



## RECORDINGS

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MUZIO CLEMENTI (1752–1832)

*THE COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS – 1*

Howard Shelley (piano)

Hyperion CDA67632, 2007; two discs, 152 minutes

MUZIO CLEMENTI (1752–1832)

*THE COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS – 2*

Howard Shelley (piano)

Hyperion CDA67717, 2008; two discs, 136 minutes

MUZIO CLEMENTI (1752–1832)

*THE COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS – 3*

Howard Shelley (piano)

Hyperion CDA67729, 2009; two discs, 122 minutes

In the previous issue of this journal, Rudolf Rasch reviewed the published proceedings of two conferences that were held in Perugia and Rome in 2002 to mark the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Muzio Clementi (see *Eighteenth-Century Music* 6/1 (2009), 113–116). Rasch emphasized that the writings in these volumes cover ‘nearly everything that can be discussed concerning a composer from the classical period: biography, musical compositions, business activities, travels, meetings, publications, musical instruments, influence, reception and so on’ (116). Also coinciding with the anniversary was the publication of Anselm Gerhard’s ground-breaking book *London und der Klassizismus in der Musik: Die Idee der ‘absoluten Musik’ und Muzio Clementis Klavierwerke* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2002) and the multi-author, multilingual volume, edited by Roberto Illiano, Luca Sala and Massimiliano Sala, *Muzio Clementi: Studies and Prospects* (Bologna: Ut Orpheus, 2002). The multi-author volume is actually an adjunct to yet another, even larger-scale project bound up with the anniversary: the sixty-volume complete edition of Clementi’s works, *Muzio Clementi: Opera Omnia* (Bologna: Ut Orpheus), whose publication began in 2000. Despite the reservations that have been expressed about the *Opera Omnia*’s editorial methods and precision (see, for example, the review by W. Dean Sutcliffe in *Eighteenth-Century Music* 2/2 (2005), 351–359), this edition represents the first attempt to disseminate the full range of the composer’s works. Publication of the scores of many of Clementi’s lesser-known keyboard pieces has now been complemented by the first recording of the complete set of his piano sonatas, by British pianist Howard Shelley. A fair number of recordings of small groups of sonatas played by various pianists and fortepianists have been issued over the years, dating back to the pioneering efforts of Vladimir Horowitz in 1955; but now, with this new Hyperion release, it seems that the assertions of musicologists such as Rasch, who states that ‘not many composers outside the ranks of the great masters can claim such attention in such a short period of time’ (review in *Eighteenth-Century Music* 6/1 (2009), 116), and Sutcliffe, who maintains that ‘Clementi has never had it so good as he does now’ (review of *Muzio Clementi: Studies and Prospects*, in *Music & Letters* 85/2 (2004), 295), are gradually being justified.

The present review covers the first three volumes of the complete recorded cycle, each consisting of two CDs (this represents the halfway point in the series, as a further three volumes are scheduled). Collectively, these six discs include a total of thirty-eight sonatas (Opp. 1–13, 20, 23 and 24) and one miscellaneous work (the Toccata in B flat major, Op. 11 No. 2), which date mainly from the 1770s and 1780s. The first volume features the Sonata in A flat major, w013, which was composed as early as 1765. This is one of the very few works to survive from Clementi’s early youth in Rome, before his move to England in his mid-teens; thus its inclusion in the recording is of considerable historical interest. The majority of the sonatas, however,



postdate Clementi's move to London in 1774 (which took place after he had spent about seven years at the Dorset estate of Sir Peter Beckford, who had 'bought' Clementi from his father), and coincide with his tour to the continent between 1780 and 1783, together with the spell of about four years immediately following his return to London. The geographical diversity that marks Clementi's early career as a composer-pianist accounts, at least in part, for these sonatas' changing stylistic preoccupations – from the unassumingly 'galant' Op. 1, to the flamboyant virtuosity of Op. 2, which made such a sensation in 1770s London, to the nervous intensity and motivic concentration of Opp. 7 and 8, which seem to have been written under Austro-German musical influences.

Throughout the three volumes Shelley maintains a high level of technical execution. In the finales of Op. 7 No. 3, Op. 9 No. 3 and the first movement of Op. 24 No. 2, he achieves impressively fast speeds with no sacrifice of clarity or control. In still more overtly virtuosic movements, such as the first movements of Op. 2 Nos 1 and 2, the passagework is extremely agile and is only very occasionally over-pedalled. Particularly impressive is Shelley's management of the characteristically Clementian double thirds in places like the exposition codetta of the opening movement in Op. 7 No. 2 and the coda of the finale in Op. 12 No. 3, where there appears to be no sense of labour or forcing of the tone.

In accordance with contemporary performance practice, Shelley frequently improvises cadenzas and ornaments repeated melodies, sometimes quite profusely – in fact, in a number of sonatas his almost constant decoration of Clementi's structural cadences with what prove to be fairly elaborate cadenzas can seem excessive. In the first movement of Op. 7 No. 3 in G minor, for instance, the pause bar preceding the return of the tonic occasions one of Shelley's characteristic flourishes. The tonic's return is delayed until late in the section by one of Clementi's typical elisions of development and recapitulation, whereby exposition material starts to reappear before the tonic is regained. An unadorned pause, demarcating the return of the tonic in a simple and forthright manner, would perhaps have been preferable to the slightly forced elegance of a cadenza. Another symptom of the tendency towards over-adornment is Shelley's continual arpeggiation of chords, which is so ubiquitous that it could be regarded as a mannerism. Suitable as this may be for the more delicate, lyrical passages, it dilutes the impact of gestures such as the emphatic right-hand block chords beginning in bar 231 of the finale of Op. 24 No. 2.

It is often the case with eighteenth-century keyboard interpretation that a certain timidity – embarrassment, even – can be evident, and this is true of Shelley's approach to the sonatas' grander gestures, and even to the higher dynamic levels. Restraint is particularly noticeable, and undue, in the first movement of Op. 1 No. 5, where the unusually full textures call for correspondingly sonorous tones. Shelley is also quite reticent about the *sforzandos* and the *fortissimo* passages in the first movement of Op. 7 No. 2, and even in the obstreperous finale of Op. 7 No. 3, which positively demands greater attack and vehemence. In overtly flashy pieces such as the first movement of Op. 2 No. 1, the emphasis seems to be more on neatness than panache, with the result that one is perhaps left merely satisfied rather than truly impressed, and with the feeling that Shelley's obvious technical accomplishment could have accommodated a more daring approach. There are, of course, exceptions: Shelley's *sforzandos* in the second movement of Op. 20 No. 1 are refreshingly robust, and the wide dynamic range he cultivates in the first movement of Op. 13 No. 6 captures very convincingly the movement's volatility, making for a much more compelling performance than the slightly parsimonious presentation of the Op. 7 No. 3 finale.

Related to Shelley's tendency to err on the side of restraint is his foreshortening of some general pauses. In the finale of Op. 7 No. 3, the pause preceding the statement of the opening in the outlandish key of G sharp minor needs to be longer in order to project the incongruity of a harmonic move that is only partly mitigated by its enharmonic dominant preparation. Similarly, one sometimes feels the need for more imaginative treatment of structurally significant points like the off-tonic recapitulations in the first movements of Op. 10 No. 1 and Op. 23 No. 3, and in one or two other movements. The off-tonic recapitulation was, after all, a comparatively unusual phenomenon in music of the 1780s, and one that challenges the traditional assumption that a composer like Clementi, who is seen to represent what Charles Rosen once called the 'anonymous musical vernacular' of the late eighteenth century, had a formulaic approach to structure (see Rosen's *The*



*Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven* (London: Faber, 1971), 22). In Op. 10 No. 1 Shelley partly compensates for his indifferent treatment of the flattened mediant recapitulation by emphasizing the eventual harmonic pivot back into the tonic, thus drawing the listener's attention to the length of time that the tonic has been staved off. Similarly, Shelley's agitation of the return to the tonic from the subdominant recapitulation in the second movement of Op. 10 No. 2 (when combined with the subdued treatment of the off-tonic recapitulation itself) projects quite well Clementi's characteristic side-stepping of recapitulatory convention. In the first movement of Op. 13 No. 6, as in Op. 10 No. 1, Shelley gives appropriate emphasis to the delayed return of the tonic after the elided development and recapitulation, and his inclusion of the repeat of this movement's second half further emphasizes the 'binary' structural connotations that emanate from the elision process. Shelley also includes the second repeats in the first movements of Op. 8 No. 1 and Op. 10 No. 1, to similar effect.

Although Shelley's approach to the higher dynamic levels is not always satisfactory, his extremely nuanced and controlled handling of the lower dynamic range, often in association with carefully judged rubato and highly sensitive melodic shaping, is outstanding. This aspect of his performance comes to the fore in his treatment of the quiet endings, which are something of a hallmark of Clementi's style (examples appear in the second movements of Op. 8 No. 2 and Op. 13 Nos 4, 5 and 6, amongst others), and, needless to say, in the slow movements – those of the expansive variety as well as the 'noble, concise slow movement' found in sonatas like Op. 7 Nos 1 and 3, which Sutcliffe has identified as another 'Clementian trademark' (see his review of *Muzio Clementi: Opera Omnia*, in *Eighteenth-Century Music* 2/2 (2005), 357). In the slow movement of Op. 9 No. 2, Shelley combines a spacious tempo with an array of subtly differentiated levels of *piano* and *pianissimo*, capturing the movement's introspection most persuasively. The slow movement of Op. 23 No. 2 is even more impressive in Shelley's hands, especially the extreme *pianissimo* he achieves during the repeat of the melody originally beginning in bar 13; here the expressive import of the opening melody's falling sevenths is realized fully without becoming cloying. One eagerly anticipates Shelley's renderings of the slow movements of later sonatas, such as those in the Opp. 40 and 50 sets, where Clementi pushes the expressive boundaries still further.

Shelley carries these approaches over into other movement types. Particularly memorable is his handling of the lyrical passage in the development section of the first movement of Op. 7 No. 3 (bars 100–117), where the opening theme is stated in augmentation in E flat major. This passage provides one of the movement's few points of repose and, as Michael Spitzer has argued, offers something of a clairvoyant vision of the ensuing slow movement (see Spitzer's review of Gerhard's *London und der Klassizismus in der Musik* in *Eighteenth-Century Music* 3/2 (2006), 335). In fact, Shelley seems to highlight this connection by omitting the customary pause between the first and second movements. Similar approaches are used with equal success in the more introspective, *minore* sections of the rondos. The passage in E flat major in the *minore* of the finale of Op. 9 No. 2 is handled in the same manner as its equivalent in the first movement of Op. 7 No. 3.

The prevailingly high quality of Shelley's performances is matched by Leon Plantinga's booklet notes, which are approachable, informative and suitable for those coming to Clementi for the first time, yet are still of interest to those with more background knowledge. The inclusion of notes by such an eminent scholar is highly commendable in its own right; Plantinga's pioneering research into Clementi in the 1970s helped to establish the foundations of modern scholarship on the composer (see, in particular, his study *Muzio Clementi: His Life and Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977)). Although Plantinga directed his energies to other areas of research in the 1980s and 1990s, he has maintained sufficient interest in Clementi to deliver conference papers, contribute a steady flow of reviews and write the introductory chapter to *Studies and Prospects* (see above). In the notes for Shelley's recordings, Plantinga surpasses the usual approachability of his prose and provides a wealth of contextual detail. Necessarily, some of the biographical facts are recycled from one volume to the next, such as the somewhat predictable references to the competition between Clementi and Mozart in 1781 that provoked Mozart's famous dismissal of the composer as a 'mechanicus' and a 'ciarlatano'. The emphasis on context, however, does not prevent Plantinga's commentary on specific works from becoming quite substantial. He devotes several paragraphs to the first



movement of Op. 13 No. 6, and his patient explanation of the subdominant recapitulation in the first movement of Op. 10 No. 2, which will be intelligible to the non-specialist, also includes some aural landmarks to listen out for: having noted that ‘this movement has a “subdominant recapitulation”, in which the return in the second half of the piece occurs in the “wrong” key, G major’, Plantinga then adds that ‘one can easily hear this when, towards the end of the movement, the ebullient opening theme, rising through a full two octaves, appears again but beginning at a surprisingly low pitch’ (notes to volume 2, 2–3).

In general, Plantinga expresses a more even-handed opinion of the sonatas here than in his previous writings, where he tended to cast the earlier sonatas in quite an unfavourable light. In his biography of Clementi, Plantinga objected to the more overtly virtuosic tendencies of works like Op. 2 No. 2 whilst lauding the cultivation, in parts of Opp. 7 and 8 especially, of linear motivic processes and approving of their increased gravitas. In the booklet notes, however, Plantinga still reserves the bulk of his enthusiasm for the more intense works in minor keys, such as Op. 7 No. 3 and Op. 13 No. 6, which ‘show great gains over the earlier ones in expressive range and structural cogency’ (notes to volume 1, 6), but he is less overtly pejorative about the sonatas that do not fall into this fairly circumscribed category. Plantinga is also very ready to acknowledge the stylistically progressive aspects of Clementi’s earlier sonatas. In the notes to volume 2 he aptly places Clementi ‘on the cutting edge of musical style’, and puts forward the subdominant recapitulation in Op. 10 No. 2 as an example of ‘the sort of restless formal experiment that marks a good deal of his music from this period’ (2). Perhaps a more robust tone is called for in this context to offset deeply ingrained notions about Clementi’s conservatism – based, as Plantinga himself acknowledges, on the universal familiarity of the Sonatinas Op. 36. Plantinga ends the notes to volume 3 with some brief comments on Clementi’s budding career as a symphonist in the 1780s. This is a simple but effective way of challenging the traditionally ‘piano-centric’ vision of the composer: it is likely that many readers will have been unaware hitherto that Clementi produced anything other than keyboard music.

Just as some of Plantinga’s remarks are apt to challenge outdated popular views of Clementi as being little more than a composer of small-scale, basically uninteresting keyboard compositions, the most successful facets of Shelley’s performances offer a highly stimulating foil to the traditional perception of Clementi as distinctly lacking in the realm of sensitive expression, or as a purveyor, by turns, of ‘galant’ superficiality and of sterile virtuoso acrobatics. Such false impressions have been greatly helped along by Mozart’s labelling of Clementi as a ‘mechanicus’, or, more to the point, by the hypnotic regularity with which his caustic comments have been trotted out in studies of keyboard history over the last two hundred years or so. Not only is Shelley successful in revealing the sensitive side of Clementi, but his approaches may indeed be in line with Clementi’s own as a performer: the notes to volume 3 quote a contemporary account of Clementi’s playing in 1784, which reports that ‘he plays with an inimitable rapture, and with a continual swelling and receding, with unwritten *lento* and *rubando* that it would be impossible to express on paper’ (2). All of this would suggest that Hyperion’s new compilation is going to be of seminal importance, not just in helping to chart unfamiliar Clementian territory, but also in revealing the contours of that territory with more accuracy than ever before.

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