

Classical & Opera

Reviews



BRASS MONKEY
John Hagstrom is a little (very little) funky on his new solo CD.

Major chords

The city's classical performers shine in the recording studio.
By **Marc Geelhoed**

★★★★★
John Hagstrom
Music for Trumpet and Winds (Albany)

As the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's second trumpeter, John Hagstrom's job is to make the first trumpeter sound good, and the chances to hear him soloing were pretty slim—until now.

Hagstrom teamed up with conductor Donald DeRoche and the DePaul Wind Ensemble for a collection of showpieces, operatic transcriptions and more highbrow concertos. You'd never guess he was a mild-mannered second trumpeter from the hair-raising high notes in Rafael Mendez's Scherzo or Andrei Petrov's six-minute Concerto, or from the way he seamlessly unfurls long

lines in Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*.

The big concertos are by Hummel and the Baroque-era's Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel. There's an easygoing quality to his playing of the Hummel that's missing from a lot of swaggering, dude-check-out-my-killer-chops trumpet-playing, while the Stölzel features his high-flying piccolo trumpet to great effect. The witty call-and-response between Hagstrom and the ensemble shows off everyone's enjoyment.

The disc also includes Mozart's "Der Holle Rache," also known as the "Queen of the Night's Aria" from *The Magic Flute*. It's been transposed into an easier key than the punishingly high original for coloratura soprano, and Hagstrom has a breezy good time with it.

DeRoche's student ensemble does a fine job and plays with bubbly charm.

★★★★★
William Ferris Chorale
Menotti: The Egg (WFC Live!)

What a fantastic 70th birthday party the William Ferris Chorale threw for

composer Gian Carlo Menotti! It was way back in 1981 that the ensemble performed this hour-long work, with the composer in attendance and stage directing this work. Released in time to celebrate the Chorale's 35th anniversary and Menotti's 95th birthday, this is *The Egg's* first recording.

Menotti's lightly melodic style is used to tell a charming story. An old man, Saint Simeon, has an egg which contains the meaning of life. His nephew, Manuel, takes the egg to the royal court, where he and others try to open it. They fail, and when Manuel eventually gives it to an old woman with a dying child, she easily opens it and feeds her child. The egg "will only open if given away."

Tenor John Vorrasi, today one of the Chorale's leaders, is a delight as Saint Simeon, and baritone Thomas Silliti is a questing Manuel. William Ferris leads the chorus and orchestra in an inspired performance. *Available from the Chorale at 773-325-2000.*

★★★★★
Grant Park Orchestra
American Orchestral Works (Cedille)

Living composers haven't been strangers to the Grant Park Music Festival. That spunky summer outfit hasn't gone for the easy crowd-pleasers, and could probably keep its audience without playing a note of contemporary music.

Conductor Carlos Kalmar and the orchestra give five premiere recordings of Americans' works on this disc. The brightest light among them is John Corigliano's *Midsummer Fanfare*, a GPMF commission for the opening of the Pritzker Pavilion. From the scratchy and wayward beginning to the thrilling theme's brassy perorations, it shows just what the orchestra can do. Such heroic (and *loud*) unison passages from the trumpets, horns and trombones bear witness to the orchestra's strength and Kalmar's work ethic.

Young (35) Michael Hersch's *Ashes of Memory* was written in 2000, yet manages to sound like a response to September 11. After much crashing, harps plink away in the carnage. John Harbison's brightly scored *Partita* keeps melodic fragments popping from section to section. Barbara Kolb's *All in Good Time* just treads water, and the less said about Aaron Jay Kernis's gutless *Sarabanda in Memoriam*, the better.

But the GPO is precise and confident, which makes up for a lot. When the music matches its high level, music-making doesn't get much better.