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- Jerry Dubins

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CHOPIN Ballades: in g, op. 23; in F, op. 38; in A \flat , op. 47; in f, op. 52. Fantaisie in f, op. 49. **Polonaise-Fantaisie** in A \flat , op. 61 • Peter Miyamoto (pn) • BLUE GRIFFIN 107 (63:38)

SCHUBERT *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (trans. Liszt). **Piano Sonata in A**, D 664. *Der Müller und der Bach* (trans. Liszt). **Impromptus**, D 935. **Allegretto** in c, D 915 • Peter Miyamoto (pn) • BLUE GRIFFIN 147 (75:22)

BRAHMS Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel. **Albumblatt** in a, op. posth. **Waltzes**, op. 39. **Piano Pieces (4)**, op. 119 • Peter Miyamoto (pn) • BLUE GRIFFIN 329 (68:19)

A PIANO RECITAL BY PETER MIYAMOTO **BACH** *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*. **BERG** Piano Sonata, op. 1. **BEETHOVEN** Piano Sonata No. 30. **RAVEL** *Jeux d'eau*. **CHOPIN** Scherzo No. 3 • Peter Miyamoto (pn) • BLUE GRIFFIN 335 (59:25)

Here we have a veritable feast of highly popular and heavily recorded core keyboard works, a circumstance which, in itself, could spell trouble for any pianist who isn't as well known as are the composers and the pieces on these four discs. So what can I say to persuade you that if you're a serious collector, Peter Miyamoto's four albums are indispensable?

Two of the four discs at hand are not new. The Chopin album was recorded as far back as 2001, and the Schubert album, recorded in 2007, was previously reviewed in *Fanfare* 32: 5 by Charles Timbrell.

What I've found regarding Schubert performance is that one's reaction can have as much to do with one's personal emotional response to the composer's music as it can to the individual who's playing it. Let it be stipulated that Mitsuko Uchida, for instance, is as technically well equipped to deal with Schubert as anyone, and that she has long been held by many to excel in this repertoire. Yet, without taking anything away from her artistry, there is something about her way with the music that doesn't speak to me with the deep sense of resonance I experience when listening to the same music played by Radu Lupu and, in some cases, by Wilhelm Kempff and Claudio Arrau. Miyamoto's Schubert affects me in that way. It's not something that's easily explained in terms of the pianist's touch, tone, pedaling, dynamics, or even phrasing *per se*. It has something to do with respiration, with the way in which the music seems to inhale and exhale with the natural rise and fall of Miyamoto's breathing.

Take, for example, the opening bars of Schubert's A-Major Sonata, D 664. I've mentioned before that my favorite performance of the piece is by Arrau in his three-disc Philips set of the last sonatas, recorded between 1978 and 1982, late in the pianist's life. To those opening measures, Arrau brings a feeling of easeful ambling down a country lane speckled by morning sunlight, and in that relaxed stroll, he touches a chord ever so slightly wistful. I'd never heard anyone capture the character of those opening measures in quite that way until I heard this performance by Miyamoto; and to me that makes Miyamoto a Schubertian of major distinction. The pianist's sensitivity to Schubert's seductive song, always unsettled by dark undertows, carries through to his readings of the later set of Impromptus, the bleak and menacing C-Minor *Allegretto*, and the two Liszt transcriptions in this beautiful sounding CD, produced and engineered by Sergei Kvitko and recorded on a Steinway Model D in Blue Griffin's "The Ballroom" Studio.

Miyamoto's Chopin album, as noted above, is the earliest recorded of these four discs, and this one affords the pianist the opportunity to display his virtuosic brilliance, which he does with impressive results. The big, bravura passages in the ballades and, of course, the *fantaisie* and *Polonaise-Fantaisie* showpieces are executed with confident, effortless flair, but Miyamoto's Chopin is by no means all glitz and razzle-dazzle. He finds the emotional core of each of these pieces, extracting the fervid poetry that lies at the heart of the music's Romantic inspiration. This album dates from 2001 and was also produced and engineered by Sergei Kvitko, but unlike the Schubert CD, this one was recorded in The Molly Grove Chapel of the First Presbyterian Church in Lansing, Michigan. The acoustic properties of the venue are exceptionally sympathetic to Miyamoto's piano and to Chopin, giving them both a sound stage that provides a lovely sense of intimacy for the quiet passages and a brightly lit but never harsh setting for the technical fireworks – another beautifully played program and recording.

Miyamoto waited until 2012 to return to Blue Griffin's studios to record his Brahms CD, one which displays three distinct sides of the composer's personality and musical makeup. Perhaps not the explicitly virtuoso showpiece that Brahms's *Paganini Variations* is, the composer's earlier Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel is still extremely taxing technically and more demanding of intellectual discipline. I've reviewed a number of excellent recordings of the piece over the years, including one by Cynthia Raim which I found to be exceptional for its formal strength. In equal measure, Miyamoto also brings both physical stamina and intuition for structural organization to his performance of the piece that make for its ideal realization.

The 16 Waltzes, op. 39, present a lighter side of Brahms, the "tavern music" side, if you will. The *Hungarian Dances* and *Liebeslieder Waltzes* fall into the same category. These were pieces that fed the Viennese craze for dance music in general and waltz music in particular. The Waltzes don't quite meet the definition of "parlor music" – i.e., pieces designed for the popular 19th-century pastime of private, in-home music-making by talented amateurs – for (1) they're of a fairly advanced technical level; and (2) they're of a musical content and style that's more public in nature. Miyamoto, of course, gets the sly, coquettish, and sometimes outright vulgar aspects of these waltzes and plays them with knowing inflection.

Finally, Miyamoto turns to the Four Piano Pieces, op. 119, Brahms's last works for piano. Though composed between 1892 and 1893, four years before Brahms's death, the pieces seem already to have departed this world for the next. But for the fairly extroverted concluding number, titled Rhapsody, which recalls, in highly condensed form, the style of the op. 79 Rhapsodies, the first three pieces, assigned Brahms's catchall Intermezzo title, are of a strangely dispassionate nature. Miyamoto's readings of the four pieces are personal and expressive, but more importantly, they achieve that sense of oneness with Brahms that I noted in my 36:5 review of Matthew Graybil's playing of the op. 119 set – an exceptional achievement.

The last and most recent of Miyamoto's four albums is the only one that is not devoted to a single composer, and the program is quite diverse, ranging from Bach, Beethoven, and Chopin to Ravel and Alban Berg. I don't detect any particular theme or premise to the program, suspecting instead that it just happens to be made up of works in Miyamoto's repertoire that are special to him and that he believes provides him with the best opportunity to demonstrate his versatility and well-rounded musicianship.

Relief, indeed spiritual refreshment, comes for me in Miyamoto's performance of Beethoven's Sonata No. 30. As always, it's the "Gesangvoll" movement by which I measure a pianist's power to communicate to me the stillness, timelessness, and sense of serene ennoblement that radiate from its pages. And I can say without hesitation that Miyamoto's reading of this movement is alone worth the price of the disc. At a slower than usual tempo, and with a quietude in the soft passages the likes of which I've never heard before, Miyamoto penetrates to the heart of this music in a way that held me in rapt bliss and brought tears to my eyes.

In Ravel's *Jeu d'eau* (*sic*), his playing is the perfect embodiment of Ravel's inscription on the score, "River god laughing as the water tickles him." The disc concludes with an imperial and imposing performance of the most majestic and stately of Chopin's scherzos, the Scherzo in C# Minor, op. 39.

As I intimated at the outset, these four discs contain some of the most dynamic and thrilling piano playing to be had on disc. Peter Miyamoto is a major discovery for me and will be for you too when you acquire any or all of these CDs.

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