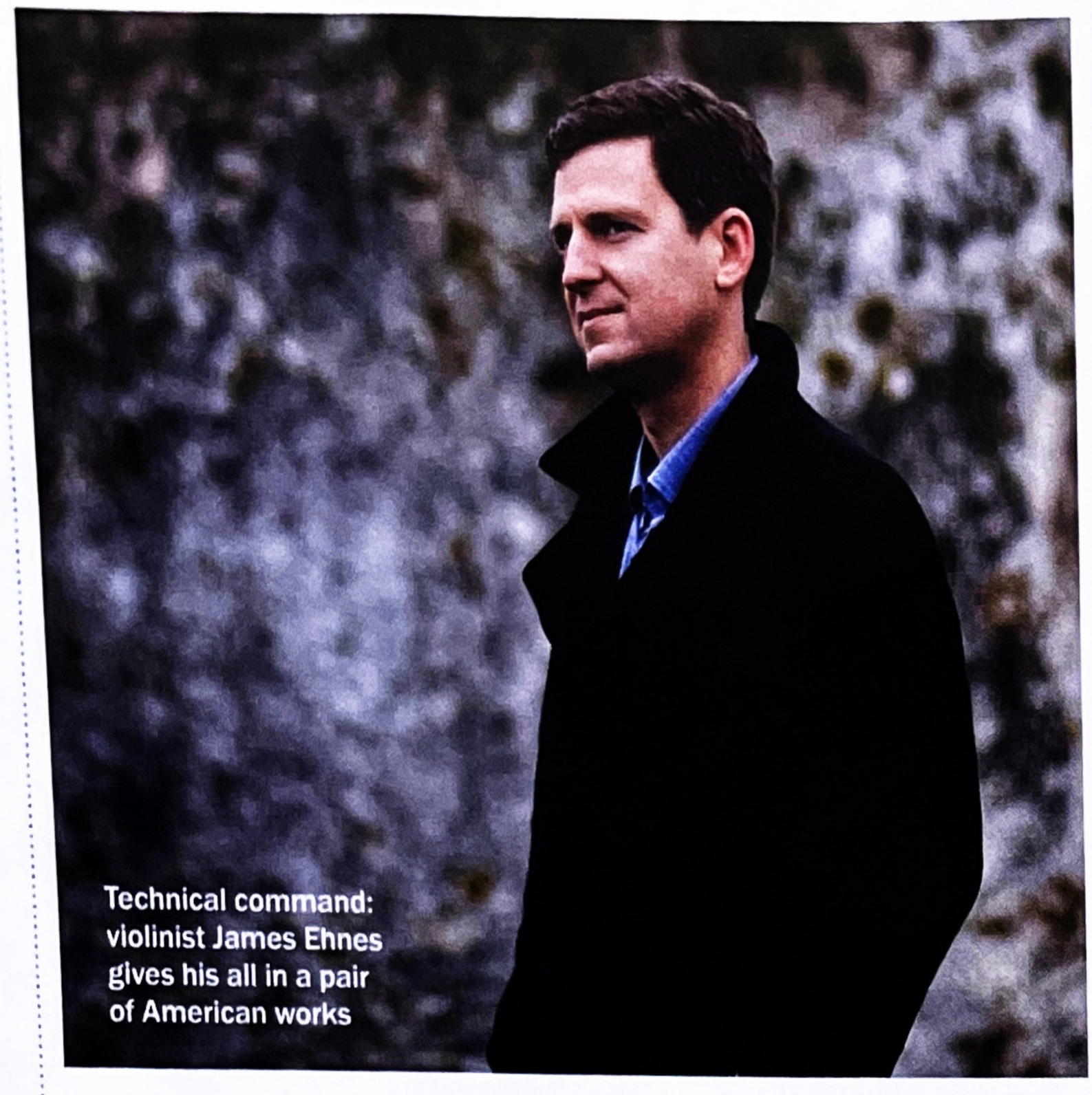

Technical command: violinist James Ehnes gives his all in a pair of American works

transformed into a clump of water reeds. Woodwinds duly evoke reed beds; Pan relentlessly pursues through the orchestra. Gardner and the Bergen Phil colour Nielsen's thrilling bursts of drama with a visceral sense of Pan's frustration and Syrinx's desperation, and an evocative frittering away to rustling reeds to end.

The two movement Flute Concerto is a late work, a pared-down, more modernist diptych, with a central flute part which flips from spare abstraction to joyous modern lyricism. Walker is a superbly lucid and agile protagonist. The 'tranquillos' are achingly so, and the Bergen nimble in support.

Nielsen's enduring dynamic volatility is again on display in his 'Sinfonia espansiva', his Third, with Gardner and the Bergen making attention-grabbing work of the punchy, driving opening, written some 15 years before the Flute Concerto. Nature abounds, with the odd echo of Mahler, particularly – wildly dancing, flourishing, to add to Nielsen's own joyous sensibility here – and Wagner, and the Bergen swing thrillingly through it all, easily switching on the intensity.

The gauzily evocative second movement pastorale culminates with luminous, offstage wordless singing over the Bergen's perfectly judged hazy orchestral arpeggios. A fine addition to any Nielsen collection. *Sarah Urwin Jones*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

Vivaldi

The Four Seasons; Concerti d'il cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione

Alfia Bakieva (violin); Les Musiciennes du Concert des Nations/ Jordi Savall

Alia Vox AVSA9958 116:24 mins (2 discs)

It must be all of five minutes since the last recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* came along, but veteran director Jordi Savall has come up with a fresh idea – and indeed a fresh orchestra. With a nod to the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice where Vivaldi famously taught female musicians, Savall has assembled an all-girl Baroque band to record these four concertos. Even though the *Seasons* are not specifically linked to Venice, and were published in Amsterdam, Les Musiciennes du Concert des Nations are well-focussed, energetic and, where necessary, pungent.

Savall has added the Italian poems (which Vivaldi may have written himself) that are appended to the concertos; they are wistfully and atmospherically spoken by Olivia Manescalchi. She usually speaks between the movements; with the longer poems she speaks over the music, occasionally pausing to cue in the vivid references to the turtledove, goldfinch, bluebottles and flies that Vivaldi illustrates.

That combination may be an acquired taste for non-Italian speakers, but the translated poems are there in the booklet, and for those who don't like the idea at all, Savall's second disc offers the same recording of Vivaldi's ever-fresh music unvarnished by any text. At the helm of all the concertos is the remarkable young soloist Alfia Bakieva, precise and agile, with plenty of force and focus, wiry and only lacking an ideal eloquence in the slower movements. Interesting slurring, decoration and some rhythmic alterations take the edge off the usual relentless staccato, and the plucked sound of the lute (or is it guitar?) continuo is welcome. The most striking additional piece is the single central movement from RV583, a highly decorated Chaconne of ethereal beauty. *Nicholas Kenyon*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★

For Clara

Schumann: Piano Concerto, Op. 54; Kreisleriana; **Brahms:** 3 Intemezzi, Op. 117; Lieder und Gesänge, Op. 32

Camerata Salzburg/ Hélène Grimaud (piano)

DG 4865917 (digital) 103 mins (2 discs)

The French pianist Hélène Grimaud first released *For Clara* last September, and this digital-only 'extended edition' adds Robert Schumann's Piano Concerto to the original album. It is not the first time Grimaud has recorded the piece, but this new version is radically different from her 1995 collaboration with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin and David Zinman.

To begin with there is no conductor: Grimaud and Camerata Salzburg concertmaster Giovanni Guzzo between them shape decisions regarding tempo and phrasing. They also use an orchestra about half the size of Zinman's, creating what Deutsche Grammophon describes as a 'chamber version' of the concerto.

The results are mixed. Grimaud's opening statement is primed with poetry, though not all listeners will respond to her freestyle phrasing and lingering over detail. Her interplay with a solo clarinet later in the movement is exquisitely tender, but a recorded balance favouring the piano often creates an occluded