



Listeners familiar with the unique artistry of Maria João Pires or that master of the

silver-throated cello Antonio Meneses will no doubt greet this new live release of their joint recital at Wigmore Hall on January 3rd, 2012 with enthusiasm. What they may not have anticipated, unless they happened to be present at the event, is the breathtaking quality of this partnership, with its rare fusion of artistic ideals and hand-in-glove collaboration between two seasoned virtuosos of distinct yet compatible temperaments. The fidelity and dimension with which the DG engineers have conveyed the magic of the evening is superb.

The opening phrase of Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata is posed so plaintively, so searchingly by Pires that, at first, one wonders how Meneses could possibly respond. Respond he does, and eloquently, beckoning toward the rich terrain that lies ahead. In less thoughtful performances, this Sonata can seem episodic when not actually disjointed. To their great credit, Pires and Meneses weave a gripping narrative that unfolds inevitably during the course of three movements, each vivid in its delineation. Their sonorities are exquisitely matched. Forward motion is so precise in execution that it seems a joint response to common stimuli. The impression is of witnessing the flawless pas de deux of two great dancers, so bound by mutual trust and technical assurance that their unfettered focus on the expressive goal is powerful enough to suspend time. The *Adagio*, for all its sensual beauty, is appropriately cast as the preamble of the *Allegretto*, where affirmation will eventually triumph, but only after an arduous journey. In the final movement Meneses and Pires once again forge a path that moves inexorably toward homecoming, neglecting neither obstacles encountered nor compensating vistas. Offered here, to the extent great music can amply convey, is a metaphor for life. I know of no finer recording of this piece.

The three *Intermezzi* of 1892, pieces Brahms described to Rudolf van der Leyen as 'lullabies of my sorrows', assume a special lustre in Pires's hands, partially because of their context within a chamber programme. But a far greater factor is her unerring sense of emotional proportion. She is able to emphasize the integrity of each piece even as she demonstrates the overarching trajectory of the set, while cloaking the whole in an aura of mystery. One of the difficulties in programming Brahms's piano music of the 1880s and 1890s is its nearly relentless sadness. Certainly Pires doesn't shrink from

the affective tenor of the *Intermezzi*. She presents them, however, with sage wisdom, as though implying life would not be life without such sadness, and somehow we are given strength to bear it. Practically speaking, Brahms's thick chordal textures become luminous through the most precise voice-leading. Pires discerns colours where others see only monochrome and her phrases are perfectly contoured to their expressive intent. Nothing is extraneous. All told, this is pianism of dazzling rhythmical acumen and exquisite lyricism, with a sense of movement, elasticity and duration that seem infallible. Pires is a great Brahms player.

As is Meneses. Were it not for the constant give and take required of both players in the E minor Brahms Sonata, it would be tempting to describe his role as dominant. Certainly his eloquent framing of the principal theme at the outset contains all the heroism and vulnerability that will unfold during the course of this *Allegro non troppo*. I honestly don't know a cellist before the public today whose sound is more satisfying. It seems to emanate from some unnameable region deep within human experience. Vibrato is always discreet and reserved as but one of an array of expressive devices. Even in moments requiring tremendous power, the sound never grows aggressive. We remain riveted to his argument by its sheer beauty of his sound and his commandingly intelligent musicality. Bluntly, we cannot keep our ears off Meneses and it is not extravagance to say that singers would do well to attend him. Between the pining of the first movement and the turbulent textures of the third, the *Minuet* provides welcome respite and refreshment. Unlike performances that make this movement seem either mincing or jarringly anachronistic, here all is elegance and restraint. The distinctive articulation Pires brings to the broken octave accompaniment of the Trio is ethereal, like a brief spring rain as the sun shines. Meneses and Pires lavish extraordinary care on polyphonic rigours of the finale, artfully sculpting its shape in a way that brings every line to the fore in vivid relief. The final cadence, despite its minor tonality, assumes the paradoxical effect of affirmation. The response of Meneses and Pires to the particular challenges and opportunities of this piece constitutes a collaboration of the highest order. Here, tendered effortlessly and without ostentation, are the delicate sharing and reciprocity indispensable to the most elevated and refined chamber music-making.

The high seriousness of Schubert's D821 and Brahms's Opp. 38 and 117 is dispelled by the congenial intimacy of Mendelssohn's *Song without Words*, and by an aria of Bach, which serves as the beautifully poised encore. I urge you not to miss this rare and fine recording. It furnishes delight for the ears, nourishment for the heart and comfort for the soul.

Patrick Rucker