Before radio and recordings, the only way to listen to a symphony outside the concert hall was in an arrangement for piano, usually in a version for four hands. Gifted amateurs could entertain family and friends with orchestral works in arrangements and transcriptions an upright piano at home. Various versions were available, from simple reductions of popular themes orarias from operas to the strikingly elaborated Liszt transcriptions of the Beethoven symphonies. Today we have a plethora of symphonic music streaming from the radio and recordings. The obvious question, then, is this do we need to buy a recording of a four-hand arrangement of the Beethoven symphonies when we can buy a disc of a professional orchestra performing the work as the composer intended? If I wrote “No”, the review would end here. So I’m writing “Yes” and hope to convince you that you can have a rewarding musical experience from listening to music distilled into the black-and-white keys (and from original works written for two pianists).

Liszt made four arrangements of the nine Beethoven symphonies for solo piano and listening to the first eight on the piano played by just two hands is overwhelming. With the right pianist you feel the symphonies could live a life on the piano alone. In the Ninth, where Beethoven adds four soloists and choir, Liszt adds an additional piano to the first one to transplant the entire work to the medium of the keyboard. The result is Liszt’s crowning glory, and only in the very jubilant final pages did I miss the human voices shouting joy to the world. Leon McCawley and Ashley Wass face the problem of all not-yet established piano duos in having to coordinate tempo, touch, and, not least, the precision of striking the keys together. It is a testimony to their admirable skills as soloists that they work together as a team to meet the gargantuan task of performing this Liszt arrangement. No, I would not have this as my sole version of the Ninth — and I don’t think anyone should — but as a pianistic tour de force and a perfect example of the art of transcription, this is an obvious first buy.

Likewise, Peter Donohoe and Martin Roscoe cannot claim to have travelled the world sharing the concert stage for years. Yet again, they are surprisingly well paired in their new all-Rachmaninoff disc, even if Donohoe comes across as the outgoing flashy virtuoso and Roscoe the restrained grey gentleman. Together they make the brilliant and the original Rachmaninoff Suites for two pianos constantly entertaining and with as much Russian pathos, blood and power as the fine early version from Vladimir Ashkenazy and Andre Previn. If the transcription of the Symphonic Dances is the last satisfactory in this recording, Rachmaninoff is partly to blame, even if I am looking for spots on the sun.

Here’s another disc featuring two pianos played by two soloists who joined forces to create an album, in this case Mozart’s original two-piano works. Earl Wild and Zaidee Parkinson possess identical phrasing, and their crystalline touch (made slightly brighter by the 1975 recording on a Bösendorfer) fits their sweet and romantic approach to the music. The concerto for two pianos is especially successful, that is, if you want your Mozart dusted with white sugar and presented with a pair of ruby roses. Not my everyday Mozart, but one I would not want to be without for a special day.

To most music lovers the idea of listening to Mozart’s sacred (solo) piano sonatas performed with an extra piano, covering those sublime works with romantic cream and sugary marzipan, would be horrifying. However, this is exactly what Greg set out to do in his Mozart arrangements, in which one pianist plays the sonatas as written and the other adds all the romantic harmonies one can imagine. The result is perverse in the extreme — or overwhelmingly tender and beautiful. The Denia Piano Duo, in their new release, is the best possible advocate for this Sachertorte Mozart wrapped in gold foil. As innocent as a piece of truffle chocolate, but not recommended to those preferring vinegar to creme fraiche.

Philip Moore and Simon Crawford-Phillips have been performing a piano duo since 1995. On this all-Stravinsky disc, Moore launches into his own four-hand arrangement of the Stravinsky Firebird. It’s a daunting task in all respects, but even with earplugs on, warning lights flashing and Crawford-Phillips his co-pilot, Moore can’t quite convince that 20 fingers can really compete with a full orchestra. This version of Firebird would definitely bring the house down in any live performance, but to say that all the colours of Stravinsky are transcended from the rich orchestration into the hammer of a piano would be a far cry from the truth. To quote, music built on a clear structural and harmonic pattern like the classicist Beethoven or Brahms, fits the piano’s sound-world better. However, when Stravinsky transcribes his orchestral works for the piano, he’s stretching them up to and maybe beyond the limit. The dance scenes of Petrushka and the ritual sacrifice of the Rite of Spring are harrowing even whimsical on the street, but without the multi-layered sparkling colours of the orchestral palette, the listener is seriously losing out. As pianists, Moore and Crawford-Phillips can compete with the best from the UK and I would love to hear them tackle works better suited to the keyboard.

The impressionistic music of Debussy and Ravel uses a vast canvas of instrumental colours and it is only fair to say that their music is far from easy to transcribe for piano. The melting sound of the woodwinds and the long archs of strings blending with the golden sound of the brass are all lost. I am full of admiration for the piano duo Genova and Dimitrov and even if I try my best to forget the orchestral world of Daphnis et Chloé, La volpe et le Uccellino, Ragazzone, etc., I do feel deprived and left empty with only a dull sandwich as a substitute for a
Pianist's CHOICE

DUO TAL & GROETHUYSEN
Choral preludes: Works by Brahms,
Keger and Febel
Sony Classical 88697 121462

You can't tell who plays primo or seconde with Duo Tal and GroethuySEN; they are a very integrated one-person-with-20-fingers gourmet meal. Like Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade, played with tremendous strength and overpowering concentration (and surely not a second too fast) by Artur Pizarro and Vita Panomariovaite, we only get the lovely smell from the kitchen. Yes, the Sadko arrangement is fine and the Capriccio espagnol served with all the garnish one can find from the piano (the pedals are used to especially telling effect), and it's all helped by a clear and natural-sounding recording. If you can afford a second Rimsky-Korsakov in your collection, choose this one, which will give you a clear idea of why Rimsky-Korsakov was the leading orchestrator of his generation — and why he did not compose very much for the piano.

Stravinsky and Debussy pop up again on the latest Katia and Marielle Labèque release, while Ravel (and Gershwin) appear on the new disc from Goldstone and Clemmow. Both duos are well established, and if the two sisters have benefited from a stronger international profile, it does not in any way diminish Goldstone and Clemmow. No need to repeat my reservations about impressionistic orchestral colours reduced to the black-and-white keyboard. Let
With the Labèques’ latest disc, we can concentrate on the joy of hearing the instrument being played by four hands sounding like one. Instead of concentrating on the joy of hearing the instrument being played by four hands sounding like one. In the Labèques’ luxurious production, we not only hear faultless piano playing but can also marvel at their presence in a cinematographically rock music-like DVD. For me, the substance of the release is the Stravinsky Concerto for two pianos in which the Labèques leap easily over any hurdles the composer throws up. I do not think music making on such a high level needs the support of a DVD, however, it would be churlish to complain about an extra gift. Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue fares brilliantly in a version for two pianos. Goldstone and Clements can compete with any jazz band and they dance around on the keyboard like tap dancers.

Dvořák's Slavonic Dances are known as entertaining four-hands pieces and brilliant orchestral showpieces. I do not feel the orchestra is needed to do justice to these works and certainly not with Claire Désert and Emmanuel Strosser playing them. The cliff-hanger danger of a live performance is captured with a vivid sound and the breathless audience is kept in suspense throughout. The presto tempos are surely faster than any orchestra can manage, while the menuetto tempos are aimed at an old people’s home. Yet I will allow such young and entertaining pianists the liberty of pulling the dances to extremes, particularly when done with such overwhelming charm and vigour.

The remaining four releases are devoted to Brahms. He himself was a master pianist and enjoyed making music with friends and fellow pianists. His large-scale Sonata opus 34b is probably the best work for two pianos and even if it is a transcription of the Piano Quintet, we never miss the sonority of the strings. Maybe it is because Brahms had such success with arrangements of his symphonic works, chamber music and even many works by his contemporaries for two pianos, that we feel he is the true master of the 20-finger idiom. Nettle and Markham are a well-established duo with many excellent recordings to their credit. Here they are not always helped by the recording engineers, but none of their musicality and finger dexterity is lost. Tempos are right and balance well judged, and repeated listening brings out even finer nuances. Of course they cannot compete with the powerhouse of Martha Argerich and Lilya Zilberstein in the same work. But who can? The nervous energy of Argerich and the dramatic pathos of Zilberstein is Brahms in a red Ferrari. My hands were shaking and my heart was beating in overdrive after listening to the Presto Finale, and I have yet to hear a more brutal and raw version from any piano duo. If no cardiac specialists were forced into action immediately after this live Labèque concert, then the audience was either deaf or dead. Strictly for fans of Argerich, fast cars and adrenaline thrills....