

## What's in a name? – recordings by a great but unknown pianist rescued from the vaults

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In the January 2019 issue of *Gramophone* the distinguished critic Jed Distler wrote a usefully comprehensive resume of the finest younger pianists, citing, at one point, Benjamin Grosvenor whose dazzling, old-school artistry brings to mind the finest of his feted forebears. Jed's mischievous suggestion that were we to lay a sheet of shellac surface noise across the best of the Grosvenor's recordings we may as well be listening to, say, the legendary Josef Hofmann, poses the question: suppose we were to apply that principle in reverse and somehow magic away vintage sound so that the likes of Hofmann, Rachmaninov, Cortot, Schnabel, Rosenthal, Friedman, Lhevinne and others sound, in sonic terms, as immediate as Yuja Wang or Daniil Trifonov? Would we then be talking about a sort of interpretative continuum where the generations meld onto an elevated bloodline that will only admit the best, and forget the issue of this or that historic 'period'? I'd say, definitely not. My contention is that the blooded divide that sliced the world pre- and post-War somehow soiled the concept of Romantic idealism, which is why Rachmaninov's Chopin Second Sonata or Schumann *Carnaval* and Friedman's accounts of various Chopin *Mazurkas* awake in us levels of fantasy that no post-War pianists, however insightful, quite manage to achieve.

So, are we then slaves to 'big name' syndrome? Can we only experience awe if the name appended to it is 'legendary'? Well, here's a test for you. You know the great Sidney Foster (1917-1977) don't you. Sorry? You're telling me that you *don't* know him? This cultured prize-winning virtuoso, one time resident of Bloomington, Indiana, who gave the Boston premiere of Bartók's Third Concerto under Aaron Copland and wrote his own cadenza for the first movement of Beethoven's Third Concerto, pupil of David Saperton (Godowsky's son-in-law and teacher of Shura Cherkassky and the like) is a pianist whose range of

imagination and ability to cue audible thunder will make you think again about everything he plays. A 7-cd set of live performances on the Marston label (57001-2) includes a remarkable recording from 1941 where this 23-year old winner of the Edgar M. Leventritt Prize (the judges included Adolf Busch and Rudolf Serkin) played the Beethoven Concerto. The rest is from the 1950s through to the 1970s, Brahms's Third Sonata raging wild, the Scherzo bursting upon us in a state of great agitation, and the four *Ballades*, the First massive in conception, the Third, restless, impulsive, and the polar opposite of the marmoreal Michelangeli.

This is the thing about Foster – he's a player who you feel has rushed to the keyboard on impulse in the privacy of his own studio just for the love of performing a favourite work. The concertos programmed also include Tchaikovsky's First (with a notably poetic slow movement), a characterful Bartók Third with Copland (recorded around the time of the Boston premiere), and a cleanly articulated Schumann Concerto from Japan. Schumann's *Carnaval* treads the Rachmaninov route with drive and eloquence but for me the set's high points are two Chopin masterpieces, the Fourth *Ballade* and the F minor *Fantasy*, both works played with a combination of storm-tossed passion and structural awareness. Foster was less the refined practitioner than an intuitive musician who seemed *au fait* with the muse's fiery breath. Intelligent too, of course, but reaching beyond the notes was his special skill

You listen and you wonder, why was this man's commercial recording career restricted to a couple of LPs? Why is his name virtually unknown while the names of his pianistic inferiors fill our households? Sadly, it's not an unknown situation but at least in this case Ward Marston has had the courage and enterprise to make amends. Please don't just take my word for it. I won't guarantee you'll like everything in the set but, to return to Jed's conjecture, were I to present you with say the Chopin *Ballade* in modern sound I've a feeling you'd say, 'this guy is one hell of a player! Where has he been? Let's hear more of him'.