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New Recordings

- Nick Cristiano

Jazz

Vijay Iyer

Historicity (ACT Music ***1/2)

This CD by pianist Vijay Iyer made many top 10 lists for 2009, and it's easy to understand why.

Born of Indian parents who immigrated here in the 1960s, Iyer was a physics Ph.D. student at U.C. Berkeley for a time before discovering that he had surprising things to say in jazz.

His trio conception here is close to groove bands. His playing with bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Marcus Gilmore is often percussive and uses fluid repetitions to build tension and generate climaxes. It's heady but accessible, as on Stevie Wonder's "Big Brother."

An invigorating aspect is how his trio generates energy and takes risks that make for good solos and good jazz. Odd meters abound, and many innovations score.

Composer and pianist Andrew Hill is an influence, especially on his chunky "Smoke Stack." Leonard Bernstein's "Somewhere" comes out sounding otherworldly and understated though still appealing, while "Galang" by hip-hop artist Maya Arulpragasam (British-born of Sri Lankan parents, she spent some of her childhood in India) contributes a mesmerizing dance beat for Iyer's explorations.

- Karl Stark

Garage A Trois

Power Patriot (Royal Potato Family ***)

Garage A Trois is a jam band on energy drinks. Or maybe a dental drill with a soundtrack.

The band, started in the late 1990s with guitarist Charlie Hunter, now sports a driving lineup of vibraphonist Mike Dillon, keyboardist Marco Benevento, New Orleans drummer Stanton Moore and saxophonist Skerik. (Among many projects, Dillon and Skerik perform in a small group called "The Dead Kenny G's.")

On this set of originals, the band works into a froth over a heavy sheen of metallic background. A raw industrial sound dominates, with such givens as a power bass and various keyboard atmospherics. "Germs" is somewhat typical of this fusion drone, while Skerik's title track sounds like Sun Ra with uncorked electronics and a vicious beat.

"Dory's Day Out" comes off like an old R&B song, albeit one chafed up by the band's gruff perspective, while "Dugout" is closer to conventional jazz fusion.

This isn't cuddling music and wasn't meant to be.

- K.S.

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Classical

Schoenberg Gurrelieder

Philharmonia Orchestra, Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting
(Signum ****)

Among the recorded choices for Schoenberg's lavishly scored early-period masterpiece, Simon Rattle's EMI outing with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra has long had the best combination of orchestral splendor, musical comprehension, and vocal glamour. But no serious *Gurrelieder* fan should pass up this new set: Salonen connects the many dots just as brilliantly as Rattle, favoring a leaner brass-and-winds-based sonority and a volatile, even explosive manner but without slighting the music's ability to intoxicate.

Two elements particularly come to the fore: Based on Danish legend, the piece has important dramatic things to say, and does so with many echoes of popular music in the air during pre-World War I Vienna. Given the heroic vocal demands, no one *Gurrelieder* is going to be ideal: Soprano Soile Isokoski and mezzo-soprano Monica Groop are the best on record in their respective roles since Jessye Norman and Tatiana Troyanos on the Philips-label set, though tenor Stig Andersen threatens to crack under the vocal strain.

- David Patrick Stearns

Hersch Sonatas No. 1 and 2 for Unaccompanied Cello

Daniel Gaisford, cello
(Vanguard Classics ****)

Philadelphia-based composer Michael Hersch progresses so dramatically from one piece to the next, one tends to look at the composition dates of these two works - 1994 and 2000 - and anticipate a letdown. Not as long as cellist Gaisford is playing them. Besides having the astounding technical equipment required for these alternately dense and meditative musical monologues, he brings to every phrase a charisma born of intense dramatic commitment.

Though written six years apart, the sonatas are fundamentally similar: Rather than following Bach's example by sketching a grand construction with a single instrument, Hersch goes for a different kind of tour de force, more like the interior monologues heard in the concertos of Alfred Schnittke - intensely communicative even when so personal as to seem enigmatic. Fits of rage, particularly in Hersch's first sonata, can seem like musical flailing on first hearing but on closer examination reveal an intricately constructed world with vast emotional scope.

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