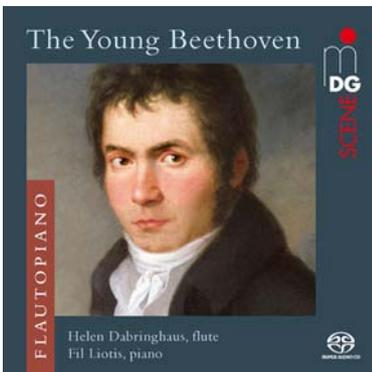




09/2020



Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
The Young Beethoven:
Flautopiano

Helen Dabringhaus (flute)
Vukan Milin (flute: Duo)
Fil Liotis (piano)

rec. 2018, Konzerthaus der
Abtei Marienmünster

MDG 903 2135-6 SACD [75:29]

This selection of arrangements of varying authenticity contains a few real gems, with solid performances.

Flautists who want to record Beethoven's compositions for flute are faced with a very basic problem: there just isn't very much of it. The composer was unimpressed with the transverse flute and while he certainly gave it vital roles in orchestral and chamber works, he wrote virtually nothing for flute as a solo instrument. It should come as no surprise, then, that this CD of early Beethoven works for flute played by Helen Dabringhaus and Fil Liotis features only one unquestionably genuine Beethoven composition.

The disc opens with the dubious flute sonata in B-flat. The manuscript was allegedly found among Beethoven's papers, and it bears the notation "Sonata di Bethoe" atop it. But it's not in Beethoven's handwriting. Nonetheless, flautists such as Jean-Pierre Rampal (who at one time owned the manuscript) have championed it as an authentic work. It's a charming little piece very much in a Mozartean style. Helen Dabringhaus gives it a light, sprightly reading that is much more in character with the music, unlike Rampal, who is inclined to inflate the piece's importance. The dynamic contrasts here (a hallmark of young Beethoven) make a solid impression.

If Beethoven had lived fifty years later, and heard the modern flute as developed by Theobald Boehm, he might have had a different impression of the instrument. Boehm arranged the second movement of Beethoven's first piano concerto for flute and piano in 1871. One wouldn't think it would translate to this format, but it does so surprisingly well. It helps that the arranger was intimately familiar with the modern flute's capabilities. It's quite effective and lyrical; one hardly misses the orchestra. This little piece is a wonderful discovery and it bears being better known.

The Serenade for flute and piano, op.41, is sort of a Beethoven composition; it began life as Beethoven's Serenade for flute, violin and viola, op.25. Since arrangements for various different configurations were much in demand, a publisher had someone (generally believed to be F.X. Kleinheinz) arrange the piece for flute and piano. He asked Beethoven to check it over, and Beethoven agreed to do so, making significant changes and revisions to Kleinheinz' work. The changes were significant enough that Beethoven approved the publisher issuing it as his own opus 41. It's generally a successful transformation, since the flute part remains largely unchanged and the piano simply has to stay out of the way for the most part. The balance is excellent between the two instruments, although we don't get the dynamic range that was found in the sonata. Unfortunately, in some movements, such as the Menuetto, the playing feels rather perfunctory, as if the participants would just as soon move on to the rollicking Allegro third movement. In the fourth movement, *Andante con variazioni*, the flute almost seems irrelevant much of the time.

The one thoroughly genuine Beethoven piece found here is the Duo for two flutes in G, WoO 26. This piece dates from Beethoven's last years in Bonn, and consists of only an Allegro and a Minuet. The participants give this an appropriately classical rendition, with animation but some reserve. Again, one could easily mistake this for a Haydn or Mozart work. Dabringhaus and guest Vukan Milin make the most of this slight piece, and the balance is excellent.

The final piece on the disc is a flute arrangement of the Horn Sonata op.17, published shortly after Beethoven's death. It's clear that this choice by the anonymous arranger was a mistake from the opening notes: the flute is wholly incapable of giving the proper oomph to the dramatic, powerful ascending notes that begin the sonata for a horn (or cello, which Beethoven also proposed as an alternative). The flute fares much better in the third movement Rondo, where liveliness is called for rather than strength.

Fil Liotis needs to be recognized as a superb accompanist, since it's obviously quite hard for a piano to avoid overshadowing a flute, but he accomplishes that task throughout while still being a full partner in the proceedings.

Overall I found this recording quite enjoyable, although the Horn Sonata arrangement is a misfire. I will be returning to the recordings of the first two pieces, however; the arrangement of the piano concerto in particular is a delight. Dabringhaus and Liotis give appropriate performances of what is admittedly a lightweight selection of pieces, and the recording quality throughout is quite satisfactory.

Mark S. Zimmer