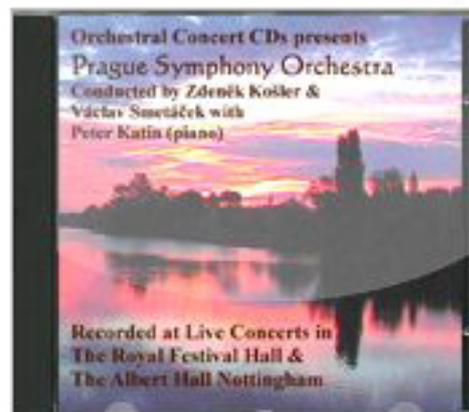


CD REVIEW 41

PRAGUE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

- WALTON Overture Scapino – conducted by Zdenek Kosler
- PROKOFIEV Piano Concerto no 3 in C Op 26
Peter Katin / Vaclav Smetacek
recorded live RFH 6 March 1968
- KABELAC Reflections op 49 / Kosler
- RAVEL Rhapsodie Espagnole / Kosler
- DVORAK Slavonic Dance no 15 / Kosler



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This CD has my highest recommendation. Its major work is Prokofiev's Piano Concerto no 3 in the best performance I have ever heard and I have 40 recordings of this work

Peter Katin told me that he only played the work a few times. He seldom played 'modern' works but, when he did, he revealed that he was more than equal to them. He recorded William Mathias's Piano Concerto no 3 and captured its verve and vigour to perfection. I have admired his performance of Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue and Bryan Kelly wrote a tango for him and Malcolm Lipkin wrote a piano sonata for him.

His Proms debut of 1953 was sensational with a performance of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto no 3 in D minor, an undisputed masterpiece of the piano repertoire. The ovation he received was one of the longest and most jubilant in Proms history.

In those days he seemed to specialise in the Romantic war horses. He recorded Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto no 1 twice with Kundell and Pritchard. With Boult, he pioneered Tchaikovsky's Concert Fantasy and other pianists have since jumped on the band waggon to play this piece. Anthony Collins was his conductor in the Mendelssohn concertos, still underrated works. With Boult, he recorded Rachmaninov's First Concerto, another glorious work and it is a superlative performance; and with Colin Davis the Second Concerto. His Grieg concerto is second to none and you can only marvel at it and the cadenza. His Schumann concerto with Eugen Goossens on World Records is very fine but the sound is echoey.

He has performed both the Brahms concertos, the second having a performance at a Prom in the 1970s.

I saw him perform the Liszt Concertos. His Totentanz was recorded and drew the highest praise. Was it Trevor Harvey who said, "Peter Katin performs fantastic feats of prestigious prestidigitation." Other reviewers spoke of the variety of his glissandi.

I also saw him perform Rachmaninov's Concerto no 4 with Geroge Hurst a work that I rate in the highest category

Katin's performance of the Liszt Piano Sonata is a must. He brings to it not only the accuracy and essential skills but an understanding and maturity lacking in many pianists.

He recorded Walton's Sinfonia Concertante with the composer conducting. I prize a letter Walton wrote to me in which he says, " I could not have asked for a better pianist. Not only was he always accurate and technically brilliant but a delight to work with."

Sir Arthur Bliss told me that he would love Katin to record his Piano Concerto.

Katin regards Chopin and Schubert highly and has recorded much of their music. His performances of the B minor sonata of Chopin he has made his very own and he has written in defence of Chopin's Opus 61.

His recording of all the Mozart sonatas are a treasure and he has some interesting things to say about repeats in Mozart. He is very subtle and understanding in Mozart concertos. He has recorded Clementi and some Chopin on a square piano and, when he gave concerts for me, he delighted us with Bach the Partita no 1 in B flat, Scarlatti, Grieg, the formidable Dance of the Trolls, a fresh and profound Beethoven Moonlight Sonata and, of course, Chopin and Schubert.

This Prokofiev concerto is a beast to play. Only the greatest pianists can play it and only the super-great pianists can play it well.

I have always been in two minds about this concerto and have had a love-hate relationship with it. There seems to be some Prokofievian sarcasm in it... and castanets!! Yet no one can deny its staggering brilliance and physical difficulties. It must be one of the most difficult concertos to play although John Lill told me that Prokofiev Piano Concerto no 2 was even more difficult.

Listening to Katin with the score before me, as all reviewers must do, I was overwhelmed. The accuracy, the attention to detail, every phrase and staccato, every dynamic... it is all there. The fingerwork is so reliable and exciting as are the big chords. The allegros are allegros - very fast, merry and lively and so dependable in Katin's hands. One never feels that the performance is going to crash and it was a live performance. The lyricism is there particularly in the second movement which is a set of variations. The finale is so exciting having tremendous build ups and more dazzling displays from this most excellent of pianists.

The orchestra is very good but they had to work hard to keep up with the brilliance and excitement. But they do.

After hearing this, I did not want to hear any more music for the rest of the day. I had had a marvellous meal and could not eat a pudding or anything else.

The Prague Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1934 by Rudolph Pekarek and Vaclav Smetacek was its conductor for thirty years from 1942. Thier conductors have included

Jiri Belohlavek (1987-1990), Martin Turnovsky (1992-1995) marvellous at Martinu, and Serge Baudo (2001-2006).

Smetacek (1906-1979) was originally an oboist and the founder of the Prague Wind Quintet. As a conductor, he won many awards.

Zdenek Kosler (1928-1995) specialised in Czech music and was renowned for his Mozart and Prokofiev. He gave the Czech premiere of Prokofiev's Symphony no. 7.

Miloslav Kabelac (1908-1979) was a distinguished Czech composer who has eight symphonies to his name. His Reflections, Op 49, are nine miniatures for orchestra completed in 1964. They are fascinating pieces with interesting orchestral colours.

The Ravel Spanish Rhapsody is stop and start music having trouble getting off the ground.

The CD opens with a lively and detailed performance of Walton's Scapino overture, well very done. The encore of a Dvorak Slavonic Dance brings the house down! Phew!

But this is Katin's disc! If you can't find it or buy it, steal it!

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