

Pianist John Damgaard has quite the list of accomplishments. Having studied with Georg Vasarhelyi, Ilona Kabos, and Wilhelm Kempff, he became an assistant professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Music from 1969 to 1984, before moving to the Royal Academy of Music in Aarhus, where he stayed from 1984 until 2007. He has performed around the world and recorded over 30 CDs worth of music, including the complete piano works of Ravel as well as the completed sonatas of Schubert. Here he turns to the smaller works of the latter composer.

And what magnificent works they are! He begins with solid renditions of the Six Moments Musicaux, some of Schubert's finest smaller pieces, written from 1823 to 1828. Damgaard is finest in works such as the popular F-Minor Allegro moderato, in the way that he makes the piece frolic and dance. He also beautifully characterizes each moment in the opening C-Major Moderato, using a variety of tone colors and pianistic touches. At times his playing is inconsistent—for example, fluctuating tempos within single phrases, or slightly clunky playing as in the opening of the F-Minor Allegro vivace (No. 5)—but in general the pianist's lyrical approach suits this opus well. That said, if one wants to truly hear just how magical the closing A \flat -Major Allegretto can sound, I'd stick with Edwin Fischer's fantastic recording on EMI. Damgaard then pushes into two of Schubert's most lighthearted, though thoroughly charming piano pieces, the Two Scherzi, D 593. In his hands, the first one scurries along, joyfully, without a care in the world, while the second bounces and scampers up to the highest reaches of the instrument. Overall, these are lovely performances of both works. This leaves the Three Piano Pieces, D 946, all written in the composer's final year. Though not as well known as Schubert's two sets of Impromptus, these three works are just as beautiful and pianistically demanding, balancing just the right amount of Romantic melancholy with moments of true lightheartedness. In Damgaard's performance the opening Allegro assai has a wonderful sense of momentum and Angst, though here, as before, his choices of tempo modifications—slower here and way faster there—often break up the flow of the movement. His clunky-sounding chords don't help either. The E \flat -Major Allegretto is beautifully shaped, though it suffers from a too-slow initial tempo: An Allegretto should have a slight lilt to it. Damgaard ends on a high note with his spirited rendition of the concluding C-Major Allegro.

While I may still prefer other pianists to Damgaard in these works—Edwin Fischer in the Moments Musicaux, Radu Lupu in the Two Scherzos, and Andrés Schiff in the late Three Piano Pieces—this recital is filled with many beautiful moments. © 2025 Fanfare