



AUDIO CLUB OF ATLANTA

JUNE 2016

Frédéric Chopin: Piano Music
David Korevaar, piano
MSR Classics MS1626

American pianist David Korevaar has his own distinctive approach to the works of Frédéric Chopin, and I personally find the results very gratifying. He packs a lot of music into the present MSR release, and all of it bears his personal stamp. The selections are mostly very well-known examples of distinctive Chopin genres – ballade, scherzo, nocturne, mazurka, and barcarolle – but they sound refreshingly different here. As Korevaar states in his booklet notes, his object was to conceive a program that formed a dramatic arc charting Chopin's development as a composer who exploited the colors and textures unique to the piano as no one had done before him. He is not afraid to take slower than usual tempos on occasion, partly to avoid the miasma of broken rhythms, cross rhythms and slurs that can be a trap for the unwary pianist fresh from tackling, say, Beethoven, for whom there are no idle toss-away gestures and everything needs to be hammered squarely on the head. Chopin, by contrast, often requires considerable discretion of the pianist in terms of a delicate hand and a discernment of which textural strands are more important than others (though in the last analysis, of course, it all counts!)

The sensual beauty of the music is the other reason Korevaar is inclined to slow down and smell the night-blooming jasmine. The warmth of the decorative fioritura and the lyrical beauty of the two voices in the Nocturne in D-flat major, Op. 27, No. 2, speak eloquently in his interpretation. Others, such as the Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48, No. 1, tend to be more powerfully stated and have more immediate impact in their extremes of grief and joy, the latter an emotional state often longed-for, dimly remembered, or illusory. The Three Mazurkas, Op. 50, are as zestful as they are rhythmically and texturally challenging, with Mazurka No. 3 in C-sharp minor the most extended and the natural mediation between harmonic extremes.

Korevaar displays a masterful hand in the Ballades, Opp. 23 and 47, particularly in No. 1 in G minor, where he captures all the tension building up through the main section, the galloping coda propelled by a double octave keyboard run to the final climax, and then – in a sensational move by Chopin that never fails to give me goose bumps, a frozen chain of spaced chords like falling icicles or a necklace of poisoned diamonds, stabbing into the listener's consciousness. Marvelous!

That leaves the Berceuse (Lullaby), Op. 57, which is actually a more difficult piece to interpret than you might imagine because of its unchanging, gently rocking rhythm and naïve melody. One might say the same for the Barcarolle in F-sharp minor, Op. 60, with its swaying, gondola-like rhythm and the requirement for simple melody such as a Venetian boatman might sing, were it not for the duet of voices that emerges in the right hand, the increasing harmonic density and the long-building climax on a third theme. It ends in a final apotheosis of something like real joy and happiness, which is rare for Chopin. Korevaar's performance ends suddenly and dramatically, as Chopin would have it.

For the program finale, we have the great scherzo No. 4, op. 54, with its quicksilver patterns of arpeggiated quavers and tremolos that we encounter in the course of a powerful and very dramatic 11-minute piece. It ends in a mood of radiant optimism – in Korevaar's words, —a momentary triumph of the sharp-side key of E major over the downward pull of the flats. That concludes a very satisfying program that, even with a duration of 76:53, you will soon want to hear again.

PHIL MUSE