



k[NOW]n Piano

aud 23.446

EAN: 4022143234469



International Piano (2021.12.01)

innocence

Great feature on Jimin Oh-Havenith's current CD project see PDF!

RECORDING FOCUS



State of innocence

Korean-German pianist Jimin Oh-Havenith travels through 200 years of musical history in a new recording that reflects her wish to reconnect with the musicality of a child. **Colin Clarke** reports

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A first glance, Jimin Oh-Havenith's *K[NOW]N Piano* looks like a typical collection of repertoire favourites: the first Prelude from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Beethoven's *Für Elise*, Schumann's *Pänschke*, Mozart's *Turkish March*, Liszt's *Liebestraum No. 3* and Debussy's *Clair de lune* are all present. But dig a little deeper and you find lesser-known works, too. Gottschalk's *Le Bananier* and Javan *Pier's Für Alina*. The juxtapositions enable us to hear familiar friends in a new light as we are led by Oh-Havenith's experienced hands through 200 years of musical history.

The fact that Oh-Havenith studied with Aloys Kontarsky in Cologne tells us we are in the presence of a musical seeker. I went to Cologne to marry my late husband. He was based there – and I wanted to study with Kontarsky anyway. Because of contemporary music, I learned to be exacting with detail. It's remained the foundation of my working process.

That exactitude is clear in Oh-Havenith's incisive technique as well as her lovely sound, which is based on a legato touch. It is very hard to play legato like a singer. I tried for a very long time, maybe 30 years. It was so important.

The title of her latest album reflects Oh-Havenith's belief that music must constantly be made anew. 'We are always dealing with two instruments: one is the piano, another is our body,' she explains. 'We are haunted by fear and tension in our psyche. It will come through in the sound we make. We have to work internally with ourselves, which has much more to do with listening than playing. Listening you can do only now, which is always new. Playing from memory draws on the past, but we only listen in the "now". This is the moment that technique steps into the background.'

Her past solo recordings span repertoire from Bach to the Romantics, with notable readings of sonatas by Beethoven, Schubert and Liszt. When it came to making *K[NOW]N Piano*, she decided it was time for something comforting, relaxing and accessible to a wider audience. I started to collect the pieces I played in my childhood. As a child, we are educated to be very competitive. But you can't make music like that – sorry! So I worked to get rid of this psychic truth. Once it was put away I found the music flows naturally, like a child's playing. You are without fear or hesitation.

This process of renewal made Oh-Havenith realise she had lost touch with the musicality she enjoyed as a child. I asked myself whether it was possible, with my present experience and awareness, to build a bridge to my younger

Oh-Havenith with Aloys Kontarsky. First steps of her and piano technique. Gerd Finkenstein (1)



self? So I took all the small pieces on *K[NOW]N Piano* and gave them their own place. The experience felt new and very present. I realised I could also reflect the story of piano music itself, so arranged the pieces chronologically.

Oh-Havenith has received positive feedback from people who love listening to her album with their grandchildren. She believes strongly in making music part of daily life because of her own struggles as a professional pianist. 'I have always tried to find a balance,' she explains. 'I can now say that daily life is the foundation for my music. As Furtwängler wrote, "All true creative activity operates only in the state of innocence".

Oh-Havenith's inclusion of Gottschalk is a cause for celebration, as anyone who knows his music will surely agree. It also has a strong personal significance: her late husband Raymond Havenith recorded an album of Gottschalk's music for the German label MusicaNova in 1987. 'Gottschalk was a great human being. Very modern. He was travelling in America, in his own train with two grand pianos, and played for everyone – including people who had never seen a piano before. He had a really big heart yet never writes an unnecessary note. I love his music.'

K[NOW]N Piano was recorded on a Bösendorfer. I can make my own sound on this piano. I have used it for my last four albums, as well as a new Russian programme recorded during the pandemic. Russian music exudes very strong energy, and I think people now are greatly in need of strength. Mussorgsky's *Pictures* is so powerful. Yet it

is never about muscle power, which is why Mussorgsky and Scriabin are so colourful. Scriabin gives us poetry, while Rachmaninov is grand, generous and deep.

Oh-Havenith uses Rachmaninov to exemplify her working process: 'It is like mountain climbing: first you see the mountain, beautiful and majestic. As we experience more on the way, this is like a jungle of notes and sound. For me, clearing up the details is the only reality of making music. It's essential to understand the connection between each step or note, and the mountain or piece as a whole.'

This is not a journey that can easily be made alone: 'When you record, you are dependent on so many people. I am lucky to work with a fantastic team: producer Ludger Böckenhoff, engineer/editor Justus Beyer and piano technician Gerd Finkenstein. They give me inspiration and they support me so much. I always think of an album as a Gesamtkunstwerk.'



Jimin Oh-Havenith's *K[NOW]N Piano* is available from Audite (AUDITE23446) jiminohavenith.com

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