



Alexander Scriabin: The Complete Piano Sonatas

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The stopwatch is notoriously unreliable when it comes to describing performances, especially when it comes to music as variable in its ebb and flow as Scriabin's. But even though overall tempo isn't everything, it becomes an increasingly dominant interpretive parameter when you push (or sink) toward the extremes. And Vladimir Stoupel, a Russian-born pianist now in his mid-forties, is nothing if not extreme: these performances are consistently slow, often extremely slow, and sometimes nearly immobile. Take the Fifth Sonata: most performances clock in between 12 and 13 minutes, with a few speeders crossing the finish line in under 11 and a couple of tortoises taking 14 or so. Okashiro, whose performance was until now the slowest I knew, takes just over a quarter of an hour – but Stoupel trudges along more than a minute behind her, having relished (even ravished) every *meno vivo* marking in the score. This is hardly atypical of Stoupel's set. His account of the Third's first movement makes Gould's sound up-tempo; his Sixth is, by a good two minutes, the slowest in my collection; moments of the Ninth may make you think the music has simply expired.

I suspect that no one could sustain the music at these glacial tempos – but if any pianist could, he or she would have to depend on a kind of textural clarity and plasticity of phrasing that, on the evidence here, Stoupel simply doesn't possess. These are bass-saturated performances in which the bottom register (in alliance with the right foot) often covers everything else that's going on (listen to the left-hand octaves in the third movement of the First). And even when the main material is audible, motivic profile is weak and contrapuntal lines are insufficiently differentiated: rarely has the climax of the Ninth sounded so much like aimless banging. As for the music's long lines: Stoupel's shortness of breath often gives the music a foursquare quality that makes the readings sound even more lethargic than they are (try, as but two examples, the huff-and-puff phrasing of the Eighth or the heavy-lifting in the climaxes of the Tenth).

In sum, these are dark, heavy, and unsubtle performances that lumber where they should leap, insist where they should hint, and drone on where they should come to the point. If Hamelin, especially in the late music, gives us an aquarium of darting iridescent tropicals, what we get here is a tank stocked with jellyfish.

Isn't there anything here to enjoy? Sure: the still opening of the Fourth, the uneasy harmonic haze in the third movement of the Third, the wide dynamic range capped by an overpowering sonority in the climaxes throughout (the second movement of the Second and the Sixth are especially imposing). But for the most part, this is playing in which Scriabin's fire has been doused and his transgressive ecstasy transformed into deadly duty. As I've said often, Hamelin's rapturously airy cycle (20:1) is my benchmark; but even for readers ready to duplicate, there are lots of preferable

alternatives. Kasman's hard-hitting set (29:3) provides an especially illuminating second opinion; so does Ogdon's sometimes manic tour of the repertoire. Then, of course, there are classic recordings of individual sonatas by Richter (his Carnegie Fifth is especially imposing, 29:6), Horowitz, Sofronitsky, Kun Woo Paik, and Wild. Even with Audite's excellent engineering, this release – the only cycle ever to require three CDs – simply isn't competitive.

