MUSSORGSKY ***Pictures at an Exhibition*****. BRAHMS** ***Variations on a Theme by Paganini, book II. 3 Intermezzi. Capriccio no. 7 in D Minor.*** **SCRIABIN** ***Sonata no. 9*** • Blandine Waldmann (pn) • DUX1353 (72:09)

Paris-born French pianist Blandine Waldmann here makes her solo recital debut in the pages of *Fanfare,* having only previously appeared herein as one of nine performers on a recital of music by Swedish composer Jonathan Östlund. Waldmann undertook studies at the Conservatories of Rueil-Malmaison and Versailles, followed by a stint at the Royal Conservatory at Brussels where she studied with Dominique Cornil, and was awarded a diploma with distinction and a First Prize for Piano and Chamber Music. She did further work on a Masters Degree at the same institution, studying with Aleksandar Madžar, and received further awards. Since then, she has gone on to receive First Prizes at ten Piano Competitions, including the Erik Satie Competition in Lecce and the International Competition EurOrchestra da Camera "Nuovi Interpreti" in Bari. She has given recitals widely throughout Europe and the United States, including two at Carnegie Hall.

She has chosen several staples of the piano repertory to launch her solo discography. These include Mussorgsky's iconic *Pictures at an Exhibition,* and I'm always happy to see the insights of what a new artist might bring to my favorite piece of music. Of course, I am also a big fan of the music of Brahms and Scriabin, and enjoyed very much her renditions of four of their pieces as well. Waldmann's approach to all of these works is fairly straightforward, as she seems to prefer to let the music speak for itself in lieu of imposing an excessive personality upon it. She plays with grace and sensitivity throughout, and uses a fair amount of pedal in each work with the result that her tone is sonorous and resplendent. As she mentions in her interview above, she does not seek originality for its own sake. Indeed, I was impressed by her artistic credo as expressed there, and find her playing to be true to it.

The opening Promenade of *Pictures* is performed at a picture perfect (why haven't I thought of that pun before now?) walking tempo—not too fast, and not too slow. One particularly nice interpretive gesture comes in measures 18 and 20, where she provides a bit of space between the eighth notes on beats four and one respectively. It's almost as though the person walking through the gallery had his attention distracted by something en route to the first painting. Another felicitous effect is the way she creates such an exquisite mood in the introduction of "Il vecchio Castello" to set up the beginning of the famous melody of that piece, whereupon she creates about as plaintive an ode from the minstrel to his lady as can be imagined. I can also cite the perfect weighting of the melody in "Tuilleries," the eschewing of the subito *piano* in measure 47 of "Bydło" in preference to beginning a gradual decrescendo six measures later, to fade away the movement to its subtle end. I also applaud the differentiation Waldmann makes in execution of measures 22 and 23 of "Samuel Goldenberg," written identically by Mussorgsky—and played identically by the majority of pianists. Here, she makes the final dismissive chord of the second measure even more "persuasive" than that of the first.

The technical challenges of *Pictures* pose no problems to her whatever. These include a flawlessly and brilliantly executed final run in "Gnomus," (the most demanding passage in the entire work), and the impeccably clean right hand work in "Great Gate" in the passage beginning at measure 155. There is plenty of power in places such as the opening of "Bydlo" and the very end of the work that require it, but also delicacy in the piece where Mussorgsky asks for it. Her use of measured tremolo throughout the right hand of "Con mortuis" puts her in the minority of pianists, but she makes a most convincing case for it. Her attention to detail extends to the care she exercises in making a noticeable increase in the rate of tremolo between measures 107 and 108 of "Baba-Yaga." I would estimate that the majority of pianists, including such luminaries as Rudolf Firkušny, miss this entirely.

Hearing a few note and other discrepancies, I asked her which edition of the Mussorgsky she used, determining that it was the Schott Urtext edition. In this case, "Urtext" is not quite accurate, as it departs from Mussorgsky's autograph in several places. Of course, one cannot fault a performer for playing what is printed in the music before her.

I could only wish for a few things that I do not hear. In "Baba-Yaga" I prefer more emphasis the quick upward octave leaps in the right hand in measures 119–121, to enhance the dramatic nature of the passage. "Limoges" could be a little more breathless, all the better to portray the gossip that Mussorgsky is evoking here. A fair amount of reverb was added to the recording, and most of the time it works suitably, but in a few places, such as "Ballet of Unhatched Chicks," it counteracts the *staccato* articulation that the pianist is playing to the detriment of the overall effect. Despite these minor observations, I applaud her rendition of *Pictures* as a very fine one, worthy of being widely heard.

For the works by Brahms and Scriabin, all of which I dearly love, I'm not nearly as picky, and have no caveats in the reading they receive from this artist. Book II of the *Paganini Variations* by Brahms ranges in mood from the drama of Variation I through the rubato of Variation II to the disjointed character of Variation VIII, all of which are persuasively portrayed by Waldmann here. Likewise, she has numerous effective touches in the *Three Intermezzi,* op 117. Note the hesitation on the rolled chord in measure nine of the first piece, and the sublimely mysterious character she imparts to its middle section. The return of the "A" section of this movement features a flow of notes that must be executed seamlessly while exercising caution that the melody notes come out. All of this the pianist achieves in flawless fashion. Her consistent skilled use of rubato reaches its zenith in the "Capriccio in D Minor," the final movement of the *Seven Fantasies* that comprise the German master's opus 116. "Capriccio," after all, is related to the word *capricious,* and it is precisely this quality which she brings to the fore.

Scriabin's Sonata no. 9 is a soul-mate to the Sonata, op. 1 of Alban Berg, written a couple years before. Both works did their part in launching music into the explosion of contemporary styles that competed with each other throughout the 20th century. The Scriabin "Black Mass" Sonata is intricate in its rhythmic and harmonic complexity, and must be a real challenge for a pianist to bring off convincingly. Its complexity, in fact, makes it one of the earliest works requiring three staves to notate in certain places. Waldmann masterfully negotiates all of these complexities, forming the work into a convincing whole, and never losing sense of its formal structure and forward motion. Despite the Russian composer's frequent use of the dissonant interval of the minor 9th, she conceives this Sonata in terms of its position as a late Romantic work rather than one that abandons the aesthetics of that era. Her expressed desire to seamlessly and fluidly make the quicksilver changes of mood in this work are exquisitely rendered. I don't believe you will hear a better reading of this Sonata.

In short, Waldmann's beautifully thought-out and executed performances of each of these masterworks will serve to convince the listener that a important new exponent of the keyboard has arrived on the scene. Heartily recommended not only to pianophiles but to music lovers of every stripe.

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