May

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The endlessly varied colourings and subtle changes of dynamics and phrasing make the repeats truly developmental'

Harriet Smith is swept away by Steven Osborne's revelatory accounts of Beethoven's last three piano sonatas, combining dramatic power and sublime intensity

Beethoven

Piano Sonatas – No 30, Op 109; No 31, Op 110; No 32, Op 111
Steven Osborne *pf*
Hyperion Ⓕ CDA68219 (64' • DDD)

I was much looking forward to getting my hands on this CD, having chosen Steven Osborne's previous Beethoven sonata disc, featuring a dangerous and profound *Hammerklavier*, as my Critics' Choice in 2016. From the first note, Osborne's kinship with the composer is everywhere apparent and he conveys the vast contrasts of the last three sonatas unerringly.

When I was doing a *Building a Library* on Op 109 last year for BBC Radio 3, I was looking for a combination of wonder and fantasy that didn't tip over into late Romanticism in the first movement, fearsome firepower without edge in the *Prestissimo* and a Classicism to the theme of the finale's variations. And that is exactly what we get here. Sample Osborne's way with the theme of the finale: it has an outward simplicity from which the variations can grow, yet listen more closely and you'll detect the endlessly varied colourings and subtle changes of dynamics and phrasing, making the repeats truly developmental. Impressive too is the way the variations unfold with complete inevitability: from the octave right-hand leap in the first, which is given without mannerism, via the perfect accord between the hands in the dotted articulation of the second, which contrasts beautifully with the more extended line of the third. The fugue has an almost gleeful quality to it and the closing minutes, in which Beethoven envelops the line in trills, is very well gauged, leading to a reprise of the finale's opening theme that is moving in its guilelessness. Altogether this performance is on a par with Richard Goode's.

What is particularly winning about this new set is the way Osborne occupies the very different world of each sonata with equal

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May Editor's Choices

MENDELSSOHN Piano Concerto No 2. Symphony No 1
Kristian Bezuidenhout *fp*
Freiburg Baroque Orchestra / Pablo Heras-Casado
Harmonia Mundi

Kristian Bezuidenhout is on superb form here, a real period keyboard delight.

NEPOMUCENO Orchestral Works
Minas Gerais Philharmonic Orchestra / Fabio Mechetti
Naxos

An auspicious way to start a 30-disc survey of Brazilian music from Naxos – hopefully one full of discoveries just like this.

BRITTEN String Quartets
Doric Quartet
Chandos

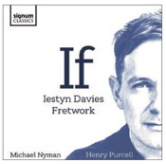
Two decades since forming on the Suffolk coast, and here even playing the composer's own viola, this is an understandably personal, powerful journey through Britten's quartets for the Dorics.

BOULEZ. DUTILLEUX. MESSIAEN
'Notations & Sketches'
Alexander Soares *pf*
Rubicon

For his debut album, British pianist Alexander Soares has chosen a fascinating 20th-century programme, with an instinctive grasp of the composers' sound worlds.

DUFAY 'Lament for Constantinople'
The Orlando Consort
Hyperion

You're in expert hands here with The Orlando Consort: if that sounds like a cliché, it's no less true, and that in-depth understanding of Dufay's music leads to something very beautiful.



NYMAN. PURCELL
'If'
Iestyn Davies *countertenor*
Fretwork
Signum

Michael Nyman and a viol consort may sound an unlikely pairing, but the result is beautiful – add in Iestyn Davies's sublime singing, and some glorious Purcell, and 'If' is a delight.

SCHUBERT 'Heimweh'
Anna Lucia Richter *sop*
Gerold Huber *pf*
Pentatone

There's something movingly communicative about Anna Lucia Richter's Schubert-singing, all impeccably done, with a strong sense of humanity and engagement.

TAVENER 'Angels'
Winchester Cathedral Choir / Andrew Lumsden
Hyperion

Chosen works from John Tavener, whose music reflected both a sense of heaven and our experience of humanity, given uplifting performances by Winchester Cathedral Choir.

'POÈMES D'UN JOUR'
Stéphane Degout *bar*
Simon Lepper *pf*
B Records

French baritone Stéphane Degout moves effortlessly into the German lieder repertoire, with compelling interpretative skill and great beauty of voice.

conviction, which is by no means always the case, even with indubitably great pianists. Uchida, for instance, convinces me far more in Op 109 than in Op 111. And last month I found Yevgeny Sudbin better in Op 110 than in the last sonata. He, however, completely pales alongside Osborne in Op 110. Just a few moments comparing the two in the second movement demonstrate the point: whereas Sudbin had a tendency for agogic distortions, Osborne has a fire-and-brimstone intensity to his playing. Even Levit, whom I much admire in all three sonatas, pales by comparison here. Lewis finds a similar sense of the extremes of the music, though he doesn't relish the clipped *fortissimo* writing to quite the same degree. And in the *Adagio ma non troppo* momentum never sags, even though the sense of desolation is manifest. Here, and throughout, there's a sense of Osborne simply letting the music sound, rather than imposing himself on it. The fugue starts unobtrusively and the outbursts of ire have tremendous power. Levit is similarly dramatic here, his accompanying figuration a little less defined – choice is really down to taste.

Anyone who has heard Osborne's visceral recording of the *Hammerklavier* won't be surprised to find a similar combination of muscularity and extreme delicacy in the opening movement of the last sonata. But again there's a sense of an underlying Classicism; and, after a *Maestoso* introduction full of sharp edges, there's an absolute inevitability and clarity to the *Allegro con brio* with plenty of *appassionato* thrown in. His pedalling is a masterpiece of subtlety and I like the clipped chords, which are angry but laced at times with a kind of grim pleasure. The ferocity with which he maintains and builds momentum from 5'56" is darkly thrilling. And the ending has a quietude that makes what comes next sound entirely inevitable.

The theme of the Arietta has, like that of the finale of Op 109, an innate sense of stillness and Osborne is every bit as compelling as Goode in the way the variations unfold, growing naturally so that the duetting hands sound as one in the second, while the boogie-woogie third has plenty of character without sounding out of place as it can do; the return to quiet of the fourth has a whispered inwardness. The trilling in the closing couple of minutes has its own range of emotion, from fragility to a sense of peace, and with the ending comes the requisite sense of the sublime. In this Osborne is assisted by a very natural recorded sound.

Steven Osborne has made many outstanding recordings but this is certainly among his finest. A magnificent achievement. G

Sonatas Nos 30-32 – selected comparisons:
Goode (3/94) (NONE) 7559 79328-2
Uchida (5/06) (PHIL) 475 6935PH
Lewis (6/08) (HARM) HMC90 1909/11
Levit (11/13) (SONY) 88883 70387-2
Sonatas Nos 31 & 32 – selected comparison:
Sudbin (4/19) (BIS) BIS2208

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