

**Chandos**

**CHAN 8507**

**JOHANN NEPOMUK HUMMEL**  
**(1778-1837)**

**Piano Concerto in A minor Op. 85** (30:19)

- 1 I Allegro moderato (15:28)
- 2 II Larghetto (4:24)
- 3 III Rondo: Allegro moderato (10:24)

**Piano Concerto in B minor Op. 89** (35:59)

- 4 I Allegro moderato (16:49)
  - 5 II Larghetto (7:53)
  - 6 III Finale: Vivace (10:51)
- DDD TT = 66:08

**STEPHEN HOUGH** *Piano*  
**ENGLISH CHAMBER ORCHESTRA**  
**Leader, José-Luis Garcia**  
***conducted by***  
**BRYDEN THOMSON**

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**J**ohann Nepomuk Hummel possessed a formidable musical pedigree. His teachers included Haydn, Clementi, Mozart and Beethoven; Mendelssohn, Hiller, Henselt and Thalberg were among his pupils. Yet Hummel's star tarnished with the years, and today he is seen as a composer of limited historical interest, conveniently bridging the gap between Mozart and Chopin and writing 'chandelier' music of little lasting significance. An estimate of the A minor Piano Concerto as 'very respectable' not only consigned a scintillating work to dusty oblivion but set the tone for future and similarly uninformed dismissal. Such critical condescension was hardly erased by Henry Chorley's plea for 'a kinder allowance' for 'a notable composer'.

Less generally, if Liszt saw in Paganini's violinistics a ground plan for his own future diablerie, Hummel glimpsed a similar potential in Mozart. Elaboration rather than classical economy was his aim, and his execution of a novel profusion of ornaments was viewed with envy and disbelief. Chopin was among the distant observers who later turned these reeling figurations to inimitable poetic advantage. As a mere teenager he could hardly remain uninfluenced by such resource, and both his Piano Concertos have *Larghettos* modelled on Hummel's and dizzying codas that, again like Hummel's, removed the need for cadenzas or further display. Indeed, the scholar exploring the origins of Chopin's early glitter will hear virtual prototypes in Hummel's Concertos. And, without citing chapter and verse, the treatment of ideas in works such as Chopin's Opus 2 Variations, Opus 4 Sonata, the Impromptus and Rondos and most of all the Piano Concertos, is inconceivable without Hummel. Chopin's way with *bel canto* also owes a debt to Hummel and so too do the heady gyrations and graceful garrulity of later virtuosi such as Moszkowski and Saint-Saëns, to name but two. More scorned than acknowledged, Hummel unwittingly provided a means for other composers' gain, a vital key to their musical character.

Yet, not surprisingly, Hummel's orchestral writing is more enterprising than Chopin's, his *tuttis* more richly and significantly scored. Again his happy blend of convention with the more striking devices of his contemporaries (the A minor Concerto's first movement octave *glissando* surely has its origins in Beethoven's First Piano Concerto) combined with a rare sense of prophecy to produce music that is fresh and vivid. The formal layout of each movement may be for the most part like Chopin's, unremarkable, but the treatment of the ideas is tirelessly brilliant and resourceful. Moreover, the occasional exoticism, such as the menacing rattle of timpani at the start of the B minor Concerto, is better integrated than similar devices in Chopin's Concertos. Differences and similarities abound: if Chopin seduces with his transformation of bravura into poetry, Hummel astonishes by leaving such flamboyance unchanged, stunning his audience and taunting his pianist with his near impossible demands. However, such intricacy can be artfully achieved when you consider the way the gracefully wilting theme of the A minor Concerto's finale is changed into a fast and furious tarantella. The fire-spitting coda, which in the hands of a skilful pianist can be like a sudden rush of centrifugal force, flashes figurations familiar from Chopin's F minor Concerto and the C sharp minor Étude, Opus 10, before concluding in a storm of scales and trills, and the sort of crystalline unison writing that Hummel made so peculiarly his own.

The B minor Concerto may move with a heavier tread, but its difficulties are no less outlandish. Once again the pianist finds himself situated like a sequined trapeze artist, tumbling and somersaulting high above the crowd whose *frisson* is increased by the absence of a safety net. Stylistically, too, the listener is startled not so much by the music crossing the divide between Mozart and Chopin as a sudden evocation of Scarlatti's high jinks (the Sonatas Longo 184 and 255, for example) and a freakish anticipation of a device in the *Andante religioso* of Bartók's Third Piano Concerto; all this within four hyper-active pages that conclude the first

movement.

Stephen Hough, the soloist in this recording, readily admits that learning these concertos was like a baptism of fire. At first sight their teeming difficulties were as inviting as a row of shark's teeth, their treacherous twists and turns often increased by today's weighty, full-toned instruments. Earlier recordings, with their lack of vigour and articulacy and with sizeable cuts (usually occurring when the music was at its most demanding) prompted talk of padding and vapidty. And so, at the risk of stepping outside my role of annotator, I can only say that Stephen Hough's astonishing and super-charged performances authentically recreate music of substance, verve, and an incandescent virtuosity. The common assumption that Hummel's concertos, like Mendelssohn's, require little more than 'dexterity and an even touch' is magisterially disproved and reinforced by what amounts to the first complete recording of both these concertos on a single disc.

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**S**tephen Hough was born in Heswall, Cheshire, in 1961, and studied at the Royal Northern College of Music and at the Juilliard School in New York. He has won many prizes, including the piano section of BBC TV's Young Musician of the Year competition in 1978, the inaugural Terence Judd Award in 1982, and in 1983 first prize in the Naumburg International Piano Competition; as a result of this he was engaged to play with many of America's most important orchestras. He has, of course, also performed with the major British orchestras, and in 1984 recorded Mozart's Piano Concerto in E flat K.271 for television.

Important concerto engagements have included his 1985 Proms début playing Liszt's Concerto No. 1, appearances at the Ravinia Festival in Rachmaninov's Concerto No. 1 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and James Levine, and Prokofiev's Third Concerto with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra under Tennstedt. Highlights of 1986 were concerts in the Far East with the Hong Kong and Singapore Philharmonic Orchestras, and a return visit to the Ravinia Festival for Bartók's Third Concerto with Levine and the Chicago Philharmonic.

**B**ryden Thomson is held in high esteem for his major contribution to raising the stature of British orchestras. He has held posts as Principal Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic, BBC Welsh and Ulster Orchestras, Associate Conductor of the Scottish National and Assistant Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. He is currently Principal Conductor of the RTE Symphony Orchestra and Conductor Laureate of the Ulster Orchestra.

The increasing interest in 20th century British music owes much to Bryden Thomson, who has given premières of many important works by British and Irish composers and has done much to promote British music at home and abroad. He has championed composers such as Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Bax, Harty, Ireland and many others; his recordings of their music have won much world-wide acclaim and played a significant part in enhancing the reputation of both Chandos and the Ulster Orchestra, with which he began the complete cycle of Symphonies of Arnold Bax.



He maintains his interest in Scandinavian composers, including Sallinen, Holmboe, Nielsen and Sibelius, and he has been very active in the field of opera: as Conductor at the Norwegian Opera in Oslo, Royal Opera in Stockholm and at Scottish Opera. Television audiences will know him for his genial but straightforward manner in handling the young competitors in the BBC Young Musician of the Year Competition.

In 1984 the New University of Ulster conferred on him an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters in recognition of his services to music in Ulster, and he recently received an award from the Scottish Composers Society.

#### A Chandos Digital Recording

Recording Producer: Brian Couzens

Sound Engineer: Trygg Tryggvason; Assistant Engineer: Ralph Couzens

Recorded at All Saints' Church, Tooting, London on September 22-23, 1986

Front cover photo of Stephen Hough by Steve Turner

Sleeve Design: Christopher Sims; Art Direction: Janet Osborn

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**[AAD]** = analoges Tonbandgerät bei der Aufnahme und bei Schnitt und/oder Abmischung; digitales Tonbandgerät bei der Überspielung

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**[AAD]** = utilisation d'un magnétophone analogique pendant les séances d'enregistrement et le mixage et/ou le montage, utilisation d'un magnétophone numérique pendant la gravure.

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**[AAD]** = riguarda l'uso del registratore analogico durante le sedute di registrazione e per il successivo mixing e/o editing, e del registratore digitale per la masterizzazione.

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