

Roger Woodward
DURRANT'S

DURRANT HOUSE
 HERBAL HILL
 LONDON E.C.1
 01-278 1733

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ARTILLERY MANSIONS,
 75, VICTORIA STREET,
 LONDON, S.W.1

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Scriabin interpretation

IN VIEW OF THE GREAT NUMBER of young pianists who now specialise in Scriabin and record his works, I am anxious to add a short note to my recent article concerning the interpretation of his music.

Many contemporary reports have survived to prove that Scriabin was a really great pianist. Since he himself played some of his most exacting works in public, he must have been a first-rate technician. Yet one ear-witness has assured me that his playing was particularly noteworthy for its lightness and transparency of texture and for the 'floating' sonority which he obtained by pressing the keys only half-way down. Scriabin's performances of his own works, as preserved by Welte piano-rolls, have been gathered on a single LP record side (obtainable as record No 681 from Record Treasures, Inc, PO Box 1278, North Hollywood, California 91604). I have only heard a few of them (*Préludes*, Op 11 and 22, *Mazurka* Op 40 No 2 and the famous *Etude* Op 8 No 12), and find it hard to form a definite opinion from these highly erratic performances of his early compositions. However, they do confirm that

*Sviatoslav Richter has succeeded
 Sofronitsky as Russia's finest
 interpreter of Scriabin*



the rhythmic freedom and rubato, for which Scriabin's playing was famous, was no mere legend. Being a great improviser himself, he undoubtedly changed many details in performance, which would explain why there are so few indications of tempo and so few dynamic markings in his scores.

Even more than a consummate technique Scriabin's music demands considerable interpretative imagination and also visionary power. Many liberties should be taken to enhance the expressive meaning. The best proof of this is provided by the extraordinary recordings left to us by the composer's son-in-law, Vladimir Sofronitsky, a pianistic star of the first magnitude whose name is not even mentioned in Western dictionaries and encyclopædias. Sofronitsky lived for a few years in France in the thirties, but he was never famous there. He later returned to Russia where he became a well established concert idol until he died in 1963, at the age of 62. Most of his records were made during recitals, and were only issued in the USSR. They are all mono, but they include the complete Sonatas (except for the first movements of No 1 and, surprisingly, No 7) and a large number of shorter pieces. They should now be issued in the Western world, for they are irreplaceable as models of Scriabin interpretation. All the performances are superb, but, in some cases (Sonatas Nos 3, 9 and 10, *Vers la flamme*, Op 72, and Two Dances, Op 73), it seems as though the true meaning of the music were being revealed for the first time. (I obtained tapes of all of Sofronitsky's MK records from the International Piano Library, 215 West 91st Street, New York, NY 10024.)

Sofronitsky was, it seems, as famous for his magical re-creation of the music he played as he was for the unevenness of his performances and his occasional technical lapses. His different recordings of the same pieces also prove that his interpretation could vary greatly from one day to another. Yet all of them display the same divinatory insight into the music's deepest meaning, the same uncanny gift for revealing the hidden logic behind Scriabin's most brutal changes of mood, his most whimsical transitions, his most unusual rhythms and most unpredictable harmonies. Sofronitsky's tempo can vary considerably within a given piece, sometimes even within a given bar (although less than the composer's in the surviving piano rolls). Like all great interpreters, he can both constantly change the character of the interpretation and the quality of the sound (in the late sonatas for instance), yet also hypnotise the listener by strictly adhering to a chosen tempo and working up to a huge climax (in *Vers la flamme*). Thus he often convinces and captivates even in the apparently least successful works.

Although belonging to a younger generation than Sofronitsky, Sviatoslav Richter was also 'exposed since childhood' to Scriabin's music, and his performances are equally exceptional and exemplary. It is surprising and unfor-

tunate that so few of them have been recorded, for they surpass those of any other living pianist. As well as Richter's well known and monumental interpretation of Sonata No 5 (DGG), there is another, equally fine, of No 6, immortalising a Prague recital of 1955. This mono recording also includes a stupendous performance of the great Op 65 *Études*.

To my mind Sofronitsky and Richter are the two foremost representatives of the true Scriabin tradition. Although Horowitz played for Scriabin as a youth and was a member of his most intimate circle, I cannot place him in the same exalted company. His playing is invariably superb from the technical point of view, yet I find most of his interpretations lacking not only in spontaneity and warmth, but also in expressive intensity.

After a composer's death, there usually occurs, between the first and the second generation of performers, a gap which coincides with his passage from contemporary to historical status. Earlier traditions must then be challenged, opposed, refuted, only to be rediscovered later. In Scriabin's case this has not yet happened for he has been too long ignored. If his music is to be convincingly played by younger pianists, then it must first of all be played extensively. Only thus can a new tradition be evolved.

Of all the recordings I have heard by younger pianists, the one I found most impressive is that of Roger Woodward playing Sonata No 10 and two early pieces (EMI). On the other hand, none of the recent American recordings seems to me entirely satisfactory because the artists lack either the powerful technique or the expressive gifts required to make the music live.

Two complete recordings of the sonatas will soon be available. Roberto Szidon's (DGG), whose first album — Sonatas Nos 4 to 10 — is already issued, is to include two early unpublished works, but I find the interpretation weak and uneven, sometimes too capricious and more often too literal. It is unfortunate that he did not take the time to live longer with this difficult music before recording it. John Ogdon (EMI) has already published an album including the complete sonatas and a large selection of shorter pieces. Although he does not possess the genius of a Sofronitsky, his playing is infinitely preferable to Szidon's. It is not always inspired, but it does give a clear and faithful image of the music. The technical level is in most cases very high, thus making this album an invaluable contribution, especially since most of the works have not been recorded before in the Western world.

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