

CD Review 17

TCHAIKOVSKY Piano Concerto no. 1 in B flat minor Op 23
MUSSORGSKY Pictures at an Exhibition.
Ayeka Uehara, LSO, Rafael Frubeck de Burgos.
EMI Classics 0946 3 59606 2 4 DDD 74.28

There are many versions of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto no. 1 that one wonders if we need any new recordings. It is this thought that may cause some pianists to want to play it differently and stamp their own individuality on it. That is all very well and good, but they still have to play what the composer wrote. Interpretation in music is not personal liberty to change or alter the score to suit your mood or preference. Interpretation is to realise, as far as possible, what the composer wrote.

Ayaka Uehara has, apparently, received praise for this recording and is highly regarded in her own country of Japan. I cannot understand why as she is very wayward in both works.

She was born on 30 July 1980 in Takamatsu and studied at the Yamaha School from the age of three. She won first prize in a piano competition in Ettlingen, Germany in 1992 and her concerto debut was in this concerto in a performance conducted by Rostropovich. In 1995 she won second prize at the Second International Tchaikovsky Competition and, in 1997, toured Poland. She was a semi-finalist in the 11th Tchaikovsky Competition. She also won second prizes in the 7th Sydney Competition and the 4th Hamamatsu in the summer of 2001. Her Wigmore Hall recital in 2004 was said to be a sensation. Listening to this disc I cannot understand the acclaim afforded to her.

It is clear that those who have give her rave reviews do not know the music and are not following the music as she plays it, or, as is the case today, judges are awarding prizes not on the quality of the playing but the attractive image the soloist portrays. Image is considered more important than performance.

Reviewers and CD reviewers should know the music be able to read it and therefore give an accurate account of the performance. A lot of reviews are not only worthless but give wrong information and recommend poor performances that are not true to the music. One will never forget the editor of the British Music Society newsletter saying that a recording of Paul Creston's Symphony no 2 was played exactly as the composer wrote it. Rubbish. The performance left out the vital piano part. This editor also said that Dvorak was influenced by Britten!!!

Back to this disc. The Concerto starts far too slowly with that big theme. It is ponderous and lacks the impact it is designed to make. The three chords in the piano that accompany the theme are unbalanced as the third chord has the strongest sound. There is hesitation in the piano part which may be called rubato but it destroys the continuity of the piece. There are unauthorized tempo changes which are, frankly, annoying and when the four note opening phrase appears solo form the pianist alters the timing making the three quavers unequal in time. Later she plays the same four note theme correctly. There is a lot of unnecessary lingering which holds up the proceedings and the music loses its essential onward drive. There is not indication in the score of the rubato and fermatas she makes in the first four minutes and later on.

The orchestral interlude is tedious and too slow which leads into the main section which again lacks the essential onward drive. There are more liberties in the performance and the music is flaccid. Even in passages when the music goes well it seems clinical and mechanical as opposed to spontaneous Romanticism. The music is often cold.

The slower melody is lingered over painfully with fussy unauthorized changes of timing. When she plays at the correct tempo as indicated by the composer the result in good. But there is hesitation at the octave runs when all the notes are to be of equal length and, in this performance, some are slowed down or held on and this is completely wrong. The next big orchestral interlude is too tentative and then, suddenly, is whipped up

as if cream. The following piano octaves are hideously out of time. The slower section is lingered over painfully by the pianist and, again, the momentum is lost destroying the continuity and making a complete mess of the timing. It is eccentric and wayward. The orchestral playing leaves a lot to be desired and I think the timpanist is not in St Luke's but outside in the High Street.

Uehara's tone is very uneven where phrases have the same tempi and volume. This is not helped by a ghastly-sounding Yamaha piano. About 18 minutes in, in the cadenza some of the note values are hopelessly wrong and there are more unauthorized changes of tempo. The lingering over passages is agonising.

The end of the first movement is awful. It is too slow and it is laborious and the pianist's double octaves are not in time and so the dramatic content is lost.

This movement at 21.52 is too long.

The second movement lacks cohesion and character and, at times, the piano has an unauthorized and exaggerated staccato. There is not a satisfactory interplay between soloist and orchestra. However the Prestissimo section is generally good but the movement sounds banal. The return to the opening melody is better with the solo oboe producing a ravishing sound.

The finale is marked Allegro con fuoco and the piano sound cannot cope with this. The big tune sound sinister and hollow which the composer never intended. One a positive note, the fingerwork is very good. The high woodwind seem lost at times and we have some unfortunate wrong notes. The big tune returns too slow and again the piano sound is annoying not having the depth and scope of a Steinway. The penultimate double octaves are not in time with pauses, hesitations and longer notes when the same values apply. The final double octaves are rattled off with great excitement, however.

When did this pianist last look at the printed music?

It will be interesting to list her the timings of each movement in performances by various pianists. I am also quoting two performances by Agerich

	First	Second	Finale
Katin	18.24	6.13	6.56
Graffmann	19.48	7.07	6.49
Donohoe	21.21	7.39	7.04
Sudbin	19.20	7.07	6.54
Ogdon	19.22	7.10	6.52
Argerich	19.07	6.20	6.54
Katchen	18.11	6.52	6.45
Osorio	20.12	7.04	6.45
Gilels	19.02	6.08	6.33
Katsaris	20.04	6.55	6.53
Agerich	19.12	6.30	6.18
Kissin	20.12	6.30	7.09
Uehara	21.52	7.29	6.59

It will be noted that Donohoe's performance of the first movement is very slow but Uehara is the slowest. Uehara is 3 minutes 41 seconds slower than Katchen's stunning performance, three minutes 28 seconds slower than Katin, two minutes and fifty seconds slower than Gilels, two and a half minutes slower than Ogdon. Her performance is as mannered as eccentric as that of Kissin.

The Mussorgsky is a little better but the tempi worry me. One gets bored with the slow speed of The Old Castle and the total performance is about four or five minutes longer than most other recorded performances.

The promenade theme is hindered by unauthorized pauses and Tulleries is hesitant and the music loses its flow. Bydio drags giving the impression that the pianist is unsure. The final movement never works even in the hands of outstanding pianists in The Grand Gate of Kiev. The music is too slow to convey grandeur and is not very pianistic. Uehara is far too slow. One can imagine Liszt accompanying the big tune with exciting runs so that the music does not appear static.

For the Tchaikovsky Peter Katin with John Pritchard is highly recommended as is the Katchen. I am not able to recommend a recording of the Mussorgsky.

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