

Sidney Foster: Rediscovering a Master

Jed Distler welcomes a survey exploring the legacy of an overlooked American pianist

Sidney Foster (1917-77) may be the ultimate candidate for the title of 'greatest pianist you've never heard of'. He studied at the Curtis Institute with two redoubtable perfectionists, Isabelle Vengerova and David Saperton. His 1940 victory in the first Leventritt competition led to a New York Philharmonic debut and a busy concert-giving schedule. Serious health problems thwarted, yet never completely curtailed, his performing career, although much of his energies were focused on teaching, primarily as a tenured professor at Indiana University from 1952 until his death. Evidently Foster was averse to the recording process, and left behind only two commercial releases. Fortunately, numerous archival concert and broadcast recordings exist. Some items appeared in the International Piano Archives at Maryland's limited edition two-disc collection 'Ovation to Sidney Foster' in 1993. The Marston label now offers seven CDs worth of live Foster material recorded between 1941 and 1975, most of which is released for the first time.

No doubt that Foster's dazzling technique, perceptive musicianship and palpable communicative powers will be a revelation for piano mavens, not to mention his wide-ranging repertoire. In a pair of Bach/Liszt organ transcriptions, Foster projects the original scoring's sonorous grandeur without losing one iota of linear cogency. Mozart's G major Sonata, K283, is a model of stylish grace and equilibrium in Foster's hands, as is the 1941 New York Philharmonic broadcast of Beethoven's Third Concerto conducted by Barbirolli, where Foster provided his own tasteful and inventive first-movement cadenza. A fuller measure of Foster's Beethoven can be found in a 1971 *Waldstein* Sonata teeming with shapely impetus, as well as certain 'old school' traits such as the broad ritards at the first theme's end and taking the Rondo's unorthodox pedal indications with a grain of salt. The pianist's 1966 Op 110 features a gorgeously parsed *Adagio ma non troppo*, and notice his sovereign, unflappable control of the briskly paced fugue.

Early 19th-century Romantics account for some of the collection's most invigorating interpretations, such as the large-scaled excitement of the



If you haven't heard of Sidney Foster, now is the time to get acquainted

Mendelssohn F sharp minor Fantasia's finale, and the daringly protracted Trio section in Chopin's 'Funeral March' Sonata. Schumann's *Carnaval* teems with nervous energy, perhaps excessively so; I find that Foster projects the composer's Janus-like passion and repose more convincingly in *Papillons* and the A minor Piano Concerto's first two movements (the latter's finale is less poised).

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Brahms's F minor Sonata and Four Ballades Op 10 live vibrantly and a little too dangerously in Foster's ardent hands. By contrast, the pianist fully settles into the Franck *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue's* comparably massive textures. Strong transitions and polyphonic awareness result in one of the most cohesive accounts I know of Chopin's F minor Fantasy, although the Fourth Ballade finds Foster all over the place in regard to dynamic scaling and dramatic contrast. It takes time for Foster to warm up at the Liszt Sonata's outset, but it's smooth and expressive sailing from the lyrical second theme

onward, while unusual accentuations and phrase groupings hold interest throughout the Tarantella from *Venezia e Napoli*.

If Foster overshoots the mark in Chopin's 'Black Key' and F major Op 10 Etudes, his stunningly controlled breakneck tempo for Op 10 No 4 gives Sviatoslav Richter's like-minded conception a run for its money. And you'll rarely hear Op 10 No 6 sung out like a heartfelt tone poem, or the Chopin B minor Sonata Scherzo's Trio move so freely over the bar lines. Foster's Rachmaninov and Scriabin may not match Horowitz's scintillation and necromantic hues, yet he brilliantly fuses bravura and poetry throughout Tchaikovsky's First Concerto, where the uncommonly fast but flexibly paced central *Andantino semplice* complements a lithe and balletic approach to the *Prestissimo* section.

Foster is both inside and on top of Prokofiev's idiom in the Ninth Sonata and a selection of *Visions Fugitives*, and he brings out all of the rhythmic vivacity and melodic joy in the faster movements of Norman Dello Joio's wonderful Third Sonata. A live 1965 Bartók Third Concerto with Aaron Copland leading the Boston Symphony boasts particular musical and historic significance, standing out for the animated conversational quality of the second movement's piano/clarinet dialogue and the sharply delineated fugato in the finale. Among Foster's celebrated encores, his rip-roaring Weber *Perpetuum Mobile* deserves attention, although this 1954 reading seems a tad helter-skelter compared to the amazing (and better engineered) 1959 performance issued on the aforementioned IPAM set. The pianist Alberto Reyes, a former Foster pupil, provides informative annotations that include touching personal remembrances of his mentor. The sound quality of these archival recordings varies from work to work, yet everything is listenable. An important and highly recommended release. **G**

THE RECORDING

'Sidney Foster: Rediscovering an American Master'

Marston (M) 757001-2

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