



World Master Pianists

Director: Friso Verschoor

Representation in the Netherlands

Email: contact@worldmasterpianists.com

Phone: +31-6-53558188

Website: <http://worldmasterpianists.nl/>

GRAMOPHONE - REVIEW

ARCADI VOLODOS

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Brahms Piano Pieces, Opp 76, 117 & 118

Arcadi Volodos *pf*

(Sony Classical)

'Comparisons become irrelevant in interpretations of such mesmerising honesty.

An award-winner if ever I heard one...' (Harriet Smith, June 2017)

READ THE REVIEW

This is one of those discs where a word count is a strange thing. For it needs only four: Go Buy This Disc. Or 4000, trying to capture why it is and how it is that Volodos creates the magic he does. It's four long years since his quietly astounding Mompou recital (8/13), which put the composer on the map for many and walked off with pretty much every award going. Brahms might seem a very different proposition but Volodos inhabits every note, every phrase with just as much conviction. My only complaint is that there could have been more – we get only the first four out of the Eight Piano Pieces, Op 76, though Opp 117 and 118 are complete. But that is a minor niggle; all these pieces have featured in his recitals and his familiarity with their every phrase is abundantly obvious. And whatever he does, you can't imagine the music going any other way, which is perhaps the definition of a great artist.

The sound Volodos coaxes from the piano, for starters, is like no one else's and has been captured superbly by Sony's engineers, utterly true to the way he sounds live in concert. It's one that is entirely devoid of hard edges, with myriad shadings right through the register,



as we hear in the agitated opening piece of Op 76. Brahms's fondness for alto and tenor registers is luxuriantly realised too, though such is the subtlety of Volodos's voicings that nothing ever becomes opaque. Readings are often broad in terms of pacing, but it has the effect of giving the music time to speak and to register. From the turbulence of No 1 we move to an entirely different world in the second piece of Op 76, here reminiscent of Schubert at his most carefree, the motion deliciously wound down at the close. The third ranges from the extraordinary fragility of the writing in the upper reaches – sounding here more than ever like a music box – down to the refulgent bass, while the gentle melody of the fourth finds itself clothed in new colours on every repetition, Volodos subtly altering the mood with each one.

Even a piece as familiar as the second of the Op 117 Intermezzos sounds new in the hands of this pianist – partly a matter of colouring, partly his spacious pacing, and partly the fact that he thinks like a singer, subtly varying each phrase as if illustrating a text. The First Intermezzo in the set is a good example of 'don't try this at home', unfolding as it does at a dangerously languid pace that would become merely comatose in the hands of a lesser artist. Hands and brain, for Volodos has clearly thought minutely about every note, every phrase of the pieces on offer here, and it is that intimacy with the pieces that sets him free, allowing each one to take wing. How awestruck the minor-key inner section of this First Intermezzo sounds here (track 6, 2'34"), Volodos taking not only its *Più adagio* to heart but also its *pp sempre ma molto espressivo* marking. How telling are those bare octaves that open No 3, too, anguish barely reined in by their *pianissimo* marking, reminding us of Brahms's description of this Intermezzo as 'the lullaby of all my griefs'. But it's not all darkness – the way he pauses before the return to *Tempo 1* (track 7, 4'22") and then caresses its opening chord is yet another instance of the sheer beauty of Volodos's playing.

The more explosive writing in the six pieces that make up Op 118 is always cushioned, with Volodos letting light into the textures – a world away from the shoutiness you get from some artists. This applies not only to the opening of the set but also, more particularly, the Ballade (No 3), which is less hell for leather than it can be, and all the more striking for that. In the fourth we go on an extraordinary emotional journey in under three minutes, while the chordal fifth, with its beautifully floated middle section, is simply ravishing. In the extraordinary final number Volodos reminds us of Schoenberg's notion of 'Brahms the progressive', imbuing as he does the opening G flat with an extraordinary sense of portent, from which we journey from an almost Impressionistic wash of sound, via orchestral range and depth in its middle section, to the profound unease of the Intermezzo's final moments.

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An award-winner if ever I heard one.

Harriet Smith