

CD REVIEW 78

RACHMANINOV

Piano Concerto no 2 in C minor, Op 18

Sonata no 2 in B flat minor Op 36

Etude Tableaux Op 33

Prelude in B flat minor Op 33 no 3

Prelude in G sharp minor, Op 32 no 12

Helene Grimaud

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Jesus Lopez-Cobos.

Dal Segno DSPRCD063

77.52



The Rachmaninov Second Concerto has been done to death and imitated in lush and sentimental Hollywood movies. And in a famous British film, Brief Encounter in which the pianist was Eileen Joyce and her performance was awful and, perhaps, the tempi had to accommodate the action on the film. What action, I hear you say?

I have heard some dreadful performances of this work and by pianists who are said to be great and this deterred me... until I heard Katin and Colin Davis perform it.

There is a problem with this concerto. The opening eight bars has chords of tenths in the left hand and they are not appoggiated but so many pianists do make them appoggiated. It may be because they have small hands and cannot make the stretch and so they do not play what Rachmaninov wrote and, in one performance, neither did the composer. To appoggiate these chords destroys the intention of those opening bars and robs the effectiveness of the ensuing climax.

Grimaud appoggiates these chords but then gives a truly magnificent performance of the rest of this melodious concerto. The opening Moderato is played with the required passion and there is a good balance between the soloist and the orchestra. There is impeccable clarity of finger-work and a minimum of rubato, thank goodness. The articulation is excellent and the rhythmic variety is well caught. All that she does makes complete sense and, although the movement is marked Moderato, it does not sound moderato but as a flowing respectable allegro. The alla marcia section is thrilling.



Many composers have written wonderful slow movements in their piano concertos... Shostakovich F minor, Samuel Barber, Ravel G Major and here in this glowing Rachmaninov concerto. The flute solo, as in the Ravel is ravishing, as is the clarinet that takes up the theme. There is some gorgeous orchestral detail and when the piano has the theme without embellishments it is poignantly beautiful. The cantabile is exquisite. Often it sounds like rich chamber music. The climax is passionate and the allegro section is quite stunning. There is a sadness at times but it is never mawkish and the playing is very telling and beautiful.

The finale is marked allegro scherzando but it is full of episodes. It is mainly a celebration and Grimaud's chords include the notes that make some of them dissonant. I know pianists who do not. The performance is sensual but not sentimental. Grimaud's double octaves are staggering and she does not leave out the 'offending' notes. How well she copes with the 'angry' section before the fugato section. The orchestra which, like the pianist has excelled in the lyric passages, now becomes wonderfully powerful. There is one transitional passage where the piano seems to meander somewhat aimlessly. The crisp pianism in the allabreve section is quite remarkable. The finale grandioso is compelling and devoid of Elgarian pomposity, I am so pleased to say.

A very fine performance of a deservedly popular work.

The Piano Sonata no 2 in B flat minor, in its original version was fiendishly difficult. The revised version has some 'cuts' in it because the composer felt it was too long for its material. The 1931 version of this CD is still very difficult technically and the sleeve notes suggests it is in three movements whereas it is in one movement but in three sections played without a break.

Again, the opening has a problem. It is marked as 4 in a bar which would make 8 equal quavers.

But this bar has 10 equal quavers. Does that not make it 5/4? The work tends to stop and start, although it has some fascinating and memorable passages and themes.

Incidentally, Rachmaninov was a master of effortless modulations.

The first movement has a haunting theme in 12/8. The second section, which is slow, has a telling theme and triumphant climaxes. The last section is a temperamental piece, often angry, but contains the best music of this sonata. Grimaud is equal to the slow music and to the vigorous explosive passages. She gives an unbeatable performance of an uneven but virtuosic work.

The Etudes Tableaux Op 33 follow. The title suggests visual impressions of paintings which stimulated the composer. The eight pieces vary in quality as one might expect, but the performances have no such variation.

Two Preludes conclude this impressive recital.

These recordings date from 1985 and 1992 but are fresh and vibrant.

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