



Maurice Ravel: Piano Works

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RECORD REVIEW Ravel

Gaspard de la nuit. Sonatine. Valse nobles et sentimentales. La valse.

Ravel's music is so all-encompassing in its absolute integrity (every note has its exact place in an overall scheme) that it possesses an almost Bach-like indestructibility. Some players emphasize the leading line, others the music's rhythmic profiles, others its textural allure, others its rich harmonic palette, yet it invariably emerges sounding utterly convincing.

Romain Descharmes, winner of the Dublin International Competition in 2006, remarkably combines all these qualities in interpretations that can withstand comparison with the finest of the past. His French accent is as acute and Galois-scented as Monique Haas's, his captivating spontaneity as compelling as Samson François, his harmonic pungency and weighting as telling as that of Werner Haas, and his exhilaration in the piano mechanism's colossal bass power in La valse curiously reminiscent of Horowitz.

The Ravel who emerges here is less an effeminate aesthete with a soft centre than an indomitable, macho personality of exquisitely refined taste. In tackling Valses nobles et sentimentales, most pianists attempt to impart a sense of stylistic unity to Ravel's coruscating inspirations, whereas Descharmes gives each waltz its own unique character, ensuring that the music's startling changes of mood register with full impact. One of the greatest challenges in this above all of Ravel's piano works is to characterize the music's dancing lilt and affectionate phrasing without sounding calculating and arch, a test which Descharmes passes with flying colours as he enters into each miniature's distinctive sound-world. This is compelling playing that takes the listener on a vital emotional journey, never generalizing the specific.

It is rare indeed that one encounters a performance of Gaspard de la nuit that has one totally forgetting the supreme technical accomplishment involved. Yet here Descharmes charms his Kawai grand into producing magical, glistening sonorities throughout 'Ondine' that, despite the pungent clarity of his playing elsewhere (not least in 'Scarbo'), suggests that he has somehow dispensed with the use of a hammer mechanism altogether. His 'Scarbo' may not be the last word in Grand Guignol, smouldering incandescence, yet its intoxicating textural allure and commendable lack of self-conscious virtuoso wizardry focuses the music's swirling changeability to a remarkable degree.

The enchanting Sonatine suits Descharmes's quicksilver tonal reactions to a tee. The

central minuet is a particular triumph, its surface nostalgia and contentment subtly spiked on occasion by Ravel's gently clashing harmonies. I can't wait to hear what Descharmes makes of Miroirs and Le tombeau de Couperin.

