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Diabelli Variations
Franz Hummel – Ludwig van Beethoven
Franz Hummel (*1939)

CD CONTENT:

Throughout the history of music, the art of variation was always held in high esteem. Added to which, the genius of Beethoven was never outstripped by any other – this, at least, is known and accepted. So how can it be that at the heart of his most fascinating, greatest and perhaps profoundest work for piano there lies a harmless waltz by Anton Diabelli, a ditty so to speak and one whose theme Beethoven once deridingly called ‘a tune with a cobbler’s patch’ because of a somewhat banal harmonic change that employs a seventh chord. Was he just trying to prove that an immensely creative spirit is capable of setting light to any musical idea, however simple? And that the most inconspicuous thematic cell can enter captivating improvisational and compositional realms, and admit the most audacious interpretation of the world?

This much is certain: Beethoven’s late works are reflected in their entirety in the Diabelli Variations, every connoisseur of this music being transported by the temerity of this derring-do, the very solutions, the richness of inspiration, the ardour of expression, the heavenly perfection of simplistic strategies, not to forget the pianistic virtuosity that in essence can literally count on Virtus as a companion. What drives a contemporary composer to start out on this undertaking, given the prevailing conditions and the need to attain such heights? Consider too the dichotomy of pretence and claim, and the exegetical, nay egocentric furore of debauchery that must be inculcated. It is a sacrilege if truth be told, any attempt to pen another 33 variations on this ‘cobbler’s patch’ of a tune, for we pay trepidation no heed. Three things must be considered:

- The belief that all and any philosophy may be perceived as but motes in the air, and that one only has to reach out in order to turn them into music.
- The arcane knowledge pertaining to the pull of gravity in a game that answers its own questions and which often causes the composer to stare in rapt contemplation at what has been created, although chance has intervened and threatened to overpower the creator.
- Finally, the enjoyable freedom that precludes a self-expression which up to now was mandatory and that inculcates adherence to everything early experience continues to dictate.

If I believe that I owe such sincere self-reflection to mankind’s cultural burden, in order not to be crucified by it, I too would simply be being sanctimonious, for this category is one I only trust with great circumspection. But my Diabelli Variations are I believe something special and despite my profound understanding of the Beethoven work – one I play myself – they remain separate from it. They are, bar any individual positioning, truly improvisatory and were ‘grabbed out of the very air’, being free from taste, without style, artistically absolutely unprincipled and in no sense ‘modern’. In a way, this makes them modern perhaps, for which I can only blame my pubescent state. As for the order, it turns out to be untamed and random. In due course, and at the flick of a wrist, quotable quotes appear whose posturing admits many a colleague long since dead who extends a hearty invitation to participate in this illustrious guessing game.

Franz Hummel
Translation: Graham Lack