

Piano Enthusiast Reference Recordings

Summary List of Recommendations with Review Highlights

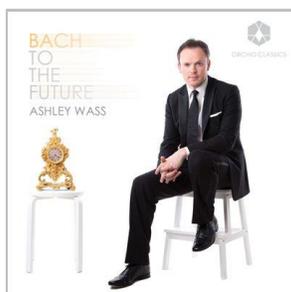
October, 2014

Bach Goldbergs. 127 versions compared, March 2013.



Andras Schiff (Decca, 1982) *No single performance can encompass the vast range of possibilities latent in the Goldberg Variations, but this performance has more positives and fewer negatives than any other version. The very first notes put us at ease: the piano tone is clear in the melody and sustaining in the bass, gentle but not dull, with enough ambience to lend a dreamy and transporting air. The aria proceeds at a natural singing pace, falling in the sweet spot of 3:50 it is more relaxed than Bacchetti's impatient 3:17, less precious and "loved-to-death" than Lifschitz' 4:57. Schiff also observes the singing legato phrasing in the melody while others give a dainty detaché, and the V-I cadences are also legato, as you would hear played by any string or woodwind instrument. Others (even Hewitt) still favor the stylistically inappropriate post-Gouldian separation of cadential tones. Throughout, variations are imbued with buoyant inflection, characterful bowing "digs" in the phrasing, and plenty of micro-dynamic energy. This rendering favors the exuberant over the solemn, and while minor-key variations may lack the gravitas of Tureck or Barenboim, they are hardly irreverently impatient as is often the case. For all these reasons I feel the Decca Schiff recording is the one version I could live with if I had to get rid of all my other recordings.*

Barber Piano Sonata. 29 versions compared, September 2014.



Ashley Wass (Orchid Classics, 2013). *Barber's fiendishly difficult Sonata requires the pianist to summon forth lightness and darkness in equal measure: almost giddy wistfulness and the deepest pathos of anguish and despair. With the chameleon capabilities of a true artist, Wass comes to terms with these extremes and gets right to the psychological core of each movement. There is a sense of unbridled energy and micro dynamic frisson which are riveting. In the bristling second movement Wass demonstrates a fearless traversal of the keyboard at breakneck speed. 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 virtuosic abandon; nevertheless, one Hell of a ride! To summarize, some listeners may prefer the more overt virtuosity of Kern or Judd, or the transcription perfect accuracy of Hamelin or McCawley—and there will always be some die-hard collectors who maintain that the old bombastic Horowitz from 1950 has never been equaled—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.*

Bartok Piano Concerti. 40 versions compared March 2013



András Schiff and Iván Fischer (Teldec, 1996) *For those seeking all three concerti on a single disc this is your best choice, by far. Not only are the performances superb, with Schiff's crystalline tone giving us a detailed and unforced clarity in even the most complex passages, and Fischer's experience with these works bringing perfect balance of ensemble at all times, but the recording itself is vividly dynamic and has a wonderful sense of lifelike immersion. Now available on Teldec's super budget label, Apex.*

Beethoven Piano Concerto No.1. 72 versions compared May, 2013



Evgeny Kissin, Sir Colin Davis, London Symphony Orchestra (EMI 2008)

It was a close race for top honors in this concerto, with Brautigan, Brendel, Schiff and Sokolov offering stiff competition. In the end it was a list of very minor considerations which had their cumulative effect and tipped the balance in Kissin's favor. The main advantage is that Kissin was strong in all movements whereas the others all had one movement that was weak and not as competitive. The other plus is that the tempi were just right in each movement. Davis also faced strong competition, especially in the rondo movement from Parrott who was the most vivid and colorful. This recording also has the advantage of EMI's Abbey Road Studios sound which offers far superior clarity to the overly-reverberant Dresden recording for Schiff.

Beethoven Piano Concerto No.2. 56 versions compared May, 2013



Evgeny Kissin, Sir Colin Davis, London Symphony Orchestra (EMI, 2008)

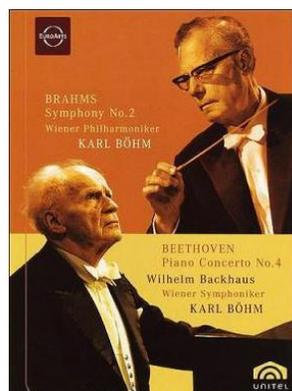
A clear standout performance from the survey. Kissin has the energy and technique to make the brilliant passagework come to life and extracts a wonderful array of touch and tone. It helps that he has an exceptional instrument full of colorful harmonic sheen. EMI has done well to capture the piano's tone and put it in perfect balance with the orchestra. Davis plays the part of a more fit and agile Klemperer, sculpting the long lines so they sing with a natural breathing arch. There's really nothing to niggle about in this well-nigh definitive performance, now available at mid-line price.

Beethoven Piano Concerto No.3. 86 versions compared May, 2013



András Schiff, Bernard Haitink, Staatskapelle Dresden (Teldec, 1996) *Schiff is really the only pianist in the survey who gives sufficient vigor to the many sforzandi indications in the score. This is absolutely critical to give dynamic thrust to the rhythmic propulsion. His passagework is sparkling clear and rendered with a variety of touch and tone that is truly masterly. Many of these felicities are simply ignored by other pianists. Haitink gets a fine balance of ensemble in the tricky (and unusual) dialog between bassoon, flute and pizzicato strings in the slow movement. Schiff is infectiously lively in the finale. The only thing that would have made it more perfect would have been a less cautious pace in the concluding presto coda. Otherwise this is a version that satisfies and engages the listener with each repeated listen.*

Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 4. 94 versions compared May, 2013



Wilhelm Backhaus, Karl Böhm, Vienna Philharmonic. (EuroArts DVD, 1967) *This recording beautifully captures the luminous tone of Backhaus and his Bösendorfer which has both depth and clarity and in lyrical sections seems to suspend itself like a halo above the harmonic foundation. There is a sense of timeless proportion like classic Greco-Roman architecture. Neither Backhaus nor Böhm seem to add anything extraneous, nor short the music any of its essential elements. It's as if the music is so deep in their bones that all become conduits for the music to express itself. Watching the video Backhaus appears as relaxed as if he were at home reading a book, and Böhm hardly ever prompts the musicians or makes a dramatic gesture. This is one of the better video productions of a piano concerto I've seen, though most often I just play the disc for the music without video. For those without a video system or a universal disc player the recent Yevgeny Sudbin and Osmo Vänskä performance gives full characterization to the music and has been beautifully recorded by BIS.*

Beethoven Piano Concerto No.5. 105 versions compared May, 2013



Stephen Kovacevich, Sir Colin Davis, London Symphony Orchestra (Decca, 1969) *Of all the hundred plus performances compared, Kovacevich and Davis achieve here the most consistently high standards between all the movements. Although there are a couple of more rapt, and sensitively rendered slow movements which I prefer, there is no question Kovacevich is magisterial and commanding in the first movement and with unequalled balance of vigor, articulation, and musicality in the amazingly rendered finale. Davis and orchestra match the soloist's gusto and perform with taut cohesion and propelling metric pulse, without ever crossing that line of being over-the-top like the Ashkenazy/Solti version inclines toward. The recording engineers give us a very vivid and realistic recreation of the performance. Now available as a budget release, this is as close to a definitive Emperor as I've heard, and is paired with a fine performance of the Concerto*

No.4. See interpretive analysis for more detailed comparisons and for discussion of other noteworthy Emperors.

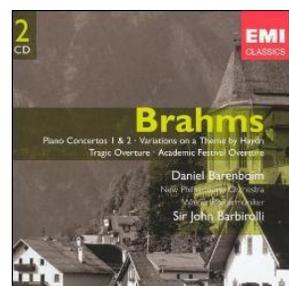
Beethoven Piano Concerto in D, Opus 61a. 15 versions compared May, 2013.



Ronald Brautigam, Andrew Parrott and the Norrköping Symphony Orchestra (BIS, 2009) *Here's one that even avid collectors have overlooked: Beethoven's forgotten D major Piano Concerto. This is Beethoven's own transcription of his beloved Violin Concerto, with the additional twist of a unique duo cadenza for piano and timpani. Composed in the time period, and of the same mood as the pastorally poetic G Major Concerto No. 4 which makes the pairing of the two on this disc ideal. Of all the piano versions surveyed only Brautigam and Parrott give us a first movement with a sense of excitement to balance the more poetic tendencies. The medium-size Swedish orchestra plays with wonderful color and lithe balances, and seem to follow the pianist and conductor with great enthusiasm. Indeed, the rapport with the pianist has an almost chamber-like give and take. The Fourth Concerto, when compared directly with the reference Backhaus version, does not have the same special sense of poignancy, yet this is*

certainly a sensitive and colorful rendering, and taken together with the Opus 61a makes for a delightful listening session.

Brahms Piano Concert No. 1 in D-minor. 88 versions compared, December 2012



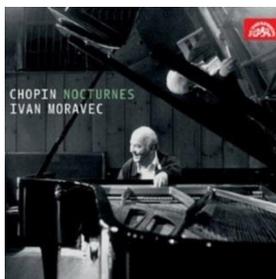
Daniel Barenboim with Sir John Barbirolli conducting the New Philharmonia Orchestra. (EMI) *This recording, dating from the late 1960's, was remastered in 1998 for improved sound quality. The sound is now, in fact, considerably better than many of the more recent recordings in this survey. A more fervent performance of this work has never been recorded. Both soloist and conductor give 100% to every measure of the work, rendering all the romantic-era ardor and passion appropriate to convey the emotional intensity of this symphonic-sized saga. Barbirolli brings forth many felicities in balance and phrasing that go largely unobserved by other conductors and the orchestra plays with rapt attention and great beauty. The two-CD budget set also includes fine performances of the Second Concerto, the Tragic Overture and the Academic Festival Overture. EMI 72649 (2CD)*

Brahms Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat. 83 versions compared, April, 2013



Rudolf Serkin with George Szell conducting the Cleveland Orchestra. (Sony) *As near-definitive as any recording can be, this classic performance still commands respect even in a survey of over 80 recordings. Serkin and Szell were at the peak of their powers and both had had the experience of previous recordings to ferret out any lingering imperfections—in the case of Serkin it was the earlier recording with Ormandy, in the case of Szell it was the earlier recording with Fleisher. This performance explores the full range of human emotion, from fierce determinism to tender transformation. The recorded sound is excellent, with the microphones up close to the conductor's podium to capture every color and nuance of the soloist and the outstanding support from the Clevelanders.*

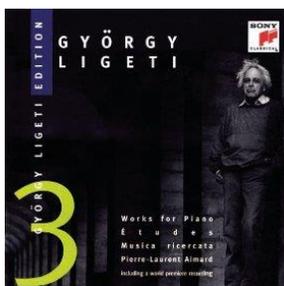
Chopin Nocturnes. 34 versions compared, December, 2012



Ivan Moravec (Supraphon, 1965)

Newly re-mastered for superb sound, these performances have been a benchmark recording for connoisseurs since their first release in 1965. Taken from two recordings sessions just months apart, one in New York on a Steinway, one in Vienna on a Bösendorfer, the best performances were then selected for release. A true delight for the pianophile! 2-CD set: Supraphon 40972

Ligeti Etudes. 11 versions compared, March, 2013



Pierre-Laurent Aimard (Sony, 1997) While this recording only includes 15 of the official 18 Etudes, they are nonetheless standout performances of consistently high interpretive vision. Each of the etudes registers with the fullest conviction on the performer's part, and the recorded sound is warm, yet with sufficient textural clarity and just enough resonance and breathing room for Aimard to paint some incredibly evocative and atmospheric renderings. His spine-tingling performance of the ever popular Warsaw in Autumn is alone worth the modest cost of this CD or download (Now offered at a budget price, ranging from \$8.99 to \$11.99 at the time of this writing). Given the quality of the performance and recording, and the more than fair price, there's no reason why this shouldn't be in the personal collection of every lover of modern piano music.

Liszt Sonata. 186 versions compared, March, 2013



John Browning (Delos, 1984) The program on this disc is really so remarkable that I consider it among a handful of my most treasured Liszt recordings. All the works on this program—the B-minor and Dante Sonatas, as well as the tre sonetti del Petrarca—are given performances that completely re-think standard performance contrivance and are rendered with a vivid and utterly riveting sense of character immersion. This is the perfect example of the archetypical Romantic Psycho-Drama that was discussed in the interpretive analysis of the survey. With Browning this is not Liszt the Abbey, but Liszt the proto-Wagnerian source, with scenes that could well be out of Tannhauser. Both the piano and artist are perfectly matched for the music at hand. Browning's New York Steinway has Stygian depth in the lowest bass register, a rich foundation of plenum harmonics in the mid-bass, and a beguiling melodic projection that floats up and out of the piano case. In

Browning's hands chords are not just chords but voiced with different emphasis depending on the musical context. All told, a riveting experience. Put away the score, turn down the lights and prepare to be swept away by the vividness and often frightening intensity of his storytelling.

Messiaen Vingt Regards. 25 versions compared, October, 2013.



Markus Bellheim. (Neos) Bellheim gives us one of the most satisfying sets ever recorded. Standards of technical mastery and interpretive insight are of a consistently high standard. It helps that the pianist has superb recorded sound both in terms of the well-voiced piano, which combines a rich and fulsome bass with great textural clarity amidst varied complex textures, and the recording engineers who have placed the microphones just right to capture color and delicate nuance without sacrificing the all-important aspect of breathing room to allow the massive sonorities to unfold without congestion. Those who already know and love the Vingt Regards will want several versions in order to experience the mystical wonders from more than one perspective, and Bellheim fits right in with the very top list of must-have interpreters. Those who are just venturing forth into the world of Messiaen could choose no finer a guide than Bellheim.

While some seem to be best with the more intimate and poetic numbers, and others the more overtly virtuosic, Bellheim strikes that perfect balance more often than any other interpreter.

Mozart Piano Concerto No. 20 in D-minor, K. 466. Survey: April, 2014



Martha Argerich with Alexandre Rabinovitch conducting the Padua-Venice Orchestra. (Teldec) Rarely heard in solo recital we can be thankful that Argerich still enjoys the camaraderie of concerto collaboration. She and Rabinovitch give us a vigorous and dynamically-charged Mozart D-minor, a real benchmark recording that shows the so-called Mozart specialists how it should be done. This is not the superficial tea-time Mozart we often hear, but the real deal, full of all the dramatic, theatrical, and operatic expression that we want in late Mozart, especially in a work as dramatic as the D-minor. The recent version with Abbado on DG is also very good, but not with a very flattering presentation of Argerich's piano tone. See the survey for complete details, as well as for recommendations on all 27 of the concerti. This recording is now available for next to nothing on Teldec's budget Apex label.

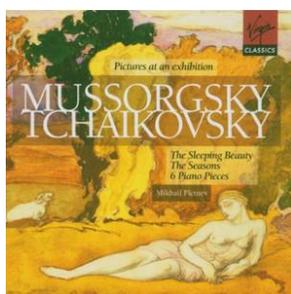
Mozart Concerto No. 21 in C, K. 467. Survey: April, 2014



Alfred Brendel with Sir Neville Marriner conducting the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields. (Philips) This single CD gives you three outstanding performances, with Concertos 15 and 21 being particular standouts. Brendel has given us ideal tempi, a nice legato singing tone, and cadenzas and flourishes which are always stylish. What sets this version apart from all others is the masterly inflection of dynamic nuance and voice leading, and the relative sense of active or passive melodic projection which creates varying "micro moods" within the overall context while always maintaining the integrity of the long line. This is especially notably in the two minor-key episodes in the first movement, which appear like momentary passing clouds on a sunny afternoon. The re-mastered sound is superior to the earlier CD version, being warm and inviting, and with just the right perspective to capture both the intimate and large-scale episodes. This is

really an essential CD for any Mozart collection. (Refer to the Mozart Concerti Survey for complete listing of reference recordings for each of the 27 concerti, as well as top picks of versions using fortepiano.)

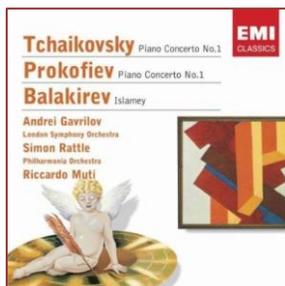
Mussorgsky Pictures at an Exhibition. 112 piano versions compared, Sept. 2013.



Mikhail Pletnev. (Virgin Classics) In the opening Promenade Pletnev shows he is one of the few pianists to understand the need to let phrases breathe, and he also has a wonderful sense of orchestral color and how to voice his fingers to give us perceptive changes in the instrumentation. Now, purists be forewarned: he does tamper with the Holy Text. But this done in order to better exorcise the demons Mussorgsky has hidden within. The various Promenades interspersed between movements are each given a completely different feel, and what magic in those few measures! Dusty old weather-worn Castello seen through the distant haze of the mid-day sun; Bydlo is a morphologic tale of the suffering of humanity; the Ballet of the Chicks conveys the humor of their uncoordinated skittishness; the slurs and staccatos and off accents conveying the bickering and haggling and gossiping of the Market Place; the spooky, airless atmosphere of Mortua; the middle section of Baba—what is the crafty old witch up to?; the jubilant

peeling of bells in Great Gate...such story telling! The coupling of Pletnev's own Sleeping Beauty transcription rounds out the program and what a tour de force it is. For those who only require one Pictures for their collection, this is it!

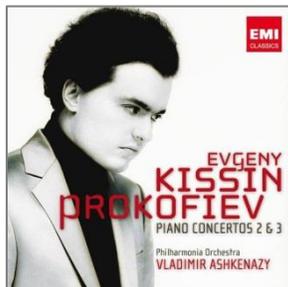
Prokofiev Concerto No. 1 in D-flat. 27 versions compared, April 2014.



Andrei Gavrilov with Simon Rattle conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. (EMI) This is one of those iconic recordings that every pianophile should have in their collection. Gavrilov's blazing virtuosity and swagger give us the kind of take-no-prisoners approach Prokofiev had in mind when he composed this work. Nobody can question the flawless and authoritative pianism of Gavrilov here, doing miracles of finger legato in the andante solo that would seem to require impossibly flexible Gumby fingers, or riding the tidal wave of adrenalin in the break-neck tempo in the finale. But Rattle deserves much credit here for providing more than just a background accompaniment. Where other conductors hold back in diffidence to the soloist, Rattle gives full dynamic sweep to the orchestral line if it is thematically important. Gavrilov has plenty of power to balance with Rattle's unbridled enthusiasm, and EMI has done an excellent job in balancing the soloist

and orchestra. The digital re-mastering offers vivid realism and tremendous dynamic punch. [For full recommendations on all five concerti and alternative selection refer to the survey]

Prokofiev Concerto No. 2 in G-minor. 27 versions compared, April 2014.



Evgeny Kissin with Vladimir Ashkenazy conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra. (EMI) *From the moment we hear the piano's softly ruminative octaves soar upward into the acoustic, we know this will be a performance of immersive mood and deep pathos. If all you care about is the cadenza then cruise around on YouTube to hear postings that have offered up the cadenza as its own entrée. But if you want the complete story, the grand overall arch of the work from beginning to end, this is a performance that will seep so deeply into your psyche that it will linger in your consciousness for days. This is the kind of artist Kissin has matured to: a deep and almost tragic figure who puts us into total experiential empathy with Prokofiev's own conception, influenced as it was by the suicide of his best friend. For me, this was probably the single standout performance of the entire concerto survey, I can't imagine any perceptive listener not being both exhilarated and deeply moved by this performance. (For full recommendations on all five*

concerti and alternative selections refer to the survey.)

Prokofiev Piano Concerto No. 3 in C. 43 versions compared, April 2014.



Martha Argerich with Charles Dutoit conducting Swiss-Italian Orchestra Lugano. (DG) *With over four decades of experience performing this concerto, Argerich has fine-honed her interpretive insight and pianistic finesse to a degree that will make any music lover giddy with delight. This is so much better than the older DG recording with Abbado that you might as well throw that one away. Once you hear this one, there will be no turning back or second guessing who's best. DG has provided us a recording of almost unparalleled realism, like being right on the conductor's podium, and the sparkling details of percussion and wallop of the bass drum are almost visceral (even on my Beyer-Dynamic headphones the bass drum made my head vibrate!). Don't settle for some poor-quality YouTube download, you'll want to experience this one it all its sonic glory. For the many legions of us who were not present at this remarkable live*

performance, the vividness of this recording allows us to imagine that we are right there. Among all of Argerich's concerto collaborations, this must certainly be her crowning achievement. (For full recommendations on all five concerti and alternative selections refer to the survey.)

Ravel Gaspard de la Nuit. 105 versions compared, October, 2012 (updated Oct. 2013).



Benjamin Grosvenor. (Decca) *This is the one performance which finally absolved all reservations I've had about whether Gaspard's fiendish difficulties could ever be mastered and put to the service of musical expression. Grosvenor gives us an incredible fluttering shimmer in Ondine, his melodic projection a nice 'compromise' between the more overt projection of Pogorelich and the more subsumed texture of Argerich. Nobody comes close to him on the right-hand double note passages leading to the climax which ripple in a fluid give and take like the water-nymph's silk gown floating in the water. I might have liked Gibet a bit slower, but this is nicely shaped and layered, and convincing in its evocative trance. Scarbo is full of jaw-dropping virtuosity on every page, yet none of this is ever self-serving in the slightest, for the musical characterization is always front and center. The propulsive drive of Scarbo never abates even in the face of the most arduous chordal concatenations. As more than just an added bonus Decca gives us one of the finest piano*

recordings I've heard in some time, a perfect balance of evocative atmosphere and textural clarity. The Chopin Scherzi are similarly stunning, while the Liszt might do with a little more Weltschmerz. But that's a mere quibble in an otherwise perfect program. This gets my vote for record of the Year!

Schumann Piano Concerto. 96 versions compared, November, 2012.



Ivan Moravec (Dorian, 1992) *Moravec's years of performance experience have polished this gem to perfection. Moravec offers wonderful felicities at every turn while Mata and the Dallas ensemble provide a real sense of engagement on the occasion of this special live recording. The CD is paired with the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 1, Opus 15.*

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