

Ian Fountain however go one better than their rivals by supplementing the requisite numbered sonatas and variations with two comparative rarities: the composer's resourceful cello transcription of the Horn Sonata and the six-movement Duo Sonata, Op. 64 based on the early E flat String Trio. Whether the latter was actually arranged by Beethoven still remains a matter of conjecture, but Geringas and Fountain seem totally committed to the work, delivering a wonderfully elegant account that emphasises the music's strongly Mozartian features. Both players are equally enthralling in the Horn Sonata transcription, projecting a muscular view of the opening movement, bringing a delightful mock pathos to the brief *Poco Adagio* and imbuing the *Rondo Finale* with grace and humour.

There are some really outstanding performances throughout the rest of this beautifully recorded set. Particularly noteworthy are the vibrant rustic energy and *joie de vivre* of both *Finales* to the Op. 5 Sonatas, the boldly depicted contrasts of mood in the opening movement to Op. 102 No. 2, and Geringas's phenomenally clear articulation of the tricky scalic passage work in the *Finale* to Op. 69. Less convincing is the slow introduction to the G minor Sonata which seems slightly understated, especially during the pregnant pauses that precede the *Allegro molto*. The opening movement of Op. 69 is also a bit inhibited warranting perhaps a more operatic approach to the melodic line and although the ensuing *Scherzo* has plenty of rhythmic dynamism, Geringas dispatches the double stops in the trio in a surprisingly perfunctory manner. Notwithstanding these caveats, these three discs offer compelling and insightful musicianship in a highly competitive field. *Erik Levi*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



BERNSTEIN

West Side Story

GERSHWIN

Rhapsody in Blue

Katia Labèque, Marielle Labèque (piano)
KML 1121 58:15 mins

BBC Music Direct £13.99

Listen hard during the *Prologue* and the end of *The Rumble* in *West*



JUDICIOUS APPROACH: Arabella Steinbacher finds ideal resonance in Brahms

Side Story and you'll catch the distant wail of a passing police siren. Varèse would have loved it. And the composer of *Amériques* would surely have approved of the pairing of Gershwin and Bernstein – mutually illuminating bedfellows propped up on the supportive pillars of jazz, classical and popular music. The *West Side Story* arrangement was made for the Labèque sisters by the work's original orchestrator Irwin Kostal. The inclusion of percussion lends a streetwise veracity two pianos alone couldn't have mustered – even under fingers so sophisticatedly attuned to the edgy clarity and rhythmic 'snap, crackle, and pop' of Bernstein's score. At full pelt they take no hostages but there's a quivering delicacy to *Something's Coming*, tender translucence in *Maria*, and if the 'cool' in *Cool* comes naturally, the tongue-in-cheekery of *I Feel Pretty* could have strayed out of a Tchaikovsky ballet. The sequence is seamless, the pacing judicious.

Rhapsody in Blue inevitably enshrines the same pianistic precision and electricity, but there's also something a touch self-conscious. Premiered in a concert entitled 'An Experiment in Modern Music' it's as if the Labèques want to provide an aural analysis of its sassy rapprochement between classical music and jazz. There's a 'Rhapsody' not exactly overburdened with the rhapsodic – though 30 years after their famous Philips recording, Gershwin is evidently still the man they love. *Paul Riley*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★



BRAHMS

Complete works for violin and piano

Arabella Steinbacher (violin),

Robert Kulek (piano)

PentaTone PTC 5186 367

(hybrid CD/SACD) 78:57 mins

BBC Music Direct £13.99

There's a strongly lyrical impulse in Arabella Steinbacher's playing which is suited to the intimate character of these Sonatas. As in her recording of the Brahms Violin Concerto, to be reviewed next month, Steinbacher opts for expansive and highly expressive interpretations yet avoids any hint of over-indulgence: *Portamento* is judiciously employed, her double stops are resonant rather than aggressive.

Robert Kulek is an admirable duo partner and projects both the richness and clarity of texture in Brahms's writing through a carefully controlled use of the pedal, responding with sensitivity to the subtle inflections in Steinbacher's phrasing. PentaTone's recording has real presence, emulating the acoustic of a wood-panelled drawing room.

Tempos are leisurely, particularly in the G major Sonata where the approach in the outer movements is largely introverted except for an unexpectedly stormy dialogue in the middle of the opening *Vivace non troppo*. At the outset of the *Adagio*, I initially wondered whether the

players were taking far too much time over the opening phrases, thereby undermining the sense of flow. These doubts had evaporated by the middle section where the funereal rhythms were powerfully held in check.

In the second movement of the A major Sonata, too, the tempo of the slow sections seems closer to *Adagio* than to *Andante tranquillo*. But this caveat hardly detracts from my enthusiasm for these musically insightful performances. *Erik Levi*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



BUXTEHUDE

Chamber Music Vol. 2: Trio Sonatas, Op. 1

Catherine Manson (violin),
Paolo Pandolfo (viola da gamba),
Ton Koopman (harpsichord, organ),
Mike Fentross (lute)

Challenge CC 72252 59:53 mins

BBC Music Direct £13.99

Ton Koopman launched his chamber music journey into the 'Complete Buxtehude' with sonatas from unpublished sources. Now he has the magnificent Op. 1 in his sights, a collection of seven trio sonatas cocking a snook at the Italians by opting for viola da gamba rather than a second violin, and by casting them in the seamless multi-sectional single movements the North Germans went for, shot through with the vivid imaginings of the so-called 'fantastic style'. Paolo Pandolfo occupies the viola da gambist's chair, and on the supposition that the music might have graced services at the Marienkirche, Lübeck Koopman retains the services of Mike Fentross's lute, and himself commutes between harpsichord and organ.

Buxtehude's title page calls modestly for harpsichord alone. It's a rich mix, richly exploited; the lute bringing energy to the music as well as seductively enlarging on Buxtehude's harmonic finesse. And with all eager to flex their improvisatory prowess at the drop of a hat, the sparks take no time in flying, even if Catherine Manson's violin is a tad more sober. The contrapuntal banter is lithe and energised, 'fantasticus' passages are seized on and cherished, and there's an unstoppable spontaneity that intoxicates. Irresistible. *Paul Riley*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★