

MUSSORGSKY *Pictures at an Exhibition*. BRAHMS *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*: Book Two. Three Intermezzos, op. 117¹. Capriccio in d, op. 116/7. **SCRIABIN Piano Sonata No. 9 • Blandine Waldmann (pn) • DUX 1353 (72:09) ¹Live: France 2014**

Few debut piano recitals are as successful as Blandine Waldmann's. The French pianist has a big tone, but perhaps what is more important is that she creates a sound appropriate to each of the composers on this disc. Her *Pictures at an Exhibition* is Lisztian in its exploration of color and virtuosity, her Brahms is burnished and golden, while her Scriabin is appropriately mysterious. I note that the Scriabin sonata was recorded as early as 2006, which makes me wonder what took the recording industry so long to recognize Waldmann's talent. In her program notes, Waldmann stresses the modernity of all the works on her CD. Indeed, it is a beautifully designed program. Brahms's *Paganini Variations* are an especially apt foil to the Mussorgsky, while the late Brahms that follows enters into a harmonic world not too distant from late Scriabin. Waldmann performs all this music with taste and sensitivity, minus the slightest hint of self-consciousness. Everything feels direct and genuine, as though executing this virtuoso repertoire were as natural as breathing. And as the three Brahms intermezzos are live recordings, there can be little doubt that the chops Waldmann displays here were not created in the studio. I feel a sense of excitement every time I listen to this CD. The playing has life and brio one rarely encounters.

The ebb and flow of *Pictures at an Exhibition* is beautifully captured. The opening "Promenade" contains the universality of the theme from the *Goldberg Variations*, with resonant and luminous chords. A gothic sense of menace inhabits "Gnome." With a tip of the hat to Chopin's "Raindrop" Prelude, "The Old Castle" is like a folk song heard from off in the distance. "Tuileries" is almost like a painting by Monet in the way color is applied. "Bydlo" is overwhelming and oppressive, like Liszt's *Funerailles*. The "Ballet of the Chicks in their Shells" is a test of Waldmann's deftness and tonal brilliance. "Samuel Goldberg and Schmuyle" is striking in the way Waldmann creates two distinct voices for the characters. "The Market Place in Limoges" possesses a rushing blend of colors like a canvas by Courbet. In "Catacombae," Waldmann presents a dark atmosphere through wonderful contrasts of light and shadow. "Cum mortuis in lingua mortua" is positively ghoulish in its frightening frigidness. Waldmann throws caution to the winds in the wacky figurations of "Baba-Yaga." "The Great Gate of Kiev" offers an exploration of the eternally Russian, with a mixture of solemnity and grandeur. My favorite recordings of *Pictures* are the monaural versions by Sviatoslav Richter and Alfred Brendel, but I never have heard a better stereo account than Blandine Waldmann's.

Waldmann is a Brahmsian to the manner born. She is totally at home with his harmonic density, while never losing the lyrical pulse. Her Book Two of the *Paganini Variations* is filled with pianistic legerdemain, always at the service of Brahms's fascinating contrapuntal arches. It is rare to find a young pianist as at home with early Brahms as with late, but that is the case for Waldmann. Her op. 117 Intermezzos possess a hue that is deep in the piano's woodiness. Waldmann's rubato here is especially subtle, while she builds climaxes that seem entirely organic. The op. 116/7 Capriccio contains a tartness to go with its pianistic splendor. As for Alexander Scriabin's Ninth Sonata, Waldmann's performance may not erase memories of Horowitz, but she grasps the harmonic subtlety and tonal mists with a completeness I find totally winning. The CD's sound engineering is excellent. Poland's Dux record label is to be congratulated for signing Blandine Waldmann. She has more to say than many more lauded young pianists recording for the major companies. I only hope that the relationship between Waldmann and Dux will be fruitful and long. Highly recommended.

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