

CD REVIEW 67

CATALINA BUTCARU

Piano Recital.

Diversions ddv 24127 (a division of Divine Art Record Company).

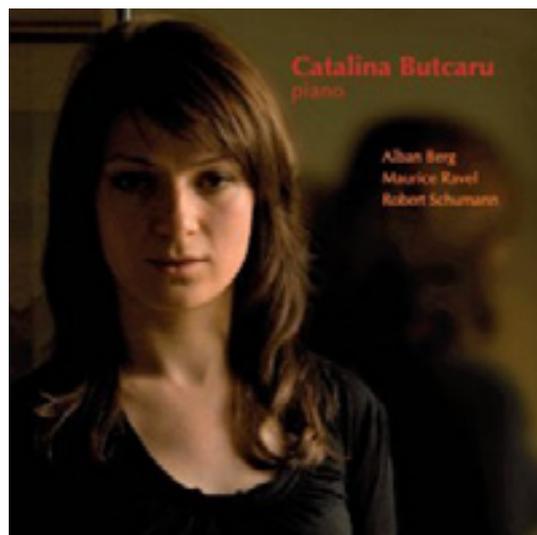
Total playing time 69' 18"

BERG Piano Sonata, Op 1

RAVEL Miroirs

SCHUMANN Humoreske, Op 20

Recorded at Wigmore Hall, London, August 2006.



This is the first disc of the Romanian pianist, Catalina Butcaru and it is nothing sort of sensational being extremely good and, indeed, superlative. These are not just performances but vital experiences. She has the technique, skill and virtuosity, but she also has what many young pianists lack, sensitivity. She is not clinical and her playing is not cold and unemotional. She is clearly committed to the music she plays, and not only does she play with reliable accuracy adhering to the scores but her performances show that she knows the pieces so well and, accordingly, reveals her insight into three very different works.

While, sometimes, the music itself is self-indulgent, particularly in the Schumann, she does not succumb or allow herself to wallow in rubato or anything excessive. Interpretation is the realisation of exactly what the composer wrote whereas many musicians believe it is licence which allows a personal liberty of the music and the abuse of what the composer has written.

The gorgeous Berg sonata has been the subject of abuse and ignorance for 50 years or more largely because people are opposed to the rich chromaticism of Berg and display their ignorance. But to be fair to them many pianists who have played this masterpiece are unequal to its considerable demands. It is a very difficult work to bring off. However, Butcaru succeeds in achieving results that cannot and will not be bettered. You have to know and understand this work to give it the justice it deserves. It is a graveyard for all but the very finest pianists. You have to pick out the melodic content and balance the material between hands with every well-defined nuance. As someone has said, fitting everything in and in its rightful place requires a unique skill in itself.

I love the range of emotion Butcaru brings to this piece. Berg was a man of much passion and sensitivity which this pianist not only understands but demonstrates. Every stringendo, accelerando, rituendo, espressivo is observed faithfully. And the beauty that Butcaru produces is amazing (bar 28 ff, for example) there is also tremendous excitement generated (for example, bar 39ff) and a telling sensitivity (for example, bar 50ff.) At the return to tempo 1 (bar 57 ff.) Butcaru makes a glorious sound so very beautiful and passionate that the music communicates on the more personal level. Bars 80ff are very exciting but never out of control and there is some scintillating moments. The attention to detail is one of the many welcome facets of this performance.

I have never heard this work played better. It is a flawless work played flawlessly.

Ravel's Miroirs is really music of atmosphere and his own sound world. It is what we call absolute music being not dependent on form, design or shape. There are five pieces, Noctuelles, Oiseaux triste, Une barque sur l'ocean, Alborada del gracioso and La valse Des cloches. Much of the music is of the filigree and delicate variety but the music is never weak or superficial. It calls for fingerwork of the highest order and we certainly have it here. I also admire Butcaru's immaculate



phrasing... For example in Noctuelles the pas trop lent section as well as the atmosphere she produces at the end of the section. Later she imbues real excitement into the more elaborate fingerwork. Oiseaux tristes obviously influenced Messiaen when he inserted bird song into his music. Listen to Ravel's bird song with the repeated high Es in bar 17 and the more melodic birdsong a few bars earlier.

The long bar 'lent presque ad lib' on the last page presents a minor problem. It is marked ppp but it is not and this is the only reservation about these performances. The range of sound is sometimes not contrasted well enough but this may be the fault of the recording engineers. The pianism remains staggering.

The pianist captures the picture of Une barque sur l'océan to perfection. How supple is her fingerwork and those rolling two octaves arpeggios both ascending and descending that pervade the opening and

conclusion of this piece are masterly. The sparkle she brings to the music conjures up the living silver sea. The build up 'en dehors' on the fourth page of my score culminates in some dramatic and majestic playing and the fingerwork is beyond belief. The tremolos have a tremendous attack and sends a shiver down the spine. This is a performance that communicates successfully. It is so good you believe the pianist is talking exclusively to you. That is how personal and telling the performances are.

Alborada del gracioso is an unequalled example to all pianists. The repeated G sharps at the beginning of the E major / C sharp minor section are crystal clear and never blurred. The Spanish rhythm is beautifully caught. The slow section is not Ravel's best music and some of the pianissimo chords are not pianissimo but again this may be the fault of the sound engineers. The right hand glissandi in fourths shines radiantly and leaves pianists like me just marvelling. The pianissimos 17 bars from the end is not that quiet.

The final piece, la Vallée des cloches has some glorious harmonies which the pianist controls admirably and the plaintive melody (bar 23ff) is ravishingly beautiful in her hands.

Schumann's Humoreske, Op 20 is not one continuous piece but falls into seven sections and each section has sub-sections. As with other piano works of Schumann this episodic music can be unsatisfactory and incoherent. This is most obvious in Carnival Op 9 which is so structurally unsound that many concert pianists refuse to play it. A substantial work cannot really be little bits and pieces wrote one famous pianist. The Op 20 is not as remiss as Carnival but its coherence or lack of it presents unnecessary problems for the performer.

My score does not define the seven sections as on the disc's sleeve notes. The sub sections makes the first section have five more sections in itself. The music is episodic since it stops and starts. It is like the curate's egg... good in parts. The Intermezzo of the third section is especially good and may hint at Bach but there seems to be a recording fault in that the repeated B flats in the right hand which are followed by a semiquaver lower E flat falling a semitone to D, and these last two notes are not always clear on my copy.. Main Section 5, Sehr lebhaft at bar 17 is marked pianissimo but it is not.. The sixth section Mit einigem Pomp is awful musically as most pompous music is. Listen to Liszt and Rachmaninov's preludes in G minor and C sharp minor. The return of the main theme that pervades this work appears in the Zum beschluss section is very tender.

The final coda, Allegro, is duff and the rests in the penultimate bar are not observed. It may be that the pianist has a different edition.

This is a must have disc. It is the best piano playing I have heard for many years.

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