

Review

A special piano duo round-up of mainly new releases finds **Marius Dawn** asking if two can be twice as fun as one – starting with Duo Tal & Groethuysen, the answer is 'yes'!

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 of upright piano at home. Various versions were available, from simple reductions of popular themes or arias 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 listening to original works written for two pianists).

Liszt made sterling 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 this complex 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 *sur de feu* and a perfect example of the art of transcription, this is an obvious fine 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-Rachmaninov disc, even if Donohoe comes across as the outgoing *fluffy* virtuoso and Roscoe the restrained grey problem. Together they make the brilliant and the original Rachmaninov Suites for two pianos constantly entertaining and with as much Russian pathos, blood and power as the fine early version from Vladimir Ashkenazy and André Previn. If the transcription of the *Symphonic Dances* is the least satisfactory in this recording, Rachmaninov 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 **Zaldir 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 Grieg 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 **Dona Piano Duo**, in their new release, is the best possible advocate for this Sachemite Mozart wrapped in gold foil. As innocuous as a piece of truffe chocolate, but not recommended to those preferring vinegar to *crème fraîche*!

Philip Moore and **Simon Crawford-Phillips** have been performing as 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 scabbers on, warning lights flashing and Crawford-Phillips as his co-pilot, Moore can't quite convince as 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 transcribed from the rich orchestration into the hammers of a piano would be a far cry from the truth. To me, music built on a clear structural and harmonic pattern like the classic Beethoven or Brahms, fits the piano's soundworld 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 *Pernoploia* and the ritual sacrifice of the *Rite of Spring* are harrowing even whittled on the screen, 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 arcs 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*, *Le val de Reppadois* espagnole, I do feel deprived and left empty with only a dull sandwich as a substitute for a



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Pianist's CHOICE

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You can't tell who plays
 primo or secondo with
 Duo Tal and Groethuysen;
 they are a very integrated
 one-person-with-20-fingers

gourmet meal. Like Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scherzando*, played with tremendous strength and overpowering concentration (and surely not a second too fast) by **Aetar Pizarro** and **Vita Panomariova**, we only get the lovely smell from the kitchens. 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 **Clemson**. 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 **Clemson**. No need to repeat my reservations about Impressionistic orchestral colours reduced to the black-and-white keyboard. Let ▶

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as instead concentrate 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 childish to complain about an extra gift. Geršwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* fans brilliantly in a version for two pianos. Goldstone and Clemons can compete with any jazz band and they dance around on the keyboard like tap dancers.

Dvořák's Slavonic Dances are known as enthralling 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 virid sound and the breathless audience is kept in suspense throughout. The presto tempos are surely faster than any orchestra can manage, while the *sonnetto* 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 Sonatas 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 sonosity 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 in Brahms is a real Ferrari. My hands were shaking and my heart was beating in overdrive after listening to the Presto Finales, 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 Lugano concert, then the audience was either deaf or dead. *Strictly for fans of Argerich, fast cars and adrenaline thrills.*

A more secure middle-of-the-road version is the Sony release with **Emanuel Ax** and **Yefim Bronfman**. Both are highly respected Brahms interpreters, and their version of the opus 34b is as polished and elegant as any Rolls-Royce engine. If they lack the warmth of Nettle and Markham and the explosive energy of Argerich and Zilberstein, they are nonetheless sovereign in their own musical kingdom. Here the Andante is never dragging, the Scherzo playful and with the rhythmic lilt and kick, and in the Finales nothing is rushed and the instruments never attacked or barged out of tune. Had to recommend them as the first choice, however I cannot see them reduced to anything else than a gold medal.

In the last years of Brahms' life he devoted some time to composing 11 choral preludes for organ. They are very much inspired by the great Bach organ preludes without being simple copies, and they were later transcribed by Eusebius Mandyczewski. It's the Mandyczewski version, along with a Chorale Fantasia by Max Reger and some Bach arrangements by German composer Reinhard Febel that's performed on a new disc by undoubtedly the greatest of all contemporary piano duos – the Israeli **Yaela Tal** and her German partner **Andreas Goehrhayzen**. Like a Mercedes, they need no introduction to the cognoscenti. They have recorded extensively for Sony Classical and concertise extensively, though sadly not that much in the UK. From listening to the recording, you will never know who is playing the primo or the secondo part; they are an exceptionally integrated one-person-with-20-fingers. Tempos are always felt correctly and dynamics are never crashing. Dare I say for once that the Brahms transcriptions are much better than the original? The Bach Chorales dedicated to the duo by Febel (receiving its world premiere here) make the strongest case for the idea that an arrangement can enhance the original work. Of course nothing is better than Bach in his original appearance, but in this case I think Tal and Goehrhayzen are the first to punctuate that statement. ■



PHILIP MOORE & SIMON CRAWFORD-PHILLIPS

Serenity: The Festival (Jan. Moore, Newcastle, The Age of Spring, Decca-Dies DKL, 1981)



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The Dena Piano Duo is the best advocate for Grieg's Mozart arrangements – Sachertorte Mozart wrapped in gold foil