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Alexander Scriabin: The Complete Piano Sonatas

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My other complete Scriabin Piano Sonata recordings are two-disc sets that include additional works besides the ten sonatas (Ashkenazy on Decca 452961 and Hamelin on Hyperion 67131, Sept/Oct 1996). Stoupel's total time precludes fitting all ten on two discs, and that leaves us with a short 44-minute CD. CD Universe had Stoupel at $31.29, about $3 less than Hamelin and more than double the older Ashkenazy.

I set up a spread sheet to compare timings and yes, Stoupel takes more time on every movement of every sonata than either Ashkenazy or Hamelin. I tossed in a few Sofronitsky and Horowitz times just to complete the picture. After several complete hearings, I believe that Stoupel has a strong affinity for Scriabin and great intellect to sort everything out clearly in some of the densest piano music of the 20th Century. The recorded sound is excellent and the big climaxes are as powerful as any on records. Yet, he fusses over little details and uses much more rubato than the others. There are times when the music almost stops and simply hangs in the air. Movements that
should dance tend to plod.

The Ninth Sonata, Black Mass in the hands of Sofronitsky, conjures up images of demons with cloven hooves darting in and out of the shadows. Stoupel's devil is massive, slowly breathing fire and laying waste to all that come before him. Ashkenazy's Fifth Sonata easily switches gears in and out of Impetuoso and Languido and Presto con allegrezza. Stoupel has all the necessary technique to manage the treacherous difficulties here, but when he hits the Languido section and shows us his wonderful dynamic control, all forward momentum comes to a halt. We are reduced to waiting for the next note.

The Tenth Sonata, with all of its trills and tremolos, builds, under Horowitz, to a shattering climax. Stoupel gets caught up in all of the minute dynamic markings. I heard new things in his performance, but I want the kinetic energy of Horowitz. For the money, Ashkenazy can't be beat. Yet, even though the other great performances mentioned here might edge Stoupel out, I like this music enough to want all of these recordings, including his. Any time I can hear a good performance, especially when it perks up my ears and makes me think anew about the music, I consider it worthwhile.

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