

INTERVIEW

Maria Lettberg

My first meeting with Scriabin's music was indirect – my mum had the complete recordings of Vladimir Sofronitsky, and I just listened to his music without knowing what pieces I had heard.

Then later, when studying in St Petersburg, I played Scriabin's Sonata No 1 and it felt like my own skin; I felt very comfortable with this music. So I played some more, and eventually played all his sonatas in recital. Capriccio then asked me to make a Scriabin recording – but they were not interested in just his sonatas, they were interested in recording all his solo piano music!

Some people said "this music is so psychologically demanding, it's dangerous music – do you feel OK?" But I also recorded Schnittke's Concerto for Piano Four Hands, and when I came back to Scriabin do you know what I discovered? Total harmony. Maybe if you play just Bach and Brahms, who are among my favourites, then you think Scriabin is so crazy, but no, I'm still OK. The paradox in Scriabin is that his music has tensions: between life and death, between sweetness and bitterness – always both together.

Scriabin used to write unusual instructions on his scores, in French. I'd read that one editor of his music had suggested removing these as they make your mind unclear. But I think these remarks actually give the key to interpreting his music and it's very important for the performer to take it seriously. It's very abstract – when you say "sadness", what does this mean? But it really gives you a lot of inspiration: words like *forte* or *mezzo forte*, they don't explain to you what kind of effects. Scriabin's words give you the feeling of how you have to do it. Knowing his background – I wrote a dissertation on Scriabin for my doctorate – helped me very much to understand his music and its aesthetic. Somehow, however, as a pianist I have to make my choice: and I pass from words to music.

Interview by
Martin Cullingford



Maria Lettberg:
formidable



Surveying Scriabin is a journey beset by problems but it's tackled with relish here

Scriabin

Complete Solo Piano Works

Maria Lettberg *pf*

Capriccio © 49 586 (8h 9' • DDD)

Includes bonus DVD, 'Mysterium: The Multimedia Projects'

Here is a virtually complete recording of Scriabin's piano music (works without opus numbers are omitted). Each disc allows you to journey from his early Romanticism to middle-period idiosyncrasy and finally to the hallucinatory magic of his last years. Reactions to Scriabin's "creative laboratory" have fluctuated wildly. For some such music was a reminder that "there are those who think that the air is filled with green monkeys with crimson eyes and sparkling tails, a kind of ecstasy that is sold in Russia at two roubles a bottle" while Stravinsky wondered at a prophetic and neurotic genius ("Scriabin, where does he come from and who are his followers?").

What is not controversial is the immensity of the challenge facing even the most intrepid pianist compelled on a journey of discovery as fraught as it is dazzling. And while I would not class Maria Lettberg, a Swedish pianist who has found fame outside the competition circuit, in the same league as, say Horowitz, Richter or

Ashkenazy, she is for the most part warmly fluent and sympathetic.

How she relishes the violent moodswings of the Op 11 Preludes, music alternately lost in its own delirium or ablaze with pianistic heroics. She understands

ideally the Mazurkas where Chopin is made to speak with an increasingly strong Russian accent and she casts a shimmering haze across the necromancy of the late sonatas where, rather like Virginia Woolf's final and tragic diaries, we are ushered into a painfully self-absorbed world. Here obsessive patterns, harmonies and intervals seem to spin in interstellar space, but Lettberg manages to make sense of an instruction such as *tres doux et pur* (the Tenth Sonata's opening) when the mood is cloudy and malignant.

An accompanying DVD shows the pianist once more fully attuned to Scriabin's demand in the Fourth Sonata to "fly towards the blue star", to imply "the creation of the world" in the Fifth Sonata and, finally, to realise the composer's assumption that he was God. This is an invaluable issue and a formidable achievement finely recorded. **Bryce Morrison**



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