

INTERNATIONAL PIANO

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Brahms Piano Sonata no.2 in F sharp minor op.2.
Piano Pieces op.76. Three Intermezzos op.117.

Libor Nováček (pf).

Landor Records LAN 285, 76 minutes

The piano works of Brahms so rarely receive the public hearings that they deserve, but happily there is no shortage of young lions of the keyboard with the necessary technique and maturity to meet the huge demands of this music in the recording studio. Among them is the young Czech pianist Libor Nováček, who evidently lacks nothing by way of courage and enterprise.

He opens with Brahms's Second Sonata, never an easy piece with which to gain converts. The first movement has an elemental virtuosity that is at once arresting, but which is never permitted to obscure the more reflective moments, as he proves himself to be an artist of vision and circumspection. The stark outlines of the following

Andante are sparingly portrayed, every note assuming a grave significance in this terrible desolation, admirably conveyed with a spine-chilling simplicity. The Scherzo comes as no little relief, although the sense of unease is maintained, nowhere to greater effect than in the innocent-sounding trio section. The finale is finely judged as Nováček proves himself to be the master of subtle rubato and brings a mordent wit to proceedings, particularly with the quotations from Schubert.

The eight Piano Pieces are a point of departure into the realm of the miniature keyboard form with which Brahms was occupied for the rest of his life. Each is played with an artistry and musicianship that is a joy to behold. Nováček shows himself to be an artist of formidable powers and acute musical understanding, from the restless, latent menace of the opening Capriccio to the sunnier disposition of the second, and from the hugely difficult complexities of the C sharp minor Capriccio to the understated finality of the concluding one.

The Three Intermezzi op.117 are very much taken at the composer's tempo markings, allowing the hushed atmosphere of the first and the gentle insistence of the second to unfold at leisure, an approach that makes the closing bars of the third unbearably poignant. A disc for the discerning Brahmsian.

RICHARD EVANS



Photo: John Oakley