

smolderingly emotional musical argument, David Crumb's Sonata is influenced by Berg's, Paul SanGregory explores musical time in *Time Preludes*, and David Cleary punishes the keyboard in his clangorous Bagatelles. Crumb specifically refers to Berg, but I detect a Bergian approach in much of this and other recent American music, an impulse to kick away at tonality without destroying it. Cleary's violent Bagatelles are an exception, but the other pieces by Ethan Haimo, Charles Bestor, and Paul SanGregory inhabit an ambiguous world somewhere between Berg and Babbitt. Haimo's "dialectical argument" based on pitch-classes sounds the most arid and technical but is highly expressive. Crumb's early Berg-infused sonata uses its template to good advantage, as a means of obtaining rigor for his many strong ideas. This is an early work but a compelling one. Bestor's Stevens-inspired miniatures and SanGregory's enigmatic preludes are delicate atmosphere pieces. Cleary's piercing, rumbling Bagatelles are from an earlier era that prized dark moods and uncompromising dissonance. It's a rather grim way to end the program.

Jeffrey Jacob, a master of contemporary American music who has presented numerous important premieres, plays with authority and insight. His intensity in Bestor's tiny miniatures keeps them from sounding ephemeral; his passion in the Haimo and Crumb pieces light a welcome romantic flame in what might otherwise be arid modernism; his rippling effects and beautifully voiced chords in the *Time Preludes* show off his refined tone, though he smites the keyboard in Cleary's bangier Bagatelles with requisite brutality. The recording is intimate and close-up.

SULLIVAN

In Fun and Earnest

SCHUMANN: *Symphonic Etudes*; LISZT: *Hungarian Rhapsody 6*; SHCHEDRIN: *Humoresque*; KAVTARADZE: *Nostalgic Tango*

Nina Kavtaradze, p
Danacord 681—62 minutes

Not even on the worldwide web can I find the age of Nina Kavtaradze. But one thing is sure in this digital age: photos do lie. A bottle of bleach plus makeup that could be confused with icing for a layer cake tend to confirm what my ears tell me: this "lioness of the piano" is a leftover from the old Soviet era. Her fingers can still ply the keyboard, but not with subtlety. Given her striking tendency to decelerate amidst copious retards and rubatos, not to mention her messy trills, the liner notes appear to be delusory in describing her style as "challenging, grand, daring, pure

American Record Guide

pathos, and remarkable oratory gesture that carries the torch of the 'great Moscow piano style', which is now impossible to find, even in Moscow, no matter how hard one tries".

Don't try too hard. She does hit all—well, almost all—the notes in the Schumann, mixing the 1837 published version with the five appended variations. Consider completeness her only virtue. Forget about subtlety; she hasn't an ounce of tone color. And where did she get that piano! Its wiry, brash, sour tone makes it (too) seem ancient.

The killer here is the Liszt: she can't be serious! It is so retarded, fermata-ed, rallentando-ed, and self-indulgent that it's comic. I mean in the opening section *every third beat of every measure* is held back! And the three-minute Shchedrin is so heavy it belies any humor. She seems to have fun with her own four-minute Tango, but wait till you hear her singing along. I first thought of a theremin until I recalled Paul Lynde's reply when asked if female frogs croak: "If you hold their little heads under water long enough".

FRENCH

Daria Rabotkina

TCHAIKOVSKY: *Piano Sonata*;

PROKOFIEFF: *Romeo & Juliet Pieces*

Concert Artists Guild 105—48 minutes (212-333-5200, x14)

One of the most enjoyable aspects of listening to a lot of young artists' debut recordings is the quick realization that classical music and musicians are thriving. Ms Rabotkina, the 2007 winner of the Concert Artists Guild International Competition, has a well-designed website, www.dariarabotkina.com, with plenty of pictures and videos that show off her considerable talents as well as her impressive repertoire, education (Vladimir Feltsman was one of her main teachers), concert schedule, and various ways to contact her and her representatives. She is an extremely talented young woman, already with a worldwide concert schedule. Her nearly two dozen ready and available concertos include Tchaikovsky 1, Prokofieff 1 and 3, and all four by Rachmaninoff!

Part of the prize for winning the Concert Artists Competition is this debut disc. Well-produced, with a fabulous sounding Hamburg Steinway, it will give anyone a clear picture about how strong a pianist and perceptive musician she is.

I have never been a big fan of the Tchaikovsky Piano Sonata In G. It has never made it into the standard repertoire, despite good recordings by Pletnev (Melodiya, July/Aug 1992) and an old one by Richter

(Odyssey LP 35204). It is long (35 minutes), quite repetitious, but very difficult; and, quite frankly, I get really tired of the dotted rhythms that seem to pervade all four movements. Still, I can't imagine it given a better, more committed performance than it is given here. Rabotkina has a tonal palette that verges on the orchestration this work truly requires. Her fearless virtuosity makes the most of the exciting passages, and her dynamic range fully encompasses *pianissimo tranquillo* right up to triple *forte, con tutta forza*. If I have a specialty niche, it would be Russian piano sonatas (I reviewed 19 in one ARG issue last year). Rabotkina's Tchaikovsky has convinced me to add it to my burgeoning collection.

I have also had the opportunity to review many recordings of the Prokofieff *Romeo and Juliet* piano pieces. They are near and dear to my heart—surely some of the greatest music Prokofieff wrote. I dare say that they are now fully established in the standard piano repertoire. Some movements are within the ability of pianists of modest abilities, while others demand a big technique. All benefit from Rabotkina's interpretation and skillful balancing of the many voices that are almost constantly part of the musical fabric. About half of these pieces are in an ABA form, with a quiet, lyrical section surrounded by bigger, more vigorous music. I was particularly impressed with Rabotkina's transitions into and out of these central sections. She is not afraid to go her own interpretive route, even if it defies convention, as in the sixth piece, the 'Montagues and Capulets' March. The immediately recognizable left-hand part alternates between a low octave and a mid-range chord through much of the piece. Most pianists sustain the low octave with the pedal right through the chord, but here we have exactly what is written—heavy, even quarter notes, not sustained at all. It is done so convincingly that I may try it myself. Rabotkina uses a variety of pianistic touches to lend orchestral colors to these pieces, which are, of course derived from an orchestral score. This is as satisfying a recording of these great pieces as is available today, and Rabotkina is a young artist—mature beyond her years—to watch for.

HARRINGTON

Visions of Beyond

Edward Rosser, p

Connoisseur Society 4260—64 minutes

What a weird recital this is. Rosser, has confined his activities as pianist, vocal coach, and accompanist primarily to New England. At the tender age of 23 he has rethought his piano technique and uses the wrist extensively so as

to achieve a very smooth, legato sound. This, along with help from the sustaining pedal, is achieved to most beautiful effect and appears to be the rationale for this program. All of the works, generally slow in tempo, cannot be intended for listening straight through.

With the exception of the Andante sostenuto from Schubert's Sonata in B-flat and the first movement of Schumann's *Gesänge der Frühe* the pieces easily stand alone, rather than as bleeding chunks. The title of the release refers to the selection from each composer's last, or near last compositions. Macabre as this may sound, most are quite beautiful and banish any image one may have of the "grim reaper" waiting in the wings.

Liszt's *Wiegenlied, En Reve, Abshied*; two Brahms Intermezzos; two Beethoven Bagatelles; Chopin's Berceuse, Nocturne in B, Mazurka in F minor represent two thirds of the program. While they are placed in an order devised by Rosser, they flow from one to the other with little contrast. All are sensitively played and would do credit to any pianist, but the slow trudge towards the pearly gates makes one anxious for the pianist to get on with it.

Debussy's 'Elegie', 'Album Leaf', and 'Evenings Lit by Burning Coals' might be thought to bring some harmonic variation, but just add yet another ingredient to the already thick cream. Although the Schubert movement might seem a little indulgent to some, it certainly makes a lovely sound.

Heard a few selections at a time, the music has an opportunity to breathe effectively. Doing it all at once may put you in a deadly lethargy. Could Rosser have really intended this? The sound is very good, but so much legato will more than fill my needs for some time to come.

BECKER

Van Cliburn Competition

HAYDN: *Sonata 58*; BARBER: *Sonata*; DEBUSSY: *Preludes I: 3-8*; GODOWSKY: *Fledermaus Metamorphosis*

Yeol Eum Son, p

Harmonia Mundi 907507—61 minutes

STRAVINSKY: *Petrouchka Pieces*; CHOPIN: *Preludes*; BATES: *White Lies for Lomax*; LISZT: *Spanish Rhapsody*

Haochen Zhang, p

Harmonia Mundi 907506—73 minutes

All of these performances were given at the International Van Cliburn Competition last spring. Son took a silver at this quadrennial event, and Zhang won one of the two gold medals (the other winner was Nobuku Tsujii). I expected great things from these youths, who

March/April 2010