

PROKOFIEV 10 Pieces from *Romeo and Juliet*. *Sarcasms*. *Tales of the Old Grandmother*. 4 Études, op. 2. Toccata • Matti Raekallio (pn) • ONDINE ODE 898-2 (69:44)

PROKOFIEV Piano Sonatas Nos. 1-9. *Visions Fugitives* • Matti Raekallio (pn) • ONDINE ODE 947-3T(3CDs: 194:07)

Even in an increasingly crowded and competitive field, Raekallio's Prokofiev stands in a class apart. True, there are other pianists (most notably Frederic Chiù) who dance through the music with more wit and élan; there are others (like Richter) who can provide more sheer ferocity too. But I don't think there's any other pianist who has surveyed significant chunks of this repertoire with a sharper ear for the way that details of texture, rhythm, and articulation interact.

Romeo is a case in point. Although it would be unfair to say that Raekallio parches the music's lyricism (listen, for example, to the sinuous wistfulness of the "Dance of the Girls with Lilies"), he does tend to assume (rightly) that the tunes can take care of themselves. He thus devotes himself instead to refining the articulation of his accompanying figures, to highlighting subtle shifts in terrain (for instance, the rhythmic hiccup that marks the return of the B section in "The Young Juliet"), and to pointing up rhythmic details that are often buried or approximated (note how well he disentangles the superimposed rhythms in "Folk Dance"). Governed by a musicality less acute, I suppose, such obsessive attention could easily decay into aural overload; but Raekallio has the ability not only to make us aware of each detail but also to make us care as well. Whether in the impulsive vitality of "Mercurio," the sparkle of the dashing runs in "The Young Juliet," or the complex of inner voices in the Minuet, every detail here carries expressive weight. It's no surprise that the Études nearly burst with the same kind of eventfulness: He conveys the rhythmic lurches of the opening of the First Etude as well as anyone—and shifts his tone of voice magnificently to give a kind of cheeky cruelty to the "tranquillo" interruptions; and no one else generates the kind of energy that he does from the overlapping rhythmic structures in the Second. But it is, perhaps, unexpected that a pianist capable of investing the *Sarcasms* with this kind of weight is also able to coat the *Tales of the Old Grandmother* with such gentle nostalgia. Indeed, not even Chiù makes as strong a case for this uncharacteristically fragile set of miniatures. In sum, a prodigious release.

The box of sonatas joins together three discs originally released separately about a decade ago. I had the highest praise for the performances when they first came out (see *Fanfare* 12:6, 13:5, 15:2), and they've held up well in the interim: If you want the cycle played by a single pianist, this adventurous set is surely the one to

have. For the record, Raekallio—in contrast to Chiù, his most significant competitor—offers the original, rather than the revised, version of the Fifth.

Peter J. Rabinowitz

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Prokofiev: Piano Sonatas - Raekallio - ClassicsToday

Review by: David Hurwitz *Artistic Quality: 10 Sound Quality: 9*

Matti Raekallio's Prokofiev sonata cycle was among the very first Ondine productions to reach these shores, and it immediately established the label (and the pianist) as major players in the classical music market. While everyone will have a favorite performance of the individual sonatas (names like Graffman, Richter, Pollini, and Gavrilov come readily to mind), these versions withstand comparison to just about any others. Raekallio brings out the steel in Prokofiev's percussive writing, particularly in the great wartime sonatas Nos. 6-8, but he also knows how to relax into the music's bittersweet lyricism without losing crucial dramatic momentum. Now conveniently packaged in a single box, this three-disc set may just be the finest complete survey of the sonatas available. [11/10/1999]

PROKOFIEV Piano Sonatas (complete). **Sarcasms** • Anne-Marie McDermott (pn) • BRIDGE 9298 (3 CDs: 183:40)

Anne-Marie McDermott is one of our great under-the-radar pianists. Although she's appeared widely in an unusually varied repertoire (from Bach to Wuorinen, via Chausson and Beach), she's never had the kind of press splash enjoyed by Kissin or Lang Lang. Nor has she been rewarded with the kind of long-term label support that Hyperion has given such contemporaries as Hamelin and Hough. In fact, this Prokofiev cycle was originally recorded in 1999 and 2003 for Arabesque, which never even issued the third CD. But McDermott stands up well against those with more prestige: everything I've heard from her up until now—most recently, her spiffy Gershwin (32:1) and her Beach/Smith CD (reviewed by Michael Cameron in 32:5)—has been excellent, and this Prokofiev collection is, if anything, better still.

What's most striking, I suppose, is the variety of utterance. Even some of the best Prokofiev pianists (say, Valentine Lisitsa or Yaakov Kaman) can homogenize the surfaces in their pursuit of visceral excitement and overall effect. But, in part because of her magnificent touch, in part because of her unfailing interpretive intelligence, McDermott makes sure that the full range of Prokofiev's discursive

practice comes through, from the impressionistic dreaminess that opens the first movement of the Eighth, to the slightly manic wit that threatens the second movement of the Sixth, to the glower of the Fourth's Adagio, to the quicksilver madcap of the Third, and to the tight motoric drive of the third of the *Sarcasms*. Granted, while her technique is solid (no strain in the finale of the Seventh) and while her sound, where necessary, is bold, she doesn't have the bone-crunching intensity of Argerich or the sheer concentration of Richter. But she more than compensates in her treatment of details, in her rhythmic resilience, in her scrupulous dynamics, and most of all in her exceptional sensitivity to the music's narrative progress (the peaceful end of the Ninth, usually so perfunctory, seems a hard-won resolution in McDermott's hands). Her darting account of the first movement of the Second—with its disorienting shifts in direction—makes even Gary Graffman's famous recording seem slightly facile. This is, quite simply, playing of the highest order.

Want a sense of the scope of her imagination? Try some of the less popular music first: her kaleidoscopic account of the Fifth (revised version) or, even better, her richly dialogical performance of the usually pale Ninth, where her biting performance of the second movement contrasts especially dramatically with her subtly troubled reading of the Andante tranquillo. Neither of these sonatas is usually considered to represent Prokofiev at his most inspired, for good reason; but in McDermott's committed performances, they seem nearly as vital as the more popular Second.

Those wanting to build up a mix-and-match collection of this repertoire can choose from the long discography of individual sonatas set down by Argerich, Gilels, Horowitz, Krainev, Leschenko, and Richter, to name but a few of the front-runners. If you're looking for a package deal, though, this cycle takes its place with the Raekallio and the Chiu as the best ever recorded, well above the relatively plain recordings by Sandor, Nissman, and Boris Berman. The excellent engineering only makes the release that much more attractive. Strongest recommendation.

Peter J. Rabinowitz

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CD Review: Prokofiev/ Complete Piano Sonatas. *Sarcasms*, Op 17

12.04.09 Anne-Marie McDermott Gramophone Magazine

By Bryce Morrison

You will search high and low for a more meticulously prepared set of the Prokofiev piano sonatas than Anne-Marie McDermott's, which also includes the early, outrageous *Sarcasms* for good measure. With technique to burn and a fierce commitment to every note, she offers highly individual performances which none

the less remain scrupulously true to the composer.

In her accompanying notes McDermott speaks of Prokofiev's "intense and dramatic musical voice", for her a "visceral and stimulating challenge". Such eloquence is reflected in all these performances where no stone is left unturned; where every "i" is perfectly dotted and every "t" no less perfectly crossed. And just when you feel, in the Seventh Sonata's 7/8 precipitato finale that her tempo is perhaps more judicious than thrilling, she whirls you away with a vengeance in the Sixth Sonata's opening, discarding Prokofiev's allegro moderato in favour of something more racy. She is smartly on the move again in the following, sardonically dancing Allegretto, yet is at the same time glowingly alert to the fourth movement's Romance, to its expressive weight and intensity. Here, in particular, you are made aware of her rich tonal resource, big-scaled but never confusing strength with violence. The popular single-movement Third Sonata is a far cry from, say, Weissenberg's depth-charge but unmusical virtuosity; and in the second movement of the quirky Ninth Sonata (dedicated to Sviatoslav Richter) McDermott's command is as breathtaking as her ethereal resolution of Prokofiev's elfin capering at the close of the finale. Just occasionally (in, for example, the "scherzoishness"- the composer's own term- of the Second Sonata's second movement) I wished she had indulged herself in a little more fantasy and freedom, let the music off the lead, so to speak. Personally, I would never want to be without certain classics of the recorded repertoire: Richter "live" in Nos 2 and 8 in his 1961 London recital (BBC Legends, 3/09), Horowitz's sic of No 7, which so astonished the composer (Philips, 1/93) and Pogorelich in No 6, always among his finest offerings (DG, 11/84), yet all in all you could hardly wish for playing of a greater integrity than from Anne-Marie McDermott. Hers is a formidable achievement, reminding us that we have waited a long time for an American pianist of this stature.

AllMusic Review by James Leonard - 4*/5*

Listeners who appreciate the piano's percussive capabilities -- a series of carefully calibrated wooden hammers striking precisely tuned metal strings -- are likely to enjoy the piano sonatas of **Prokofiev**. In this three-disc set of all nine sonatas, **Anne-Marie McDermott** creates incredibly exciting and driving performances, treating her instruments, a Yamaha and a Steinway, as percussion instruments. With her crisp attack, clean articulation, muscular technique, inclination toward brisk tempos, and disinclination to overuse the sustain pedal, **McDermott** emphasizes the piano's machine-like qualities. This doesn't mean she can't let the music sing when it's appropriate; with subtle legato and blended balances, her Ninth Sonata's Andante tranquillo is wonderfully lyrical. It does mean, though, that **McDermott** knows how to rock. In the Second and Eighth sonatas' concluding Vivaces, in the Fourth's closing Allegro con brio, ma non leggiere, and especially

the Seventh's final Precipitato, **McDermott**'s performances rock as hard as **Metallica**. The set includes a witty take on the composer's Five Sarcasms. Captured in atmospheric sound, these performances leave the listener intrigued to hear what **McDermott** would do with **Prokofiev**'s five piano concertos.