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HINDEMITH Piano Sonatas Nos. 1–3. Suite “1922” • David Korevaar (pn) • MSR 1507 (73:01)

The word among musicians and reviewers has always been that Paul Hindemith was a wonderful, witty, and warm person who wrote stark, cold, and generally forbidding music. The lone exception that is usually made for him is his opera *Mathis der Maler*, which he purposely tried to write in a semi-populist style because he wanted it to become a standard repertoire piece, and of course the excellent symphonic poem that he culled from that score. Nonetheless, I found the piano sonatas on this set to be both well constructed technically and warm in feeling and scope. Perhaps this comes from pianist Korevaar’s wonderfully lyrical reading, full of nuance and played in a singing style (Anatoly Vedernikov played it much more objectively in a 1965 performance, but Glenn Gould, although he used less pedal, played this sonata almost as lyrically as Korevaar in his Columbia recording), but one can’t mask the notes no matter how sympathetic the reading and they are, quite simply, among Hindemith’s most attractive works.

But perhaps there is a clue as to why this is so in the statement that these sonatas followed on the heels of his completing *Mathis der Maler*. Yet there is also that fact that the composer acknowledged inspiration from the passionate poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, part of which reads, “and you beautiful Ionian isles, where the sea breezes blow cool upon warm beaches, and under a powerful sun the grapes ripen; oh, where a golden autumn transformed the sighs of the poor into a song, now that the lemon grove and pomegranate tree, full of purple apples, and sweet wine and kettledrum and zither lead them to the labyrinthian dance.” Such high-flown phrases may seem antithetical to much of Hindemith’s music, but surely not to this First Piano Sonata. It is a gem, full of feeling and bypassing some of the composer’s more congested harmonies.

Moreover, Hindemith showed his well known (to friends, anyway) sense of humor when he submitted this sonata to his publisher. He included a note saying, “So you won’t think senility is setting in, I’m enclosing another smaller brother....It is the lighter counterpart of the rather weighty first.” It is indeed a fleet, somewhat lighthearted piece, although in this work I felt that Korevaar was just a tad too weighty in his touch on the keyboard. It could have sustained a lighter approach and still have been valid as a reading. Nonetheless, there is some sparkle in the performance and almost folk-like rhythms here and there. The one movement that is all business, so to speak, is the concluding rondo.

That being said, the lengthier Third Sonata seemed to me to lie somewhere in the middle. Its discourse is longer than in the Second, yet its mood seems surprisingly sunny for a composer who had recently exiled himself from his native country. Having fallen afoul of the Nazis aesthetically, he decided enough was enough and left Germany in 1935, which led to the premiere of his First Sonata by Walter Gieseking being canceled a year later. The second-movement scherzo in this Third Sonata is particularly playful for Hindemith, and Korevaar has its full measure. The third movement is particularly interesting, combining a rather sinister-sounding scherzo with light, delicate filigree work in its midst. The final fugue, though a bit thorny harmonically, has a bounce and swagger in its rhythm.

Hindemith’s early Suite “1922” was his youthful attempt at fusing the character of early jazz as he heard it with classical structure, and it is simply delightful—one of the few works by this composer that earns that adjective. One should note, however, that most Germans had a very skewed view of what was really jazz until the very late 1920s, when authentic American jazz bands made their way there, thus much of what Hindemith heard as jazz (as with Kurt Weill) is synthesized here in a ragtime form and rhythm. This does not detract from its wonderfully exuberant character, of course, but it does explain why “Shimmy” sounds nothing like “Sister Kate” and “Ragtime” doesn’t quite have the rhythmic lift of Scott Joplin’s own playing. Of course, such things are subjective anyway, and I’m sure that if an American pianist with some jazz experience chose to play these pieces they could be interpreted with more “schwing,” as Albert Lion of Blue Note records liked to call it, and less seriousness.

All in all, however, this is a fine recording, particularly of the sonatas.

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