

Christophe Rousset recorded much of Bach's keyboard music early in his career and now returns to the harpsichord for the last major missing work, The Art of Fugue

a touch more sweetness and freedom (and that gives you the triple fugue in incomplete and completed forms), Davitt Moroney's stimulating *Gramophone* Award-winning 1980s recording (Harmonia Mundi, 5/86) still shines strongly. **Lindsay Kemp**

Beethoven

'A Beethoven Odyssey, Vol 8'

Piano Sonatas – No 13, 'Quasi una fantasia', Op 27 No 1; No 16, Op 31 No 1; No 18, 'Hunt', Op 31 No 3; No 22, Op 54

James Brawn *pf*

MSR Classics (MS1472 • 78')



James Brawn's traversal of Beethoven's piano sonatas has reached

its eighth instalment, with a selection of sonatas composed between 1800 and 1804. The E flat Sonata, Op 27 No 1, always overshadowed by the *Moonlight* Sonata with which it shares an opus number and subtitle, *Quasi una fantasia*, is here given a creditable performance that highlights its formal audacity. Some of the *sforzandos* seem subdued but it soon becomes evident that Brawn generally

eschews the marked contrasts that are the hallmark of many Beethoven players.

None of the humour inherent in the first movement of the G major Sonata, Op 31 No 1, is slighted and the *Adagio grazioso* abounds in beautiful and varied articulation. The *Allegretto* Rondo sounds closer to an *Andante con moto*, with a tendency to accord each beat of the bar equal emphasis, impeding the sense of forward momentum.

My favourite performance on the album is of the great E flat Sonata, Op 31 No 3. The first movement is appropriately spacious and morning-fresh. Following the brusque jauntiness of the Scherzo, the graceful and gracious Minuet is the perfect foil. Brawn does himself proud in the *Presto con fuoco*, with its devil-may-care, galloping life affirmation.

Last of all is Op 54, the relatively unassuming two-movement sonata separating two leviathans, the *Waldstein* and the *Appassionata*: a *Tempo d'un menuetto* followed by a congenial *Allegretto*, all of which surrounds Brawn with some of the most salubrious waters of the disc. I regret having caught up with this Beethoven series so late, but with two more discs presumably yet to come, there is much to look forward to. **Patrick Rucker**

Beethoven

Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli, Op 120

Shai Vosner *pf*

Onyx (ONYX4241 • 52')

Be	Et	Ho	V	En
Di	Ab	El	Li	
Va	Ri	At	Io	Ns
Sh	Ai			
Wo	Sn	Er		

Serious forethought and scrutinised detail inform Shai Vosner's interpretation of

Beethoven's *Diabelli* Variations, sometimes getting in the music's way, notwithstanding many moments of illumination.

The pianist's fussy pointing of the first variation's dotted rhythms undermines the sudden dynamic contrasts and funeral-march gravitas, and Vosner brings out the cross-rhythmic intricacy of Var 2's broken chords but not the melodic implications that Martin Helmchen uncovers (Alpha, 4/18). The lack of a resolute basic pulse in Var 4 dissipates the rollicking spring in Var 5's repeated notes. Vosner's strong left-hand up-beats reinforce Var 7's inherent swagger, which, however, tends to soften when the pianist rushes during crescendos. By contrast, Vosner deftly yet firmly navigates the *Presto* Var 10's rapid broken chords, although I've heard more airborne lightness from pianists as

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divergent as Julius Katchen and Peter Serkin. Granted, the X-ray clarity of the pianist's linear interplay in Var 19 is more Bachian than Beethovenian, yet why not allow Wosner to channel Glenn Gould?

Var 13 most tellingly exemplifies the conflict between intention and realisation that I often glean from Wosner's playing. This variation alternates *forte* chords in dotted rhythms with rests followed by piano responses. The effect can be deliciously deadpan when played absolutely straight, as in Charles Rosen's recording (4/78), although Rosen's unexpected elongation of a single rest on the B-section repeat is a masterstroke of comic timing. At the opposite end lies Mitsuko Uchida's pompous overstatement (Decca, 5/22); she's Jerry Lewis to Rosen's Jack Benny. By comparison, Wosner's inflections are either tentative or misjudged.

In Var 22 Wosner significantly misses the caustic subtext characterising Beethoven's burlesquing of 'Notte e giorno faticar' from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* by overarticulating the appoggiaturas, which sound brasher and far more effective as quick upward brushstrokes. The pianist also reduces Var 23's 'bang/scamper' wildness to note-perfect caution, whereas he really lets loose and makes an appropriately big noise in Var 32's fugal textures, even to the point of overpedalling at times. It is in the slower, introspective variations that Wosner's sensitivity and sustaining powers unambiguously shine. Note, for instance, Var 24's three-dimensional voice-leading and timbral diversity, and how the songful rumination of his *cantabiles* in Var 31 is anchored by a strong left-hand presence. It is for this reason that I prefer Uchida's comparable yet fuller-bodied shaping of Var 14.

If my critiques seem unduly picky, it's simply because this artist's considerable pianistic and interpretative gifts deserve to be evaluated in world-class company. For as this excellently engineered release makes perfectly clear, Shai Wosner has a great *Diabelli* Variations in him, and I hope he'll continue to live with this work and record it anew down the line. In the interim, Uchida, Helmchen, Rosen, Daniel Shapiro (Azica), Igor Levit (Sony, 11/15) and Stephen Kovacevich (Onyx, 1/09) remain my top recommendations. **Jed Distler**

Beethoven • Busoni

'Symphonies, Vol 4'

Beethoven Symphonies (arr FX Scharwenka) - No 1, Op 21; No 6, 'Pastoral', Op 68 **Busoni** Duettino concertante (after Mozart, K459/iii)

Tessa Uys, Ben Schoeman *pf*
Somm (SOMMCD0677 • 74')



In many ways, Xaver Scharwenka's piano duet transcriptions of Beethoven's

symphonies stand out from numerous others by such 19th-century 'in-house' arrangers as Selmar Bagge, Hugo Ulrich and Wilhelm Meves. His textural decisions in regard to octave doublings, registration and deployment of tremolos avoid clutter and aural fatigue, creating effective and stylish contrasts between sonorous heft and transparent delicacy. What is more, the physical logic of Scharwenka's keyboard layout ensures minimum awkwardness and maximum impact, transforming these works into plausible four-hand sonatas where one hardly misses Beethoven's felicities of orchestration.

Vol 4 may be the best instalment yet in the Uys and Schoeman piano duo's Beethoven/Scharwenka cycle. Their incisive thematic interplay and judicious balancing of lyricism and brio throughout the First Symphony evoke the *cantabile* flexibility and *opera buffa* qualities typifying Toscanini's 1930s BBC and NBC performances. The duo generate palpable tension in the Scherzo through careful accentuation and attention to Beethoven's *subito* dynamics, which gives the illusion of pressing ahead, even though the basic tempo is not particularly swift. Perhaps their relatively fast pacing of the first and fourth movements' slow introductions is to compensate for the piano's limited sustain in relation to the orchestra.

On the other hand, Beethoven's orchestral soundscape loses nothing in translation via the duo's vibrant and robust performance of the *Pastoral* Symphony. The first movement's warmly inflected trills and full-bodied cello lines are cases in point, as are the mellifluously voiced repeated chords assigned to the horns, plus *détaché* articulation that is rounded rather than spiky. The 'Scene by the Brook' comes alive with vividly characterised contrapuntal detail that sometimes goes for nothing in orchestral performances. The 'Peasants' Merrymaking' Scherzo features a particularly boisterous Trio, replete with hard-hitting droning fifths in the bass. I would have anticipated a relentlessly speedy 'Storm' in context, yet the duo's granitic deliberation yields a cumulative force on the scale of Otto Klemperer's extraordinary live 1964 Berlin Philharmonic recording (Testament, A/03). The 'Shepherd's Song' after the storm continues in a rather terse and businesslike

vein, missing some of the tenderness and repose that one often expects in this movement. As an encore, the players offer Busoni's two-piano transformation of the finale from Mozart's Piano Concerto No 19 in F, K459. Their reading sounds heavy-handed and foursquare when compared alongside to the lithic and more crisply energised Anderson and Roe recording (Steinway & Sons, 5/14). Still, the duo's remarkable ensemble synchronicity and fervent commitment in the Beethoven/Scharwenka works deserves my highest recommendation and I look forward to further volumes. **Jed Distler**

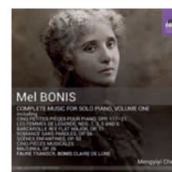
Bonis

'Complete Music for Solo Piano, Vol 1'

Bonis Barcarolle, Op 71. L'escarpolette, Op 52. Les femmes de légende - No 1, Mélisande, Op 109; No 3, Ophélie, Op 165 No 1; No 5, Phoebe, Op 30; No 6, Salomé, Op 100 No 1. Il pleut!, Op 102. Mazurka, Op 26. Méditation, Op 33. Cinq Petites pièces, Op 117-121. Cinq Pièces musicales. Romance sans paroles, Op 56. Scènes enfantines, Op 92 **Fauré** Clair de lune (transcr Bonis)

Mengyiyi Chen *pf*

Toccata Classics (TOCC0361 • 78')



This release is billed as Vol 1 of the complete music for solo piano of Mélanie

Hélène Bonis, known as Mel Bonis (1858-1937). Even among some pianophiles, her name remains unfamiliar, though she is increasingly well represented on disc, if not in the concert hall. There are already a handful of recordings dedicated exclusively to her piano works, which number roughly 150. If you have never heard any of her music, what can you expect? As a rough guide, I would put her in the same bracket as Chaminade, Chausson and Chabrier, with elements of Fauré, Chopin and Debussy inevitably in the mix, while maintaining her own distinctive voice. Whatever, Bonis falls decidedly into the 'unjustly neglected' category.

Mengyiyi Chen (b1993, Wuhan), a name new to me, is a US-based pianist. Hers is a well-chosen programme with which to introduce newcomers to the composer. The opening Barcarolle, Op 71, is typical of her graceful lyricism, *Il pleut!* (among the disc's highlights) an example of a quirky, unpredictable side. Overall, I had hoped that these 29 short pieces might have elicited a more imaginative response from Chen. Her playing is sincerity itself and pleasant enough