

Veiled Virtuosity

AMIR FARID

Liszt | Brahms | Prokofiev | Beethoven
Greenbaum | Vine | Maroufi

move



Pianists have Franz Liszt to thank for the fact that they now have to practise several hours a day. Of course there were pianist/composers before him who incorporated their own idiosyncratic technical tricks into their works (Clementi's runs of parallel thirds and Hummel's quicksilver staccato octaves come to mind), but it was Liszt who insisted – through multiple compositions and performances – that the minimum standard for technical competence on the instrument be raised, and after him piano playing could never be the same.

Liszt's utter prodigiousness at the piano and his almost super-human ability to sight-read has been widely documented (he sight-read – to performance standard – Grieg's Piano Concerto and Brahms' Piano Sonatas in front of their respective composers, shouting excited commentary above the din as he played). What is less reported (perhaps because it is all *too* human) is that he also practised fanatically, determined to master technical feats hitherto deemed impossible, such as single-handed legato chromatic sixths or scales in broken tenths. Additionally (and perhaps more importantly), he used his ever more attuned sense of keyboard geography to constantly revise his own keyboard works so that the most virtuosic effects could be accomplished in the most economical way – of all composers for piano, Liszt manages to most consistently make his works sound harder to play than they are (notwithstanding the fact that they are often dementedly hard!).

In light of this hard work and innovation, we can view Liszt as a sincere and creative artist of the highest order. Unfortunately, his gift for pushing the boundaries of pyrotechnics has meant that history has treated him unkindly.

The accusation that Liszt was interested in exploiting glib virtuosity solely for the sake of getting women to throw their underwear on stage has certainly been levelled at him more than once...

Part of the reason that this 'empty vessel' image of Liszt still persists is that it was so strongly entrenched and disseminated by an opposing camp of composers in his own lifetime – Brahms, of course, being its chief propagandist. To talk of two teams of composers ('if you are not for us, you are against us', etc.) is not such an extreme image for this very deep schism existing in mid nineteenth-century Germanic music. In one corner, Liszt and Wagner – innovators, musical prophets, insistent on music's programmatic nature and its integration with other art forms; in the other, Brahms and Schumann – guardians against musical philistinism, upholders of the noble arts of form and counterpoint, musical purists. Any crossover or mutual admiration was minimal, and vehemence was never particularly censored – Clara Schumann noted that Liszt's music made her physically ill, while Tchaikovsky is on record as calling Brahms a 'giftless scoundrel'.

The perceived division and personal animosity between Brahms and Liszt was absolutely real. What has become 'less real' over time is the notion that their respective music really expressed such divergent paths at all. Certainly, as they are represented on this CD, the traditional stereotypes don't really hold up. Liszt's *Consolation in Db* may have the more programmatic title, but it's Brahms' *Rhapsody in Bm, Op.79 No.1* that tells the greater story. The work is dedicated to Elisabeth von Herzagenberg, a talented former student of Brahms whom he came to rely on (via an unrequited crush) as a muse and critic in

his later years and, aside from a tight formal structure, there is little emotional or technical restraint to be found. A jarring dissonance opens the work which then proceeds on its virtuosic and stormy way, with chains of block chords and runs traversing the length of the keyboard. This rage returns at the work's close as well, however the B-major oasis in the middle of the work, with its delicate chains of ever-rising double suspensions, is one of Brahms' most unashamed moments of poetic sweetness.

Liszt's set of Consolations show an eloquent and intimate side to the composer that is conveniently ignored by those who decry his 'empty virtuosity'. The Db consolation owes far more to Chopin than it does to Paganini, being for the most part a beautiful and unpredictable cantilena for the pianist's right hand set against a rippling and curvaceous accompaniment. The piece is not without its difficulties, but it's the virtuosity of delicacy and taste that's explored rather than anything gladiatorial.

What these two works require, unequivocally, is that the technical demands – while considerable – must be rendered invisible so that the musical message of the piece can shine through. They require a sort of 'veiled virtuosity', and once these two giants had completed their legacy of music for the instrument, great piano music could never be otherwise.

Sergei Prokofiev's *Toccata, Op.11* carries on this tradition. While there's no denying the fireworks on display, there is an underlying menace and pessimism about the piece in its insistence on returning to a 'screen-saver' of repeated Ds, regardless of how wide-ranging the traversals in between may be. The pianist is only able to escape the incessant looping in the coda by way of a super-charged tempo increase

and a glissando traversing the length of the keyboard.

Widely acknowledged as two of the great miniaturists for piano, both Brahms and Prokofiev would likely have found much to admire in Carl Vine's **5 Bagatelles**. These exquisitely crafted miniatures focus almost obsessively on one idea each. The germs of the first four pieces are reminiscent of motifs and textures found in Vine's earlier *First Piano Sonata*, although in the Bagatelles there is the feeling that these ideas have been newly curated – carefully excised from their surrounding environment and spot-lit to perfection. A stunning array of scenarios are depicted here: a disquieting nocturne; a skittish moto perpetuo; a muted love song; a lop-sided jam session. The final piece – the starkest and longest of the set – was actually the first written. Entitled 'Threnody: For all the innocent victims', it was premiered with Vine playing piano at the 1994 Australian National AIDS Trust annual fund-raising dinner. Its aura of introspective grief tinged with a glimmer of hope provides a suitable gravid ending for what, in toto, is a major masterwork for piano.

Threnody is also the impetus for Stuart Greenbaum's *Evocation*, commissioned by Marjorie Dunlop to commemorate the life of Daniel James McCluskey, who died suddenly in January 2006. He was an accomplished law and music student at the University of Melbourne, and an orchestration student of Greenbaum in 2004. In that same year he included *Evocation* (from Albéniz' cycle, Iberia) in his solo program and that piece provided a loose starting point for this one.

A moving and poignant elegy, the title refers both to the literal definition of 'creation anew through the power of memory or imagination'

and also to the work of the same name by Isaac Albéniz – with the idea that Daniel might have his own 'Evocation'. The premiere performance was given by Amir Farid on 29th October 2006.

There is something elegiac about the works of Javad Maroufi too. Maroufi emerged last century as perhaps Iran's most high-profile art-music composer. Like Alberto Ginastera in Argentina, Toru Takemitsu in Japan and Australia's own Peter Sculthorpe, he made it his mission to create a musical language that mirrored his country's landscape, lifestyle and culture. *Golden Dreams* is his most famous piano work – a soulful aria which opens with dramatic tremolandos imitative of Persian zithers and then settles into something more timeless and strangely hypnotic. His *Prelude No.5*, while shorter, is a dramatic, darker work with familiar harmonies tending to resolve in unfamiliar ways, and a strong exploitation of the augmented 2nd – so recognisable as the interval that gives the harmonic minor scale its piquant flavour. In Maroufi's hands it lends the work a peculiar poignancy as the interval constantly pulls the harmonic direction downwards even as the piece climbs up to the highest, sparsest registers of the keyboard. There is no mistaking the heavy heart behind these works, reflecting a culture that is grand, turbulent and rich with nostalgia.

The last word in veiled virtuosity though, has to go to Beethoven. Before any of the other works on this CD had even been conceived, Beethoven's completed set of 32 piano sonatas is really the last word in the sublimation of technique to musical ideas – ideas so powerful that the music scene some 200 years later is still feeling their effects. The *Sonata in C, Op.53*, dedicated to Ferdinand von Waldstein, is conceived as a grand statement – arguably

Beethoven's grandest in the genre up to this point. The first movement is unbridled in its virtuosity with an irresistible forward drive built up from a motif of, unbelievably, nothing more than pulsating C-major chords. The harmonic territory traversed in the first few moments is astonishing – by bar 5 we are in Bb major, however the second subject of the exposition is in E major (a key about as far removed from Bb as is possible). As quavers give way to triplets give way to semiquavers, and extremes of register are further explored, the overall feeling is of a buoyant, unstoppable force of nature – perhaps a larger metaphor that can be applied to Beethoven himself.

The second movement has the curious title 'Introduzione'. It turns out this enigmatic and fragmented shadow of a movement is all upbeat to the final movement. This closing Rondo is also illustrative of the forces of nature, but in an ambling and pastoral vein (the analogy of the 6th Symphony comes to mind). There is a *literal* veiling at the opening here, with Beethoven asking for the sustain pedal to be depressed continuously for several bars at a time, through all manner of harmonic and articulation changes, while keeping the sound *sempre pianissimo*. The beautiful effect here is of a slow blooming as, out of the haze, a pianistic tour-de-force gradually makes itself apparent. By the movement's end, scalic runs, moto perpetuo triplets, octave glissandi and melodies embedded in chains of trills will have all made an appearance. The miracle is that the quite deliberate technical stacking is always kept absolutely secondary to a profound musical statement about joy, metamorphosis and humankind's relationship to the natural world. Liszt may have taught pianists the power of practice, but it was Beethoven who taught them the mighty power of a single thought.



Winner of the 2006 Australian National Piano Award, pianist Amir Farid has been described as “a highly creative musician – a pianist of great intelligence and integrity. He brings strong musical substance to all that he does, imbuing it with his own particular experience and understanding”, and who “in a well-populated field...distinguishes himself for all the right reasons”.

In 2004 Mr. Farid completed his B.Mus (Hon) at the University of Melbourne under the guidance of Ronald Farren-Price, and later attended the Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM) studying with Rita Reichman, Geoffrey Tozer and Timothy Young. In 2009, he graduated with distinction as a Scholar supported by the Gordon Calway Stone Memorial Award at the Royal College of Music London, studying with Andrew Ball.

He has performed concerti with the Sydney Symphony, Melbourne Symphony, Melbourne Chamber Orchestra, Orchestra Victoria, Melbourne Youth and ANAM Orchestras, including Rachmaninoff's 2nd Piano Concerto at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl with the Melbourne Symphony in front of a capacity 13,000 strong crowd. Collaborations with conductors include Graham Abbott, Peter Bandy, Alexander Briger, Oleg Caetani, Brett Dean, Marko Letonja and Benjamin Northey.

As a chamber musician, Mr. Farid is pianist of the acclaimed Benaud Trio (www.benaudtrio.com), winning the Piano Trio prize at the 2005 Australian Chamber Music Competition, and with whom he undertook a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada.

As an associate artist, he was winner of the prize for best pianist at the 2006 Mietta Song Recital award, and the 2007 Geoffrey

Parsons Award. Collaborations include cellists Alexander Baillie, Mats Lidstrom and Martin Loveday, saxophonist Claude Delangle, clarinetist Dong Jun-Mo, contralto Liane Keegan, pianist Max Olding, soprano Merlyn Quaife, the Tin Alley String Quartet and mezzo-soprano Pamela Turner.

Throughout his studies, Mr. Farid has participated in lessons and masterclasses with Michele Campanella, Aquiles Delle Vigne, Nikolai Demidenko, Christopher Elton, Gordon Fergus-Thompson, Cord Garben, Mark Gasser, Angela Hewitt, Ian Holtham, Leslie Howard, Julian Jacobson, Geoffrey Lancaster, Stephen McIntyre, Malcolm Martineau, Dominique Merlet, Hamish Milne, Lisa Moore, Ian Munro, Ruth Nye, Adrian Oetiker, Max Olding, Bart van Oort, Christina Ortiz, John Perry, Geoffrey Saba, Natasha Vlassenko, Frank Wibaut, Gerard Willems, Oxana Yablonskaya and John York.

Mr. Farid would like to acknowledge the support and generosity of the following organizations and individuals: Mr. Neville Arthur, the Australia Business Arts Foundation, the Australian Music Foundation, the Australian National Academy of Music, Mr. John Garran, Mrs. Lois Goodin, Mrs. Heather de Haes, the Ian Potter Cultural Trust, the Royal College of Music, The Swiss Global Artistic Foundation, the Tait Memorial Foundation, the Turnbull Family and the University of Melbourne.

www.amirfarid.com

Javad Maroufi (1912-1993)

1 Golden Dreams 4'13"

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

2 Rhapsody in B minor, Op 79, No 1 10'40"

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

3 Consolation No 3 4'55"

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Sonata in C, Op 53 "Waldstein"

4 *Allegro con brio* 11'42"

5 *Introduzione: adagio molto* 4'34"

6 *Rondo: allegro moderato* 10'45"

Javad Maroufi

7 Prelude 4'03"

Stuart Greenbaum (b. 1966)

8 Evocation 9'12"

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

9 Toccata, Op 11 5'14"

Carl Vine (b. 1954)

5 Bagatelles

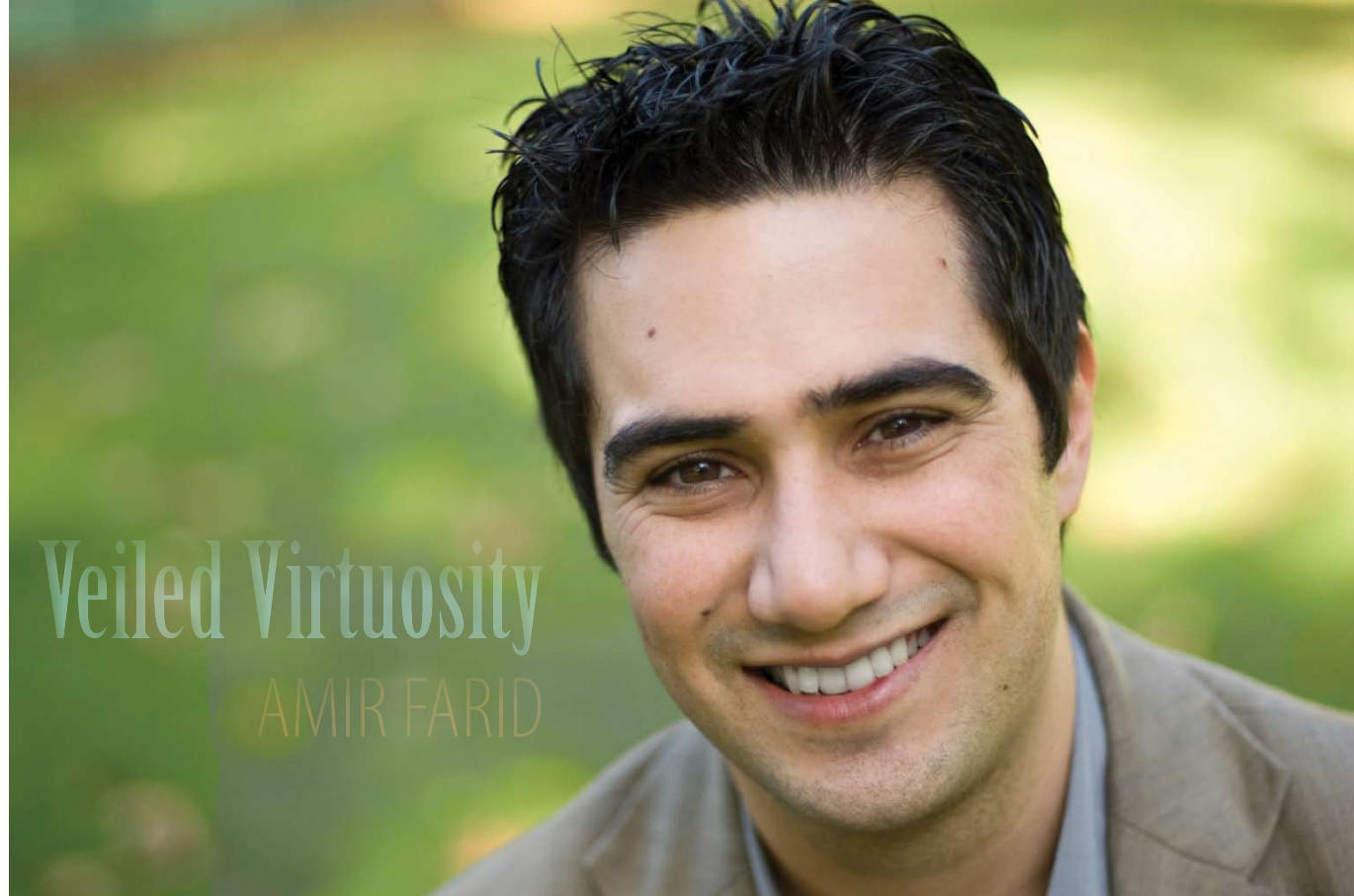
10 *Bagatelle 1* 3'22"

11 *Bagatelle 2* 1'16"

12 *Bagatelle 3* 2'13"

13 *Bagatelle 4* 1'18"

14 *Bagatelle 5* 3'25"



© 2009 Move Records

Recorded in Move Records studio

Piano Yamaha C7

Recording and editing: Vaughan McAlley

Mastering: Martin Wright

Photography: Lars Schlereth of Saga Images

www.saga-images.com

www.move.com.au