

EDITOR'S CHOICE



Libor Novacek:
expansive dignity



A prize-winning pianist aims high – and mostly hits his targets



Liszt

Années de pèlerinage, année 2: Italie, S161 – Sposolizio; Il penseroso; Canzonetta del Salvatore Rosa; Sonetto 47 del Petrarca; Sonetto 104 del Petrarca; Sonetto 123 del Petrarca; Après une lecture du Dante (Fantasia quasi sonata). Mephisto Waltz No 1, 'Der Tanz in der Dorfschenke', S514

Libor Novacek *pf*

Landor Records © LAN278 (73' • DDD)

In days of yore when pianists weren't so thick on the ground (and the distinguished ones as thinly spread out as they are today), the most absorbing Liszt players for me were Claudio Arrau, Clifford Curzon and Wilhelm Kempff. Naturally, their response to the composer was far from uniform; but they didn't substitute stridency for power. There was a common desire (not always reflected on disc) for an evenness of touch at all times.

Libor Novacek doesn't quite achieve a similar standard; his tone hardens above *forte*. Otherwise his command of the keyboard is very impressive and he aspires to the highest interpretative ideals in this second book of *Années de pèlerinage* which, like the first, contains some of Liszt's finest music.

This artist takes time to express his views about these masterpieces. He is not in a hurry, not even in overtly virtuosic pieces such as the *Dante* Sonata and the First *Mephisto Waltz*. There is an expansive dignity to Novacek's playing that spares them from falling into a trough of banality, as often happens. How a similar approach works at a slow tempo (basically *lento*) may be heard in the *Petrarch Sonnet* No 123 where Liszt tries to convey its spirit through numerous marks of expression. Novacek doesn't balk at observing them. Nor does he balk at emotional involvement with the music; and both virtues are duplicated everywhere. The recording by Tony Faulkner doesn't get in your way. It is unobtrusively excellent – as recordings ought to be. **Nalen Anthoni**

Rachmaninov

Études-tableaux – Op 33; Op 39

Rustem Hayroudinoff *pf*

Chandos © CHAN10391 (62' • DDD)

A flair for Rachmaninov that makes this player stand out from the crowd



Rachmaninov's first set of nine *Études-tableaux* was written in 1911 in tandem with the second set of Preludes, Op 32, which share a more daring harmonic language than earlier Rachmaninov works. The second set of nine (more extended) *Études-tableaux*, composed seven years later and among the last works he wrote before leaving Russia for good, take this development further. I view them as miniature tone-poems.

Somehow I missed Rustem Hayroudinoff's earlier Rachmaninov recordings (Preludes and the complete works for cello and piano), as well as his warmly received 2005 account of the

'Hayroudinoff takes the composer at his word – a courtesy to Rachmaninov not granted by every pianist'

Dvořák Concerto. On the evidence of his latest disc for Chandos, for whom he now records exclusively, they will be well worth acquiring. These are meticulously prepared and observed readings – if Rachmaninov asks for *ppp* *legatissimo* or sharply contrasted dynamics from one bar to the next, then Hayroudinoff takes the composer at his word, a courtesy to Rachmaninov not granted by every pianist.

But Hayroudinoff goes much further than mere accuracy. If he cannot quite equal the composer's breathtaking nonchalance in the three he recorded (Op 33 Nos 2 & 7 in 1940, and Op 39 No 6 in 1925), he comes close. His rich tone and beefy attack serve him well in such passages as the ecstatic climax to the Op 39 E flat minor study (superbly paced and structured) and the pealing bells of Op 39 No 9; he sings with a touching simplicity in the C major and first of the A minor Op 39 studies. Temperamentally he is right inside the music. This is powerful Rachmaninov playing that transcends the artificial constraints of the recording studio. **Jeremy Nicholas**

Rameau

Pièces de clavecin – Suite in E minor; Suite in G minor; Suite in A minor

Angela Hewitt *pf*

Hyperion © CDA67597; © SACDA67597 (78' • DDD)

Short on demonic drama but Hewitt bravely takes on Rameau on the piano



Angela Hewitt's continued attraction to the summits of 18th-century harpsichord repertoire here leads her to Rameau, where few pianists have ventured with any strong intent. The reasons for this are not hard to divine: like most French harpsichord music, it comes encrusted with ornaments and other interpretational niceties tailored to the instrument's particular qualities, often designed to help project and shape a melodic line in the absence of significant dynamic variation; played on the piano, on which they often come out louder than what surrounds them, there is a danger of all these *cadences*, *pincés* and *ports de voix* sounding fussy, intrusive, even ugly.

But then, Hewitt has already tackled the delicate and fugitive world of Couperin to some acclaim, and Rameau certainly ought to be more robustly adaptable than that. Does she manage it? Well yes, some of the time. She is, of course, a master pianist with the kind of refined finger technique and musical sensibility that can bring to Baroque music all the clarity of line and texture it needs, and those ornaments are certainly kept under control, with none shirked. The more conventional dances – the allemandes, courantes and sarabandes – are played with the contrapuntal understanding familiar from her Bach playing, and there is some wonderfully tender music-making in character pieces such as "Les triolets" and the magnificent "L'enharmonique". What is missing elsewhere, however, is the demonic quality which lurks in such pieces as "Les sauvages", "Tambourin" and "L'égyptienne", a major part of Rameau's musical personality which the bravura attack and strong bass resonance of a big French harpsichord can help unlock. Really fine piano-playing then, but not really to be regarded as definitive for Rameau. **Lindsay Kemp**

Schumann

Fantasia, Op 17. Kreisleriana, Op 16. Drei Romanzen, Op 28 – No 2; No 3

Andrea Kauten *pf*

Sony Classical © 88697 00026-2 (78' • DDD/DSD)

An overheated approach to Schumann



Andrea Kauten is a Hungarian-Swiss pianist who, according to Sony's fulsome notes, wishes everyone could be filled with her passion and intensity when she

touches a piano. Later we are told of her "precise, highly Romantic (*sic*) manner of playing, which is rapturous yet controlled". And so it is doubly disturbing to hear a pianist who cannot leave well alone.

Lacking clarity or perspective, Kauten cannot see the wood for the trees. The booklet-note