

Instrumental

Beethoven

Piano Sonatas – No. 30 in E, Op. 109; No. 31 in A flat, Op. 110; No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111.

Eric Le Sage (piano).

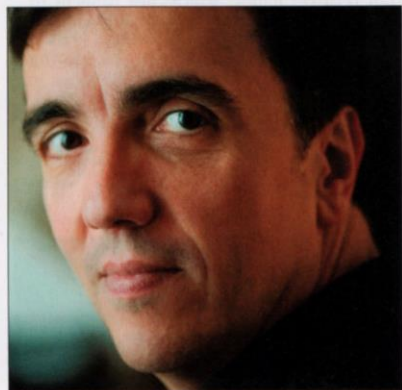
Alpha ALPHA607 (full price, 54 minutes). Website www.outhere-music.com. Producer/Engineer Jean-Marc Laisné. Dates January 7th-10th, 2012.

Comparisons:

Piano Sonata No. 31:

Brendel (Philips) 438 374-2 (1973, two discs)

Brendel (Philips) 446 701-2 (1995)



Eric Le Sage

Jean-Baptiste Millot

Eric Le Sage has made distinguished recordings of Schumann's piano music as well as a lot of French chamber music, notably Fauré and Poulenc. Now he has turned to the last three Beethoven piano sonatas. The refinement and flexibility so apparent in his Schumann playing is deployed to fine effect here. Le Sage is a musician with a rare ability to produce an unforced singing tone and he demonstrates this beautifully in the hymn-like opening of the last movement of the E major Sonata, Op. 109. Le Sage also shows time and again in these performances his ability to clarify musical textures and contrapuntal lines without ever hardening the sound. The second movement of Op. 109 is a good example: there's plenty of Beethovenian drive, with every part not only clear but also given a sense of purpose.

The same attention to detail can be heard in the voicing of the chords at the start of the A flat Sonata, Op. 110. While some pianists seem to force the top line in the upper register, Le Sage maintains its poise at the same time as investing it with all the necessary seriousness. In other words, this is very beautiful Beethoven playing, but it is also immensely thoughtful. Le Sage is marginally less successful in drawing together the disparate elements in the last movement of Op. 110 (it doesn't quite come across as the unified conception that Alfred Brendel manages to convey), but this is a rare moment – and the smallest of gripes since the main fugue is so powerfully played, helped by Le Sage's clear delineation of the musical lines.

New

Op. 111 opens excitingly, but the highlight of this performance is the ethereal, almost dream-like account of the second movement. There's a noble calm about Le Sage's approach that bears comparison with the greatest Beethoven pianists. The care with which details are observed may seem like a rather utilitarian virtue, but here the musical rewards are many, among them scrupulous voicing and balancing of chords allowing them to resonate to maximum effect, the most sensitive phrasing and a clear-sighted view of the overall structure.

These are aristocratic and engrossing performances and lead me to hope that there will be plenty more Beethoven from Le Sage: he's a pianist with a very individual sensibility that is extremely well suited to these late masterpieces. The disc is recorded in good sound and has interesting notes. Collectors wanting to hear a fresh and most sensitively conceived view of these works – with a focus on their beauty as well as their power – should find many rewards here. *Nigel Simeone*

Brahms

New CD/SACD

Piano Sonata No. 2 in F sharp minor, Op. 2. Scherzo in E flat minor, Op. 4. Variations on an Original Theme in D, Op. 21 No. 1. Three Intermezzi, Op. 117. Jonathan Plowright (piano).

BIS 2117SACD (full price, 1 hour 16 minutes).

Website www.bis.se. Producer Jeremy Hayes.

Engineer Jeffrey Ginn. Date January 2014.

Comparisons:

Piano Sonata No. 2:

Haeffliger (Avie) AV2173 (2008, rev. Jan 2010)

Three Intermezzi:

Pires (DG) 479 0965 (2012, rev. Feb 2014)

Jonathan Plowright deserves some sort of medal. He's one of the small group of pianists these days – Leon McCawley is another – who reject received wisdom about the way Brahms should sound on the instrument. The old-school approach to Brahms playing involves pressing each note deep into the key bed, dampers habitually raised, sluggish tempos and the production of a thick, undifferentiated sound that could be charitably described as morbidly obese. The label 'old school', in this instance, does not imply an unbroken historical tradition. Early in the twentieth century, Brahms, apart from his concertos, was not considered an 'effective' composer for the piano; his solo pieces were rarely encountered in recitals. The gnarled, muddy sound that came to be considered ideal in Brahms was the result, I believe, of pianists' efforts to match the volume of bloated twentieth-century orchestras. A reconsideration has long been due.

Plowright is all about a lean sound (a light-reflecting sound of tensile strength rather than stolid mass), agile fingers and, when appropriate, swift, lithe tempos. As with

his 2012 Brahms disc for BIS (reviewed in December 2013), which included the F minor Sonata and *Handel Variations*, Plowright's approach adds up to compelling music-making, as thoughtful and original as it is viscerally exciting.

By placing the Op. 4 *Scherzo* at the end of the disc, the producers saw fit to step outside a strict chronological ordering of the pieces. One can't help but wish they had also placed the beautiful *Variations on an Original Theme* first. Instead, tracks 1-4 are devoted to the Second Sonata, surely a work more interesting for its promise than its achievement (here one must insert the obligatory qualifier that its composer was only 19). And it is true, in Plowright's hands, the second-movement variations are imbued with an ineluctable atmosphere of rare fragrance, their voice-leading characterized by a jewel-like precision. They serve as the perfect *amuse-gueule* for the Op. 21 No. 1 *Variations* to come. The degree to which Plowright's sympathetic interpretative gifts benefit the F sharp minor Sonata are best grasped by dipping into almost any of the more than 30 recorded performances of the work currently available. Of more recent recordings, it may be that Plowright and Andreas Haefliger share a league all their own, surmounting the Sonata's myriad infelicities to present a compelling artistic whole. In the first movement, where Brahms pounds away at the same four-voice chord 13 times in rapid succession, Plowright imparts urgency rather than hysteria. The awkward tremolos at the end of the scherzo never lose their melodic contour, and the start-again-stop-again finale is given a steady sense of momentum.

With the D major *Variations*, the sailing is smooth and unencumbered: beautiful music beautifully played. Plowright gives the E flat minor *Scherzo* an air of menace, a welcome condiment for the piece's neo-Medievalism that, in other performances, can become cloying. The sensitive lyricism that permeates the three *Intermezzi*, Op. 117, is delicious and tinged with a melancholy that happily sidesteps any hint of clinical depression. They bring to mind another fine recent performance, by Maria João Pires at the Wigmore Hall, for which Plowright's is a worthy masculine companion.

Brahmsians will want to hear this latest milestone in interpretation of his piano music. Others will also relish this superb disc, representing the original thinking and expert playing of an artist in the full blossom of maturity. Highly recommended.

Patrick Rucker

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