

US REVIEWS

A wide variety of piano music this month, from masterpieces by *JS Bach* and *Schubert* to *George Rochberg's* jazz-inspired works

MUSIC US CHOICE

A great Romantic

Tim Parry enjoys this highly dramatic account of one of Liszt's greatest cycles



RHETORICAL FLAIR: Lowenthal brings a grand style to Liszt



LISZT

Années de pèlerinage (complete); Christmas Tree Suite, Books I & II

Jerome Lowenthal, Carmel Lowenthal (piano) *Bridge 9307A/C* 178:17 mins (3 discs) Recordings of Liszt's complete *Années de pèlerinage* – all three books – are not as common as one might think. Jerome Lowenthal has many of the attributes a pianist needs for this music: a generous Romantic temperament, a flair for rhetorical drama and musical narrative, and a strong sense of line. This set contains many fine

performances, and also includes the early version of 'Les cloches de Genève' and books 2 and 3 of the duet version of the *Christmas Tree Suite* (where Lowenthal is joined by his daughter Carmel).

The playing is muscular, at times almost brash, in the bigger pieces – 'Orage', 'Vallée d'Obermann', the Dante Sonata – yet Lowenthal sustains a lovely singing line in 'Au lac du Wallenstadt' and the Petrarch Sonnets. But he is reluctant to offset such big pianism with lyrical calm: passages in 'Vallée d'Obermann' cry out for such contrast, and I would have welcomed more poetic refinement in 'Au bord d'une source'. Nevertheless, there is much to enjoy.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



ROCHBERG

Piano Music, Vol. 4: Four Short Sonatas etc Sally Pinkas (piano) *Naxos 8.559634* 68:45 mins



OFF THE BEATEN PATH

Works by Clementi, Liszt etc Ian Hominick (piano) *MSR MS 1341* 67:46 mins



CHOPIN • SCHUMANN

Chopin: Ballade Nos 3 & 4 etc; Schumann: Kreisleriana Burkard Schliessmann (piano) *MSR MS 1361 (hybrid CD/SACD)* 123:54 mins (2 discs)



SCHUBERT

Last three Sonatas Craig Sheppard (piano) *Roméo Records 7283-4* 118:18 mins (2 discs)



BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas, Op. 31 Thomas Sauer (piano) *MSR MS 1284* 69:05 mins



JS BACH

Well-Tempered Clavier, Bk II Peter Watchorn (pedal harpsichord) *Musica Omnia MO 02020* 186:34 mins (3 discs)

GEORGE ROCHBERG (1918-2005) was a student of Menotti and himself taught virtually alongside George Crumb at Pennsylvania University where his pupils included William Bolcom. Volume 4 of a survey of his piano music reveals a bewildering range of styles. *Carnival Music* juxtaposes exuberant jazz with deeply introspective reflection. The *Four Short Sonatas* are heavily contrasting one-movement works that also together allude to a single four-movement work. Finally, the early *Variations on an Original Theme* is a grand and ambitious work. Sally Pinkas gives superbly committed performances (★★★★).

In **OFF THE BEATEN TRACK** Ian Hominick traverses Clementi, Czerny, Thalberg, Moscheles, Medtner and Gershwin among others. Unfortunately the cavernous sound quickly becomes clattery. Some of the repertoire choices are perhaps too adventurous: Hominick

doesn't quite have the technical flair for Moscheles's *La petite babillarde*, or an ideal level of imaginative charm for Thalberg's Nocturne or Sibelius's Romance. He makes a decent fist of Medtner's idiom in the demanding *Fairy Tale Sonata* (Op. 25 No. 1), but here, as elsewhere, I could have wished for more dynamic range and contrast (★★).

Burkard Schliessmann has a more natural keyboard flair and fluency, evident in this lavishly packaged 'Anniversary Edition' encompassing **CHOPIN, SCHUMANN** and Bach. Alas, I found his Chopin at times rather glib, the dramatic pacing too often out of kilter with moments of musical or structural significance, so that the music seems to pass by without incident. The Bach C minor Partita is better, if a little sober. Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, too, is given a decent performance, although other pianists have revealed more of its poetic richness (★★★).

Craig Sheppard's live discs have often exuded a gritty integrity and musicality. Sadly his performances here of **SCHUBERT's** final three sonatas miss an essential poetic repose. The tone is hard, the phrasing either inflexible or rhythmically unsteady. The opening C minor Sonata, D958, sounds as if different performances have been spliced together. The following A major Sonata holds together better, but in the B flat major Sonata the overall shortcomings are most evident, the bluntness of delivery is quite at odds with music's rarefied quality – altogether a recording simply not worthy of this artist (★★).

Thomas Sauer's disc of **BEETHOVEN's** Op. 31 Sonatas could make a pleasant after-concert moment, but his performances are also disappointing. Recorded at a low level, with slightly spongy sound, the playing misses much of the music's essential turbulence and dramatic bite. The disc does improve – No. 1 is the worst performance, No. 3 the best. But throughout, the harmonic tensions so crucial to this music are underplayed, while, on a technical level, ornaments – particularly trills – are unevenly played (★★).

Finally a delightful discovery. Peter Watchorn's meticulously sculpted account of Book 2 of **BACH's** *Well-Tempered Clavier* is played on a wonderfully rich, organ-like pedal harpsichord. The tempos are often quite expansive, but the music rarely sounds academic or pedestrian. There is rigour and integrity, and Watchorn's musicianship, and the instrument itself, draws you in and holds your attention (★★★★). *Tim Parry*