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« RECORDING OF THE YEAR 2004 »

An expert and highly interesting set of Chopin performances from one of the greatest pianists of current time. Schliessmann displays a fabulous technique, superb musical instincts, and an inquisitive nature. His blend of intuition and intellect is riveting, and listeners will experience a truly unique look at these Chopin masterpieces. In the standard CD format, the soundstage is exceptional with a rich and well-detailed environment. In the multi-channel format, the sound is more expansive, revealing nuances not available in the standard format.

« RECORDING OF THE MONTH » 16. 8. 2004

This is an outstanding recording, and I would expect nothing less from Burkard Schliessmann who is one of the most compelling pianists of our time. With a fabulous technique, superb musical instincts, and a truly inquisitive nature leading to distinctive interpretations based on extensive cultural and biographical research, Schliessmann blends the most rewarding aspects of an intellectual and intuitive approach to all the music he performs. When a new recording from an artist such as Murray Perahia is released, we have a fairly good idea how he will play the music based on past recordings and concert appearances. With a few recordings for Bayer under his belt, the primary insight we have concerning Schliessmann is that he will take a highly individualized path like the trail-blazing pianists of the early 20th century combined with the superior technical wizardry of the 21st century pianist.

That Schliessmann is his own man is not unexpected given that his teacher was Shura Cherkassky. In all of Schliessmann's recordings he explores colors and textures, often defying expectations with a patience and maturity well beyond his young-adult status. The eminent music critic Harold Schonberg has called Schliessmann's playing "representative of the best of the modern school". My view is that Schliessmann's artistry bears a striking resemblance to some of the pianistic titans including Alfred Cortot and Walter Gieseking.

Schliessmann's new disc programs seven of Chopin's most popular and large-scale piano works. Each is wide in architectural design and displays great depth and diversity of emotional content. Worthy performances must reveal the most tender and poignant moments as well as the passages of tremendous energy, strength and urgency. Most important, the logic and cohesion of the myriad themes cannot be forgotten as they merge into a magnificent tapestry that needs every musical strand to play its role.

Burkard Schliessmann is more than up to the task of giving the full measure of the above qualities. He has a vision for each work that insures a sense of inevitability and overall scope. His pin-point articulation is so well projected that even the most caressing notes and phrases have a strength rarely encountered in other recorded versions of these works. Schliessmann's sonority and supple phrasing are reminiscent of the legendary Claudio Arrau, and his inflections emit great meaning. Perhaps most impressive are the lower voices that are consistently given a granite-like edifice with wonderful clarity and contribution toward the overall coherence of each work on the program. Here are just a few highlights of the disc that I have kept to a minimum in the interest of not being overly redundant:

Ballade in G minor - Schliessmann immediately sets his own course in the first subject where he uses rather demonstrative pauses between motifs instead of legato transitioning. I had never heard the work played in this manner, and the initial effect can be startling. However, it soon becomes clear that Schliessmann is adding another emotional and structural layer to the music that enriches it through heightened contrast with the traditionally melancholy and smooth flowing lines.

Ballade in F major - I do not believe there is any music more serene and comforting than the F major's first subject. Schliessmann offers wonderfully lilting phrasing that seems to make time stand still while also conveying a sense of spiritual closure. The subsequent angst and power of the succeeding themes has a spell-binding effect from Schliessmann with a magnificently stern quality and tremendous bass strokes that growl in exquisite detail from their foundation.

Ballade in F minor - Never before have I been so strongly aware of the pent-up human urges that are seething below the music's surface but taking so long to erupt. With incisive inflections and powerful bass lines, Schliessmann offers a potent balance of voices that allows Chopin's tension and full breadth of emotional content their full measure. Every time I listen to the performance, I am on the edge of my seat waiting anxiously for fulfillment.

Fantaisie in F minor - I am always a little disappointed when a Chopin recital does not include the *Fantaisie* in F minor, because I consider it the composer's greatest large-scale piano work with its constant and transcendent invention. Whatever you might want from a romantic-era piano composition, the *Fantaisie* has it all including a strong capacity for narrative examination. Perhaps most important is the intense heroism that permeates the work; even the prayer-like intermezzo is delivered by a proud and confident personality.

I find the *Fantaisie* the best Schliessmann performance on the program. His total command of the idiom never lets us forget that heroism is at the center of the work, and his narration is clear and rich. Also, I detect some strong anger and brutality in the interpretation, more than in other versions I have heard. Once acclimated, these additional layers of meaning enhance the sweep and narrative properties of the work.

The disc's sound quality is exceptional in the standard CD format with a rich, well detailed and resonant environment. In the multi-channel format, the sound is fantastic; the breadth of the recording opens up and reveals nuances and meanings not available in the standard format. However, I do want to emphasize that readers who have not yet taken advantage of the SACD format should not be wary of acquiring the disc. Put simply, the superb Schliessmann performances shine through regardless of the equipment at hand.

I listened to many comparative Chopin recordings in reviewing the Schliessmann disc, giving particular note to the recent discs of the Ballades from Stephen Hough on Hyperion and Stefan Vladar on Harmonia Mundi. At no time did Schliessmann's interpretations take a back seat to any of the comparison discs, and the narrative scope and vision he gives the Four Ballades far surpasses the episodic qualities of the Hough and Vladar performances.

In conclusion, I consider the Schliessmann disc an essential acquisition for piano enthusiasts. He challenges our perceptions of the great classical piano works and gives us illuminating performances of exceptional pianism. I also strongly recommend that readers investigate his other Bayer recordings, each one as superb as the Chopin offering. Personally, I would love to hear Schliessmann's way in Bach and Shostakovich keyboard works with their intense contrapuntal leanings. In the meantime, any disc from Schliessmann is a treasure to experience.

Don Satz