

Instrumental



Brahms
Piano Sonata No 2,
Three Intermezzi et al
 Jonathan Plowright *p*
 BIS BIS2117 (SACD)
 ★★★★★

PLOUGHING THE RIGHT FURROW

Young Brahms or old Brahms, Plowright has the measure

It's all on for young and old when masterly English pianist Jonathan Plowright continues his survey of Brahms with another matchless release on the Swedish BIS label. Recorded earlier this year at Potton Hall in Suffolk, this superbly engineered recording finds Plowright moving on from the Third Piano Sonata and *Handel Variations* to explore pieces that span more than 40 years of the composer's career.

It finishes with the Scherzo in E Flat Minor, penned by an 18-year-old Johannes, that so impressed Liszt and Schumann when he showed it to them along with a letter of introduction from Joseph Joachim. At the other end of the spectrum are the three *Intermezzi* Op. 117 written in 1892, five years before he died. The hauntingly beautiful last one of the triptych is described by the lovably grumpy Brahms as "the lullaby of all my griefs".

Two years separate the Scherzo and the Piano Sonata No 2 in F Sharp Minor Op. 2, published in 1853. It was brought out at the same time as what we know as the First Sonata, the manuscript of which was headed "the fourth", so it was probably his third attempt. It seems Brahms started with the *Andante con espressione* and added the three

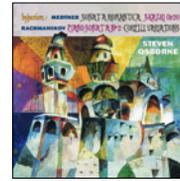
other movements later to form a sonata.

Although in no way imitative, there's a sense of the heroic Beethoven in the stormy opening allegro, as well as occasional Schumannesque eccentricities and, in the andante, a lovely theme worthy of Schubert.

Having said that, this is Brahms full of confidence and finding his own voice in this work. Plowright finds colours and textures in the opening bars so often missed by other pianists. His command of the material is second to none and this is a nuanced and finely judged reading.

The other work on the album is a sterling take-no-prisoners account of the *Variations on an Original Theme* Op. 21 No 1. Plowright negotiates the wide convergence of styles and moods on this disc with all the assuredness and attention to dynamic and tempo that have won him a swag of awards and first prize in the European Piano Competition. He ranks alongside Paul Lewis, Steven Osborne, Stephen Hough and Freddy Kempf in the leading peloton of British pianists. If you are looking for a Brahms set with subtlety and empathy to spare this is the one to go for. Bring on the third volume! **SM**

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Medtner · Rachmaninov
Piano Works
 Steven Osborne *p*
 HYPERION CDA67936

★★★★★

Former footnote now justifies his place at the top table

To think 30 years ago Nikolai Medtner was a footnote in most music guides and only familiar to the more *recherché* pianophiles. Now Hyperion can risk having two recordings of his *Sonata Romantica* in their catalogue.

Steven Osborne's consummate technique and tasteful musicianship is made to measure for Medtner's style, bringing subtle colours and lucidity to romantic fantasies where fistfuls of notes can turn into a turgid mess in lesser hands. The two *Skazki* Op. 20 are superbly characterised while Osborne's firm grasp takes the Sonata by the scruff of the neck and convinces us of its worth.

Those qualities serve Rachmaninov's language equally well. Listeners prone to cultural stereotyping may long for a more obviously Russian volatility but the unbiased will find there is no lack of unbuttoned spontaneity here. The *Corelli Variations* veer from thoughtfully ruminating to wildly explosive and Osborne vividly conveys Rachmaninov's later style with its death haunted narratives and aching nostalgia.

Osborne decides to conflate the two extant versions of the Piano Sonata No 2, a pragmatic choice that proves ideal with his textural clarity keeping a firm grip on Rachmaninov's ramblings and exuberances, yet there is no lack of flamboyance and fire – a delicious performance. Hyperion's sound is equally scrumptious with a firm image and just the right amount of room resonance to let the climaxes expand. **WA**