

Prokofiev & Tchaikovsky - Piano Concertos (2015)

Written by bluesever

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Sergei Prokofiev: Piano Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 16 *I. Andantino - Allegretto II. Scherzo. Vivace III. Intermezzo. Allegro moderato IV. Finale. Allegro tempestoso*

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-Flat Minor, Op. 23

I. Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso - Allegro con spirito II. Andantino semplice - Prestissimo III. Allegro con fuoco

Beatrice Rana – piano Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia Antonio Pappano – conductor

In 2013 Italian Beatrice Rana received the silver medal and audience award at the 14th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. She had played both Prokofiev's Second and Beethoven's Third Piano Concertos. There's already a Rana album on Harmonia Mundi consisting of Bartók Out of Doors, Ravel Gaspard de la nuit and Schumann Symphonic Études and an album for ATMA Classique of Chopin Préludes, and Scriabin Sonata No. 2. Recorded in Rome for Warner this collaboration with Sir Antonio Pappano marks her first concerto release.

Prokofiev was still a student at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory when he wrote his Second Piano Concerto which is scored for large orchestra. At the Conservatory he had gained a reputation as a radical with his often unremitting rhythms and liberal use of chromatic and dissonant writing. When Prokofiev introduced his Second Piano Concerto at Pavlovsk near St. Petersburg in 1913 the audience reaction was negative attracting lots of hissing with a large number of people leaving the hall. During the turmoil of the Russian Revolution the score was thought destroyed so in 1923 the exiled Prokofiev reconstructed the entire thing using a manuscript of a two-piano reduction his mother had brought out of Russia. Twice as long as the First Piano Concerto the immense technical demands of the Second Concerto are some of the most challenging in the repertoire, on the margins of what it is possible to play. Rana is very much at home with the exacting and tempestuous nature of Prokofiev's writing characteristics as she draws the listener into its contrasting moods with captivating engagement. Its undertow of mystery and foreboding as heard in the opening movement is striking. The Scherzo whirls

vigorously along and is almost motoric; a precursor to the sound-world of French composers Poulenc and Françaix. There are wide mood-swings in the unsettling Intermezzo with its suggestion of Ragtime and the energetic and enigmatic Finale is full of dramatic thrills and spills. From the first note to the last Rana's characterful performance is full of vitality and exuberance yet maintaining total control. Of the alternative recordings of the Prokofiev I admire I would cite the account played by Jean-Efflam Bavouzet and the BBC Philharmonic under Gianandrea Noseda. Recorded in 2013 at Salford, Bavouzet is in remarkable form playing with burning commitment. The account forms part of his complete set of the five piano concertos on Chandos. Another excellent recording is the 2014 Berlin account played by Kirill Gerstein and the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin under James Gaffigan on Myrios Classics. Certainly Beatrice Rana's high quality performance can hold its own with any of the above accounts.

It seems preposterous today to think that one of the greatest works in classical music repertoire Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto was denounced by pianist Nikolai Rubinstein who was engaged to introduce the work. Completed and published in 1875 Tchaikovsky dedicated it to pianist Hans von Bülow who believed in the work and who gave the première in Boston, United States the same year. Decisive and well shaped Rana's thrilling playing of the opening movement feels totally attuned to Tchaikovsky's world and combines her dramatic power with the grandeur of the writing. In the lyrical Andantino semplice Rana and the solo instruments of the orchestra play marvellously with all the intimacy of chamber musicians. She is thrilling and rather audacious in the Finale — full of drama with marvellous rhythmic impetus together with that rarely achieved poetic quality contained only in the finest accounts. Rana's performance of the Tchaikovsky is compelling and highly rewarding; nevertheless it is hard to look elsewhere than the distinguished 1994 account from Martha Argerich and the Berliner Philharmoniker under Claudio Abbado at the Philharmonie, Berlin (Deutsche Grammophon). In addition Argerich recorded another exceptional account live in 1980 in Munich with the Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks under Kirill Kondrashin on Philips.

Under Sir Antonio Pappano the excellent Orchestra dell' Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia is on top form, conveying a vivid sense of urgency. Rana made this exciting recording in 2015 at Sala Santa Cecilia, Rome which seats nearly 3,000 people and has an excellent studio acoustic. For Warner the sound team provide clarity and excellent balance between piano and orchestra. Included in the booklet is an eminently readable essay by Jed Distler.

The combination of the enduringly popular concerto from Tchaikovsky and the lesser known but mightily impressive Prokofiev makes this a really appealing coupling. A name that we are certainly going to hear a lot more about in the future, Beatrice Rana is in quite stunning form.
---Michael Cookson, musicweb-international.com

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