

CD Review—

Brian Thornton & Spencer Myer,
Robert Schumann: Works for Cello & Piano

by Jarrett Hoffman



Hearing the music of Schumann through the lens of cellist Brian Thornton and pianist Spencer Myer is to experience a level of expressivity one might forget even exists. *Robert Schumann: Works for Cello & Piano* contains three brilliant performances of works by that composer, and in an interesting quasi-encore, one scoop of Schubert to top things off.

Schumann's Op. 70 *Adagio and Allegro* provides the listener with a good introduction to Thornton's and Myer's long partnership: it's an equal collaboration, each of them flexible to make way for the other, and confident to sing out. Nuance and character are everywhere. Colors shift constantly and convincingly in the *Adagio* section, while the *Allegro* captures the feeling of running through the streets with joy. (Whether anyone has ever actually done that is up for question.)

The performance of the *Five Pieces in Folk Style* is the kind to make jaw meet floor, a real master class in musicality. In the bold-flavored first movement, subtle variations of articulation mean that the repeated main theme always represents an opportunity, not an obligation, for the listener.

The "Langsam" ushers in a totally separate world, velvety and warm, while the third movement shows Thornton edging back and forth between gentle and piercing tone, as though he's not exactly sure how to feel. It comes across as complexly human in a way that's rare to hear.

The “Nicht zu rasch” brings another delicious moment of uneasiness, when Myer makes a passage of accompanying eighth-notes so much more than that. The finale is pure swashbuckling, and shows Thornton rooting around in his endless box of musical ideas.

Throughout the more famous *Fantasiestücke*, the duo’s sense of ensemble shines. Their balance allows Myer to bring out important lines of counterpoint and response that often go unheard, and their timing stays in lockstep through every push and pull of phrasing.

The first movement reveals an interesting sacrifice. Thornton and Myer take a measured and deliberate tempo, and though the music loses some direction, each gesture gets juiced a little more thoroughly. That also means that when the faster second movement arrives, it feels more distinctly like new ground, and the vivacious finale completes a clear progression from slow to swift.

If this were a recital program, the sensitive performance of Schubert’s *Ave Maria*, D. 839, would be a great encore, coming after what would surely be a powerful ovation for Thornton and Myer. But without hearing applause, it’s hard to put yourself into that same frame of mind. Here the Schubert feels a little disappointing as the final piece — though that’s a matter of aesthetics probably worth exploring all its own.

Robert Schumann: Works for Cello & Piano was released on the Steinway & Sons label in August.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 12, 2019.

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