



Rezension

ALEXANDER Scriabin Das Solo-Klavierwerk The Solo Piano Works Complete Recording

8 CD+Bonus-DVD: 49 586 WG: 48

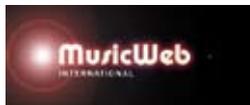


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The Solo Piano Works
Complete Recording

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rec. Deutschlandradio Kultur,
Studio 10, Berlin, 2004-2007



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The rather unassuming slimline box in which this set is presented hides a vast world of musical invention and discovery, both in the incredible variety of Alexander Scriabin's work, and the remarkably high quality interpretations of Maria Lettberg.

If, like me, you'd never heard of Maria Lettberg as a recording artist, then this might be partly because she seems to be developing a career several notches below the usual pianistic radar, eschewing international competitions and exploring the less conventional avenues of the piano repertoire alongside the work of Brahms, Schumann, Liszt and Schnittke. She is however a product of the widest of musical backgrounds, having not only graduated from the St. Petersburg Conservatory, but also having studied with renowned pianists from the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm and the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki.

I would like to be able to say that the bonus DVD, „Mysterium“, provides the key to some of Scriabin's music for piano and the recordings in this set, but the filmed recordings are a bit of a let-down. We are given excerpts from five of the sonatas and Vers la flame, the bulk of which consisting of some footage of Maria Lettberg looking dreamy behind a white Bösendorfer, surrounded by some anthroposophical colour effects supposed to represent the synaesthetic visions Scriabin associated with certain keys. This is occasionally accompanied by some heavy-handed symbolism, such as hugely magnified spermatozoa to give the „cycle of life“ a kick start. More of interest is an interview in which Maria Lettberg explains her background with and approach to Scriabin, again looking rather different to the Gillian Anderson crispness of the cover photo. This is conducted in German, but has English and French subtitles. She has clearly studied Scriabin's life and work deeply, and refers to the composers own recordings as important references. Instinctively sceptical about performers who record the complete works of certain composers, she points out the unique case to be made for Scriabin. There is an entire musical universe to be found in Scriabin's work, from the gracefully Chopinesque through to the uncompromisingly avant-garde, some of which still sounds modern today.

The recordings proper are very well done indeed, the piano sound rich and vibrant, and the studio acoustic proving pretty much ideal - not so dry as to be tiring, not so reverberant that detail is obscured in the thicker textures. The interpretations, while described as „unique and original“, are actually in no way shockingly unconventional. Lettberg describes feeling entirely comfortable with Scriabin's pianistic and musical language, finding it natural and „her own“, when she finally came to start working with his music. One of my favourite Scriabin performers of recent times has been Artur Pizarro, whose recordings appeared on Collins Classics. Comparing the two pianists with the 24 Preludes Opus 11 I can't honestly say which I would now prefer. Both have a highly natural sense of rubato and phrasing, and while there are some differences of emphasis and taste in voicing certain passages I don't find Lettberg lacking any of the poetry which draws me towards Pizarro. There does seem to be a more overt narrative going on in Pizarro's playing; the stories seeming to gather and build into substantial novel. Lettberg's playing allows the music to speak for itself a little more, the sense of abstraction possibly indicating a more intellectual approach. There is a searching among the notes more for questions than for answers - a sense of the moment, rather than that of a definitive statement.

Scriabin's ten Sonatas are a key element in any set of his works for piano, and my principal reference is that of Håken Austbø, whose 1990 recordings are now available on a Brilliant Classics set which also has the entire Piano Sonatas of Prokofiev and Shostakovich.

The first thing from this box you are likely to hear is the opening of the Sonata No.1 Op.6, and Lettberg is impressively dramatic, the plunging chords filled with sonority. I love the sustained quality of the second movement, and you have a sense of Lettberg's sensitive touch in the long melodic lines. Her feel for the architecture of the music is also beyond reproach, and if you think you can get away with just dipping into the odd fragment here and there think again, you'll be hanging on to the bitter end as the emotional message and drama of the music unfolds. Austbø is a tad more tumultuous in the opening of this sonata, and the development is more fragmentary, the passing notes given less emphasis. I won't say this is an invalid or lesser interpretation, but the more overt piling on of textures in the heavier passages is harder to take in my opinion. I get less of a sense of direction in Austbø's slower movements as well, and while I admire his articulate Presto I do prefer Lettberg's weightier left hand in the Funèbre finale. The compact Sonata No.4 Op.30 has always been a fascination of mine - an elusive combination of nostalgic longing, quicksilver magic and almost salon banality. Lettberg has a fine hold on the impressionistic feel of the first movement, and both she and Austbø are in touch with Scriabin's sense of „flying freely“ with a great deal of air and space. I prefer Lettberg in the second movement however, relieved to find that, despite her seemingly cerebral approach at times, she is capable of finding the fun in the music and communicating it with solid robustness.

The massive technical demands of these sonatas is well known, and the demands we as listeners place on the performer are a high pressure element of any recording. Even given the allowance and luxury of the cosmetics of a studio situation, Lettberg is clearly well up to the task in these works: one never gets the sense that her technique is strained in any way, and so it is the sense of being able to move beyond the notes into the kinds of spiritual planes sought by Scriabin that we have to look for to make these more than merely satisfactory recordings. Listening to the later sonatas, such as Sonata No.9 Opus 68 which has the forbidding subtitle Black Mass, one can sense the „desecrated sacred relic“ in the work's disjointed climaxes and frenetic figurations, as well as those grimly suspenseful dark shadows lurking in the underlying pianissimo sections which open and close the piece. This is the kind of hothouse romantic intensity which drives many people away from Scriabin, and while it will never be an easy ride, Maria Lettberg's impassioned but clear-headed interpretation brings as much of the composers incredible imagination to life as we can safely handle without our loudspeakers exploding in a thick cloud of purple smoke. The same is pretty much true of the other late Sonatas, the White Mass included.

You may find yourself wondering if it's actually worth having 8 CDs worth of „the rest of Scriabin“, but the remarkable thing is, there is really no such thing as a filler in this box. Even taking some of the lighter works such as the Impromptus, there are jewels and delights to be discovered all over the place. The shorter pieces, the Poèmes and Morceaux for instance, are all worlds in miniature, and the whole, as has already been indicated, creates a unique musical universe.

There are one or two pieces for which I have a special affection, if only because I associate them with some concert experiences of my own. My accompanist and mate Johan „the piano“ Cnossen is a passionate advocate for the work of Scriabin. While Scriabin has not entirely been ignored by record companies (e.g. Yevgeny Sudbin on BIS SACD1568) of late, my colleague regularly bemoans the reluctance of audiences to accept him as a staple of concert programming, at least over here in The Netherlands. He usually illustrates what people don't want to hear with the opening bars of Vers la flame Op.72, and if it's a nice piano and a receptive crowd he'll happily play the rest as well. I organise concerts for the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague, and the reputable Johan and I recently had fun trying out numerous pianos for a client looking for a grand piano for one of our outside venues. One thing I can confirm is that the instrument on these recordings, whatever it is, has been well looked after and nicely intonated - I've heard enough Scriabin „live“ demonstrated on a variety of instruments to know what to listen out for: there's warmth, colour and singing tone aplenty on these recordings. Without being able to guide you to a respectable recorded alternative, I can assure you that Maria Lettberg's massive five and a half minute crescendo does ample justice to Scriabin's obsessive Op.72 creation. The other two pieces which we took all the way to the recording studio were the Preludes Op.11 No.9 and 10, and as these will now forever be engrained onto my musical hard-drive I was also delighted to find that Lettberg's idea about how these pieces should go was not dissimilar to the ones my colleague put in the can. Maria Lettberg is more daring in 10, the climax rising like a cry of desperate and distorted joy rather than the elegant arch with which I was more familiar. This only serves to show how good this music is - like all great pieces, able to take an almost infinite variety of subtle transformations without losing its identity.

Do I have any criticisms of this set? Yes, but they are mostly ones of presentation. The slimline box is a usefully compact package, but the CDs are put in those quasi-disposable paper envelopes which are sealed with something nasty and rubbery, as if they are supposed to have gone through the post. I hate those - they make your nice new virginal box look like a car boot sale by the time you've played all the discs. The booklet is also a bit of a mess. Full of interesting and useful quotes from Scriabin himself, and learned texts from Lettberg who did her thesis on the piano music of Scriabin, the layout is messy and confusing, with paragraphs, sentences and footnotes floating around like mystic inventions in their own right. The musical benefits outweigh all of these picky caveats, but with such a major project one might have expected just a little more effort in these directions.

Complete sets of Scriabin's piano music are not thick on the ground. Michael Ponti squeezes quite a lot onto a 5 CD set on the Vox label, but that set doesn't seem to have the absolute „complete“ credentials of this 8 disc Capriccio box. There is also a set by Gordon Fergus-Thompson on ASV from which you can pick-and-mix, as they are still available on single discs. There are of course plenty of distinguished versions of the complete Sonatas, Håken Austbø's Brilliant Classics box bargain very much among them, but if you are already a Scriabin fan and reluctant to replicate certain pieces I would still urge you to have a serious think about splashing out on Maria Lettberg's excellent set. There are qualities in her playing which will have you re-discovering old favourites, and there are so many other little extras which cast the more famous pieces in broader or different lights, that you need at the very least to put it on your wish list.

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