

## VOCAL

**Paul Frehner – Horizon: Madog**  
**Jeremy Huw Williams; Ensemble**  
**Paramirabo; Angela J. Murphy**  
**Navona Records NV6819 (navonarecords.com/catalog/nv6819)**



► In the realm of rock music, the question “what was the first ‘concept’ album” is a good conversation starter for audiophiles and amateur music historians alike.

While the debate often ends in a tie (between Frank Zappa’s *Freak Out* and The Beatles’ *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*), a better question might be: “what constitutes a so-called concept record in the first place?” And while that question will not be solved within this column, I am confident that a tri-language opera (French, English, and Welsh) that explores the theme of post-apocalyptic environmental renewal through the life of a “back-to-the-lander” named Madog who looks for non-technologically mediated means of connecting communication practices across diverse communities, would certainly count as “conceptual.”

Released on Navona Records earlier this year and composed by Western University professor Paul Frehner, with what I can only imagine was an extraordinarily challenging to write libretto by Angela J. Murphy, *Horizon: Madog* creatively takes fans of contemporary classical music and opera on exactly such a conceptual and exploratory journey. Calling upon his background as rock guitarist, Frehner takes inspiration from progressive rock and avant-garde jazz, blending diverse musical styles on this interesting and exciting project. Also featuring a new composition for analog synthesiser, the entire recording is a welcome addition to the canon of Canadian operatic composition and electroacoustic music, as well as offering a testimony to the creativity that can result when collaborations across composers, soloists, and ensembles work effectively and musically together to good end.

**Andrew Scott**

## CLASSICAL AND BEYOND

**Bach – Goldberg Variations for double reed trio**  
**Tacamis Trio**  
**Leaf Music LM 307 (leaf-music.lnk.to/lm307PR)**

**Bach – Goldberg Variations**  
**Baroque Chamber Orchestra of Colorado;**  
**Frank Nowell**  
**Navona Records nv6821 (navonarecords.com/catalog/nv6812)**



► Even in 2026, the genius of J.S. Bach is revealed in new and exciting ways. His *Goldberg Variations*, a war horse within the Baroque canon, was originally composed for

the two-manual harpsichord, but has been interpreted using just about every instrumental and vocal combination imaginable. A hallmark of technical difficulty, the piece demands much from its performers who need to find their own opportunities for dynamism (the original harpsichords offered no dynamic touch sensitivity) and personalization within what at this point is a plethora of wonderfully recorded and creatively interpreted performances. Good thing then that there are still imaginative and skilled musicians out there willing to take up the mantle of responsibility and find ever new ways of approaching this great work. And two fine new 2026 recordings, *Bach – Goldberg Variations* by the Baroque Chamber Orchestra of Colorado and *Bach: Goldberg Variations for double reed trio* by the Tacamis Trio do just that.

I had the good fortune to attend the Tacamis Trio’s album launch party at the wonderful Arts & Letters Club of Toronto recently and to hear the skilled double-reed maneuvering and interpretive aplomb that this talented young trio brings to the Goldbergs. Comprised of oboist Caitlin Brooms-Jacobs, English hornist Tracy Wright, and bassoonist Allen Harrington, who collectively form the double reed section of the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra, Tacamis’ unique instrumental combination and compelling ensemble sound mined the expressive expansiveness of a well-chosen selection of the 30 variations, plus a few beautiful Renaissance pieces. Both the performance and their most recent recording on Leaf Music highlight the groups musicality, ability to weave together compelling contrapuntal lines using an unorthodox, but beautiful, collection of instruments, and their symbiotic performance style that undoubtedly comes from working together, as they have done, in both the MCO and the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra for



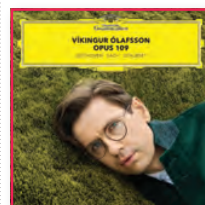
over a decade.

While the intimacy of the trio format can tease out the delicate intricacies of Bach’s piece. It is indeed an impressive undertaking when an orchestra, in this case the terrific Baroque Chamber Orchestra of Colorado (featuring a new arrangement by violist Alexander Vittal), takes on Bach’s famous aria and its subsequent creative inventions. Vittal’s version captures both said delicacy, along with the intensity and expansiveness that, for example, *Variation 2* deserves, and which an impressive large scale orchestra such as this can handle admirably.

Both recordings are excellent and while listening to them back-to-back, one gets the sense of not only how seamlessly Bach’s timeless piece can move within various ensemble shapes and sizes, but how in the skilled hands of the many wonderful musicians represented here, there is still much to discover and much joy to be had from a work that is nearly 300-years old.

**Andrew Scott**

**Opus 109 – Beethoven | Bach | Schubert**  
**Vikigur Ólafsson**  
**Deutsche Grammophon 13812**  
**(deccaclassics.com/en/catalogue/products/opus-109-beethoven-bach-schubert-vikigur-olafsson-13812)**



► Born in Reykjavik in 1984, Grammy award winning pianist Vikigur Ólafsson completed his studies at the Juilliard School, and since then

has earned an international reputation, performing with such orchestras as the Berlin Philharmonic and the Royal Concertgebouw. Ólafsson signed a contract with DG in 2016 and in ten years, has made some 30 recordings, this latest one featuring music by Bach, Schubert and Beethoven.

The disc opens with the *Prelude No.9 in E Major* from Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* – all of a minute and 44 seconds – a seemingly odd choice for an opener. Equally intriguing is his decision that every composition on the recording be in the key realm of E, stemming from Ólafsson’s synaesthesia (in his mind, the key translates into vibrant shades of green.)

Beethoven’s *Sonata Op.90* from 1814 that follows is sometimes referred to as “a struggle between head and heart.” Ólafsson plays with a strong assurance, easily meeting the demands of the two contrasting movements.

He returns to Bach with the *Partita No.6*, long regarded as the grandest of all the *Partitas* and a true study in contrasts. While