



Sidney Foster: Rediscovering an American Master

Marston 57001-2 7 CDs



Who was Sidney Foster? The question arises because Foster never achieved the recognition he deserved. Bouts of ill-health and an innate modesty played their part, as did sheer bad luck, leaving Foster virtually without a portfolio.

Marston's invaluable issue reveals a pianist of towering stature with a conflicted nature. Incandescent performances are offset by others where Foster plays with dazzlingly virtuosity that leaves the listener with little else. His 'Tarantella' from Liszt's *Venezia e Napoli*, for example, scarcely suggests the composer's definition of a virtuoso as one 'called upon to make emotion sing and sigh... to breathe the breath of life'. The same is true of Schumann's *Carnaval*. Why so violent in 'Estrella', and where is the elegance and piquancy that characterises the recordings of Moiseiwitsch, Cortot, Myra Hess or Géza Anda? This is hardly the sort of playing to which you return for enlightenment.

Elsewhere there are performances in which Foster's phenomenal facility is complemented by a rare poetic artistry. I have seldom heard a more mesmeric performance of Chopin's Fourth Ballade, its volatile and elegiac character set free from conventions. The transition from the introduction to the bleak principle theme is one of many highlights. More controversially, you may wonder why the Scherzo from the Sonata in B minor is ratcheted up to near breaking-point, but you will surely marvel at Foster's magnanimity in the Largo and experience what a colleague called 'the boggle factor' in the finale's equestrian gallop.

The rhetoric of Tchaikovsky's First Concerto is blazed to the heavens, and

even though Foster is overbearing in much of Bartok's Third Concerto it is difficult to resist the spine-tingling bravura of the finale. Other major successes include Scriabin's and Prokofiev's Ninth Sonatas, the dark Dostoyevsky recesses of the former matched by the unsettling whimsy of the latter.

No discussion of Sidney Foster would be complete without mention of his performance of four Chopin *Études* (Op 10, Nos 4,5,6 and 8). These are truly astonishing in their virtuosity and no more fiercely ignited (or wittily voiced) No 4 exists on record.

This is an issue that leaves you frequently bewitched, sometimes bothered and occasionally bewildered. Beautifully presented with many photographs and an essay by Foster's devoted student, the Uruguayan pianist, Alberto Reyes.

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