

Alexei Lubimov

Messe Noire

Stravinsky: Serenade in A

Shostakovich: Sonata No. 2 op. 61

Prokofiev: Sonata No. 7 op. 83

Scriabin: Sonata No. 9 op. 68, "Black Mass"

Alexei Lubimov: piano

ECM New Series 1679

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"This album is dedicated to my teachers and mentors Anna Artobolevskaja, Heinrich Neuhaus, Lev Naumov and Maria Yudina" Alexei Lubimov

1913, 1925, 1942 and 1943 – stations of Russian piano music in the first half of the 20th century: Scriabin, Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Four important works, all of them masterpieces. But what connects them? "I see this selection as a panorama of different styles", says Alexei Lubimov. "Messe Noire" is a subjective selection, and could have had a completely different look. Nevertheless, when the outstanding Russian pianist presents his first solo program since the album "Der Bote" ("The Messenger" – ECM New Series 1771), so highly praised by reviewers when released three years ago, one expects not just highly reflective interpretation, but carefully-considered dramaturgy as well.

In the surprisingly homogenous compilation of elegiac miniatures in "Der Bote" – from Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach to Valentin Silvestrov – a withdrawn, meditative tone easily bridged the span of three centuries, and the relationship between the works was immediately audible. "Messe Noire" concentrates on the short span of only 30 years. However, the contrasts between the works are all the more marked and the conflicts carried out in them more intense. Just as "Der Bote" was a "new" program, as Lubimov himself said, representing as it did his repertoire interests since the 90's, "Messe Noire" is a relatively "old" one. Even as a student at the Moscow Conservatory he had often played the pieces. He had lived with them, yet at the same time they had caused him some irritation. Lubimov was one of the first in the Soviet Union to espouse the cause of the western avant-garde, from Schönberg and Webern to Stockhausen and Boulez. In the late 60's he gave first performances in Moscow, much against the will of the regime, of works by the American composers Charles Ives, John Cage and Terry Riley. Shostakovich and Prokofiev were of less interest to him at that time.

Now, however, he is fascinated by the juxtaposition of Prokofiev's seventh Sonata and Shostakovich's second. Composed in 1942 and 1943 respectively and both deeply influenced by the events of the Second World War, the pieces share a stylistic relationship yet have "a completely different emotional aura". Shostakovich, who worked on his second Sonata between his seventh Symphony "the Leningrad" and the no less monumental eighth, evokes suffering and fear. The setting is bare and thin for long periods. The composers seeks a hold, one could even say a refuge, in the neoclassical use of Baroque compositional models. In his booklet text to this recording Reinhard Schulz sees the unpretentious movement of the music as a summons to, "battle on, whatever the cost": "Deepened by the forlorn melody of the second movement, the sonata increasingly reveals that herein lies its underlying content and its richness."

Prokofiev on the other hand, in spite of all the raging confrontations, remains positive, but, as Lubimov remarks, his is a strained optimism. After the first performance by Sviatoslav Richter the seventh Sonata was awarded the Stalin Prize second class. Today it is a standard

work, a “pièce de résistance” of all piano virtuosi. The creation process of both works was rather laborious. Prokofiev drew up sketches for the seventh Sonata in Moscow, at the same time as he was working on his sixth. It was not until he was evacuated to Tbilisi that he wrote down his ideas within a few days. The manuscript of Shostakovich’s second Sonata however is covered with crossings out and corrections. It would appear that the composer had originally even intended to integrate a fugue into the work.

“Shostakovich and Prokofiev composed in Moscow and for Moscow. Both Sonatas are inextricably connected to the place and time of their composition,” remarks Alexei Lubimov. As opposed to them, Scriabin and Stravinsky represent the cosmopolitan type of Russian composers. However, their works also represent two poles in Lubimov’s program.

Of Scriabin’s ninth Sonata, Reinhard Schulz writes: “Only seldom have structural logic and vibrant freedom been so thoroughly thought out and brought together”. In scarcely more than eight minutes, it portrays in notes the hammering triumph of satanic powers over, in Scriabin’s words, the “slumbering shrine”. In 1913 Scriabin, only two years away from his premature death, looked far into the future with this sombre music impregnated with mystery. Stravinsky, the visionary composer of 1913’s “Rite of Spring” was already looking backwards by 1925. Between the Piano Sonata and “Oedipus Rex” he wrote his Serenade in A, a work of about twelve minutes, with which this CD opens, albeit with deceptive cheerfulness. “In each of the pieces, I have caught moments which are characteristic of that sort of music” – was Stravinsky’s lapidary comment to the four movements “Hymn”, “Romanza”, “Rondoletto” and “Cadenza finale”. Lubimov regards Stravinsky as one of the most important of all 20th century composers: “Stravinsky anticipated the post-modern. His works are lively and appealing, especially in their often only minimal inner development.”

Alexei Lubimov was born in 1944 in Moscow and at the city’s conservatory was one of the last students of the legendary piano teacher Heinrich Neuhaus. He developed an interest in “old music” at an early age, but was equally interested in contemporary music, especially composers of the western avant-garde. In the 1970s when officialdom clamped down on artistic freedoms, Lubimov formed the Moscow Baroque Quartet, which gave him the opportunity to perform numerous works of “old music” on historic keyboard instruments – a pioneering deed in the then Soviet Union. In 1988 he founded the avant-garde festival “Alternativa”. Since the 80s, Lubimov has performed around the world. He has played with numerous important orchestras and renowned conductors and plays chamber music with partners such as Christian Tetzlaff, Natalia Gutmann and Andreas Staier.

His extensive discography includes works from the Baroque to the present day. ECM New Series has so far published three recordings with Alexei Lubimov. The New Yorker declared the recording “Der Bote” (The Messenger) to be one of the “most distinctive discs of 2002”. Russell Platt wrote: “The performances are so hauntingly persuasive that each one seems indispensable.” The Silvestrov CD “Metamusik / Postludium” (ECM New Series 1790) on which the pianist plays with the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra under the conductor Dennis Russell Davies received enthusiastic reviews. Together with the Keller Quartet Lubimov has also recorded Alfred Schnittke’s Piano Quintet (ECM New Series 1755). In September of this year, in time for Arvo Pärt’s seventieth birthday, ECM will release “Da Pacem” with the first recording of Pärt’s “Lamentate”. Alexei Lubimov is the soloist in this work for piano and orchestra from 2002, and Andrey Boreyko conducts the Symphony Orchestra of the SWR Stuttgart.

CD package includes 16 page German-English booklet with liner notes by Reinhard Schulz