

Johannes Brahms - The Piano Concertos (2006)

Written by bluesever

Saturday, 17 September 2011 08:38 - Last Updated Thursday, 12 September 2013 21:41

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CD1 1. *Piano Concerto No.1 in D minor, Op.15 - 1. Maestoso - Poco più moderato* 20:52 2. *Piano Concerto No.1 in D minor, Op.15 - 2. Adagio* 14:02 3. *Piano Concerto No.1 in D minor, Op.15 - 3. Rondo (Allegro non troppo)* 11:28 CD2 1. *Piano Concerto No.2 in B flat, Op.83 - 1. Allegro non troppo* 18:11 2. *Piano Concerto No.2 in B flat, Op.83 - 2. Allegro appassionato* 8:39 3. *Piano Concerto No.2 in B flat, Op.83 - 3. Andante - Più adagio* 12:21 4. *Piano Concerto No.2 in B flat, Op.83 - 4. Allegretto grazioso - Un poco più presto* 9:27
Nelson Freire – piano Gewandhaus Orchestra Riccardo Chailly – director

There are so many recordings of these two giants of piano concertos. Both works of epic stature need both an excellent soloist and orchestra. These works of symphonic strength need an orchestra that is not just an accompanying partner for the soloist who needs for his part intelligence, power, balance, sensitivity and poetry(!) in order to tackle the ongoing massive orchestral flow.

Among the great recordings of these piano concertos rank certainly Leon Fleisher and George Szell on Sony (a violent and passionate orchestra - need one say more with a monument as Szell and his beloved Cleveland Orchestra? - and a poetic pianist as Fleisher who marvelled and sculpted these works from his childhood on), Emil Gilels and Eugen Jochum on Deutsche Grammophon (a true classic interpretation, balanced, mature, but for me just a little not passionate enough, anyway Jochum recalls this recording a year before his death as one of the special moments of his entire career), and last but not least Hélène Grimaud and Kurt Sanderling on Erato, as for the piano orchestra no.1 (a volatile and passionate brahmsian fury, a reading of genuine romance, sturm und drang, power and insight). The latter version became recently my personal beloved one for the ongoing pulse and heartbeat of miss Grimaud, not just a pianist, but a musician.

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But now Decca surprises us with an ardent live version of these works with the legendary Brazilian Nelson Freire and the even more legendary 250 year old central european Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig (Mendelsohn was one of its first Kapellmeisters!) under the baton of its new conductor Riccardo Chailly: an invaluable coupling.

Chailly has proven himself as one of the utmost exciting conductors of the last fifteen years in the entire world, (e.g. his phenomenal integral Mahler recordings with the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra of which he was principal conductor until last year).

Nelson Freire's legend speaks for itself and was for some years probably only becoming more intriguing and glooming due to his absence in the studio during so many years. But don't misunderstand he is one of the true great pianists of the past and ongoing century! Not only a musician, an artist, a sculptor !!! (Listen also to his marvellous Schumann piano recital on Decca, and his recent tackling of the second sonata of Chopin, the last part is blowing you away completely, a dazzling account).

It's amazing -as to me- how little exposure this new legendary coupling of Nelson Freire and Riccardo Chailly has gained yet in international reviews and critics (there is a review written in superlative terms on classictoday.com).

In any event, these new live recordings, recorded in November 2005 (no. 2) and February 2006 (no.1) reach nearly the ideal: a volatile orchestra, a magister at piano !!!

There is plenty of structural coherence, the rhythms of both orchestra and pianist are perfectly chosen, there is an organic, massive and ongoing orchestral flow, there are both so many fiery, volatile attacks and poetic, even carressing passages by both orchestra and Freire, there is a pulse of true romantic power and wisdom, maturity, never getting sticky (e.g. the honest felt andante in the second piano concerto with a marvellous cello solo).

This is a thrilling account that sets the new standard against which any available recording will be placed for evaluation. The DECCA sound quality of this disc is quite impeccable, revealing every detail! Buy this gems. You'll never regret! --- Joris Verhelst, amazon.com

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This is the Brahms piano concerto set we've been waiting for. Nelson Freire and Riccardo Chailly offer interpretations that triumphantly fuse immediacy and insight, power and lyricism, and incandescent virtuosity that leaves few details unturned, yet always with the big picture in clear sight. The D minor No 1's headlong opening tutti updates Szell/Cleveland's patented fire and brimstone with a warmth of tone that manages to convey both line and mass as few others do – the slower, bleaker Sanderling (Erato, 7/98), or Harnoncourt (Teldec, 8/00) traversals, for example. Timpani and brass proudly step up to the fore in both concertos, while frequently buried lines emerge from the gnarly textures with uncommon clarity and specificity. In Chailly's hands, a genuine chamber music aesthetic consistently governs the lustrous warmth of Brahms's underrated orchestrations, to say nothing of the heights to which the conductor has led his revitalised Leipzig Gewandhaus ensemble.

Balanced within the orchestra as an equal partner, Freire is completely on top of and inside both works' solo parts, from No 1's fervent yet cogently shaped octave outbursts and the B flat's graceful, light-footed finale to both slow movements' unforced simplicity, organic flow, and freedom from sentimentality. No doubt that the presence of an audience fuels the palpable give and take between soloist and conductor. Just as the Szell/Cleveland cycles with Serkin and Fleisher (Sony, 3/94R, 4/98) and Gilels/Jochum (DG, 6/96) were benchmarks in their day, these gorgeously engineered, stunningly executed and temperamentally generous performances will stand as points of reference for generations to come. ---Jed Distler, Gramophone

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