

**SCRIABIN** **Symphony No. 2. Piano Concerto** • Vasily Petrenko, cond; <sup>1</sup>Kirill Gerstein (pn); Oslo PO • LAWO 1139 (76:33)



Symphony 2 / Piano Concerto 220  
Audio CD  
Lawo Classics

Looking into shadowy corners can deliver big surprises. Scriabin's symphonic output is overshadowed by a single work, the *Poem of Ecstasy* (Symphony No. 3), and his fame as a major piano composer, which is unquestioned in Russia, has left his early Piano Concerto in obscurity. It and the Symphony No. 2, paired on this new release from Vasily Petrenko and the Oslo Philharmonic, were composed by a burgeoning talent finding his already idiosyncratic way. The Piano Concerto, from 1897, displays a voluptuous gift for melody and Romantic surges of passion, with a piano part of suitable brilliance. But Scriabin couldn't hold his imagination within the confines of a conventional post-Liszt concerto. Reviewing the excellent 2015 account from Yevgeny Sudbin in *Fanfare* 38:6, Phillip Scott noted that "Scriabin attempted to produce a typical three-movement Romantic concerto, but already ... was breaking away from accepted musical boundaries. Many sections of the work are imbued with fantasy and the kind of exploration that is the antithesis of an unfolding musical argument." The very things that broke the mold (and earned the displeasure of Rimsky-Korsakov) make the Scriabin Piano Concerto so appealing today. In the hands of a sympathetic soloist, the work's free imagination and unpredictability, founded on harmonies more easily absorbed than in later Scriabin, cause the music to soar on its own exhilaration.

Kirill Gerstein could hardly be better in the solo part, which ranges widely between the soft, murmuring themes of the slow movement and the bravura runs, arpeggios, and roulades in the outer movements. Russian pianists more or less own this concerto on disc—there are recordings by Vladimir Ashkenazy, Anatol Ugorski, Oleg Marshev, and Nikolai Demidenko, although also a notable historical one from Solomon Cutner—and yet, comparing Gerstein with Sudbin (who impressed both Phillip Scott and Steven Kruger), I find more thrilling

panache in the fast music and tender reveries in the *Andante*. It's also high praise to say that Petrenko conducts with a deeper and more natural grasp of Scriabin's idiom than Pierre Boulez, who conducts for Ugorski on DG. He's much warmer, too, which isn't quite a surprise.

As a collaboration, Petrenko and Gerstein are seamless, even though nothing should be taken away from their rivals; the level of performance for this concerto is high. It also helps that LAWO's recorded piano sound is fuller and more natural than the somewhat bright and brittle sound given to Sudbin by BIS. For pianophiles, this is sure to be one of the top concerto releases of the year. Petrenko brings equal sympathies to the Second Symphony, composed in 1901, four years after the Piano Concerto, and possessing the same instincts. The score challenges the boundaries of a conventional 19th-century symphony (although Mahler had broken ground more radically already). We get five voluptuous movements, usually played as three, that pull us into the hothouse delirium of the concerto. Reviewing the last Scriabin Second to come my way, from Valery Gergiev and the London Symphony in 2016 (LSO Live), I noted that "at age 30 Scriabin found his *métier*—the chromaticism, ecstatic trumpet calls, and unlimited rhapsody one associates with him have all arrived. Only the finishing touch, Scriabin's totally liberated harmonic language, has yet to emerge." At the time I was happy with Gergiev's account, but in retrospect Jim Svejda was closer to the mark when he found the conducting impatient, falling into a let's-get-this-over-with mode.

Petrenko remedies this with a loving, patient, thoroughly engrossing reading that elevates the music in my estimation, just as he and Gerstein do in the concerto. What can seem bombastic is rendered like a natural joyous effusion, and since this is a score of extremes, the meditative solos that interrupt the first movement, along with the fluttering dialogue between flute and violin that opens the middle-movement *Andante*, are exquisitely phrased. Gergiev has better soloists technically, but Petrenko's capture the music's fragile mood more delicately. This conductor was at his best in the complete Prokofiev *Romeo and Juliet* from Oslo, and now that this new release is an equal triumph, they seem to have made a musical marriage that promises special things for the future. Warmly recommended as a must-listen for anyone attracted to both works. **Huntley Dent**

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