

Schumann Introduction & Allegro appassionato, Op 92. Chopin Piano Concerto No 1 in E minor, Op 11

Sveinung Bjelland (pf). Norwegian Radio Orchestra / Christian Eggen

Lawo Classics LWC1149 (DDD)

[58 minutes]

In his informative and perceptive booklet-note, Robert Matthew-Walker avers of Schumann's *Introduction and Allegro appassionato*, Op 92, that it "remains arguably Schumann's most unjustly neglected masterpiece; it contains some of his finest and most original themes and most brilliant piano writing". That might seem odd for a work that has been recorded dozens and dozens of times (there are over 80 issues containing it currently available on *Presto Classical's* database), yet I do see what he means. The piece is always the bridesmaid, never the main event on disc, a piece to pad out a 'Complete Schumann' anthology or pianist-focused collection. In a sense, so it is here as Chopin's First Concerto takes up the bulk of the disc's not-quite-hour-long duration, yet with one important difference: here it leads out the programme and is of equal importance to it as the larger concerto and no mere filler. Sveinung Bjelland, a pianist new to me, plays this minor masterpiece with great sensitivity and aplomb. The Norwegian Radio Orchestra accompany neatly, the odd rough edge aside, well-drilled by Christian Eggen.

Neither of the Chopin Piano Concertos, both composed in 1829-30, made a lasting impression on me until Ingrid Fliter's marvellous recording for Linn Records with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Jun Märkl in 2014. Bjelland has a not dissimilar lightness of touch and a lively refinement of tone that makes his performance almost as persuasive as Fliter's. He is a touch more expansive in the opening *Allegro maestoso*, rather more so in the central *Romanza*, his *Larghetto* pace eventually over a minute and a quarter slower than Fliter's. Honours and speeds are even in the concluding *Rondo*. Again, the Norwegian Radio Orchestra are not as slick here and there as some accompanying groups (listen to the very first chord, for example) but overall this is a fine account and coupled with the Schumann makes for a fascinating disc. Rather good sound.

Guy Rickards