Debussy
Estampes; Images I; Images II; Children’s Corner; La plus que lente; Lisle Joyeuse
Stephen Hough (piano)
Hyperion CDA 68139 69:25 mins

Stephen Hough’s Debussy playing at the Royal Festival Hall a few years ago left me dangling blissfully from cloud 30, never mind nine, so anticipation ran high for this album. And its beauties are many and varied. Whether it’s the gorgeous delicacy with which he orchestrates the different layers of sound in Estampes- ‘Pagodes’, the louche sinuosity of L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Trionfo or the tenderness of The Little Shepherd in Children’s Corner, there’s no doubt that Hough is largely in his element here.

Nevertheless, on the third time through I was still asking myself why I didn’t love it quite enough. How is it that some of the melodic phrasing seems a bit over-stolid, that the colour palette is not as varied as it might have been, that it could, that sometimes the pedalling sounds a touch excessive, or that a few elements of Lisle joyeuse sound almost lumpy instead of silken?

It is so very untypical of Hough that it seemed necessary to check the booklet – and lo and behold, he’s playing a Yamaha. Maybe it’s wrong to blame the tool instead of the craftsman. But pianos can make one heck of a difference to a musical result; it’s hard not to wonder if this choice is an experiment that, for this recording, doesn’t prove wholly successful. Jessica Duchen

PERFORMANCE ★★★★☆
RECORDING ★★★★★

Mozart
Piano Sonatas, Vol. 5: Nos 6, 7 & 14; Fantasia in C minor
William Youn (piano)
Oehms Classics OCH1057 77:04 mins

An irresistible account of the Sonata in D, K284 opens this exceptionally engaging and warmly recorded Mozart recital. Korean pianist William Youn, performing on a modern instrument, brings a sparkling array of colours to the quasi-orchestral textures of the opening section, producing brilliant floridness in the treble balanced by a firm and sonorous foundation in the bass. The rest of the work is equally enthralling – a charming and elegant Rondeau en Polonaise followed by an extended Finale where Youn works hard to maximise contrast and character in each of the two variations. In comparison to K284, the Sonata in C, K309 is a much less extrovert work. Youn perfectly encapsulates its charming mixture of playfulness and humour in the outer movements, and produces some wonderfully expressive cantabile playing in the central Andante un poco adagio.

With the C minor Fantasy, K475 and Sonata in C minor, K457, we move into rather different musical territory. Both works may appear powerful precursors of Beethoven’s Sturm und Drang style, yet Youn steadfastly resists the temptation to over-dramatise the musical argument with heavy articulation and over-use of the sustaining pedal. At the same time, there are moments in the Fantasy where Youn could perhaps have allowed himself to be a bit more spontaneously responding to the improvisatory nature of Mozart’s invention. However, I have no such qualms about the performance of the Sonata. The outer movements are delivered with energy and passion, and there’s some lovely tender playing in the Adagio. Altogether, a fine conclusion to an impressive complete cycle. Erik Levi

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

Halo music for piano
Kendall: On the Chequer’d Field
Array’d; Tabakova: Modétudes; Halo; Nocturne; Phibbs: Preludes
Andrew Matthews-Owen (piano)
Nimbus NIMB1216 62:59 mins

Pianist Andrew Matthews-Owen has long been noted as a sensitive collaborator in his more usual role as an accompanist. But he also holds dear working with composers and, for the first time on disc, he steps out solo to present music of three richly held in high regard: Joseph Phibbs, Hannah Kendall and Dobrinka Tabakova.

The two most recent works were written for Matthews-Owen. Hottest off the press is Phibbs’s Preludes (2016); six beautifully restrained impressionist essays which comprise an affecting journey touched by personal connection: Colin Matthews is one dedicatee; the memory of Steven Stucky is another. Kendall’s On the Chequer’d Field Array’d (2013) depicts the stages of a game of chess. Whether the ensuing battle of wits is interned or between opponents seems not to matter – but what does are the conflicts played out across the keyboard in vivid and intriguing patterns. Modétudes (1994-99) are seven playful miniatures by Tabakova, characterising different modes. Her folk leanings delight, giving way to a passionate romanticism in Halo (1999). The title describes colours shimmering from the moon – as they do, evocatively, from the piano thanks to Matthews-Owen’s unshowy finesse. Steph Power

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

Background to... Dobrinka Tabakova (b1980)
Born in Bulgaria, Tabakova moved to London to study at the Royal Academy of Music, and graduated the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. She studied composition under Diana Burrell, Simon Bainbridge, Robert Keeley and Andrew Schultz, and was awarded a Ph.D. in composition from King’s College, London. Her choral piece ‘Praise’ was performed at St Paul’s Cathedral for the Golden Jubilee of Elizabeth II. Her first full-length album, String Paths (on ECM), was awarded five stars by BBC Music Magazine and was nominated for a Grammy in 2014.