

César Franck - Piano Music (1997)

Written by bluesever

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1. *Prelude, choral et fugue: Moderato*
2. *Prelude, choral et fugue: Poco piu lento*
3. *Prelude, choral et fugue: Tempo I*
4. *Prelude, choral et fugue: Allegro moderato e maestoso*
5. *Prelude, aria et final: Lento*
6. *Prelude, aria et final: Allegro molto ed agitato*
7. *Troisieme Choral*
8. *Danse Lente*
9. *Grand Caprice*
10. *Les Plaintes d'une poupee*

Performers:

Stephen Hough, piano

Only the most exalted comparisons will do for Stephen Hough's latest disc, and even they are struggling to compete. Not that his predecessors had a level playing-field. Recorded in 1929 and 1932, presumably with little or no chance of retakes, Cortot offers a characteristic mixture of inspiration and approximation. In the *Prelude, choral et fugue* Richter on Melodiya is massively authoritative and daring (hear his drawing together of thematic threads towards the end), but the 1956 Russian recording is very fuzzy; his Philips account, of uncertain date, is live and has other heart-stopping moments (for instance the first arpeggiated entry of the "Choral"), but the thin-toned instrument is a penance to listen to.

To say that it is only the trappings of modern recording that enable Hough to stand shoulder to shoulder with these giants would be to underestimate his achievement. Of course a beautifully regulated Steinway and a near-ideal acoustic are a help. But Hough himself has a dream-ticket

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combination of virtues – astonishing agility, a faultless ear for texture, fine-tuned stylistic sensibility and an exceptional understanding of harmonic and structural tensions. He acknowledges all Franck's nuances, notated and implied, without ever disturbing the broader flow; he gives full rein to the heroic Lisztian cascades, without ever tipping over into melodrama. Perahia (Sony Classical) and Cherkassky (Nimbus) – two of my favourite pianists – are among the Franck exponents on CD who are comfortably surpassed. The only hint of a nit I could pick would be that the fortissimo arpeggiations in the "Choral" (track 2, from 4'03") don't ring as resonantly as they might. I can't imagine the calm at the end of the "Aria" being better judged.

In their very different ways the almost comical bravura of the Grand caprice and the salon charm of the Danse lente and Les plaintes d'une poupee are extremely difficult to bring off. Yet anyone who has followed Hough's recording career will know that this sort of thing is meat and drink to him. As for his own transcription of the A minor Chorale, which stirred fond memories of my own organ-playing days, the unavoidable adjective is 'awesome'.

Stephen Hough's recent Hyperion issues have given him a lot to live up to. This recital triumphantly does that. His own booklet-essay couches information, insight and anecdote in clear, elegant prose. It would surely qualify for the Gramophone Award for insert-notes, if such a thing existed.-- Gramophone [4/1997], arkivmusic.com

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