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CD REVIEW

« RECORDING OF THE YEAR 2008 »

German pianist Burkard Schliessmann charts new territory in the *Goldbergs*, characterizing musical phrases like conversations amongst warm, human characters. Far from the flair of young Gould, the serenity of old Gould, the severity of Tureck, or the drama of Perahia, this is the most humane Goldberg I've ever heard.

« RECORDING OF THE MONTH » 27.5.2008



Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)

Aria with 30 Variations, BWV 988 "*Goldberg Variations*" (1741-42) [83:06]

Burkard Schliessmann (piano)

rec. 17-19 July 2007,  Studio Berlin

BAYER RECORDS BR 100 326

[38:06 + 45:00]



Stereo
Multi-ch

Someone once said that if Dublin were ever destroyed, it could be reconstructed from James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I think that if the entire body of Western Civilization were suddenly snatched away from us, save one work of art, we could rebuild a good chunk of it, if that one remaining work were Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. It transcends mere musical expression - though it is saturated with that - by incorporating philosophical, mathematical, architectural, rhetorical and even religious ideas in a density that is unmatched by any other work. The variable factor in rebuilding the western world from the *Goldbergs* would be: Which performance to use? The unperformed score itself is only a blueprint for a world awaiting creation.

The world according to Rosalyn Tureck's *Goldbergs* would be monumental, built out of marble columns and wide-open spaces. Vladimir Feltsman's would be a topsy-turvy house painted audacious colors, with the occasional door opening on the top floor into mid-air and some of the windows underground. Young Glenn Gould's world would be nothing more than a piano in a warm, late-night room. Older Gould's reconstructed world would be nothing but clouds, light and midnight sun. Murray Perahia's world would be one of poise, grace and piety, an entire city of interconnected, elegant buildings.

As much as I love all those performances, I had never found myself forced to consider this: Where is the human element in all these worlds? But the recent Bayer recording by Burkard Schliessmann dares to put the question front and center, and in the process creates a distinctive profile, one that not everyone will like.

Great artists can polarize, and the intensely thoughtful Schliessmann has never shied away from pursuing deep and subtle shades of expression where others play to the gallery. The pianist ups the ante here by daring to bring his connotation-rich, philosophical style to a piece that is considered by some a sacred tome not open to experimentation. Clements' review shows a positive antipathy for Schliessmann's no-stone-unturned approach, but for listeners who don't mind his questioning of every old assumption, Schliessmann can be revelatory.

What strikes me throughout this recording is the sense that Schliessmann is always searching for what is conversational in this music. Where Gould and Tureck awe the listener, Schliessmann makes these thirty variations sound human and approachable. This is the recording for all those who have previously found the **Goldberg Variations** too abstract and unfriendly. Yet there are layers of things going on, too, which can satisfy the connoisseur hoping to find new discoveries.

While this is worlds away from being a period-style performance, Schliessmann nonetheless adapts some historically-informed practices, such as playing runs of continuous short-value notes unevenly, giving those parts a gentle swing. It's something that isn't done very often, certainly not by mid-twentieth century pianists like Gould and Tureck, who were trained to play notes as written, as opposed to the natural swing that used to be commonplace in classical music until theorists squeezed the life out of it. Listen, for instance, to *Variation 1*, where Schliessmann jettisons the usual stiff-collar approach and instead gives the passing figurations a gentle swing. At first hearing, it may even sound unintentionally uneven, but then one can always go listen for comparison to the deadly even scales and runs Schliessmann deploys in his Godowsky arrangements of Strauss waltzes or his Liszt transcriptions of Schubert songs on his DVD (Arthaus Musik 100 455).

Another example of how human Schliessmann makes this music sound is *Variation 23*, where Schliessmann finds wit and shape that others only hint at. Those who expect their baroque keyboard music to have the regularity of a sewing machine might not like the way Schliessmann shades the rhythms, but I love it. He makes every polyphonic voice independent, as if it weren't one person playing all these notes, but rather a small orchestra of pianists, each one an individual. Schliessmann's **Goldbergs** are populated with dozens, perhaps hundreds of such characters. Friends, enemies, teachers, laborers, family, lovers, they are all here, living life. No other **Goldberg**, for better or worse, is more full of personal, human touches than this one. Some would call it a romantic approach, but I'm not convinced that is true. I think that the true romantic approach is Perahia's. For all Perahia's lucid, Mozartian poise, he shapes the entire work with a dramatic, programmatic sense. Schliessmann instead lives inside each variation, more interested in each section's inner life than in pushing the whole piece toward a climactic point. This thoughtful characterization naturally gives *Variation 29* and *Variation 30*, the quodlibet, layers of richness that make them grand summations, even as they amble comfortably along.

Though Schliessmann is often identified with romantic piano music, he's no romantic. He's onto something new, an artistic "ism" that hasn't been named yet. If score literalism can be taken at this point as a very twentieth-century phenomenon, it seems that a new artistic philosophy is emerging in the twenty-first. If the old school, whether it be Gustav Leonhardt's Bach or Pierre Boulez's Mahler, is based on the denotations of the score and historical documentation, the emerging new school is one of connotations, finding the connections no one ever noticed before, both within a piece of music, and outside it as well. Schliessmann's **Goldbergs** teem with life because he plays not like someone who spends 12 hours a day practicing (which, for all I know, he may), but rather like someone who reads books, talks with friends, views art, travels to historic sites and, simply, lives. Schliessmann may be a musician, but more importantly, he's a human being.

Like Schliessmann's other Bayer recordings, this disc is given gorgeous, high-resolution sound. I had a little trouble getting my Sony SACD player to recognize the hybrid layers, but once it did, I found lively, three-dimensional sound in the multichannel layer. The regular CD layer is quite good in its own right, richer and warmer than any standard CD from more than ten years ago. Incidentally, the performance is spread over two discs, but it's priced as one. Though it is in fact possible to fit more than 80 minutes on one disc, the amount of manufacturing defects skyrockets when that is done. Instead, Bayer wisely opted to split the work at its natural break, leaving two discs of around 40 minutes, which can be manufactured with virtually no defects. Since the piece naturally cleaves between *Variation 15* and the "Overture," as Bach designated *Variation 16*, it doesn't bother me in the least. The accompanying booklet also contains sizeable essays by Schliessmann himself, who offers much food for thought as he talks about the theoretical and practical aspects of both playing and understanding the variations.

In summary, this is a **Goldberg Variations** for those who want to get inside the piece and live inside it, instead of admiring it from afar as it sits on a marble pedestal. Recommended warmly for those adventurous enough to enjoy hearing an old favourite transformed into something new.

Mark Sebastian Jordan