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**PIANIST POSSESSED -- by Wilfred Mellers**

If virtuoso pianism is a form of possession, it's hardly surprising that the piano recital dropped into the doldrums with the rise of our clinical technocracy. Today, however, technocracy itself is discredited by the young; and there are signs that we're in for the revival of the virtuoso magician.

Raymond Leventhal's Liszt and Alken recitals were a straw in the winds; so, at a more intrinsically musical level, is the recent phenomenal success of the young Australian **Roger Woodward**, whose performances of (very) modern music have been events rather than recitals. Interestingly enough, his awareness of the new is complemented by veneration for the romantic repertory; and his recording debut for EMI consists of three discs of piano music, ranging from Chopin's first book of studies to Scriabin's last sonata with Rachmaninov, Prokofiev and Shostakovich thrown in for good measure.

One side of the Chopin disc (OASD7560) consists of the opus 10 Etudes complete; the youthful performance is as assured as the youthfully yet astonishingly mature music. Woodward negotiates the fiendishly tricky A minor with almost casual ease, thereby allowing the music to sound dreamily spectral (as it should be) rather than devilish. The lovesick E major is exquisitely balanced in line, subtly shaded in timbre, its sentiment uncloying; the beautiful E flat minor has a Bachian density in its quasi-polyphonic figuration the F minor reveals the slightly malign poetry that many pianists comfortably evade.

If this side of the disc is good, the other side is unadulterated magic. The barcarolle-like D flat Nocturne glimmers out of a crepuscular half-light, taut yet tender almost to heartbreak in line, infinitely mysterious in variety of coloration. So it prepares us for Chopin's last large-scale composition, the Polonaise Fantaisie, which Liszt (of all people) considered too pathological to be art. Woodward's performance demonstrates that the art is indeed consummate, and more profoundly "modern" than anything in Liszt, even during his final prophetic years. I've never heard the enharmonic ambiguities in the opening section sound so tentatively explorative, yet inevitable, so that they suggest visionary horizons, and the extraordinary middle section – teetering between B major, G sharp minor and D sharp minor – sounds tranced, drugged, yet flowers into those fantastic garlands of multiple trills, engendering light.

After such a performance of this weirdly great piece one isn't surprised that Woodward's command of the *Célesté Volupté* and *Douce Ivresse* of Scriabin's 10<sup>th</sup> Sonata (on QASD7562) is totally convincing. Because the inner strands of the harmonic polyphony are delineated with such precise variety of nuance and colour, Scriabin's quivery sonorities came out as at once sensuous and paradoxically disembodied; as in *Parsival*, only more so, the Flesh itself seems to become Word. One sees why Scriabin, once extravagantly praised, then neglected and reviled, is again coming into his own; he offers a private heaven of the senses, without attachment to church or establishment. Comparatively, Prokofiev's Seventh Sonata, on the other side, sounds what it is; a superbly-written late romantic sonata, in which heroism has turned frenetic, even a little rancid. It's powerfully disturbing,

impressive music, here magnificently played; but it is not, like the Scriabin, a voyage of discovery. Nor is Shostakovich's D flat Prelude and Fugue, which completes the disc; though this too is a fine piece, disturbing in Beethovenian-comic vein. Rachmaninov's Preludes, which Woodward plays on OASD 7561, hardly aim at discovery or disturbance. Yet these performances – sumptuous in detail, poised in line, controlled yet compulsive in rhythm – help us to understand why Rachmaninov's haunting tunes and harmonic-figurative eloquence haven't been dimmed by the years. The music is “beautifully written for the instrument” because its technical probity is synonymous with authenticity of feeling; elegiac languor and neurotic frenzy are released in the elegance of the pianism, so self-preoccupation never degenerates into self-indulgence.

But in assessing Woodward's potential (which has been compared to that of the young Horowitz and Richter) I come back to the Chopin Nocturne and *Polonaise Fantaisie* and to the Scriabin sonata. On this evidence his all-Scriabin recital at the dear old Wigmore on October 8<sup>th</sup> should be not so much a concert, more a way of life. If that means we're all likely to end up, with Scriabin, in or near the looneybin, at least that nonsense, rejecting the values we're established on, has its own Alice in Wonderland logic. Once in a while, when there's no rock to cling to – such as Chopin discovered in Bach, in a mythic Poland, in Italian bel canto – one may need the courage to be lunatically reborn.

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