

AL

## Jonathan Plowright explores the music of Bertrand Chamayou



### JS BACH

**Sonatas Nos 1-3; Partitas Nos 1-3**  
Markku Luolajan-Mikkola (cello)  
Linn LC11615 158 mins

One cannot argue with the booklet note enumerating the ways in which JS Bach's music has been successfully transcribed. But plunging the airy violin solo partitas and sonatas down a twelfth to be played on Baroque cello proves a step too far.

In Markku Luolajan-Mikkola's hands these sprightly dances are barely recognisable as they lumber through a gloomy, boomy church acoustic. The elegant E major Loure grinds away as if heard on an LP at half speed, while the faster Gigue is all friction. Luolajan-Mikkola is a distinguished cellist and teacher, and his affection for the music is palpable. But the sound is congested, phrases lumpen, tempos laboured. The tumultuous D minor Chaconne loses momentum and almost drowns in its own bass resonance. A low point is perhaps the fugue of the Sonata in C: we're painfully aware of bow against string, and strained, sour intonation. There are virtuosos who might have been able to bring this off – Paolo Pandolfo is one, but he has wisely chosen not to try. *Helen Wallace*

PERFORMANCE ★★  
RECORDING ★★★



### BRAHMS

**Variations on a Hungarian Melody, Op. 21 No. 2; Piano Pieces, Op. 76 & Op. 118; Waltzes, Op. 39**  
Jonathan Plowright (piano)  
BIS BIS-2127 81:19 mins

This third volume in Jonathan Plowright's series of recordings of

Brahms's piano works lives up to the high promise of the first two, and it opens with an early work which is rarely played and little esteemed. Brahms was only 20 when he composed his *Variations on a Hungarian Melody*, and though they seem perfunctory in comparison with the music that was to come, they do have his hallmarks: the textures and turns of phrase are already there, as is the expressive economy and bursting invention.

Plowright dispatches these with brisk clarity before getting down to business with the Op. 76 piano pieces, which he presents as though they are a single monologue in subtly varied pastel hues. Until leading us out into bright sunlight with the final *Capriccio*, he keeps us in a subdued and understated realm; the second *Capriccio* is delivered with delicacy and at an unusually gentle pace, while the architecture of the A major *Intermezzo* is lovingly delineated.

Plowright's pacing of the waltzes is masterly, his articulation is pellucid, and his touch poetically suggestive. No. 7 is not milked for emotion, and No. 15 is shorn of its hackneyed associations and made quite matter-of-fact, while No. 8 is played without pedal, thus emphasising its odd little lilt; No. 12 feels enigmatic.

The masterpieces of Op. 118 are delivered with fiery splendour. The first *Intermezzo* comes at us in tempestuous waves, and we are then taken through a series of dreamscapes. The final *Intermezzo* begins with a faint cry from a rocky crag which is answered by a rumble from the depths below; Plowright's account of this supremely mysterious miniature is majestic.

*Michael Church*

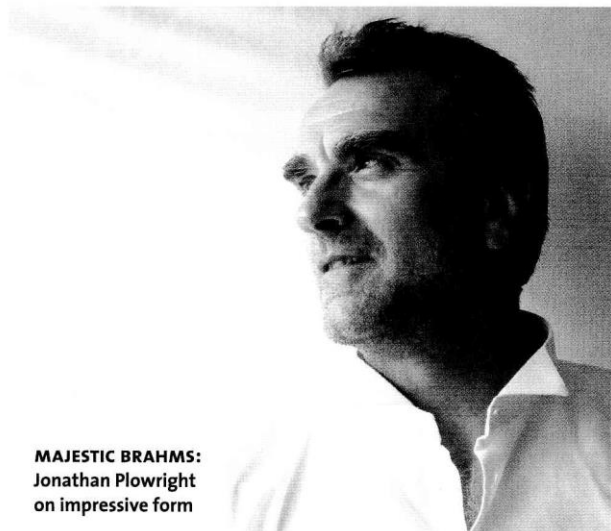
PERFORMANCE ★★★★★  
RECORDING ★★★★★



### D SCARLATTI

**Keyboard Sonatas (selection)**  
Yevgeny Sudbin (piano)  
BIS BIS-2138 (hybrid CD/SACD) 74 mins

Gabriele D'Annunzio's description of Domenico Scarlatti's sonatas as 'a soft hail of pearls that rush, gleam, resonate, bounce' could well have inspired the Russian pianist Yevgeny Sudbin in these sparkling and vivacious accounts. This recording showcases 18 of these gems and Sudbin highlights their endless



**MAJESTIC BRAHMS:**  
Jonathan Plowright  
on impressive form

variety: shimmering studies and stately fugues are laced together with vigorous dances and elegiac reflections. In a soundscape drenched with flamenco rhythms and the exotic colours of the composer's adopted Spain are heady evocations of gypsy songs and strumming guitars, percussive castanets and goblet drums.

Long immersed in Scarlatti's music, Sudbin is an ardent advocate, his fearless Russian-school technique making light weather of even the most breakneck writing: rhythms are crisp and buoyant; virtuoso passagework is dashed off with devil-may-care abandon. This is impressive playing, by any standards.

Fleeting moments in the more extrovert pieces are rather too forcefully pummeled, and certain expressive gestures (dynamic swells, romantic *ritardandos* and elaborate cadential flourishes) might be appropriate for a concert recital of Chopin but seem unnecessary for this intimate Baroque chamber music.

Sudbin is at his most eloquent when the mood is introspective: he draws a limpid *bel canto* in K208, creates an atmosphere of veiled mystery in K213, and paints the muted colours of K318 with the most delicate of brushstrokes. The generous acoustic highlights the lustrous Steinway sound without muddying textures.

Sudbin's compatriots Vladimir Horowitz and Mikhail Pletnev are both celebrated Scarlatti exponents, but the younger Russian by no means stands in their shadow.

*Kate Bolton-Porciatti*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★  
RECORDING ★★★★★

*Yevgeny Sudbin is interviewed in our 'Rewind' feature, p15*



### SZYMANOWSKA

**Complete dances for solo piano**  
Alexander Kostritsa (piano)  
Grand Piano GP685 73 mins

The cover photo, showing dance in Toulouse's Place du Capitole, is a little misleading: Maria Szymanowska (1789-1831) was something of an international celebrity, but not especially cosmopolitan in her music. Polonaises and mazurkas – she was the first composer to formalise the mazurka as a pianistic genre – dominate here in a programme of her complete dances for solo piano, and in spite of her travels to Western Europe's musical centres she was Slavonic in her outlook. Born in Warsaw, where she lived for much of her short life, she spent her first years in St Petersburg as court pianist to the tsarina. Her salons attract composers and artistic figures, a Goethe fell deeply in love with her.

As a composer, Szymanowska is a miniaturist: several of this CD's 50-plus tracks last no more than a quarter of a minute, and offer little scope for emotional depth. Perhaps this accounts for the impression of young Russian pianist Alexander Kostritsa gives here of sometime rattling through these pieces, though his pleasing lightness of touch suits the music well. An attractive collection, but one maybe better suited to listening in small doses to total immersion. *John Allison*

PERFORMANCE ★  
RECORDING ★