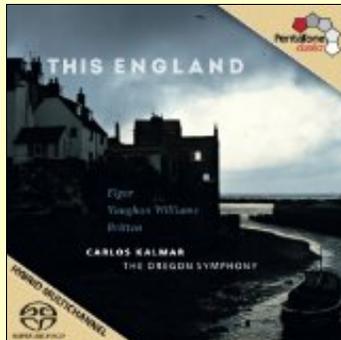


Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

February, 2013



"This England," music by Elgar (Cockaigne), Britten (Passacaglia and Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*), Vaughn Williams (Symphony No. 5) Carlos Kalmar, Oregon Symphony PentaTone (Hybrid SACD)

Carlos Kalmar scores impressively with "This England," only his second SACD release since he took over the reins as music director of the Oregon Symphony Orchestra in 2003. In a program of choice symphonic works by Edward Elgar, Ralph Vaughn Williams and Benjamin Britten, the Uruguay-born maestro reveals the qualities that are best and most enduring in the English composers. The distinctive sound of the Oregon Symphony, whose solid brass and string sounds seem resonant of the Pacific northwest itself, reinforces the mood of the music in many ways that are difficult to define precisely, but nonetheless felt by the listener.

Elgar's Cockaigne overture, subtitled "In London Town," is his affectionate and often humorous portrayal of the endless vitality of the city itself ("Cockaigne" being as synonymous for London as "Gotham City" is for New York). Kalmar and the Oregon do a grand job with the flow and sweep of Elgar's seamless panorama of urban life, with its bustling crowds, three different brass band episodes (including one band of Salvationists with the cornet typically off-key), and a horse-drawn brewery wagon, from which several barrels of beer appear to tumble off and bounce over the cobblestone pavement at one point in the score (answer to a drunkard's prayer!)

Vaughn Williams' Fifth Symphony had roots going back to 1938, but when the composer premiered it at a Proms concert at Royal Albert Hall in London in 1943, it was absolutely the right work to appeal to a war-weary public. It is the quietest, most ruminative of all the composer's symphonies, beginning and ending in mist, disquieting and tonally uncertain with its muted horns at the very opening but confident and secure in the beautiful string passages at the very end, as the composer all but takes the audience home again and tucks it into bed in a



Elgar: Cello Concerto + Smetana: Moldau, etc. Zuill Bailey, cello; Krzysztof Urbanski, Indianapolis Symphony Telarc

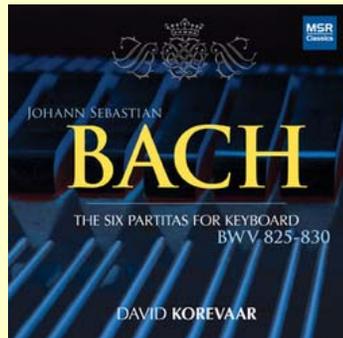
Considering the fact that Telarc comes out with a new classical CD once in a blue moon these days, they really have a way of making every little bit and MHz count! The present offering featuring super cellist Zuill Bailey with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra under its music director Krzysztof Urbanski is no exception. Bailey and Urbanski undertake their tasks as soloist and conductor as if these sessions were to be their last recorded testament on earth and they were determined to make the most of it. The results are stunning, almost overwhelming. This CD should, in fact, qualify as an early top contender for industry honors.

Zuill Bailey, in particular, is so intensely focused, it's frightening. It's as if we were listening to a young Janos Starker. The Alexandria, VA native and Juilliard graduate who is currently an exclusive Telarc recording artist cultivates a dark tone and a concentrated dramatic energy appropriate to Sir Edward Elgar's Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85. This work is often described as "elegiac" and "contemplative," but that doesn't mean its composer was at peace with the world. Quite the contrary. Elgar was profoundly influenced by his memories of the Great War that had caused such carnage and destruction, and thus underlying moods of sadness and anger frequently rise to the surface.

From the four heavy chords by the cello upon its initial entrance and the recitative with a nobly poignant melody that soon follows it, the cello part requires the utmost concentration from the soloist and his closest sympathy and coordination with conductor and orchestra. There are many mood and key changes throughout this four-movement work, the *fortissimo* restatement at the climax of the first movement by soloist and orchestral strings of that same striking melody being just one example. For another, take the fast-building crescendo with pizzicato

valedictory mood reminiscent of the ending of his Second ("London") Symphony of 1922. Kalmar does a wonderful job of capturing the subtle moods of this beautifully and effectively understated symphony that does not need to rely on histrionics to make its points. Most beautiful movement of all is the Third, a Romanza marked *Lento* that, with its cor anglais solo and muted strings, has conjured up for many listeners the picture of an English garden by moonlight. I get a different image from the music intoned quietly and confidently by the brass in the middle of the movement, taken from the lyric "Save me! Save me, Lord! My burden is greater than I can bear" in the composer's opera *Pilgrim's Progress*. Instead, I visualize the famous news photo of the dome of St. Paul's emerging undamaged and shining in the morning sun, seeming to drift serenely and triumphantly above a blanket of smoke and fire following a night of the Blitz.

Well, every man to his own imagery. There is absolutely *no* ambiguity, either in Benjamin Britten's concept or its superb realization by Kalmar and the Oregon Symphony of the Four Sea Episodes and Passacaglia from the opera *Peter Grimes*. We have musical images of the sea itself, interspersed with darker imagery representing the guilt-driven state of mind of the opera's protagonist. It is not the pleasant seacoast at Brighton we hear in Britten's music, but rather the more forbidding seascape of Aldeburgh in the composer's native Suffolk, with its dark blue shingle beaches, cold sunlight and colder waters. The "Storm" finale, marked *Presto con fuoco*, says it all, as powerful drum beats and jagged phrases from the brass that seem to emanate from the depths of the sea, together with the crying of sea gulls captured in the lull just before the end, foretell Peter Grimes' tragic death.

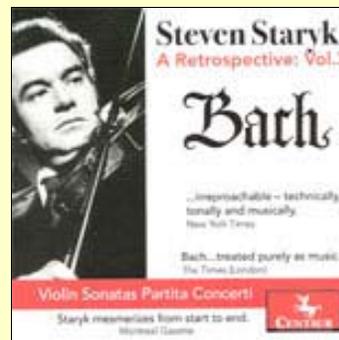


Bach: Complete Partitas, BWV 825-830
David Korevaar, piano
MSR Classics

David Korevaar, that wonderful American pianist who was once a pupil of Earl Wild and now balances a very active performance career with teaching at the University of Colorado, gives us yet another splendid exhibition of technical prowess allied with musicianship in this account of Bach's six keyboard Partitas. His is a first-rate achievement on a number of levels, beginning with the firmly-centered, sensually beautiful, clear tone that permeates the entire recital. These works, which were originally written for harpsichord, usually sound to good

chords in the cello at the opening of the second movement. It overwhelms us just as we are still ruminating on the significance of its predecessor. The lyrical third movement flows without a break directly into the fourth. It begins sensationally with a rising crescendo, followed by another deeply moving recitative and cadenza by the cellist. It ends *fortissimo* with a blaze of fireworks followed by three quiet chords that let us know, in no uncertain terms, that this is the end.

The rest of the program (at 36:45, it could hardly be termed a "filler") is given to sensational performances by Urbański and the ISO of Czech composer Bedřich Smetana's *Vyšehrad* (The High Castle), *Vltava* (The Moldau) and *Šárka*. As these are the first three of six tone poems in Smetana's cycle *Má Vlast* (My Country), may we take what we are given here as an earnest of more recorded treasures to come? Certainly, Urbański makes a fine impression in the first two tone poems, with their nostalgia-colored imagery of a glorious but faded past, guiding us surely and smoothly through the several vistas as both High Castle and Moldau emerge, create indelible pictures in our imagination, and then fade from view. But *Šárka*, the legend of the Amazon maiden tied to a tree as bait for a princely knight and his hunting companions, creates the strongest impression of all. Beginning *attacca* at the very end of The Moldau, the music tells its lurid tale of lust, love, deceit and sudden death in unmistakable terms as Urbański guides orchestra and listener through all these vivid elements with consummate skill.



Steven Stryk Retrospective, Vol. 3
Bach Concertos, Sonatas, Partita No. 2
Centaur Records

During his long active career, Steven Stryk was often termed the "King of Concertmasters," having served in that capacity in orchestras on both sides of the Atlantic. Currently in retirement (though still quite active as a teacher and competition judge), he began compiling a 30-CD anthology drawn from recordings of some 190 major compositions that he made between 1952 and 2003. Released to the public as the "Steven Stryk Retrospective," they reveal a concert artist who was remarkably true to himself. That goes double for these 1961-1978 Bach recordings. Whether "live" or made under studio conditions, it makes no difference. The Stryk sound is distinctively the same. For this artist, the

advantage in piano arrangements, but never, to my recollection, better than this.

Scholarly research is another key to Korevaar's success with the Partitas. By its nature, the partita was a combination of an initial formal movement, followed by a suite of dances. By Bach's day, only the Menuet was still actually danced, but, in the composer's hands, the others were far from fossilized relics and retain the spirit and vitality of the original forms. In a very real sense, this is keyboard music that "dances," and Korevaar is very much aware of this quality in the music. With his own research into baroque performance style reinforced by Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne's *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach* (Indiana University Press, 2009), Korevaar is keenly aware of how important dancing was in 18th century life. Not just dancing, mind you, but doing it with seemingly artless grace (The word "nonchalant" crept into our own language about this time).

That enables him to do such a beautiful job of characterizing individual dances of the same type. For instance, the Allemande in Partita 2 is serious, even agitated at times, while the one in Partita 4 has a noticeably probing, spiritual quality. Rhythmical values and tempi are also of vital importance. Bach's Giges afford plentiful examples. The one in Partita 1 is a technically demanding exercise in perpetual motion, while the Gigue in 6 is wonderfully bold and vital, more like a caprice than a dance and informed with what Korevaar describes as "an early example of swing."

The six partitas all begin with a different generic form, representing all the ways used in Bach's day to kick off a dance suite: Preludium, Sinfonia, Fantasia, Overture, Praeambulum, and Toccata, in order. Those in 2, 4 and 6 represent genres in which robustly fugal sections were expected. The Toccata in Partita 6 is altogether remarkable with its improvisatory flourishes at beginning and end and its mighty three-voice fugue that Korevaar carries off to perfection. And he does a great job distinguishing the gracefully flowing French Courantes in 2 and 3 from their faster triple-meter Italian cousin the Corrente in the other four partitas. The Corrente in 6 is the most stunning of the set, with its jazzy leaps and skittering syncopations over a walking accompaniment of eighth notes – *wonderful* to hear in this account.

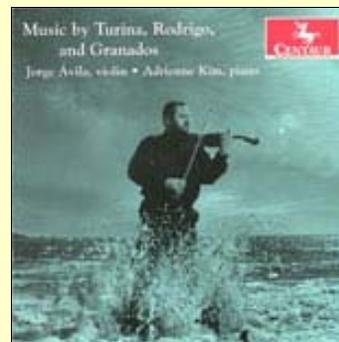
Korevaar does not trip up in the transition between the major sections of the Courante in 2, where many other artists come up a cropper. But he does have some difficulty with Menuet II in Partita 1, where he has to really bear down to take its rhythmic complexities in stride after the sensationally fast pace he has set for himself in Menuet I. But these are flyspecks, and should not impair your enjoyment of this very attractive 2-CD set. That pleasure is enhanced even more by the Candlewood Digital high resolution *Natural Presence*TM recoding, superbly recorded, edited and mastered by Richard Price.

music was the thing, and his grasp of the subject went well beyond the scope of the instrument itself.

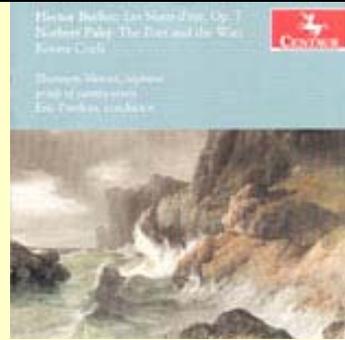
From the very opening of the Allegro of Bach's Concerto No. 1 in A minor, recorded with Bernard Haitink and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam in October, 1961, we pick hear the magisterial quality that led *Gramophone* to describe Staryk as "one of the great ones." The string sound, richly burnished, has a definite sheen to it. The performance is scrupulously honest and straight-forward. Staryk prefers to let the music speak for itself, without any gimmicks, so that the heart-melting quality of the music in the Andante – and even more so, that of the Adagio in the sumptuously rich Concerto No. 2 in E major, with Staryk serving as soloist and conductor of the Vancouver Baroque Orchestra in a 1975 studio recording – comes through naturally and unforced as an essential element of the music.

The Sonatas for Violin and Keyboard in G minor, BWV 1020, and E minor, BWV 1023, were both recorded with harpsichordist Kenneth Gilbert. For once, there is an equal partnership in these (to my mind) much-abused and seldom-convincing works, as Staryk and Gilbert make telling contributions without either partner sacrificing his own distinctive artistry. Gilbert is particularly effective in the opening Allegro of BWV 1020. Again, it is the Adagio movements that make the most lasting impression, which is as it should be.

Staryk's account of Partita No 2 in D minor for solo violin is actually segued from two recorded performances. Movements 1-4 were recorded in London in 1962, and the fifth movement, Chaconne, in Toronto in 1978. There is some rationale for this, as the Chaconne, longer and more elaborate than all the previous movements combined, was not an integral part of a typical dance suite, or partita, but a set of harmonic variations on a repeated pattern from a ground bass. This Chaconne staggers the imagination in its seemingly endless wealth of inspiration and range of moods, from pensive to exultant, and even including an imitation posthorn call. Staryk explores it all with the utmost in concentrated power and insight that made his name famous.



Music by Turina, Rodrigo, and Granados
Jorge Avila, violin; Adrienne Kim, piano
Centaur Records



Berlioz: *Nuits d'été* + Palej: *The Poet and the War*
 Shannon Mercer, soprano
 Eric Paetkau, the group of twenty-seven
 Centaur Records

Canadian soprano Shannon Mercer, backed by the Toronto-based chamber orchestra known as the group of twenty-seven under Eric Paetkau, lends her distinctly luminous voice to a memorable account of Hector Berlioz' song cycle *Les Nuits d'été* (Summer Nights). Then she stretches her ample tessitura even more to include the demands of the song cycle *The Poet and the War* by Polish-Canadian composer Norbert Palej. It all makes for a provocative, if not always sensually beautiful, program.

In terms of sensual beauty, there is little that could be added to *Les Nuits d'été*. Berlioz, famous as an operatic and symphonic composer, eschewed the theatrics in his settings of six poems by Théophile Gautier in favor of a more purely lyrical style that was better suited to these reveries and meditations on romantic love, absence of one's beloved, the sadness of separation, and the consolation of death, with images of white monuments and brooding cypresses as a backdrop. Mercer's artistry captures for us the aching tenderness that infuses Berlioz' music, to be relieved at the end of the cycle by the rising spirits and billowing sails of the final song, "*L'île inconnue*" (The Undiscovered Isle).

Palej's *The Poet and the War*, with its lush harmonies that are liable to become unpredictably bitter without notice and its often bleak soundscape, may not be as euphonious as the Berlioz songs, but there is a good reason. These are settings of verses from *White Magic and Other Poems* by the short-lived Polish patriot Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński (1921-1944) who perished, together with his wife and unborn child, in the uprising against the Nazis. Many of these poems are bitter reflections on the misfortune of having lived and loved in a tragic time and place, as in *Black Lullaby*: "Night is growing and ruin hits the windows. / The wind, blind like me, before our home kneels down. / Who took that time away from us, free from fear – my love?" Mercer captures this mood exceptionally well.

The group of twenty-seven - for some reason, they list their name without caps - take the stage in Palej's eloquently moving symphonic work *Rorate Coeli*, which draws its inspiration from Isaiah 45:8: "*Drop down dew,*

Honduran violinist Jorge Ávila, a U.S. citizen since 2003, is joined by pianist Adrienne Kim, his recital partner of the past 15 years, in a splendid program of works by Spanish composers Enrique Granados, Joaquín Turina, and Joaquín Rodrigo. These three, representing the regions of Catalonia, Andalusia, and Valencia, respectively, were seminal figures in the rise of a distinctly Spanish school of music in the 20th century.

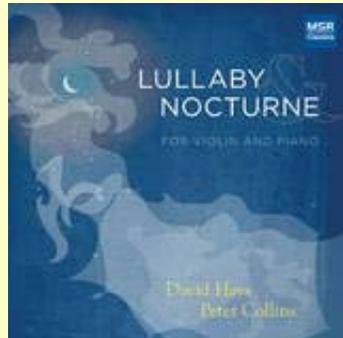
That wasn't as easy a task as you might think. For two centuries, foreigners – Italian, Russian, and French – had been ransacking the attractive folk and popular music of Spain. In order to create a uniquely nationalist school, these new Spanish composers needed to go considerably beyond the simple folkloric level that had inspired their predecessors, while at the same time retaining its recognizable flavor. Other European composers were exploring nationalistic veins, of course. Some, such as Bartók and Sibelius, had set themselves the task of making the foursquare melodies and rhythms of their own folk cultures more appealing to a broader audience. The Spaniards had precisely the opposite problem; namely, how to overcome the prejudice of many critics that music so enchanting to the ear must be "easy music" to compose.

Consequently, the music of Granados, Turina, and Rodrigo heard on this disc requires a mutual sympathy and a closer integration between performers than merely that of melody and accompaniment. For this, Ávila and Kim are ideally equipped by temperament and familiarity with each other's styles. Ávila's violin captures all the wonderful warmth in the opening Adagio section of the finale of Turina's Sonata No. 2 for Violin and Piano, subtitled *Sonata Española*. Along with Kim's propulsive pianism, he does an absolutely stunning job with the Paganini-like virtuosity in the final Allegro molto of Rodrigo's exuberant *Sonata Pimpanete*.

Kim does beautifully with the Debussy-like impressionism in the opening of the Turina sonata, and is absolutely attuned to the strumming chords that lie under the violin's languorously passionate cadenza in the same composer's *Rumaniana*, a tribute to the gypsy ethos in Spanish music. There's more excellent work from both partners as they realize the sunny warmth of Granados' *Danza Andaluza* and the exalted feeling and discretely erotic flavor of his single movement Sonata for Violin and Piano.

Praise also for Adam Abeshouse, who produced and engineered these recordings at the Performing Arts Center, SUNY Purchase. This man must never sleep, judging by the many occasions I've had to recognize the quality of his work!

ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain the just / Let the earth be opened and send forth a Savior.” It is marked *Allegro Feroce*, but once we get past the bleak dissonance and “ferocious” rhythms of the opening, the most telling moments in this 10-minute score are the two episodes in which heart-melting warm harmonies predominate in music characterized by genuine depth of feeling. If Norbert Palej writes more works like this, his international reputation will be assured. And if the group of twenty-seven always play this well, perhaps they will indulge themselves the luxury of a few capital letters?

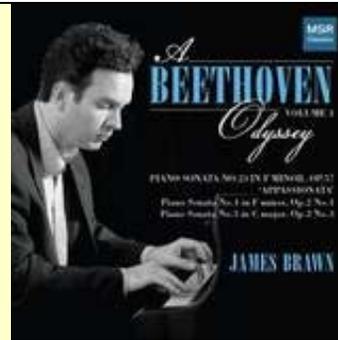


“Lullaby & Nocturne,”
short pieces for violin and piano
David Hays, violin; Peter Collins, piano
MSR Classics

This offering of lullabies and nocturnes by violinist David Hays and pianist Peter Collins is pure delight. Consisting of 18 short pieces by as many composers, it amounts to a good, old-fashioned “encore recital” with a theme. There’s not a bad track in the entire program. Or to paraphrase Shakespeare, there is not one of these 18 choice selections that is so mean that it would not do honor to a memorable recital.

As arranged and programmed by Hays and Collins, these pieces display a variety of colors, moods, and styles. Lullabies (also known by the French name “berceuse”) are by their nature written to soothe and relax, lowering blood pressure by their gently rocking rhythms and having a calming influence on listeners who are not always fretful infants. Nocturnes are often, but not necessarily, calm in mood, reflecting the serene beauty of the night. There may be sad or disturbing episodes in some of these pieces, such as Debussy’s “Reverie” or Tchaikovsky’s “Lullaby in a Storm,” but the principle underlying these pieces still holds true.

There are some very familiar favorites here, such as Brahms’ famous “*Wiegenlied*” (Cradle Song), wonderfully re-animated in its present setting and performance, or Stravinsky’s *Berceuse* from *The Firebird*, which assumes a whole new dimension in this arrangement by Hays and Collins than we are used to hearing in the oboe solo over a muted orchestral setting in the original ballet. And Chopin’s Nocturne in D-flat major, Op. 27, No. 2, seems to acquire a more down to earth poignancy from the presence of Hay’s violin. Directness and enchantment, in



“A Beethoven Odyssey” Vol. 1:
Sonatas 1, 3, and 23, “Appassionata”
James Brawn. Piano
MSR Classics

English native James Brawn commenced his piano studies in New Zealand and Australia and has widely concertized in both countries and in the United Kingdom, where he now makes his home in the picturesque Cotswolds. He also lived for a time in the U.S., though he is not as well known in this country as he is elsewhere. That last observation may be in for a radical change, as Brawn’s newly launched sonata cycle “A Beethoven Odyssey” is likely to put him on the map with music lovers on this side of the Atlantic, too.

Brawn has everything it takes for a Beethoven interpreter, including an unfailing ear for sonority and dynamics, a superb sense of rhythm, a keyboard touch judiciously varied according to the particular sound and texture he wishes to evoke, and an intelligent grasp of the entire musical canvas of each sonata, and not just its choice details, as delicious as they often are.

That guiding intelligence carries over into his program building, as well. In the present instance, placing two of Beethoven’s earliest Sonatas, Opus 2, No. 1 in F minor and No. 3 in C major in the same recital as his mature middle period masterwork No. 23 in F minor, Op. 53, the universally acclaimed “Appassionata,” was more than just a stroke of luck. These early works of 1795, too often dismissed as transitional works with roots in the Viennese Classical Era, actually look boldly to the future, and Brawn does not take them lightly. Both use their opening movements to set the mood for all that follows, in a way the classical sonata of Mozart and Haydn seldom did. With swiftly ascending melodic figures, arpeggios in passagework and chords, lightning-sudden key changes and big dynamic contrasts, and particularly in the use of strongly accented *sforzandi* (literally “punches”) in the opening Allegro of Sonata No. 1, Beethoven makes himself known as a radical new presence to be dealt with.

Sonata No. 3 is an even weightier, more portentous work, adding broken chords and off-beat *sforzandi* to the composer’s arsenal in the opening movement and blistering staccato octaves and trills that ratchet up the level of excitement in the spirited, high-energy finale.

various degrees, characterize such familiar items as Grieg's "At the Cradle," Liszt's Nocturne No. 3, and the transcription of Schumann's "*Abendlied*" (Evening Song), with its subtle moods as delicately applied as they are here.

But the lesser-known items in this program tended to make an even greater impression on me, despite (or perhaps, because of) their lack of familiarity. The "*Berceuse*" of Ignaz Neruda (1843-1915), charming in its simple direct lyricism and playful contrasted episode, makes an ideal opening piece for this recital. Nocturne No. 6 in F major by John Field (1782-1837) has a range and depth of feeling I had not previously associated with this composer. Karol Szymanowski's "Notturmo" has a stunning Spanish flavored episode. The more-familiar "*Berceuse*" from the opera *Jocelyn* by Benjamin Godard (1849-1895), as a perfectly formed and deeply satisfying example of *aria da capo*, may be the best item of all in a program that never fails to deliver unexpected pleasure.

Without distorting his interpretation in favor of these "special effects," Brawn uses them as Beethoven surely intended, to keep the listener off-balance and on the edge of expectation.

Finally, we arrive at the "Appassionata" of 1805. Now we realize what Brawn has been doing all along in his beautifully paced and meticulously developed accounts of the two early sonatas. He has been preparing us for their fruition in Beethoven's middle period. What were special effects in Sonatas 1 and 3 are now completely integrated as part of the Beethoven style we all know and love (and which may have been hard at times for his contemporaries to take). Imagination and superlative technique meet happily in the "Appassionata," and Brawn revels in both elements even as he realizes this work's bold formal outlines. He is very much at home with its rich sonorities in the opening Allegro, including the composer's expressive use of what has been termed the piano's "cello register."

Brawn gives proper weight to each of the four almost crudely simple variations in the Andante in order to set us up for the highly dramatic moment when the soft diminished seventh at the very end is succeeded by a much louder diminished seventh, and – *Attacca* – we are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of the finale. Without pause, Brawn's virtuosity takes us resolutely through this sensational whirlwind movement and its even faster and more strongly accented coda, all the way to the thrilling conclusion. In the process, he does not fail to sound the intended note of desolation when the sonata ends, as do only a handful of other works in Beethoven's career, without the expected major-key resolution.