Brahms, Dvořák, Suk

Brahms	Cello Sonata No. 1 in E minor op. 38 Cello Sonata No. 2 in F major op. 99
Dvořák	Waldesruhe op. 68, no. 5 Rondo in G minor op. 94
Suk	Ballade in D minor op. 3, no. 1 Serenade in A major op. 3, no. 2

Steven Isserlis *vc*, Stephen Hough *pf*

Hyperion CDA67529 (74 minutes: DDD), £13.99
Notes and translations included.

This recording offers a remarkably diverse selection of music, all of it composed for cello and piano between 1862 and 1896. With the pieces by Dvořák and Suk, Brahms's two sonatas make a well-balanced programme of late-nineteenth-century music for this combination of instruments; moreover, the performances by the cellist Steven Isserlis and the pianist Stephen Hough for the most part are splendid.

Character is a useful concept in approaching this music. The works by Dvořák and Suk form a contrasting group of character pieces; each of Brahms's seven movements is distinct in character from the others. Although character is more associated with late-eighteenth-century than late-nineteenth-century aesthetics, Arrey von Dommer's 1865 revision of Heinrich Koch's musical dictionary includes a lengthy discussion of 'Character'. Dommer's edition also offers definitions for qualities such as *amoroso* and *angenehm*. The entry 'Character' emphasizes the wide range of possibilities but also notes the connection between certain genres and 'characteristic' features that allow us to recognize musical pieces as belonging to those genres.[1] Character thus encompasses both the particular and the typical. Surprisingly, Dommer does not include a separate entry for the important nineteenth-century genre 'Characterstück'. Dvořák's *Waldesruhe* exemplifies the kind of *Characterstück* that comes most readily to mind: a programmatic title suggests a specific character (here, sylvan quiet). The names of the other short pieces on the recording indicate genres with traditional characteristics: the declamatory quality of Suk's ballade, the popular sound of his serenade, the quadratic tunefulness of Dvořák's rondo theme. Brahms's sonatas likewise include a rondo, along with a scherzo, a fugue, an adagio qualified as 'affettuoso', and – evoking an obsolete genre – an Allegretto quasi Menuetto. The two first movements, moreover, are sharply differentiated from each other; therein lies a possible link between the sonatas.

Brahms's E minor Cello Sonata is the earliest work on this recording: the first two movements date from 1862 and the finale from 1865. It is one in a series of

[1] Arrey von Dommer, ed., *Musikalisches Lexicon auf Grundlage des Lexicon's H. Ch. Koch's* (Heidelberg: J.C.B. Mohr, 1865): 149–51. Dommer does not use the modern spelling of the word.

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works for various media that show his newly achieved mastery of writing for instrumental ensembles (as opposed to solo piano). In the late 1970s, James Webster, elaborating on comments by Donald Francis Tovey, demonstrated the impact of Schubert's music on these works of Brahms's 'first maturity' – in particular, on his harmonic style and approach to sonata form.[2] Schubert's influence is evident in other aspects of this music, as well, such as the use of gypsy style (for example, in the finales of the G minor and A major piano quartets ops. 25 and 26) and the sheer length of many themes and movements. In the first two movements of the cello sonata, Schubert's music left its traces in yet another facet of style.

When Brahms wrote this piece, there were still relatively few sonatas for cello and piano to serve as models. In a number of passages in the first and second movements, he solved the problems of clarity and balance peculiar to the type by using a texture found in Schubert's piano trios (and music for piano, four hands). Like Schubert, Brahms at times has the pianist's two hands play the same notes an octave apart, usually in the treble register. (See, for example, bars 21–24 and 71–76 in the first movement and bars 3–12 in the second.) Even with a great deal of imitation between the parts, this Schubertian way of writing for piano helped Brahms create exceptionally transparent textures. The fugal finale, in contrast, has the thicker, lower writing for piano considered more typical of Brahms's style and present, already, in his very early sonatas for solo piano.

Any successful performance depends on choosing suitable tempos. This is especially true of Brahms's first cello sonata because of the basic disproportion between the movements: the first movement has the expansiveness of much of the music from this period, whereas the other two movements are relatively brief. For a scherzo, Brahms substituted the Allegretto quasi Menuetto – an example of a moderate-tempo, introverted type he made his own – while the final movement is a driving Allegro. Most performers play the first movement, marked Allegro non troppo, too slowly, perhaps because the sonata as published does not include a slow movement. Isserlis and Hough have wisely chosen a brisker tempo for the first movement than one usually hears, and it works beautifully. Without becoming precious, the duo allows itself a great deal of rubato in the first two movements and in general makes the most of the give and take between their instruments that Brahms has composed into all three movements of the sonata.

Brahms completed the F major Cello Sonata, technically a much more demanding composition for both players, in the summer of 1886. According to his biographer Max Kalbeck, an adagio originally part of the E minor Sonata, which Brahms removed 'because he did not want to overload the work', may have become the nucleus of the F major Sonata. The later sonata's Adagio affettuoso impressed Kalbeck as being 'the soul of the work, which now had to fashion for itself its body'.[3] Since the autograph of the earlier sonata is missing, we can only speculate about this possible source for the second sonata. But the specific density, so to speak, of the Adagio affettuoso, especially when considered with stylistic features in the first movement – an unusual fragmented opening theme and, frequently, a quasi-improvised sound – makes it plausible that Brahms composed the other movements as foils to it. According to this hypothesis, he had removed a version of the adagio from the earlier sonata

[2] James Webster, 'Schubert's Sonata Form and Brahms's First Maturity (II)', *19th-Century Music* 3 (1979): 52–71.

[3] Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, 4 vols (1912–1921; reprint, Tutzing, 1976), 4: 33.

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because of a problem of balance, which must have stemmed in part from the long, lyrical theme that opens the first movement. (In excising the adagio, of course, he created a different problem of proportion among the movements.) Due to its harmonic and motivic complexities, the Adagio affettuoso is one of Brahms's weightiest, most richly detailed movements. Here performers often err by choosing too quick a tempo, which does not allow them to do justice to either the details or the grandeur.

The performance of the F major Sonata by Isserlis and Hough is on the whole excellent. Their handling of the tremolos in the first movement, for example, is superb. Modern performers often want to make sure that we hear all of the notes, so we know that they are not 'cheating'. But do we really wish to hear everything, especially in a tremolo? Isserlis and Hough clearly have mastered the technical problem, but they do not force us to listen to each note in what should be a background textural effect, as it is in this recording. In other respects, as well, they offer commendable performances of this movement and the other fast movements, an energetic Scherzo (Allegro passionato) – an alternative type used by Brahms less frequently than that represented in the earlier sonata—and Rondo finale (Allegro molto). Within the brisk basic tempos they chose for the last two movements, Isserlis and Hough provide nicely inflected accounts, in particular of moments in both the Scherzo's trio and the finale that modulate from F major to distant keys such as D♭ and G♭ major. The tempo of the Adagio affettuoso, however, is not as slow as it should be; furthermore, the players do not permit themselves the degree of rubato audible in the other movements of both sonatas. They therefore give a less commanding, less nuanced account of the Adagio affettuoso than would be possible if they allowed more time for the long lines of the music to unfold.

The first of the two pieces by Dvořák dates from approximately the same time as Brahms's F major Cello Sonata. Dvořák composed *Waldesruhe* as part of a cycle for piano, four hands, in 1884, then arranged it for cello and piano in 1891 for farewell concerts he gave with the cellist Hanuš Wihan before leaving for the United States.[4] Several days before he made the arrangement, Dvořák composed the Rondo in G major for the same concert tour.[5] The two movements that make up Suk's op. 3 date from 1890 and 1896, respectively. Like the pieces Dvořák composed for Wihan, Suk's op. 3 pairs a slow movement – Dvořák's marked Lento e molto cantabile, that by Suk Adagio ma non troppo – with a dance-like faster movement. In these four pieces, Isserlis and Hough play with all the technical mastery, verve and freedom one could want.

The surprising diversity among the works on this recording, which were written for a single medium within less than three and a half decades, inspired the musing about character with which I opened this review. Character, as an aspect of nineteenth-century as well as eighteenth-century music, may well be a topic that merits further study.

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[4] Antonín Dvořák, *Waldesruhe für Klavier und Violoncello Opus 68 Nr. 5*, ed. Milan Pospíšil (Munich: Henle, 1999), V.

[5] Antonín Dvořák, *Rondo für Violoncello und Klavier g-moll Opus 94*, ed. Milan Pospíšil (Munich: Henle, 2002), Preface.

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