing too, from bassoonist Markus Weidmann and guitarist Jürgen Ruck.

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“How can something so hauntingly strange have been written in the second decade of the 19th century?”

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Better known is the main work here, Henze's *Harmoniemusik* 1950, based around a hymn by the poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Henze dedicated this large scale piece to Britten: the first performance featured Peter Pears and guitarist Julian Bream, accompanied by an instrumental octet. The music is consistently alluring, Henze's free use of dodecaphony prompting some wonderfully singable music, scored with breathtaking delicacy. Tenor Andrew Staples sings with warmth and agility, at his best when partnered by Ruck's guitar. Disappointingly, the texts aren't translated, which means that those with limited German will need to resort to, er, Google. This is a minor gripe: snap up forthwith a handsome tribute to an important composer.



Reicha Rediscovered, Vol 1 *Ivan Il'ic* (piano) (Chandos)

You'll have heard of Antoine Reicha if you're a wind player. You might even have strolled past his tomb whilst searching for Jim Morrison's grave in Père Lachaise cemetery. Born in Prague in 1770, he's remembered as being a friend of Haydn and Beethoven and an extremely influential teacher. Pitching up in Paris in 1808, he eventually became a professor at the Conservatoire, his pupils including Berlioz and Liszt. You half expect the largely forgotten music of a

celebrated teacher to be dry, dutiful and rather correct, but what we hear in this collection is ear-tickling. You sense that Reicha must have been good company. Sample the seven-minute fantasia *Harmonie*, from the soberly named *Praktische Beispiele*, an enchanting opus full of quirky key changes which sound disarmingly modern. Prokofiev would have approved. There's more of the same in a brief *Capriccio*, and a loopy four-minute *Fantasia* based entirely on an E major chord.

A larger-scale *Grande Sonate* from 1805 behaves with more superficial decorum, but still contains some terrifically inventive ideas, my favourite being the second subject which appears a minute or so after the sonata's comically florid opening. The tune is already fabulous, made more so by a delectable left-hand part. It's impossible to keep a straight face. Reicha's *Sonata on a Theme of Mozart* takes the trend for composing variations and paraphrases on operatic arias a step further, using the *March of the Priests* from *The Magic Flute* as the basis of a carefully structured first movement. Though perhaps the theme keeps him a little too tightly on the rails: the sonata really hits its stride in the second and third sections. Perhaps the most striking piece comes at the end of this recital: a brief, quizzical *Étude* modelled on a Bach prelude. How can something so beautiful, so hauntingly strange, have been written in the second decade of the 19th century? Performances are glorious. Ivan Il'ic's playing exudes technical brilliance and warmth in equal measures; the dominant impression is of a pianist keen to share this extraordinary music with a wider public. The affection is palpable. Chandos's rich sound is impressive, and further volumes are promised. A winner.

Shostakovich: Symphony No 5, Barber: Adagio *Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Manfred Honeck* (Reference Recordings)

Shostakovich 5 comes with cartloads of extra-musical baggage, so much so that it's easy to lose sight of the work behind the story. The symphony's context is neatly spelt out in Manfred Honeck's sleeve essay (how many conductors can write so eloquently?), but better to listen first and read later. This is the sort of performance you want to press into the hands of someone who's never heard the piece. It's marvellous, in so many ways, Honeck steering a near-ideal course between hysteria and sobriety. Lower strings are impressive from the outset, their sound pungent and full of weight. But just as remarkable is how Honeck gets his violins to really sing when the second subject enters, their intonation flawless. Spectacular rasping horns kick off the movement's development, brass and wind playing with a paint-stripping ferocity that suggests a vintage Soviet orchestra. And the pale, bleached sonorities in the coda – this is luxury playing. Honeck plays the scherzo as a Mahlerian *ländler*, applying touches of very Viennese rubato. It works.

There's more Mahler in the great *Largo*, the crucial wind solos played with a very vocal flexibility. The effect is haunting, and the weight of string tone at the big climax has to be heard to be believed. The last movement's bombast has a suitably sharp edge, and Honeck's sensibly chosen tempo in the closing pages is near-ideal. Exceptionally good; I've banged on about recordings from this team for several years now. One wonders why it's taken so long for this live performance to be released: it was taped in 2013. Fans of this work shouldn't hesitate. And, if you don't know it well, start here. The slightly incongruous coupling is Barber's *Adagio*, Honeck basing his reading on Barber's acapella choral version, using the text of the *Agnus Dei*. For all its beauties, and despite the Pittsburgh strings' sumptuous playing, I prefer the sparer, humbler sound of Barber's quartet original. But I accept that I'm in a minority. Magnificent engineering and good sleeve notes – you'd expect nothing less.

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