The Marston Records label releases a box set of more than nine hours of unreleased recordings of Sidney Foster, made during his public appearances. A master whose fame, by inexplicable meanders of life, has never been at the height of his talent and his musicality.

Although Sidney Foster (1917-1977) was to be considered one of the most accomplished American pianists of his time, he was inexplicably, throughout his life, ignored by the record industry, leaving a couple of Mozart concertos, engraved with the Vienna Chamber Orchestra under the baton of Helmut Froschauer, and a dozen sonatas by Muzio Clementi, both originally published by Musical Heritage Society. In 1938, he won the MacDowell Competition and, in 1940, the first edition of the prestigious Leventritt Competition. This last prize allows him to make his debut with the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra in 1941, during which he performs, in public, the Concerto in C minor op. 37 of Beethoven under the direction of John Barbirolli, presenting his own cadenza in the first movement of the work (this performance is included in this box). From then on, he began a career with regular recitals at Carnegie Hall, as well as performances with the New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Boston Symphony, Houston Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony, Minneapolis Symphony, the Dallas Symphony and dozens of other ensembles. In the early 1960s, he performed in Britain, Holland, Germany, Israel, Japan, and the Soviet Union where he performed twenty-two concerts in thirty days, playing four concertos and offering three different recitals in Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk, Tbilisi, Yerevan, Rostov-on-Don and Kishinev. From 1952 until his death, he was a professor at Indiana University.

Sidney Foster's repertoire ranges from Baroque to contemporary, and is rich enough to fill, almost end-to-end, the seven discs of this release without any of the compositions found here appear more than one time. In some respects, the style of the artist resembles, so to speak, that of Josef Hofmann, who was, in our opinion, the most eminent pianist ever to record in the history of phonography. Especially because their game is a clever mix of intellectual and natural element; on one hand, coherent and measured (but not restrained), it is, on the other hand, marked with the seal of spontaneity and a sparkling expressiveness, as much as with a fertile sound imagination. They also electrify, in passages subjected to a fast tempo, by the precision of the articulation and the capacity to vary the shades, sometimes substantially, during the passage from one note to another. In their performances, they remain intellectual and creative, and are not afraid to take a risk for a more attractive final effect, without neglecting, within this breathtaking virtuosity, the melodious and harmonious side of the pages they cover. This is therefore in the service of these scores, above all, and the very music that their approach is subjected to, although some critics are ready to blame Foster for excessive rubato, a too limited color palette and exaggerated character extrovert and rowdy with his scenic "feats".
For this set, the very first work, the Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor op. 23 of Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, already reveals this radiant beauty and subtlety of touch. Listen to how the octaves sing and shine at the beginning of the first movement, and how the Apollonian gentleness of lyrical moments intertwines with Dionysian liveliness and intense climax drama. And if this performance is drowned in the cordial agreement of the dialogue between the soloist and the orchestra, it is also obscured by a handful of false notes, an aspect which differentiates the game of Sidney Foster of about fifty years (engraving of January 15, 1966) of Josef Hofmann at the same age, the latter having been an outstanding perfectionist. On the other hand, this care of technical excellence is noticeable in the young Foster, in the performance (mentioned above) of Beethoven's Concerto in C minor, recorded in 1941, and remaining the only sound document available to him. pianist for the 1940s. As for the other concertos of this issue, let's not forget to mention the one in E major of Bartók, whose reading, recorded in April 1965, combines the gracefulness with a lyricism somewhat rough, but also highlights the contrast between the diverse colors - sometimes dark (and biting), sometimes pastel - of an imperfect orchestral accompaniment and the sound of a piano with a slightly nasal tone.

For the interpretations of Sidney Foster's solo piano music, most of which should not escape our attention, let us highlight those that, in all this opulence, seem to us the most seductive.

In the first place, let us recall the engraving of the recital which he gave on May 3, 1954 in Bloomington, and which is restored to us in its integrity. Spontaneity and feverish enthusiasm distinguish these performances by the flamboyant playing of the soloist. Fantasy op. 28 from Mendelssohn, Sonata op. 35 of Chopin and, especially, the Tarantella of Liszt are of a virtuosity breathtaking and volcanic intensity. The same goes for Schumann's Carnival, which, however, is full of empathy and sensuality, as well as a sort of entanglement more due to the musician's fiery musical temperament than to a desired effect. Liszt's Tarantella, white-hot by unparalleled finger dexterity, permeates, despite a number of failed touches, rage and passion that are difficult to find in the other existing performances of this work.

In the second place, let's talk about his Chopin, who is lively, singing, profoundly articulate and dazzling with clarity, but also, at times, light as a feather, while constituting an exquisite combination of lyricism and impetuousness. With Foster, it's also a Chopin that can get carried away by anger, for example in the climaxes of Fantasia in F minor which, according to one of the summer commensals in Nohant, reflect the quarrels between the composer himself and George Sand. Then, an authentic Chopin and looking marked by the torments of his life. Foster is surprisingly creative, finally, with minor modifications introduced in the C sharp minor study op. 10 No. 4 and the Study in F major op. 10 No. 8. For the first, in the resumption of the initial theme, Foster changes rhythm by using four eighths instead of the same number of sixteenth notes in the score, starting to execute them earlier than indicated in the measure in order to finish the process at the right time, which breaks in some way the present mirror design of this page (these sixteenth notes appear in the right hand, three octaves higher, at the beginning of the work). It makes us perceive an exciting dialogue, or rather a "battle", between the two hands, including a remarkable polyphonic effect. For the Study in F major op. 10, he renounces playing a total of
eight notes in the bass throughout the composition in order to replace them with octaves added in such a way that they precede, in intervals of a second, other already existing octaves. In addition, he dissociates three chords by proposing them in the form of arpeggios, and he increases an arpeggio of Chopin by the addition of a note. For the Sonata op. 58, recorded on July 1, 1969, the reading he gives is this time purged personal alterations more or less contestable on his part. Crossed in an epic tone and a rich but balanced expressive palette, it is at the same time vehement and inflamed. In this light, and taking into account the above comments about Chopin's interpretations, this one presents itself as a delightful example of the implementation of the spiritual testament of the author of Preludes op. 28, whose musical achievements appeal and flow properly from improvisation and emotions, despite his obsession with perfection of form.

Thirdly, think of Sidney Foster's Brahms who, in the Ballades, creates soundscapes bathed in twilight atmospheres and, sometimes even, a melancholy sobriety, even a frozen atmosphere. As for the Sonata in F minor, we are confronted with a vibrant performance and an outfit favoring contrasts of nuances and tempo without losing coherence of the subject.

As for the other highlights of this set, let's talk about the performance of Sonata op. Sergei Rachmaninov, with a fervent, almost continuous pulse, as well as a touch of delicacy attentive to the refinements of the score, and awakening echoes of the high tradition of the singing of the Orthodox Church. In addition, we will find here Norman Dello Joio's rare Sonata in G major, a 1947 page developed for Sidney Foster, linking the classical structure with the romantic expression, played brilliantly and enthusiastically, in a way that also highlights well the soloist's musical intelligence as his gift of transmitting emotions smoldering in the very depths of the works he addresses. And if his Mozart are candid and harmonious, still only a bit "spicy" for the finale of the Sonata in G major K. 283, and the last movement of the Sonata in C major op. 53 by Beethoven is distinguished by elegance and a touch of pearls, Liszt's Sonata is both lively, articulate and analytical.

For the smaller musical forms, let us first mention the performance of Bach's Prelude and Fugue in A minor BWV 543 transcribed by Liszt, engraved on April 27, 1952, which is tense and which testifies mainly to humanity and sincerity. of this instrumentalist sensitive to the subtleties of colors, movement and rhythm. Let us not forget to mention the interpretation of César Franck's Prelude, choral and fugue FWV 21, defatted by the limpidity of the shots and the agility of the articulation, poetic, as well as, for the fugue, given with verve. The reading of Debussy's two Préludes proves, in turn, the care taken by the pianist in the search for nuances, dark rather than luminous. Last but not least, note the admirable execution of the fantastic Cracovian in B major Op. 14 n°6 of Paderewski, devoid of softness and sentimentality, radiant, led by a hopping rhythm and duly punctuated with typical accents of this dance.

Here is an invitation to a fascinating journey to discover rare musical treasures in the best quality reports possible, a publication recommended for fans of the piano.