

Review by Jerry Dubins

BRAHMS Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 2.
Intermezzos: in E, op. 116/4; in A, op. 118/2 • Filippo Faes (pn); Volker Hartung, cond; Cologne New PO • JPK 031216 (2 CDs: 104:17)

To be honest, Filippo Faes is a pianist I’d not previously heard of, and I suspect many readers and colleagues haven’t either, for there is no entry for him in the *Fanfare* Archive. Only the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 2 is a relatively new recording, having been recorded in 2012. The First Concerto was recorded in 1996, and the two Intermezzos even earlier in 1990. According to the accompanying press release, the recordings of the two concertos have been remastered and are here reissued together for the first time.



From Faes’s bio I learned that he was born in London in 1960, and that in 1989 he took first prize at the International Schubert Competition in Dortmund. Since then he has distinguished himself as a leading authority on Schubert, not only as a performer, but also as conductor, author, and lecturer. Faes refuses, however, to be typecast. He has concertized widely throughout Europe, collaborated with many famous artists, and as both chamber music ensemble partner and conductor he has participated in premieres of new works by a number of contemporary composers. He has also produced programs of his own for radio and TV. Faes’s Schubert can be heard on a Naxos album of sonatas (8.551284), but his musical diversity can also be heard on recordings of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, Beethoven’s Triple Concerto, and Alfredo Casella’s Triple Concerto.

The first thing I noticed about Faes’s Brahms No. 1 was the timing of the first movement, 20:56. For the longest time now, I’ve been complaining about how slow most of today’s pianists take this movement, stretching it out to 22, 23, and even 24 minutes, when Brahms’s own practice metronome marking would suggest a timing of no more than 17 or 18 minutes. Faes doesn’t take the *Maestoso* at that breakneck speed, but at just under 21 minutes, his is the fastest performance—and therefore the closest to the composer’s own presumed tempo— than any other version I’ve reviewed since William Kapell’s 1953 recording with Mitropoulos and the New York Philharmonic, in which they blazed through the movement in just under 20 minutes. Faes doesn’t beat that mark, but he does beat Leon Fleisher’s 21:19, a recording with Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra I’ve always loved and considered an especially favorable coming together of pianist, conductor, and orchestra.

Surprised as I am to hear myself say this, Filippo Faes may actually displace Fleisher in my loyalty. It’s hard to describe the drama that Faes brings to the *Maestoso*, with no small contribution by Volker Hartung and the Cologne New Philharmonic Orchestra. The development section arrives on

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a bolt of lightning, charging the room with half a million volts of electricity. The thunder that follows is both fearsome and frightening. For sheer force of power and weight, this may be the most adrenalin-rush-producing performance of this movement I’ve ever heard. But there’s more, much more, to it than that. This is a reading that really digs deep into the score, bringing out fragmentary rhythmic and motivic counterpoints between the piano and orchestra that engage each other in interlocking exchanges that are revealed by no other performances I’ve heard.

In so many Brahms reviews, I’ve quoted Alex Ross’s observation that rhythm is Brahms’s secret weapon. Faes and Hartung take that assertion as seriously as anyone I know. They bring out the rhythmic elements—the offsetting of the metric downbeats (where is the bar line?), the syncopations, and the accents that work at cross purposes against each other between piano and orchestra—in ways that make themselves felt as never before.

But let me not leave the First Concerto without noting the palpable, throbbing beauty that Faes and Hartung bring to the second movement. Emotionally intensifying in ever-rising arcs, their *Adagio sostenuto* is a thing of deeply-felt expression and beauty that are beyond words to describe. Nor let me move on to the Second Concerto without noting the tremendous energy and drive Faes and Hartung invest in the First Concerto’s finale. This is a performance of Brahms’s D-Minor Concerto for the ages, and for a pianist I’d never heard of before, Filippo Faes, at least for me, has managed to sweep the field.

My long-held theory, that pianists who do well by Brahms’s First Concerto are apt to do less well by his Second, and vice-versa, has now been turned on its head by Faes; and with a performance of the Second Concerto like this, no one could be happier than I to be disabused of an idea worthy of the scrapheap. From the moment the Cologne orchestra’s hospitable first horn extends its warm welcome to the piano, I knew this performance was going to be special.

Faes handles the opening cadenza-like recitative very freely, with lots of rubato and unmarked pauses, which threw me at first. But as he neared the climax of it—just before the orchestra re-enters—I realized how he had been slowly and cumulatively building to that moment. And when the orchestra does enter, it’s in time and up to tempo. There is no sense of dragging or holding back. Both Faes and Hartung maintain a firm grip on the movement’s progress, yet at the same time, manage to project a feeling of expansiveness and majesty.

The second movement (*Allegro appassionato*) storms and rages as fiercely as one could ask for, but just as with the First Concerto, Faes and Hartung invest this movement with a frightening dramatic power that derives from the rhythmic fight to the death between the combatants—soloist vs. orchestra. I was left so shaken at the end of this movement I had to take a short break before continuing.

Ursula Heckmann, the orchestra’s principal cellist, plays the *Andante*’s solo beautifully, but without sentimentalizing it; nor do Faes and Hartung allow the movement to drag. Their tempo feels a bit faster for this movement than is the norm, and their conception of it doesn’t quite conform to the loving, embracing romance it’s so often portrayed to be. There are upwellings of unrest and even lashing out in anger and frustration in this performance. It’s different and unusual, to be sure.

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The finale is one of those emotionally ambiguous movements in which Brahms turns a jaunty, happy-go-lucky sounding tune into a grim, march-like juggernaut. The two personalities clash and vie against each other in a constant battle for dominance, creating a very unsettled and unsettling feeling. And once again, the whole drama is driven by fierce rhythmic conflicts, which, in turn, drive this performance like none other I’ve heard.

Having heard Filippo Faes’s accounts of Brahms’s two piano concertos, I would like to know how it is possible for a pianist of this stature to be virtually unknown, at least here in the States? These performances alone should vault him to the top echelon of artists on the world stage today.

That said, you may have noticed in the above that I have fairly consistently named Faes and Hartung together as a pair, and that is because Volker Hartung and the Cologne New Philharmonic Orchestra are players as crucial to these performances as is Faes. I don’t think I’ve ever heard a conductor and orchestra as in sync with a soloist as are Faes, Hartung, and the New Cologne Philharmonic, not just in terms of technical matters such as coordination and balance, but in terms of a shared interpretation of the music and an absolute conviction in that vision.

The two Intermezzos included as encores at the end provide a few moments of calm to breathe, contemplate, and come down from the high of the two concertos. These are “live” performances, taped in three different venues—Bremen, Hamburg, and Cologne—so the recorded sound varies somewhat based on hall acoustics. Applause is included at the ends of the Second Concerto and Intermezzos, but not the First Concerto, and the occasional cough and rustle from the audience is audible.

These are very special performances, and I hope that these recordings will lead to the much wider recognition that Filippo Faes deserves. **Jerry Dubins**

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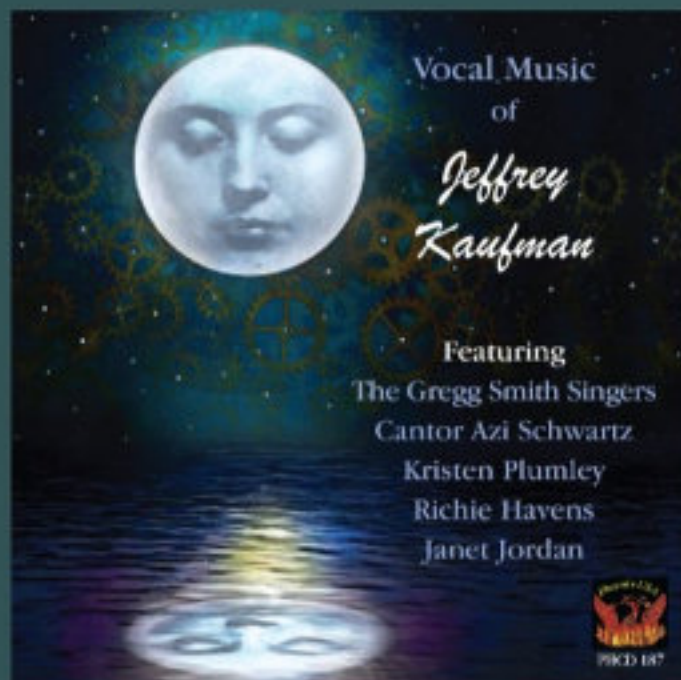
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