

## Classical CD Of The Week: Mozart, Sonatas For Fortepiano

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Opinion

— Jens F. Laurson (@ClassicalCritic) **March 9, 2016**

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**, *Keyboard Sonatas vol.8 & 9*, Kristian Bezuidenhout (fortepiano), Harmonia Mundi

There have been fortepianists before **Ronald Brautigam** and Kristian Bezuidenhout upon whose shoulders those two might be said to stand. But none had managed so convincingly to bring the fortepiano into the mainstream. And none have so convincingly interpreted anew classics, favorite pieces that had become dear to us in homogenously round, gorgeous-sounding Steinway versions.

Think of Mozart, where the wafting romance of his sonatas was the beloved norm (with lovely, even stupendous recordings from **Mitsuko Uchida** or **Christoph Eschenbach** among many others) and anything akin to a straight-forward, crisp and relatively light account already stood out (such as **Ingrid Haebler**'s very fine performances, for example). One problem in **Mozart Sonatas** is always the balance of delicacy and muscularity: Anything light has the danger of drifting into precociousness (the "Dresden china" approach) and anything grand of becoming unbecomingly brawny and soupy. That's where a good modern copy of an original instrument (or a very well restored original-original specimen) comes in.

The instruments from around Mozart's time, when they sound good and aren't dried up rickety museum pieces that can't hold a proper tuning for ten minutes, have the great advantage of allowing for both: the robust – while still bringing about a relatively delicate sound. You can really pound them (within reason), but the result won't be a wash of cathedral-filling sound with an endless decay that enfolds all notes in a merciful haze of vagueness. There isn't an instrument-builder who has done more for restoring fortepianos to their rightful niche-place in music appreciation than the American Paul McNulty on whose fortepiano-farm in the Czech Republic grow the most harmonious-sounding, juiciest such instruments. And it's no coincidence that both Ronald Brautigam and Kristian Bezuidenhout record and usually play on his copies. This all by way of introducing Bezuidenhout's cycle of Mozart's Keyboard Works, which is decidedly not for

original instrument lovers only, but for everyone.

The final volume in this 7-issue, 9-CD traversal pulls all the stops and shows once more (as has already been shown in the previous releases, including a superb [volume Two](#)) what the qualities of his playing and that of the instrument are. The instrument used is a copy of an 1805 Walter & Son, so just slightly anachronistic, given Mozart's death in 1791 and the particular works on the disc. Bezuidenhout mixes and matches the early (Sonatas K.279 from 1774) with the late (K576, 1789); the famous ([Sonata in C-major K.545](#)) with the unknown (8 Variations on Grétry's *Dieu d'amour*) and throws in completed fragments and even the disestablished *Modulating Prelude* which is now no longer thought to be authentic Mozart but had been, for many years. This aids the texture of the recordings since it keeps the ears alert with new and unknown sounds, rather than just hopping from greatest hit to greatest hit.

In all this, Bezuidenhout's unfailing touch and musicality – spunky yet determined but also sweetly lyrical when the occasion calls for it – is a pleasure to behold. His first Mozart recording, already then an insider's tip, was titled "*Sturm und Drang*". In a way that could still be the title of all his Mozart, which has an infectious, boyish delight about it. To paraphrase myself from a review of [a recital he gave at the Mozart-Woche](#) last year: Bezuidenhout's playing is beautiful to the point of immaculate, delicate but never emaciating. At the same time he is not one to get stuck at mere beauty and never prone to make Mozart sound facile. With him at the wheel, lively wit – so much more readily at hand with a fortepiano and its quicksilver, pebbly short notes – comes to the fore aplenty. Perhaps said second volume, packed with favorites, is the better place to start, but what a way to finish this cycle, this is!

**MOZART Piano Sonatas: No. 12; No. 13. Fantasy, K 396. Variations on "Ein Weib is das herrlichste Ding, " K 613 • Kristian Bezuidenhout (fp) • HARMONIA MUNDI 907499 (69:05)**

My pleasure in Kristian Bezuidenhout's traversal of Mozart's keyboard works, now at its third installment, grows unabated. If anything it has been enhanced by deep and repeated samplings of some of his other recent recordings: early Mendelssohn concertos with the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra and Gottfried von der Goltz, his collaborations with Mark Padmore in Schumann and Lachner songs, and, something I simply can't get enough of, his "*Kreutzer*" Sonata with Victoria Mullova. (All but the last are Harmonia Mundi; the Beethoven sonatas with Mullova are on Onyx.) I can also happily report that, at least in most of the critical organs I track, response to this Mozart series is well nigh unanimous: praise for

Bezuidenhout as pianist, as musician, and admiration for his tremendous gifts. The anchors of Volume 3 are the two Sonatas, K 332 in F Major and K 333 in B $\flat$ , both ripe fruits of 1783. In the first movement of the F-Major Sonata, with its suddenly overcast skies as the rippling major flows suddenly into choppy, syncopated minor waters, Bezuidenhout demonstrates his ability to turn on an emotional dime, yet always within the logically inevitable construct of Mozart's sublime affective discourse. The Adagio unfolds with all the rich characterizations and contrasts of an operatic *scena*, and we are the spellbound observers of a gripping drama whose outcome we can only guess. While Bezuidenhout embellishes all repeats in quick movements, his ornamentation in slow tempos is conspicuously apt, always abetting the lyrical flow. The finale, its emotional contrasts notwithstanding, gambols, skips, and gallops in a fine kinesthetic madness fluctuating between merriment and elation. The B $\flat$ -Sonata is as grandly august as anyone could wish, though its golden hues seem especially burnished and radiant.

Between the sonatas, the earlier of the two C-Minor fantasies and Mozart's last set of variations provide contrast. The variations are based on a tune called "A Woman Is the Most Marvelous Thing In The World" composed by Benedikt Schack for a play by Schikaneder, Mozart's friend and collaborator. Schack, it is interesting to note, created the role of Tamino in *The Magic Flute*. If the K 613 Variations lack the virtuosity of the variations on a theme by Gluck, K 455, or the suave sophistication of those on a minuet by Duport, K 573, they nevertheless emanate the naïve nobility of his late operatic masterpiece. That is precisely the quality with which this performance is imbued. Particularly persuasive is the sixth variation in an ominous F Minor, with its slithering, snakelike chromaticism. Anyone familiar with Bezuidenhout's reading of the C-Minor Fantasy, K 475, in Vol. 1 of this series won't be surprised at the audacious originality of his interpretation of its younger sibling, K 396. There's something irresistible in his no-holds-barred approach to these sorts of tragic scenes, as though a singer walked center-stage to the footlights, thrust out his chest and threw open his arms, raised his chin, and let it rip.

The piano Bezuidenhout uses is another superb Paul McNulty replica, this one from 2009. Like the instruments used in the two earlier recordings, it is based on an original by Anton Walter & Sohn, but a slightly later vintage (1805). To say that this is state-of-the-art Mozart playing is only meaningful with the qualification that there are at most three or four pianists in the world today capable of anything remotely similar. I know of no player on a modern Steinway or Bösendorfer, in fact, who could pull off an F-Major Sonata of greater charm or vivacity, or inflected with more color or nuance. Bezuidenhout seems to have it all: grasp of the characteristic rhetoric, comfort with late 18th-century style, exquisite sense of pacing, identification with every note he plays, and a highly developed musical discernment that allows him to distinguish the important from the subsidiary, substance from ornament. Plus he plays the fortepiano like nobody else. I can't

wait for the next installment. **Patrick Rucker**

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**MOZART Piano Sonatas: in A**, K 331; **in C**, K 309; **in Eb**, K 282; **in Bb**, K 281. **Variations on “Salve tu, Domine” in F**, K 398. **Romanze in Ab**, K Anh 205. **Variations in Bb**, K 500. **Variations on “Ah, vous dirai-je Maman” in C**, K 265. **Adagio in F**, K Anh. 206a. **Variations on “La belle Françoise” in Eb**, K 353 • Kristian Bezuidenhout (fp) • HARMONIA MUNDI 907529.30 (2 CDs: 141:46)

The fortepiano is by no means my favorite instrument. That truly needs to be said because this Mozart recital is a stunner. Rarely can I listen to more than two hours of any one composer at a sitting and not at least slightly drift off. The program here is one of those exceptions, as in the last month I have probably played this recording over 40 times complete from beginning to end. There are two major reasons for this: Firstly, Bezuidenhout has carefully crafted this program to show the many different sides of this multifaceted composer using a variety of solo genres. It is fascinating that not one of the pieces on either volume 5 or 6 is in a minor key! And yet never does the overwhelming major sound become monotonous. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, is Bezuidenhout's approach to the composer. His Mozart is not a pretty, dainty, and delicate one; his is a vigorous, energetic, and spontaneous one, though filled with a keen sense of both elegance and sensitivity—it is, in a sense, a Romanticized Mozart, in which the listener can sense the 20th-century's teachings. Is this the manner in which Mozart should be played? That's impossible to say. But it does work—and at times brilliantly!

Bezuidenhout's way with the music is somewhat free. He uses slight pauses between certain phrases and deviations in tempos in certain movements. He is even slightly percussive in instances such as the “Rondo alla turca.” Yet so well thought out is the musical idea that there is hardly an instance that doesn't make one stop and listen. The pianist's free way works especially well in the numerous sets of variations, where Mozart too is free in terms of notation (the cadenza at the end of the Variations in F Major, or the end of the Variations in Bb Major providing perfect examples). One of the finest moments of the program, however—and I look at this two-volume set as one big recital—comes in the C-Major Piano Sonata. The pianist does not treat the first movement just as a solo piano piece; rather, there is an orchestral quality to his playing here as well, just as in the aforementioned A-Major Sonata. The slow movement to K 309 is equally

beautifully rendered: The longing quality is made palpable by the careful shading and the wonderfully judged pauses. This is one of the highlights of the disc. The third movement brings back the sunny quality for which Mozart was so well known. Especially noteworthy here is the pianist's attention to details of articulation—the smooth ebb and flow of the arpeggiations on one hand, the bouncy and crisp use of staccato on the other—which add to the overall joyous mood. The tempos are well judged throughout the entire recital, never overly fast as in some performances. Even more importantly, Bezuidenhout is never afraid to imprint his own personality on the music. Repeats are often ornamented judiciously, though never so much so as to disturb the musical idea. One always hears Mozart above all. That's not to say that I agree with everything the pianist does. At times I find the playing a bit too fussy, but that happens only rarely: Take the opening of the A-Major Sonata. Its theme is simple and straightforward. In Bezuidenhout's hands it sounds just a bit too calculated, as though he's trying to say everything in the movement too soon, foreshadowing the effect of the variations that follow.

While there are those who would outwardly refuse to listen to this recording based purely on the instrument, I would warn against such strong leanings: The playing alone will win you over. Bezuidenhout's approach to Mozart is uninhibited, unafraid, and unabashed—this is Mozart playing which is simply delightful. And if you think you know this music like the back of your hand, give this a try. There's more to the music here than first meets the ear. And who can ever have enough Mozart in their collection? **Scott Noriega**

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## **MOZART: KEYBOARD MUSIC, VOL. 2 - ClassicsToday**

Review by: Jed Distler   *Artistic Quality: 8   Sound Quality: 9*

It's easy to understand why critics have favorably responded to Kristian Bezuidenhout's Mozart playing: He's a flawless technician and a musician of great finesse, who appears to carefully calibrate every scale, run, ornament, rolled chord, and dynamic curve. Sometimes the results sound studied, sectionalized, and a bit predictable, as in his consistent diminuendo in each appearance of the A minor Rondo's main theme, or the underlined change of color in transitional passages throughout both sonatas' outer movements. By contrast, Andreas Staier makes more of the C minor first movement's angst and drama by virtue of a faster, steadier basic tempo and more propulsive bass lines, although Bezuidenhout gauges the C minor finale's recitative-like sequences with impeccable timing.

Similarly, Ronald Brautigam's more vocally oriented inflections of phrase and involving dynamic interaction between hands lends greater interest to the Rondo.

However, Bezuidenhout's inventive and witty embellishments on repeats are second to none, and his brisk, ebullient shaping of the D major Rondo positively delights. And Bezuidenhout's lyrical side appreciably opens up when he employs the soft pedal on his Paul McNulty fortepiano (modeled after an Anton Walter & Sohn 1802 Viennese instrument), as you hear in the K. 540 Adagio's D major theme. It's clear that Bezuidenhout is a Mozartean for whom ideation and execution are one and the same, and it will be interesting to follow this complete Mozart keyboard music cycle as it progresses.