

# Barber Piano Sonata

In E-flat Minor, Opus 26

*Comparative Survey: 29 performances evaluated, September 2014*



Samuel Barber (1910 - 1981) is most famous for his *Adagio for Strings* which achieved iconic status when it was played at F.D.R.'s funeral procession and at subsequent solemn occasions of state. But he also wrote many wonderful songs, a symphony, a dramatic Sonata for Cello and Piano, and much more. He also contributed one of the most important 20<sup>th</sup> Century works written for the piano: The Piano Sonata, Op. 26. Written between 1947 and 1949, Barber's Sonata vies, in terms of popularity, with Copland's Piano Variations as one of the most frequently programmed and recorded works by an American composer. Despite snide remarks from Barber's terminally insular academic contemporaries, the Sonata has been well received by audiences ever since its first flamboyant premier by Vladimir Horowitz. Barber's unique brand of mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century post-romantic modernism is in full creative flower here with four well-contrasted movements that offer a full range of textures and techniques. Each of the strongly characterized movements offers a corresponding range of moods from jagged defiance, wistful nostalgia and dark despondency, to self-generating optimism, all of which is generously wrapped with Barber's own soaring lyricism.

The first movement, *Allegro energico*, is tough and angular, the most 'modern' of the movements in terms of aggressive dissonance. Yet it is not unremittingly pugilistic, for Barber provides the listener with alternating sections of dreamy introspection and moments of expansive optimism. The opening theme is stern and severe with jagged and dotted rhythms that give a sense of propelling physicality of gesture and a mood of angry defiance. The secondary theme, really more catchy and memorable than the first theme, appears in its first guise in measure 23 as a simple lyrical line in the soprano. Later, this thematic idea is given an expanded intervallic contour and made more resolute through bolder harmonic bolstering. Much like many of Copland's characteristic themes that evoke the expansiveness of the open

frontier of America (physical or idealistic), there is a pronounced use of open and pure intervals, in this case two rising perfect fourths and a descending perfect fifth. This proves to be one of the most memorable themes of the sonata and one which latches onto the listener and continues to resonate long after the performance is over. It is for this reason that, despite all the angular conflict, the movement is rooted in a strong bedrock of optimism. But, of course, the way each performer inflects this theme will determine how the listener perceives the narrative: if stiff and without dynamic arch, it may seem like a throwaway bit of existential resignation, if softened rhythmically and given a rising and falling dynamic profile it conveys a sense of being vulnerable to the possibility of hope.

The interplay of explicit and suggestive, pointed and diffuse, verdant and acerbic also plays a role in defining the contrasts of textures between the various sections. Ashley Wass plays the opening measures with an overlay of pedal that somewhat blurs the jagged rhythmic edges—and that concerned me at first—but he does this intentionally every time that particular passage occurs in order to provide maximum contrast with the lighter, more crystalline detail of the dreamy passages. The effect of this increased dissonant sonority is to convey psychologically a sense of unfocused confusion in the din of noisy modern day angst. This makes the retreat into the inner sanctum of the dream world all the more compelling. In between these two states he plays with terse and tightly coiled phrases, oftentimes with the phrase endings clipped short, all of which conveys a sense of agitation and even fearful flight. Others, Leon McCawley, for example, play the same phrases with a softened elasticity and more gentle tapering of phrase endings, and that conveys a much different psychology. Same notes, same tempo, different narrative.

The second movement, *Allegro vivace e leggero*, is a lightly-textured, scintillating waltz, fantastic and frenetic, like a hazy, half-conscious recollection of Ravel's *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*. On a psychological level it suggests lingering memories of giddy, half-inebriated social dances: Strauss's Vienna, Ravel's Paris, New York's Flapper Twenties. Interpretively, very small differences in inflection can steer the listener's impression one way or the other. Joanna MacGregor (on Warner Classics) seems even quicker than her brisk timing would indicate, giving us a breathless whirlwind of ghostly pianissimo filigree that conveys feverish mania if not outright dementia. Olga Kern (on Harmonia Mundi) is even faster than MacGregor in terms of timing and (at 1:45) the fastest in the survey. But what a difference in feeling from MacGregor: Kern seems so relaxed and limpid in tone she even manages time for some subtle rubato and playful nuance. One makes the listener wide-eyed with vicarious paranoia, the other brings a smile to the listener with her graceful élan and coy wink. I like both, and prefer such characterization to performers who stoically sail through the notes as if they were mere *Kraftsmusik* that leaves nothing for the listener to hold onto. But even that, I suppose, is preferable to the many versions of pianists bumbling their way along just to play the notes.

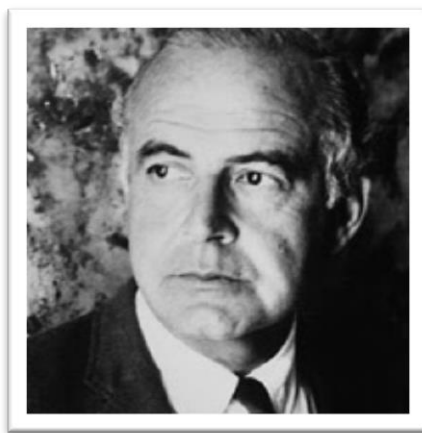
The third movement, *Adagio mesto*, is a grand soliloquy of the soul singing out in its darkest hour. This is the most personal expression of the composer who loved life and people, but often suffered from bouts of debilitating depression. Depending on the temperament of the performer, the inflection may suggest a more active sense of present drama as it unfurls its anguished despair (Evgeny Kissin), or it may convey a state beyond despair to the point of catatonic despondency where the atmosphere is as still and airless as a sealed coffin (MacGregor). Some otherwise highly communicative renderings suffer from a piano that is too lightweight and insufficient in lower-end weight to convey the dark somberness of the steady left hand progression. Olga Kern's piano has plenty of weight but she chooses not to go that

dark of mood, instead emphasizing a more optimistic lyricism from the right hand. In fact, the overall quicker timing of her Adagio may be an attempt to keep the melodic line at a reasonable singing tempo. Compare Kern at 4:55 with MacGregor at 6:49. Wass and Hamelin also favor slower tempos that are beyond a singer's capability, and thus convey a more symphonic type of breadth. Yeol-Eum Son (Harmonia Mundi) needs to work further on the voice-leading, as many lines were started but then left dangling. Listen to Hamelin for really masterful voice-leading. In sum, the movement may be either passive or active drama, and the tempo may be more flowing and lyrical or slower and conveying a sense of suspended stasis.

The final movement, *Allegro con spirito*, is one of the most exciting fugues ever penned. This movement gave Barber the most difficulty in terms of conceptualization, but once he had a theme that allowed for developmental permutation he (incredibly) dashed off the movement in just a day. Unlike the terse and lapidary thematic ideas of the preceding movements, the fugal exposition is rather long and fluid in linear motion. This allowed Barber to dovetail layers of activity at multiple levels, with at one point as many as six "voices" simultaneously. From the listener's perspective it is the strong syncopated accents which give a propelling interest to the music which might otherwise have come off as a mere academic exercise. Knowing that Horowitz was to give the premiere, Barber did not hold back on any demands required of the pianist, indeed, with Horowitz looking over his shoulder Barber may have intentionally "upped the ante" by throwing every virtuoso trick he could muster within the framework of the fugue.

As regards the fugue, the cold hard facts are that many well-intentioned and otherwise musically sympathetic pianists simply don't have the chops to pull it off. Many engaging and highly communicative performances (such as MacGregor) falter at this point. Conversely (or perversely), Hamelin, who has the requisite technique, seems to downplay the virtuosic element. It's as if the music were in fact so easy and unchallenging to him that he remained somewhat disengaged. This perception is due mostly to his eschewal of micro-dynamic impulse (meaning that syncopated accents and metric profile are more subdued than typical). For exciting finales, one must listen to Van Cliburn, Horowitz (with much allowance for scenery chewing), Terrence Judd, or pre-imminently, Olga Kern from her gold medal winning performance at the Van Cliburn competition. At 3:55 Kern is the fastest, shaving off a few seconds from Terrence Judd's previous record of 3:58. At least a half dozen recordings clocked in at over five minutes, and those were all, obviously, dead on arrival.

Evgeni Kissin has been playing this work recently though he has yet to issue a commercial recording. Based on the live televised broadcast from Tel Aviv, I'd say he may be a top contender, so keep your eyes and ears out. I caught a posting of the broadcast on YouTube and my impression was that while the first movement seemed to flounder from a lack of interpretive consistency the other three movements were very polished and highly effective. Especially riveting was the Adagio which he renders with intense agitation and turmoil in the inner moving textures, while projecting an anguished cry from the declamatory right hand. His fugue demonstrates superb voice-leading and digital clarity, though, here and possibly even more so in the studio environment, he does not convey the same kind of exciting frenetic energy as do Kern or Judd.



*Barber in a more pensive mood*

**Further Explorations:** Barber's Sonata is his most serious concert work, but he did write some attractive smaller pieces for piano. Some of these might make fine encores after a serious concert, or played for entertainment at soirees amongst a small gathering of friends. His *Excursions* incorporates idiomatic American popular styles such as blues, ragtime, jamboree and boogie-woogie. The lovely *Nocturne*, has a haunting air of nostalgia, and makes for a good introductory work for pianists whose techniques are not yet developed enough for the frightful Sonata. Written as an homage to John Field (who gave the name 'Nocturne' to this kind of music), I see in Barber's modern re-make more of a direct kinship to Liszt's D-flat Consolation. In any case, when the gossamer pianissimo figurations are played with sensitivity (try Leon McCawley) this is one of the true delights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; it sets aside for a moment all the post-World War, Nuclear era Angst that inhabits most of the music that we find.

**A note on sound:** Many listeners have a strong preference for modernist styles of music that are recorded in a dry acoustic. Of a recording that I found to be utter anathema and unlistenable, with microphones placed to pick up every swoosh of the damper pedal, and seemingly recorded in a sound isolation booth, one noted critic said: "The recorded sound is appropriately dry." Earl Wild even recorded his version of the Sonata in the cozy comfort of his home in Columbus, Ohio, and that is about as dry as you can get. The idea is, of course, that the complex textures of modern music require more clarity, and less ambient obfuscation than romantic music which was written with the sonority of the concert hall and opera hall in mind. This is only a half truth, for even disregarding the fact that Reger wrote some of the most complex contrapuntal music for organ (in several instances where the two feet play three or four notes with heel and toe at the same time!) to be played in reverberant cathedrals, we have to consider some of the points of Gestalt Effects as discussed in my essay: **Listener Psychology: How we Perceive Music**. Concert music, dramatic theater, and operatic spectacle all require a larger-than-life sense of immersion into the event, irrespective of the acoustic requirements that should be free from dynamic constriction.

Barber's Sonata is intended for the concert hall, not a home soiree. Some of his works such as the more intimate *Nocturne*, or any of his famous songs such as *Sure on This Shining Night* (depending on how robust the singer's voice is!), may work effectively for small and intimate gatherings. But big music, with big gestures and intense emotions requires some breathing room for the dynamics to unfurl without aggressive glare from nearfield reflections or acoustic

overload. When people come over to my house I don't sit down and play the Hammerklavier Sonata or Mephisto Waltz, because the space is too restrictive for listeners to enjoy that kind of aural onslaught. I choose instead a Chopin Nocturne or Brahms Intermezzo. There's a time and place for every kind of music.

In terms of obfuscation, the player can adjust his/her articulation so that that clarity is maintained, but in any case, the interplay of ambience does not impede conveyance of staccato or pizzicato effects, but actually allows for more dimensionality to the layered textures and colors of the music. This is what was so missed in Earl Wild's cramped and colorless recording environment (I'm sure engineer Ed Thompson did the best he could under the circumstances). But beyond the issue of ambience, there is also the issue of how close we want our ears to be to the inner mechanical workings of the piano. Personally, with vigorous virtuoso music I want to stay at a safe distance in case there are any snapped strings! Even if the engineers get just the right blend of directness and ambient breathing room, many recordings from engineers who are not used to recording classical piano music do not place the microphones so that we get a balanced presentation across the full range of the keyboard. Often the mid-bass will seem fulsome and very close to the listener's ear while the treble section will seem to be several meters removed (or vice versa). Glenn Gould once experimented with intentionally altering the perceived distance of textures within a work by Sibelius, where one line was recorded right on top of the vibrating strings and another line was recorded thirty feet away. He called it spatial counterpoint. Well, that's not what we want for Barber's Sonata, or serious concert music in general.

Herewith is my summary take on the 29 recordings vis-à-vis sound characteristics of the recording space and suitable microphone placement.

For those who prefer a drier, more direct sound, try Olga Kern on Harmonia Mundi, recorded with directional microphones facing the piano (this configuration was determined in order to minimize noise from the audience). The piano is superbly voiced and with exceptional color and richness, well captured by the microphones.

For those who prefer more ambient space, try Leon McCawley on Somm, which also has the advantage of one of the lowest noise floors and commendable purity of sound so that the music emerges from a perfect backdrop of silence. For those who like a lot of concert hall ambience, and a more symphonic soundscape, try MacGregor on Warner. There is no loss of intimacy during pianissimo sections as the microphones were probably omnidirectional, capturing both direct and reflected sounds in good balance.

Most listeners will prefer something in between these styles, and for them, there is none better than the fantastic work Hyperion has done for Hamelin. Here we can hear every detail of Hamelin's superb voice-leading, but there is always plenty of breathing room for the loudest climaxes.

As for pianos, I've already said that I think Olga Kern was fortunate to have the best of the bunch, and she knows how to take advantage of it. For the most part the round hammers on Hamburg Steinways while lovely for Liszt and Chopin, work against clarity in the outer movements of the Sonata. Many recordings using Hamburg Steinways were just too blunt in transient attack, and this softens the rhythmic contour and micro-dynamic energy. Ideal in this case, is a good New York Steinway, which is what Barber knew and worked on anyway (and of course, the choice of Horowitz, who premiered the work).

Many die-hard collectors still maintain that Horowitz or Cliburn or Terrence Judd have never been equaled. Those recordings, especially the old 1950 mono recording of Horowitz are really showing their age and I do not recommend them to anybody but the most determined piano student who might want to glean some interpretive ideas from these masters. They are certainly not enjoyable for listening pleasure or for conveying the true color and dynamics of the piano. The old John Browning recording on Phoenix is the absolute worst sounding, but his performance is certainly the most unique. It's hard to reconcile his pecking and pointillistic approach when Horowitz (Browning's teacher)—who worked closely with the composer—gives an entirely different and more overtly romantic slant to the music.

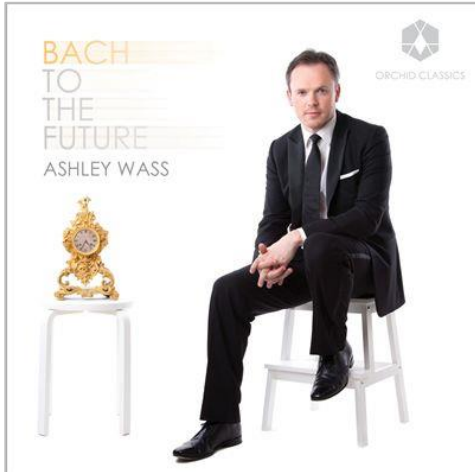
Other recordings to avoid are Daniel Pollack on Naxos (noisy, grainy recording of a clangorous piano suffering from excessive tuning stretch) and Lori Sims on Two Pianists (severe registral imbalance, bloated mid-bass, harsh treble, and artificial reverberation).

**Winnowing the top contenders:** Leaving out the older recordings with dated sound, the following are the top picks for interpretive insight and technical finesse among current offerings, listed by movement in approximate order of preference (the Kissin broadcast concert is included for comparative purposes, but it is not available commercially):

- I. Wass, Hamelin, Kern
- II. Wass, Kern, MacGregor
- III. Wass, (Kissin), MacGregor, Kern, Hamelin
- IV. Kern, Wass, (Kissin)

Now, factoring in the performance of the entire work, herewith are featured profiles of the top recommended recordings . . .

# Recommended Recordings



## *Piano Enthusiast Reference Recording*

**Ashley Wass** (Orchid Classics). The intrepid British pianist gives us a rather odd program that requires some shifting of gears as we proceed between the five B's of Bach, Beethoven, Busoni, Berg and Barber. But in terms of the Barber Sonata there is no question this was a standout performance in this survey. The different moods of each movement can be a challenge for some pianists to come to terms with but Wass has the chameleon capabilities of a true artist and gets right to the psychological core of each movement.

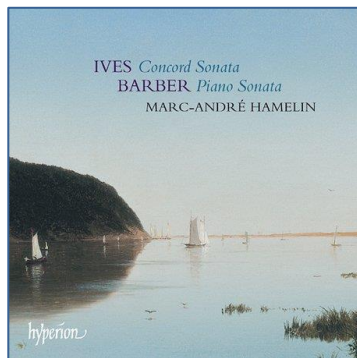
In the first movement Wass maximizes the contrast of textures and sonorities between the various sections, and in general plays with an unbridled nervous energy that takes hold of the listener and doesn't let go. In the bristling second movement Wass channels the best aspects of Martha Argerich's playing, which is to say full of micro-dynamic *frisson*, and a fearless traversal of the keyboard at breakneck speed. But it's not just speed and clarity that make it effective, it's also the shape and nuance. His Adagio is very expressive and personal, each phrase lovingly molded. His vision is less tormented than the churning agitation of Kissin, but the cumulative impact is even more powerfully transformative. In the fugue, Wass is not afraid to use the pedal for sonority and then contrast that with passages that are finely etched and with a high degree of metric articulation. Only in the final two pages might one have wished for more of Kern's virtuosic ferocity, but taken on its own, in context with the preceding, it is a satisfactory conclusion to a performance that has taken the listener on one Hell of a ride.

To summarize, some pianists may prefer the more overt virtuosity of Kern or Judd, or the transcription perfect accuracy of Hamelin or McCawley, but considering all the varied and contrasting moods inherent in this work, Wass provides the deepest musical immersion into the underlying psychology of the work. And on a purely pianistic level, he must also be considered among the top handful of advocates for this exciting masterpiece. Well recorded.



**Olga Kern** (Harmonia Mundi). If you want the most exciting fugue ever recorded this is it. But let's back up for a minute and appreciate the three movements that precede it. In the first movement she guides us with expert finesse through the shifting moods and textures whether it be bitterness, pensive rumination or giddy ecstasy. Her second movement vies with Wass as being the best ever recorded, the difference between the two is that Wass shapes the overall line with greater dynamic arch, while Kern has the more delightful (and astounding) rhythmic suppleness and characterful rubato. In the third movement she finds a comfortable middle ground (which many listeners may prefer) between the churning agitation of Kissin and the despondent stasis of MacGregor. The expressive canto sings forth wonderfully. In the fugue, she takes no prisoners, but vanquishes all

before her, especially in the hair-raising conclusion. With a more focused articulation and finer metric nuance, and without resort to pummeling blasts from the bass, she surpasses both Horowitz and Judd to give us the visceral rush of adrenalin that Barber intended. Recording is rather close, but not uncomfortably so, to capture every color and detail of Kern's tour de force.



**Marc-André Hamelin** (Hyperion). This is really an essential CD for every serious piano collector. The Ives *Concord Sonata* receives the finest performance I've ever heard, by far (and I point that out here because I'm not likely to do a comparative survey of Ives). As for the Barber, it too receives a superb performance and is captured in ideal sound by Hyperion. There is already a lot of buzz amongst pianists on the internet about the positives of this performance. In particular, Hamelin demonstrates masterly voice-leading with careful finger legato and perfect balance of textures, applying a firm, solid touch that is never percussive. The effect is almost like an organist at the keyboard, and that certainly has its advantages in

the exposition of the first movement, or in the long sustained lines of the Adagio. But in the lighter-textured dreamlike episodes of the first movement, or the mercurial fleetness of the second movement, Hamelin seems too stoic, like he's not enjoying the banter of the party. In the treacherous fugue, he negotiates all the difficulties with unflappable aplomb, yet in this case, it's as if these challenges barely register with him or engage any kind of inner excitement. Despite these few less than perfect impressions, there is no question this performance leaves most others in the dust. I'd just rather hear Hamelin in a live concert, preferably after he's had a cup of coffee to get his motor revving high.

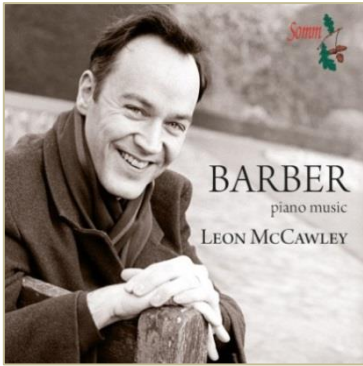


**Joanna MacGregor** (Warner Classics). Here is an artist that I have yet to single out for any of the Piano Enthusiast Reference Recordings, yet I've enjoyed every one of her albums and have played them often. She's one of the few pianists I'd undertake some degree of inconvenience in order to hear her play because she's an artist with something unique and compelling to say. It may not always be what we think of as a reference rendition, but the musical narrative is always highly communicative. In the case of the Barber, the opening movement spreads out before us like a monumental, grim and sonorous symphony by Shostakovich, even the contrasting sections fight against the burden of some unseen weight. The

second movement is an incredible, ghostly apparition, manic and utterly breathless, all rendered with a feathery light pianissimo that may send a shiver down your spine. I'm not sure that is exactly the kind of intent Barber had in mind, but it sure is riveting story telling. The adagio starts with a barely audible whisper of a hypnotic trance, proceeding to grow organically by sheer willpower to a tragic ballad of symphonic proportion. The final fugue sort of breaks the spell of the first three movements, because it's macro-dynamic, long-lined conception (again, more orchestral than pianistic) doesn't quite convey the



frenetic energy that is needed. Even so, one must hear the story to the end, and with lights dimmed it can be a powerful experience.



**Leon McCawley (Somm).** This is actually the only all-Barber CD among the recommended versions, so for those of you who wish to explore more of Barber's piano works, there is no better guide than McCawley, who has made somewhat of a specialty of playing this music. His reading of the *Nocturne*, in particular, is exquisite. As for the Sonata, his earlier recording for EMI is also very good, and available at a good price, but personally I'd opt to spend a bit more and get this re-make. Many of the finer nuances of inflection show greater mastery and interpretive grasp, and as I pointed out in the commentary, I found this be the finest sounding recording in the survey. Audiophiles among you will want to hear the purity and transparency of this fine recording. To characterize his performance I'd say that he favors a lighter clarity of articulation, especially in the dreamy episodes of the first movement and in the finely etched micro-dynamic contours of the fugue.

His fugue is a transcriber's dream: every note value and cross accent is faithfully observed without any fudging of the pedal; but this scrupulous attention to detail means that a certain degree of freewheeling excitement is lost. Along with Hamelin, this is one of the most technically accurate renderings we have, but Hamelin also suffers from a sense of over-control and lack of spirited panache. The exciting versions by Judd or Kern are less accurate, though still in the incredible 97-98% range of accuracy, so it will depend on each listener how much they value complete accuracy versus visceral excitement.

In the darker more anguished moments of the first movement, or in the great Adagio, McCawley is not as tortured and despairing as some, but many listeners may prefer that kind of outlook. In direct comparison to the other recommended versions, I may prefer the greater psychological intensity of those, but taken on its own, I've always thoroughly enjoyed listening to McCawley, and the realism of the recording really puts you right in the same room with him as he conveys a genuine and infectious enthusiasm for this music.

# Discography

*The following performances were evaluated for the purpose of this survey*

	<u>Pianist</u>	<u>Label</u>	<u>Provenance</u>	<u>Source</u>	<u>Recommended?</u>
1.	Paul Barnes	Orange Mountain Music	Studio	Streaming	No
2.	Stephen Beus	Endeavor Classics, 2006	Live concert	Streaming	No
3.	John Browning	Phoenix	Studio	Streaming	No
4.	John Browning	Music Masters	Studio	CD	No
5.	Van Cliburn	Orfeo, 1964	Live concert	Streaming	No
6.	Van Cliburn	RCA, 1965	Studio	CD	Yes
7.	Robert DeGaetano	Crystonyx	Studio	Streaming	No
8.	Steven Graff	Centaur, 2010	Studio	Streaming	No
9.	Marc-Andre Hamelin	Hyperion.	Studio	CD	Yes
10.	Carol Honigberg	MHS	Studio	LP	No
11.	Vladimir Horowitz	RCA, 1950	Studio	CD	Yes
12.	Jeffrey Jacob	Centaur, 1993	Studio	Streaming	No
13.	Terrence Judd	Chandos, 1977	Live concert	LP	Yes
14.	Olga Kern	Harmonia Mundi	Live concert	CD	Yes
15.	Evgeny Kissin	Televised Broadcast, 2011	Live concert	YouTube	Yes
16.	Ruth Laredo	Nonesuch	Studio	LP	No
17.	Joanna MacGregor	Warner Classics	Concert hall	CD	Yes
18.	Claude Maillols	Pianissime	Studio	LP	Yes
19.	Leon McCawley	EMI	Studio	CD	No
20.	Leon McCawley	Somm	Studio	CD	Yes
21.	Ulrich Murtfeld	Audite	Studio	SACD	No
22.	Garrick Ohlsson	Arabesque	Studio	CD	No
23.	Eric Parkin	Chandos	Studio	CD	No
24.	Daniel Pollack	Naxos	Studio	Streaming	No
25.	Lori Sims	Two Pianists, 2013	Studio	CD	No
26.	Yeol-Eum Son	Harmonia Mundi	Live Concert	Streaming	No
27.	Ashley Wass	Orchid Classics, 2013	Studio	CD	Yes
28.	David Allen Wehr	Chandos	Studio	CD	No
29.	Earl Wild	Ivory Classics, 1999	Home	CD	No