

## **MENDELSSOHN Songs Without Words - Gramophone**

### **Brautigam plays the Songs on a reconstructed fortepiano**

Author: Jeremy Nicholas

Brautigam is, if not the foremost, certainly the most prolific of today's fortepiano specialists, with complete cycles of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven to his credit, all widely and justly praised for their outstanding musicianship, revelatory insights (Beethoven's 32 sonatas in particular) and recorded sound. Turning his attention to Mendelssohn, Brautigam uses an instrument built in 2010 by Paul McNulty after an 1830 Pleyel preserved at the Musée de la Musique in Paris. It offers a rare opportunity to hear some of the composer's most beloved works as he might have heard them: the first four of the six volumes of Songs Without Words, each containing six pieces, written between 1829 and 1841. Brautigam adds to these five individual Lieder ohne Worte without opus numbers.

There is, of course, much to savour and admire (not least the sound engineering by Ingo Petry), but I can't pretend that listening to 29 of these little tone-poems in sequence is the most rewarding way of hearing them. One is made aware, in a way that is not evident when the Songs are cherry-picked, that not all of them are equally inspired and how often Mendelssohn falls back on the same harmonic and figurative devices. The brisker ones work best but I miss the modern grand piano's sustained, singing tone in pieces such as the beautiful opening E major Song and No 3 from Op 30 in the same key. To my ears, Mendelssohn's genius was to compose music that would sound far more effective on an instrument that had yet to be built.

## **Mendelssohn: Songs without words - Gortler - ClassicsToday**

Review by: Jed Distler    **Artistic Quality: 9**    **Sound Quality: 9**

The Israeli pianist Daniel Gortler plays Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words beautifully. He commands a warm, singing sonority, tasteful musicality, plus fingerwork that is consistently fluent and well-defined. Among my favorite moments over the course of this two-disc set are the E-flat Op. 30 No. 1's gorgeously-spun legato right-hand lines against the left hand's sonorous organ-

like accompaniment, the effortlessly-gauged swirling passagework in the F-sharp minor Op. 19 No. 5 Presto agitato, the A major Op. 53 No. 6 Molto Allegro, and the C major Op. 67 No. 4 Spinning Song. Even the once-hackneyed Spring Song (Op. 62 No. 6) emerges with welcome eloquence and dignity.

Granted, you may prefer Daniel Barenboim's more subjective pianism in certain selections, or the closer, fuller sonic image of Benjamin Frith's Mendelssohn cycle on Naxos, to say nothing of Ignaz Friedman's matchless epic style on old 78s. I also hope that an enterprising record company soon will preserve Frederic Rzewski's remarkable interpretation of the entire cycle, with its predominantly fast tempos and underlying nervous energy. That said, collectors seeking the Songs Without Words will find this release most satisfying. [4/14/2009]

### **Felix MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY (1809-1847) - MusicWeb Review**

Songs Without Words, Book 1, Op 19b [13:52]

Songs Without Words, Book 2, Op 30 [15:23]

Songs Without Words, Book 3, Op 38 [13:29]

Songs Without Words, Book 4, Op 53 [14:53]

Five unpublished Songs Without Words (1828-1837) [10:02]

Ronald Brautigam (fortepiano)

rec. August 2011, Österåker Church, Sweden

**BIS BIS-SACD-1982**

[69:19]

Ronald Brautigam's Mendelssohn is so good it's easy not to notice how good it is. That is, this playing feels so natural, so effortless, so perfectly songlike (*cantabile!*) that it's tempting to think, "why *wouldn't* the music sound like this?"

That said, an awful lot of skill went into this recital of twenty-nine *Songs Without Words* (including five which, unpublished, are omitted from many "complete" recordings). Listen to how Brautigam is always able to "float" the melody over its accompaniment without making the melodic notes feel forced or over-emphasized; listen to how the long line is preserved so that you can easily imagine the broader "songs" (say, Op. 30/5) being sung from start to completion. Listen, in the very first track, to how incredibly busy Brautigam is keeping his left hand without showing any strain, and without letting the melody sag for a second. Occasional rubato, the most tasteful of pauses and delayed chords: Brautigam uses many an artistic trick without ever seeming to be trying at all. A lot of these selections are played very quickly, which makes their ease and luminous beauty all the more impressive. The first four books take 58 minutes, versus **Michael Korstick's** 62. It all sounds natural. This Mendelssohn breathes like a living thing.

There are two things left to be praised: the sound, up to BIS's atmospheric

standards - more resonant and less dry than, say, Hyperion's piano recitals; I prefer the BIS style. The piano is a Paul McNulty fortepiano built in 2010 after an 1830 Pleyel. It is a superb instrument, and although the 1830s Grafs are the warmest instruments of all to my ears, this one is very well-suited to the music at hand. If you don't think a fortepiano can sing, think again. A superb recital.

***Brian Reinhart***