



Originals and beyond

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[Fanfare](#) (Huntley Dent - 2015.08.11)

Two of the works on this album from the adventurous duet pianists Norie Takahashi and Björn Lehmann are intellectually daunting. Following Beethoven's three complexes of dense fugal writing in the *Grosse Fuge* is beyond me without some analysis and preferably a score; the same is true of Schoenberg's *Chamber Symphony No. 1*, where each of the 15 instruments is a soloist, with little or no overlap of parts. The labored program notes are a trial to read, but they make a sound point: Both the Beethoven and the Schoenberg contain very few passages, or even notes, inserted for harmonic reasons. Instead, every note is thematic, serving some structural purpose. As such, both scores are miracles of dense, precise organization (although Schoenberg took pains to say that he didn't work this out intellectually but via his subconscious).

With that in mind, is it helpful or a drawback to reduce these thorny works to the monotone of a single piano played by four hands? My own response is to split the difference. We lose the color of the original instruments—quite a major loss in the *Chamber Symphony*, where the disposition of notes among eight woodwinds, two horns, and five strings allows Schoenberg to provide signposts according to instrumental timbre. On the other hand, in the piano reduction he reduces a wealth of intersecting lines to fewer strands, rather like untangling a ball of yarn. In the Beethoven, a string quartet delivers a fairly homogenous sound, not so far removed from a keyboard, so the main loss comes from the piano's inability to do what strings can do. It can't draw a true legato, for example—not particularly a problem when the *Grosse Fuge* has such minimal legato writing once the short introduction is over. In both cases, the listener certainly appreciates the added clarity, and Takahashi and Lehmann excel in following each other and rendering a unified interpretation. The two performers met as music students in Berlin and continue to pursue busy solo careers.

The easy piece here is of course the Schumann *Second Symphony*, which one might expect to sound more pianistic because of the composer's fame as a keyboard writer. There's also the rather outworn complaint that Schumann wrote his symphonies for the piano in the first place, later dressing them up with clumsy orchestration, so a two-hand or four-hand reduction simply brings them back to home base. In actuality, his four-hand transcription seems totally straightforward and unexceptional to my ears. The scherzo and finale sound unusually well suited to the keyboard, though. Maybe the old complaint had its justification. The present reading is very musical and enjoyable. My only reservation is that Schumann's orchestration is necessary to separate out the cyclical motif that holds *Symphony No. 2* together, and from its first clarion statement in the brass, a piano is no substitute.

The title of this release is somewhat misleading: *Originals and Beyond: Original*

transcriptions for piano duo. These aren't original transcriptions in the sense of newly made; all three works were arranged by their respective composers. Nor was there much of an original intent behind them. For rehearsal purposes and to disseminate new music before the age of the gramophone, it was normal practice to produce piano reductions for two hands, four hands, and two pianos. This use has been outmoded by recordings, albeit piano scores are still common for study and for singers' rehearsals in opera before the orchestra appears. Ultimately, the audience for this disc might be confined largely to listeners with an analytical approach to two difficult scores. The recorded sound, as heard through conventional two-channel stereo, is excellent. Slimline cardboard packaging; notes in German and English.

