

## **Amazon Review - Rick Artdefoix - A Treasure, thoughtful and poetic Brahms**

**Rating: 5\*/5\***

For everyone liking Brahms this will be an irresistible buying. A real discovery, an alluring one. And for the ones not knowing well the Brahms music, this cd would be the best way to love it. When I say I like "almost" the whole, I mean there are works of this composer I don't particularly appreciate. - e. g. The two first sonatas. But I've nothing to object to the way this pianist plays them. Couteau has everything needed to reveal us the beauty within this music. Thoughtful and poetic as he performs it. His Brahms is fascinating. As could be expected from a winner of the Brahms International Piano Award. He plays with strength and a privileged sense of rhythm. His masterful technique goes together with a sensitivity that allows him to draw the inner secrets of these works. His resounding tone does the rest to make the whole unique. Would say that with the Angelich set this is the best recent account of the Brahms music there is. Have them and love both. As a curiosity, have to mention that besides Eric Le Sage, Couteau studied with Angelich too. But of course, their playing is not alike. Couteau represents for me the idea I had of how this composer has to be interpreted. So, it comes close to perfection. He is as good as that. The Rhapsodies Opus 79, the Fantasies of Opus 116 are beyond praise. The same applies to the Waltzes, the Hungarian Dances or the Opus 76 pieces. So, if you want a "modern" quality reading of Brahms, don't hesitate, get this box. Me, I will keep following Couteau's career. The production is very good too, as an artist of this size deserves. The set case is a sturdy one, but it isn't well tighten, leaving too much room for the booklet and the discs, so they dance a bit when moving it. The same happens with the box cover, it doesn't adjust tight enough. Aside this minor defect, it's a bargain buying, lavish in haunting melodies.

## **Amazon Review - RN ESQ - Brilliant Brahms - Rating: 5\*/5\***

There are a number of sets of Brahms "complete" works for solo piano: Barry Douglas, Martin Jones, Gerhard Oppitz, Idil Biret, Julius Katchen, the DG compilation (various pianists), and the Brilliant Classics compilation (various pianists); I put "complete" in quote marks because some sets are more complete than others. That being said, all of the sets on offer have at least 6 CDs. Now we have Geoffrey Couteau, a French pianist who recorded the solo works in chronological order of composition, on a Steinway D, over a period of several months in 2015.

Couteau won First Prize at the Brahms International Competition in 2005, and so one might expect that he would have more than a passing familiarity with Brahms. And so in fact he does: his Brahms is fluid, crystalline, and pure, in stunning recorded sound. For comparison, I have the Katchen set (6 discs) and the Biret set (12 discs, which includes the concerti and other pieces outside the core solo repertoire). I now do not listen to either of those. I would urge you to get this set, which is cheap, well put-together in an attractive sturdy box with a generous book of essays, and which may go out of print sooner than later (the label, La Dolce Volta, is one I've never heard of). Highly and urgently recommended.

### **Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897) - MusicWeb Review of Barry Douglas**

Complete Works for Solo Piano

Volumes 1 to 6

Barry Douglas (piano)

rec. West Road Concert Hall, Cambridge, UK, 2011

**CHANDOS CHAN10951** [6 CDs: 441:19]

I have always found the solo piano music of Brahms preferable to his monumental orchestral scores, and as a result have a few recordings of my favourite pieces to sit alongside the recording of the complete piano works by the versatile Martin Jones (NI 1788). However, I do feel that this recording is one of Jones's least successful, and while it contains some fine performances, there are others that are rather run of the mill. There is no such trouble here with Barry Douglas, who delivers first-rate performances throughout.

Brahms was first and foremost a pianist, indeed his early reputation was built on his concert programs, where he introduced the audience to 'serious' music, such as the sonatas of Beethoven, along with the lighter pieces and parodies of opera which were the preferred repertoire of concert goers of the day. He would even perform some of his own arrangements of popular operatic works, although he composed them under a pseudonym. His first meeting with Schumann had followed a successful concert tour with the Hungarian violinist Ede Reményi, a colourful character who had been banished from the Austro-Hungarian Empire due to his involvement in the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 and would later become the solo violinist to Queen Victoria. It was Reményi who introduced the young Brahms to Hungarian music and therefore instilled in him the passion he would have for this music for the rest of his life. Brahms had been composing before his meeting with Schumann, though he deemed the majority of these early works as unworthy and destroyed them.

What was left is a body of work that Denis Matthews, in his monograph of 1978, divides into three phases: "Mostly Sonatas – Entirely Variations – Shorter Piano Pieces". This is where, for me, Barry Douglas scores highly, as he rejects the idea of presenting complete sets such as the opus 10 Ballades on a single disc, in favour of a more concert style, a recital series, one in which each disc presents music from each of these phases. The result is a series that is not at all dry. Rather, the change between pieces from the different groupings always gives the listener something fresh and exciting. While this approach might not suite every listener, it is not difficult to change between discs to get the required opus sets.

There are highlights on each disc, opening with a strong statement of intent with the Rhapsody Op. 79 No. 1. Here Douglas nails his credentials as a Brahmsian firmly to the wall, and I for one was never disappointed throughout the whole set. Other highlights of this disc include the Romance, Ballade and the Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, all of which leave Martin Jones, as well as many of the other recordings I have, in their wake.

The second disc opens with a wonderful performance of the Op. 10 No. 2 Ballade and this, like the opening track of disc one, really sets the tone for what is to follow. The Rhapsody and the two Op. 16 Intermezzos are excellent, with the final work on this disc, the Piano Sonata No. 3, setting the seal on a most enjoyable programme.

Disc three presents the Op. 39 Waltzes, which here benefit from individual tracks, something lacking on the Nimbus recording, where they are presented as two tracks. However, it is what follows that is of greater interest. The Theme and Variations in D minor, based on the second movement of the String Sextet Op. 18, has new life breathed into it, with Douglas's choice of a slower pace producing a much more nuanced performance. This is followed by wonderful performances of three Intermezzos before the disc ends with one of the best recordings of the Piano Sonata No. 2.

The fourth volume opens with the first of Brahms's three sonatas. With the influences of both Beethoven and Schumann clear to hear, here is 'the young eagle', as Schumann famously called him, stating his intent as a serious composer, a composer for the future, and it receives here an impassioned performance by Douglas, one that clearly lives up to the passion of the young Brahms. Further homage is paid to Schumann in the Op. 9 Variations, before the first of the Op. 10 Ballades, with its theme of a Scottish folk song clearly coming through, sets the scene for the first book of the Variations on a theme by Niccolò Paganini, which rounds off the disc wonderfully well.

The fifth disc does not skimp on the excitement either, opening with the

Intermezzo Op. 118 No. 1, before the second book of the Variations on a theme by Niccolò Paganini. This is followed by a further set of Variations, his Op. 21, before the fruits of his friendship with the violinist Ede Reményi come to the fore with a group of pieces based on Hungarian dance and song tunes. Here Douglas expertly coaxes every aspect of the folk tradition out of the music in these thrilling performances.

This Hungarian theme is carried over into the final disc, which opens with a spirited performance of the 'Rakoczy' March. This is an arrangement, probably dating from the first half of the 1850s, of a piece best known for Berlioz's inclusion of it in *La Damnation de Faust* a few years earlier in 1846, and in Liszt's arrangements which culminated in his Hungarian Rhapsody No.15. While a number of works without opus number make up the best part of this disc, the three Op. 76 pieces stand out before the Hungarian Dances take over and form a fitting conclusion to this wonderful set.

Barry Douglas is excellent throughout. If you are looking for a complete set of the Brahms piano music, look no further. His are spirited and thoroughly nuanced performances, making many of my other recordings of Brahms's piano music redundant. As mentioned above, these discs have the feel of a concert performance, and this is added to by the natural sound of the recording. The slight reverberance of the piano is pleasing and not at all intrusive. The six CDs come with the original booklets from the original releases, so six in all, with detailed and informative notes by Calum MacDonald and Nicholas Marston being a real bonus.

This is a wonderful set, and if it is a set of Brahms's piano music you are looking for, look no further, for there are performances here that will stand the test of time and, as I have already said, many that supplant my old favourites. Even if you are not looking for a set, the original releases brought together here are all recommendable and I have seen the set offered at the equivalent of six discs for the price of two. So I know what I would be doing, I would be rushing out to buy this out-and-out bargain.

***Stuart Sillitoe***

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