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Beethoven String Quartets in F Major, Op 18, No 1; C minor, Op 18, No 4; B flat major, Op 18, No 6 (transcribed for piano four hands by Hugo Ulrich and Robert Wittmann)

Duo Stephanie and Saar (pf)

New Focus Recordings FCR147, 78 minutes

Before mechanical sound reproduction, large-scale music was often first experienced in piano transcriptions, some created by journeymen composers of talent. One such, Hugo Ulrich (1827-1872), born in Opole, Silesia, struggled financially, creating a piano trio (dedicated to his mentor, music editor Siegfried Dehn) and symphonies before resorting to transcriptions of symphonies and other works as subsistence labour. Of these faithful, yet pianistically rewarding works by Ulrich, Stephanie Ho and Saar Ahuvia have chosen transcriptions – done in collaboration with Robert Wittmann, another now-forgotten composer – of three early Beethoven string quartets for piano four hands.

These transcriptions are based on a profound understanding of melody and the subtle progress of musical ideas, conveyed in a refined fashion by Ulrich and his partner. Likewise, Ho and Ahuvia prove to be uncommonly thoughtful and co-operative in these intimate efforts. The pianists themselves observe in CD booklet notes that the works contain Beethovenesque ‘bravura passagework, powerful symphonic cadences, [and] diabolical four-part fugues.’ These challenges they meet with abundant skill and self-effacing mastery. Ahuvia explains that he discovered these transcriptions when Leon Fleisher, his teacher at Baltimore’s Peabody Institute, ordered his students to examine them as a way of revivifying Beethoven’s spirit at the keyboard beyond his piano sonatas. Indeed, this is a transcendent reminder of past four-handed glories, following the Prague Piano Duo’s vivid recording of the same composer’s Seventh Symphony in Ulrich’s transcription (on Praga SACD PRD/DSD 250219). BI


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Brahms Violin Sonatas; Scherzo from the F-A-E Sonata; Lullaby (transcribed by John Lenahan)

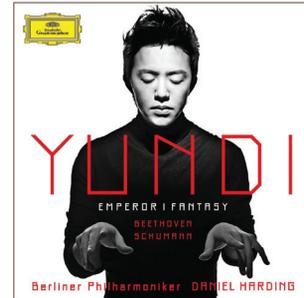
Leonidas Kavakos (violin), **Yuja Wang** (pf)

Decca 0289 478 6442 4, 76 minutes

The meteoric career of the Chinese virtuoso Yuja Wang, born in Beijing in 1987, continues apace. Her mastery of Brahms, especially in dazzling renditions of that composer’s Paganini Variations (one was released on Deutsche Grammophon, DG 0289 477 8795 2) is well known to fans. Yuja-watchers may be disappointed that in the photos adorning this new release, the pianist is cloaked in a relatively modest body-length black dress that leaves far more to the imagination than her usual, much-publicised, recital mini-dresses. There is, however, cutesiness aplenty in the programme of this CD, starting with an aggressive Scherzo that the young Brahms wrote in 1853.

The CD ends with a sugary, pianistically soppy transcription of Brahms’s *Lullaby* Op 49 No 4 by British pianist John Lenahan, as if Yuja’s enervated, frazzled fans will only be fit for sleep after hearing her. Between these two curiosities, the good news is that Wang, who has considerably more experience as a chamber musician than most of her Chinese superstar peers, is a persuasive interpreter of the three Brahms violin sonatas. Nurturingly supportive to her colleague, the extroverted Greek violinist Leonidas Kavakos, who is two decades her senior, she never loses her individuality.

Wang joins a few contemporary pianists, including Peter Serkin, Peter Frankl and Klára Würtz, worthy to hear alongside past keyboard eminences who have recorded these works, including Rudolf Firkušný, William Kapell, Rudolf Serkin, Arthur Rubinstein, Vladimir Horowitz, Robert Casadesu and Pierre Barbizet. BI


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Beethoven Piano Concerto No 5 ('Emperor'); **Schumann** Fantasie Op 17

Yundi (pf), **Berlin Philharmonic/ Daniel Harding**

Deutsche Grammophon CD 0289 481 0710 0, 66 minutes

The Chinese pianist Yundi, born in 1982, has affinities with Beethoven, as his 2012 CD of the ‘Pathétique,’ ‘Moonlight’ and ‘Appassionata’ Sonatas (also Deutsche Grammophon, DG 4765049) testifies. Beethoven’s spiky sprightliness strikes a chord in Yundi, who has made recordings of Chopin and others marred by languid, sluggish tempos. Sadly, these also afflict the Schumann Fantasie he performs here. Daniel Harding’s ponderously fustian conducting of the ‘Emperor’ sometimes stymies Yundi’s best efforts.

I remember interviewing the pianist on his first trip to New York, when he was still a promising Yundi Li (indeed, when he was relaunched by EMI with an amputated name and some disappointing CDs, one waggish critic exclaimed, ‘He’s no Yundi Li!’).

Since that time, the unassuming provincial Chinese youth with already-swollen knuckles from long practice sessions has been transformed by more strenuous fashionista makeovers than some Hollywood starlets. Deutsche Grammophon dropped Yundi Li from its roster, caving in to the alleged ultimatums of his rival Lang Lang, only to have the latter defect to Sony, clearing the path for Yundi’s deserved return to the DG label. Before that, in belated celebration of the 90th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, EMI Classics released Yundi’s *Red Piano* CD, featuring the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*, a collaborative work first premiered in 1969 during the Cultural Revolution, and *My Motherland*, a propaganda song praising North Korea, written for a 1950s Korean War film. BI