



Nelson Freire plays Saint-Saëns, Grieg and Liszt

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This worthy addition to the discography of Nelson Freire captures one of a handful of live concerto recordings to be found outside his major-label catalog, in this case the Saint-Saëns Concerto No. 2—the boldest of his five piano concertos—coupled with incidental solo works by Grieg and Liszt. The solo pieces are studio recordings from 1966; the concerto is a live recording from 20 years later. Without a discography of the pianist to consult, I'll venture to say that everything here is a new addition, and the recorded sound is quite good throughout. In the Saint-Saëns the forwardly placed piano is as full and realistic-sounding as one could hope for, but orchestral detail hasn't been sacrificed.

What immediately attracts major pianists to the Saint-Saëns Second is the gesture of placing a cadenza-like prelude before the orchestra enters, a twist on a Bach organ prelude, and as in Bach (or Beethoven's Choral Fantasy, which uses the same gesture) the music is free-form, improvisatory, and expressive. Freire takes a large-scaled Romantic view of the introduction, setting the mood for a reading of the first movement strong in passion and virtuosity. Ádám Fischer's conducting follows suit, although he's fairly ordinary in comparison to such a charismatic soloist. Taking Jean-Yves Thibaudet and Charles Dutoit (Decca) as a good modern standard, Freire is just as sparkling in the Scherzo but more virtuosic in the finale, where Fischer also catches fire. It would get no argument from me if someone called his reading a first choice. (Equally exciting concerto performances can be found in Decca's two-CD collection of the pianist's radio broadcasts, which I welcomed enthusiastically in Fanfare 38:4.)

Since there was no online booklet, I can't say why the Liszt and Grieg pieces, being studio recordings, didn't make it to disc previously; I presume this was a radio broadcast. In any event, the recorded sound, if a bit dry and confined, is perfectly respectable. In his selection of five of Grieg's 66 Lyric Pieces, Freire is so convincing that one longs for more. Charisma isn't what these homey pieces call for, being chiefly aimed at the Victorian market for amateur-level character pieces. Freire brings the sensitivity of a great Chopinist to meditative miniatures such as "Lonely Wanderer" and imparts a touch of brilliance where he can, as in "Little Birds." The only other pianist I know who found such modest magic was Walter Gieseking in his monaural collection for EMI.

Liszt is more familiar territory for Freire, whose Decca album for the composer's bicentennial was one of the high spots among a slew of solo recitals that year; he has also recorded the B-Minor Sonata, Totentanz, and both concertos. The three works on the present release are fairly offbeat. The two Hungarian Rhapsodies, No.

5 and No. 10, are generally found only in complete cycles—neither was recorded by Horowitz or Richter, and Grigory Ginzburg has only a single recording of No. 10, just to name my favorite Lisztians. Freire gives No. 5 a dignified, stately reading suitable to its solemnity. No. 10 is far more a showpiece, like the famous No. 2, and here Freire shines with effortless passagework and trills while avoiding any hint of vulgarity. He succeeds in finding the music behind the cascade of notes, in the vein of Alfred Brendel's Liszt but with more warmth. Polonaise No. 2 is as heroic and showy as Chopin's most forceful examples, so I'm surprised that I didn't know the piece already. It's like Chopin with bells and whistles added, an exciting final flourish to the program. Richter has been captured in this work no less than 15 times (!), the vast majority on tour in 1988; I should have been paying much better attention. Freire plays at the same level of bravura.

Everything about this release is superb. In the current issue I review Freire's new release of Brahms solo piano works, also new to his discography, so it's a month to celebrate for those who esteem his art.