

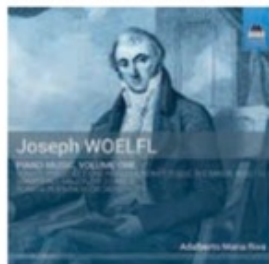
Woelfl

'Piano Music, Vol 1'

Piano Sonatas – Op 27 No 2; Op 38. Sonate, précédée d'une introduction et fugue, WoO113

Adalberto Maria Riva *pf*

Toccata Classics © TOCC0383 (73' • DDD)



At the turn of the 19th century the Viennese musical elite loved nothing more than a gladiatorial keyboard contest. One of the most celebrated took place in March 1799 between Beethoven – then at the height of his powers as a virtuoso – and the Salzburg-born Joseph Woelfl (1773–1812), who had studied with Mozart's father and sister, possibly even with Wolfgang himself. The duel produced no obvious winner, though it highlighted the differences in style and aesthetics between the two men. While Beethoven's improvisations were praised for their brilliance and power, also their mystery and sometimes esoteric complexity, those of his equally famous younger rival came across as more pleasing and 'accessible', not least for the Mozartian 'ease, precision and clarity' with which he tossed off the most difficult passages. That Woelfl was deemed the more amenable personality goes without saying.

Writing in the booklet to this opening salvo in a projected Woelfl sonata series, Adalberto Maria Riva characterises the composer's style as lying 'somewhere between Clementi, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert', which certainly leaves the options open. Despite the odd tempestuous gesture in the C minor Sonata (WoO113) of c1804, there is little Beethovenian dynamism in these essentially amiable works, even if the finale of the B minor Sonata (Op 38) begins with what sounds like a tamed rerun of the finale of

Beethoven's A minor Violin Sonata, Op 23. Clementi is evoked in some of Woelfl's keyboard sonorities, particularly his partiality to wiry two-part counterpoint. In several movements – say, in the *Adagio* of the B minor Sonata – the invention sounds elegantly 'Mozartian', though the tunes are less distinctive and Woelfl can meander where Mozart never does. Elsewhere, Woelfl's leisurely time frame and fondness for dipping casually into remote keys foreshadows Schubert. On a blind tasting, you might be forgiven for mistaking a songful A flat major episode in the finale of the C minor Sonata as an unknown Schubert Impromptu.

Riva plays this thoroughly agreeable music as affectionately as he writes about it. At times – above all in the C minor Sonata's *Allegro molto* and the first movement of the F major, Op 27 No 2, here yielding and ruminative to a fault – I craved a stronger sense of forward momentum. His ultra-flexible approach to tempo, enhanced by a fondness for separating left and right hands in lyrical music, can be slightly enervating. But the mellow sonorities Riva draws from his Bösendorfer, his contrapuntal clarity and sensitivity to harmonic colour, are often persuasive in music that typically lives by addition and varied repetition rather than cumulative growth, à la Beethoven. In sum, a disc of gentle pleasures that whets the appetite for future issues in Riva's Woelfl pilgrimage.

Richard Wigmore