

Big Boxes: Maria Lettberg's Reference Scriabin Cycle

Artistic Quality **10/10** *Sound Quality*

Review by: Jed Distler
10-Apr-2013

So far as I know, only two pianists have recorded comprehensive Scriabin solo-piano cycles. One is Michael Ponti; the other is Maria Lettberg, a Riga-born Swedish national residing in Berlin, who lived with this repertoire for years, and even wrote a doctoral thesis on Scriabin. She recorded all of Scriabin's solo piano works with opus numbers between 2004 and 2007 for a co-production between the Capriccio label and Deutschlandradio Kultur.

Unlike Ponti, with his horribly-engineered and ill-tuned instrument, Lettberg enjoys the advantage of a beautifully regulated concert grand and resplendent, lifelike engineering. She revels in the composer's dynamic extremes and inner-voice labyrinths both real and implied. Her big, juicy sonority and refined articulation consistently address the sensual element that perpetually lurks underneath the surface of nearly every composition, from the early, Chopin-influenced Preludes, Etudes, Mazurkas, Waltzes, and sundry short pieces to the harmonically ambiguous, intensely mystical late sonatas and poems. Granted, you won't encounter the ice in the fire revealed throughout the younger Richter's incisive live Second, Fifth, or Ninth sonatas, nor the jackhammer impact of Horowitz's repeated chords in *Vers la flame* or his trills in the Tenth sonata. At the same time, Lettberg can unleash enough fervent momentum to help tighten looser-knit works like the *Fantasie Op. 28* and the rarely played *Allegro Appassionato Op. 4* (sound clip). A bonus DVD features Lettberg in excerpts from different sonatas interspersed with discussions about the music and a multi-media project called "Mysterium", where video artist Andreas Schmidt reinterprets the music in terms of abstract manipulations of color. While Lettberg may not displace favorite versions of specific works, her overall consistency, meticulous technique, and total identification with Scriabin's idiom deserve nothing less than our highest rating. Capriccio's bargain price is enough to forgive the pianist's poorly organized booklet notes, although they contain many interesting quotations from the composer.