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FEATURE REVIEW by Jerry Dubins

SCRIABIN 24 Preludes, op. 11. ***Sonata-Fantasy* in g♯,** op. 19. **2 Impromptus,** op. 14. **4 Preludes,** op. 22. **12 Études,** op. 8/11–12 • Russell Hirshfield (pn) • NAVONA 6302 (63:00)

In a recent review of an album that contained Scriabin's Fifth Piano Sonata, I wrote that "Scriabin is a composer I've yet to make peace with, and there's probably not enough sand grains left in my hourglass to do so." I should have qualified that statement by saying that it applied only to his piano works from his later phases in which the struggle for form, content, and tonal logic was lost in the battle against his neurologic synesthesia and alarming descent into delusions of mystic grandeur. Prior to 1900, Scriabin's piano works, in particular, are not only quite normal in terms of form, content, and tonal logic, they're deeply indebted to, some might even say worshipful of, Chopin.

Early evidence of that emerges in the 24 Preludes, op. 11, composed between 1888 and 1896. With but one exception, and then only in spelling, Scriabin follows the exact same sequence through the major and minor keys that one finds in Chopin's Preludes, op. 28. That spelling exception is in the Prelude No. 13, which Chopin writes in the key of F♯ Major (six sharps) and Scriabin writes in the key of G♭ Major (six flats). They're enharmonically equivalent—thanks to equal temperament tuning, same black and white keys on the keyboard. A while back, however, I read an article which suggested that Chopin employed a piano tuner who may have tuned the composer's piano to something not quite equal to equal temperament. Who knows?

Would Scriabin's actual approach to melody, harmony, and keyboard figuration be mistaken for Chopin's? It's doubtful. But the remarkable thing is that in his own way, Scriabin captures Chopin's style and moods.

The earliest-composed pieces here are the 12 Études, op. 8, of which pianist Russell Hirshfield gives us the final two numbers. Once again, Chopin is the model, this time his two sets of Études, opp. 10 and 25. The last number in Scriabin's set is deservedly popular. Played here with great bravura and intense feeling by Hirshfield, the piece is a distillation of pianistic virtuosity in service to a poignant, longing-filled Romantic rhapsody. It's jaw-droppingly gorgeous! I know there are readers and colleagues who will disagree with me, but I'm entitled to my opinion, and that is how tragic I find it that Scriabin should have devolved from this to his later piano works.

Next up chronologically are the Two Impromptus, op. 14, composed in 1895. As much indebted to Schumann as to Chopin, the pieces exude both charm and introspective melancholy in in the best tradition of the salon genre.

Scriabin's *Sonata-Fantasy* in G♯ Minor, op. 19, and his Sonata No. 2 are one and the same work; *Sonata-Fantasy* is simply an alias. Said to have been influenced by the sea—which one is anyone's guess—the two-movement piece was finally published in 1898, but it was five years in the making. Extended passages of great supple beauty alternate with passages of Impressionist washes that sweep across the keyboard, and outbursts of inchoate rage that momentarily all but abandon tonality. The second movement is a nervous, obsessive *moto perpetuo* that somehow reminds me of the finale to Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata, except that Beethoven's fury is focused; Scriabin's frenzy is a tantrum. Whether or not it's too soon to call this a transitional work in Scriabin's lurch towards his later works I don't know, but there are enough broken plates in this sonata to suggest that the table will soon have to be cleared and reset.

Completed in 1897, the Four Preludes, op. 22, encapsulate all that is beautiful and terrifying about Scriabin's early piano music. The first Prelude of the set, with its open harmonies and repeated rhythmic, bell-like ringing, reminds me of the second movement (*Andantino*) of Schubert's A-Major Sonata, D 959—a chilling vision unfolding in an inexorable tread towards oblivion.

Scriabin composed some of the most hauntingly beautiful Romantic music anyone has ever written, until he didn't. Listening to these early works and knowing what was to follow is like somehow witnessing, moments ahead of time and in slow motion, the oncoming 18-wheeler and the gruesome wreck that's about to happen.

As far as I can tell, Russell Hirshfield hasn't had a lot of exposure on record. He did join saxophonist Dan Goble for an album titled *Mad Dances* that was favorably reviewed by Ronald Grames in 35:2. More recently (2017), he released an album on the Phaedra label of piano music by Belgian composer Piet Swerts (b. 1960) that was well received in the Netherlands and Belgium, but I'm not sure if it has had wider distribution.

According to his bio, Hirshfield has appeared in recital throughout the United States, and in Brazil, China, Belgium, England, Serbia, Costa Rica, and South Africa, programming both traditional and contemporary music. He is also Professor of Music at Western Connecticut State University, and has presented masterclasses and conference lectures throughout the United States and abroad. He was a member of the Artist Faculty for the 2019 International Piano Festival in Bačka Palanka, Serbia, Guest Artist for the 2015 Piano Master Class Series at New York University, and a member of the piano faculty for the 2013 Oxford University Piano Festival in England.

Hirshfield's current album, by concentrating on Scriabin's early piano works, provides the listener unfamiliar with the music of this enigmatic Russian composer an inviting sampling of his most easily embraced pieces and unquestionably some of the most arrestingly beautiful and affective music of the Romantic piano literature. Hirshfield plays to those strengths of these pieces without sentimentalizing them, and the result is a recital, thankfully made permanent on a recording *par excellence* that can be enjoyed over and over again. Very strongly recommended.
Jerry Dubins

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