**William Kapell: Broadcast and Concert Performances 1944-1952**

William Kapell (pf)

Marston Records 53021-2, 3 CDs, 203 mins



Recordings by William Kapell are sought as eagerly as gold dust. America's brightest musical star may have shone all too briefly: when returning to California from an Australian tour, his plane went down. He was 31. So a special thanks to Ward Marston for adding to other tributes (most notably, RCA's magisterial nine-CD collection).

On display once more is an outsized talent, one that blazed meteor-like across America, initially in swashbuckling performances of that exotic show-piece, the Khachaturian Piano Concerto, while also alerting his audience to a deeper sensitivity. Note Kapell's response to passing shadows as well as brightness in Mozart's Sonata in C major K 330; to the gravitas of the Bach-Busoni *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*; and to subtle major/minor alternations in two of Schubert's *Ländler*. His style in two of Chopin's *Mazurkas* (he planned to record them all) tells you, too, of a special affinity for that composer's most elusive and confessional manner.

Yet in the final reckoning, it is a compulsive brio that leaves its most indelible mark. Kapell's wit and charm in Abram Chasin's *Tricky Trumpet*, with its all-American memory of Gershwin, could light up even the most dour face. Meanwhile, few if any pianists have spun off the reeling 15th Variation from Rachmaninov's *Paganini Rhapsody* with such sparkle and insouciance.

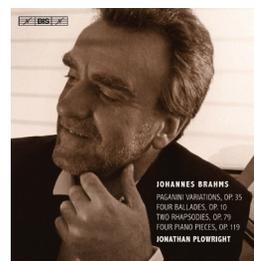
At the same time not everything would have survived Kapell's intimidating self-criticism: there are touches of impatience in Granados' 'The Maiden and the Nightingale' from *Goyescas*; and 'The Little Shepherd' from Debussy's *Children's Corner* sounds more flustered than plaintive. The blistering pace of 'Dr Gradus ad Parnassum' from the same suite is a far

cry from the composer's marking of *modérément animé*. Such things perhaps remind you that even at his tragic death at a scarcely later age, Dinu Lipatti had already acquired a poise and lucidity to complement his regal command.

Nonetheless, talk of 'potential' (Olin Downes) can seem churlish when faced with such glory. Even for waspish Virgil Thomson, Kapell was already 'one of the great ones'; while for Claudia Cassidy there was in him 'the relentless, terrible and wonderful compulsion of genius. He had to play.' Such comments capture precisely an extraordinary nature.

Ward Marston's reminder and remembrance includes two interviews (sententious in the style of the times and without the mischievous wit that prompted Kapell to say of Horowitz, 'If people understood what his tone meant, he'd be banned from the keyboard'), and a touching tribute from the pianist Raymond Lewenthal.

BRYCE MORRISON

William Kapell in 1948**Brahms Works for solo piano Volume 4:**

Paganini Variations Op 35; Four Ballades Op 10; Two Rhapsodies Op 79; Four Pieces Op 119

Jonathan Plowright (pf)

BIS 2137, SACD, 82 mins



In parallel with Barry Douglas' fine survey for Chandos, Jonathan Plowright has been setting down his own complete Brahms cycle for BIS. Douglas purposefully mixed individual items from different collections into what amounts to personal playlists – very convincingly, it must be said; Plowright, on the other hand, adopts the conventional approach of complete works, sets/opus numbers. It is the only straightforward aspect of his presentation of these marvellous works: let's be clear, this is a magisterially performed and revelatory programme, comprising one early, one middle-period and one late set framed by the two books of the 1863 *Paganini Variations*.

Earlier instalments in Plowright's series, the first of which was released back in 2012, have all garnered considerable and consistent acclaim. Volume 4 once again demonstrates his fluency of interpretation and command of the keyboard. The clarity and finesse of Plowright's playing and sureness of touch matches his insights into Brahms' style. Or styles, I should say, since his way with the early Ballades is as acute and compelling as in the Two Rhapsodies Op 79 and Four Pieces Op 119. The key to his vision of these works is that they are integral compositions, and to attain Brahms' intentions one should play them as such; thus the Four Ballades are not separate works (as Chopin's are), likewise the Four Pieces.

I do not recall when I enjoyed *any* Brahms programme more. This is the new benchmark survey for Brahms as Paul Lewis' is for the Beethoven Sonatas. I cannot recommend this more highly.

GR