Allusions and beyond

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Norie Takahashi and Björn Lehmann's piano duo has been around since 2009 and already has two previous releases on the Audite label: "Originals and Beyond" and "Transcriptions and Beyond." Allusions and Beyond continues an exploration of familiar and more or less unknown repertoire, and this nicely programmed recording is packed with variety and interest.

Max Reger's admiration for Johann Sebastian Bach knew no bounds, and he made around 150 transcriptions of his works, of which this Fifth Brandenburg Concerto is a fine example. This kind of music in piano duet can easily sound rather dated, and as a domestic entertainment it certainly belongs firmly in that period before we became provided with the passive ease of broadcast music. Takahashi/Lehmann turn in a nice performance with plenty of life and expression, not attempting to introduce 'authentic' atmosphere but also not making Reger's version of the piece into anything heavier than it need be.

Equally if not more intriguing are György Kurtag's transcriptions of Bach. Kurtag as a composer is quite an uncompromising modernist, but timid listeners need have no fears with regard to these tracks. Bach's music is kept intact while the colour of the piano is broadened as an organ might with extra stops, adding octaves or fifths here and there and exploring contrasting registers for instance in the rumbling textures of Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu Dir. The added notes in O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig give the upper register a remarkable toy piano/music box effect.

With Bernd Alois Zimmermann we enter the world of two pianos as well as that avant-garde tension in which artistic abstraction meets the challenges of time and tradition. Zimmermann's work in this period involves much layering of time in every sense, and the allusions here appear in unexpected musical quotes that emerge and mix with each other, pitting Bach against Messiaen, Debussy, Mozart and other elements including fragments of jazz. This is 'music about music': demanding, but with an acceptance of its poetic impact by no means unrewarding. Zimmermann's stormy rages and sunlit shafts of beauty are to my mind like Beethoven's – only difficult in their requirement of focus and clarity, and the musicians here certainly give a virtuoso demonstration of communicating the force and "imploring appeal" of this score.

The musical contrast here between Monologues and Brahms' Variations on a Theme by Haydn could hardly be greater, but creates its own moment of musical magic. Takahashi/Lehmann play this work with plenty of detailed consideration, only giving

in to legato richness where the variations demand it, but with nicely proportioned dynamic contrasts and articulation giving as much clarity as they deliver with the other works in this programme. Collectors will have their own favourites when it comes to recordings of this work, and I have my own soft spot for the heightened drama from Martha Argerich and Nelson Freire in their live Deutsche Grammophon recording (review), but this version will do very nicely.

Beautifully recorded and nicely presented, this is the kind of release I have no hesitation in recommending to anyone looking for a meaty and entertaining adventure into the toothsome sonorities of good piano duo playing.

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