

Steven Lubin

CD Reviews

“Twenty years back, Arabesque released several Mozart concerto recordings with Steven Lubin and The Mozartean Players—recordings that were widely praised (see John Bauman’s comments in 8:3 and 9:6 [*Fanfare*, Vol.8, No.3, and Vol.9, No.6]). These performances of K.449 and 467 were taped at the same time—but because of corporate changes at Arabesque, they were neither edited nor released. Now, at last, they’ve appeared on a new label devoted to Lubin’s work, past and present.

Since the 1980’s, of course, period practice has become mainstream—and the tart, anti-Romantic sound of the instruments in and of itself no longer has the revelatory cleansing power that it once did. Even in this more competitive climate, though, Lubin’s bold readings stand out: for their rhythmic resilience (listen to the spring with which the orchestra launches K.467), for the way Lubin’s imaginative articulation clarifies the phrasing (even the most conventional gestures seem freshly minted), for their rhetorical poise. You’ll also be struck by the rapport between soloist and orchestra, a rapport that gives the performances an engagingly conversational quality (the witty exchanges in the finale of K.449 deserve special mention).

Not surprisingly, given the zesty affirmation of the interpretations, it’s the outer movements that grab you most immediately. In the long run, though, you may find yourself turning to these performances even more for the middle movements, which offer a paradoxically serene impetus that avoids sentiment without falling into negligence. As on the earlier releases, the engineers have found just the right balance between the fortepiano and the orchestra—and Lubin’s notes offer valuable insight into the performances. The timing is short, but with music-making of this quality, it’s hard to complain. Highly recommended.”

—Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Fanfare*, July/August, 2006

Beethoven-Concerto Cycle on CDs:

L'Oiseau-Lyre [Decca] 421 408-2, three CDs, with Christopher Hogwood and the Academy of Ancient Music

Excerpts from some of the reviews garnered, worldwide:

What a joy, this Beethoven cycle—a godsend for the performance-practice partisan that merits comparison even to modern-instrument mainstays like Fleisher and Kempff. Lubin's playing of four different fortepianos is mature and imaginative. *David Claris, Fanfare*

Steven Lubin, a renowned fortepiano specialist, seeks to convince, never to shock. His playing, technically very assured, is of a clarity and transparency to which we are not at all accustomed in this repertoire. He possesses the fluidity and grace that suit the earlier concertos so well, but he also knows how to wax ardent and combative in the two mature masterworks. Lubin possesses a singing line of remarkable profundity. The adagio of the Fifth Concerto, as well as that of the Third, are voluptuously poetic. Despite



a respect for the letter, the spirit is very much a presence. All of Beethoven is in evidence here, with its gripping contrasts and its play of shadow and light. *Francis Albou, Répertoire [France]*

Steven Lubin provides miraculous solo playing on four different fortepianos to mark different stages of development during Beethoven's life. It can be easily recommended as the best recording of the Beethoven concertos in the catalog. *Jonathan Richmond, The Tech [MIT]*

Steven Lubin's playing is beautiful, clean, precise, graceful and yet resolute, and he achieves moments of profound intensity, as in the Adagio of the Emperor. *Laura Poli, Musica [Italy]*

The just-released recording of the five Beethoven Piano Concertos results from a collaboration between the American pianist Steven Lubin and the Academy of Ancient Music, directed by Christopher Hogwood—and it is in fact phenomenal. A virtuoso soloist playing four different copies of Viennese pianos loses none of the specialness of each—he draws out all the instruments' finest nuances, without ever thereby losing the forest for the trees. *Musik-Journal [Germany]*

If we play the concertos in the order in which they were composed, we do sense a 'growth' in the form, and Beethoven's mastery of it; but the playing style varies appropriately, so that the parts of this series are as interesting as the whole. Most of the tempos seem just about right, and the pacing of movements are thoroughly convincing. The technical standards are high: the solo playing is virtually flawless, the orchestral articulation very clean. *William Drabkin, Early Music*

The set is an arresting, controversial experience. Lubin's pianism is extremely cultivated, and Hogwood stresses clarity and rhythmic verve. *Allan Ulrich, San Francisco Examiner*

You'd better listen. These recordings challenge the status quo as much as or more than previous efforts of this kind. It is almost as if the early-instrument approach permits the musicians to be forthright and lyrical, and full-blooded and dramatic, without having to be either eccentric or academic. The real proof is in the pudding. And what a pudding! What matters is that the sound is right, and so are the tempos, the phrasing, the larger architecture, the drama. *Eric Salzman, Stereo Review*

The Lubin/Hogwood set is not only the first complete series of these pieces on period instruments but also, I think, a set of great performances. *Leslie Gerber, Fanfare*

Lubin achieves an extraordinary color range in the solo parts, within the seeming limitations of nuance of the historic pianos, and elicits from each instrument its maximum of tonal charm. It is generally astonishing how all the painstaking scholarly research for this project in no way diminishes its artistic impact. The recordings burst with vitality, and are as unlike bloodless academic test-tube samples as they could possibly be. *Joseph Oehrlein, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung [Germany]*

The whole performance has plenty of vitality. Lubin has many sensitive details of timing, shaping the music attentively, sometimes pushing urgently towards a cadence: all very aptly tuned to the vigorous, fiery young Beethoven... There is a lot of tension in Lubin's playing, with a certain amount of holding back and pressing forward as his view of the musical sense demands; the effect is of a large-scale performance, of the kind that keeps one on the edge of one's seat...perhaps closer to what Beethoven heard in his imagination than anything recorded before. *Stanley Sadie, Gramophone [England]*

Here is a very bold step into little charted waters. Lubin uses four different pianos: I like best the pungent piano in the bustling First Concerto, and the sturdy one used for the Emperor, which attains a steely



eloquence in the slow movement. These are no-nonsense readings, sharp-edged and often very exciting. *Nicholas Kenyon, The Observer [England]*

With the release of all Beethoven's piano concertos played on historical instruments, it is clear that some kind of milestone has been reached in the early music movement...Mr. Lubin plays with full conviction; he knows how to build a climax, to "take it away" toward the end of a cadenza, to underline a crucial point. This is a set everyone interested in the Beethoven concertos should have, fascinating for what it adumbrates and satisfying for what it achieves. *Will Crutchfield, The New York Times*

The performances are excellent...I suspect that many listeners will prefer Lubin/ Hogwood to all others in this highly competitive field. *Joseph McClellan, The Washington Post*

Lubin uses the extra clarity of the fortepiano very tellingly and, though speeds are on the brisk side, he is never extreme, and slow movements are allowed to breathe and find poetry and repose. Hogwood accompanies with freshness and resilience, and the recording is attractively vivid. *Edward Greenfield, The New Penguin Guide [England]*

For the listener who has heard the Beethoven concertos played only on modern pianos, any one of Lubin's realizations is startling enough to make it seem as though the concerto is being heard for the first time. From the standpoint of technique and musicianship...Lubin's [are] shapely, animated, and always brilliantly articulated accounts. *James Wierzbicki, Musical America*

Lubin's pianism has a freewheeling joie-de-vivre that serves to inspire conductor Hogwood. Lubin is deeply concerned with phrasing and shaping, and that concern makes his performances eminently worthwhile. *Harris Goldsmith, Musical America* Lubin proves adept at drawing contrasts and building them in varied and interesting ways. Lubin's special insight and imagination and intense lyricism [contribute to] the success of his venture. *Jonathan Richmond, Christian Science Monitor*

Authenticity in the narrowest sense is not the primary issue here. There is no attempt to produce a precious or quaint sound; on the contrary these pieces are bold and spacious in their interpretation. This is a very welcome and definitive performance. There is no doubt among several reviewers that this set will become the standard against which all future authentic instrument performances will be compared; with these recordings in your collection, you really will not need a "modern"-instrument version at all. *Jim Pollard, The Blue Note*

Steven Lubin uses four different instruments for the five concertos, and readily justifies that in the development and expansion from no.2 (the first written) through to the Emperor. The articulation of passagework is sparkingly clear in a way virtually impossible on a modern Steinway. Slow movements have the lyrical poetry and repose one needs. Even in the hushed question and answer of recitative at the end of the Adagio of no.2, with its amazing anticipation of Beethoven's last period, Lubin conveys on his light-toned instrument the necessary weight and gravity. In no.3 Beethoven's own big cadenza for the first movement comes out marvellously well, with the flurries of figuration in their new clarity more than usually conveying the flavour of what a Beethoven improvisation must have really been like. *Edward Greenfield, The Guardian [England]*

If these recordings become the standard period instrument performance of Beethoven's piano concertos, it will not simply be because this is the first complete cycle available on CD. Steven Lubin does not merely play Beethoven on the fortepiano. He transforms the instrument from a quaint antique into a powerful and intriguingly individual musical voice. It is Lubin's command of each musical moment that contributes the decisive human dimension to the impact of his instrument's distinctive sonorities. This inspired



collaboration between Lubin and Hogwood's Academy of Ancient Music stands impressively on its own as a legitimate and substantial interpretation of Beethoven's great cycle of concertos. With this set in your library you really don't need a "modern" version. All of the expressive shading is here, and all of the sweeping dynamics too. *It's the real thing. Tom Vernier, Digital Audio & Compact Disc Review*

Less than twenty years for a cascade of revolutions that takes us from the classical Mozartean mold to the titanic daring of the "Emperor!" It is just this individuality that the complete Lubin-Hogwood edition succeeds in restoring to each of these pages. It is aided in this by the pianist's choice of instruments; he demonstrates decisively to what extent the master's writing was a consequence of instrumental innovations. This would not suffice to cause a stir, however, if it were not supported by a liberty of playing and phrasing, a search for supple and free sonorities that recreate a delightful spirit of surprise and a sense of improvisation. *Serge Martin, Diapason [France]*

There is plenty of personality in these performances, particularly from the pianist... Any set that gives us such excellent performances, so well recorded, and provides us the opportunity to hear old music with new ears deserves a strong recommendation. I'm especially glad that the worthy playing of Lubin, a superb artist, will be getting this wide exposure. *Leslie Gerber, Fanfare*

I'll not give up any of the great sets of the past: Schnabel/Sargent, Fleischer/Szell, Kempff, or the various recordings by Curzon, Gould, and the like. But this one will certainly take a place of honor with them. Though I find all of the performances entrancing, the passion which Lubin brings to the Third is especially attractive. In the Emperor we find the whole emerging with a new-minted splendor. One can imagine how boldly original this music must have sounded in 1809 when originally heard! *John Bauman, American Record Guide*

Listening to these discs, one realizes how this work has been accomplished without a trace of pedantry. The performances are, from all perspectives, truly exemplary: Lubin and Hogwood have reached a level, in the care with which they phrase, in the quality of the sounds they produce, in the pure beauty of the music-making, that would be awfully hard to surpass. *Fernando de Carli, Compact Disc [Italy]*

