

Champion of Rarities

Jonathan Plowright is one of the leading British pianists of his generation, yet his appearances on disc have been few and far between – until now, that is. Jeremy Nicholas takes up the story

Jonathan Plowright holds my personal award for the 'Most Unusual Recital Venue' – an elephant reservation! 'It was in a place called Addo, an hour's drive inland from Port Elizabeth. I was playing a concert with the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra and the promoter rang and asked if I fancied going on to play a recital in an elephant park. The game wardens rig up these lights, and the elephants come down in the evening through the bush. I said, "Well, why the hell not?" She arranged for this grand piano to be transported there – and, no, the keys were plastic' (I had wondered how any elephant could be a fan of the piano). 'It was put down on the hard-packed earth immediately above and overlooking this man-made watering hole where the elephants drink. The audience was mainly citrus farmers, most of whom had never been to a piano recital, so it was a popular programme. I'd been liberally sprayed with fly repellent and the only light I had was a little standard lamp. I started with the *Moonlight Sonata*, dusk was falling and – this is unbelievable but I swear it happened – the elephants appeared through the bush walking to their watering-hole in time with the music. With the elephants were warthogs, wildebeest – and one white rhino. Very unusual. Hardly ever seen. At the end of the first movement, the audience applauded, and a game warden whom I'd befriended was so keen for me to see this rare sight that he shouted out, "Jonathan!

There's a white rhino behind you!" I turned round in time to see this huge white arse disappearing into the bush.'

Talk about a 'slow career trajectory'. Plowright (born 1959, Doncaster, England) has been toiling in the vineyard for the best part of 30 years without any undue acclaim. Gold Medallist at the Royal Academy (1983), Gold Medallist and Commonwealth Musician of the Year at the Royal Overseas League Competition, honoured with a Fulbright Scholarship and Countess of Munster Award, winner of the 1989 European Piano Competition and runner-up in the Washington DC International Piano Competition – none of these achievements led to the kind of recognition that his talents so evidently merited. Though widely admired by his peers and fulsomely praised by the critics, he has managed to keep a remarkably low public profile and be largely ignored by agents. One wonders if there is an in-built prejudice against British pianists without exotic names.

Now, in his mid-forties, Plowright has won the recognition for which he has been patiently waiting and working. His 2001 recording for Hyperion's 'Romantic Concerto' series of the two piano concertos by Sigismund Stojowski attracted rave reviews ('a tremendous release ... a truly great recording, an award winner,' trumpeted *International Record Review*; 'two gloriously worthwhile rarities in superb