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.

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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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take up the offer, but his subsequent eight-month stay in Germany (October 1836–June 1837) not only marked his musical coming-of-age, but also saw him establish a foothold in the country. From thenceforth most of his works were published in both England and Germany, and he enjoyed a privilege unique among English composers of possessing as great a reputation in Germany as in his homeland.

The London in which Bennett grew up was a remarkably cosmopolitan city whose flourishing concert life attracted numerous foreign musicians, particularly pianists, drawn by the innovative piano industry. Hummel, Kalkbrenner, Moscheles and many others spent months or years in England, alongside other early Romantics, among them Spohr and Weber. As a result, budding English composers were enabled to hear at first hand the latest continental fashions. Bennett was no exception and his works demonstrate their strong European roots: listening to his concertos one is at once struck by the similarities between their sound world and that of his models, to the extent that his development of the concerto idiom of Hummel et al. can legitimately be compared with that of his contemporary, Chopin. Take, for example, the second subject of the fourth concerto's first movement, which possesses that sense of dreamy, languorous elegance so typical of the period. Of Mendelssohn, under whose spell he also fell, there is less evidence. But that said, is it entirely coincidental that the opening phrase of the fourth concerto is so like that of Mendelssohn's first? Both are set over tonic pedals, rise gradually over a two-octave span, grow from piano to forte and are seven bars in length. The effervescent Caprice, too, possesses a deft Mendelssohnian elegance, although the music is very much Bennett's own. Perhaps more surprising is the absence of Beethoven, whose spirit, if not presence, can be sensed in two of Bennett's earlier concertos – the second (in E♭ major) and, more particularly, the third (in C minor). Here it is restricted to the centre of the slow movement, a delightful Barcarole, originally written for his previous concerto (in the same key), whose slightly sentimental opening belies the power of the central dialogue between soloist and orchestra. Here, as in the equivalent movement of the C minor concerto, one can see Bennett following the example of Beethoven's fourth concerto.

Both the Caprice and concerto were first heard in London in 1838: the former (which had been started in 1836) at Bennett's annual benefit concert on 25 May and the latter (which had been written with his second visit to Leipzig in mind) at a semi-public performance at the Royal Academy of Music on 26 September. Some ten days later, he left for the Continent and the work's official premiere was in the Gewandhaus, Leipzig on 17 January 1839, with Bennett again as soloist and Mendelssohn conducting. From that time onwards it featured regularly in concert programmes, both in England and abroad, and remained among his most-performed works.

Despite his gifts as a pianist which, in Schumann's opinion, placed him second only to Mendelssohn, Bennett was a reluctant performer with a particular aversion to virtuosity for its own sake. As the works on this disc demonstrate, however, that did not prevent him from making considerable demands on his pianists – demands that Howard Shelley, directing the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra from the keyboard, amply meets. Indeed, Shelley is an ideal advocate, able to bring not only great delicacy, but also considerable force to the music: the soloist's first entry in the concerto is marked 'con forza', reminding us that after his Leipzig debut in 1837 Bennett had noted that he had had a 'bad *clavier*,

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not *strong* enough'.[2] The orchestra, too, serves the music well, with a sense of brightness and clarity sometimes lacking in Hilary Davan Whettan's earlier recording with Malcolm Binns and the Milton Keynes Orchestra.

Orchestra and soloist are equally persuasive in the piano concerto by Francis Bache – a work even less familiar than Bennett's. Born in 1833, Bache began his only concerto in 1851 while studying with Bennett at the Royal Academy. Although he played the first movement in the Hanover Square Rooms, London in 1852, he substantially rewrote it and completed the work while a student at the Leipzig Conservatoire in 1856; his death at the age of 24 doubtless explains why the complete concerto appears never to have been performed. Bache, like Bennett in his Caprice, set out to entertain rather than edify and his concerto is a delightful work written in a broadly Mendelssohnian idiom, but with a strong hint of the lightness of touch that the young Schubert made so much his own. Bache's delicate scoring is particularly delightful – the solo cello in the Andante, or the melting second subject of the first movement – while his formal experimentation, with solo cadenzas linking the three movements, suggests that his death was a serious blow to English music.

For anyone interested in the history of the concerto in the years following Beethoven's death there is much to be learnt from and to enjoy in this recording. No less importantly, it provides a timely reminder that, in Bennett, England produced a composer who had the potential to put the country back on the musical map of Europe. That he did not is as much a reflection on the difficulties encountered by native composers as a verdict on his musical abilities: perhaps this disc will encourage new recordings of his other concertos and works for solo piano.

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[2] J.R. Sterndale Bennett, *The Life of William Sterndale Bennett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907): 57.

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