A Confluence of Two Worlds: Pianist and Harpsichordist Sophia Gilmson

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Written by Christopher Brodersen

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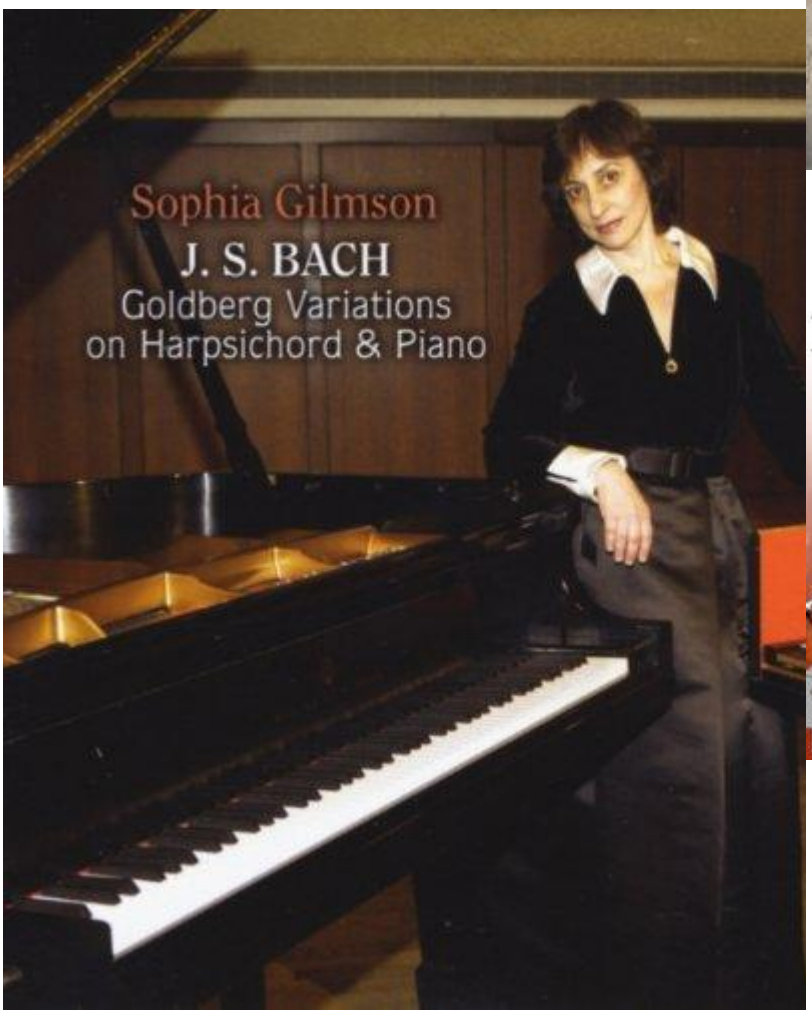
Harpsichordist Sophia Gilmson

BY CHRISTOPHER BRODERSEN



J.S. Bach Goldberg Variations On Harpsichord and Piano

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Recently I spent a delightful hour on the phone chatting with Sophia Gilmson apropos her new release of the Bach *Goldberg Variations*, played on

harpsichord and piano. What follows is a distillation of that conversation.

Q: I just finished watching the DVD that contains your demonstrations of selections from the Goldberg*s played on the two instruments—although I haven't gotten around to watching the full performance.*

A: Well, the thing you need to know when watching my performance is that you would not see me—you would see the score.

Q: Ah, so the score is flashed on the screen. Great idea.

A: You understand—the DVD has the same performance as on the CDs. We thought the score demonstration would enhance the educational value of the recording.

Q: That it does. My wife, who is a pianist, watched it earlier. She said the comparisons between piano and harpsichord technique were very enlightening.

A: Excellent.

Q: So, tell me a bit about your background. I know you teach at the University of Texas in Austin, but judging from your accent, you're obviously not from there.

A: I was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, which at the time was called Leningrad, USSR. I'm a graduate, *cum laude*, of the Leningrad Conservatory, where I studied with Vitaly Margulis, who has been the major musical influence in my life. I was fortunate to

be at the Leningrad Conservatory at the time of its peak; there were many fabulous people teaching and studying there. For example, a few years ahead of me was a magnificent cellist named Mischa Maisky, well known in Europe, also a pianist whom I consider to be the Gilels of our time, Grigory Sokolov. It was just a glorious time to be at the Conservatory.

Q: What brought you to the U.S.?

A: It was during a very short period of time when all of a sudden the possibility of emigration became available to us. Before that, citizens were not allowed to leave the Soviet Union. Even for those prominent musicians who toured abroad—Gilels, Richter—their activities were very strictly controlled.

It happened during the Brezhnev regime. For a short time emigration became at least remotely possible. Many applied, and many were denied permission—they received the nickname of “refusenik”—I wonder if you remember that.

Q: Yes, of course.

A: These people were not so lucky, because they were usually fired from their jobs and had to spend years in political limbo. My husband and I were very fortunate; we received permission almost immediately and were able to travel first to Vienna, and then to Italy, where the international Jewish organization HIAS helped us. The U.S. agreed to accept us, and we arrived in Houston, where a social worker was assigned to us and met us at the

airport.

In discussing our situation, she explained that with me, it wasn't going to be so easy. She said there were already several Russian pianists in Houston: four from Moscow and two from Leningrad, and that they were all working as hairdressers! She said that it would be practically impossible for me to settle in America as a pianist because there were so many of us and the employment possibilities were nearly non-existent. Well, as you can imagine, I was devastated. But I must say, not one single day of my life have I found it necessary to work as a hairdresser, and if I did, I would be horrible at it! [laughs]

Q: I'm glad of that.

A: Then the social worker found me a job; I was offered to be trained as a "key-punch operator." She felt that because my fingers were so well developed, I would make a very good key-punch operator. But that never happened either. To this day, I still don't know exactly what a key-punch operator does! [laughs]

My beginning in this country was very slow—I couldn't understand why no one would offer me a job in music. It's not that I was a snob; I loved to teach, and I loved working with children. As a musician, I could do a lot of things: play chamber music, accompany, etc. I was ready to do just about anything. The Western system and the American style of living were completely foreign to me. Prior to emigration, I had never been abroad. All I knew was the Soviet system, where you are told how to

work and what to do, and that's the end of it. So the concepts of personal initiative and private enterprise were very new to me.

In addition, I didn't speak English, and I had never driven a car. This was Houston, Texas, where without a car, you can't go anywhere. I didn't have a car, and I didn't even have a piano! But I was young and very enthusiastic; I had just graduated from the Leningrad Conservatory, so I was in good "pianistic shape." At our transition point in Rome, I had the chance to play a few concerts. The word got around about me, and I was invited to play at the radio station of the Vatican. They made a recording of my performances; this was so popular that it was rebroadcast for several years. I still remember the studio and the piano; it was a wonderful nine-foot Bechstein.

Somehow, little by little, things started happening in Houston. I received a surprise gift: an upright piano. I don't know from whom—my donor remained anonymous. It was a little Wurlitzer spinet, which I still have. It's a kind of museum piece for me, although it's really a terrible piano. [laughs] But I keep it as a memento. This piano enabled me to start giving piano lessons to children. But to be honest, I couldn't fathom why they would want to take lessons from me. You understand, I came from a life where classical music was a kind of holy art. And here these kids would come to me slovenly and disinterested, with untrimmed fingernails.

Q: I was expecting you to say that they couldn't wait for the lesson to be over so that they could get to

their baseball game.

A: Maybe they did, but I wouldn't have known—I couldn't speak English! I only knew what *I* was saying.

You know, this idea that the child must have *fun*, that piano lessons had to be entertaining—it didn't sit well with me. That was the prevailing attitude among the parents. One student of mine—all he ever wanted to do was learn a single song from *Chariots of Fire*, while I wanted him to learn pieces from the *Anna Magdalena Notebook*. I knew why I was teaching these kids: I had to pay my rent. But I couldn't understand why the parents would want to subsidize me when their kids were as disinterested as this.

Q: Maybe the parents understood your value as a teacher.

A: I don't believe in the beginning they did. In any case, I had a tremendous turnover. My students were leaving me in droves; new ones were coming in. Eventually I had a few students who could play reasonably well. I joined the local piano teachers' association, and started showing off my best pupils in recital and competitions. It gradually became clear that I had something to offer. It was a slow and difficult process, but little by little, I built a studio that, if I had taken it back to Leningrad, would have been more than acceptable there. And I'm not talking about just one or two star pupils; I am talking about the entire studio. Many of my students were winning competitions, playing with orchestras, and

getting noticed by university faculties.

Meanwhile, I was working on my own performances. I played just about everywhere, for anyone who cared to listen. Being very young, inexperienced, and quite naive at the time, I felt that I should also try my luck at competitions. In fact, I won the first prize at the Young Artists in Recital Competition in New York City in 1978; at that point I had only been in the United States for two years. It was a big competition; it now carries the name Frina Auerbach Competition, after the person who started it.

I was *so* surprised. “Stunned” is perhaps a better word. There were actually two first prizes. Not shared, as sometimes happens, but the judges decided to award two separate first prizes. My co-winner was Robert McDonald, who’s now teaching at Julliard. He works a lot with Midori.

Q: Ah, so he’s her accompanist.

A: No, I‘d rather say he’s a collaborative artist. They’ve formed a duo.

Well, after the competition, Robert and I were invited, along with the second and third place winners, to play a recital at Carnegie Recital Hall, now known as Weill Hall. I also performed on the radio program of Robert Sherman in New York. But, big surprise: no job offers as a result of winning the competition! The following year I won another first prize: the recording competition put on by the Guild of American Piano Teachers. But again, nothing happened. So I returned to Houston after the

competition. I had become something of a local hero. The newspapers all wrote about me, but not much was happening.

Looking back, my early years in American seemed to progress very slowly, but Imust say that not one single day did I work outside the field of music. I never had to wait tables, and I was never a hairdresser, which is certainly good for all concerned! [laughs] Then I started teaching at a small community college outside of Houston, the College of the Mainland. There were wonderful people there; we all became great friends. But musically speaking, it was no great challenge for me. At a community college, you typically don't find many high-level piano students. But socially, it was a wonderful experience.

Many of the friends I made during this time came from the NASA community. The husbands all worked for NASA, and strangely enough, many of the wives were pianists and piano teachers.

Q: Really?

A: Yes. They asked me to lead a series of pedagogical workshops. In fact, it gave me the chance to put the finishing touches on my piano pedagogy course. These were real professionals, with established studios, and they were very eager to hear what I had to say about technique, choice of repertoire, nurturing of younger students, etc., everything the Russian School of piano playing is justly famous for.

It was a wonderful period in my life, because it was

around this time that I received my American citizenship. The day after the swearing-in ceremony, when I arrived for work at the College of the Mainland, my colleagues and friends had arranged a big party in celebration, including a big cake in the shape of the state of Texas!

I lived in Houston for a total of 17 years. While working at the College of the Mainland, I maintained a private studio, although not all that big. I had many talented students, but I always felt that I couldn't provide them with the same kind of performance opportunities I had during my formative years in Leningrad; performing in real concerts, in front of an audience, not just in competitions. Also, I wanted them to get more experience in collaborative performance—playing with their peers who studied other instruments. With all this in mind, I approached a prominent teacher in the area, Shu-Hao Pao. Together we formed the Houston Young Artists Concerts, a program that provided performance opportunities for musically gifted students. Eventually we attained non-profit status; the program is now quite substantial and provides many opportunities for pre-college students on all instruments.

In 1993, I was invited to join the faculty of the University of Texas at Austin. Austin is such a lovely place—right now, the temperature is 100 degrees! [laughs] For about eight months out of the year it's delightful here, but during the summer months, when it's 100-plus outside, I go elsewhere. This year, I was away on a five-week trip—three weeks of very intense work, and two weeks of blissful rest.

I was at the World Piano Conference in Serbia for a week, and then two weeks at the InterHarmony Festival in Tuscany, then a week in Croatia visiting friends, followed by a week in Colorado.

Q: Sounds like you keep very busy. You also find time to record—your new release of the Bach GoldbergVariations *is the topic today. In your liner notes and on the DVD, you state that, as far as anyone knows, you are probably the first person to record the work on both piano and harpsichord.*

A: You know, when I started this project and began doing some research on the subject, that seemed to be the case. Much later, I found a reference to an unofficially recorded performance of the *Goldberg*s on piano and harpsichord by Roselyn Tureck, who was a great Bach interpreter of the 20th century.

Q: Of course.

A: Evidently she made an unofficial recording, not in a studio, and not intended for commercial release. I didn't know about this at the time I was making my recording.

Q: I don't think anyone can gainsay your effort because of that.

A: Well, at least I'm the only artist currently before the public who has released such a recording.

Q: And certainly yours is the only version currently in the catalog.

A: I think so. If another recording exists, I would

certainly like to know about it.

Q: I have to put this next question rather delicately, because there are people in both the piano and harpsichord camps who would question your sanity for attempting a project like this….

A: [laughs]

Q: There are harpsichordists who would say, "Why in the world would anyone want to perform the Goldberg*s on the piano?"—and vice versa. At least from that standpoint, yours is a rather brave venture. Of course, you do address this issue somewhat on the DVD. But how would you counter, for example, a period instrument enthusiast who might be critical of your performance on piano?*

A: Well, the *Goldberg Variations* have had a rather interesting history. Throughout the entire 19th century they were probably performed very infrequently, until 1931 when Wanda Landowska brought them back to life on the harpsichord. Of course, her harpsichord was not authentic; it was built to her specifications by the piano manufacturer Pleyel. There were a lot of additions that the harpsichord of Bach's time didn't have.

Q: Of course.

A: But that is completely beyond the point. She deserves credit for bringing the harpsichord, and this music, back to life. From an aesthetic standpoint, I don't find her recording of the *Goldberg*s all that enjoyable, but historically speaking it has tremendous significance. It was a

beginning.

Q: I don't think there's a harpsichordist alive who doesn't at least grudgingly acknowledge Landowska's importance as a pioneer.

A: I think she should be acknowledged. I must say that I do not belong to the "purist" camp, either on the harpsichord or the piano side. Apparently during the Baroque period, composers were much freer in their choice of instrument. Bach took Vivaldi's string concertos and arranged them for keyboard. He even took his own music and rewrote it for different instruments: oboe and violin concertos that became keyboard concertos, and so on. Apparently for Baroque composers, and specifically for Bach, the musical idea was more important than the instrumental idea.

I most certainly admire the many wonderful recordings on harpsichord that exist in the catalog. The same holds true for piano. But hearing the same piece of music performed successively on both instruments produces, I think, an entirely new perspective on the music, and by extension, on the whole Baroque repertoire for keyboard. Each instrument presents its own set of interpretive demands. It's not a question of which instrument best suits my needs; it's about how I can best fulfill the requirements of each instrument, about how I can produce the best possible musical results, regardless of which instrument I use.

In my program notes, I express the hope that the listener will not try to decide which instrument is "better." I hope the audience will be able to enjoy

the uniqueness of each instrument, and the different possibilities that each instrument has to offer.

Q: You mention this on the DVD. But for me, the part that hit home was your elucidation of the differences in technique between piano and harpsichord. Many of them had to do with the use of the two contrasting manuals of the harpsichord, for example, the concluding section of Variation 13.

A: Yes. You see, in the *Goldberg Variation*s, Bach actually specified which variations were to be played on two manuals, and which on single manual. When you play on two manuals, the physicality becomes obvious: one hand is above and the other hand is below. When the same note is available on two keyboards, this does not present any problem at all. When you bring the two-handed topography of the harpsichord into the one keyboard of the piano, hands begin to collide. And so you have to find a way to accommodate this "collision."

But that's only one issue. Most important to me is the quality of the sound and its continuation. The sound of harpsichord decays much more quickly than that of the piano, and that presents different opportunities for phrasing and balancing of voices. In the case of the piano, the availability of dynamic shading leads to a very flexible phrasing. The harpsichord, however, calls for a variety of articulation that can be used to shape phrases. So the question is: which means will I use to achieve the best possible musical results?

Q: Your demonstrations on the DVD are quite

possibly the best part of this release. Especially for those listeners who are not keyboardists—I hope they will take the time to watch the DVD and not only listen to the CD. As the saying goes, "One picture is worth a thousand words." No explanation is needed—just watching your hands says it all. You know, whether you like it or not, you've probably built a case for the harpsichord over the piano, at least from my perspective.

A: Well, if that's the case, then I'm very happy! You know, I've always loved the music of Bach. I was very fortunate in my youth to have a teacher who introduced me to Bach in such a manner that I immediately fell in love. It's rather unusual for young children to have Bach as a favorite composer.

Q: Yes it is. Typically children don't choose Bach as their favorite.

A: That love of Bach stayed with me all throughout my musical growing-up years. When you play a lot of Bach on the piano, which I did, inevitably the question arises, "How would *he* do it?" Bach's music is such an enigma. He notated hardly anything in the way of interpretation in his scores: there are very few dynamics or tempo and articulation markings. Do you play it loud, soft, fast, slow? Do you play it legato or non-legato? What do you do? And of course, everyone arrives at a conclusion in his or her own special way. So the question persists, "How *did* Bach play his music?" Obviously, he didn't play it on the modern piano, which means he could not shape his phrases dynamically. Would he have wanted his music to

sound musical, or would he have wanted it to sound like a typewriter? No question—of course he wanted it to be musical.

How would he do this on the harpsichord? How would he have achieved musical expression and phrasing on an instrument that doesn't respond dynamically the way a piano does? That was the question that brought me to the harpsichord. I said to myself, "Hey—give it a try—see what happens." It was very enlightening; I learned so much for myself, both musically and pianistically, from this experience.

Q: Naturally that begs the question: when did you first encounter the harpsichord, and whose harpsichord was it?

A: It was in Houston. Actually, there was a wonderful person there, an influential music editor named Dr. Willard Palmer, who heard me play at one of my piano recitals. He encouraged me to play the harpsichord. I told him, "Dr. Palmer, I'm not a harpsichordist." He sent me a beautiful letter, which I still have somewhere in my files, in which he wrote, "Nonsense, Sophia. I heard your Bach; I heard how you realized the ornamentation, how you used articulation. You are a harpsichordist—you just don't know it yet." [laughs]

At this point, I decided to give the harpsichord a try. I gave some concerts on an instrument that belonged to the Houston Harpsichord Society. It was a single-manual, so I could only attempt pieces that don't call for two manuals. I enjoyed this very much, except I couldn't do it all that well, because

my technique on the harpsichord wasn't well developed. It was a piano technique, not a harpsichord technique.

In the process of practicing, I developed a clear idea of how I wanted the harpsichord to sound. But I didn't know how to achieve this sound! Through trial and error, I found the proper way to articulate, the proper way of using agogic adjustment—a little longer here, a little shorter there, thus creating flexible phrasing. At that time I didn't have the idea of performing the *Goldberg Variations* in public, because, of course, this is such an immensely difficult piece. This happened much later when I was in Austin; I began practicing on the magnificent two-manual Dowd at the University, the same instrument we used for the recording.

On the harpsichord, I had to adjust the physicality of my playing. It goes way beyond the two keyboards—it's a question of the touch itself. It's how the fingertip meets the key: so different from the piano, because the mechanism is so different.

Q: You might say that it's more intimate—you feel the "pluck" directly.

A: You feel the pluck, and yet the distribution of the weight in the arm is very different from the piano. All the sound is concentrated in the fingertips. Of course, being a Russian pianist, I use a lot of arm weight. When you think of the opening of the Rachmaninoff Second Concerto, for example, arm weight has to be behind practically every note. Not on the harpsichord.

Q: So have you ventured into any other areas of the Baroque repertoire for harpsichord? Couperin, perhaps?

A: Not yet. I don't know if I'll go there; at least I don't have any immediate plans. The music of Bach is what interests me the most, Couperin and Rameau less so. In fact, if I ever do another recording—which is by no means certain, considering how cumbersome a process it is—I would like to do a program that couples preludes and fugues of Bach with those of Shostakovich in the same keys.

Q: Great idea.

A: That would be on the piano. The focus of that program, if I ever get around to doing it, would be the exploration of polyphony and tonality, rather than the exploration of instruments.

Q: As far as I know, that's another concept that's never been tried before, at least on CD—the juxtaposition of the keyboard music of Bach and Shostakovich. You should go for it—I'd buy that CD.

A: [laughs] I just don't know if I have time in my life for such a project.

Q: With all your interest in early keyboards, have you ever played the clavichord?

A: We have a small one in our music room. It has a lovely sound, but I could never perform publically on it. When you play on it, you are practically the only one who hears it!

Q: Right.

A: The clavichord was very popular during the Baroque as an instrument for the home, partially because you could play on it while others were sleeping in the house.

Q: That leads me to another question: have you ever experimented with the fortepiano?

A: Oh, yes—absolutely. I love it! I've never gotten around to performing publically on the fortepiano, but I love to practice on one. It's the perfect instrument for Mozart, Haydn, and maybe early Beethoven. It has a lovely sound, and is capable of such delicate dynamic shading.

You know, a while back I was in the Twin Cities—I can't remember if it was Minneapolis or St. Paul. Someone took me to the museum of old instruments there. It was a time of the day when the museum was closed, so they opened the doors and let me wander about. I spent two glorious hours going from one instrument to another, from harpsichord to clavichord to Pleyel to Érard to Broadwood. I played music from every period on the appropriate instrument. I tell you, a Chopin mazurka played on a Pleyel grand piano is a perfect delight!

Q: Marvelous.

A: You know, when I go from piano to harpsichord and back, even now it takes me a few minutes to adjust. After I've practiced on the harpsichord and then go back to the piano—and you understand, the

piano is the major instrument in my life—for a good two minutes I don't like it. It feels to me like driving a truck. But then I begin to enjoy the flexibility, the shading, the balance—all the tools and resources of my craft that I come to expect. Then I go back to the harpsichord, and again, for a good two minutes, I don't like it either. Oh, it sounds so dry. I can't phrase and balance the way I would like. And where's the pedal? But then after about two minutes, I find my love for its clarity, sweetness, and nobility again.

Q: So speaking as a pedagogue, this is a good thing, right? It's good for a keyboardist to try his or her hand at different instruments. You might not like what you hear at first, but if you stick with it and give the instrument what it wants, you become a better player.

A: It's a tremendous experience from every possible viewpoint. In fact, when I compare my recording with others I've heard—and you know there are so many wonderful performers who play beautifully and with such technical perfection—I think the main contribution of my recording is its pedagogical value. I hope there's artistic value, as well. But I really think that pedagogically, it's quite unique.

Q: I'd go along with that. As I said at the beginning, there aren't many in the harpsichord camp who would look favorably upon your effort. "Oh well, she's a pianist. How can she possibly be any good at the harpsichord?" And vice versa. But I have to hand it to you, you've done it.

Let's consider the non-keyboard world for a

moment. If you're a horn player and you spend some time mastering the valveless natural horn, your modern horn playing almost always benefits. I have several horn player friends who have told me this unequivocally. If you play an old instrument, your modern instrument improves. I think you've proven that—at least, you've demonstrated that it's possible.

A: I feel that it was a mutually enriching experience. I think I'm playing the harpsichord expressively *because* I'm a pianist. And I think I play the piano more clearly now because I learned to play the harpsichord.

BACH *Goldberg Variations* • Sophia Gilmson (hpd, pn) • SOPHIA GILMSON (2 CDs: 86:57)

BACH Goldberg Variations **(introductory talk, demonstrations, two complete performances, scores) Sophia Gilmson (hpd, pn, lecturer) SOPHIA GILMSON (DVD: 129: 58)**

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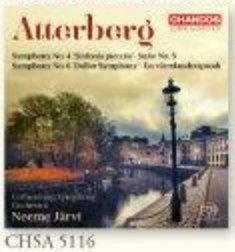

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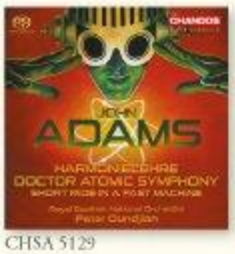

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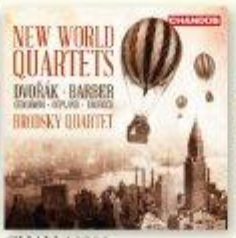

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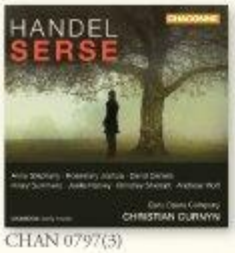

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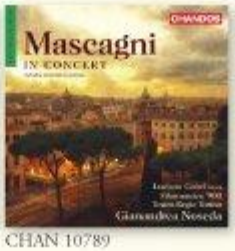

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