



Alexander Scriabin: The Complete Piano Sonatas

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This is a worthwhile and valuable box of Scriabin's sonatas. It's especially good having them under one roof, as it were, especially when played by this young and exciting Russian pianist.

Friedrich Sprondel says in his booklet notes that the First Sonata of four movements can remind one of Chopin but oddly enough Rachmaninov came across to me. The score lacks pedalling indications but Stoupel tries manfully to cope with the complex of contrapuntal writing. Despite the passionate anger which Scriabin put into the work due to his arm injury and despite the commitment of Stoupel the work remains diffuse and without a clear structure. It is not a piece I will return to.

The Second Sonata is quite different. The impressionist textures of the long opening movement - there are just the two - are presented wonderfully. It's true that the work's complex rhythmic patterns are not put across but I'm not sure if that actually matters in the beauty and haze of a sound that prefigures Ravel. The second movement is marked presto and is a virtuoso piece which is actually quite difficult to follow in the score. On the whole, I prefer Alexander Melnikov on Harmonia Mundi (HMN911914) simply because I can hear more detail. The performance by Stoupel does however remain both fine and very enjoyable.

The Third Sonata is the most romantic. It is in four movements and nominally in F sharp minor. Its use of chromatic sequential passages, especially in the fourth movement is not only sometimes tedious but also, despite various key signature changes, makes a mockery of the key.

The first and third movements have related material as does the second and the fourth. The second movement has a very beautiful second idea, marked mostly pp which is almost reminiscent of Grieg. The third movement has a very memorable melody which Scriabin seems sad to leave. In this recording the work ends up being the longest in the set by far. I must confess to preferring Bernd Glemser on Naxos (8.555368) who not only shaved well over six minutes off the overall time but gives a tighter rendition of the outer movements giving them a greater feeling of direction. After all the finale is marked Presto! The problem seems to be sometimes that Stoupel is so keen to bring out the inner parts under the melody that a real sense of melody is lost.

I was encountering the Fourth Sonata for the first time. It's a short work of only two movements in another obsessively sharp key. The second is a faster and more developed version of the first but I wasn't surprised that it dated from the period of the Second Symphony. Here the chromaticisms are no longer decorative but add, especially in the first movement, a feeling of the mystical which from now on is to be

significant.

When it comes to the Fifth Sonata Stoupel seems to come into his own. The Third and Fourth had been inspired by poetry but at the head of the score of the Fifth four lines are quoted beginning "I summon you to life, secret yearnings", the words which Scriabin also used for his 'Poem of Ecstasy' completed at the same time. Indeed it shares many characteristics with the Poem. These include the use of augmented harmonies which never seem to resolve, in ever chromatic passages; this despite the lack of major/minor key structures and despite his insistence on using key signatures such as F sharp, E major, Db major. The two works are in one movement. The booklet notes for the Fifth Sonata just offer 'Allegro impetuoso - Con stravaganza' but it is not all like that. Indeed after just ten seconds we collapse into a 5/8 section marked Languido. Both ideas return and others offer similar sudden contrasts. This is where Stoupel wins over many other pianists: he is able to hold up these quixotic changes and still give a firm sense of structure. Unfortunately the recording here and in the set as a whole seems to be too bass heavy and the upper register of this piano is rather brittle. My advice is that you turn up the volume slightly above normal but reduce the bass. This produces a sound that is rich and warm.

The Sixth Sonata is of the same length and is also in one unbroken span, a form Scriabin was to adopt from now on. The so-called 'mystical chord' is used right from the start. It can also be heard as a significant sound in 'Prometheus - The Poem of Fire' which had just been completed. This chord, which commences the Sonata, consists of a perfect fourth, a diminished and an augmented fifth. The latter two intervals form the opening of the whole tone scale and this Debussian sound again draws the best from Stoupel. He obtains a silky tone from the unnamed piano. Scriabin was apparently frightened of this sonata and never performed it himself. It is for the most part written on three staves and is punctiliously full of expression marks.

The Seventh Sonata is subtitled 'The White Mass' the title being connected with the mystery of Man's relationship with the universe. It is even more improvisatory, chromatic and even atonal than the previous sonatas and yet culminates in a massive twenty-four note chord. I just wish that Stoupel had followed Scriabin's extraordinary markings a little more carefully. Often he seems to overlook 'poco vivo' or even 'molto piu vivo' and what about those marvellous bars marked Presto 'en un vertige'. Sadly he misses that moment. Just recently I heard the late Ruth Laredo's recording of this work (Nonesuch 73035-2) and was knocked over by her passion, total accuracy to the score and delicacy of touch and of pedalling. Look out for it.

The Eighth Sonata is my especial favourite. I suspect that this may be due, at least in part, to its clarity of form. The Lento introduction is so contrapuntally complex that Scriabin was forced to notate several bars onto four staves. The first subject is marked Allegro agitato and Stoupel is neither Allegro nor agitato which is an emotion much needed at that point. When the ideas are recapped later he captures the mood more successfully. The 'Tragique' second subject is much more convincing and even more deeply felt later in the recap. Stoupel has a real grasp of the slow, dreamy sections but the faster ones sometimes find him becalmed in his reverie. A 6/8 Presto section, when it first comes half way through, is rather overlooked and the following Allegro seems to be of the same tempo. Nevertheless despite these points this is, overall, a beautiful and convincing performance.

We know that Scriabin had an obsession with the diabolical. The Ninth Sonata is subtitled 'Black Mass' though it was not his choice. In addition it seems to hover around the interval of the diminished fifth - the so called 'Devil's interval'. Despite these factors in this performance the Ninth Sonata certainly comes across as a beautiful and evocative piece. It is compact in form and length just quoting briefly at

the end a reminiscence of its oscillating opening. For the Allegro section which constitutes the final third of the sonata, Stoupel takes a while to ease himself into the tempo. Once on his way it makes for a very impressive virtuosic display and reaches an almighty climax.

So we arrive at the Tenth and last sonata. Not for nothing has it been called the 'Trill Sonata'. They are there because, to quote the composer, "this is a sonata about insects ... Insects are born of the sun". Its form is remarkably similar to the Ninth Sonata. I haven't mentioned the myriad French expression instructions with which Scriabin litters the sonatas, phrases like "avec une ardeur profonde et voilé" and "avec ravissement et tendresse". Stoupel is excellent in this work and tries consistently to present to us these different markings. He is that little bit more careful and deliberate than Glemser as mentioned above and I feel that that is right in this physically demanding and intricate work.

Despite certain reservations, and wouldn't it be remarkable if there were none, this is a fine set. In addition one's admiration must go out to any pianist who can tackle these ten works and record them at a rate it seems of two a day. Although I have other versions there are moments in these performances which I shall treasure.