Vari a Alba (ABCD191), in whi y rewrote the music - and irely faithful to the score. yet Play on the accordion allowed him thing new in every single vari rument can not only sustain a no e piano (never mind the harp can also emphasize one melc another, unlike the organ. It ca lter balance in contrapuntal textu ge the weighting of chords even d - and, of course, invest each ..... character selected from a

phenomenal range of colours. One US review of that Goldberg CD began 'Boy, this is fun!', and that's exactly the kind of delighted response it elicited from me — I felt like a kid stumbling into an entirely unsuspected area of his playground. In fact, I had a composer friend of mine staying with me for a few days just after the Goldberg CD arrived and he happened to mention that he had just had a commission for an accordion concerto. Had he heard Väyrynen's CD, I asked. No, he said, so I put it on and he sat there for an hour, open-mouthed with astonishment, barely able to empty his glass.

Now Väyrynen returns with another earenchanting romp through Bach, happily demolishing all the old signposts and charting new routes over this well-travelled territory. His accordion, applying different colours and weights to the various strands of a contrapuntal argument, brings an unexpected richness to the textures at the same time as it makes them crystal-clear. The statement-andanswer construction of the menuets in the C minor Suite, for example, can rarely have been clearer, with each secondary statement heard as an echo, slightly veiled and at a distance. And because he can maintain a melodic line that would die away on another instrument, he can have fun with rhythm and pace in a way impossible in most other acoustic media. Taken at some of the tempos heard here, the Sarabandes would otherwise sound like an old man whose iron lung had malfunctioned but here they become real islands of tranquillity among the bustling jollity of the other movements.

That's where Väyrynen really scores: the French Suites are collections of dances, of course, and he manages to invest Bach's basses with an elastic tension that bubbles through the melodic layers above them. Yet he finds the same vivacity in the C minor Passacaglia and Fugue, where he demonstrates that, although the accordion obviously can't generate the sheer weight that the organ can command, volume isn't a prerequisite of tension, and he produces a reading that fizzes with excitement. Sure, he takes the fugue at a tempo that would sound garbled on an organ, but why not? More than almost any other piece in the classical repertoire, this piece posits a sense of architecture, and Väyrynen marries that inevitability with roller-coaster excitement.

Mind you, the accordion could also wash dishes, walk dogs and change babies' nappies and it wouldn't make a blind bit of difference to Bach: it's because the instrument is here in the hands of a superb musician, whose inexhaustible musical insights are on a par with his astonishing technical ability, that this music reveals its unsuspected reserves of elation and calm fulfilment. Mika Koivusalo has captured it all in immediate and natural recorded sound. It says 'Vol. 1' on the cover — hooray! Grab this one and the Goldbergs in the meantime.

Martin Anderson

## **Brahms**

New CD/SACD

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5. Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24.

Jonathan Plowright (piano).

BIS SACD2047 (full price, 1 hour 13 minutes). Website www.bis.se Producer Jeremy Hayes. Engineer Ben Connellan. Date August 2011.





Years ago a violinist colleague startled me by saying she wasn't keen on the Brahms

String Quartets. 'It always seems there's this giant symphony inside, struggling to escape the constraints of four instruments', she explained. A similar observation could be made about the three surviving piano sonatas, all completed by Brahms's twenty-first year, after which he abandoned cultivating the solo sonata. The first two are large works, but the third, with its five movements running for well over 40 minutes, is immense. Its challenges, both musical and technical, are legion, and relatively few pianists risk its rigours in public performance. During decades of concert attendance, the only pianist in my experience who was entirely convincing in the F minor Sonata was Rubinstein. Jonathan Plowright's brilliant new release on BIS is certainly one of the best recordings of the sonata to date. He has achieved a near-ideal realization of a work often considered a triumph of musical imagination in the abstract but, in practical application, a virtual impossibility.

One of the keys to Plowright's success, it seems to me, is his ability to give full rein to the passionate intensity of this 'young man's music', while maintaining a pervasive Olympian calm. This dynamic symbiosis of Dionysian and Apollonian elements fuses dramatic impetus with shape and contour to forge an extraordinarily powerful interpretation. The beginning of the Sonata erupts from the piano's lowest registers, exploding ever higher in lacerating defiance before finally collapsing

## Instrumental

into brooding pianissimo figures mid-range on the keyboard, sinister in their circumspection. In lieu of a loosely connected succession of affects, Plowright presents a seamless narration, vast in proportion and pregnant with consequence. Relief from this conflagration doesn't occur until the second page of the score with the appearance of the heroic motif, marked by Brahms 'fest und bestimmt' - firm and certain. Plowright's ability to conceive and portray the narrative integrity of these massive blocks lends his reading symphonic scope and architectonic cohesion. His sound is full and ample, yet infinitely varied, never straying into the realm of that over-pedalled, 'fat' Brahmsian sound once considered ideal. Clarity prevails everywhere and, in lyrical sections, assumes a limpid fluency of melting beauty.

Only after the turbulent drama of the first movement has abated and the delicate song of the 'Andante espressivo' begins to unfold do the true dimensions of this interpretation become apparent. There is evidence that Brahms wrote this slow movement before the surrounding ones, and Plowright appropriately makes it the focus and generator of the entire piece. Phrasing is exquisitely shaped, while the narrative thread is maintained through a variety of superbly wrought textures. Plowright seems to have a dozen pianissimo dynamics at his disposal, each more quiet and still than the other. The vibrantly masculine 'Scherzo', boisterous and lithe, may break the lyrical spell of the 'Andante' but it can't obscure its memory. The fourth movement, an 'Intermezzo', seems here the precursor of Mahler's grim battlefield scenes in Des Knaben Wunderhorn. A final coup de maître is held in reserve: the finale seems neither long-winded nor diffuse but a sufficiently weighted,

The wonderful performance of the *Handel Variations* that rounds out the disc is a deeply considered interpretation, filled with riveting details. Yet perhaps because it is a work that poses fewer thorny problems than the Sonata, it has been recorded persuasively many times. It is the Sonata that charts new interpretative territory here, brilliantly and with very few peers. I would urge you not to miss it. Meanwhile, I'll write to my violinist friend and tell her there's a pianist who has liberated the symphony that lurked within the F minor Piano Sonata and that she should have a listen. *Patrick Rucker* 

genuinely cathartic summation.

## Brahms

Nev

Works for Solo Piano, Volume 2. Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5. Ballades, Op. 10 – No. 2 in D; No. 3 in B minor. Fantasien, Op. 116 – No. 2, Intermezzo in A minor; No. 6, Intermezzo in E. Intermezzo in B flat minor, Op. 117 No. 2. Ballade in G minor, Op. 118 No. 3. Rhapsody in E flat, Op. 119 No. 4.