

BURKARD SCHLIESSMANN - 'Chopin: Ballades'

An SACD review by Mark Jordan



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Fellow composer Robert Schumann once described Frédéric Chopin's piano works as "*cannons camouflaged with flowers*". With their debut multichannel Super Audio Compact Disc, Bayer Records of Germany gives us a performance by Burkard Schliessmann of Chopin's '*Ballades*' which presents those extremes as facets of the unified artistic force of a composer who, despite his extensive fame, is still clearly underrated. Instead of histrionics or exaggeration, Schliessmann gives us Chopin the musical thinker. Whether or not this new recording dislodges any of your favorites (and it may!), it certainly sheds new light on an ultimately elusive genius.

But before turning to this new release, let us examine some of the major recordings of the '*Ballades*' from over the years. Back in the classic era of 78 r.p.m. discs, the legendary French pianist Alfred Cortot recorded the complete '*Ballades*' in 1926 and 1933, with the latter set prevailing. In the '*G minor Ballade*', Cortot features a flowing and free manner, savoring every new flavor in the ever-changing mood of the piece. As is usual with Cortot, there are some finger slips and approximated passages along the way, but his lack of grandstanding combined with a fleet and vertiginous ending make his rendition quite refreshing, despite the archaic recorded sound. Cortot's take on the second '*Ballade*' is masterful in its portrayal of growing unease and passion, and his version of the fourth is fleet and dashing, worlds apart from the visionary epic style of many recent performances. The place where Cortot comes to grief is in the third '*Ballade*', in A-flat major. There Cortot seems unable to take the piece at face value and goes in search of ways to shade it and make it seem more dramatic, leading to some odd distortions. And that's not even considering the finger twists he gets into in his overwrought climax.

Moving forwards a generation, the brilliant but inconsistent Samson François recorded the '*Ballades*' in 1954 in clean monophonic sound. François is more 'arch' in his interpretations than Cortot, flashing his best debonair charm in places and a devil-may-care insouciance in others. François' is the fastest traversal of the '*Ballades*' that I've heard, but in places such as the end of the '*G minor Ballade*', it seems he's more interested in his own virtuoso flair than in the work itself. Perhaps his finest moments are in the '*A-flat Major Ballade*', where François is flirtatious and playful in a way that eluded Cortot.

Moving into the stereo age, we meet the towering performance of the '*Ballades*' by Polish-born Arthur Schnabel from 1959, a performance that has greatly influenced the current conception of these works. Schnabel seems to define the modern approach of epic grandiosity as he finds a spacious poise in many pages, but his alternately icy and demonic flashes keep the dramatic interest going. I wonder if I am alone in finding the closing pages of Schnabel's '*G minor Ballade*' not quite up to the level of the rest of the recording. Once those sweeping scales come in, it almost seems that Schnabel drops back a notch in intensity, as if a bit abashed at seeing a fairly standard virtuoso

touch at the climax of what has been overall a complex drama. Fortunately, the unusual and dizzying contrary-motion scales at the very end show him regaining his nerve to close with a great torrent of sound, recorded close-up and rich in the 1950's RCA manner.

Few subsequent records rivaled Rubinstein's until the distinctive 1987 Deutsche Grammophon recording by another Pole, Krystian Zimerman, a recording which coincidentally duplicates much of the repertory on Schliessmann's new disc. Zimerman moves past Rubinsteinian poise and stakes out a new territory of hushed and tragic intensity in quiet passages and icy glitter in the more violent parts. Without lacking aristocratic poise himself, Zimerman adds a high-strung intensity that flirts with mannerism, and a visionary otherworldliness apt to emerge in unexpected places. Though not embraced by all, the recording made fair claim for Zimerman's status as a major Chopin interpreter. Characteristically, Zimerman is a degree slower than Rubinstein, who was himself a degree slower than Cortot and François, thus moving the mainstream of Chopin performance into a very broad plain. Not that Zimerman lacks technique and drama – his headlong run into the closing pages of the '*G minor Ballade*' is one of the wonders of the modern age, culminating in a dramatic stagger through Chopin's final "chromataclysm" (if I may be pardoned for inventing a word to summarize that strange and wild moment!).

But in the opposite corner of modern Chopin performance is the American Murray Perahia, who recorded the '*Ballades*' in 1994. Perahia proves something of a throwback to Cortot's manner. Perahia has a less self-conscious style than the current norm – he seems to flow very naturally with the music, feeling no need to demonstrate his "art" or "insight". He flows more convincingly from section to section than is usually seen, keeping the ebb and flow in mind. There's not as much banging about in the loud parts as most performances, but if we keep in mind anecdotes of Chopin's own playing, we would suppose that his playing sounded much more like this than the heavy-duty string-breakers like Horowitz. (Of course, this is an ironic thing, as Perahia was for a time an associate of Horowitz. He finally had to leave behind Horowitz and Horowitz's style, because it simply didn't work for him.) Perahia finds the intimate soul of the '*Ballades*' in his performances quite unlike any other recording.

The next major recording to come along was that by Evgeny Kissin in 1999 for RCA. Kissin first caught the world's attention with performances of Chopin's '*Piano Concerti*' at the age of twelve, but there's mounting evidence that he is not very temperamentally suited to Chopin. Here, Kissin seems quite arch and rather flashy, as if playing to reach the back row in a football stadium. His version of the '*A-flat Ballade*' completely misses the inherent playfulness of the work. Though largely lacking the inwardness that makes the finest Chopin performances so endearing, Kissin's renditions are brilliant and exciting from a dramatic and virtuosic point of view. In a way, one imagines that if we could go back in time and hear Franz Liszt play Chopin, it would have sounded something like Kissin's performances.

Now, with so much ground covered by past masters, is there anything new that Burkard Schliessmann could possibly bring to these keyboard warhorses? This recording says, "yes". Schliessmann appears to make a conscious effort to gather the disparate strands of early twenty-first century Chopin playing and weave them together. In terms of tempo, Schliessmann's timings are close to the Zimerman end of the spectrum, even surpassing him in the '*G minor Ballade*', yet his manner is closer to the flow and organic growth of Perahia. Schliessmann concerns himself above all else with finding the long line, the inner logic to hold these eventful pieces together. By contrast, for all his flash, Kissin seems to deliver a series of dramatic episodes that don't truly hold together. If Zimerman's enormous emotional range holds together, it's only through the sheer willpower of the player. Schliessmann instead keeps the contrasts in perspective, to let the composer's logic show through more clearly, thus supporting the thesis that Schliessmann proposes in his in-depth liner notes, which is that Chopin is often unfairly dismissed as a maudlin miniaturist who never developed into a deeply substantial composer. Though it is easy to miss some of the visceral thrills of Rubinstein or Zimerman, Schliessmann's point is valid, and his performance proves it. If anyone ever doubts the substance beneath the emotional dramas of Chopin's music, they must remember that a musical performance can be distorted by a lack of "deep thinking" by the performer. The structure and logic are there.

To look at some more specific moments: Schliessmann's opening in the '*G minor Ballade*' is even more tragic and thoughtful than Zimerman's. Schliessmann presents the musical strands one by one, and then begins pulling them together, leading into a very concentrated version of the first theme. Chopin had a very staunchly classical streak, and examination of his compositions shows it at work constantly in his structures. This doesn't mean, however, that Schliessmann is inexpressive or cold. It merely means that Schliessmann chooses not to play up the drama for mere titillation or easy thrills. Likewise, moving into the second theme, Schliessmann plays with tenderness, but without the hypersensitivity on display in many other versions. Whereas most treat the piece as a sequence of events, Schliessmann seeks to unify and show that it can be played as different facets of a single gem.

The cumulative effect of this approach brings its own strengths, even if the adrenaline factor isn't in the range of Kissin or François. But the spacious tempo allows the listener to focus in and hear notes that are usually just a blur. And, for those who demand at least a little flash, Schliessmann deploys a few bursts of sharp-edged brilliance in the final scales just to remind the listener that he can. Although Schliessmann does not ultimately have the galvanic edge of a Zimerman (who else does?), he certainly has a deep understanding of how this music works. There are a few places, such as the closing pages of the '*F Major Ballade*' (which ends in a vehement A minor), where Schliessmann's detailed delineation of the musical argument is maintained at the expense of forward movement. Schliessmann's crowning achievement in this recording is the '*A-flat Major Ballade*', where he pulls off the unlikely feat of matching Perahia's sense of playful delight, and variety of touch and color. And Schliessmann's magically gentle bass runs are worth the price of admission themselves.

Also included on this disc are similarly thoughtful, flowing performances of the '*Barcarolle*' (played with charm instead of nostalgia), the '*Polonaise-Fantasia in A-flat*' (with much less hand-wringing than Horowitz or Argerich), and the great '*Fantasy in F minor*', where Schliessmann strikes an effective compromise between Perahia's wondrous fantasy and Zimerman's alienated obsessiveness.

So, to go back to Schumann's analogy, if Cortot, François, and Perahia give us Chopin's flowers; and Rubinstein, Zimerman, and Kissin give us the underlying cannon; Schliessmann's approach concentrates on synthesizing the two to the point that they can't be considered separately. This makes for an interestingly probing, even cerebral take on the '*Ballades*' that may not dislodge everyone's dear favorites, but will certainly give Chopin lovers good food for thought, as well as ammunition to defend the composer from those who haven't looked deeply enough into his works to understand them.

In terms of recorded sound, this is an auspicious debut in multichannel for Bayer Records. The sound is fairly intimate, suggesting a moderate-sized hall, and Schliessmann's performances are well adjusted to this space. By comparison, Zimerman's 1987 digital recording on Deutsche Grammophon sounds like a much larger space, which suits Zimerman's more epic approach, although the distancing of Zimerman's piano in combination with the 16-bit recording technology of the period lends a brittle, glassy sheen to Zimerman's sound. Again, that's not entirely inappropriate to Zimerman's cool approach, and here Schliessmann's approach goes hand-in-hand with the intimacy and warmth of the recorded sound. There is a fairly quick decay of the tones on the high-end, possibly suggesting a lush, well-upholstered complement of seats in the hall, or perhaps wall hangings absorbing excess reverberation. Whatever the case, there is a richness of warmth and overtones in the sound captured here, without the glassy ringing that mars so many recordings of these stormy dramas. The rear channels define the space, bringing the sound envelope around you without drawing attention to the rear channels themselves through excessive bounce-back. Indeed, when listening, I wasn't able to detect any specific bounce from the rear channels at all, but I could certainly tell the difference upon switching to the stereo program of the SACD layer. Though remaining handsome, the sound lost a great deal of its depth and "room presence". Granted, there is a touch of diffusion in the multichannel sound, but the gain in sense of space outweighs it considerably.

The sound of the Compact Disc layer of this hybrid release is noticeably less inviting than the Super Audio layer. The highs lose a little of the halo of overtones that a piano naturally creates. The CD layer also brings a slight muddiness to the lower mid-range and upper bass (at least in comparison to the SACD layers). In comparison to other CD recordings of these works, the above comments about intimacy and warmth still apply. Those accustomed to the sheen of Zimerman, or the flash of Kissin may find this performance and its recorded sound a little subdued, at first. But give it a close listen, and you just may find yourself won over by its insight and honesty.

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