

Ramey Piano Music, Volume 3. New
 Bagatelle on 'Dies irae'. Blue Phantom.
 Burlesque-Paraphrase on a Theme of
 Stephen Foster. Djebel Bani (A Saharan
 Meditation). Two Short Pieces. Slavic
 Rhapsody (The Novgorod Kremlin at
 Night). Piano Sonata No. 6 (Sonata-
 Fantasia). Suite. Toccata Giocosa.
Stephen Gosling (piano).

Toccata Classics TOCC0114 (full price, 1 hour
 18 minutes). Website www.toccataclassics.com
 Producer/Engineer Joseph Patrych. Dates May 7th, 8th
 and 10th, 2010.



Stephen Gosling

Toccata Classics

This is the third instalment of Philip Ramey's extensive oeuvre for piano (I reviewed the first in July/August 2006, though the second passed me by) and brings us right up to 2010. Indeed, it is the more recent music here that I find most engaging, expertly written though the very Prokofievian *Suite*, written in the 1960s, is. There's a vein of the exotic postcard in such works as *Slavic Rhapsody (The Novgorod Kremlin at Night)* (2009-10) and *Djebel Bani (A Saharan Meditation)* (2009) which is very appealing. For postcards they are rather large, in fact: the former clocks in at just over 13 minutes, the latter at just over seven. They are carefully wrought, intricately developed evocations of place, essentially in the grand romantic tradition. *Slavic Rhapsody*, while it still has more than a tinge of Prokofiev, also has something of Rachmaninov about it, though the music's harmonic vocabulary and structure are quite different from anything either Russian composer would have thought of.

Djebel Bani evokes a sinister Moroccan mountain and the composer chose the Locrian mode, famous for its tritonal fifth, F natural-B natural, to convey this. Convey it he does: it's a weird, floating work, the sinister aspect of the mountain confirmed by a quotation from the *Dies irae*. That chant appears again in *Bagatelle on 'Dies irae'* (2010), the ironic title once again suggesting the spirit of Prokofiev. This is a case of a world in a grain of sand: in its fewer than three minutes, the work manages to conjure up the apocalyptic in the most remarkable way.

The most substantial work on this recording is the Sonata No. 6, written in memory of the composer's mother in 2008. I can do no better than quote commentator Benjamin Folkman's description of the work as 'genuinely narrative, modernist music: dramatic, mercurial, even granitic, in its composer's most titanic virtuoso style'. Stephen Gosling is that titanic virtuoso, both here and in all the other works represented on the disc. The recorded sound is an admirable combination of resonance and clarity.

Ivan Moody

Schubert

New

16 Ländler und zwei Ecossaïsen, D734.
Piano Sonata No. 17 in D, D850. Drei Klavierstücke, D946.

Béla Hartmann (piano).
Meridian CDE84594 (full price, 1 hour 19 minutes).
 Website www.meridian-records.co.uk Producer
 Susanne Stanzleit. Engineer Richard Hughes. Date
 April 19th-21st, 2010.

Comparisons:

Piano Sonata No. 17:

Curzon (Decca) 443 570-2 (1964)

Schnabel (EMI Références) 7 64259-2 (1939, two discs)

Schubert's grand and powerful Piano Sonata No. 17 in D major, Op. 53/D850 has never lodged in the public imagination to quite the same degree as his last three piano sonatas, Op. posth./D958, 959 and 960. Many people's first acquaintance with the D major Sonata was undoubtedly Artur Schnabel's HMV/EMI recording (listed as a comparative version above). Schnabel himself must have had a very high opinion of the work because, though he recorded Schubert's last two sonatas, he never recorded the turbulent No. 19 in C minor, D958, which left his interpretations on disc of Schubert's final triptych incomplete.

I usually mention comparative versions very near the end of a review, but in the present recording of the D major Sonata by the Czech/German pianist Béla Hartmann it is relevant to mention two of them from the outset. One is the Schnabel recording referred to above, but the other (which I really should have mentioned in the previous review as an equally important vintage version) is that of Clifford Curzon. The relevance of both versions here is that they cast a helpful light on Hartmann's interpretation.

He unquestionably has the technique required for the three fast movements. He also has the sensitivity for their more lyrical moments, as well as throughout the *Con moto* slow second movement. The latter qualities particularly relate to the Curzon recording, though Curzon's elegance and patrician temperament always coexisted with his pianistic and interpretative powers. In other respects, however, Hartmann's approach to this sonata is much more like that of Schnabel, in that he occasionally has lapses of control or rushes his fences, as well as sometimes making a slight accelerando in

order to intensify a crescendo, which can be effective in some musical contexts, but not always in others.

More positively, Hartmann is not afraid to expand the tempo of certain passages for expressive effect – for instance, Schubert's sudden outburst of thirds and sixths in dotted rhythms combined with triplets, which interrupts the lyrical second subject group of the first-movement exposition and recapitulation.

I have several reservations: his tone can harden at louder dynamics, even when one has reduced the volume; it sometimes sounds as if he is over-peddalling, though that is actually not the case because the effect is being created by the recorded sound. More generally, it feels as if his psychological proximity to the music is too consistently close, which minimizes the amount of necessary light and shade.

The other two works on the disc are well chosen from the point of view of balance and contrast. The substantial, late *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. posth./D946 are published with the subtitle 'Impromptus aus dem Nachlass', and they are every bit as wonderful as Schubert's more famous sets of *Impromptus*, Op. 90/D899 and Op. 142/D935. In the first *Klavierstück* (a turbulent *Allegro assai* in the rare and sombre key of E flat minor), Hartmann omits Schubert's second Trio section. The first Trio, in B major (Schubert's enharmonic re-spelling of C flat major), has a sustained, richly expressive character, which he projects effectively. The second Trio, in A flat major, has a more flowing quality in its 6/8 metre. Schubert excised this Trio from his autograph manuscript, but Brahms, who edited the entire work for its first publication in 1868, included it. Its omission compresses Schubert's five-part form twofold (the second Trio plus the resultant missing da capo of its main section), which is a pity. When the second Trio is included, it prefigures the five-part form of the lyrical second *Klavierstück*, whose two contrasting Trios are respectively turbulent and iridescent.

With regard to the Curzon comparative version of the D major Sonata listed above, this is available on a Decca CD in the label's 'The Classic Sound' series, but its front cover shows 'London' rather than Decca. The reason for this, of course, is that from the LP era onward English Decca recordings were released in North America on London Records, in order to distinguish them from discs by American Decca. Stephen Pruslin

Reviewed next month
Hélène Grimaud's live recordings of
Mozart's Piano Concertos
Nos. 19 and 23 on DG