

PERSONAL TOUCH

It's time to clear the air when it comes to Brahms' solo piano works, says Jonathan Plowright. For too long, the composer has been subject to overindulgent interpretations, without any regard for the subtle textures and careful markings in his scores

BRAHMS HAS ALWAYS HELD a particular fascination for me because of his style, the way he writes for the piano, and the poetry in his music. Also, I believe he is (after Bach) the most 'linear' composer: his writing is very contrapuntal and full of hidden canons. In fact, I think his music has everything.

The first piece of Brahms I learnt, aged 17, was the F minor Sonata. I am fortunate never to have really struggled with the technical difficulties of this or of any other piece by Brahms. That is probably because his music suits the way I play. When I was recording the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, I looked at the autograph score online. There were a few corrections that Brahms had made in pencil, in addition to adding some fingerings. It was interesting to see how he must have used his hands by looking at the way he fingered his music. I realised then that I tend to use my hands in a very similar way to create a particular effect.

This may sound contentious, but I have rarely heard Brahms played how I think it should be, and I am constantly disappointed by people's perception of his music as heavy and bombastic. Pianists tend to play Brahms with a lot of pedal, and I think this is completely wrong. In fact, if you look closely at the score, this is not what is written. Brahms puts in pedal marks specifically where he wants them. He alters the accompaniment to change the texture, and he is constantly 'thinning out' the sound. Pianists seem to have an almost pathological fear of losing a bass note, and as a result everything gets over-

pedalled. Examine the score, however, and you'll find that whenever there is any kind of moving bass that involves quavers or semiquavers, Brahms jumps up an octave from the initial bass note. In other words he clears it and thins the texture by pushing the bass up an octave (sometimes two) higher.

The next, and third, volume of my complete recordings of Brahms' solo piano works includes the *Hungarian Variations*, Eight *Klavierstücke* Op 76, 16 Waltzes, and Six *Klavierstücke* Op 118. At the time of writing this I'm working on the fourth volume, to be recorded in January 2016: Two Rhapsodies Op 79; two sets of Paganini variations; the Ballades Op 10,

and Four *Klavierstücke* Op 119. There's a perfect example of what I mean about pedalling in the Rhapsody Op 119, No 4, about two-thirds of the way through. A section marked *pp ma ben marcato* is followed 16 bars later by a five-bar phrase with three ascending pedal Gs. Brahms asks you to shut the pedal down even though it's all over the same harmony – otherwise the texture would become far too thick.

The most frequently used word in Brahms' scores is *leggero*. Look at the start of the Intermezzo Op 119, No 3: *molto piano e leggero*; or the Intermezzo before that: *piano sotto voce e dolce*. At the start of the B minor Ballade (Op 10, No 4), the music



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RECITAL PREVIEW

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looks almost like curtains hanging down. Brahms puts two quaver rests after the first quavers in the left hand (B naturals). Only in the last two bars of that figure – 45 bars further on – does he finally ask for full pedal. He makes exactly the same request in the first page of the Ballade No 2. Of course you would use a little pedal here, but not fully sustained until the final two bars.

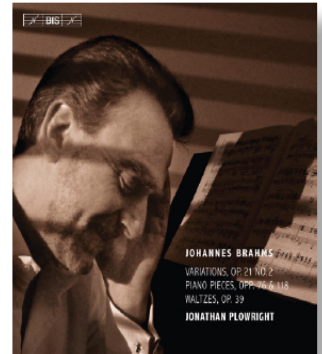
The pianist who I think gets closest to Brahms is Radu Lupu. I also like a lot of what Katchen does. Katchen is the Erroll

Flynn of Brahms players, giving us a swashbuckling view of the composer! It is clear he has thought carefully about the music, even though I would prefer a little more poetry.

I'm not sure why Brahms has been so misrepresented – I suspect not because of any particular interpretation. Maybe it's because over time concert halls have become larger and pianists felt the need to fill the space; or perhaps having played the two concertos in a way that cuts through the thick orchestral texture, they then approached the solo music in the same manner? However, some pianists do take a rather cavalier attitude – as if what is written in the score is not really that important. It is as though the notes are so beautiful they are just there to be enjoyed. That is when the piece gets lost or is clouded by personal preference, instead of looking at what Brahms is actually trying to say.

INTERVIEW BY JEREMY NICHOLAS

The third volume in Jonathan Plowright's survey of Brahms' complete piano music is now available on the BIS label (BIS 2127).



Plowright will perform a Rhinegold LIVE recital at London's Conway Hall on Thursday 4 February 2016. The evening includes a drinks reception at 6.15pm followed by the performance at 7.00pm, featuring music by Brahms, Mozart, Chopin and Paderewski. Sign up for free tickets at www.rhinegoldlive.co.uk

