

SCRIABIN **Symphony No. 2. Piano Concerto** • Vasily Petrenko, cond; Kirill Gerstein (pn); Oslo PO • LAWO 1139 (76:30)



I take back all the bad things I've said, or at least thought, about Scriabin's Piano Concerto. I've known it ever since I was in high school. I had the Michael Ponti LP on Candide, and I always found playing it strangely unsatisfying. It was like being invited to hear an acclaimed speaker give a presentation, and breathlessly anticipating his arrival at the microphone, only to endure 30 minutes of him clearing his throat and shuffling his notes before leaving the stage. Other recordings I later acquainted myself with (Ashkenazy/Maazel on Decca, then Ugorski/Boulez on DG) did little to change my mind. I confess

that I requested the present CD not for the Piano Concerto but for the Symphony No. 2—and more about that anon—but I have to say that Gerstein and Petrenko have charmed me so much that I have revised my opinion about this work. Scriabin composed it for himself when he was only 24. The year was 1896, and the concerto that he wrote takes Chopin's and Rachmaninoff's pianistic gestures and transports them into an opium dream of lush melodies, lush harmonies, and lush orchestral backdrops (at times, foretelling the splendors of Hollywood) that seldom develop as you expect them to. Speaking of Rachmaninovff ... the story goes that Glazunov, when he became acquainted with the Piano Concerto, commented that it proved "beyond a shadow of a doubt that Scriabin has lost his mind." Rachmaninoff is said to have responded, "He never had a mind to lose." I thank Gerstein and Petrenko for showing me that Scriabin's Piano Concerto sounds a lot like a concerto that Rachmaninoff might have composed if he had been a druggie. They are less restrained than the other performers I've mentioned, yet at the same time they are more detail-oriented, and the sheer prettiness of this reading goes far to sell the work.

One could make fun of the Symphony No. 2 as well, except it's a work I've enjoyed almost ever since I first made its acquaintance. It starts out with a gloomy theme that is transformed, in the last movement, into a triumphant paean, whose pomposity is more endearing than annoying. The unintentionally comical coda, based on this same theme, also foretells the splendors of Hollywood. You expect a garish sun to rise behind the orchestra—and then to fry all of them to a crisp. To make this music work, I think you have to be willing to wallow in it shamelessly, while still maintaining discipline in execution. Until now, Muti/Philadelphia (EMI) has been my go-to recording, but Petrenko/Oslo go one step further. This is very intense, emotional playing. One senses Petrenko loves this piece, and that he has been successful in conveying that love to the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra. The orchestra responds with playing that is deliriously poetic (try the start of the central *Andante*) and, when it needs to be, biting. The *Tempestoso* fourth movement is tremendously exciting, in part because the playing is so alert and precise. The Norwegian brass are in their glory, especially in the final *Maestoso*. Yes, it's pompous, but for once, one feels that the music has come by its pomposity honestly. The engineering is glorious too. This is one to play loudly, whether or not the neighbors are home. I'm setting this CD aside for my Want List. **Raymond Tuttle**

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