

Steven ISSERLIS



GRIEG; HOUGH; MENDELSSOHN

Steven Isserlis is a past master when it comes to matching his pianists to repertoire: Robert Levin in Beethoven, Dénes Várjon in Schumann and Stephen Hough in sonatas from Brahms to Rachmaninov and now those of Grieg and Mendelssohn.

Isserlis and Hough balance the urgency of the opening theme of Grieg's glorious sonata with a luminous reading of the rhapsodic second idea and everywhere their reading glints with conviction. Hough sets a slightly faster pace in the second movement than Pascal Amoyel for Bertrand (another exceptionally fine interpretation), and Isserlis is matchless in the way he tugs at the simple melody to heart-rending effect. The cellist is also deeply moving in the solo opening of the third movement before the lively *Halling* bursts in.

Isserlis has previously recorded Mendelssohn's Second Sonata with the fortepianist Melvyn Tan. Now his range of colours is wider still, his intensity more unfettered, and everywhere you have the sense that he and Hough are egging one another on, unafraid to take risks. The slow movement is a thing of beauty, with all the yearning that you'd expect but also a freedom that Hough sets up beautifully in his finely nuanced

opening soliloquy. It's more rhetorical than Huw Watkins or Larry Todd, and Isserlis's sense of impassioned yearning is even more affecting than Paul Watkins and a great deal more palatable than the histrionic sobbing tone of Mischa Maisky. We're also reminded of Hough's great affinity for Mendelssohn (remember those concerto recordings from 15 years ago?) in the way he can combine airiness of texture and brilliance of articulation while moving at speed, and the finale is one of the most exuberant on disc.

In between we get Hough's own Sonata for cello and piano left hand, a work whose single movement has three distinct sections. Its nickname of *Les adieux* refers not only to Beethoven's sonata of that name but also to Dussek's, while the marking of *Im Legendenton* over the second part refers us back to Schumann. It's unafraid to breathe an air of nostalgia – making it a good companion to the other sonatas here – but the results are refreshingly personal. One of the sonata's most fascinating aspects is the close interplay between the two protagonists, their lines often entwined, with the piano frequently leading the way, drawing the cello up into the treble register. The second section has a hypnotic, slightly Eastern quality to its lines, while the rapt final section hovers, shimmers and finally achieves stasis, the cello returning to the *pizzicato* of the outset, now resolved on its lowest note. The performance couldn't be more persuasive and the two players are beautifully recorded, with Isserlis providing typically engaging notes.

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