Live & Encores: An Interview with Pianist Burkard Schliessmann

BY JAMES HARRINGTON

Burkard Schliessmann has been interviewed six times before in *Fanfare.* The first interview, by Peter Rabinowitz in 27:4, was mostly about his recordings of Chopin and Schumann. The second, with James Reel in 31:3, featured an extensive discussion on Bach's *Goldberg Variations.* A third interview, again with Rabinowitz and in 33:5, was titled "Cannons Camouflaged by Flowers" after Schumann's description of Chopin's music and discussed Schliessmann's Chopin/Schumann Anniversary Edition 2010. The fourth interview was with Jerry Dubins in 38:4 and returned to Bach's keyboard works. The fifth, "Affective Affinities" by Gary Lemco in 46:2, covered extensive Schliessmann repertoire. The sixth, "Heart, Ecstasy, Intellect" in 45:3, was by Robert Schulslaper. This interview is centered on his latest release, *Live & Encores*, which features works long associated with the pianist, and was recorded before an audience.

You played a Fazioli on one of your first recordings (Brahms), but have been a Steinway artist for many years since that time. When I noticed the Fazioli piano pictured on the booklet cover, and that the recording was made in the Fazioli Concert Hall, I assumed things have changed. Would you care to comment?

Yes, of course. But first of all, nothing has changed. I'm still an Official Artist of Steinway & Sons and I will always remain so; my love for these instruments is unbroken.

However, it really was a special and inspiring moment when I selected a Fazioli F278 on March 6, 2023 in the Concert Hall of Fazioli in Sacile, Italy. One instrument (among three) was a really special one and spontaneously reached my heart and soul, because it enabled the interpretation of works from all epochs. One had the impression that the instrument was born anew for each work, possessed

of extraordinary breadth, a palette of colors, and flexibility, clarity, transparency, presence and yet warmth, culminating in nearly a purity. Fazioli sources its woods from the same forests as Stradivari once did, which is why Fazioli is known as the "Stradivarius of concert grand pianos."

So, what was the spontaneous idea of capturing the sound in a recording? All those present—Paolo and Luca Fazioli, Dieter and Sylvia Fischer, Job Wijnands—were thrilled by this idea. Elena Turrin, PR manager of Fazioli, succeeded in organizing three dates in April, where in the presence of invited guests in the Concert Hall of Fazioli I presented a wide-ranging program, which was recorded live by the excellent sound engineer and technician Matteo Costa.

I regularly watch a pianist walk out onto the stage at Carnegie Hall and bare his or her musical soul to an audience of nearly 3,000 people. No one has ever been 100 percent perfect, but that does not lessen what each one has to say. You have so much to say, and I find the excitement of live performance more satisfying than an absolutely note-perfect edited studio recording. Did this thought enter into your decision to release a live recording?

Because I played live for this edition? It's quite an obsession to me to communicate at this moment, at this time, with my audience. I don't only play for them; it's something I want to *give back* to them. I feel how each listener in the audience is listening to me, and I feel its warmness, for example, and I give it back to the complete audience. I feel the intensity of hearing, of listening. This is like electricity, and this I give back to the audience. It's very stimulating.

I have enjoyed your great recording of the Goldberg Variations *for many years now. Your live recital opens with three large Bach works that you have recorded before. How would you characterize differences between the 2015 studio recordings and this 2023 live recording?*

Let's start with the *Goldberg*s you mention. The "secret" and reason that you still like it probably is that I understand (and play) Bach as an aspect of human realism. Today many young pianists (I won't mention any names) want to play Bach, given different ways of understanding his music. "Decorative surface" and "falsely introduced transcendence" are not the right way; they are signs of false understanding in the production of the inner structure of Bach's harmony and polyphony. Thus the effect on the listener may be overwhelming at first, but it has no lasting effect.

The three Bach works you mentioned are from 2012, which I recorded in the famous Teldex studios in Berlin; they were released in 2015 on Divine Art. I'm convinced you will hear the artistic development all over the years reflected in my interpretation, especially in view of the fact that it is a live recording. The repertoire presented in *Live & Encores* consists of works that I have studied since my earliest youth and performed in numerous concerts. It is something personal and therefore authentic, which is why I chose this program.

As already mentioned, I have played Bach more than any other composer; I also played the complete organ works at the age of 21—and those by memory. As a child and youngster I had been taught by one of the last master-students of the legendary Helmut Walcha, and I had been affected completely by this style of insight into Bach and the internal structures of his music. This method of regarding the independent coherence of all the voices gave me a special comprehension of Bach and his philosophy. Lastly, one can say that I have been growing up with Bach, even to this day. Bach really cannot be seen, understood, and interpreted from an isolated standpoint. Bach has to be explored as part of something complete, unique, of a universe—an aspect of human realism.

The *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* is one of my favorite works of Bach. The uniqueness of the Fantasia rests on its exuberant chromaticisms, which convey a feeling of infinity through the extensive use of enharmonic change, to say nothing of all the suspensions and passing notes, thereby inducing a state of weightlessness in the listener. No less important is the immediacy of the music's expressive language, thanks in no small part to the privileged position accorded to a recitative-like passage located at the very center of the work. The chromatic modulations speak a language all their own, and recall the religiously inspired rhetoric of grief and mourning that invites an attitude of calm resignation, one that was to be found at a later date in the music of Liszt. But the anguished chromaticisms also create a sense of erotic tension that invites comparisons with Wagner's *Tristan*-esque harmonies, where the excesses and liberties found in Wagner's chromatic procedures achieve a unique degree of expressiveness and a personal intimacy in terms of a musical language that points

in the direction of the mysterious and the metaphysical. The ending of the Fantasia is unique.

Bach's bold harmonic writing in his *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* has encouraged performers to privilege the virtuoso element in concerts and in arrangements. In the 19th century the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* was a classic example of the Romantics' approach to Bach. One of the founders of the Bach revival, Felix Mendelssohn, performed the Fantasia at two concerts in the Leipzig Gewandhaus in February 1840 and January 1841, firing his audience with tremendous enthusiasm. He himself attributed the impact of his performance to his free interpretation of the arpeggios in the Fantasia and to his ability to exploit the effects of one of the grand pianos of the time, using differentiated dynamics, picking out the top notes, overusing the sustaining pedal and doubling the bass notes. This interpretation became the model for the second movement (*Adagio*) of Mendelssohn's Second Cello Sonata, op. 58, of 1841–43, in which the top notes of the arpeggio in the piano spell out a chorale melody while the cello plays an extended recitative recalling the recitative from Bach's Chromatic Fantasia and even quoting the final bars of this last-named work.

This Romantic interpretation proved influential. As a young virtuoso, Johannes Brahms used to launch his concerts with the *Chromatic Fantasia*, while Liszt also performed the work at his recitals. Max Reger even prepared an organ arrangement. Bach's highly expressive work, which is surely one of his most personal, has retained its fascination across the centuries. It has also been frequently reprinted with interpretive additions and performance markings. In his own edition of the work, the Romantic Bach interpreter Ferruccio Busoni drew a distinction between the recitative and the final passage as the coda.

The *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* is a visionary work that looks far beyond its age in terms of its formal design, its structure, its character, and its inherent musical language. Even today it continues to point the way forward.

So, back to your question: Especially in view of the "live experience" of these recordings, the difference between my two performances is probably due to a special and directly immediate understanding of these interpretations.

The Divine Art website notes that the physical SACD set is not available right now, but should be in the near future. Playing a disc on a good stereo system always provides the best sound quality, but the download/streaming process seems to be the most common way people get their music these days. What are your feelings on this?

First, I will note that we had a technical problem with the production of the physical SACD. But I'm sure my label will have a new and perfect working SACD soon, which will provide SACD multichannel, SACD stereo, and CD stereo options. The download and streaming processes really are modern and necessary media in today's market. I have especially in view my releases of the *Goldberg Variations* (remastered in 2022 and released on Divine Art 25754) that are available on Dolby Atmos on special platforms. So, we are lucky to have these means of distribution, especially for young audiences, to give them direct ways to access music in general and bring them closer to it. However, to have a physical product still remains the traditional—and probably truest—way of listening. I am personally delighted that vinyl LPs also are enjoying a renaissance.

One hundred years after the Goldberg Variations *were published, Mendelssohn wrote his* Variations sérieuses*. Since Mendelssohn played such an important role in the revival of Bach's music, can you comment on the influence Bach had on Mendelssohn's compositional technique?*

Of course! Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy was decisive to the rediscovery of Bach. Immediately after Bach's death, Bach's music was downright forgotten. Even his own sons, Carl Philipp Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann, no longer understood him, as they had already adapted themselves to the Classical era and mistakenly regarded Bach's compositions as outdated.

Mendelssohn performed Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Berlin in 1829 and 1841: On March 11, 1829, the *Passion* was heard again for the first time in 100 years. This performance rediscovered Bach as a composer and heralded a renaissance of his works. As part of the so-called "Historical Concerts," the *Passion* was performed again on Palm Sunday, April 4, 1841, in Leipzig's Thomaskirche, the place of its premiere.

The *Variations sérieuses*, op. 54, from 1842 by Mendelssohn are considered one of the compos-

er's masterpieces in terms of inner unity. In its time, it was considered as one of the most virtuosic works of piano literature, as it masterfully demonstrates the entire piano technique in a unique way in a compressed form. Each variation builds on the other and develops from the energies of the preceding variation. Thus the work is already a vision of Arnold Schoenberg's later "developing variation."

I see a new Schumann disc to be released in March. What else is in the future for your repertoire and recordings?

Regarding my Schumann CD: Between August 28 and September 2, 2023, I played my Schumann project in the renowned Teldex studios in Berlin, titled *Fantasies* (to be released in March 2024 on Divine Art 25752). This recording was made after years of intensive study of Robert Schumann's *oeuvre*. This production pursues a completely different goal: While *Live & Encores* represents a real live impression and thus something immediate and spontaneous, and presents a concert program that displays a variety of stylistic elements from Bach through Mendelssohn to the high Romanticism of Schumann and Chopin, the studio production concentrates exclusively on Robert Schumann, and attempts to illuminate the inner germ cells of his music in its expressiveness and explosiveness and to bring it to its limits.

Stylistically, Schumann's piano works belong to a transitional period that was inspired by Bach's polyphony and conditioned by the successors and imitators of Viennese Classicism, and particularly the music of Beethoven. Schumann saw Bach as the origin of all combinatorics in music; for Chopin, Bach meant greatness, order, and calm, but also a sense of security in the past. The elements of Schumann's style that make him original and great, and which are uniquely characteristic of him, can be viewed in two ways. His compositional inventiveness took him far beyond the harmonic progressions known until his time; on the other hand, he discovered in the fugues and canons of earlier composers a Romantic principle. He saw counterpoint, with its interweaving of voices, as corresponding to the mysterious relationships between external phenomena and the human soul and, being a Romantic composer, found himself impelled to express these in complex musical terms.

To point out this challenge, I had an outstanding Steinway (D-612236, provided by Daniel Brech—see www.piano-solo.org) with two keyboards placed in a special flying case, that allowed them to be changed. The piano could then provide individual pieces with different voicing, sound, and intonation. The first keyboard has a bright, brilliant sound, the second a dark, warm sound. My recording producer, Julian Schwenkner, did an outstanding job, and *Fantasies* will also be released in 7.1.4. Dolby Atmos. We used 14 microphones, installed by recording engineer Jupp Wegner, a specialist for Dolby Atmos.

During the time of the recording process I worked as if in a trance: I merged with the great acoustics of the Teldex studio, with the unique instrument and the respective compositions and, in discussions with Julian Schwenkner and through comparison of various editions and originals of the works, took Schumann to a special level—his highest level, interpreted in his disjointedness, intricacy (despite the Classical structure in his forms), vision, eccentricity, and morbidity, from the early works up to the *Gesänge der Frühe*, op. 133. This also inspired me (and challenged all of us) to create two completely different interpretations of some works by exchanging the keyboards: E.g. the *Arabeske* and also "Des Abends" from the *Fantasiestücke*, op. 12.

In this way, I also showed the variety and complexity of interpretative possibilities depending on the instrument used and acoustic environment. In the end, three SACDs were produced. A special feature is the second SACD with the *Fantasiestücke*, op. 12; the second interpretation of the *Arabeske* made by using the other keyboard with its darker and warmer sound, and at the end—as if closing a circle—a completely different interpretation of "Des Abends," serving somewhat as a transition to the darkness of the *Nachtstücke*, op. 23, with which the third SACD begins and introduces the late pieces by Schumann.

I've been asked very often why I recorded the Fantasie in C, op. 17 again after I already gave a great live interpretation of it in March 2023 in the Concert Hall of Fazioli in Sacile, Italy, presented in *Live & Encores* (Divine Art 25755). Schumann himself described the Fantasie's opening movement as the "most passionate" of all his works. This was a significant remark, but the circumstances of the work's genesis should not be overlooked, especially when it is being performed. There is no

question of insipid sentimentality about it. Indeed, structurally speaking, the world of *Tristan* is already omnipresent in the first movement. In the development section the theme starts as if heard from far off, "as if retelling a legend," and first occurs in the dominant minor before appearing in more decisive form in the main key of C. It reaches its *fff* climax on an unresolved suspended chord, which is identical with the famous "*Tristan* chord" whose accented A♭ is still present in the C Minor of the soothing Postlude. With the second reprise of the main theme we encounter Schumann's most audacious inspiration, an interrupted cadence suspended harmonically over three bars. Various critics have insisted that the first movement dominates the other two, but in fact the rhythmic and technical extremes of the second movement, and the variety of tonal color of the third, are what ensure the strength and coherence of the work as a whole. Here, in particular, the passionate outbursts lead the listener into Romantic depths far out of reach of the cozy drawing rooms of the period. Lyrical melody, and a craving for death, transfiguration, and spiritual bliss sublimate the ecstatic quality of the anticipations of *Tristan* into a more chaste dream world.

I therefore played the Fantasie in C, op. 17 again within a short time (March and August 2023, live and in the studio) because the difference in interpretation is extraordinary. This can be seen above all in the third movement, based on the acoustics of the Teldex studio, and also in the instrument: Whereas in *Live & Encores* I had the overarching line in mind and thus followed a relatively fleet tempo (especially against the background, because one knows that Schumann's metronome markings are to be understood relatively), in *Fantasies* I gave the third movement a real *Tristan* experience by giving the inner voices and harmonies the highest poetry, but also explosive electricity. This tempo is therefore much slower than in *Live & Encores*. You have to listen to both interpretations and compare them to understand the complexity and multi-layeredness of interpretation in general, which is based on the different prerequisites.

My future recordings? I have many ideas: Above all, I'm going to look at Chopin again with the three sonatas, opp. 4, 35, and 58, which are really a big challenge. Chopin is the crowning and climax of piano playing. His music is so unique, so all-affecting in its emotionalism, musical architecture, and structure that all past giants are present in it, especially Bach and Mozart. Chopin's elegance is so singular that again you need much experience to convey his music in the real and original style. The question of rubato is very sensitive: It's nothing arbitrary, but rather something well calculated and well proportioned, integrated into the Classical strength of the form, which is constructed on the profound knowledge of the polyphonic and contrapuntal structures of Bach and Mozart.

To approach Chopin, you have to separate him completely from Schumann stylistically. Schumann admired Chopin very much and saw him as a friend, but Chopin himself had much less interest in and esteem for Schumann. The young Schumann's creative path led him from Classical forms—however deeply revered—to the freedom of subjective self-expression. This stood in a profoundly deep contrast to Chopin, who found himself favoring a Classical form of musical essence. He needed to bring in nothing from outside; his music is nearly absolute.

Both composers, Schumann and Chopin, held Bach in highest esteem in a special way, and saw themselves inspired by him in their own work throughout their lives. Schumann saw in Bach the origin of all combinatorics in music; for Chopin, Bach meant greatness, order, and tranquility, but also rootedness in the past. He himself mastered the laws of logic and construction and, unlike many of his contemporaries, gave his works a Classical structure over and above the Romantic element.

As a reflection of a great entity, of an all-encompassing span, Chopin represents a very special pinnacle of 19th-century piano composers, and from an aesthetic point of view can indeed be regarded as the "crowning glory of piano playing." He lies in the field of tension between the "importance of the moment and the demand of the case." Therefore, I see Chopin in the area of tension between the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic eras, striving for a connection between clearly structured but also improvisationally free and rapturously Romantic playing.

And then there is the *Etudes d'exécution transcendante* of Liszt. Franz Liszt called one of his best-known piano cycles by that name because he expected this opus to be presented and interpreted in a way that, in a sense, overcomes the materiality of tone production and intonation within itself. The purely technical mastery should transcend itself in such a way that the last relics of the material

of sound dissolve into absolute aesthetics, like in an act of faith, because a doubt about a successful realization would have an inevitable failure as a consequence.

After this I will return to Bach with the *Art of Fugue*. But not on the concert grand piano—no, I will play it on a great organ in a cathedral. By this, a circle would be closed, and I would return to the artistic inspiration, development, and training of my childhood and youth.

⬇ ***BURKARD SCHLIESSMANN: LIVE & ENCORES*** • Burkard Schliessmann (pn) • DIVINE ART 25755 (Download: 93:25) Reviewed from an mp3 download: 320 Kbps/16-bit provided by the artist

BACH Partita No. 2 in c, BWV 826. ***Italian Concerto,*** BWV 971. ***Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue,*** BWV 903. **MENDELSSOHN *Variations sérieuses,*** op. 54. **SCHUMANN Fantasie in C,** op. 17. ***Carnaval,*** op. 9: XII, "Chopin". ***Fantasiestücke,*** op. 12: III. "Warum?". **CHOPIN Waltz in c♯,** op. 64/2

Schliessmann writes, "I feel how each listener in the audience is listening to me, and I feel its warmness, for example, and I give it back to the complete audience. I feel the intensity of hearing, of listening. This is like electricity, and this I give back to the audience." Schliessmann gives his audience here a generous program of pieces that are very close to him. This recording was made on April 3–5, 2023 at the Fazioli Concert Hall in Sacile, Italy. Besides these incredible performances we are able to enjoy this program in state-of-the-art Dolby Atmos high-definition audio. The hybrid multichannel SACD is presented as a beautiful two-CD boxed set with a 60-page booklet, but is currently having some minor production problems and should be back in stock soon. In the meantime, I was able to enjoy the program via a download.

There is also a download of the booklet. Schliessmann provides an extensive and well-written booklet essay (about 20 pages each in English, German, and French). It gives the listener a good insight into the tremendous musical mind at work here. Divine Art's production values have been quite impressive in recent years, and never more so than on the Schliessmann releases that have come my way. From the very high-definition audio to the mixing and balance to the booklet design, pictures, and texts, I cannot believe any artist could ever hope for anything more than this label regularly delivers.

Special mention should be made of the various brilliant movements and sections, whether in Bach, Mendelssohn, or Schumann. Schliessmann never loses track of the melodies, and they are always shaped and given sensitive dynamic shading. While these are characteristics we expect in the slower movements, it is a revelation when they are applied to technically demanding, brilliant movements. I cite a few examples here: Bach's Capriccio in the Partita and third movement in the *Italian Concerto*, Mendelssohn's *Variations* Nos. 16 and 17, and the second movement of Schumann's Fantasie. A number of young pianists seem to take these movements as fast as possible, probably to show off their technical skills. Not Schliessmann, for he has no technical limitations, but finds and brings out the melodies here and keeps the level of excitement and virtuosity present without being overpowering to the music.

Part of the reason I have enjoyed listening to this exceptional program many times is that Schliessmann's playing at any tempo is always rhythmically alive. Bach's Fantasia is full of virtuosic, quick passages that move into some slower chordal sections. There is always a forward rhythmic movement, even when Schliessmann is slowing down for a contrasting section. The slow movement of the *Italian Concerto* can be uninteresting if taken too slowly, with little sense of the flow of the melody. With Bach's ornamentation in the second half, this presents more rhythmic challenges. I have never heard a better performance of this movement than Schliessmann's on this disc: It is perfect. The long build-up to the climax of the third movement of Schumann's Fantasie, a glorious outpouring of Schumann's love for Clara, is another place where the rhythm must move the piece forward. This performance makes that inevitable moment eagerly anticipated and eminently satisfying as well.

The Bach pieces are a part of Schliessmann's repertoire that he recorded and released before (Divine Art SACD 25751; see the feature article in *Fanfare* 38:4, Mar/Apr 2015). These fully exploit the resources of the modern grand piano. As the pianist points out, if you are going to play Bach on the piano, use everything it is capable of. His ornamentation is always tasteful and appropriate. He also points out that the current performances are just the most recent in a line of performances going back to his youth. His artistry has matured over all these years, and the performances here are reve-

latory. Given that his forthcoming Schumann disc was recorded after this one, I anticipate more great and fascinating performances from Schliessmann in the near future.

It is impossible to find words to give this recording a higher recommendation. It has already earned a spot on my Want List for the current year, and I'll continue to listen to it regularly. **James Harrington**

⬇ ***BURKARD SCHLIESSMANN: LIVE & ENCORES*** • Burkard Schliessmann (pn) • DIVINE ART 25755 (93:25) Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

BACH Partita No. 2 in c, BWV 826. ***Italian Concerto,*** BWV 971. ***Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue,*** BWV 903. **MENDELSSOHN *Variations sérieuses,*** op. 54. **SCHUMANN Fantasie in C,** op. 17. ***Carnaval,*** op. 9: XII, "Chopin". ***Fantasiestücke,*** op. 12: III. "Warum?". **CHOPIN Waltz in c♯,** op. 64/2

In *Fanfare's* Mar/Apr 2015 issue (38:4), I interviewed Burkard Schliessmann, mainly in connection with his then new SACD Divine Art album of works by J. S. Bach. Among a couple of other items, that disc contained the Partita No. 2, the *Italian Concerto*, and the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue*, all three of which are duplicated here on this newly released two-disc Divine Art SACD set. I hasten to add, however, that these are not the same performances. It's impossible for them to be since they were recorded as recently as April 3–5, 2023 at the Fazioli Concert Hall in Sacile, Italy, on Schliessmann's personally owned Fazioli F278 concert grand.

These works are near and dear to the pianist's heart and are part of his core repertoire, so it's only natural that he would want to go on record with them again. The same may be said of Schumann's Fantasie, which was included in Burkard's three-disc album, only released in September, 2021, but remastered from a much earlier recording that had been previously issued on the Bayer label. The Divine Art three-CD set, titled *At the Heart of the Piano*, received several glowing reviews in *Fanfare* 45:3.

As far as I can tell, this is Schliessmann's first time on record with Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses*, and while I don't believe that the pianist has recorded Schumann's *Carnaval* complete, he does give us here the ninth movement, titled "Chopin," as one of his two encore pieces. And then, for his second encore, he offers a performance of Chopin's Waltz in CT Minor, which I do believe he has recorded previously.

Schliessmann's new set at hand begins with Bach's C-Minor Partita, and I have to admit that the pianist's way with Bach is definitely his own, yet one that I find quite captivating. Take, for example, the manner in which he addresses the shift in tempo, texture, and musical content at the point in the score marked *Andante* that follows the *Grave Adagio* introduction to the piece. His left-hand "walking bass" eighth notes are clearly articulated with a staccato touch, but not nearly with the *martelé* aggressiveness of, say, Glenn Gould's staccato. Meanwhile, Schliessmann's right hand remains remarkably free to follow the clues and bring out the notes that constitute the melody as it plays hide and seek among the mirrored maze of Bach's contrapuntal crossword puzzle. The melody notes are not necessarily contiguous in all of the running passagework. Somewhere in there is a singable line, because Bach always sings, and he teases the player's fingers to find the song in the line and the listener's ears to hear it. Schliessmann has a keen ear for those notes, and his fingers know how to make the line sing.

Next on the disc is Bach's Italian Concerto, which, being a piece for solo harpsichord, is not a concerto as we normally define the term. Nor is there anything one can point to that identifies it as Italian. In fact, the original title of the piece was *Concerto in the Italian Taste*. The Italian Concerto plus the French Overture together comprise Book II of Bach's *Clavier-Übung*, the shortest of the three books in which the composer published what he considered to be his most important keyboard works.

With due apologies to all pianists, I will say that the Italian Concerto is one of those pieces specifically designed for a two-manual harpsichord that cannot be fully realized as intended on the piano. Bach achieves the concertino-vs.-ripieno "concerto" effect by juxtaposing passages of lighter and softer textures against fuller and louder ones. But he also designates the lighter—i.e., solo or concertino—passages to be played on the second manual, which through the use of different stops can be made to sound like a completely different instrument.

The piano can accomplish the first part of this, differentiating the textures through dynamics

and touch, which I have to say Schliessmann is very, very good at, but not even he can make us believe we're hearing two different instruments. It's just not in the nature of the beast.

Following the Italian Concerto, Schliessmann gives us what is perhaps Bach's blockbuster non-organ keyboard work, and likely his most popular, the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue*. Believed to have been composed between 1717 and 1723, during the composer's time in Köthen, it dates from the period during which Bach was experimenting with various systems of tempered tuning that led to the first book of his *Well-Tempered Clavier* in 1722. The *Chromatic Fantasia* and the *WTC* (I) were written around the same time and possibly even overlap. It's now thought that the fugue was added to the Fantasia at a later date.

In the manner of its virtuosic, seemingly improvisatory style, the Fantasia part of the piece isn't entirely unique. Bach was certainly familiar with the toccatas, ricercars, and fantasias of Frescobaldi and Froberger, many of which exemplified the so-called "fantastic style" (*stylus phantasticus*), popular as early as the end of the 16th century. What *is* likely unique, however, about Bach's Fantasia is that it's thoroughly chromatic, and not just successively but consecutively or serially. In other words, it doesn't simply modulate freely from one key to another; it abuts diminished seventh chords by chromatic half-steps, one immediately after the other, thus sounding all 12 tones of the chromatic scale.

Some may be disappointed that the mathematically minded Bach didn't come up with a 12-tone subject for the Fugue, but as noted earlier, the Fugue was most likely not composed at the same time as the Fantasia. There have even been suggestions that the Fugue might not be by Bach but by one of his contemporaries, and that it was only later tacked onto the Fantasia when it was finally published.

As can be guessed, the pair together require the utmost in virtuosity and control from the player. The Fantasia is extremely demanding for the duality of its requirements. On the one hand (no pun intended), it engages both hands simultaneously in equal oppositional playing, which requires enormous discipline and concentration; while on the other hand, the player must simultaneously display the virtuosic flair and sense of freedom that convey the impression of a toccata-like improvisational style. And that's just the Fantasia. Add to it the rigorous technique demanded by the Fugue, and you have quite an exhibitionistic *tour de force*. Little wonder that the work was a favorite of Mendelssohn, Liszt, Brahms, and other 19th-century virtuoso pianists, and still attracts keyboard artists and thrills audiences to this day. In Schliessmann, the work has found a modern-day master and magician.

To conclude disc one, the pianist turns to Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses*. Over 100 years and an entire historical era, the Classical period, may have intervened between Bach and Mendelssohn, but it was Mendelssohn more than any other composer that we have to thank for ensuring and enshrining Bach's legacy in music history. Mendelssohn was a tireless advocate for Bach's music and an assiduous student of Bach's counterpoint and methods of composition. Yet I couldn't help but wonder if there wasn't some deeper connection between the works on the disc by Bach and Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses* that led Schliessmann to include this particular Mendelssohn work.

The answer is a partial yes. That the Variations is in D Minor, the same key as the Chromatic Fantasy, is the least and most superficial of the similarities. More significantly, the theme on which the variations is based is highly chromatic. Within its first eight bars, each of the 12 tones of the chromatic scale is sounded at least once. It is no less difficult to write a set of variations on such a theme than it is to write a fugue on Bach's chromatic subject. Both are equally unpromising, yet both motivated their respective composers to produce some very extraordinary music.

Did Mendelssohn feel challenged to see what he could do working in the variations form with a thoroughly chromatic theme? Who can say? What can be said is that Schliessmann brings an expressive beauty to the slower variations and a dramatic intensity to the faster variations that I've rarely heard in this piece. For an example of the former, listen to Variation 14, and for the latter, to Variation 9.

Disc two is considerably shorter, consisting mainly of Schumann's Fantasie in C, op. 17, followed by Chopin's Waltz in CT Minor, the second number in the composer's set of Three Waltzes, op. 64. And finally, there come the two encore pieces listed in the headnote to this review.

Schumann's Fantasie, as a composition, needs no introduction. It's likely his greatest and most famous work for solo piano, not to mention one of his top contenders for most technically difficult. In fact, on a scale of 1 to 5, pianolibrary.org rates the second movement of it the penultimate entry in its

category 5 list, edged out only by the *Presto* finale of the composer's Piano Sonata No. 2 in G Minor.

Such ratings, of course, are relative. What poses near insurmountable difficulties for one player, another player might find more tractable to his or her technique. If Schliessmann is challenged by the piece, you wouldn't know it from listening to him play it. He has reached the pinnacle sought and coveted by all players, which is to surmount all technical obstacles to the point where conscious awareness of them ceases to exist and all that is left is to dwell in the higher realm of pure music-making.

Burkard Schliessmann is in that class of musicians. His latest album is most assuredly a must-have for pianists and lovers of solo piano music, but also, I'd say for the general music lover as an example of what musicianship at its finest is all about. **Jerry Dubins**

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From the grand, rolled chords of the "Sinfonia" of Bach's Second Partita, several things become clear: This is an interpretation of conviction and clarity, caught in ideal sound and performed on a phenomenally well-prepared piano. The piano in question is a Fazioli F278, and heard on its home turf; it is unsurprisingly in peak condition.

It is in Schliessmann's use of gesture, set against underlying harmonic and structural processes, that the genius of this reading of Bach's Second Partita lies. The later section of the Sinfonia scurries along; there is real insight in the Allemande, too, with lines unfolding limply and yet with each note perfectly weighted. Again, there is a close-knit relationship between the local level (the touch itself) and the higher structural level (here, the phrase). The Courante breathes nobility; the relationship between anacrusis to downbeat clearly has been micro-analyzed prior to the performance, and ornaments are always stylistically applied. Similarly, Schliessmann's left-hand bass articulation in the Sarabande—a mezzo-staccato, as if the notes came from a bowed cello—is both carefully judged and perfectly executed. How teasingly Schliessmann articulates the Rondeau. The final Capriccio is taken at a steady pace, granting it a patina of tranquility underneath the surface activity. This is a fascinating reading, and the live provenance only adds to its heartfelt veracity.

The well-known *Italian Concerto* also begins with an imperiously rolled chord. Ornaments once more adorn the musical surface with grace, and Bach's harmonic sleights are well realized, in particular in interrupted cadences. The central movement is taken daringly slowly, with each left-hand note placed carefully, over which the right hand sings. Clarity is once more the watchword for the finale, with a repeated, marked emphasis on the opening downward leap. There is an impulsive side to Schliessmann's interpretation that is most appealing. The finest of the Bach performances, though, is that of the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue*, where gesture is all in the Fantasia. Fantasy is in the title and suffuses Schliessmann's performance, contrasted with the stricter fugue. There are moments of real grandeur, as if this were a transcription of an organ fugue, yet linear definition is never once compromised. The final high treble statement of the fugue remarkably seems to stretch out to the heavens.

The Bach performances form a valuable appendix to Schliessmann's *Goldberg Variations*. In an interview accompanying that release in *Fanfare* 31:3, Schliessmann articulates his thoughts about Bach performance, with especial reference to playing that piece on a modern piano. It is worthwhile remembering (and in a sense, the performance's integrity reminds us) that Schliessmann was at one time a pupil of the great organist Helmut Walcha, whose emphasis on the independence of voices in Bach was clearly a lesson well learned.

The account of Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses* that follows reveals parallels with Schliessmann's Bach, most notably in the independence of lines (the very first variation is a clear example of this). One of Mendelssohn's most loved works, it emerges here as a pillar of the piano repertoire. The imagination of Mendelssohn's writing is emphasized (the fifth variation), while the sixth reminds us that Mendelssohn was perfectly capable of writing *Angst*-laden music (think of the F-Minor String Quartet, too). The facility of the seventh variation is an object lesson in piano playing. The suddenly strict part-writing of the tenth variation is given with real sobriety of outlook, and that same analytical slant shines through variation 13. The whole coheres beautifully, leading to a finale shot through not just with dexterous energy but real beauty, so those final chords carry huge weight.

Over on the second disc, the Schumann Fantasie blazes forth. My review of Schliessmann's previous recording of this (from the disc *At the Heart of the Piano*) appeared in *Fanfare* 45:3. That was a performance of huge integrity; this one is too, but is perhaps more human at heart. One feels the impetuous surges of emotion a touch more in the first movement. I have previously written on Schliessmann's chameleonic way with the piano, of adapting his sound appropriately to each composer. And so it is here, with Schumann as sonorous and burnished as they come. The Fazioli supports this approach fully. The chords that close the first movement are superbly judged, and the recording reproduces the piano's tone perfectly. It is in the "song" of the finale that Schliessmann really shines, though. Many pianists over-project when the line goes to the middle or lower voices, but Schliessmann gets it just right. There is a momentum to his playing of the finale that also feels entirely natural. Schliessmann's interpretations just keep growing in maturity.

It is a rather nice touch that the final piece on the program is Chopin's Waltz, op. 64/2, and the first encore is Schumann's "Chopin" movement from *Carnaval*. The waltz rhythm of op. 64/2 is maintained as in few other performances, and yet the poignant undercurrent remains intense. Nothing is rushed, and yet scales still sparkle, melodies sing, and the rubato is entirely convincing. Schumann's take on Chopin really does sound like a Schumannesque Chopin *Impromptu*. This is a dream of a performance: One revels both in the loveliness of the piano and in Schliessmann's playing. Finally, the recital turns back to Schumann for "Warum?", at once a heart-led outpouring and a study in perfect part-writing. Schliessmann voices the individual lines so that they sound like a conversation between several participants—a great way to end a fabulous recital.

An almost equal participant in this project is the sound engineer, Matteo Costa, who works miracles in capturing an instrument with which Schliessmann is clearly besotted (and rightly so). Detailed and expansive booklet notes by Schliessmann himself are the icing on the Fazioli cake. Schliessmann's questing mind and solid technique present us with interpretations that convince at every level. Recommended. **Colin Clarke**
