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GODOWSKY, L.: Piano Music, Vol. 14 (Scherbakov) - 53 Studies on the Chopin Études, Vol. 1

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The finishing tape of Konstantin Scherbakov's Godowsky marathon is in sight. His project to record the complete works began back in 1996 but he has waited until now to tackle what are arguably the most musically and technically daunting of Godowsky's entire oeuvre: the 53 Studies on Chopin's Études published between 1894 and 1914.

He is only the fifth pianist to record the entire set (assuming there is a second volume coming at some point), the others being Geoffrey Douglas Madge, Carlo Grante, Marc-André Hamelin and Emanuele Delucchi. Discounting Madge's account because of its many shortcomings, what, in the first place, distinguishes Scherbakov's new recording from its three competitors is that rather than play all 53 Chopin-Godowsky studies in sequence as they do, he has chosen to play just one Godowsky version of each of the 27 Chopin studies in order – Op 10 Nos 1-12, Op 25 Nos 1-12, Trois Nouvelles études. This avoids the (to me at least) enervating experiences of seven different versions of Op 10 No 5 in succession and four (or five, depending on whether you admit ossia readings as separate studies) of Op 25 No 2 one after the other.

Without laboriously commenting on each of the 25 studies on this volume (Keith Anderson's booklet whisks you through each study's genesis clearly and economically), three other points contribute to what is an outstanding release. The opening piece is Godowsky's Study No 1, based on Chopin's Op 10 No 1, in which the right-hand arpeggios of Chopin's original are transferred to the left hand, while equally demanding arpeggios in contrary motion are given to the right hand. It's a majestic concept which, from the very opening bars, plays well with the muscular, weighty tone of Scherbakov's conception of the studies.

There is a similar sparkle and panache on show throughout this disc, and many of the studies are played with the relish of an end-of-concert encore, individually tailored to stagger and delight an audience. That does not mean that Scherbakov eschews the lyrical elements of Godowsky's recreations. Try Study No 5, which is the 'Tristesse' Étude transferred into D flat and played by the left hand alone (though you wouldn't know it).

The second point, complementing Scherbakov's total command of the material, is the depth and richness of the piano tone, recorded at the Wyastone Concert Hall by producer, engineer and editor John Taylor, a very different listening experience to the Wyastone sound in days of old.

Hamelin's benchmark recording was made over 20 years ago. It remains an outstanding achievement in the recorded history of the piano. Scherbakov offers an utterly compelling alternative with all the benefits mentioned above, a fine tribute in Godowsky's sesquicentenary year.

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