

For the rest, Maltman made interesting, smart choices—three songs by Emmanuel Chabrier, for instance, a composer whose work made a strong impression on Ravel. These made up what Chabrier called his “barnyard suite”, a set that concluded with an exuberant performance of ‘Ballad of the Big Turkeys.’ Six brief rather Brahms-like songs by Max Reger—*Simple Melodies*, the composer called them—opened the second half and were followed by three light-hearted songs by Hugo Wolf under the title *Stork Tidings*.

In sum, Maltman and Saint-Gil delivered what is rarely encountered: an almost perfect recital.

MICHAEL ANTHONY

Stephen Hough: Sonata No. 4 (*Vida Breve*) (world premiere)

Morrow GA

On November 10 at Spivey Hall in Morrow, Georgia, just south of Atlanta, pianist Stephen Hough performed a recital of top-flight solo piano repertoire by Debussy, Chopin, and Beethoven, plus the world premiere of his own Piano Sonata No. 4. It is the shortest of Hough’s four sonatas at only 10 minutes, a little more than half the length of his first. Hough, who likes subtitles, christened it *Vida Breve* not only for its conciseness but “to evoke the melancholy of life’s short duration”.

While all four sonatas in share musical gestures and form—an overall arch-like shape of sorts—No. 4 differs in temperament from the other three. It can easily be described as the most “public” of the lot, with harmonic language a bit less challenging for average audiences. Nevertheless, this little Fourth Sonata is a work of some substance, not fluff, having both detailed craft and emotional engagement.

Hough builds his entire single-movement sonata on five tiny motives. After a somewhat free, whispery introduction, they appear strung together like a long polymerized molecule in a slow fugato, building to a climax that recalls the opening materials but with bold octaves in the instrument’s upper range. Another fugato ensues, confident in its energy and rhythmic drive. Another climactic point brings the fifth of these motives to the fore in a passionate outburst, revealing itself as a

quote from a popular French chanson, ‘En Avril a Paris.’ All of the materials then whirl about with abandon, leading suddenly to the antithesis of the first climax, an emphatic ending in the keyboard’s lowest octaves.

Hough delivered both a forthright performance of Chopin’s Piano Sonata No. 2 and a rather personal interpretation of Beethoven’s *Appassionata Sonata*, pieces for which he has been generously reviewed elsewhere. But key to this program, and its high point, was Debussy’s *Images*. He opened the recital with Book II (followed by his own sonata) and began the second half with Book I.

Hough had the control and clarity to bring out both the subtle and the vibrant in Debussy’s luminous palette of modernist sonic colors. It is music for which Hough showed great affinity, attending to the details with a fluid expressiveness that was never overdone. He was aided by his remarkable companion, a Hamburg Steinway known as “Clara”

The 400-seat Spivey Hall, in addition to its pristine acoustics, offers artists a choice of world-class pianos. For his last appearance here in 2015, Hough performed on the then-new “Clara” Hamburg Steinway Model D-274 concert grand, named for Clara Schumann. Now, Spivey Hall has yet another new Hamburg named “Robert” (naturally) to complement “Clara”. Hough was one of several pianists who evaluated the “Robert” Hamburg Steinway in London in advance of its acquisition late last year. This recital was his first opportunity to choose between the two.

According to Sam Dixon, Spivey Hall’s executive and artistic director, Hough chose “Clara” with the needs of Debussy’s *Images* in mind, saying that it supplied the beauty and sustaining quality of tone he sought, especially in the most quiet and intimate moments. Had he been playing a Liszt program (as he is doing elsewhere this season), he would have chosen “Robert” for its somewhat greater brightness and its action that facilitates fast passage work and repeated notes. Hough’s choice underscores the vivid truth that a single pianist may prefer different instruments to meet the aesthetic and musical needs of different works.

Hough capped off his recital with a pair of encores drawn from his new “Stephen Hough’s Dream Album” (Hyperion): ‘By the Sleepy Lagoon’ by Eric Coates and ‘Das Alte Lied’ by Henry Love.

MARK GRESHAM