

## Classical CDs Weekly: Schumann, Stravinsky, Xenakis

Romantic piano music, bone-crunching Greek Modernism and an unusual recording of a famous ballet

by [Graham Rickson](#) | Saturday, 22 October 2011

Share |

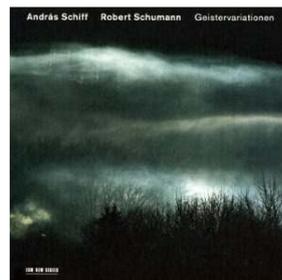


Schiff plays Schumann

Yutaka Suzuki

### Schumann: *Geistervariationen* András Schiff (ECM)

Hungarian pianist András Schiff has been revisiting some of the core repertoire with which he first made his name. This ECM two-disc set offers a revelatory Schumann recital – this label's typically dour cover art giving little hint of the vibrancy and colour of Schiff's playing. *Papillons* and the *Kinderszenen* are both performed with unshowy sincerity – Schiff's lightness of touch in the miniatures which make up *Papillons* is a delight, and *Kinderszenen* never sounds clichéd – this is the sweetest, sincerest *Träumerei* I've heard. Schiff also gives us the nine *Waldszenen* – *Vogel als Prophet* has a probing, improvisatory feel, and the *Jagdlied* has bounce and swagger.



The disc takes its name from the 1854 *Geistervariationen*, their theme supposedly dictated to an ailing Schumann by angels. That the melody itself is so unshowy, so simple comes as a slight disappointment, and after the bravura of the earlier works it's startling to hear how subdued and subtle Schumann's five short variations are. The big attraction of the set is the C major *Fantasy*, a sonata in all but name. In 1975, Schiff managed to track down a copy of the work's original ending, languishing in a Budapest library. Here, the Beethoven quotation used in the work's first movement is recalled in the closing minutes. It works beautifully, and Schiff also gives us Schumann's original close as a comparison. There's also a powerful account of the F-sharp minor sonata. Astonishing playing, stunningly recorded and very well annotated.

### Stravinsky: *The Firebird* Les Siècles/François-Xavier Roth (Les Siècles Live)

After recent discs of historically informed Poulenc and Saint-Saëns, perhaps it's not such a surprise to find a Stravinsky ballet performed on antique French instruments. François-Xavier Roth's enterprising Les Siècles give us a live

*The typically dour cover art gives little hint of the vibrancy and colour of Schiff's playing*

### free newsletter

Get a weekly digest of our critical highlights in your inbox each Thursday - free!

Sign up for our newsletter

[View previous newsletters](#)

### latest in today



**Don Pasquale, Glyndebourne on Tour**  
Not everything fits in Mariame Clément's backdat of Donizetti'...



**The Village Social, National Theatre Wales**  
NTW's second season opens with a set of pagan tales touring village ha...



**The Ides of March**  
George Clooney's star-packed morality tale super anatomises politic...



**CD: Magazine - No Thysself**  
Post-punks return after 30 years with an album of grace and substance



**Bon Iver, Hammersmith Apollo**  
The Wisconsin folkie is one of the great musical performing talents cur...



**Spooks, Series 10 Finale, BBC One**  
Thrilling climax for long-running spy saga

### most read



**Albatross**  
Another low-budget British film doesn't come up to snuff



**Hidden, BBC One**  
Terrific cast, great writing, promising plot - can the show keep it up for...



**Downton Abbey, ITV1/ Lulu - Something to Shout Abo...**  
Tears and tragedy at Downton, and a Lulu doc th could have done better



**Colouring Light: Brian Clarke - An Artist Apart**  
A documentary director explains why he made a I about the punk-inspired...

### buy

Find Schiff's Schumann: *Geistervariationen* on Amazon

Find Les Siècles's Stravinsky on Amazon

Find Xenakis's Alpha & Omega on Amazon

### related articles

BBC Proms: Schiff, Hallé, Elder

Classical CDs Weekly: Dvořák, Rózsa, Xenakis

### explore topics

Classical music Stravinsky  
REVIEWS Schumann new releases

### more classical music

Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Ivri Ilja, Barbican Hall

How many French horns can play Wagner at one time?

Classical CDs Weekly: Bach, Schwertsik, Shostakovich

Schiff, Baker, Hallé, Elder, Bridgewater Hall, Manchester Les Arts Florissants, Union Chapel

[more...](#)

### from the archives



**theartsdesk Q&A: Pop Musicians The Hum Leagu...**  
An exclusive interview with the electro-pop legend on the eve of their fir...



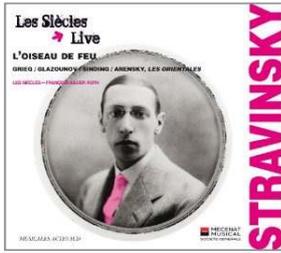
**Freedom to Create Prize 2009: Filmmaker wins**  
Mohsen Makhmalbaf pleads for democracy in his country Iran



**What I'm Reading: Conductor Peter Philli**  
The founder of the Tallis Scholars picks J G Farrer and Naguib Mahfouz



**Cosi Fan Tutte, Glyndebourne Festival Op**  
A magnetic Fjordiligi at the centre of Mozart's gar that is not a gam...



performance of *The Firebird*, neatly coupled with a reconstruction of *Les Orientales*, a ballet which was performed in June 1910 as a prelude to Stravinsky's work. Short numbers by Glazunov, Sinding, Arensky and Grieg have been skilfully stitched together. The rowdy Bacchanale from Glazunov's *The Seasons* is the one familiar item, but more arresting are the three miniatures by Arensky and Grieg's *Le Djinn*, sweetly orchestrated by Bruno Mantovani. It all works brilliantly – perhaps the most entertaining 20 minutes of orchestral

music I've heard all year.

The sheer beauty and accuracy of the playing is more of an issue when you listen to *The Firebird* – could a Parisian ballet orchestra really have played such challenging music as accurately as this in 1910? I found myself half hoping for more fluffed entries and audible signs of strain. The lean, transparent sound is a real plus – linking the work more closely with its two successors, and there's a suppleness and flexibility to Roth's direction which is effortlessly matched by his players. There's a thrilling edge to the brass chords in the final cadence which sounds authentic, even if the virtuosic percussion writing heard earlier in the ballet is recorded a little too closely. Exciting fun, and good to see another lurid sleeve from this source.

Watch François-Xavier Roth and Les Siècles play Stravinsky

**Xenakis: Alpha & Omega** Various artists (Universal Classics)

A four-disc anthology of music by the Greek composer Iannis Xenakis could send many casual listeners running for cover. They'd be mistaken - this is an extraordinary collection of pieces; several of which are among the most ear-stretchingly dissonant, exciting and uncompromising you'll ever hear. The unwary should avoid 1954's staggering *Metastasis* – heard here in a fascinating 1955 recording conducted by Hans Rosbaud. Opening with screeching string glissandi and roaring brass, it eventually dies away on a unison string note. You're left reeling at how any musician could actually imagine, let alone notate these sounds. Xenakis was obsessed with maths and architecture, working with Le Corbusier in the 1950s, and a sketch reproduced in the booklet for *Metastasis* looks like a piece of curve stitching.

There are several compositions created on magnetic tape – one of which, *Concret PH*, was a curtain-raiser for Varèse's *Poème électronique*, performed at the 1958 World Fair in Brussels. Three minutes of electronically processed cracking embers might not sound enticing, but the sounds are wonderful – brittle, glittering, almost like birdsong in places.

And however hard it is to pin down exactly why, Xenakis's wildest outbursts always sound controlled, cunningly organised. Six percussionists unleash terrifying volleys of sound in 1969's *Persephassa*, the drum sounds of the opening gradually yielding to a bewitching variety of unpitched sounds over the work's 30-minute span. We get the remarkable performance of the piano concerto *Keqrops* given by Roger Woodward and Claudio Abbado, and a good selection of Xenakis's shorter works. None of this music is easy listening, but it's impossible not to be impressed by such craggy, exhilarating physicality.

Add Comment

[Post a comment](#)

more from [graham rickson](#)

The Queen of Spades, Opera North

Classical CDs Weekly: Bach, Schwertsik, Shostakovich

DVD: Cave of Forgotten Dreams

share this article

Share |



West Side Story 50 Years On: Dubbing Art Marni...

An unseen Hollywood legend tells the inside story voicing a reluctant Na...



Martin Simpson, Queen Elizabeth Hall

Hard folkie brings a sceptic round with his guitar-playing

1 of 664 »