



Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor Op. 15 [47:41]

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B Flat Op 83 [49:27]

Vincenzo Maltempo (piano)

Mitteleuropa Orchestra/Marco Guidarini

rec. 2018, 2R Studio Produzioni Multimediali, Italy

PIANO CLASSICS PCL10145 [2 CDs: 97:08]

Vincenzo Maltempo has released a series of critically acclaimed recordings featuring music by Alkan and Lyapunov. He clearly has a prodigious technique but with this recording he ventures into much more mainstream territory. It is a daring move by Maltempo to tackle Brahms' two piano concertos at a relatively early stage of his career. These concertos are among the most difficult in the repertoire in terms of stamina and some of the greatest pianists of the last century have left landmark performances, so he is up against stiff competition.

The D Minor Concerto opens well with Marco Guidarini and the Mitteleuropa Orchestra capturing the baleful turbulence of the piece to perfection. The strings bring strength and virility to the opening movement while Guidarini ensures the textures do not become too murky. Maltempo's piano playing is very fine throughout and he brings eloquence and nobility to the opening piano statements. The layering of sound is excellent although there is perhaps scope for Maltempo to have brought greater lyricism and to have unearthed more of the poetry in this music. The double octaves are played with explosive power and the piano playing has an unbridled quality which I very much liked. On a few occasions some of the playing from both the soloist and the orchestra lacks polish although this is a minor point. The coda is an explosive tour de force with orchestra and soloist driving the music to its inexorable conclusion.

The Adagio second movement is a love song for Clara Schumann and this concerto often stands or falls by the conviction with which it is played. The tempo is a little fast for my taste although there is an argument for adopting a relatively fast tempo given the length of the previous movement. Maltempo's playing in this movement is superb and stands comparison with some of the greatest performances. One can hear the heartfelt emotion in a very direct and immediate way at the climax points in the music and the final succession of trills is mesmerizingly beautiful. Guidarini and Maltempo adopt a steady tempo for the Rondo finale and again much of the playing is very fine. The staccato bass is crisp and controlled and Brahms' lyrical voice emerges in a very musical way. I enjoyed Maltempo's handling of the final cadenza, which has a free improvisatory quality.

In the Second Piano Concerto, Brahms adopts a tighter, more formal structure and many of the exchanges between orchestra and soloist have a chamber music feel. The opening horn solo (so reminiscent of Schubert) is mellow and subdued while Maltempo's response is reflective and calm. The ensuing cadenza from Maltempo is a technical tour de force, paving the way beautifully for the first orchestral tutti. Guidarini and the Mitteleuropa Orchestra prove able and responsive partners throughout the opening movement and they capture the chamber music feeling of the music. However, I would have liked greater weight and depth of sound in some of the tutti passages. Maltempo's handling of the demanding piano part is assured, although there are some moments of untidiness. The same cannot be said of the scherzo where Maltempo commands attention from the outset. He brings a judicious, probing quality to the music and gorgeous dark colours. The coda boils up in an immensely exciting way with Maltempo showing amazing technical facility.

The cello solo which opens the slow movement is solid but does not quite have the plaintive eloquence which one hears in other performances. Maltempo plays with commendable technical authority but he does not capture the poetic essence or probe the depths of emotion in this movement in the same way as he did for the first concerto. In the finale, Maltempo again shows what a masterful technician he is with some delightful leggiero playing. Brahms' scampering runs are played with a deft lightness of touch and the movement is characterised by a feeling of mischievous fun.

Overall, Maltempo displays moments of greatness in his playing of both concertos, although his performances are not in the same league as those of Fleisher, Gilels or Kovacevich. There is no doubt that he has an affinity with this music and it would be good for him to revisit it at a later stage in his career.

Overall, this recording is recommended and the slow movement of the D Minor Concerto and the finale of the B Flat are particularly to be commended.

Robert Beattie

http://musicweb-international.com/classrev/2018/Oct/Brahms_PCs_PCL10145.htm

