

CD Review 28

SCRIABIN: Piano Works

24 Preludes Op 11
5 Preludes Op 16
2 poems Op 71
Poeme: Vers la Flamme Op 72
2 Dances Op 73
5 Preludes Op 74.

Lucille Chung
Dynamic CDS 416 (DDD) (62.31)



There is absolutely no doubt that Ms Chung is a very, very fine pianist. She was born in Canada and made her debut at the age of ten with the Montreal SO under Charles Dutoit. She has toured the world and worked with many famous conductors. She won the first prize in the Stravinsky International Piano Competition in 1989, and was second in the 1992 Montreal International Music Competition. Other prizes and awards have come her way. Her recordings of the Mendelssohn concertos was nominated for a prize and her CD of music by Ligeti is astonishing.

I wonder why she has recorded these slight works of Scriabin.

Scriabin was a very weird man and a follower of Madame Blavatsky of the Theosophy movement which had notorious paedophiles among their ranks. She was a spiritualist and a psychic and proved to be both a fake and a charlatan and was eventually exposed as such. But Scriabin succumbed to this nonsense as did Cyril Scott who tried to influence Edmund Rubbra. Scriabin was a immoral man... in fact, a utterly loathsome character. He was pompous, narcissitic, effeminate and known as Pussy, but you will say we are not to trespass into his private life but consider his music.

Let me remind of the metronome marks for various tempi

		Scriabin's tempi Op11
Allegretto	crotchet equal about 100	crotchet 138 crotchet 78
Vivace	crotchet equals 126 plus	crotchet 63-76!!!
Andante	crotchet equals 80 - 100	crotchet 40!!!
Largo	crotchet equals 58 to 70	crotchet 80

And so the first prelude, Vivace, according to Scriabin is to be played at the tempi of crotchet equals 76, and no faster, whereas the lowest tempi for Vivace is 126. Vivace is wrong for Scriabin to head this prelude.

For the second prelude, the usual tempi for allegretto is crotchet equals 100. Scriabin wants 138 which is not allegretto but an allegro or vivace. In another prelude, marked allegretto, he wants crotchet at 78 which is andante.

We could point out other examples but these are sufficient to show that Scriabin was all at sea.

The first prelude is never played as written although Ms Chung comes closest. The second is akin to a cheap waltz and some of the chords are too big for this pianist and are arpeggiated. A famous pianist remarked that this piece was dull with the rubato and dull without it. Prelude 3 has drive and Prelude 4 is beautifully played but is melodic nullity and some big chords are not played as written. Prelude 5 seems to have an authorised rall at the end. Prelude 6 has some merit while Prelude 7 presents problems with big left hand chords. The debate continues as to whether pianists who cannot manage big chords should arpeggiate them.

Prelude 8 has snatches of melody whereas 9 is another example of melodic nullity. Prelude 10 is so slight as to have no purpose but that could be said of most of them.

Prelude 11 is really dreadful and an example of how not to write for the piano. In bar 4, the right hand has a big chord of which E and B above middle C are held as a dotted minim for the whole bar and yet the left hand has to play these two notes separately. Utterly ridiculous. Call Scriabin a composer?

Prelude 12 has chords too big for most hands. What do we do with them?

Prelude 13 has too much going on so that the quasi-melody is lost. Prelude 14 makes for a welcome contrast and 15 captures an atmosphere. I cannot find the mystery in 16 although it emulates Chopin's funereal music and 17 is slight and lacks any purpose. 18 creates some rare excitement and 19 is banal reminding one of a flea pit cinema and 20 is cheap and nasty, a sort of drama for a ludicrous silent film.

By now I have tired of these preludes. Scriabin's music has nothing to say.

You listen to 33 minutes of these preludes and there is nothing memorable about them. As one Russian pianist said, "Just notes, just bloody notes!"

This is such a pity for here is an exceptional pianist who, as one famous musician said, is playing music that is beneath her.

But it has achieved something. Listening to this has cured Sally of her problem.

The rest of the music on this disc falls into the category of pointless music although we accept that some people like this music. But we ask why? It is slight, has no memorable themes to grasp, is depressing and just notes, just bloody notes!

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