

Christian Sinding

(1856–1941)

Sonata in B Minor, Op. 91 (22:29)

1. I Allegro non troppo (10:06)

2. II Andante (4:56)

3. III Vivace (7:23)

4. Con fuoco (3:02)

5. Melodie (3:24)

6. Marche Grotesque (2:50)

7. Serenade (1:43)

8. Irrlicht (1:20)

9. Capriccio (1:30)

10. Caprice (1:54)

11. Alla marcia (2:32)

12. Pomposo (3:50)

13. Frühlingsrauschen (*Rustles of Spring*) (2:38)

Jerome Lowenthal, piano

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Total Time: 47:50

Notes by Jerome Lowenthal

In 1940, as Hitler's troops swept across Norway, the eighty-four year old Christian Sinding, venerated as the country's leading living composer and internationally celebrated, was prominent among those who welcomed the invader to his country's shores. Sinding adored Germany, where he had lived for forty years, and German cultural attitudes. Now, he may have felt, he had the opportunity to be in Germany without having to leave home. Sinding died the following year and thereby escaped the danger of a postwar trial for treason. But the special flavor of "Rustles of Spring" had turned rancid, at least for his countrymen, by association with Vidkun Quisling, Knut Hamsun, and Kirsten Flagstad's husband. Suspected, justifiably or not, of fascistic sympathies, Sinding presented an unpleasant contrast with the great Norwegian master Edvard Grieg, whose stout defense, a generation earlier, of Alfred Dreyfus had so enraged Debussy. Deprived of the support of his countrymen, Sinding's international standing, which had once earned him, in such halls as that of Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, a place in the roll-call of the great master composers, now sank into semi-oblivion. What remained for the general public was a nostalgic memory of *Frühlingsrauschen* and occasional performances of the *Violin Suite* and the *Piano Quintet*.

Undoubtedly there were other things besides politics responsible for the decline of Sinding's reputation. The extraordinary appeal of *Frühlingssrauchen*, of which the many editions (including a "scholarly edition" by the great Leopold Godowsky) certainly resulted from the charm of its melody, harmonies and pianism, but at least as much from its wonderfully potent evocation of the sounds of nature. To a lesser extent, this is true of most of Sinding's piano music. His forms are conventional and his harmonic daring, though striking, is mainly coloristic. Sinding's sweeping arpeggios and stormy crescendi constantly remind us of wind-swept shores and perilous fjords. Nature-evocation is common in romantic music; the German woods are as present in Schumann and Brahms' music as are the Swiss mountains and valleys in Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage*. In the twentieth century, both Bartók and Messiaen have given magical voice to, respectively, insects and birds. But the sounds of nature have gradually receded from our music, and today's largely urban audience tends to be indifferent or even hostile to such extra-musical implications. Perhaps, too, the aspiration towards post-Wagnerian nobility and the triumphalism that is latent in this music have come to seem out-dated and irrelevant. As for the charm of Nordic modality, it is more accessible in the music of Sinding's great predecessor, Edvard Grieg. (Incidentally, both Grieg and Sinding studied in Leipzig with Reinecke and some of their lovably "Norwegian" turns of phrase can be found in Reinecke's music.)

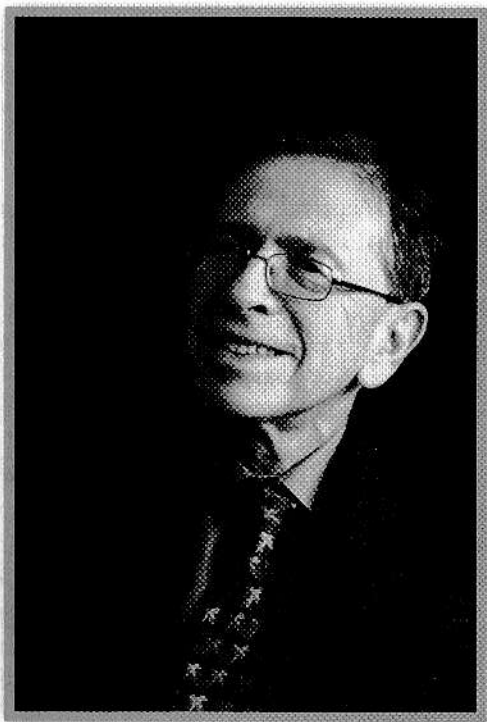
This disc contains ten short character-pieces and one large work- a sonata replete with prophetic utterances and subtly harmonized melodies. These works were all once immensely popular, and their charms are open to the listener.

Sinding's *Sonata in B minor*, Op. 91 (1909), by its key and its virtuosic pianism, looks back to Liszt's great Sonata (1853). Although it is in three discreet movements, this sonata, like Liszt's is organic in its conception. However, the organicism is achieved not through thematic transformation nor by any of the sophisticated contrapuntal devices used by Liszt, but rather by a unity of mood-fluctuation, with epic grandeur yielding to nostalgic yearning. The second movement is a simple and perfectly composed theme and variations, while the outer movements are in tumultuous Sonata-Allegro form.

The ten character-pieces are masterpieces of the genre: *Con fuoco* looks back to Schumann and forward to Strauss; *Melodie*, like the Sonata, is in b minor, but the mood is less bardic and more that of a simple folk-tune; *Marche grotesque*, a piece built on a long crescendo followed by an almost equally long diminuendo as the grotesque marchers disappear into the distance, was once a favorite concert encore; *Serenade* is a delicately harmonized love song; *Irrlicht or Feu follet* is less ambitious in virtuosity than Liszt's celebrated etude of the same name, but, like the Liszt, it sug-

gests lights which dazzle and darken; *Capriccio* is a Brahmsian explosion of cross-rhythmic phrasing and shifting registers; *Caprice* is a study in dancing pianism; *Alla Marcia* is a powerfully chordal statement of b flat minor darkness; *Pomposo* is larger than the others and grandly heroic. And *Frühlingsrauchen (Rustles of Spring)* is the piece that was played so often that surviving older pianos, we are told, can play it without the aid of an executant. Its rustling perfume still inheres in the music, as in the rest of the music on this disc. We need only open our ears.

Jerome Lowenthal, born in 1932, continues to fascinate audiences, who find in his playing a youthful intensity and an eloquence born of life-experience. He is a virtuoso of the fingers and the emotions. Mr. Lowenthal studied in his native Philadelphia with Olga Samaroff-Stokowski, in New York with William Kapell and Edward Steuermann, and in Paris with Alfred Cortot, meanwhile traveling annually to Los Angeles for coachings with Artur Schnabel. After winning prizes in three international competitions (Bolzano, Darmstadt, and Brussels), he moved to Jerusalem where, for three years, he played, taught and lectured. Returning to America, he made his debut with the New York Philharmonic in 1963, playing Bartók's *Concerto No. 2*. Since then, he has performed more-or-less everywhere, from the Aleutians to Zagreb. Conductors with whom he has appeared as soloist include Barenboim, Ozawa, Tilson Thomas, Temirkanov, and Slatkin, as well as such giants of the past as Leonard Bernstein, Eugene Ormandy, Pierre Monteux and Leopold Stokowski. He has played sonatas with Itzhak Perlman, piano duos with Ronit Amir (his late wife), Carmel Lowenthal (his daughter), and Ursula Oppens, as well as quintets with the Lark, Avalon and Shanghai Quartets. He has recently recorded the Beethoven *Fourth Concerto* with cadenzas by eleven different composers. His other recordings include concerti by Liszt, solo works by Sinding and Bartók, and chamber-music by Arensky and Taneyev. Teaching, too, is an important part of Mr. Lowenthal's musical life. For eighteen years at the



Jerome Lowenthal

Juilliard School and for forty summers at the Music Academy of the West, he has worked with an extraordinary number of gifted pianists, whom he encourages to understand the music they play in a wide aesthetic and cultural perspective and to project it with the freedom which that perspective allows. Bridge Records has recently released Mr. Lowenthal's recordings of Tchaikovsky's three Concertos and Concert Fantasy (BRIDGE 9301A/B) with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sergiu Comissiona.



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Executive Producers: Becky and David Starobin

For Bridge Records: Barbara Bersito, Douglas Holly, Paige Hoover
Michael Marrero, Charlie Post, Doron Schächter, and Sandra Woodruff

Brad Napoliello, webmaster
E-mail: Bridgelec@bridgerecords.com

Bridge Records, Inc.
200 Clinton Ave. · New Rochelle, NY · 10801
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