



RECORDING OF THE MONTH

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)/ Ignaz MOSCHELES (1794-1870)

5 Studies in melodic counterpoint Op.137a (1863) [15:02]

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)/Carl CZERNY (1791-1857)

Violin Sonata No.9 in A major Op.47 "Kreutzer" transcribed for cello (1802) [38:33]

Paul HINDEMITH (1895-1963)

Cello Sonata Op.11 No.3 (1919) [20:42]

Jelena Očić (cello); Federico Lovato (piano)

rec. FWL Studios, Leipzig, Germany, 4-8 January 2011

CHALLENGE CLASSICS CC72524 [74:27]

Having made the [previous collaboration](#) between cellist Jelena Očić and pianist Federico Lovato one of my 2010 discs of the year I was keen to hear this recording. It is a pleasure to be able to report that all of the excellent impressions of that first disc are repeated but in addition the players prove as at home in 19th Century repertoire as they were in the 20th.

My criteria for considering discs for "disc of the year" status is quite simple: musical/technical excellence, high quality engineering/production and a sense of the revelatory whether introducing the listener to new music or revealing hidden facets of old favourites. Well, this might be my first disc to review of 2012 but there will have to be some pretty stunning performances to dislodge this one from another top six finish. I find every facet of this production totally commendable. The techniques of both players are so secure as to make any comment on those lines thoroughly superfluous. But such is the standard of just about any international soloist these days that criterion alone would not ignite my enthusiasm in the way this recital does. What gets me utterly transfixed are the big musical personalities on show here. Both players, but Očić in particular, revel in exploring the entire expressive range of both the music they play and their instruments. This is by nature a risk-taking strategy, a no-half-measures, music-making-as-recreation that has me spellbound. In concert they must be a stunning team. Not that this should imply any kind of reckless, gatling-gun unsubtle approach. Far from it – this is the ideal fusion of supreme musicianship and questing spirits.

As with their first CD this disc has the feeling of a well-structured recital. Each of the three main constituent works acts like a course at a particularly enjoyable banquet. The disc opens with five of Ignaz Moscheles *Studies in Melodic Counterpoint Op.137a*. That is a rather dry title for a sequence of pieces that prove to be little short of stunning. Czech-born Moscheles was part of Mendelssohn's close social and musical circle that studied and drew inspiration from the works of Bach. As liner-note writer Thomas Schipperges points out; one of classical music's enduring legends is that Mendelssohn almost single-handedly was responsible for the reappraisal of Bach in the 19th Century. If this has an element of truth as far as the public perception of the baroque master was concerned then in the conservatoires he never went away as a model for analysis and appreciation. Moscheles' studies played here – what a shame there was not room on this well-filled disc for all ten – are cello parts that are simply added on top of the pre-existing Bach preludes from *The well-tempered clavier*. Moscheles re-jigged the keyboard slightly but in essence this works as a 'modern' (ie mid-19th century)

commentary on baroque works. With the exception of the famous Gounod re-working of 1st prelude to create his *Ave Maria* I cannot think of another example of this way of arranging – and I love it. The highlights are a simply gorgeous *Prelude No.3 in d minor* [track 3] with Očić's counter-melodies gently musing over and intermingling with Lovato's beautifully poised account of the Bach original. Rightly, Očić provides a very Romantic response to Lovato's more appropriately cool and objective approach. This is also true of the fifth and final selection which is the famous *Prelude No.1 in C major*. The players set a brisk basic pulse but this allows the Moscheles long-breathed countermelody to arc over the bubbling prelude like an eagle soaring over a mountain. Očić skilfully paces her part building to an exultant climax [2:15 on track 5] before a perfectly judged retreat into silence.

The central panel of this three part programme is much more familiar ... although not in this version. Beethoven's 9th Violin Sonata *The Kreutzer* is a mainstay of any violinist's repertoire but I had never heard this transcription for cello by Beethoven's friend and disciple Carl Czerny. Therefore unlike the Bach/Moscheles this is a contemporary, probably commercially-inspired, transcription. The liner rightly points out that Beethoven was not averse to recycling his music into different forms and instrumentations; whether to promote its musical qualities or simply make some money is open to debate. What is unclear from the liner is exactly how long after the original's publication in 1805 Czerny made his transcription. Judging by ear alone he has changed very little to alter the structure or even keys of the original. Perhaps because I'm a paid up member of the violinist's union I am not wholly convinced by the basic premise of this transcription. Not that the performance here can be faulted on any level. This is a thrillingly virtuosic and dramatic reading which serves to emphasise just how revolutionary Beethoven was as early as 1803; the *Eroica* was still a couple of years away. Everything about this work from its scale to its structure and its virtuosity presages the aesthetic of the Romantic Age just dawning. Yet because it sits on that cusp it is impossible to ignore the elements of the Classical era that remain. So the surgingly ardent first movement comes off best of all in Czerny's reworking. On occasion I have felt 'dainty' violin playing here can sound underpowered and in danger of being overwhelmed – never an issue here. Throughout the disc Očić and Lovato have a remarkable rapport and technical ease that makes a mockery of the serious difficulties this music presents. Where I am less convinced – but again I have to stress this is a function of the transcription *not* the performance – is in the second and third movements where the original's light filigree passage-work flickering above the piano writing is now re-voiced into the middle of the texture. Likewise, the cello is not able to toss away with will-o-the-wisp nonchalance Beethoven's finger-twisting passage-work. There is no comparable work of this time in the cellist's repertoire – Beethoven's own cello sonatas 'proper' do not come close to the emotional and musical scale he achieved here. Again, I can only marvel at the extraordinary breadth of tone and expression that the players achieve. Just to take one example – the famous opening of the sonata where the string instrument plays alone a chordal sequence. I have often heard this played as a straight germinal introduction to the material that follows. Očić plays with an improvisatory freedom that both makes light of any technical issues but also harks back to a Baroque influence. Both here and in the Hindemith to come Očić finds moments of pared back, edge of the chair intimacy that is simply remarkable.

Moving on to the Hindemith after the 'main course' of the Beethoven might seem to be a transition fraught with potential musical indigestion. At first sight this does appear a musical *non sequitur*. But do not jump to conclusions – in fact this turns out to be an inspired piece of programming. I had not heard this work before. Dating from 1919 this is young man's music; confident and bursting with ideas. More to the point – and here is the skill in the programming – the debt to Bach is clear, albeit a debt paid through the refracting lens of 20th century harmony. The opening is a brilliant Toccata/Prelude-like virtuoso display that destroys any notion of Hindemith as 'dry' or 'academic' instantly. Not that this is easy listening; given the time and place of its composition how could any serious-minded work be so? There are other

versions in the catalogue but it is not exactly bulging with alternatives. The range of colour the players command again is little short of spectacular. Try around the 6:00 mark in the opening movement [track 9]. Lovato's right hand meanders aimlessly while the right tolls a sepulchral bell. Against this Očić's cello ranges in expression from pared back muted horror to full-throated passionate outbursts. In less skilful hands this extreme range could sound simply grotesque or bizarre. These players grade their transitions and pace the outbursts so well that the listener is swept along by the power of their narrative. I am taken back to this same pair's performance of the Kabalevsky Sonata which so impressed me on their last disc – this is music-making of equal world-class stature. Apparently Hindemith completely excised the original final movement after the early performances prior to publication. Not that the music that remains has any sense of dismemberment. There is still pain and rage. Again I find the pictorial power of this music totally compelling. Not that there is any direct programme although apparently it was originally entitled *Funeral Cortege and Bacchanalia* after a Whitman poem. Instead it just conjures immediate and powerful images in my mind. Again the keyboard seems condemned to prattle foolishly to itself obsessing over a little recurring figure like a child repeatedly bouncing a ball. It requires the cello to coerce the piano to leave the trivial material and join it in the main processional of the movement. Ironically towards the end of this section the cello becomes diverted by the repetitive figure before the movement peters out inconsequentially. The final movement – as it now is – bursts in without a break. This is unmistakably 20th century music although with the same galloping compound time rhythms of the final movement of the Beethoven. I cannot think of any other music written around this time quite like this – it looks forward to Shostakovich's nightmare scherzos and has a machine-age unrelenting energy which places it in a firmly post-romantic modernist camp. Perhaps most extraordinary is the way in which it ends; such a moth-like fluttering away into dark and silence that the first time finds the listener waiting for something else to happen. Its a final example of the superlative control exercised by these players and used to benefit the music. I am not an enormous fan of most recital discs for the simple reason that I am rarely in the mood for the disparate *moods* of such a disc. All the more credit therefore to the team who put this disc together for finding a programme of remarkably diverse and unusual repertoire which works so well both as individual items and more impressively a coherent whole.

Challenge Classics' production is unfussily sophisticated with the cello placed 'in front' of the piano but at the same time allowing the two instruments to interact as equal partners. The piano is caught with rich and even tone. As mentioned before the range of timbres that Očić finds from ghostly whisperings to guttural muscularity is a miracle in itself. That every nuance is caught with total fidelity reflects huge credit on the engineer and producer too. I rather like the minimalist style carried over from the first disc too; a high contrast cover photograph emphasising blacks and whites with a white CD. The liner is printed on good high-white paper in a reasonable sized font. The note is extensive and interesting although it suffers a little from the verbosity of academe when translated from another language: "the impulsive-compulsive drive marks the young Hindemith's awakening to the objective clarity of an anti-Romantic approach to musical expression" ... discuss - you have three hours to complete your answer, no conferring.

This is a simply stunning disc and I do not expect to hear a better recital this year. There is playing here that enshrines all of the musical values I hold most dear; peerless technique serving questing minds and brilliant musicianship. Rather touchingly the disc is dedicated to the memory of Bernard Greenhouse who mentored Očić - he would be very proud of his former colleague I am sure. Očić and Lovato are proving to be one of the most interesting, exciting and brilliant of all duetting teams at the moment regardless of instruments. A revelatory disc that deserves to achieve classic status – more please.

Nick Barnard

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