follow it up by giving us Bairstow's *Six Variations on an Original Theme*, a work that 'even Elgar could have taken pride in acknowledging'.[10]

Timothy Storey

Grieg

Violin Sonata No. 1 in F major Op. 8
Violin Sonata No. 2 in G major Op. 13
Violin Sonata No. 3 in C minor Op. 45

Solo piano miniatures arranged for violin and piano by Joseph Acron:
At Home Op. 43 No. 3; Puck Op. 71 No. 3; Lonely Wanderer
Op. 43 No. 2; Scherzo-Impromptu Op. 73 No. 2; Grandmother's
Minuet Op. 68 No. 2; Dance from Jölster Op. 17 No. 3

Hagai Shaham *vn*, Arnon Erez *pf*

Hyperion CDA 67504 (76 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

This recording offers a fine opportunity: the review and study of a major composer's complete output of one genre, played beautifully and idiomatically without being excessively mannered, which enables the listener to focus on the pieces themselves. Shaham and Erez have an absolutely natural, organic kind of ensemble between them, and neither player is drawn toward excesses of interpretation or execution; one never senses an overly athletic bow-arm, overly liberal doses of thunder coming from the piano or excessive sentimentality. Rather, the duo avoids the lure of concert-hall expression and strikes a balance between the expanded emotional and dynamic range of the later nineteenth century and the chamber aesthetic. This is truly fine playing, playing that sustains repeated listenings, and because it does not call a lot of attention to itself, it enables the listener to move directly through it to Grieg.

At risk of calling down the wrath of the Muses: I am not sure the sonatas themselves sustain similar attention. As a Norwegian, Grieg was long considered to be a composer of peripheral European nationality (like, say, Chopin or Dvořak). Also like Chopin, the musical miniature was long considered to be more natural to him than were larger-scale musical structures. With Chopin, the work of the last few decades has buried this canard once and for all. With Grieg, it may not be a canard. Put differently, it may be that his approach to the balance between the structurally and thematically familiar and unfamiliar that informs all new works may have stood up less well in the intervening years. The six Grieg miniatures included at the end of this recording, originally for piano but arranged for piano and violin by Joseph Achron, seem almost to dare the listener to draw this conclusion; several of them are familiar to the general listener, yet they still seem fresh, unforced and not overly ambitious.

[10] Ibid., 301.

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Grieg himself, at least at the end of his life, considered the sonatas for piano and violin to number among his best pieces: 'the first naïve, rich in ideas, the second national and third with a wider horizon'. The first two were composed before the composer's twenty-fifth birthday – the second being written on his honeymoon – while the third dated from his early forties. All three, though, are intensely national, with a Norwegian cast to the melodic material apparent throughout and the 'wider horizon' of the third not really clear. Furthermore, to this listener at least, the sonatas seem to be siblings close – perhaps too close – in age. It will be some time before I want to hear a motive that worries at the scale degrees 1–7–5–7–6 again, for example, and the composer's practice of generating longer themes through sequential repetition of a small cell begins, after a while, to grate. It smacks of the academically formulaic, unfortunately, and this overuse of formula lays open a broader issue.

Romantic-era composers who persuasively used sonata forms found ways to infuse new life into the older paradigms; only think of the names Schumann, Chopin, Liszt and Brahms and one is reminded of a variety of new strategies. Schumann's interrogation of every aspect of the form, Chopin's expansion and reinterpretation of the older binary-form variant, Liszt's thematic transformation and Brahms's broadening of the palette of usable musical languages – all of these (and more) reinvigorated sonata form in a natural and evolutionary way. Indeed, the variety of approaches in the late eighteenth century points up a similar reinvigoration in the sonata's heyday: Haydn, Emmanuel Bach, Christian Bach, Mozart, Clementi and Beethoven all used the form to produce unique work after unique work, squarely within their time and syntax, but far from predictable nonetheless.

The first movements of Grieg's three sonatas, in contrast, seem to have used the same compositional template: all three are two-theme sonata-allegro forms, and in all three the recapitulation behaves itself in a gentlemanly, predictable way. The textbook nature of these three movements belies the fact that it is a historical textbook that is being used, so to speak; this sonata form is the familiar, excessively simplified and pedagogical version that in no way reflects the multiplicity of eighteenth-century possibilities. The second movements, too, bear rather too much relation to each other; all are ABA' form and all are lovely and charming and characteristic, though sometimes (for example, the A section of the Sonata No. 3 in C Minor Op. 45) the sucrose content approaches danger level. The fugato in the third movement of the Sonata No. 1 in F Major Op. 8 is a surprisingly academic gesture, strict-sounding, correct, soon over and not picked up in any way later on. This is particularly curious because Grieg was a fine contrapuntalist; Mikhail Pletnev's superb Deutsch Grammophon recording of the student fugues, which Grieg never released (but never destroyed either), demonstrates a real expressive contrapuntal command, which makes this isolated and somewhat stilted passage harder to understand.

Ultimately, this may amount to no more than another confrontation with the great mystery of why some composers' music continues both to communicate and perplex, eternally attracting performers, listeners and scholars, always yielding something up but promising still more, while other music eventually feels spent. It may well be that, in his time, Grieg's melodies spoke to his contemporaries (and particularly his countrymen) in a compelling, vivid and present way. It may be that his blend of his nationally inflected thematic material with time-honoured formal structures amounted to the optimal way to present his musical ideas, orderly and clear. Still, there is a nagging sense that, outside Norway, Grieg has never really been seen as more than a 'nationalistic' composer, and that this

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may have something to do with some of these predictable aspects of his melodic language and formal approach. Regardless, it is worth spending the time re-examining these pieces in detail, particularly in the sympathetic interpretations of Shaham and Erez, because a window is opened into a nineteenth-century aesthetic thereby, and not only the aesthetic that we find in textbooks. (Nineteenth-century chamber music itself is an under-represented genre in the Great [Simplified] Narrative.) That the composer thought these pieces to be among his biggest artistic successes makes the task even more important.

Jonathan Bellman
University of Northern Colorado

Sterndale Bennett

Piano Concerto No. 4 in F minor Op. 19
Caprice in E major Op. 22
Bache Piano Concerto in E major Op. 18

Howard Shelley *pf/cond*
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra

Hyperion CDA67595 (65 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

That Robert Schumann should have considered an early nineteenth-century English composer to be a potential saviour of European music will strike most contemporary readers as bizarre. But Schumann's ringing endorsement of the young Englishman – 'Were there many artists like Sterndale Bennett [1816–75], all fears for the future progress of our art would be silenced'[1] – serves to remind us that for a few years in the late 1830s while his star was in the ascendant, a brilliant future seemed to beckon. And it was from this time that the two works on Volume 43 of Hyperion's The Romantic Piano Concerto series, the Piano Concerto No. 4 Op. 19, and the Caprice E major Op. 22, for piano and orchestra, date. Together with the Piano Concerto in E major Op. 18 by Bennett's pupil Francis Edward Bache (1833–58) they make an interesting and attractive coupling.

Despite the advocacy of several pianists, not least Malcolm Binns, who recorded all Bennett's available concertante works for Lyrita in the 1980s, the comparative neglect of his music today might suggest that Schumann drastically overestimated his prospects. But the evidence available in 1836 – four piano concertos, five concert overtures, four symphonies and a number of works for solo piano – suggested otherwise and represented no mean achievement for a composer not yet 21. While Schumann's verdict might be considered generous, it was by no means unreasonable. Nor was he the only musician to be impressed by Bennett's immense promise: after hearing him play his first piano concerto in London in 1833, Mendelssohn immediately invited Bennett to Leipzig as a friend, not a pupil. It was not until after leaving the Royal Academy of Music in 1836 that Bennett was able to

[1] Robert Schumann, *Music and Musicians: Essays and Criticisms*, ed. and trans. Fanny Raymond Ritter (London: William Reeves, [1877]): 214.

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