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BRAHMS Piano Concerto No 1 (Lars Vogt)

For decades it's been fashionable for pianists, or pianist-conductors, to lead the concertos of Mozart and Beethoven from the keyboard, the way they were ordinarily performed in the 18th and early 19th centuries. As the 19th century progressed, however, with the emergence of conductors such as Weber, Spontini and Spohr, not to mention increasingly complex orchestral scores, the discrete roles of soloist and conductor became entrenched. In most Romantic piano concertos, after all, pianists have their hands full, so to speak, and are only too happy to have someone else keep the band together.

Enter Lars Vogt and the Royal Northern Sinfonia, of which he has been music director since 2015, with the mighty Brahms D minor Concerto from 1858, in which Vogt is both soloist and conductor. The performance was captured over two days in late 2018 in the orchestra's home space, the Sage Gateshead concert hall. The music-making is nothing short of sensational.

This is a bold Brahms D minor with immense character, audacious and courageous. It is also perhaps the most sensitive and subtle reading of the score in recent memory. Tempos are spacious and rubato is ample, yet invariably organic. A wealth of seldom-heard orchestral detail emerges, with exquisite wind-playing especially prominent. Nothing is extraneous; every gesture seems bent towards maximum expressivity.

The opening onslaught of the *Maestoso* is terrifying in its fury, though it quickly becomes evident that this is but one of the movement's many intricate facets. The whole rests on the

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(4) Ballades

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 1

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character and poise of a six-beat measure that, despite its firm footing, seems infinitely flexible and never far from the dance. The ensemble between soloist and orchestra is almost impossible to describe in its integration and subtlety. Synchrony doesn't enter the picture. Instead we hear an unimpeded outpouring of shared intent. The *Adagio* is without tears or monumentality, establishing from the beginning a quiet calm which serves as the *mise en scène* for a lyrical discourse of utmost tenderness. The Rondo has a convincing folk-like character of infectious appeal. When all is said and done, you realise no one has overplayed. Rather than bursting at the seams, this is a D minor Concerto that is unfailingly proportionate, fresh and profoundly human.

The four Op 10 Ballades round out the recording, each imbued with a distinct character so apt that you're left wondering how so many interpreters have failed to grasp their telling details.

It's rare to have the pleasure of witnessing a musician mid-career growing by leaps and bounds. Lars Vogt has always been a pianist of remarkable gifts but over the years his artistry has risen in stature in ways one scarcely could have imagined. I suspect that this is Brahms you will treasure in the long term and I urge you not to miss it.

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