

Instrumental

Bach • Beethoven • Rzewski

JS Bach Goldberg Variations, BWV988

Beethoven Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli, Op 120 **Rzewski** The People United Will Never Be Defeated!

Igor Levit *pf*

Sony Classical © 88875 06096-2 (3h 13' • DDD)



Igor Levit's late Beethoven sonatas (11/13) and Bach Partitas (10/14) on Sony Classical have already made bold declarations of his pianistic and artistic prowess. Now he confirms his appetite for the big entrance with three monuments to variation form, each rooted in its own century, yet all united by the harnessing of maximum variety, maximum discipline.

Levit will be stuck for some years to come with the epithets 'young' and 'Russian-born, German-trained/domiciled'. But the instant he touches the piano such information becomes irrelevant. Certainly he can muster all the athleticism, velocity and finesse of a competition winner ready to burst on to the international scene. But like the rarest of that breed – a Perahia, say – his playing already has a far-seeing quality that raises him to the status of the thinking virtuoso. There is, if you care to rationalise, a Russian depth of sound and eloquence of phrasing, tempered by Germanic intellectual grasp. There is also a sense of exulting in technical prowess and energy. But not once in the course of these three themes and 99 variations did I feel that such qualities were being self-consciously underlined. Levit's musical personality is as integrated and mature as his technique. And both of these are placed at the service of the music's glory rather than his own.

Which brings me back to the concept of the three-CD set. Now 77, and so far as I know still going strong both as composer and pianist, Frederic Rzewski can hardly complain at daunting comparisons with Bach and Beethoven, since his variation set *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* so conspicuously invite them. And whatever one's attitude to the early-1970s counter-cultural ideology of the piece, its attempt

to fuse that ideology with high-flown classical difficulty, or its occasional nods to 'extended' techniques of the time (including some whistling and shouting), it needs to stand on its own feet if it is not to go down in history as a mere folly. Getting to know the work through its dedicatee and first performer Ursula Oppens (a Vanguard LP of 1976), I confess I couldn't get past the opening few variations before feeling that the concept was more interesting than the realisation and that the militancy of the original had been trivialised rather than enhanced. Rzewski's own recording exerted more of a spell, despite indifferent piano sound. In 1999 Marc-André Hamelin raised the virtuoso bar a few notches higher, and by virtue of that fact alone the whole experience became more compelling. But now Levit has gone a stage further, with an even wider range of colour and attack, plus an almost tangible sense of mission, which together help to paper over the cracks in the musical invention and make me, for one, attend to Rzewski's righteous fury and flights of fancy with new respect. Levit's 'Improvisation' (an option allowed by the composer before the final reappearance of the theme) has a summative power that surpasses even Hamelin.

As the intelligent if somewhat over-heated booklet-essay opines, Levit is in his element with variation form: 'identifying with the particular musical situation and at the same time maintaining his distance from it'. That combination is a pre-condition for a top-notch *Diabelli* Variations, and Levit uses it as a springboard for playing of unfailing concentration and insight. Kovacevich's 1968 recording, made at roughly the same age as Levit's, offered a quite extraordinary identification of pianist and composer, holding the balance between wildness and continuity more cannily than in his remake for Onyx 40 years later. To say that Levit can withstand the comparison is the highest praise. Among other outstanding recorded accounts, Anderszewski is more temperamental and occasionally extreme, sometimes making Levit sound a fraction ordinary (as in the state of grace he finds for the final *Tempo di menuetto*) but more often raising suspicions of mere striving for effect. Schiff on ECM demands to be heard, not only for his own merits but for offering parallel versions on a 1921 Bechstein and

a wonderfully clattery fortepiano from 100 years earlier.

Levit's *Goldberg Variations* range themselves more naturally alongside the patrician intelligence of a Perahia than with the *sui generis* extremes of a Glenn Gould. At times Perahia's imagination in repeats arguably betokens a fraction more wisdom. But such fine nuances only emerge in the dutiful process of comparison, rather than in the wholly absorbing experience of Levit traversing another musical peak. Top-notch recording quality, too. If a finer piano recording comes my way this year I shall be delighted, but frankly also astonished.

David Fanning

Brahms

The Complete Solo Piano Music, Vol 3'

Variations on a Hungarian Melody, Op 21 No 2. Piano Pieces - Op 76; Op 118. Waltzes, Op 39

Jonathan Plowright *pf*

BIS © BIS2127 (81' • DDD/DSD)



Jonathan Plowright's complete Brahms piano music for BIS, inaugurated in 2013, has now reached Vol 3, with all its intelligence, subtlety and power in full blossom. Other pianists – Leon McCawley, Stephen Hough and Andreas Haefliger among them – have hinted at a new direction, or perhaps a restoration, in Brahms interpretation. Plowright, in his original, thoughtful way, leads the pack. Thick, muddy textures awash in pedal (sounds patently unachievable on the latest pianos Brahms knew) and leaden tempi so characteristic of the mid-20th-century approach to this music are rapidly and happily becoming things of the past.

One thing that makes Plowright's interpretations so compelling is that they sound totally fresh, as though a fully formed, cultured musician, unencumbered by conventional approaches or received wisdom, took up these scores for the first time in maturity. The results are often unexpected, yet always apt and never less than convincing.

The B minor Capriccio (Op 76 No 2) is unrushed, diffident, as though confiding its drolleries in a whisper. The robust