

Re:view

Marius Dawn is looking for intellectual illumination, but finds only a few sparks of light in this issue's releases, from the likes of Oleg Marshev, Hamish Milne and Kathryn Stott

In the plethora of piano releases for this issue, quality has suffered in comparison to quantity. Not that you'll find bad pianists here in the sense of poor technical ability. Far from it! Some of these players are awesome in their high-polished virtuosity. But what about the musical content? Are we always completely convinced that the composer is presented to his best advantage? Sadly we are not.

When it comes to finger virtuosity, few can challenge **Evgeny Kissin**. Not many recordings of the complete Beethoven concertos are tossed off with such ease; here even the notoriously hard Fifth Concerto sounds like child's play. Musically Kissin approaches these concertos with naivety and innocence, which can be charming and forgivable in the two early concertos. He is surely best in the intimate dialogue of the fourth concerto - however, the roses should go to Colin Davis for putting on a brave face to Kissin's often forced tempo changes and rather hard and brittle piano sound that the orchestra is required to match. Surely Davis would have preferred a more restrained and classical approach to the slow movement of the Third, a concerto that fares better in Ronald Brautigam's hands (see below). And if the LSO feels lost in most of the final movements, it is again the relentless pulling around with phrases and tempos from Kissin that's at fault.

Conductor Andrew Parrott has his Swedish orchestra in a firm grip for his accompaniment to **Ronald Brautigam's** Beethoven, and their approach - even if on the faster and sleeker side - makes for more jolly listening than Kissin's. Brautigam is more flamboyant than Kissin in the first and third concertos, for instance. Yet with so many recordings of the Beethoven concertos available - from masters like Kempff and Barenboim to today's younger players - you will have no trouble finding one that's more entertaining and is pulled off with more class and style.

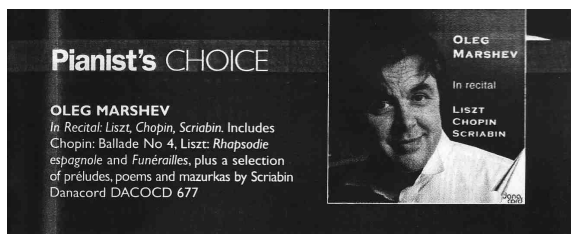
Who wouldn't dream of playing two of the finest piano concertos from the last century with the Berlin Phil and, on top of that, with Seiji Ozawa, a conductor who really understands the idiom? Add to that a superlative recording team and a concert hall with a natural and spacious acoustic and you are in for a clear winner. However, I cannot recommend a release just for the sake of all the other people involved. It's hard to listen to a piano concerto without paying attention to what the pianist is doing, but **Yundi Li** leaves an indifferent impression with his Prokofiev No 2. How on earth he manages to make Prokofiev sound like Mozart with too many notes is beyond me. The gravitas, the overwhelming force and the desperation that is embedded in the first movement cadenza is here reduced to kindergarten Prokofiev. Of course Li can play all the notes with suave lightness, but surely Prokofiev wanted something more substantial - at least Ozawa leads the orchestra in the right direction. If only the pianist would have followed the conductor and, yes, the composer. If you are looking for a

brilliant light-footed version of the Ravel G major Concerto, Li is a safe bet, though his sharp and thin piano tone suggests a low-calorie Ravel. There are really no bad versions of the Ravel Concerto in the catalogue and this version is a pleasure to listen to for the sake of the orchestra. Don't get me wrong - this is a fine recording and Li does his utmost to make Ravel sound like a French Mozart, but this should not be your only version of this thrilling, jazzy and neo-classical concerto.

Artur Pizarro is on a more advanced musical level than the young Li and his recording of the complete Ravel solo piano music will hopefully one day include the two works for piano and orchestra. In this second solo disc of his series, Pizarro plays Ravel in a light, delicate way, similar to Li's approach to the concertos. Pizarro does not fall into the trap of trying to make Ravel sound like Mozart, but he often lacks the depth and richness of sound that suits the heavier chords of the bigger works such as *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and not least the tender Pavane. The reverberant recording and inelegant piano sound could be the reason why Pizarro plays his Ravel in a lightweight style. His previous Beethoven and Chopin releases were excellent, though.

More French music comes from **Charles Owen**. His complete recording of the 13 Faure Nocturnes fits on just a single disc, which is a surprise when you hear the generally slow tempos he takes for almost all the early nocturnes. Liszt claimed not to understand Faure's music when he heard it and to the first-time listener, the repetitive and melodically constrained and harmonically often quirky constellations can be daunting. Owen is clearly fascinated by Faure's intricacies and his chords and phrasings do much to make the music come alive. If I again mention Owen's rather slow and limp tempos it is not to dismiss his musical judgement, however, I honestly doubt all the nocturnes are strong enough individual compositions to be lined up one after the other. As with many a French film, and not least with French philosophy, things can become a little tedious. To overcome insomnia I suggest the disc be played from beginning to end, but to sample Owen's subtle, fine and very musical piano playing, take just a single Faure nocturne before bedtime.

Kathryn Stott made the benchmark recording of Faure's piano music for Hyperion and she still reigns supreme. In fact, with her very first Faure recording on the now-defunct Conifer label, she outdid any French pianist. She has constantly released brilliant recordings for various labels, so here comes the latest - nearly two-dozen pieces inspired by dances. Stott often delights her audience with Ginastera and Lecuona as encores, and some of her live performances have found their way on to disc before, however this is her first entire dance album. She clicks her heels in the South American music like a native and is equally ravishing in her Spanish dances. I could do without the Sibelius *Valse triste* extract and do we really



In Oleg Marshev's new disc the revelation comes with the Scriabin pieces, which are quite simply ravishing

need just a single Chopin Mazurka to round off this hourly dance class? These are minor irritations that in no way diminish this truly enjoyable release from probably the most suave of all female British pianists.

I feel tempted to draw a parallel between Kathryn Stott and the late **Phyllis Sellick**. Both have given immense support to contemporary music while still finding their roots in French music of an earlier age. Sellick died in 2007 and left far too few substantial recordings. The Somm release of her early pre-War recordings of French music reveals playing as idiomatic as Stott's in Faure. Probably only the legendary French Marcelle Meyer could be a real contender to Sellick in the Couperin/ Rameau and Debussy/Ravel repertoire. The disc should be listened to for the 1941-2 Rymington recording of the Tippett First Sonata, a studio recording made in the presence of the composer, sadly here not receiving the best transfer, but still with full musical impact leaving modern versions far behind in the shadow. If you can live with the murky sound, this is a moving paean to the Lady of British Pianists.

Hamish Milne, in his capacity of professor at the Royal Academy of Music in London and as one of the most broadcast pianists, is deservedly revered in the UK. Surprisingly the half-hour long Busoni arrangement of Liszt's organ work *Ad nos, ad salutarem undam* is at least Milne's third recording of the work to date. I remember an early convincing L'Oiseau Lyre/Decca long-playing recording (coupled with the Reubke Sonata) and a later jaw-dropping live performance, so in this new Hyperion recording Milne competes with himself. I would not be without the excitement of the live version, but I would strongly recommend this disc for the other half-hour long work, the Busoni *Fantasia contrappuntistica*— it was not only inspired by Bach, but in its construction and restrained discipline in some ways even outdoes what Bach had harmonically envisaged. Milne is not a pianist for the small lollipops: the bigger, the meatier and the more colossal, the more he relaxes and the more we feel how approachable the music is. He has the intellect to capture the whole work from the very first bar over the myriad of intricacies in the many interwoven voices to the final chords. One does not feel musically patronised, although the less brave may be baffled by the sheer brainpower behind the composition. In Milne's hands the end result is pure music that will, after repeated listening, open a world of pianistic beauty.

Three new releases feature Bach suites: Simone Dinnerstein with the Fifth French Suite, Jean-Frederic Neuberger with the Second English Suite and Murray Perahia with the complete English suites. Dinnerstein and Neuberger are no intellectual matches for Milne, or for Perahia, for that matter. **Simone Dinnerstein** gave a live concert in the Berlin Philharmonie in November last year and, in addition to the Bach, she played Bach Chorale Variations by Philip Lasser (b. 1963) and the opus 111 Beethoven Sonata. Even on paper it sounds like too

heavy a programme, and, sadly, Dinnerstein has only her sparkling finger virtuosity to help her. The Bach suite survives her wilful projection of dynamic changes the best, but the Beethoven sonata just cannot endure with sharp accents in the first movement, a dragging slow movement and a toccata-like rush in the end. Not at the top of my desert island list.

I had much more fun listening to **Jean-Frederic Neuberger** wowing the audience at Suntory Hall in Tokyo. From a technical point of view his concert is faultless and if his Bach leaves you breathless, the Liszt Sonata will make your heart stop. How on earth he manages to get through such a devilish programme with so many heavyweight scores is truly amazing and the hall should immediately invite him back. Musically many questions are left unanswered. Chopin's Ballade No 2 is continually hectic and the intimate night-at-the-lake opus 15 no 1 Nocturne becomes a stormy tornado at the ocean. Even the Liszt Sonata, with all its brilliance and overpowering force, lacks some intellectual depth. I would still recommend this release - this is a highly gifted youngster.

Murray Perahia has no technical limitations, but he is not interested in competing with the youngsters in the steeplechase. He is more content to show his musical intellect. Compare his Bach suite to Neuberger's and there's no doubt who holds the intellectual trump cards. Perahia triumphs with maybe too much pedantic underlining of each voice, extended dynamic patterns and too leisurely tempos. What made me keep listening was his round and clear piano tone, his slightly old-fashioned but disarmingly charming romantic phrasing and his total lack of pretentiousness. I can strongly recommend this Bach set to those wanting all the English Suites performed with nobility and unflinching taste. However, to my taste, too much of a good thing can be, well, too much!

The last two releases have plenty of everything. Each pianist is, in their own way, a Russian giant, but neither as well-known as many of the aforementioned pianists. **Viktoria Postnikova** recorded the complete solo piano music by Tchaikovsky, and those who only know the piano collection *The Seasons* will be surprised to find so much more piano music by the composer. Let me quickly say that not all of it is worth listening to more than a few times, yet there are gems like the sonatas and some finely chiselled early piano miniatures. Postnikova is at home in this music and her advocacy makes the music sound better than it is. Originally released and recorded some 15 years ago, the seven discs are now packed in a competitively-priced box set and are not to be missed.

Oleg Marshev has recorded all of Tchaikovsky's works for piano and orchestra, and is one of the few pianists who has in his discography more works for piano and orchestra than solo recitals. Critics around the world praise his releases, however, this new recording, made straight after a successful New Zealand concert tour, may be his best. Never has the Liszt *Funerailles* sounded so devastatingly tragic, the Spanish Rhapsody so super virtuosic and the Chopin so stylish and brilliant. The real revelation comes with the last Scriabin pieces which are quite simply ravishing in their beauty and where one really can say that the piano sings. Round up many of the younger pianists mentioned earlier in this review, and they will sound grey by comparison. If ever you wake up one night and question what piano playing is all about, the answer lies right here.