A great Romantic

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

ROCHBERG
Piano Music, Vol. 4: Four Short Sonatas etc
Sally Pinkas (piano)
Navos 8.559/G4  68:45 mins

OFF THE BEATEN PATH
Works by Clementi, Liszt etc
Ian Hominick (piano)
MSR 5134  67:46 mins

CHOPIN + SCHUMANN
Chopin: Ballade Nos 3 & 4 etc; Schumann: Kreisleriana
Burkard Schlessmann (piano)
MSR 5181 (hybrid CD)  121:34 mins (2 discs)

SCHUBERT
Last three Sonatas
Craig Sheppard (piano)
Romero Records 7283-4  118:38 mins (2 discs)

BEETHOVEN
Piano Sonatas, Op. 31
Thomas Sauer (piano)
MSR 5128  69:05 mins

JS BACH
Well-Tempered Clavier, Bk II
Peter Watchorn (pedal harpsichord)
Melissa Ormrod MCD 0020  186:34 mins (3 discs)

GEORGE ROCHBERG (1918-2000) 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. Carnivall 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 claustrophobic. Some of the repertoire choices are perhaps too adventurous: Hominick doesn't quite have the technical flair for Moscheles's La petite baladette, 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 Schlessmann 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 brutality 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 tempo are often quite expansive, but the music rarely sounds academic or pedestrian. There is vigour and integrity, and Watchorn's musicianship, and the instrument itself, draws you in and holds your attention (★★★★★★). Tim Parry