

**BRAHMS Piano Sonata No. 3 in f. *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*** • Jonathan Plowright (pn) • BIS 2047 (SACD: 72:45)

The chance meetings that occur in the realm of classical music recordings never cease to amaze me. Browsing through the new releases bin on a recent trip to a local record shop, I came across a new Hyperion release (67905) containing a piano quintet and a piano quartet by two romantic Polish composers with unpronounceable names, unless you're Polish, of course—Juliusz Zarębski (1854–1885) and Wladyslaw Żeleński (1837–1921). Chamber music maven that I am, I purchased the disc, hoping my find would yield wonderful works on the order of the piano quartets and quintets by Schumann, Brahms, and Dvořák. Unfortunately, neither the Zarębski nor the Żeleński lived up to my expectations.

But what does any of this have to do with the BIS Brahms disc at hand? Well, the chance meeting in this case was Jonathan Plowright, who just happened to be the pianist on the above-cited Hyperion CD. What didn't fully register, though, until I took a closer look at the pianist's complete discography, is that Plowright seems to have focused his repertoire not just on the music of Polish composers—he recorded Volumes 28 and 44 of Hyperion's "Romantic Piano Concerto" series, containing works by Zigmund Stojowski and Henry Melcer-Szczawinski, and another Hyperion disc of solo piano works by Paderewski—but largely on composers who, in many cases, stand outside the mainstream classical, romantic, and early 20th-century piano literature. One finds recordings, for instance, of Plowright playing works by Constant Lambert, Eugene Goossens, Federico Mompou, and Joaquin Nin-Culmell, but nothing I can find by Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, or Liszt. This new BIS release, however, is not Plowright's recorded debut in Brahms. In fact, he recorded the F-Minor Sonata, along with other of the composer's works, for the shortlived Kingdom label back in 1990.

What's needed in both of the early Brahms works on this disc is not just consummate keyboard technique but physical strength and endurance, for this is music that requires the quick bursts of energy of the sprinter *and* the stamina of the long-distance runner. Plowright demonstrates that he possesses both, with remaining power held in reserve. There is yet another demand, however, that these Brahms scores make upon the player, and that is the instinctive ability to apprehend the grand design and cause order to spring from seeming disarray; or, to invoke the cliché, to see the forest beyond its individual trees. Master of execution though Plowright is, his readings strike me as being intently focused on the details of the music rather than its structure.

To put it in modern-day, business-oriented technobabble, it could be said that Plowright's playing is event-driven and that his approach is one of micromanaging the notes and phrases under his fingers. Translation: these performances convey to me an impression of moment-to-moment interpretation in which musical utterances of arresting beauty are triggered by local events of short duration, such as temporary tempo fluctuations and expression markings, e.g., *fest und bestimmt*. But what I sense is not quite there yet is the rigorous organizational discipline brought to the *Handel Variations* by Cynthia Raim (see *Fanfare* 33:2) or the masterful musical grasp displayed in the F-Minor Sonata by Sheila Arnold (*Fanfare* 32:3). None of this is meant to diminish Plowright's exceptional technical command or the magnificent sonorities he draws from his Steinway D piano, which is reproduced, by the way, with extraordinary clarity and full-bodied presence by BIS's fantastic SACD recording.

I recall reading somewhere that Plowright professes a special fondness for Brahms and is planning, or would like, to embark on a project to record the composer's complete solo piano oeuvre. If the present disc is the launch in a survey, despite my misgivings expressed above, I think it represents a reasonably good start, and I look forward to future installments. **Jerry Dubins**

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**BRAHMS Piano Sonata No. 2. Variations on an Original Theme**, op. 21/1. **3 Intermezzi**, op. 117. **Scherzo in eb**, op. 4 • Jonathan Plowright (pn) • BIS 2117 (SACD: 76:26)

In 36:6, in a generally positive review of Jonathan Plowright's first volume in a projected complete survey of Brahms's piano music, I expressed minor reservations relating to the pianist's seeming tendency to "micromanage" the notes and phrases under his fingers, conveying to me "an impression of moment-to-moment interpretation in which musical utterances of arresting beauty are triggered by local events of short duration, such as temporary tempo fluctuations and expression markings." In writing that, I may not have made it clear that I was referring primarily to Plowright's performance of Brahms's *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, which is more demanding of long-range strategic planning and organizational discipline than are the big, sprawling sonatas that come at the beginning of the composer's life's work, and the four sets of wistful, introspective, life's leave-taking pieces that come towards the end.

That previous album also contained Brahms's Piano Sonata No. 3, a work demanding consummate keyboard technique, physical strength, and the endurance of a long-distance runner, qualities Plowright possesses and commands in abundance. On this new release, the pianist works his way both

backward and forward, taking on the equally challenging Sonata No. 2, composed in 1852, and the Three Intermezzi, op. 117, that came exactly 40 years later in 1892.

Chronologically, the F#-Minor Sonata was the first of Brahms's three piano sonatas to be written, but was published after the C-Major Sonata which elbowed its way into first place. All three of the composer's piano sonatas are big, bravura works, characterized by a type of virtuosic writing not like that found in the keyboard works of Schumann or earlier composers such as Chopin and Mendelssohn. Ironically, the style, not to mention the spirit, of this F#-Minor Sonata is closer to that of Liszt than the 19-year-old Brahms would have cared to admit only a year or two later, the irony being that Brahms would become the *de facto* representative, whether he wanted to be or not, of the anti-New German school of which Liszt and Wagner were the chief delegates.

I wouldn't go so far, however, as to call the F#-Minor Sonata the most "un-Brahmsian" of Brahms's works, as some commentators have. To do so is to view something retroactively that hadn't yet come to pass. How can we say that a work Brahms wrote as early as 1852 is either "Brahmsian" or "un-Brahmsian," when we only know from our present perspective what came to define the "Brahmsian" sound? It's like saying that not knowing Freud, Shakespeare was a perceptive analyst of human motives and actions. Besides, I'm not so sure I'd agree that the F#-Minor Sonata is completely "un-Brahmsian." The scherzo, with its insistent signature triplet figure, should dispel that notion.

Composed sometime between 1855 and 1857, the Variations on an Original Theme, op. 21/1, came to share an opus number with an earlier work, the Variations on a Hungarian Song, op. 21/2, with which its only point of commonality is its theme-and-variations form. Both works, however, display Brahms's early interest and skill in variations technique. The later piece, especially the one on this disc, is no mere practice exercise. It's a major work, some 20 minutes in duration, with 11 variations that run the gamut of expressive moods and compositional procedures, including a canon in contrary motion. But most freakishly, perhaps, 35 years later the opening bars of the first of the three op. 117 Intermezzi are so close a parallel to the theme of the op. 21/1 Variations that it's hard to imagine that Brahms wasn't quoting or at least paraphrasing himself. I'm sure Plowright's programming these specific works was not an accident.

The Scherzo in E♭ Minor, op. 4, is an even earlier work than the Second Sonata. Composed in 1851, the scherzo also has a Liszt connection, which may explain why these early solo piano works by Brahms took on a Lisztian cast. Touring with Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi in 1853, Brahms arrived in Weimar, where he met Liszt and Joachim Raff. This was the occasion on which Liszt publicly acknowledged the 20-year-old Brahms by playing this scherzo. The famed pianist then proceeded to perform his recently composed B-Minor Sonata, during which Brahms allegedly repaid the honor by falling asleep in the middle of it. Once again, in the scherzo we have the pervasive triplet ostinatos that would become such a

persistent rhythmic feature in Brahms's music.

I have none of the reservations about Plowright's second Brahms installment that I expressed about his first. In the early works, which make up most of the program, he maintains, as before, an iron grip on the technical demands, playing boldly, assertively, and with commanding authority. Then, with the most sensitive touch, singing tone, and feeling for their pensive poetry, Plowright gives really touching readings of the Three Intermezzi. His performance of the middle number in B $\flat$  Minor has a special otherworldly feel to it.

The recording, made in Potton Hall in 2014, captures Plowright's Steinway D piano in a very warm, detailed, lifelike acoustic. Highly recommended to lovers of Brahms's solo piano music. **Jerry Dubins**

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**BRAHMS** *Variations on a Hungarian Melody*, op. 21/2. **7 Piano Pieces**, op. 76. **Waltzes**, op. 39. **6 Piano Pieces**, op. 118 • Jonathan Plowright (pn) • BIS 2127 (SACD: 81:19)

This is Volume 3 in Jonathan Plowright's survey of Brahms's solo piano music. Volume 1, containing the F-Minor Sonata (No. 3) and *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, was reviewed in 36:6; and Volume 2, containing the F $\sharp$ -Minor Sonata (No. 2), *Variations on an Original Theme*, op. 21/1, the Three Intermezzos, op. 117, and the Scherzo in E $\flat$  Minor, op. 4, was reviewed in 38:5.

Plowright continues here with a program that mixes early and late Brahms, though in this case, there is no "big" work, like one of the sonatas or *Handel Variations*, as before. Instead, we get many of Brahms's smaller pieces that become "big" works by virtue of being collected and published together under single opus numbers—the 16 Waltzes, for example, which range from the shortest of 32 seconds to the longest of two and half minutes, but in total add up to 20 minutes.

Plowright is a sensitive player who is highly adept at intuiting Brahms's musical moods and at bringing out the nuances of these various pieces; and yet he does so without indulging in sentimentalizing effects. He allows the music to speak for itself, and his tone, touch, and technique, depending on the content and character of the piece at hand, range from bold, assertive, and commanding to pensive and poetic, as noted in my previous review.

With two of Brahms's three sonatas, the *Handel Variations*, three of the five sets of later piano pieces (opp. 76, 117, and 118), the Waltzes, and the two stand-alone, unrelated op. 21 theme and variations works now behind him, Plowright still faces a number of major challenges, not least of which are the C-Major Sonata (No. 1), the Ballades, op. 10, the *Paganini Variations*, op. 35, the Two Rhapsodies, op. 79, and the two remaining sets of late piano pieces, opp. 116 and 119.

Based on Plowright's two previous volumes and now this latest one, I feel confident in saying that this is shaping up to be the best of the more recent Brahms cycles to come my way. BIS's superb multi-channel surround sound recording adds extra bloom to Plowright's Steinway D for a spacious and highly satisfying listening experience. **Jerry Dubins**

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**BRAHMS** *Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Books I and II*, op. 35. **4** *Ballades*, op. 10. **2** *Rhapsodies*, op. 79. **4** *Klavierstücke*, op. 119 • Jonathan Plowright (pn) • BIS 2137 (SACD: 82:08)

Volume 4 in Jonathan Plowright's survey of Brahms's piano music brings us a very full program containing a number of the composer's most popular works, including the four Ballades, the two Rhapsodies, and his most explicitly showy work, the Variations on a Theme by Paganini, a work of almost Lisztean glitz, written expressly for the piano virtuoso Carl Tausig. By my estimation, the only works left to come in Plowright's Brahms cycle are the Sonata No. 1, the Variations on a Theme by Schumann, op. 9, and the set of *Klavierstücke*, op. 116. Those remaining items should nicely fill a fifth volume.

I've had very positive things to say about Plowright's previous releases in this survey, and there is nothing in this latest installment to change my previous assessment that Plowright is a sensitive player who is highly adept at intuiting Brahms's musical moods and at bringing out the nuances of these various pieces; and yet he does so without indulging in sentimentalizing effects. The "Paganini" Variations, in particular, have long been a test of a pianist's virtuosic mettle, and Plowright acquits himself spectacularly well, tossing off the work's technical challenges with equal aplomb if not quite equal panache of Garrick Ohlsson in his two-disc Brahms collection on Hyperion. But the very minor difference may be due to Ohlsson's instrument and/or to Hyperion's slightly brighter acoustic. I should mention that, in a bit of programming creativity, Plowright separates the two books of the Variations, placing the first at the beginning and the second at the end, so that they effectively form bookends to the works that come between them.

Plowright proves himself a real powerhouse in the two Rhapsodies, projecting their emotional turbulence with great strength and passion and their contrasting moments of repose, few as they are, with an understanding tenderness. His reading of the Rhapsody No. 1 in B Minor, especially, is an intensely excited utterance. The tonal interconnectedness of the four Ballades—D Minor, D Major, B Minor, B Major—has long been noted, but other than that, there doesn't seem to be any thematic thread and definitely no literary thread that links them together. In fact, the First Ballade is the only one based on a literary source, the Scottish ballad "Edward," an unhappy tale of family disharmony, if ever there was one. The

remaining three ballades are purely musical narratives that tell no stories. Plowright finds the emotional core in each of them and plays them all beautifully. In the four *Klavierstücke*, op. 119, we have Plowright's take on Brahms's last set of late piano pieces, which, by no means, are all introspective, wistful reflections on what has been. In fact, only the first of them, the Intermezzo in B Minor, fits that description. The next piece, the Intermezzo in E Minor is more agitated than it is sad, and to some extent, the manner of writing recalls that heard in the Rhapsodies. The third number, the Intermezzo in C Major, has about it the character of forced gaiety in the face of pain; while the last piece, in E $\flat$  Major, titled Rhapsody, is brave, bold, heroic, and stoic. That's quite a medley of contrasting and even contradictory emotional moods the pianist has to navigate in a short period of time, putting himself in the right frame of mind for each piece. Plowright succeeds admirably in that regard, finding just the right tone for Brahms's valedictory to the solo piano. I eagerly look forward to the conclusion of Plowright's Brahms cycle. Meanwhile, this presumed penultimate volume is strongly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

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**BRAHMS Piano Sonata No. 1. Fantasies**, op. 116. **Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann**, op. 9 • Jonathan Plowright (pn) • BIS 2147 (Download: 68:59)  
Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

This is Jonathan Plowright's fifth volume of Brahms's complete works for solo piano. Unless I've missed something or Plowright intends to record the composer's piano arrangements of some of his own works, such as the second movement of the String Sextet, op. 18, or the cadenzas Brahms wrote to concertos by Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, I'm pretty sure Plowright can now call this project done.

In following and reviewing the previous three volumes in this series, I've found Plowright to be an ideal Brahms pianist and interpreter, and this presumed final installment provides further confirmation of that impression. Saving the first and one of the most technically daunting of Brahms's keyboard works for last, Plowright here takes on the composer's brawny, big-boned Piano Sonata No. 1 in C Major, op. 1.

In birth order, the Second Sonata actually comes first, but Brahms chose to publish the C-Major Sonata as his op. 1, believing it to be a better work than the F $\sharp$ -Minor Sonata, which he published next as op. 2. Rather oddly, it seems, Brahms dedicated his Sonata No. 1 not to a fellow pianist or a patron that commissioned it, but to a violinist, Joseph Joachim, who was only 22 in 1853, just two years older than Brahms and not quite yet the famous virtuoso and beloved

teacher he was destined to become. In any case, their on-again, off-again, friendship was sorely tested by Joachim's nasty divorce but ultimately survived to the end.

At 20, when Brahms composed the C-Major Sonata, he was full of hormones and hankering for fame, fortune, and opportunities to sow his wild oats. The sonata was meant to impress with its boldness and bravura. To play it requires not just stamina but endurance. Plowright manages both, but his performance feels less to me about harnessing the power and commanding the drama of the piece than it does about achieving clarity of voicing and transparency of texture.

I may be imputing something to Plowright's reading that he may not have intended, but it strikes me that he approaches the sonata mindful of the pianos Brahms would have had access to in 1853. According to Max Kalbeck's massive biography of the composer, published between 1904 and 1914, Brahms was known to play Baumgardten & Heins instruments during his formative years in Hamburg, which is where the first two sonatas were composed and first performed. Six years later, Brahms played the Hamburg premiere of his First Piano Concerto on a Baumgardten & Heins piano.

Plowright delivers sufficient dynamic force where needed, but his is not the sort of intrepid performance the young Stefan Vladar gave us in his 1991 recording for Sony. Plowright is more considered and subtle; the sonata is more for him than a virtuosic vehicle.

Plowright wraps up his traversal of the four sets of late piano pieces with the Fantasies of op. 116. Composed in 1892, these seven pieces make up the first group of the four late sets and, as such, with the exceptions of the second and fourth numbers, they haven't yet turned quite as intimate and introverted as some of the pieces in the later sets do. In fact, Nos. 1 and 7 are quite extroverted and virtuosic. No. 4, however, the longest of the seven pieces, is a mirror into Brahms's loneliness and largely self-imposed isolation in the last years of his life. Plowright strikes the perfect in this piece of halting phrases that momentarily coalesce from fragments and then seem to disintegrate into the ether.

Out of the turmoil besetting the Schumann household in 1854 comes Brahms's brief but deeply moving Variations on a Theme by Schumann, op. 9. Schumann had just been confined to the insane asylum in Bonn, leaving Clara pregnant with their seventh child. The 21-year-old Brahms took it upon himself to become surrogate husband, father, and head-of-household in Schumann's absence.

Already enamored of Clara, Brahms chose the fourth number from Schumann's *Bunte Blätter*, op. 99, as the theme for his variations, surely not a coincidence that Clara had used the same theme for a set of her own variations a year earlier.

With the variations Plowright puts a highly satisfying finish to his Brahms cycle. Warmly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

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## Stunning Brahms from Jonathan Plowright - 2nd Volume

Review by: Jed Distler    *Artistic Quality: 10    Sound Quality: 10*

The second volume in what one hopes will be a complete Brahms piano music cycle from Jonathan Plowright charges from the starting gate with engines ablaze and fingers primed for action. In other words, behold the most incisive, dramatic, and multi-dimensional account of the composer's Piano Sonata No. 2 on disc since Katchen and Arrau!

Part of the excitement lies in the pianist's absolute rather than approximate observation of Brahms' difficult-to-execute articulation marking in the first-movement exposition, the vivacity and point of his arpeggiated chords, and his ability to project the keyboard writing's textural mass with minimum pedal and equal attention between registers. Using very little rubato, Plowright conveys the Andante's "con espressione" largely through minute dynamic gradations and quality of touch. He makes effortless light of the Scherzo's rapid broken chords while insightfully contouring the finale's imitative right-hand writing against leaner than usual left-hand pedal-points. In the Op. 21 No. 1 Thema, Plowright's straightforward tempo anchors all sorts of delicious inflections and altered voicings, although the variations themselves cohere by virtue of the pianist's tightly-knit tempo relationships and relative simplicity from an expressive standpoint.

The three Op. 117 Intermezzi are no less masterful. Plowright plays No. 1 with a kind of classical understatement that avoids underlining the central section's across-the-barline phrasings and lush harmonies. By contrast, No. 2 is measured, rounded, and more wistful in relation to the faster, business-like interpretations many younger pianists favor. Rather than veil No. 3's unison opening in mystery, Plowright parks it in neutral, so to speak, with little hint at the more impassioned than usual major-key climax just around the bend.

If the Op. 4 Scherzo's opening motive is not so characterfully spelled out as in the old Backhaus, Friedberg, and Kempff recordings, Plowright's awesome legato control and supple rhythmic sense convey a lithe, elfin shimmer rarely heard in this score. Malcolm McDonald's terrific booklet notes and BIS's bracing surround-sound engineering are worthy of their own review. Even in a catalog packed to the rafters with great Brahms piano recordings, this stunning release should not be missed.

## AllMusic Review by James Manheim - 5\*/5\*

British pianist **Jonathan Plowright** enters a crowded field of recordings of two **Brahms** keyboard standards with this release on Sweden's BIS label, and he



doesn't even have especially original interpretations to offer. What he does accomplish are detailed, near-flawless readings of two vast, complex works, both pulsing with the energy of **Brahms'** youth. The Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, was completed in 1852, when **Brahms** was 20. In many ways it's the first work of his maturity, uniting lyrical fantasy and structural unity in startling, daring ways. Sample **Plowright's** treatment of the finale of the sonata's unusual five-movement sequence, which is a series of quasi-improvisatory gestures tied together with iron logic. He never lets any detail fall out of place, and he is alert to the ways in which central European dance music, the warmth, life-affirming counterpart to **Brahms'** intellect, is never far from even the most intricate phrases. In the Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24, he is equally good in a work that is almost exclusively about register and texture: until the end, it is composed almost entirely of diatonic harmonies. **Plowright's** Steinway sounds clean and powerful, and he keeps control over processes lasting many minutes. The engineering from BIS, working in Britain's acoustically superior Potton Hall, is nonpareil: it puts you squarely in front of **Plowright's** piano, right where intelligent observers in the **Schumann** circle would have been at **Brahms'** original performance of the work in 1852, but it does not fetishize extraneous noises. A superior **Brahms** recital.

#### **Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897) - MusicWeb - 4th Volume**

Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 35, Book 1 (1862-63) [14:19]

Ballades, Op. 10 (1854) [24:46]

Two Rhapsodies, Op. 79 (1879) [14:37]

Piano Pieces, Op. 119 (1893) [16:04]

Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 35, Book 2 (1862-63) [11:07]

Jonathan Plowright (piano)

rec. January 2016, Potton Hall, Westleton, Suffolk, England.

**BIS BIS-2137 SACD** [82:08]

This is the penultimate volume in a five-disc edition of Brahms's piano music, and those who have already bought the three previous volumes will need little persuading to add this fourth release in the set to their collections.

This programme brings together some of Brahms's most sublime late piano music with the earlier *Ballades*, and the spectacular *Variations on a Theme by Paganini* which is here nicely divided as two bookends to the rest of the works. This is Brahms letting his hair down, with plenty of pianistic bravura and in some aspects delivering some strikingly banal variations, almost making us flinch with their over-the-top melodramas or overt salon-sweet pleasantness. All composers should be allowed a little bad taste from time to time, and even in these cases Brahms is never uninteresting. Jonathan Plowright plays stylishly and with an admirable lightness of touch, controlling subtleties of tone and balance even when Paganini's 24<sup>th</sup> *Caprice* seems well buried under avalanches of octaves. My main reference

for this work has of late been Garrick Ohlsson's fine recording on the Hyperion label ([review](#)), which has a bit more oomph in the low register for the recording but still maintains an admirable horizontal momentum. The Hyperion disc doesn't give track numbers for each variation which is a shame, but even given this I'm pushed to decide on a preference between these two. If anything, Ohlsson keeps my attention a little more, with an added layer of poetic imagery to go along with the apocalyptic pianism, but both are truly excellent.

The rest of this programme is more interesting musically as far as I'm concerned. The *Ballades Op. 10* are big favourites of course, working well with their restrained and intimate atmosphere as a foil for the *Variations*. Plowright holds the long crescendo in the first 'Edward' *Ballade*, pushing into the realms of orchestral weight by the climax while maintaining unforced texture in the sonority of the piano. I like his tasteful way with expression, avoiding *rubato* that might disturb the flow of the music while maintaining a song-like rise and fall in *Ballade No. 2*. There is drama at the heart of *Ballade No. 3*, but this is the fluttering restlessness and quiet chorale-like song at its centre more than the stern defiance of the opening flourishes. The final *Ballade No. 4* is a tribute to Robert and Clara Schumann, and the warmth of Brahms' affection for his friends shines through in Plowright's playing - still keeping a respectful distance from overdone histrionics, but letting the notes speak for themselves - at times in all their strangeness - in the best possible way.

Perhaps it is the implication in the title, but the two *Rhapsodies* unlock a freer approach to time from Jonathan Plowright. The *Agitato* marking of the first is explored in a narrative of bewildering changes, resting for a time in the dancing sunbeams of the softer central section, but reprising that sense of angst once the opening material takes hold once more. The second of *Op. 79* goes to even greater extremes, the *ritenuto* markings taken very seriously by the performer here, driving structural pillars firmly into the ground and building a musical palace with features both strikingly beautiful and darkly sinister.

The opening of the first piece in the *Op. 119* set has now taken on a post-modern, minimalist character that is only partially dispelled by the Schumann-esque cadences further along. These later pieces are forward-looking in character, heedless of fashion but stoutly refusing to descend into eccentricity and overly tragic emotions in the same period as Erik Satie's *Vexations* and the same year as Tchaikovsky's *Sixth Symphony*. Plowright steers us through with a steady hand on the Teutonic tiller, not too extravagantly jocular, not too heavily heroic and certainly not stickily sentimental.

Comparisons there are aplenty for all the music here, and I go back to Radu Lupu as often as not when it comes to the *Rhapsodies* and *Piano Pieces Op. 119*

(review). Lupu is more Lisztian in the *Rhapsodies*, getting the plates and cutlery rattling with his forceful and dramatic performances. Lupu's playing is still full of poetry, and if you go in more for extremes then his playing may satisfy more here. The *Op. 119* is filled with elegance, but Lupu's restraint is more of the kind which is coiled and ready to release into concert-hall filling sonority at the earliest opportunity - a tension in performance that isn't such a feature of Plowright's readings. Repose means repose in his interpretations, and it is Brahms the composer who sends us moving on, on a fervent search for musical treasures rather than the pianist. Plowright joins us in this voyage of fertile discovery rather than being imperiously above the music and bending it to an equal creative force in performance. There is of course much to be said for both recordings, and there are of course many others in between. Lupu remains breathtaking, but I'm a huge fan of Jonathan Plowright's Brahms - this release serving to enhance that view.

**Dominy Clements**