

Meridian

Carl Maria von Weber: Piano Sonatas - volume 1
Pier Paolo Vincenzi

CDE 84639

Meridian

A Natural Sound Recording

CDE 84639 TT 76'00"



LC 13637 DDD MCPS

COMPACT
disc
DIGITAL AUDIO

Recorded in
"Auditorium - House of Culture"
Acquasparta (TR) Italy
22-25 Sept 2015
Recorded by Richard Hughes
Produced by Susanne Stanzeleit

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P.O. Box 317, Eltham, London, SE9 4SF

CARL MARIA VON WEBER

Piano Sonata No.1 in C major, Op.24

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|-----|-------------------|------|
| [1] | Allegro | 9'43 |
| [2] | Adagio | 8'22 |
| [3] | Menuetto: Allegro | 8'30 |
| [4] | Rondo: Presto | 4'34 |

Piano Sonata No.2 in A flat major, Op.39

- | | | |
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| [5] | Allegro moderato, con spirito ed assai legato | 15'55 |
| [6] | Andante | 6'51 |
| [7] | Menuetto capriccioso: Presto assai | 4'09 |
| [8] | Rondo: Moderato e molto grazioso | 7'11 |

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| [9] | Invitation to the Dance, Op.65 | 10'40 |
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Vol. 1



My first encounter with the piano sonatas by Carl Maria von Weber happened about 10 years ago through Dino Ciani's wonderful recordings. Thanks to my admiration of this great piano poet, who died too young, I became fascinated with these remarkable works, which might otherwise well have remained unknown to me for many years – Weber's sonatas are after all not exactly the focal point of modern concert hall programming. Having said that, in addition to Ciani's recordings, there have been many fascinating renditions by great pianists such as Cortot, Richter, Gilels and Arrau. Their interpretations are often extremely different from each other, sometimes conflicting dramatically (think of the difference in speed of the Allegro Feroce of the Sonata op. 49 between two recordings I referred to, Ciani and Richter), however, all show a deep respect and a clear awareness of the importance of these works not only in terms of history, but also, and above all, aesthetics.

One only needs to look at the 19th century to see to what extent Weber was revered by musicians; Chopin certainly had Weber in his repertoire, and Liszt even put himself in charge of an edition of Weber's works (which included the rather arbitrary addition of a few notes too many – not really acceptable in our current climate of respecting the Urtext above anything else!)

One therefore asks oneself what might have led these works to have been gradually pushed to the sidelines of the popular concert repertoire. After all, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Weber was a very "trendy" composer: the young man, with a sure hand and fresh and brilliant ideas, knew how to win the favour of the public and, in a sense, even how to meet its demands. As an author of symphonic music, he attracted attention as a fine orchestrator, and

as an author of opera he was able to exploit the growing need for the creation of a proper German style, in a time when Italy still exported its model to Germany and half of Europe. Even as a pianist, Weber knew what he was doing in terms of being a catalyst for attention and admiration: his piano playing, especially in the shorter, more concise works, mainly conformed to the atmosphere of "salon music" that was asserting itself in bourgeois circles. Music of less formal structures but containing great displays of virtuosity, the exploration of not only the tonal and expressive possibilities, but also the "acrobatic" aspect of piano playing were evolving rapidly.

Is this perhaps the reason Weber is often almost forgotten or at least not seen as relevant for the pianist of the present day? Perhaps nowadays his music seems insufficiently "committed", more an elegant exercise in style, poles apart from other, deeper and richer experiences of his contemporaries? The two sonatas on this CD were written over a period of time ranging from 1812 to 1814. They were the years, for example, in which Beethoven was working on his Opus 90 and Opus 101 sonatas.

It is hard not to highlight the differences between these two types of new compositions: one constantly extending form and structure, almost written not "for the piano" but "from the piano", the other, a show piece full of theatrics, written in pursuit of the effect, of the immediacy of expression and, in some cases, even bordering on the rather showy virtuosic side of performance. Is this distinction enough, however, to rank the first as class A music and throw the second into oblivion?

I have always believed that one of the biggest mistakes in approaching the listening to and the reading of musical literature is the desire to, at all costs,



build a personal or, worse still, collective "classification", thus establishing entirely arbitrary criteria for judgment.

When stating that Weber's piano music is less important from a historical point of view, than the output of his contemporaries, we would be making a serious mistake. It is beyond all reasonable doubt that Weber's way of treating the piano had a substantial impact on the Romantic generation which followed him; Chopin and Mendelssohn primarily (and like other great contemporaries more readily forgotten, Hummel to start with), and it is only partially true that the form elaborated by him lacks the structural tension that, starting with Haydn, had reached its maximum expressive potential with Beethoven. Moreover, it is later Beethoven who tried to trace, in his last works, a possible alternate route for the future. A possible "alternate route", not the only one possible, if you do not want to make the mistake of perceiving the Beethoven hyperbole as the only way forward, with the grotesque result of creating a chasm in the evolution of musical language in general and with the piano in particular, a "dark gap" between the Bagatelle opus 126 and the first experiences of Chopin (which are, however, chronologically almost contemporary). Nor, if you will allow me to say, can we place between these two worlds, the universe of Schubert in its own right, more of a poetic style that perhaps reaches out more to the young Brahms than to his contemporary colleagues of the first Romantic generation.

Consequently we cannot ignore the historical importance of the indispensable contribution of the Hummels, the Fields and, to get back to the CD, of the Carl Maria von Webers.

The Sonata Opus 24 still surrenders a great deal to the taste of "salon music": the fourth movement, Presto, the first to be written from a chronological

perspective, is revealed as a piece of "skill" (L'infatigabile, as Weber himself called it, then it was Alkan who gave it the most famous title *Perpetuum mobile*), and also the other fast movements are not shy to celebrate a triumphant virtuosity made up of arpeggios, double notes, octaves, scales and leaps as arduous as they are effective in order to surprise and fascinate audiences. It is not the case, however, that all this, should come at the price of an original understanding of form and its internal dialogue.

Let us analyse, for example, how the thematic material in the first movement is treated, or how Weber addresses the comparison with the Sonata form, the test for each composer of the time. After a theatrical diminished seventh arpeggio (which would normally be a prelude to some kind of tragedy), a peaceful first subject in C major reveals itself, with soft and simple sonorities. The texture is enlivened by a long, decidedly contrasting episode made of leaps and sudden changes of register, virtuosity as challenging as it is spectacular. It is not a simple modulating bridge; it is something much more complex, both in texture and in harmonic structure. What happens after is fascinating: tension fades away and a second subject appears, in G major, light and elegant, totally generated by the material created in the bridge, which carries out its function to temper the momentum just experienced: there is contrast and also dialectic, not between the two main sections, but between the connecting episode and the second subject. The development centers around the thematic material of the modulating bridge. The first subject only reappears at the end of this segment, in the curious key of E flat major. It is not a real recovery, the tone of the structure will be, once again, definitely possessed by the exuberant transitional episode that, in restoring the formal balance, guides us to the second subject, this time staying in C major.



Now, this brief summary of the form of the first movement of Opus 24 would be enough to silence the criticism of those who, to this day, accuse Weber's music of superficiality and shallowness. Beethoven began to follow his route his way towards a certain aesthetic of the sublime, others, in an effort to revitalise the language of tradition, followed new paths: Weber, in this context, urged a dramatisation of the musical discourse, even in the instrumental production.

The Sonata Opus 39 in A flat major, was composed two years later (1814) and among the four, it was the favourite of the romantic generation and of the interpreters of the twentieth century. Orchestral sonorities, bass tremolos, abundant didactic indications (morendo, passionato, con duolo, con molt'affetto ... almost a sort of programmatic track) make this masterpiece an incredible leap forward in the ways of comprehension, not so much for the form as for the internal tension. Weber's is a pioneering experience, which will however, leave tangible traces in the next generation: as in fact suggested by some commentators, perhaps it will be these experiences, not the echoes of Vienna (the last offerings of Beethoven and Schubert) which will inspire the sonata creations of Schumann.

This disc concludes with one of Weber's most famous piano works: Aufforderung zum Tanze, Opus 65, a masterpiece that needs no introduction. We only have to reflect on how, also in this case, Weber's taste is in line with that of the time, and yet he knows how to take advantage of the tendencies of his contemporaries to anticipate the times: a cross between a brilliant rondo and a waltz, in this passage it is impossible not to see a helping hand given to the great musical production of the Strauss family!

This publication aims to be the first of two volumes, the second of which will contain the other two sonatas. Believe me, this project has not been driven by the wish to add yet another complete recording of complete works to the catalogue. What it has been driven by is a real desire to redress the balance and to ensure Weber's compositions receive the attention they so richly deserve.

The attempt to reach a fair balance between spontaneity and freshness - without being superficial - and depth and density - avoiding any didactic temptation - was perhaps the most difficult task in interpreting these works.

I hope that in listening to these masterpieces, you can enjoy the same joy I felt in examining them in depth.
Pier Paolo Vincenzi



www.pierpaolovincenzi.it