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LIEBERMANN Nocturnes 8–11. Variations on a Theme of Schubert. 2 Impromptus. Piano Sonata No. 3

David Korevaar (pn) • MSR 1688 (68:28)

Given that the present MSR CD is labeled Piano Music, Volume 3, I thought it would be expedient to check the Fanfare Archive for the reviews of volumes one and two. What I assumed would be a straightforward matter turned out to be a bit more complex. There was a volume one of the piano music of Lowell Liebermann reviewed by Barbara Kevles way back in 27:3, more than 14 years ago, but this was issued on the Koch label, and contained at least two performances by David Korevaar that had been reissued from an earlier CD on Musical Heritage Society. However, I could not find that volume two of Liebermann's music has ever been reviewed in Fanfare. I then checked the MSR website to see if it had reissued the Koch disc(s), or had issued themselves a second volume. Apparently not, as I could find no mention of either there. Finally, I checked Amazon and found the Koch issues of volumes one and two offered there, the latter selling for \$52.52 and the former for a staggering \$468.11.

Since the MSR disc may be acquired for the relative pittance of around \$13.00, readers interested in Liebermann's piano music will undoubtedly want to begin to explore his keyboard music with volume three. This composer is quite well known, of course, for his writing in a conservative musical style. Like many others these days, he believes that there is much to be said within the ambit of tonality. The recital begins with four of the composer's Nocturnes, and I would affirm that Liebermann successfully captures the original meaning of the term as a "night piece." The opening Nocturne No. 8 exudes an atmosphere of mystery through subtle and sometimes gently dissonant harmonies. At around the seven-minute mark, the piece reaches a rather agonizing climax in which the density of notes produces more dissonance than I thought this composer had in his compositional quiver, but the piece resolves to quietude in its last section. The Ninth Nocturne is characterized by a rapidly running sequence of notes supported by reiterated chords, while the 10th in the series, a memorial for Gian Carlo Menotti, eschews virtuosity in its elegiac expression. The 11th, the final in this series to date, opens with a simple melody accompanied by arpeggiation in the left hand, but the complexity and virtuosity is ratcheted up considerably before the piece concludes, leaving the impression that the person who had been sleeping peacefully at the beginning of the work saw his pleasant dream morph into a nightmare. It's a very dramatic and powerful work.

The tune that Liebermann uses for his Variations on a Theme of Schubert comes from the Lied Heidenröslein, about as simple a tune as one can conceive. After stating Schubert's Lied almost verbatim, the composer attacks it mercilessly with biting bitonality, draconian drama, Hanon-exercise-like runs, and so on. I find humor in much of this piece (e.g., the atonal music box effect at around the nine-minute mark), and on the whole to be a brilliant deconstruction not only of Schubert's tune, but of his style in general. Heidenröslein is reiterated at the end of the piece, just to remind the listener what all the fuss has been about, and give him one last guffaw.

The Two Impromptus bear a bit of resemblance to the Nocturnes in their mostly gentle yearnings, although the first of them contrasts its gentle sections with those of considerably greater turgidity. Lasting more than 17 minutes, the CD's closing Sonata No. 3 forms the major work in the recital. It expands considerably on one of its composer's hallmarks—an unsettled atmosphere (often heard in the previous works herein)—to yield a work of dark drama, full of restlessness (engineered through multiple changes of meter) and passion. The four movements, following each other with little or no pause, are connected into one seamless tapestry that grips the listener throughout its course. Its last movement is exciting indeed, and has a whiff of Prokofiev emanating from it.

In 27:3, my colleague Raymond Tuttle wrote about this composer's music in a review of his chamber music: "Liebermann lacks nothing except a voice that is completely his own. It is unlikely a station-surfer will come across one of these works on the FM radio dial and exclaim 'Aha! Liebermann!' before the music's end. Is that a problem? No, not really, but let's not make grandiose claims for this music. It's enough to praise and enjoy Liebermann's talent."

While I do not completely disagree—certainly Liebermann's style doesn't smack the listener in the face as that of, say, Copland, might—I do hear compositional traits in his music (wandering melodic lines that turn in certain distinctive directions, for instance) that might well identify it to those who know his output well. That these are subtle rather than overt does not to my mind lessen their import. Whether or not his music will be considered to be "great" by future generations also does not lessen the considerable impact it makes upon me as I write these words in 2018. I am moved by these works, and have reason to believe that many readers of this magazine would be as well if they follow my advice to acquire the disc. Pianist David Korevaar, to whom Liebermann has dedicated at least one work, displays his considerable gifts in these readings. He dashes off the technical demands of some of these works with aplomb, while caressing the simple and quiet sections to bring out every last bit of their poetic nature. Here is a pianist with palpably clear musical gifts and intelligence, and one who should be widely heard. Recommended on all accounts to the point you'll find this disc on my Want List elsewhere in this issue.

David DeBoor Canfield

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