



Edvard Grieg: The Violin Sonatas

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Gramophone (Mike Ashman - 2015.10.01)

GRAMOPHONE

In a letter to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Grieg assigned each of these sonatas – the heart of his chamber music – to one of his three creative phases. He described the F major (1865, written when he was only 22) as 'naive, rich in models'; the 1867 G major as 'nationalistic' (his mentor Niels Gade was to chide him after the premiere not to 'make the next sonata so Norwegian'); and the much later C minor (1887), immediately the most popular, as 'the one with the broader horizon'.

Mainline European (ie from south of Scandinavia) recorded performances often weigh down Grieg's naturally lighter melodic invention by pushing all out for the grand and the serious, seemingly in a kind of fear (once expressed even by past writers in these columns) that the music lacks form. In contrast, the approach taken by Scandinavian violinists such as Henning Kraggerud and Terje Tønnesen takes fullest account of (rather than trying to make more sophisticated) the dance rhythms that figure so prominently in the Allegretto of No 1 and the outer movements of No 2. Try the very start of an impressive recent contender – the young Norwegian Vilde Frang's 2011 Warner recording of No 1 – and you hear the difference immediately with the light touch of her bow after the false-key start.

The present recording certainly drives the works hard, with Pietsch's violin enjoying what moments of virtuosity there are, for example in the first movement of No 3. This German duo are not the last word in natural Grieg style but their tendencies towards over-weighty Brahmsian concert elevation of the scores are absorbed by exciting playing which feels very live, with a natural platform balance between instruments. Enjoyable – but I'd still choose Kraggerud for all three sonatas, supplementing with Vilde Frang for the First and the famous old Kreisler / Rachmaninov pairing in the Third.