

Jonathan Plowright: 'The only thing I could do was music'



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Late junction

The complete Brahms could seem an unlikely choice for a pianist who wasn't always over-keen on practice, but that is not the only surprising thing about Jonathan Plowright, says Jessica Duchan

Turning points have always been unpredictable matters. Even so, the way that piano fans have woken up at last to the playing of Jonathan Plowright is worthy of a double take. The British pianist, 55, is a musician of an integrity that is possibly greater than his fame. His somewhat self-effacing nature makes him almost an unlikely figure alongside the younger, more exhibitionistic stars of the international platform. His

Brahms may yet change everything.

He is in the midst of recording the composer's complete works for solo piano for the BIS label, on five discs, and the series so far has been greeted with rave reviews. Among them, *Gramophone* declared: 'How richly satisfying to hear playing of such unimpeachable musical honesty and awe-inspiring grandeur ... if such playing is anything to go by you are listening to one of the finest living pianists.'

Tackling the complete Brahms is a tall order, but Plowright was little daunted. 'I find that everything Brahms says makes perfect sense to me, whereas with other composers there are always odd sections where you wonder what something means,' he says. 'I also love the gentler side to his writing and the lightness as well, which I very rarely find in performances I hear.'

Too often we still think of Brahms as heavy-duty and stodge-laden. 'He's not

really,' Plowright smiles. That applied to his personality as well as his music: 'He should have hired a PR agent! Look at these pictures of him aged 17 or 18 and he was a strikingly handsome youth – a young lion ready to take on the world. But then you see the famous picture of him in sideways profile and he looks as though he's just had a really bad meal. It gives the wrong impression.'

Hyperion, too, has been lapping up Plowright's abilities for its famous Romantic Piano Concertos series, with an emphasis on rare Polish music. The background to these recordings, he recounts, was less straightforward; he was asked to record one particular piece, but simply could not take to the music. 'I realised I needed to find a good alternative,' he says. 'I went to the library in the Royal Academy of Music, which has an area on the top shelf that's a bit like the hardcore pornography section, with all these odd concertos! I found this

one piece that had a fantastically long opening melody for the piano that just goes on and on and on. It's by Sigismond Stojowski. Then I realised there was a second concerto as well. So it started from there.'

Add this to a longstanding fascination with, and recordings of, Paderewski, plus more concertos on Hyperion by Melcer, Żeleński and Zarzycki and it is clear that Polish music has become a crucial area for him. Now it is about to feature again in a further Hyperion release, this time works for piano and orchestra by Ludomir Różycki, a contemporary of Karłowicz and the 'Young Poland' composers. 'They're very much in the late-romantic Polish tradition,' Plowright says. 'Rather Hollywood: sweeping melodies, ravishing harmonies, big orchestration.' One wonders what Poland has made of it all. 'They have been a little confused, wondering why they've left it up to an Englishman to rediscover this music,' Plowright admits, 'but they are always very generous in their praise and their thanks.'

Plowright's musical career got off to an unconventional start. Born in Doncaster, the son of a builder, he showed early promise that won him a music scholarship to a Jesuit school in Lancashire. 'My mother thought this would be good for me,' he says, 'because even if I didn't want to become a musician, a Jesuit education was considered very fine and they would never have been able to afford it. I was there for the next five years, not really wanting to play the piano. I was constantly forced to practise!'

After leaving school, he adds, 'I wanted nothing to do with the piano. I considered architecture, accountancy and God knows what else. It was in those wonderful days when education was free, so I thought I'd go to university, have a good time and hopefully then make up my mind about what I wanted to do. But the only thing I could do was music. I failed the exams at the end of the first year and they asked me

to leave. In a panic, I rang my ex-head of music at school. He got me some late auditions and so I went to the academy – still under duress.'

It was Alexander Kelly, his piano teacher both at school and subsequently at the RAM, who recognised that the last thing this rebellious student needed was to be pushed. 'For the whole of that year,' says Plowright, 'I would go to lessons having done 30 minutes practice and he'd say, "That's wonderful Jonathan, see you next week..." I'd go away thinking, "Yes, I'm getting away with this, this is wonderful..." And then I began to realise that I actually wanted to do this. For the first time ever, I made the decision myself that I was going to be a pianist.'

He went on to win the RAM's gold medal, a Fulbright Scholarship to the US, and the gold medal of the Royal Over-Seas League Competition, among other accolades. Over the intervening years he has mingled international concert life with teaching; he is a professor at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland as well as head of keyboard at the University of Chichester (which mix presents him with a substantial weekly commute). That Polish passion often draws him back to the likes of Paderewski and Stojowski for high-profile celebrations, recitals and recordings.

But he still hates practising. 'I'd rather be doing other things,' he laughs. This has its advantages, though: 'I've developed a way to get a lot done in a short space of time. If I'm going to waste time, I'd rather be doing it on the sofa watching tv. So it's a very practical approach. As you get older, the less time you have available, so it's become even more honed and very economical.'

Like many of the finest musicians, then, Plowright has ploughed an individual furrow, developing a *modus vivendi* in his own way and in his own time. And if the recordings are anything to go by, he is living up to his name. CM

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