

## CD REVIEW 114

### KABALEVSKY

**Piano pieces for children young and old** (NI2682) (72.38)

**A recital of concert pieces** (NI2683) (77.29),

Kirsten Johnson, Nimbus NI6282 and NI6283

#### Track Listing NI6282

- 1 Seven Good-Humoured Variations on a Ukrainian Folksong Op. 51 No. 4
- 2 'Children's Dreams', Six Pieces for piano Op. 88
- 3 'From Pioneer Life', Five Pieces for piano Op.14
- 4 Five Happy Variations on a Russian Folksong Op.51 No. 1
- 5-8 Nineteen Pieces from Thirty Children's Pieces for piano Op. 27
- 9 Six Variations on a Ukrainian Folksong Op. 51 No. 5
- 10-11 Nine Pieces from Twenty-Four Easy Pieces for piano Op. 39
- 12 Merry Dance Variations on a Russian Folksong Op. 51 No. 2
- 13 'In the Camp of the Pathfinders', Six pieces for piano Op. 3/86
- 14-15 Ten Pieces from Thirty-Five Easy Pieces Op. 89
- 16 'Grey Day' Variations on a Slovakian Folksong Op. 51 No. 3
- 17-18 Four Rondos for piano Op. 60

#### Track Listing NI6283

- 1 Three Preludes for piano Op. 1
- 2 Variations for piano in D major ("Toccata") Op. 40 No. 1
- 3 Variations for piano in A minor Op.40 No.2
- 4-6 Six Preludes and Fugues Op.61
- 7 Rondo in A minor Op. 59
- 8 "Spring Games and Dances" for piano Op.81
- 9 Recitative and Rondo Op. 84
- 10 Variations on an American Folk Song Op. 87 No.1
- 11 Variations on a French Folk Song Op. 87 No. 2
- 12 Variations on a Japanese Folk Song Op. 87 No.3
- 13 "Lyric Melodies" for piano Op.93A (Prelude-Waltz-Variations-Coda)

It is nigh impossible to review all 31 tracks in these two CDS.

The pianos pieces for children are excellent for teaching purposes, although one wonders how often they are used. Many of the pieces are mini miniatures and, indeed, slight and will, sadly, have a limited appeal. They are played very well but it takes some stamina to listen to them all at once which lasts 72 minutes. I also wish that this pianist played all the items in each set and not just excerpts. There are a few gems such as A Sad story from op 39 which has appeared as a Grade Four piece with the Associated Board Exam pieces.

Kabalevsky lived from 1904 to 1987 and was interested in Soviet politics and Soviet youth. He was keen on folk songs from various quarters, and enjoyed writing variations. Whether the simplicity of



these children's pieces are charming or enduring, depends on your viewpoint. This composer's success largely depends on his major works such as his symphonies and the four piano concertos of which the third is often described as the Youth concerto. The Piano Concerto no 4 is a curiosity and may indicate the composer's tiredness.

The Six Pieces Op 88, has some interesting titles such as Who will win the argument? Tale of an old organ grinder, Contrasts, Queer Walk and Naughty Boys. Descriptive titles can be off putting and, indeed, may be unsuitable since people will search in the music for what constitutes the significance of the titles. The piano piece Fireworks by Debussy does not sound anything like the subject matter. In Ned Rorem's Eagles there is said to be a passage of eagles copulating in mid air but how can that be depicted in music?

If we look at Kabalevsky's In the Pioneer Camp Op 3/86, we have titles such as In the Morning, Morning Exercises, On the river, Through forests and mountains, Extraordinary event and By the Campfire. Does the music clearly conjure up their respective titles? Some may say, Does it matter?

Similarly, Op 14, From Pioneer Life, the titles of the five pieces are Drummer, Sporting Game, Holiday, Pioneer Song and March.

The recital CD has, as its most substantial work, the Six preludes and fugues Op 61 each with a title namely Summer Morning on a lawn, Becoming a young pioneer, Evening song beyond the river, In the young pioneer camp, Story about a hero and Feast of Labour. Kabalevsky's interest in Soviet boys pioneer camps is somewhat obsessive.

The general feeling is that this music may have a limited educational interest but it is not great music by any means. One would have preferred the soloist to 'put some meat on the table' with say the Sonata in F.

Ms Johnson is an American from the mid-west and has loved the music of Kabalevsky since she was a child. Indeed, she plays with conviction, wit and a good sense of rhythm. She is excellent at lyricism and makes a fine sound with the piano. She has also championed rare music. Musicians like this are to be highly commended although some of her chosen composers may not merit her dedication such as Amy Beach, her music being regurgitated Brahms as many have said.

This pianist currently lives in the UK and we shall watch her career with interest. I do hope that these CDs will become popular since they do serve a useful purpose and I hope it encourages piano teachers to take up this music.

As usual, I have not consulted the promotion blurb about these CDs. That is for lazy reviewers who do not know much, if anything, about the music and those reviewers who cannot even read music.

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