

Instrumental



Brahms
Piano Sonata No 3 in F Minor,
Handel Variations
 Jonathan Plowright *p*
 BIS-2047

★★★★★

PLOWRIGHT GETS IT RIGHT

This big-boned Brahms is never flash for flash's sake

The image of heavyweight composer and patriarchal guardian of a decaying Romantic tradition makes it easy to forget that Brahms started out as a virtuoso concert pianist. It is equally easy to forget that his third and final sonata, for his own instrument, was completed at the ridiculously precocious age of 20 (during a sojourn with his new friends Robert and Clara Schumann). From then on it was as if he had said all that he wanted to say in the genre, and his large-scale piano compositions were henceforth confined to sets of variations – those on themes of Paganini and Handel being the most substantial.

For his ambitious debut on the BIS label, the British pianist Jonathan Plowright exhibits a prodigious musical appetite, tackling the meaty Third Sonata for his main course with the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel* making for a rich and sumptuous dessert.

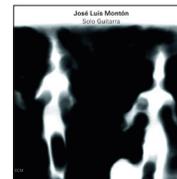
The sonata again confounds any expectations you might have of Brahms as a structural conservative, being cast in no less than five contrasting movements, linked with a recognisably Beethovenian thematic motto. It receives a carefully considered yet intensely dramatised reading, more tempestuous in approach than, say Radu Lupu's, but in its

own way equally thoughtful. At its wildest – and it visits some pretty extreme climes – it reminded me of Percy Grainger's vivid recording, but without all the eccentricities. Plowright has a commanding technique and can bring enormous weight to bear on the keyboard when required, but he can also pull right back – as he does, for example, to realise the beautiful second subject of the first movement. His rapt yet filigree reading of the second movement reveals Brahms's acknowledged debt to his revered Bach.

Plowright's Eastern European credentials are on display in the "schizoid" scherzo – reminiscent of Chopin (or almost prefiguring Ravel's *La Valse*). The fourth movement, a solemn intermezzo, is stillness itself, with only the Beethovenesque rumblings rearing their heads to trouble proceedings. The fifth alternates between galumphing dance and romantic dream before Plowright grows that extra arm required to bring it to its Lisztian conclusion.

The *Handel Variations* are equally distinguished by perfectly executed Baroque articulations (at times taken at a considerable lick) and plenty of Romantic pizzazz. Plowright's engineers have done him proud, every note caught with clarity in a highly natural perspective. Please, BIS, can we have some more? **CP**

“
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Solo Guitarra
Music by Bach, traditional music for guitar

José Luis Montón *g*
 ECM 2246

★★★★★

Tradition and innovation combine in flamenco style

Just as flamenco guitarists Paco Peña and Paco di Lucía have stretched the boundaries of what constitutes flamenco, so too does Barcelona-born José Luis Montón draw on “new characters in the alphabet of flamenco” in his inspired, impassioned creations, while introducing a few of his own. As Montón writes in his brief booklet note: “In this music I have tried to translate all the sincerity and love of art that I appreciate so much when I encounter it.” Thus most of the pieces start from a traditional base – *bulería*, *tango*, *soleá*, *seguirilla* and so forth – before pushing off from the shore in search of new horizons. Works such as the opening *Rota (farruca)* and the percussive *Al oído (cantiñas)* combine sweetly ornamented melodies with flurries of *punteado* and machine-gun bursts of *rasgueado*, while rhythms and harmonies take unexpected twists and turns.

One of the biggest and most enjoyable of those twists is Montón's beautiful, flamenco-inflected arrangement of JS Bach's Air from the Orchestral Suite No 3 in D. Here, as in many other pieces on this recording, the main melody sneaks up on you amid a fresh, lyrical introduction. Other highlights include the intense *Altolaquirre* (tango), the exciting *Conclusión (seguirilla)* and the magical *tanguillo, Hontanar*.

Throughout, Montón's musical invention is matched by an enviable technique and sense of drama. **Will Yeoman**