

Tuesday, December 07, 2010

A Remarkable Chopin Set

This review originally appeared on Musicweb-International.com on Wednesday, December 8, 2010.

CHOPIN: His Contemporaries and His Instruments

BRILLIANT CLASSICS 94048 [6 CDs: 66:30 + 58:21 + 49:31 + 66:58 + 72:09 + 77:29]

CHOPIN: His Contemporaries and His Instruments

CD 1 John FIELD (1782-1837) Nocturnes, Complete [66:30]

CD 2 Frederic CHOPIN (1810-1849) Nocturnes, Complete, Volume I [58:21]

CD 3 Frederic CHOPIN (1810-1849) Nocturnes, Complete, Volume II [49:31]

CD 4 Works by ALKAN, KALKBRENNER, Clara SCHUMANN, LEFÉBURE-WÉLY, WEBER, GLINKA, SZYMANOWSKA, DOBRZYNSKI, CHOPIN

CD 5 CHOPIN Early Works

CD 6 CHOPIN, von WEBER, ALKAN, LISZT

The Nocturne as a Musical Art Form

Mention the term Nocturne to a music-lover and the name of Frederic Chopin should come almost immediately to mind. It was the Irishman John Field, however, who actually pioneered the form, and Chopin, having taught and performed Field's music, refined it and perhaps set the gold standard for the genre. The Nocturne came about as a result of improvements on the piano as an instrument. With the advent of the sustaining pedal, left hand harmonies of a wider scope became possible since the figures no longer needed to fit under the hand to be played - like the Alberti bass prominent in the music of Mozart and Haydn, for example. Field was highly influenced by the cantilena arias of Rossini and thus imitated them at the piano. The melodies are characteristically flowing with occasional outbursts of coloratura fanciness. The accompaniments are always broken and cover a range of two to three octaves. Cast as a rule in ABA form, the middle sections are often turbulent, in surprising contrast to the languid and somewhat melancholy outer sections. These works, although often simple-sounding to the untrained ear, can require great technical prowess on the part of the pianist, due both to the wide leaps in the left hand and the demanding middle sections. Chopin's nocturnes in particular present an added difficulty, in that he had a propensity very subtly to alter his melodies, repeating many notes but changing just a few so that memorizing the music can be a great challenge. There is also the frequent use of right hand flourishes of anywhere from eleven to fifty notes all squeezed on top of a left hand figure of six or nine notes, making hand coordination a bit of a nightmare.

The focus of this set from Brilliant Classics is the Nocturne, mainly as seen through the eyes of Frederic Chopin. The guise is to compare and contrast Chopin with his peers. Four of the six discs are exclusively dedicated to this form, including the complete outings by Field and Chopin in the genre. We then get one disc dedicated to Chopin's very early music, and one to smaller works (mostly nocturnes) by his contemporaries. They are all performed on historic instruments that would have been familiar to Chopin, and for which he would have composed his music.

A Note about 19th Century Pianos

Pianos in the nineteenth century were not nearly as standardized as today's modern concert grands, and each builder had a distinct and individual style. Of the many competitors, two cities became the leaders in the building of pianos, Vienna and London. Viennese instruments were lighter in touch and enabled rapid passage-work to be executed with minimal strength of hand. English pianos on the other hand were firmer to the touch. The keys sank a bit deeper when depressed and required more strength. As a result, English instruments were often favored for works with orchestra. The end result of these contrasts was the formation of two very different techniques, and the switch from the two styles of instruments was often problematic for performers.

The Music and Performances

Although he invented the genre, and his works were immensely popular during his lifetime, John Field's nocturnes, elegantly performed here by Bart van Oort have a certain sameness about them that gets a bit tiring to the ear if you sit through an entire program of them. Having said that, it is also obvious that Field was a fine craftsman, and his pioneering techniques and his carefully studied use of rubato are signs of his complete mastery of his instrument. It just seems that he never goes as harmonically far afield as Chopin did, making for a certain sweetness that doesn't wear well over time. Mr. van Oort coaxes a lovely tone from an 1823 Broadwood piano. There is a richness here that I didn't quite expect to hear, particularly in the upper register. Past experience has led me to dread a tinkly and shallow sound from nineteenth century instruments. Van Oort is clearly a master of these early pianos, not just a modern player moonlighting in the museum for extra bucks.

Frederic Chopin preferred the pianos of the French firm Pleyel for their veiled tone and nuance. Bart van Oort comments in his excellent notes that it took him some time to get accustomed to playing these two lovely instruments dating from 1842 and 1837. He states that it is very difficult to make them sound beautiful. We would never know that from his elegant and graceful performances of Chopin's Nocturnes. If one were to

complain at all it would be that there is the occasional note that simply thunks a bit without having a lot of resonance. Van Oort however coaxes a rich and warm tone out of these instruments, and his command of Chopin's style can easily be compared to that of Rubinstein. He brings out melodies most beautifully, is not afraid to let go and show off a bit in the stormier sections, and he is a master of rubato. His approach is subtle, and it is obvious that he simply knows how to play the music.

Mr. van Oort concludes his contribution to this set with a strikingly beautiful recital of nocturnes by some lesser-but-still-very-fine composers. Of particular beauty are the works by Charles Alkan, a child prodigy who later went on to compose some monumental works for piano, and whose music has been championed by the pianist Raymond Lewenthal. The brief but passionate nocturnes performed here are of a unique harmonic richness and thankfully lack the kind of meandering quasi-virtuosity so prevalent in later 19th century salon music. Works by Glinka, Clara Schumann, Kalkbrenner are noteworthy for their understated grace. Mr. van Oort plays them with particular panache. Maria Szymanowska's single contribution to the recital is a particular delight, reminding me very much of Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words. The five examples by Dobrzynski were a pleasant surprise indeed. Dark in hue, rich in melodic inventiveness, one wonders why such pieces languish in obscurity when so many bad war-horses refuse to die! Of all the instruments used by Mr. van Oort, this 1837 Erard has the most rich and beautiful tone.

Most accounts of Chopin's own playing indicate that he had a very light and delicate touch - that his playing was graceful and never thundery and that his choice of pianos would often change dependent on his physical strength at the time. When he was well, he preferred a Pleyel, but when weaker, he would return to the less heavily weighted keys of an Erard. Constantino Mastroprimiano performs these boyhood works of Chopin on a Graf piano, which is most closely related to the action and sound of the pianos Chopin would have played as a young man. As the program booklet mentions, a modern virtuoso is faced with a huge challenge when performing on a period instrument. The first of which is to find a playable piano, as of all the musical instruments around, pianos age the most poorly. Then the player is forced to do a great deal of research into treatises of the period to rediscover long-forgotten techniques of playing, techniques that would never work on the modern Steinway. Mr. Mastroprimiano's work has obviously paid off.

These youthful works display Chopin's early delving into the folk music and dances of his native Poland. And although the pieces presented here are of nowhere near the harmonic and technical complexity of his later ventures, they are indeed harbingers of the greatness to come. Much simpler in melody and far less well developed in structure than his mature pieces, Chopin nonetheless displays his early mastery of the keyboard. I was

particularly delighted with the Polonaise in b-flat minor. It is pretty safe to say that very few modern sixteen year olds could write with such confidence and mastery. There is also ample evidence of Chopin's ability to improvise and ornament, as we often get little versions of the kinds of pianistic coloratura that would eventually be hallmarks of the mature nocturnes.

Although I am not as much in love with the sound of the Graf piano from 1826 used here, its lighter tone and lack of bass thunder although characteristic of the Viennese style of piano building, is still missed. Nonetheless, Constantino Mastroprimiano proves himself to be master of both the instrument and the music, and these performances are packed with youthful exuberance and panache.

Finally, we are left with a recital of mature works by Chopin and some of his more significant colleagues. Cor de Groot's sampling of the Mazurkas is beautifully played and we now see where Chopin was headed when he penned his teenage works in the genre. These are works of deep feeling and often express a kind of longing homesickness. The 1847 Pleyel piano used here has a gorgeous, sweet and resonant tone. It is no wonder that Chopin liked to play these instruments.

Weber is considered by many to be the founder of the Romantic Movement, the predecessor that allowed the likes of Wagner to come into being. Highly nationalistic, Weber first became known as a piano virtuoso and as a composer of songs. He would later go on to be a major opera composer with a dramatic flair that would inspire the likes of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss. His piano sonatas were immensely popular in their day, in spite of their tendency to be a bit sprawling and over-long. This example, coming in at nearly half an hour is longer than many of Mozart's symphonies, and does not always keep the listener's attention. The first movement in particular rather loses it at mid-point before finding its way home at the end. Jan Vermeulen is a pianist of formidable force, and he does everything in his power to keep the music interesting. There is much to enjoy here, just be fresh when you listen.

Charles Valentin Alkan had a brief but brilliant career as a pianist, and for someone as popular as he was in his day, it is easy to wonder why he is so neglected today. It is perhaps due to the overly demanding complexity of his works, the hugeness of form that borders on self-indulgence and the harmonic language that can seem bizarre even into the 21st century that keeps him from being played as much as perhaps he should. The two brief but elegant works performed here by Sanley Hoogland should give the listener nothing to fear. I found the music to be enjoyable, but rather wanted a bit more

expression. Tempi tend to be set in stone and there is certainly room for a bit more rubato. I found these performances to be disturbingly static.

We conclude with the grandfather of all virtuosos, Franz Liszt. Music's first real superstar, Liszt was highly inspired by Nicolo Paganini, whose playing caused Liszt to disappear for weeks, sequestering himself alone with his piano until he developed the perfect technique, mastering every possible challenge and creating a number of new ones along the way. He would later go on to have a major career as a conductor, composer and, astronomically paid soloist. His later life was marked by generosity and pedagogy, and he inspired more than a generation of other composers, championing the works of Berlioz and Schumann and Chopin amongst other luminaries.

Of all the composers featured in this set, it is perhaps hardest to hear Liszt's music on an antique instrument. These ears are just too accustomed to the likes of Van Cliburn, Lazar Bermann, Artur Schnabel or Claudio Arrau hailing forth on the modern concert grand. Fred Oldenburg plays convincingly on this 1842 Erard, and the glittery filigree of the Ricordanza and Harmonies du Soir shines beautifully on this instrument.

Brilliant Classics is a label to be reckoned with for their inexpensive price point, and their huge span of repertoire. Although most of their catalogue is licensed from other labels, they give Naxos a run for their money, particularly in the presentation. Program notes are thorough and interesting, and the packaging is quite attractive, compared to Naxos house-brand approach to marketing.

For lovers of romantic piano music, this is a most fascinating look at the development of the romantic piano. The ample doses of Chopin are handsomely offset by the selections from his contemporaries, and overall there is little to fault with any of the performances. Not every historical piano featured here will suit every ear, but that's OK. This set provides a remarkable look back into the history of the piano. This is a journey that most music lovers will enjoy taking, even if it takes a few days to get from one end to the other.

<http://thetenordiaries.blogspot.com/2010/12/remarkable-chopin-set.html>