City of Shadows, it is delightfully rich in comic-book running around and dusted with hints of Britten.

Wheeler adapts with impressive ease to the three works’ different territories: City of Shadows is a chamber symphony dedicated to Kent Nagano, while Crazy Weather for two string orchestras and Northern Lights for a very large orchestra were both Koussevitzky Foundation commissions. The performances are more than authoritative. Wheeler’s music has an off-kilter attitude which suits the orchestra’s own cool jazz-influenced musical sensibilities; they react quickly to Wheeler’s sometimes audacious shifts in mood and get to play their very outstanding chops.

Laurence Vittes

‘Confetti Man’

Bacharach/David Send Me No Flowers
(arr McKay/Balachrishnan)

Balakrishnan Alex in A major, Confetti Man
Carisi Israel (arr Balakrishnan)
D’Rivera La Jocotea Mintzner Windsquan
Powell Bouncin’ with Bud (arr Smoczynski)
Shorter Instant Eyes (arr Guitari) Summer
Pattern Language: Julie-O Concert Etude #1

The Turtle Island Quartet have turned the genre of the string quartet on its ear in repertoire that elegantly circumvents the mainstream. On their new disc, ‘Confetti Man’, the musicians pour irresistible energy and dazzling skills into pieces with roots in everything from bluegrass and jazz to rock and beyond.

The disc’s title comes from David Balakrishnan’s two-movement explosion of rousing and haunting ideas that embrace all of the influences above as well as Indian music. Balakrishnan has hopped into the Turtle Island’s ability to bring a sense of improvisatory surprise to whatever they touch. The composer’s invigorating artistry can also be glimpsed in his arrangement of John Carter’s Israel and in his own bluegrass past, Alex in A major, which calls upon the Turtle Island musicians to go wild with country fiddling.

Latin influences rub shoulders with contemporary techniques in Paquito D’Rivera’s infectious La Jocotea (‘Little Turtle’), and the ensemble proves as cosmopolitan as the tender lines of Wayne Shorter’s ballad Instant Eyes as it is playfully subversive teaming with vocalist Nellie McKay in the Burt Bacharach-Hal David pop tune Send Me No Flowers.

Turtle Island cellist Mark Summer has a moment in the sun performing his solo Pattern Language: Julie-O Concert Etude #1 with remarkable exactness and flair. His colleagues join him for the disc’s finale, Bud Powell’s bopbon Bonnen’ with Bud, in an arrangement by Turtle Island violinist Mateusz Smoczynski that brings out all of the coolest qualities in this singular group’s artistic arsenal.

Donald Rosenberg

‘Dances for Piano and Orchestra’

Caldiron Dark Dancers of the Mardi Gras
Castro-Herrera Vals capricho, Op 1
Chopin Krakowiak, Op 14
Gottschalk/Kay Grand Tarantelle, Op 67
Pierné Fantaisie ballet, Op 6 Saint-Saëns
Valéa caprice, ‘Wedding Cake’, Op 76
Weber/Liszt Poloneaise brillante, Op 72537

Joel Fan
Northwest Sinfonia/Chirstophe Chagnard
Reference Recordings © RR134 (1999 • DDD)

It might be interesting to know how many thousands of notes Joel Fan plays on this recording. Each of the seven works calls for an artist who has no fear of cascading passagework and acrobatic leaps. Fan sounds perfectly at home in these virtuoso novelties, which are probably known to few musicians other than intrepid pianists.

But there’s a great deal of charm to be found in the repertoire, which explores all sorts of dance idiosyncrasy as realised by 19th- and early-20th-century composers. Several of these are titans, in their distinctive national ways, such as Saint-Saëns, whose delicious Valse-caprice in A flat major has the apt subtitle ‘Wedding Cake’. Weber’s Polonaise brillante goes through a blockbuster transformation in Liszt’s arrangement, while Chopin is in prime, majestic form in his Krakowiak in F major.

Less well known but equally disarming are Gabriel Fieni, whose Fantaisie-ballet is an exuberant ride, and Mexican composer Ricardo Castro Herrera, who paints all sorts of colors in his Vals capricho. Gottschalk’s Grand Tarantelle, in a reconstruction by Hershy Kay, provides soloist and orchestra with a glittering showcase. The disc’s real ear-opener is Charles Wakefield Cadman’s Dark Dancers of the Mardi Gras, which exudes bountiful excitement and lyrical ardor.

The recorded sound is a bit distant, so turn up the volume to appreciate the fervour and dynamism Fan brings to his challenging duties. He immerses himself in a series of colourful collaborations with the Northwest Sinfonia led by Christophe Chagnard.

Donald Rosenberg

‘Dreams & Prayers’

Beethoven String Quartet No 15, Op 132 – Heilig Dankgesang (arr A Far Cry)
 Goljov The Dreams & Prayers of Isaac the Blind
 Hildegard of Bingen O ignis spiritus paracleti (arr A Far Cry) Sanikol Vecd

David Krakauer @ A Far Cry

Here’s how Miki-Sofia Cloud, a violinist in the Boston-based ensemble A Far Cry, describes the programme she curated for the group’s newest recording: ‘This album explores music as a passageway between the physical and the divine as expressed over the mystical branches of three faith traditions and 1000 years of history. In each of these four works, something very simple — a breath, a word, a single note — is transformed into something transcendent, and even holy.’

Cloud doesn’t exaggerate. The music and performances keep you transfixed, whether for spiritual or sonic reasons. Two selections are arrangements by members of the conductorless ensemble which put vital new spins on old music. The unison chants of Hildegard of Bingen’s O ignis spiritus paracleti become communal celebrations as shaped by these superb musicians. Transcriptions of Beethoven string quartets for larger string forces aren’t always persuasive but A Far Cry give such nuanced life to the third movement of Op 132 (Heilig Dankgesang) that the music’s juxtaposition of the divine and the exhilarating is vividly achieved.

The two newer works also seize ears and soul. Mehran Ali Sanikol’s Ved – Arabic for ‘ecstasy’ — conjures up a Sufi ceremony by building rhythmic momentum on increasingly propulsive phrases. From Jewish tradition, Osvaldo Goljov’s The Dreams & Prayers of Isaac the Blind, already a contemporary classic, explores a spectrum of moods, with the clarinet and strings engaged in activity both introspective and wailing. The Criers, as the musicians of A Far Cry call themselves, truly soar with their guest, the spectacular clarinettist David Krakauer.

Donald Rosenberg

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