

**MUSSORGSKY *Pictures at an Exhibition* BRAHMS *Paganini Variations*, Book 2, op. 35. *Intermezzi*, op. 117. *Capriccio in d*, op. 116/7 **SCRIABIN Piano Sonata No. 9 in F**, op. 68, “Black Mass” • Blandine Waldmann (pn) • DUX 1353 (72:09)**

Imaginative, maybe inspired programming is what may well determine this disc's success. The works by Mussorgsky and Brahms are all well-known; Scriabin's magnificent Ninth Sonata perhaps a touch less so but equally deserving of our attention and, indeed, love. The works sit so well together, the granitic Mussorgsky ceding to crepuscular Brahms via the outgoing second book of *Paganini Variations* and from thence to the phantasmagorical, astral landscapes of late Scriabin. On another level, we move from the descriptive (Mussorgsky's impressions of the paintings) through to the furthest regions of the abstract via Brahms' autumnal musings.

The French pianist Blandine Waldmann, a Parisienne, has previously impressed on a disc of music by Swedish composer Jonathan Östlund on Divine Art (*Fanfare* 39:4). There, it was her range of keyboard color that was so striking. Here, we get a change to see just what she can do in this regard, and much more besides.

The Mussorgsky is rugged and uncompromizing, as well it should be. Dissonance is as much a vital part of this landscape as consonance; in fact, it sits perfectly with Mussorgsky's often monolithic way with the piano (Waldmann's “Bydlo” is particularly stark). Within these confines, Waldmann finds great variety; the held-breath fourth Promenade (the one that immediately precedes the chicks) a case in point. Her control over diminuendo is remarkable, exquisitely calibrated; she plays with the idea of Impressionist at certain points of “Limoges” yet pulls away at the last minute. Her staccato is brilliantly witty and perfectly calibrated; not a single peck to the gossiping women of the marketplace. There is a huge intelligence here, too, with low textures that link to late Liszt and a brilliant “Hut on Fowl's Legs” that leads to a noble “Great Gate”. The recording fully supports Waldmann's interpretative prowess, although the sound of the climactic “Great Gate” is a touch muffled.

Certainly no-one has yet eclipsed the white-knuckle ride of Sviatoslav Richter's (in)famous Sofia performance of *Pictures* (infamous for the plethora of wrong notes and misses; famous for its interpretative brilliance and sheer knock you off the seat power). But Waldmann's reading is never less than compelling.

The Brahms *Paganini Variations* (1862/63) seems still to await its day for full recognition of its genius, despite readings by the likes of Michelangeli and Arrau. The not inconsiderable demands on the pianist certainly have a part to play in this (not that they seem to bother Waldmann too much) but again it is the interpretative depth and the variety of sound available that impresses. Waldmann aims the tone of the fourth variation perfectly, nostalgic bit not sickly, while the interior twelfth variation seems to hint at the crepuscular world of the later pieces. So it is that op. 117 (1892) seems not a million miles removed; the surprise comes when Waldmann highlights the most progressive of the harmonic progressions, implying, nay, pre-echoing, the heady harmonic heights of the Scriabin. Of course, in the Brahms she is in competition with the likes of Gilels, and in her approach she is arguably less flighty than some. This is considered, serious, and often highly beautiful, playing; perhaps the stark octaves of the opening of op. 117/3 hearken back to the Mussorgsky in this context. The *Capriccio in D-Minor* from op. 116 is here a magnificent outflowing, beautifully judged on all levels, not least the tightrope of sustaining pedal versus clarity (and when she does allow passagework minus that sustaining pedal, how effective it is). The close of this *Capriccio* is tremendously exciting. Waldmann's Brahms is wonderfully assured throughout her selection.

In Scriabin's Ninth Sonata, Waldmann comes head-to-head with Horowitz, Richter and Solokov, three titans of the keyboard, not to mention Aimard or the astonishing

Sofronitsky (whose February 1960 performance reissued on Brilliant Classics is the one record collectors are most likely to come across). Again, Waldmann's aim is secure (she is something of a pianistic William Tell in this regard), finding the perfect blend of sensuous sonority, clarity and interpretative vigor. Waldmann absolutely holds her own in this elusive score due to her compelling belief in her own interpretations.

A terrific disc, thought-provoking and fabulously thought through in terms of repertoire and presentation. Interesting notes from the pianist herself, too.

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