



Camille Saint-Saëns: Complete Piano Concertos

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Fanfare (Peter Burwasser - 2010.11.01)

Every review I have seen of a complete set of the Saint-Saëns piano concertos comments on the surprising lack of wider appeal to performers and audiences of this music for all but the Piano Concerto No. 2. I can only add my voice to the choir; this is all wonderful music. The variety of texture, mood, and dramatic structure is really quite remarkable, and the technical quality of the writing ranks with the best of the 19th century. The music does not have the depth of Beethoven and Brahms, it is true, but it is certainly not cold or overly showy. I am especially fond of the Piano Concerto No. 1, with its beautifully prominent writing for the horn. Saint-Saëns got the bum rap in his own day, and continues to in our time, but it is not deserved.

The question becomes not whether or not to own a recording of this music, but which set to buy. Classic recordings by Rogé and Collard are available on budget reissues, and the king of the heap, both interpretively and in terms of expense, is Stephen Hough's 2002 transversal as a part of Hyperion's massive Romantic Piano Concerto survey. There are few pianists on the scene today who match his magical combination of virtuosity, elegance, and insight. That said, I am quite smitten by this new release. Anna Malikova is a late product of the mighty Soviet music-making machine, although the empire was crumbling just as she was graduating from the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in 1991, where she studied with Lev Naumov. Her playing is bold and colorful, very attuned to the character of the music, which some (including myself) consider hallmarks of the Russian school of pianism. I would have to concede the last degree of nimbleness to Hough, and his set does include another 15 minutes of Saint-Saëns bonbons. But Malikova's playing is a bit more, well, playful, making this a highly seductive collection. The regional German orchestra plays beautifully under the direction of Thomas Sanderling. Yes, he is the son of Kurt Sanderling, the great German-born conductor who spent most of his career in Russia, where Thomas was born.

The icing on the cake, always with the Audite label, is the recorded sound, which is robust yet naturally balanced. I can really hear the advantage of SACD sound when listening to Audite releases, although the audio is nearly as good on standard CD playback.