

MOZART: Piano Sonatas 4, 5, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18; Fantasia; Gigue; Rondos

Marc-Andre Hamelin

Hyperion 68029 (2CD) 155 minutes

Sonatas 11, 17, 18

Menahem Pressler—LDV 19—61 minutes

Pressler's single CD clearly tells us of his intention to record all the composer's piano sonatas, whereas Hamelin's two-disc set does not. Neither entry gives a volume number. In the case of Hamelin, I suppose this leaves things open should he decide to follow up this first recording. In the case of Pressler a major disappointment is playing time that could easily have accommodated another sonata.

Pressler, now in his 90s, joins that select group of performers who continue to play with some artistic relevance and respectable technique far into their golden years. The two sonatas played by both could not be more sharply contrasted.

The many photographs in the *La Dolce Volta* booklet show Pressler smiling, all warm and bubbly. He clearly loves this music and his earlier recording—MHS vinyl—was one of the gems of the catalog. These, I'm sorry to say, leave much to be desired.

The opening Allegro of Sonata 17, while phrased with care, shows some caution and unevenness that can only be attributed to age. While finger slips are absent from this studio recording, a seriousness of purpose leaves little room for sparkle. Although the Adagio flows evenly, it does sound a bit studied—too concerned with getting things just right. In the final movement a sense of caution returns, and with it the occasional unevenness. With Hamelin the approach is more aggressive. His Allegro sparkles at a faster pace, and the flawless execution is often quite thrilling. The Adagio is caressed with more confidence and expression, and the final Allegretto is more imaginative in exploring contrasts and ebullience.

Sonata 18 finds Pressler making a sincere effort in the opening Allegro. He makes no attempt to push himself out of his comfort zone; and, if the pianism is a trifle dull and heavy, it is never unmusical. Hamelin at a faster tempo may sound a bit glib at first, but gives the music such excitement one has to accept his playing as joyful and effective. Everything is kept light in texture and, if I was reminded of Glenn Gould's speedy dispatches sometimes, his control continues to be amazing. I would call the Adagio a draw between the two pianists. Both phrase expressively, though some might find Pressler tending to drag. For the final Allegretto there can be no doubt that Hamelin, while always keeping things light, grabs the attention more easily. Pressler is more relaxed but convincing in his own way.

Pressler's Sonata 11 is his best on this recording. The long 'Theme and Variations' opening movement is beautifully judged, and the two ensuing movements are a joy to listen to. Once again his earlier MHS recording scores over this one in subtlety and avoidance of heaviness on the downbeat in the 'Alla Turca'. Since his MHS recordings were in stereo as well, his once great artistry would be best served if that earlier set were to be reissued. For this one I believe he simply waited too long.

Hamelin, fully enjoying the fruit of his

prime years as a pianist, again uses his magic touch to convince us of his ability to tackle practically anything. Nowhere is this better evidenced than in Sonata 12, where he adheres to a lightness of execution and speedy delivery but never lets the music degenerate into prissy fluff. The Adagio is deeply felt, and the final whirlwind Allegro assai takes one's breath away.

Sonata 10 finds a few surprises in the opening Allegro moderato. They give the impression of Hamelin toying with the music ever so slightly. This takes the form of slight hesitations or the almost willful *ritardandos* at the end of some phrases. The Adagio and final Allegretto go perfectly, with none of these intrusive interpretive points.

I found much to like in Sonata 13. Everything is smooth and even. The music sparkles without alien interpretive choices, and the tonal production is all one could wish for. The Andante cantabile is beautifully paced and quite moving. The final Allegretto *grazioso* smiles with an honesty of expression, yet overflows with dazzling technical brilliance.

The familiarity of Sonata 16 often finds players attempting to introduce all sorts of interpretive aberrations. Not so here. Hamelin lets the music speak forth with innocence and a total absence of fuss. As one of the "little sonatas for beginners" it exudes charm when played as well as here. Charm, sensitivity and beauty of execution is present in abundance as well in Sonata 4. The forte-piano contrasts in the Minuet titillate the ear as they should, without calling forth undue attention. A delicious virtuosic confection is what the final Allegro is all about. This is yet another sonata done as well as can be imagined.

The two Rondos, K 485 and 511, and the D minor Fantasia, K 397 make for some scrumptious sweetmeats in a program laden with delicacies. Once again they are played with delicacy, but not a hint of wimpiness. The Fantasia also has the added dimension of drama, strongly shaped and executed. The brief Gigue, K 574 is less often heard but fully worthy of more frequent resurrection with its almost Bachian energy.

Notes are good, and the sound is well up to Hyperion's lofty standards. If this is not the start of a Mozart series, it definitely should be.

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