

ALBUM REVIEWS

Reviews by **Peter Quantrill** and **Warwick Thompson**

DONOHOE & LUTCHMAYER

Busoni: *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*, Sonatas, Chopin Variations, etc.
Chandos CHAN20342

★★★★



What's in a name? Busoni intended his *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* to live up to its subject, the final unfinished piece in Bach's *Art of Fugue*.

But if the grandiose title and half-hour scale of the piece have put you off before now, try this lucid and springy new version. Peter Donohoe and Karl Lutchmayer have experience of playing the *Fantasia* live, which tells to good effect in the coursing pulse and theatrical tension of their dialogue. It helps, too, that the 12 sections are tracked separately, giving listeners without a score a bird's eye view. There's nothing cute or miniature about the two Sonatas, but Donohoe (in No 1) and Lutchmayer (in No 2) underline their Chopin-like potential for harmonic mystery and textural magic. Donohoe's shrewd sense of timing is especially persuasive in the later version of the Chopin Variations, and in the Gothic glories of the Bach/Busoni D minor Toccata. **PQ**

POLINA OSETINSKAYA

Simple Music: Solo piano works by Silvestrov, Pärt and Kancheli
Evidence Classics EVCD 126

★★★★



It may be unfair to her artistry, but I can't listen to the playing of Moscow-based pianist Polina Osetinskaya without feeling admiration and awe for her courage

in loudly criticising the war in Ukraine, and suffering socially and professionally in the process. In this album, her performance of her friend Giya Kancheli's *Simple Music* is designed as comfort in this situation, both for herself and her audience: 'It was hard to live, hard to breathe, but music helped us to survive,' she writes. The work consists of 26 slow and melancholy miniatures, with titles such as 'King Lear', 'Don Quixote' and 'Waiting for Godot.' They're all tuneful, some of them are jazz-lite, and one or two are quirkily faux-naïve in a spiky way. I find Kancheli's soundworld overall a little too unvaried to provide comfort, but still admire the impulse behind the presentation. The album includes a few similarly pared-down, bittersweet works by Valentin Silvestrov and Arvo Pärt too. Brava, Osetinskaya. **WT**

FRANK DUPREE

Kapustin: Piano Concertos Nos 2 & 6, Variations, Toccata, etc.
Capriccio C5528

★★★★



For me, Kapustin irresistibly conjures up the look and feel of Soviet-era light entertainment (YouTube holds hours of it). Cascades of notes à la Oscar

Peterson, passing forays into hoochie-koochie, every gesture coordinated just so, like the Bolshoi corps de ballet dancing *Swan Lake*. Frank Dupree has compared the challenge of this music to the Ligeti Etudes; both composers find joy in the virtuosity of both creation and execution. The generic title of 'Variations' conceals an irresistible four-minute romp through Gershwin's 'I got rhythm', raising the curtain on Dupree's latest stop on his Kapustin odyssey. The Southwest German Radio SO and Big Band under Dominik Bekkirch are snappy partners in the Concertos Nos 2 (1972) and 6 (1993). The opening of the *Concert Rhapsody* (1976) is Kapustin at his most laidback and cinematic, a welcome break from his wired, triple-espresso energy. **PQ**

PIZARRO & ZHOK

Mario Tarengi: Works for Two Pianos including world premiere recordings
Danacord DACOCD 983

★★★★



If you're scratching your head and thinking 'Mario Who?', then you're not alone. Mario Tarengi (1870-1938) is one of those easy-on-the-ear Romantic

composers whose music has fallen by the wayside. But as Artur Pizarro and Rinaldo Zhok demonstrate in this album of world premiere recordings, the neglect is utterly undeserved. In his substantial *Variations on a Theme of Schumann*, and further *Variations on Chopin's Prelude No 20*, Tarengi displays joyous energy exploring the harmonic and rhythmic potential of his chosen themes (even if he doesn't quite reach the levels of inventiveness of Rachmaninov's Op 22. Still, no shame in that.) There are some delightful Baroque pastiches (a gavotte, a prelude and fugue) and an Allegro Festoso with enough oomph to power a parade of drag queens. Pizarro and Zhok play the works on restored pianos from the 1920s which offer a darkly rich timbre, full of unusual chocolatey warmth and heft. A winner. **WT**

YOAV LEVANON

Liszt: Concertos 1 & 2, Totentanz
 Luzerner Sinfonieorchester/Michael Sanderling
Warner Classics 5021732423979

★★★★



They say you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, and – now I realise – neither should you judge a pianist by their physique. In the case of Yoav Levanon, one

fears that a strong breeze might blow him over. And yet the muscular strength, and the sheer surprising *bigness* he brings to the two Liszt concertos, belies his slight frame. His performance is wonderfully exhilarating – the percussive *Marziale* of Concerto No 2 is an especially barnstorming moment – but the more reflective passages are handled beautifully too. I get a sense that Levanon instinctively appreciates Alfred Brendel's comment that unless one understands the mysterious 'allure of the fragmentary', one can't successfully perform Liszt. It's also rather touching to note that Levanon was only 19 when he made the recording last year – the same age as Liszt himself when he first began to sketch material for the earlier concerto. A major career beckons. **WT**

YOUNG-AH TAK

Schubert: Piano Sonatas D784 in A minor & D894 in G major
Steinway & Sons Steinway30235

★★★★★



A Korean pupil of Leon Fleisher, now teaching at the Crane School of Music in New York, Young-Ah Tak brings a spring to the meditative step of D894's epic

opening *Molto moderato*. The keynote is nobility rather than world-weariness, and Schubert's song-writing runs through the veins of her phrasing. I find the forthright pulse and 18th-century elegance of her *Andante* no less persuasive: partly a matter of the exceptionally rich and immersive sound, which projects bass weight and top-register lyricism with equally well-modulated fidelity from a front-row perspective. There's nothing fey or fancy about Tak's Schubert. The A minor D784 sets out with bold intent, unburdened by anachronistically pathos, always seeking the heart of the phrase, capped by a fiery *finale* where every note of the counterpoint means something. My only complaint is the short measure (54 minutes) from a pianist who has the full measure of Schubert on a modern piano. **PQ**