eavesdropping, listening from next door to the pianist’s private reverie. Hough’s masterly use of the pedal and exquisite phrasing are very special accomplishments.

Everyone will have their own favourites; but elsewhere and by contrast are powerful readings of Liszt and Dohnányi, ‘Waltzengel’ as a rhapsody with lashings of Villa-Lobos, two transcriptions of dances from Don Quixote (the ballet) which teeter amusingly on the kitsch and, to end, Mompou’s ‘Jeunes filles au jardin’, one of the earliest pieces Hough ever played, his companion as an encore for 40 years, which he first heard as a child on a mixed album ‘much like this one’ (writes Hough), played by Clive Lythgoe.

My only cavil is that the empty concert-hall acoustic at Wyastone leads the upper treble at forte and above to fly away, sounding disembodied from the lower register. Obviously, Hough and his longtime producer Andrew Keenler know the effect. It is a small matter, one of personal preference perhaps. No matter. Witty, wisful, extrovert, introspective and cheeky by turn, this is a masterclass in a certain style of piano-playing, and a dream of an album. Jeremy Nicholas (O1BD)

‘Life’

JS Bach
Solo Violin Partita No 2, BWV1004 –
Chaconne (transcr Brahms) Busoni
Berceuse, K249 No 7. Fantasia after JS Bach, K253
B Evans Peace Piece Liszt Fantasia and
Fugue on ‘Ad nos, ad salutarem undam’, S259
(arr Busoni). Isoldens Liebestod (Wagner), S447.
Solemn March to the Holy Grail from Parsifal
(Wagner), S450 Rzewski A Mensch Schumann
Geistervariationen, Wo204
Igor Levit

Sony Classical 2 88985 42445 2;
2 0175 880531 (114 4 D00)

Igor Levit

Igor Levit likes to deal with big subjects, whether it’s late
Beethoven or supreme
Bach. Now he addresses something bigger still: life and death itself, though the set is
titled ‘Life’, looking at the works list, you might be forgiven for thinking that ‘Death’
would have been a more apt name.

The project itself grew from a personal tragedy, with the accidental death of a
close friend of Levit’s. The resulting pair of discs are a formidable, perhaps even
forbidding prospect and they demand intense concentration.

The album begins in the Stygian gloom of
Busoni’s Fantasia after JS Bach – a work
written in 1909 in memory of his father.

Levit gives the piece a cloudier, more
mysterious opening than Hamelin and his
tempo is steadier. At the point where
Busoni quotes Bach’s choral melody,
BWV766, Levit finds an apt solemnity,
marvelling at each harmonic shift. Even in
the biggest of climaxes, the sound never
comes overbearing, thanks as much to
Levit’s subtle engineering as to the pianist
himself. But it’s in the quieter moments
where Levit’s musicianship is most telling –
just sample the close of the Fantasia, with
its air of quiet mystery.

The way Levit has formed this
programme is extraordinarily effective. The
Brahms reworking for left hand of Bach’s
D minor violin Chaconne is a probing,
introverted affair, and how effectively
Levit can imbue a single line with light
and shade; as the music ascends into the
treble, there’s a real feeling of it coming
into the light, too. You might prefer a
more dramatic approach but this one has
nobility in spades. Talking of coming into
the light, that’s something that has been
happening to Schumann’s long-neglected
Geistervariationen. If Imogen Cooper
brings to them a sense of inevitability and
Anderszewski revels in their strangeness,
Levit reveals something different again.

He gives the theme an enormous sense
of regret, while the repeated Ds in the fourth
variation have a sense of grounding.
In contrast Anderszewski, who sees them
as dramatic cries, leading to an agitated
final variation, whereas Levit consoles with a
yearning beauty.

From Schumann to Frederic Rzewski’s
‘A Mensch’, the third movement from
Dreams, Part I, and itself a memorial to
the actor and poet Steve Ben Israel. Levit
has already proved himself a supremely
sympathetic champion of Rzewski and he
captures the changeability of mood, from
the reflexive to the sardonically playful,
bringing a sense of inevitability as idea
follows idea.

Liszt dominates the second disc,
beginning with a fine account of the
Wagner Parsifal paraphrase. What comes
next is even more striking: Busoni’s
reimagining for piano of Liszt’s mighty
organ work, the Fantasia and Fugue on
the choral ‘Ad nos, ad salutarem undam’.
Levit, never hurried, whips up a violent storm of sonorities, yet there’s always
a clarity of thinking that allows him to
guide us through the fullest of textures
and most virtuoso of writing. He brings an
intensity to the Adagio, which is grave
and spacious in his hands. Ohlsn is notably
faster here – perhaps more to my taste –
but Levit somehow manages to beguile
through sheer conviction. The final Fugue
is underpinned by a violent energy, and it’s
only with the affirmative climactic bars
that the darkness is eventually banished.

From here to Liszt’s reworking of
Wagner’s Liebestod, seductively voiced
and ultimately unerringly soulful.
Without late Liszt, Busoni’s Berceuse
would have been unimaginable: one of
his most exquisite utterances (in which the
pianist is instructed to hold down both
pedals throughout), it has a bittersweet
middle section and, throughout, Busoni
achieves much with the sparsest of means. Here,
I do find Levit just a little too drawn-out
compared to the masterly Hamelin. Bill
Evans’s Peace Piece improvisation might
seem an odd bedfellow but in fact it fits
perfectly. Evans created it in a 1958
recording session and in his hands it has
a directness that is inimitable (and shows
how much he learnt not just from Debussy
but from Messiaen too). That Levit
manages to make it sound his own without
betraying the original is the tribute to his
extraordinary artistry.

The essay by Anselm Cybinski forms the
ideal counterpart to the aural experience.
This is a fascinating, compelling set that
demands to be heard.

Harriet Smith (11/18)
Busoni Fantasia after JS Bach, Berceuse –
selected comparison:
Hamelin (0/98, 11/13) (HYPER) CDA67951/3
Schumann Geistervariationen – selected comparison:
Cooper (10/15) (CHAND) CHAN10974
Anderszewski (#17) (WARN) 9029 58883-1
Lisz/Busoni Fantasia and Fugue on ‘Ad nos’ –
selected comparison:
Ohsawa (6/13) (BRIDGE) BRIDGE9377

‘The Berlin Recital’

Ligeti Études – No 1. Désordre; No 3. Touches
bouquées; No 5. Vertige Prokofiev Piano Sonata
No 8; Op 84 Rachmaninov Études tableaux –
Op 33 No 3; Op 39 No 1; Preludes – Op 23 No 5;
Op 32 No 10 Scriabin Piano Sonata No 10; Op 70
Yuja Wang (1)

DG 483 6280GH (65 4 DDDD)
Recorded live at the Kammersaal of the
Philharmonie, Berlin, June 1, 2018

‘Exceptional artistry, technical perfection
and boundless imagination’ it
says on the back cover. Such hype normally
puts my back up. But on this occasion I’ll
happily endorse it.

To start, as Yuja Wang does, with
one of the most well-flogged warhorses
in the repertoire, in the shape of the
Rachmaninov G minor Prelude, would