



condition often associated with the composer. A slowing down of tempo is used at similar places elsewhere and for the transitional sections in the rondo finales of the trio and the sonata. For the Rondo in D, the waltz-like character of the main theme is initially conveyed with a pause on each upbeat. When the theme returns, Goldstone and Clemmow prevent it from becoming caricatured by using less rubato. For the opening section of the 'Notturmo', the duo adopts a similar performance tradition of prolonging the last beat of each bar.

While this particular recording will obviously appeal to those with specialized interests in nineteenth-century piano arrangements, those who considered the musical abilities of Schubert's friends (particular the ones in conventional professions) as limited, will be pleasantly surprised. Indeed, these transcriptions reflect Gahy's experience of writing and performing for four hands and his respect and fondness for the composer. And even though the strings are occasionally missed (such as the solos in the slow movements of the trio and the sonata), Goldstone and Clemmow ensure that such moments are few and far between. Combining the sensibility of fine chamber musicians with their experience of interpreting Schubert, the duo provides an engaging introduction to Gahy's transcriptions.

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JOSEPH WÖLFL (1773–1812)

PIANO SONATAS OP. 25 & 33

Jon Nakamatsu (piano)

Harmonia Mundi HMU 907324, 2003; 69 minutes

Posterity has not been kind to Joseph Wöfl. His main claim to fame rests on his well-documented pianistic rivalry with Beethoven that culminated in a performance duel between the two titans in Vienna in March 1799. His compositions, many of which were well received during his lifetime, have sunk into total obscurity, and there is no modern edition of any of his thirty solo piano sonatas or his Op. 17 sonata for piano four hands. The same is the case for the remainder of his output: seven piano concertos, two symphonies, various pieces of chamber music (not least twelve string quartets and six piano trios), a number of stage works and songs. Born in Salzburg and a pupil of Leopold Mozart and Michael Haydn, Wöfl moved to Vienna in 1790, where the precise nature of his relationship with W. A. Mozart is still the subject of some debate. Leopold's customary nickname for him was 'Verwalter Sepperl' (his father was an 'administrator', and Sepperl is a diminutive of Sepp, a south German abbreviation for Joseph), and he appears to have been on familiar terms with the entire Mozart family. He dedicated his three piano sonatas Op. 2 to Nannerl, and in 1799 Constanze recommended him highly to Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig as 'einen geschickten Musikus und Componisten, als meinen freund' ('as a skilful musician and composer, as my friend': Wilhelm A. Bauer, Otto Erich Deutsch and Joseph Heinz Eibl, eds., *Mozart – Briefe und Aufzeichnungen, Gesamtausgabe* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1962–1975; revised 2005), vol. 4, 227). In 1791 he travelled to Warsaw as composer-in-residence to Count Ogiński, presumably Michal Kazimierz Ogiński (1728–1800), himself an amateur composer. He acquired a reputation as a virtuoso pianist and returned to Vienna in 1795, where he soon came to be regarded as the only major rival to Beethoven, who was only slightly his senior. Both were also highly skilled at improvisation, although contemporary reports cite Beethoven as being the more adept of the two. Between 1799 and 1805 he was based in Paris, and in the latter year he moved to London, where he remained until his death.

A letter to the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* of 22 April 1799 praised Wöfl's dexterity: '[he] plays passages which seem impossible with an ease, precision and clearness which cause amazement . . . and . . . his



interpretation is always, especially in Adagios, so pleasing and insinuating that one can not only admire it but also enjoy it' (Eliot Forbes, ed., *Thayer's Life of Beethoven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 205). The *Journal de Paris* (quoted in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Revised Edition* (London: Macmillan, 2001), vol. 27, 511) lauded him as 'one of the most exciting pianists in Europe', and Johann Ferdinand Schönfeld's *Jahrbuch der Tonkunst von Wien und Prag* (ed. Otto Biba (Munich: Katzschler, 1976), 67) described him as 'a truly skilful fortepiano player with an unprecedented accomplishment; he reads everything that is put in front of him with an unbelievable accuracy'. Václav Tomášek described him as 'tall, very thin, with huge hands that could easily stretch a 13th' (quoted in *The New Grove*, vol. 27, 511): a head and shoulders portrait of him is reproduced on the front cover of the CD. Tomášek continues with the only negative report of his playing: '[His] peculiar virtuosity apart, his playing had neither light nor shade – he was entirely lacking in manly strength'. Although such a colourless virtuoso performance style would surely not attract many admirers today, there were those at the time who actually preferred this to Beethoven's far more emotionally extroverted manner of playing. Their piano duel at the villa of Baron Raymund von Wetzlar as reported by a musically qualified eyewitness, Ignaz von Seyfried (he also commented on Wölfl's enormous stretch, albeit of a tenth rather than Tomášek's cited thirteenth), is described by Thayer (*Life of Beethoven*, 205–207) and discussed at length by Tia DeNora ('The Beethoven–Wölfl Piano Duel', in *Music in Eighteenth-Century Austria*, ed. David Wyn Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 259–282). The conclusion by those present on the occasion was that it ended in a draw: 'It would have been difficult, perhaps impossible, to award the palm of victory to either one of the gladiators in respect of technical skill. . . . But for . . . [the attitude of their patrons] the *protégés* cared very little. They respected each other because they knew best how to appreciate each other, and as straightforward honest Germans followed the principle that the roadway of art is broad enough for many, and that it is not necessary to lose one's self in envy in pushing forward for the goal of fame!' (Thayer, *Life of Beethoven*, 207). Wölfl subsequently dedicated his set of three sonatas Op. 7 to Beethoven. He also had other competitors, including Jan Ladislav Dussek (1760–1812), who apparently composed his piano sonata 'Le retour à Paris', Op. 64, in 1807 deliberately to outclass Wölfl's contemporaneous 'Non plus ultra' sonata, Op. 41.

Wölfl's compositions for piano 'make, by the standards of the day, high technical demands', but, as with his own piano playing, 'generally lack emotional substance' (*The New Grove*, vol. 27, 511), which clearly explains their subsequent neglect. His piano sonatas were composed between around 1786 and 1808, although the earliest publication of any of them was not until 1795. The three Op. 33 ones date from 1805 and the single Op. 25 sonata presumably from around 1803 (the year of his Opp. 24 and 26) – this work is not in fact listed in *The New Grove*. As the sleeve notes to the present CD by Chris Salocks explain, various compositions by Wölfl were published with identical opus numbers in different countries, and in the case of Op. 25 additionally a set of three accompanied sonatas with violin and cello. The present performances are based on early London editions, even though the Op. 33 set was first published by Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig. Apart from a solitary wind sextet, this is the only recording of any of Wölfl's music currently available, and Harmonia Mundi is thus to be commended. The Californian Jon Nakamatsu's pedigree as a pianist is considerable as winner of the Gold Medal at the Tenth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 1997 (his previous recordings have been of music by Chopin and concertos by Rachmaninov and Lukas Foss). A Steinway model D grand piano was used for the recording sessions, as in many a Beethoven sonata recording. With no score available to assist the reviewer, the technical accuracy of these performances cannot easily be determined. Exposition repeats are clearly observed within Wölfl's well-defined structures, and Nakamatsu's playing is, for the most part, stylish. His interpretation of Wölfl's frequently louder dynamic levels tends to be hard-edged and tonally monotonous, although there is plenty of variety in his softer playing, and his articulation is excellent in rapid passages.

Of the four sonatas included on this CD, the Op. 25 work is musically the most interesting. Each of the three Op. 33 sonatas, in C major, D minor and E major respectively, consists of the usual three movements (fast–slow–fast, all with rondo finales), with a total performing time here of between around thirteen and



sixteen minutes. In contrast, Op. 25 in C minor, subtitled ‘Sonate précédée d’une Introduction & Fugue’, consists of no fewer than five movements with a total timespan of some twenty-six minutes, more typical of a late Beethoven or Schubert piano sonata than one from the early 1800s. The first two movements are concise (each is around two minutes in length) and are labelled ‘Introduzione: Adagio’ and ‘Fuga [Allegro]’ respectively, with the third movement headed ‘Sonata’ in accordance with the work’s subtitle. Beethoven’s ‘Pathétique’ sonata in C minor, Op. 13, of 1797–1798 springs immediately to mind as an initial point of reference, and this masterly work may indeed have served as a model for Wölfl. The dramatic and primarily rhythmic introduction ends on a half-close and is followed by a strict fugue. The opening *Allegro molto* of the sonata proper is characterized by a rapid figuration in octaves. The subsequent musical material is dominated by a recurring two-bar motive based around the rhythm of a crotchet – dotted quaver/semiquaver – two crotchets – two minims that in its more lyrical guise within the second subject is positively Schubertian. The first bar of this figure also permeates the opening movement of Op. 33 No. 3 and must therefore be regarded as a stylistic cliché. The development is primarily motivic, and there is a regular recapitulation. The *Adagio* in A flat is also somewhat reminiscent of Beethoven’s ‘Pathétique’ and commences with a hymn-like theme with a later varied reprise. The *Allegretto* rondo finale with a popular-style refrain is actually the longest movement of the five and includes a Schubertian episode.

Overall the technical demands of Op. 25 do not exceed that of an average Beethoven or Schubert sonata, and the same is the case for the three Op. 33 sonatas. Space permits only a cursory overview of these slighter works. The opening *Allegro con Spirito* of Op. 33 No. 1 is almost Mozartian, with a melodically attractive songlike slow movement and a technically demanding finale in which the right hand has more-or-less continuous semiquavers throughout in a busy *moto perpetuo*. The outer movements of Op. 33 No. 2 are both in 3/4 time, the first movement’s second subject with a Schubertian waltz-style left-hand accompaniment and the finale an ‘Alla Polacca’. Many a turn of phrase is clearly reminiscent of either Beethoven or Schubert, the latter notably in more lyrical second subjects and occasionally in accompanying figurations, although without their imagination or greatness. Wölfl all too frequently runs out of steam, resorting to simple extensions, sequences or passagework, with accompaniments sometimes of the Alberti bass type. This naturally raises the question of his individuality as a composer. Despite occasional flashes of inspiration, this music clearly does not extend the boundaries of classical structure or style, which is hardly surprising of course, given Wölfl’s compositional status. Nevertheless, with performances such as these, in which Nakamatsu makes a convincing musical argument for a revival of Wölfl’s sonatas, a niche should be found in the repertory for this late classical ‘Kleinmeister’ of the keyboard.

DAVID J. RHODES

