

INSTRUMENTAL REVIEWS

conjures up a rich palette of tonal colours throughout, but to particularly bewitching effect in the two Thalberg fantasies where in places as many as four distinct voices are held separately within the same spectrum. The execution is so incredibly neat and well ordered, and yet sounds completely spontaneous, like an inspired improvisation. And if you are one of those who think Hamelin is too cerebral and emotionally cool, then this will disabuse you. I have never heard him play *fff* passages with such unbridled energy and vehemence. This is a master pianist at the height of his powers.

This cannily chosen programme gives Liszt and Thalberg the chance to shine at their individual best, with *Hexaméron* allowing us to hear them side by side in a compendium of contemporary Parisian piano styles. (Hyperion usefully divides the work into nine tracks to enable the listener to easily follow the sequence of variations by Thalberg, Pixis, Herz, Czerny, Chopin and Liszt himself.) There are too many highlights on this outstanding disc to list individually following this barnstorming opening, though the *Don Pasquale* fantasy is as sprightly as Earl Wild's famous recording (Vanguard, 11/68, 8/92) and Hamelin's own live performance at Husum in 1994 (Danacord, 4/97), while the *Norma* fantasy outstrips Hamelin's earlier recording (Music & Arts, 1992). The final section of the *Moses* fantasy (first encountered on Raymond Lewenthal's stunning but sonically inferior 1975 Angel recording) left me sitting there grinning like an idiot: just when you think all possibilities of Thalberg's famous three-hands effect have been exhausted, he adds another (his audiences used to stand on their chairs to see how it was done). Here, Hamelin's *leggero* hemidemisemiquaver arpeggios are of the kind that, even if you had followed your mother's advice and practised harder, you would never equal. Not in a million years.

In all this, he has been laudably supported by recording engineer Arne Akselberg in Berlin's Teldex Studio with his longtime producer Andrew Keener. As I said, buy it! **Jeremy Nicholas**

Ravel

'Le langage des fleurs'

À la manière de Borodine. À la manière de Chabrier. Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn. Pavane pour une infante défunte. Prélude. Sonatine. Le tombeau de Couperin. Valses nobles et sentimentales

Ann Martin-Davis *pf*

Guild © GMCD7825 (69' • DDD)



Ann Martin-Davis's new disc of Ravel, subtitled 'The Language of Flowers',

is anchored by the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and *Le tombeau de Couperin*, leavened by the *Sonatine* and smaller works.

After the little 26-bar *Prélude* of 1913, passed around the room as an *amuse-gueule*, the dance gets under way. Yet for all their artful detail, these *Valses* seem to lack lilt and momentum. If Martin-Davis's *Valses* come in at only roughly a minute and a half longer than those of, say, Bertrand Chamayou on his *Gramophone* Awards-nominated disc (Erato, 3/16), they nevertheless seem very slow indeed. While scrupulously adherent to the score, Martin-Davis tends to pause slightly to delineate phrases and emphasise cadential figures. Add close microphone placement which sacrifices much of the piano's ambient sound and that sense of abandon so characteristic of the *valse* simply evaporates.

Happily, this *Tombeau* is ample compensation for the *Valses*' relative lack of pep. Heralded by a swirling *Prélude*, the appropriately deliberate Fugue, playful Forlone and irrepensible Rigaudon are all *comme il faut*. Earnest innocence in the Menuet provides the perfect contrast before an exciting Toccata, all the more bracing for its *pointilliste* bent. Of the smaller pieces, the *Pavane* stands out for its forthright delicacy and simplicity, its tender melancholy thoroughly convincing. There's a great deal to enjoy in these seasoned performances. **Patrick Rucker**

'Encounter'

Brahms Vier ernste Gesänge, Op 121 (arr Reger)

Busoni Ten Chorale Preludes after JS Bach.

Six Chorale Preludes after Brahms, Op 122

Feldman Palais de Mari **Reger** Nachtlied, Op 138 No 3 (arr Becker)

Igor Levit *pf*

Sony Classical © 19439 78657-2 (99' • DDD)



Bach meets Brahms, with Busoni and Reger as enablers, and they all meet Feldman thanks

to Igor Levit. The chorale prelude arrangements go together so obviously that they must have been coupled more often than I can remember (I recall Paul Jacobs on Nonesuch and at least one complete Busoni). But it's certainly excellent to have them in such fluent, classy performances.

Brahms's *Serious Songs* without the voice feel strangely ersatz to me, but their place in the programme has an undeniable logic. And Feldman's typically quietist, 29-minute (in this slower-than-usual performance) *Palais de Mari*, inspired by Syrian ruins housed in the Louvre, may well win admirers who come to it through an interest in the other composers and who know that Levit can be trusted to bring fierce concentration to any repertoire he advocates.

Levit has been on an extraordinary inner journey through Covid times (see Alex Ross's extended essay about this in *The New Yorker*, May 18, 2020), offering more than 50 online 'concerts', seemingly all decided on the spur of the moment. In his own words, quoted in Sony's thoughtful booklet essay: 'To be able to make music without any outward constraint and spontaneously to choose works that deal with the basic questions of love and death, of loneliness and the possibility of truly loving one's neighbour – all of this has brought a feeling of relaxation to my piano-playing that I had never known until now.' Fine words. But I wish I could say that this relaxation translates fully on to this album. In fact I was surprised to find several of the chorale preludes a little uptight, never plumbing the kind of depths that, say, Brendel brought to *Ich ruf zu dir* (a treasured World Record Club LP, coupled with Busoni's *Fantasia contrappuntistica*, which I'm not sure ever appeared on CD). Nor am I sure the recording quality does full justice to the subtlety of Levit's tonal palette. All in all, then, a highly collectable disc, but not quite the epoch-making one the pianist's stellar image has led us to expect. **David Fanning**

'The French Album'

Chabrier Habanera **Debussy** Estampes –

La soirée dans Grenade. Préludes: Book 1 –

No 2, Voiles; No 5, Les collines d'Anacapri; No 7,

Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest; No 10, La cathédrale engloutie; Book 2 – No 2, Feuilles mortes;

No 3, La puerta del vino; No 7, La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune; No 12, Feux d'artifice.

Suite bergamasque – Clair de lune **Fauré**

Pavane, Op 50 **Rameau** Nouvelles pièces de

clavecin en concerts – L'Égyptienne; Menuets;

Les Tricotets **Ravel** Miroirs – Alborada del

gracioso. Pavane pour une infante défunte

Jorge Federico Osorio *pf*

Cedille © CDR90000 197 (75' • DDD)



I confess that before this I had not encountered Jorge Federico Osorio (born

GRAMOPHONE *talks to ...**Marc-André Hamelin*

The pianist talks about his recording of opera paraphrases by Liszt and Thalberg, and the virtues and challenges of this still occasionally maligned area of repertoire

Liszt and Thalberg shared a famous rivalry, but what are the key differences in their approach to writing operatic paraphrases?

There's no question that both men knew the instrument to its core and were tirelessly inventive and innovative in the exploration of pianistic possibility, but it's a testament to the piano's potential that they each managed this in very different ways. If a generalisation is to be made, one could say that Liszt tended more towards brilliance, limitless textural invention and harmonic spice, whereas the overriding characteristic of Thalberg's piano-writing is a kind of extreme elegance.

How did you choose which works to include on this album?

Without exception, I've known all five works on the album from very early on, some since childhood. Not by playing them of course, but by being aware of them through repeated listening (although I did try to play some of them as soon as I was able!). I really feel that they are among the best that both composers had to offer in the operatic fantasy genre. In the case of Liszt, I could have included the *Faust* waltz paraphrase or the *Tannhäuser* Overture, but in the end I settled on limiting the present programme to Italian opera. I did play the *Tannhäuser*

Overture many years ago, and it must count as one of the most uncomfortable things Liszt ever wrote – it constantly feels like it was written in the wrong key.

I originally intended to devote a whole disc to Thalberg's operatic fantasies, but the more I explored them, the more I felt disappointed by how poorly many of them held together, despite other qualities. So I thought it best to show Thalberg to his best advantage; I think that *Mosè* and *Don Pasquale* really stand above the rest of his output.

A singing line is obviously crucially important in this music. What other qualities are required to bring it to life?

What I tried to do is to have as much of this demanding writing under pianistic control at all times so that I would only have to concentrate on and highlight the important thread that is the melodic material. Obviously, the music was written to dazzle and to celebrate the glory of the piano, but if all these scales, figurations and roulades are not integrated into something that makes emotional sense and retains the flavour of the original operatic material, then the pianist's toil becomes purposeless.



Once mastered, this music must be enormous fun to play.

Well, when it works, yes! These kinds of pieces feel much better the more one is in shape at the time of performance, but repertoire like this is especially vulnerable to anything less than total preparation and concentration. On another level, I do believe that those pianists who oppose what people like Liszt and Thalberg have done so well, and who refuse to delve into this part of the literature, are depriving themselves of a multi-dimensional area of pleasure. Yes, some of it occasionally lacks subtlety, some of it is in questionable taste, but the best of it is irreplaceable and, dare I say, immortal.

Mexico, 1951) but on this hearing I very much hope to get to know him better. A critic on the *Los Angeles Times* has described him as 'one of the most elegant and accomplished pianists on the planet'. Elegant, yes, and whose playing has a warmth and humanity that I found immensely appealing.

From the first bars of Fauré's *Pavane*, to quote the great Jorge Bolet, 'you know you are in safe hands'. So far as the recorded sound is concerned, captured in the Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago, it's realistic, honest, and with plenty of room to capture the tonal bloom of the instrument, a beautifully voiced Steinway.

And what a cleverly selected programme this is. The Fauré ends quietly on a single (tonic) low F sharp, which becomes the

dominant of Debussy's 'Les collines d'Anacapri'. This is followed by a judiciously chosen further six *Préludes* from Books 1 and 2 with 'La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune' leading to 'Clair de lune' (from *Suite bergamasque*). These will leave you in no doubt that you are listening to a master colourist who does not present them in a washy Impressionist haze but as individually sculpted tone poems. You will, for instance, rarely hear the left-hand quavers at the end of 'La cathédrale engloutie' so clearly yet with Debussy's *flottant et sourd* direction fully realised.

From two centuries earlier, three short pieces by Rameau are far from anachronistic, as one might expect, in this context. After which we are off to Spain for the remainder of the recital: Chabrier's

Habanera neatly eliding into the same languorous dance rhythm for both 'La puerta del vino' (Book 2) and 'La soirée dans Grenade' (from *Estampes*). 'Alborada del gracioso', though a fine performance, does not quite reach the heady heights of Lipatti's benchmark. Osorio ends, as he began, with a pavane, this one a dance that, in the words of the composer, 'a little princess might, in former times, have danced at the Spanish court'. It is played without sentiment and is thereby ineffably more touching.

The recording is released on the Chicago-based Cedille label, a not-for-profit organisation 'devoted to promoting the finest musicians in the Chicago area', funded by contributions from individuals, foundations and corporations.

Jeremy Nicholas