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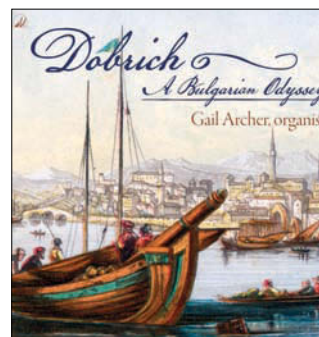


Craig Williams
West Point Chapel
seveneightartists.com



Reviews

RECORDINGS



DOBRICH: A BULGARIAN ODYSSEY. Gail Archer, organist. Schuke organ of Dobrich (Bulgaria) Concert Hall. Meyer Media, 2025. Anytime I have the chance to hear new music that utilizes post-tonal techniques, I love to have a first listen without any knowledge of the composer's or performer's intentions. It becomes a game of looking for gestures, motifs, timbral manipulation, and other such devices that make the pieces shine. Combine this with a stellar organ that can handle the registrations, and we have an excellent recording of repertoire that we do not normally encounter.

With *Dobrich*, Gail Archer has given us a panoply of Bulgarian music composed in the last 70-plus years. Some of the pieces are more tonal than others, but all of them have something to offer any listener or performer. It is clear that Archer has done the work to present a wide array of music that is representative of the many voices found in Bulgaria. And it is so exciting to listen to what she has given us!

The album is anchored by four longer works: one in the beginning (Sabin Levi's *Erendira*), two in the middle (Neva Krysteva's *Victimae paschali laudes* and Radosveta Hurkova's *Variations on the Song "Polegnala e Tudora"*), and one at the end (Velislav Zaimov's *O Heiland, reiss die Himmel auf*). Smart programming like this allows the smaller works to have their own space in between the larger pieces. The work that may be the most approachable is Bozhidar Abrashev's *Prelude for Organ*. An attractive piece with a lovely

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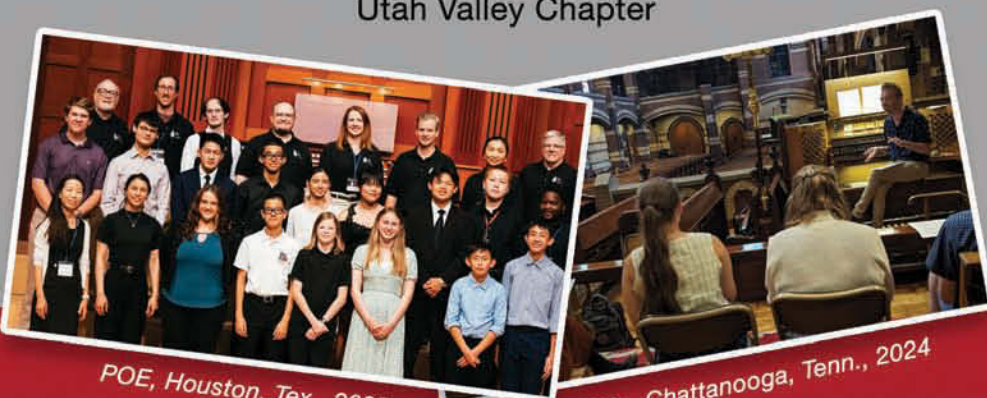
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POE, Houston, Tex., 2025

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soloed melody in the second half, it would work excellently as service music.

I'd like to highlight Krysteva's *Victimae paschali laudes*, as it is perhaps the most complex work, both technically and sonically. The composer seems to be exploring as much of the chant melody as possible, and she uses every gesture to incredible effect. The movement starts grandly, using the opening notes of the chant as the first musical gesture. From there it quickly moves into a spectrally manipulative sound, continuing with melodic gestures as the chant unfolds. As the piece continues, it fluctuates between bigger and smaller moments, only to end subtly—and very effectively.

The standout work for me was *Two Frescos*, composed by Evgeny Cheshmedjiev. Both movements have a delightful sense of humor; the composer is clearly playing with expectations by pulling the pulse out from under our feet. Archer confirms this in her liner notes: "The composer is constantly tying over rhythms into the next bar and adding subtle eighth note rests at unexpected moments." Even with the slightly ambiguous tonality, both movements end in a charmingly tonal manner, perhaps allowing us to laugh with the composer as we finally get what we wanted to hear all along.

I am so appreciative of Archer's work to highlight this music. Her dedication to excellence and her thoughtfulness in compiling this program are truly admirable. Having an opportunity to hear repertoire from a place I am unfamiliar with while being guided by an expert is the best kind of musical journey. I do not think this music will suit everyone's taste, but if you have a curiosity for the unusual and are looking for something fresh, this album, this odyssey, is for you.

BENJAMIN CORNELIUS-BATES, FAGO