

A1B

**CLEMENTI Piano Sonatas: in E<sup>b</sup>, op. 11/1; in B<sup>b</sup>, op. 1a/2; in g, op. 7/3; in E<sup>b</sup>, op. 9/3; in A, op. 10/1 • Susan Alexander-Max (fp) • NAXOS 8.557695 (71: 49) Fanfare – Vol. 2**

Considering the pivotal importance of Muzio Clementi—one of the few whose piano playing rivaled that of Mozart; an important publisher, notably of Beethoven; a manufacturer whose pianos were competitive with those of Broadwood on the English market; a teacher whose pupils included J. B. Cramer, Therese Jansen, John Field, and Friedrich Kalkbrenner; and, most significantly, a composer whose active career spanned 55 years and yielded a wealth of piano music which, alongside that of Haydn and Mozart, heralds the instrument's first "Golden Age"—his relative neglect by pianists, both in performance and on recordings, is difficult to understand. Horowitz, of course, made a fetish of certain pieces, and his recordings of some of them are still in print (cf. op. 25/6 on Sony 93039; op. 33/1 on RCA 62643; op. 34/2 on Membran 222353). More recently, and no doubt more stylishly, Constantino Mastroprimiano has surveyed some 18 sonatas of various periods (Brilliant 93338), including several in common with the CD reviewed here. However, Susan Alexander-Max makes a compelling claim with her second volume of early Clementi sonatas for Naxos. New York-born and Juilliard-trained, Alexander-Max studied with Ilona Kabos in London and has continued to make her career there. She is a splendid pianist who employs an uncommon variety of touch and articulation, perfectly calibrated for late 18th-century style. Best of all, Alexander-Max is blessed with a vivid imagination, lavishly applied toward a realm of expressive ends. Her choice of a fortepiano by Derek Adlam (a replica of an instrument by Michael Rosenberger, a Viennese builder and disciple of the great Walter) adds a vast dimension of interest to these sonatas from the early 1780s. Part of the excitement of the performances lies in the pleasure of discovery: how good it is to experience these pieces by Clementi, that master of brilliantly resourceful keyboard-writing, on a piano he would have recognized and delighted in.

Savor, for instance, the silvery luminescence of the pathetic exposition in the G-Minor Sonata, op. 7/3 (from 1782) and the contrastingly veiled, mysterious quality produced when the *una corda* mechanism is engaged in the development and recapitulation. Alexander-Max gives Clementi's Italianate lyricism its full due in the shapely and lovely cantabile slow movement. In the furious concluding Presto, cascading left hand octaves roar and rumble with ferocious effect. (The same figuration, when played on a modern piano, sounds miniaturized and tame by comparison.)

The E<sup>b</sup> Sonata, op. 9/3, leaves the stormy pathos of op. 7/3 for sunnier territory. The predominately four-part textures of the first movement, punctuated with

brilliant scale passages and tremolos, are beautifully delineated in this performance. Alexander-Max is at pains to demonstrate the slow movement's unusual contrasts: the principal theme is indicated (in three-quarter time), the first beat *forte*, the second *piano*, and the third *sforzato*. The sonata's galloping finale, with roulades of triplets encompassing the keyboard, is as exhilarating as it is fun. Throughout, the engineers have done an excellent job of capturing the fortepiano's special flavor.

One hopes that when she has completed the cycle of early Clementi sonatas, Alexander-Max will go on to record at least some of the later ones, though they will require pianos of larger compass than the Rosenberg replica heard here. Meanwhile, these performances are an important step toward a fuller appreciation of the Italian-born English master who, though seldom achieving the genius characteristic of Mozart and Haydn, proved more influential than either on the future of piano composition and performance. Highly recommended. **Patrick Rucker**

**This article originally appeared in Issue 31:2 (Nov/Dec 2007) of *Fanfare Magazine*.**

**CLEMENTI Piano Sonatas: in F**, WoO 3; **in E $\flat$** , op. 6/2, **in B $\flat$** , op. 9/1, **in F**, op. 13/5; **in C**, op. 20 • Susan Alexander-Max (fp) • NAXOS 8.570475 (77:46)

**CLEMENTI Piano Sonatas: in C**, op. 34/1; **in g**, op. 34/2; **in C**, op. 37/1; **in G**, op. 37/2; **in D**, op. 37/3; **in B $\flat$** , op. 46; **Piano Sonatinas**, op. 36 • Howard Shelley (pn) • HYPERION 67814 (2 CDs 146:19)

When Muzio Clementi died at the age of 80 in 1832, his prestige was so immense that he was accorded the honor of burial in Westminster Abbey. Born in Rome, taken to England as a boy of 13, Clementi remained, as his letters reveal, very much the English gentleman for the rest of his life. With his position in English musical circles firmly established, he secured his influence on the Continent by frequent tours—some of years' duration—promoting himself as a virtuoso pianist, his many pupils, the pianos manufactured by his firm in London, and his own music, especially the symphonies. Nearly everyone who knew Clementi thought him a man of extraordinarily intelligence, wit, and charm. His interests were wide-ranging and his tight-fistedness legendary. His business acumen and persistence are exemplified by the fact that, following a long and difficult courtship, he was the first to publish 10 important works by the temperamental Beethoven (who, incidentally, admired and was influenced by Clementi's piano music). As remarkable as the breadth of Clementi's career is its longevity. In his 20s, he was popularizing the piano in London little more than a decade after J. C. Bach had introduced the instrument to audiences there. He was 29 at the time of his famous "musical duel" with Mozart before Josef II of Austria. In his 60s he helped found

the Philharmonic Society, which did much to revive London's languishing musical life in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. And at 72, the *éminence gris* of the piano, who had taught J. B. Cramer, Therese Jansen, John Field, and Friedrich Kalkbrenner, attended the London debut of a newcomer, Franz Liszt.

Alan Tyson's 1967 thematic catalog, Leon Plantinga's brilliant "life and works" study of 1977, and the complete critical edition of his works begun in Italy a few years back have all contributed to a more balanced and accurate assessment of Clementi's achievement. Today few would dispute his place, alongside Haydn and Mozart, among the preeminent piano composers before Beethoven. But the beauty and originality of Clementi's solo sonatas notwithstanding, pianists have been slow to approach this seminal repertoire in any comprehensive way on recordings. Two who have taken the plunge are an American pianist, long resident in London, Susan Alexander-Max, and British pianist Howard Shelley.

Shelley has now reached Volume 5 of his traversal of all the sonatas for Hyperion. Most of the pieces on these new discs are products of the second half of the 1790s, with the exception of op. 46 (published in 1820, though probably composed some years earlier). The same fluency and impeccable technical polish that have characterized the earlier installments are at work here as well. And it must be said that, in those little gems, the six "progressive" sonatinas of op. 36, one does detect the occasional spark of enthusiasm. But, hopeful as I was that this new release would dispel some of the reservations voiced in my review of Volume 3 of the series (*Fanfare* 33:1), sadly it is not the case. It's as though a superbly gifted pianist has mastered a big chunk of repertoire solely for the sake of recording it. "Mastered" is the operative here, because these interpretations do not sound, to my ears at least, fully digested, seasoned, lived with—born, as it were, of love and necessity. Even more frustrating is the fact that Shelley has so many interesting recordings to his credit. His contributions to the Hyperion "Romantic Piano Concerto" series are numerous and distinguished; his recordings of a number of 20th-century British piano concertos are seldom less than compelling; and, not so long ago, he recorded a Schumann concerto (Chandos 10509) that was nothing short of revelatory. Yet hearing these Clementi sonatas—each scarcely differentiated from the next, affectively or stylistically—you're left wondering how so much effort and expense could be devoted to so perfunctory an exercise. Why, if this is the result, bother with Clementi at all?

Fortunately, the elegant and committed performances of Susan Alexander-Max in the latest installment of her ongoing series of the early Clementi sonatas for Naxos obviate the question altogether. My only reservation here is that the series designation "Early Sonatas" seems to suggest that Alexander-Max may not eventually record all these pieces. Naturally for a composer whose works are considered the foundation of what may be achieved on the piano, the choice of an instrument that Clementi himself would recognize is an enormous advantage. In this case, a replica of a late 18th-century Michael Rosenberger piano by Derek Adlam provides an added dimension to these performances. But it is the probingly sensitive artistry of Alexander-Max that leaves no doubt why Clementi was so

celebrated in his day and so influential on subsequent generations. The two-movement F-Major Sonata without opus number, for instance, stands out as a finely honed minor masterpiece despite its *faux-naïveté*. The other two-movement work on this disc, the E<sup>b</sup>-Sonata, written in Vienna, opens with a fully fledged Adagio, invested here with all the breadth and ardor of an opera *scena*. Yet it only hints at the cantabile eloquence Alexander-Max brings to the Larghetto of the op. 13 F-Major Sonata. Reviewing the second volume of this series (31:2) I mentioned the extraordinary variety of touch and articulation that characterize her playing. Having now heard more of her work, I would add that her grasp of Clementi's idiom is enormously sophisticated, reflecting an acute understanding of his stylistic development within the context of turn-of-the-19th century piano playing. Alexander-Max exploits the distinctive sonorities of her piano's registers with a fine ear for instrumental color, making it a joy to listen to her boldly imaginative interpretations.

There are several fine single discs of Clementi sonatas available, among which Maria Tipo's (EMI 54766) and Jos van Immerseel's (from 1979, reissued as Accent 10011) are artistically distinctive. Of recent, more comprehensive surveys, certainly the sets of either Shelley or Alexander-Max are preferable to the series by Costantino Mastropiriano on Brilliant, which is unfortunately marred by a pervasive rhythmic instability. Ultimately, however, the vivid, thoughtful, and loving performances of Susan Alexander-Max make her Clementi's most eloquent advocate. **Patrick Rucker**

**This article originally appeared in Issue 34:1 (Sept/Oct 2010) of *Fanfare Magazine*.**

**CLEMENTI Sonatas: in G, WO 14; in A, op. 2/4; in g, op. 8/1; in B<sup>b</sup>, op. 8/3; in f, op. 13/6 • Susan Alexander-Max, fp. • NAXOS 8.555808 ( 71:08)**

Muzio Clementi's place in musical history rests securely on his rivalry with Mozart and as a teacher of a clutch of students who paved the way for the heroic pianism of the 19th century. He was known as a whiz of a musician; even Mozart, who reserved praise for all but the brightest of his contemporaries, begrudgingly admired him. You can hear his brilliance in every page of these early sonatas, which contain a lively and inventive style that points the way to early Beethoven in a manner that complements Haydn's influence on the young genius from Bonn. Yet, certainly compared to his contemporaries Mozart and Haydn, the brilliance is superficial. Even in the slower music, the emotional qualities sound decorative or imitative, Clementi's voice mirrors the last gasps of the age of rococo. There is much to enjoy here, but listen elsewhere for real depth and pathos.

Susan Alexander-Max, a London-based, Juilliard-trained musician, plays the sonatas in just such a spirit, asking no more or less of them than is there. She plays her beautiful fortepiano with an intuitive sense for the color and tonality of the instrument, which only enhances the *élan* of the music.

**Peter Burwasser**

**This article originally appeared in Issue 27:5 (May/June 2004) of *Fanfare Magazine*.**

**Guardian Review - 5\*/5\* by Edward Greenfield**  
**Clementi: Early Piano Sonatas, Alexander-Max**

Playing on an attractively mellow-toned, un-twangy fortepiano, the American pianist Susan Alexander-Max gives magnetic performances of five sparkling early sonatas by Clementi in what I hope is the start of a series from Naxos.

Some 18 years older than Beethoven, Clementi - Italian-born but based from boyhood in England - wrote these sonatas for his own use on his European tours as a leading virtuoso, whom the Emperor Joseph II pitted in contest against Mozart. Even the earliest sonata, in G major, written when Clementi was only 16 and hitherto unpublished, develops striking material. The two minor-key sonatas in particular point forward to Beethoven and beyond, exploiting the keyboard in adventurous ways with a wide dynamic range and bold harmonies.

**AllMusic Review - 4 1/2\*/5\***  
**Clementi: Early Piano Sonatas, Vol. 3**  
**Review by James Manheim**

The recordings of **Muzio Clementi**'s piano sonatas by American historical keyboardist Susan Alexander-Max focus on this minor master's early sonatas, seemingly a narrow topic, but actually a very useful one. **Clementi**'s works were widely published in their own time, and their chronology is often problematical. A program of early **Clementi** sonatas captures the music the young **Beethoven** would have heard and helps make clear the nature of **Clementi**'s considerable influence, which is most apparent in the energy and pianism of the Presto finales. These sonatas, in two or three movements, are attractive on their own terms, as well, and unlike **Mozart**'s sonatas of the 1780s they are not really suited to performance on the harpsichord. In Alexander-Max's concise formulation, "They introduce the public to a new virtuosity which was exploring a newly developed instrument in a society that was changing as rapidly." Alexander-Max uses a modern replica of a 1797 Viennese fortepiano by **Michael Rosenberger** -- a heavy, muscular instrument that outdoes the familiar **Walter** examples from the same period for sheer power --

and her readings aim toward and succeed in bringing out the variety of textures and accents implicit in Clementi's seemingly innocent melodic lines. Like the other discs in Alexander-Max's ongoing series, this one is strongly recommended for anyone with the slightest interest in the music of the late 18th century, and it is as good a place to start as any other with the music in the air when Beethoven was a student. Alexander-Max's booklet notes are in English only.