

CD REVIEW

CAROLYN KOTOK: Piano Recital. The Classical Recording Company CRC710-2 (68.21)



RACHMANINOV	Piano Sonata no 2 in B flat minor, Op 36 (1931 version)
SZYMANOWSKI	Nine Preludes Op 1
DEBUSSY	Images book II Cloches a travers les feuilles Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut Poissons d'or
CHOPIN	Impromptu no. 1 in A flat, Op29 Impromptu no 3 in G flat, Op 51 Waltz in A Flat, Op 42 Mazurka in C sharp, Op 63 no. 3

Here is a very fine pianist, born in Germany, and who studied at the Purcell School and the Guildhall School of Music in London with Paul Berkowitz and Joan Havill. Then she studied with Konstanze Eickhorst at the Hanover Hochschule and, then, privately with Benjamin Kaplan in London, a very fine pianist and possibly Britain's finest piano teacher. See my essays on pianists.

She was first noticed in 1986 playing in a gala concert in Birmingham Town Hall with a splendid conductor and very amiable man, Sir Charles Groves. She has won at least five prodigious prizes. Her Mendelssohn Concerto with Arthur Davidson in Fairfield Halls in Croydon is still talked about. She is also a teacher of the piano in North London and it may be that these activities has not bought her fully into the public eye which she deserves. She has performed throughout Europe, South Africa and the USA.

The choice of programme is disappointing, but that does not take away from her sterling performances. Most of the music is often dreamy, delicate and intimate and one would have wished for a more contrasted programme.

The Rachmaninov is the best music on this CD. One would have preferred the earlier version without the cuts that the composer made. Surely the opening bar is 5/4 not 4/4. I realise that when composers wrote mini cadenzas and flourishes, a time signature was not important and the notes were written in smaller print, but my copy of the sonata has the opening bars in the same size print as all the other notes and the bar has ten quavers.

I admire the balance between her hands. Her left hand is not just a filling. She uncovers the rich chromaticism and her fingerwork is reliable. I would have preferred a greater contrast in tone from pp to ff but that may be an engineering problem. The clarity of the cascades is wonderfully clear. When we pass from 4/4 into 12/8 she captures the rhythm and it is alive. There is a plaintive melody but the music begins to wander and meander ; it becomes dreamy and, perhaps, somewhat feeble.

There is no question that the music is very difficult to play. The double octaves with four notes in each hand would present problems to inadequate pianists but not to Kotok, and I did like the cascade of tolling bells.

The second movement begins in E minor, then through E major to C major with which it ends. The music is tentative to start with and I still think it is full of a dreaminess which makes the music somewhat weak. But there is sensitivity in her playing and a great deal of colour and when the music builds up there is beautiful judgment by this pianist in what is probably some of the best music in the work. The weak has become strong.

The finale, in two flats, follows without a break and this seems to be more mature Rachmaninov. The clever

chromaticism is still there and the march like figure is well caught. However, there follows a passage that sounds like a cheap waltz which takes away the seriousness of this sonata. Astute listeners will detect glimpses of the B flat and D minor preludes of Op 23. The last bars show the pianist's virtuosity.

Would it be possibly true to say that the preludes are more interesting and better written than this sonata? There is certainly more meat in them and more interesting thematic material!

The playing is quite superb but I do not think that this is Rachmaninov at his best. I think it was the great John Lill who when asked about the two sonatas made one brief comment, "The first sonata is a very good piece". That does not mean that he dismissed this second sonata.

The rest of the music on this disc is well played but not the most endearing pieces. The Szymanowski preludes have only one quick one in the series of nine and, therefore, contrast is lacking. Each of the pieces are pleasant enough. In the first, the melody is not always clear because of how it is written, but the performance is reliable. The second in F have lovely nuances and is played with great feeling highlighting its gorgeous harmonies. The next two are both with five flats in the key signature and they are rather aimless wanderings, music that goes nowhere, rather like the miniature works of Scriabin.

Szymanowski, in my opinion, was at his best in his orchestral works and his Violin Concerto no. 1 is a most sumptuous and glorious work, rich in romanticism and as sensitive as the great Berg Concerto. In his piano music, Szymanowski does not seem to be so fluent or comfortable. The great Arthur Rubinstein complained that in one of the sonatas the music goes from *pppp* to *ffff* in one bar and in less than a quarter of a second without any rests or fermatas. Impossible and ridiculous!

The Debussy pieces are impressionistic music which David Drew described as 'usually musical nullity.' And he was right. Music that seeks to merely evoke an atmosphere only really works in the cinema and television in order to set a scene whether it is joy, tension, mystery or danger. Somebody once, 'Music must have coat hangers, some structure on which to hang something attractive and worthwhile'.

The Chopin pieces are small, salon pieces and do not have much to offer.

The playing is good; the music and choice of programme lacks contrast.

It may surprise you to learn that Ms Kotok has a black belt in martial arts which has included kick boxing and chopping a block. She regards this as a diversion from her exacting music career. She is also interested in the psychology of performance and nutrition.

I look forward to hearing her play again.

David Wright 2009

