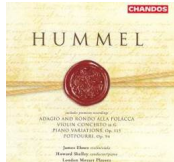


Hummel – Potpourri-Adagio-Variations-Violin Concerto (2004)

Written by bluesever

Monday, 09 January 2017 14:45 -

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1. *Potpourri in G minor for Viola and Orchestra, Op. 94 (1820) [18:42]* Adagio and Rondo alla Polacca in A major for Violin and Orchestra (undated) [10:38]
2. *Adagio con moto* 3. *Rondo alla Polacca*
Variations in B flat major for Piano and Orchestra on a Theme from the Berlin Singspiel "Das Fest der Handwerker", Op. 115 (1830) [15:07]
4. *Larghetto* 5. *Allegretto – Larghetto* 6. *Finale. Vivace*
Concerto in G major for Violin and Orchestra (undated) [21:40]
7. *Alegro risoluto – Rallantando* 8. *Adagio* 9. *Rondo*
James Ehnes - violin and viola London Mozart Players Howard Shelley - conductor and pianist

With the release of this new recording, Chandos now has nine Hummel discs in its inventory. I first became familiar with Hummel's music through an early 1990s Chandos disc of two piano concertos played by Stephen Hough. The performances were magnificent and the music outstanding, but I never dreamed that so many additional Hummel recordings would be issued by this exceptional British label.

As the recorded legacy of Hummel continues to grow, it is clear that he was one of the most accomplished composers of the period bridging the Classical and Romantic eras. His popularity during his lifetime was immense, and Franz Schubert thought so highly of Hummel that he dedicated his wonderful last three piano sonatas to him. Listening to Hummel's music, it is easy to hear why he was so popular. Hummel's works are informed by expert architecture, logical musical progression that sounds natural at all times and an abundance of musical invention. Those not convinced by his music tend to point to a deficiency of emotional depth. This view has some merit as Hummel's goal was to please his audience with attractive and vibrant themes. However, the advantageous features noted above more than offset any lack in emotional fecundity. Also, we need look no further than Hummel's sacred choral music to hear the depth of the human condition generally not found in his other compositions.

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The new Chandos recording showcases a fine mix of the viola, violin, and piano as solo instruments. As it happens, the sole work on the program not quite from Hummel's top drawer is the Potpourri for Viola and Orchestra, but its history is an interesting one. Until recently, it was known only in a reduced version with half its length omitted and its full orchestration not realized. Hummel composed the piece in 1820, and it was published a year later with an additional version for cello and orchestra (Op. 95). Chamber versions, a form quite popular for the purpose of playing orchestral music in the home, were also prevalent at the time.

Hummel's Potpourri has eight sections/variations that have an improvisatory element and contain music from Mozart and Rossini operas as well as an incisive fugue. Although the work is listed as being in the key of G minor, only the "Grave" first section belongs to that key. This first section is a stunning display of poignant refrains from the viola that makes one anxious to hear the remainder of the work. The second section is a gorgeous Andante in B flat major from the aria "Il mio tesoro" from Mozart's Don Giovanni. With the third section Allegro in D major, Hummel offers vivacious and exciting music. The fourth section Allegretto in F major will be familiar to many listeners as Figaro's aria "Se vuol ballare" from Mozart's Marriage of Figaro. The fifth section in A minor is marked "Allegro assai" and unfolds into a compelling fugue superbly crafted by the composer. Unfortunately, the next two sections are rather innocuous, but the final section is a rousing Allegro ma non troppo in 6/8 time. Overall, I find that this delightful work takes on a 'sameness' as it progresses through the eight sections. It isn't among Hummel's more rewarding compositions, but his trademark elements of naturally flowing and melodic music are apparent throughout the piece.

The remainder of the program consists of three premiere recordings, each one representing prime-time Hummel. The Adagio and Rondo alla Polacca has an attractive slow introduction of about two minutes followed by a vivacious eight-minute Rondo having an excellent blend of smoothly flowing lines and sharply contoured and confident declarations. The musical invention of the work is ample, and every passage is highly enjoyable. Most impressive is the exciting conclusion preceded by the violin's comforting arioso. The Variations in B flat major has a remorseful Larghetto introduction followed by a series of increasingly rich and ornamented variations that sparkle appealingly.

Chandos saves the best for last with the substantial Violin Concerto in G major. Although I stated earlier that the work was prime-time Hummel, the manuscript is undated and not in Hummel's hand. As the liner notes indicate, it is likely that more than one composer contributed to the composition. Also, the manuscript is not complete, leading Howard Shelley and Stephen Hogger to edit and complete it for this recording. In three movements, the opening theme has the rhythmic swagger and imitative passages so prevalent in Hummel's music. After a short but

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pleading 2nd Movement Adagio, the Rondo begins with one of Hummel's most ingratiating tunes emanating from the solo violin. It scissors its way through a sinewy labyrinth most appealingly, putting this reviewer in the dancing mode.

Performances throughout are exceptional. Howard Shelley has been a prime champion of Hummel's works, and his conducting and playing are fully idiomatic and reflective of Hummel's most endearing musical traits. James Ehnes, a rising star among string soloists, handles both the solo violin and viola parts with technical aplomb and enthusiasm. I would have preferred more sharply etched playing from Ehnes, but I cannot deny his lovely tone and heart-felt interpretations. Sound quality is exceptional, particularly the clarity invested in the solo string music.

In conclusion, those who have been collecting the Chandos series of Hummel recordings have no reason to hesitate acquiring the new release. I am also highly enthusiastic about the Hummel sacred choral music that Chandos is now offering. There are two discs to date, both conducted by the highly versatile Richard Hickox with the period instrument orchestra Collegium Musicum 90. As Chandos continues to explore Hummel's legacy, I tip my hat to this excellent enterprise that has put him firmly on the musical map where he belongs. ---Don Satz, musicweb-international.com

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