

Pianist, Irina Chukovskaya provides an impressive recital for Melodiya of works by Shostakovich that are all too rarely heard

CLASSICAL REVIEWER



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Born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan into a family of musicians, Irina Chukovskaya began her studies at the age of six with the legendary piano teacher, Tamara Popovich in Central Music School at Tashkent Conservatory. She went on to study at the Central Music School in Moscow, the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory and at Rutgers University, USA.

Chukovskaya went on to become a prize winner at the International Frederic

Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw before establishing herself as an outstanding performer of modern piano music. The great cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich described her playing as 'remarkable for its virtuosity, sound musicianship, and true artistry.' She has performed in major venues throughout Russia, Poland, Italy, Israel, South Korea, Greece, Hungary and Taiwan as well as the United States and Canada. In 1989 she moved to the USA where she performed in over half of the fifty states. In 1997 she returned to Russia where she continued her concert activities and embarked upon a teaching career, first at the Moscow Conservatory, then as professor in the piano department of the Gnesins Russian Academy of Music. She has given master-classes in the USA, South Korea, France, Montenegro, Serbia and Greece. In 2010 Ms. Chukovskaya was awarded by the Russian Government with the title 'Distinguished Service to the Arts of Russia'.

Shostakovich's **Piano Sonata No. 2 in B minor, Op. 61** was written in 1943. The first two movements were completed on 18th February in Kuibyshev, where he had been evacuated at the time of the Siege of Leningrad. The third movement was completed whilst at

Arkhangelskoye near Moscow on 17th March the same year. Shostakovich himself gave the first performance in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatory on 6th June 1943.

Irina Chukovskaya brings a fast, fluent touch to the *Allegretto* delivering a terrific forward drive, beautifully phrased, rising through some quite wonderful dynamic passages with moments of articulation, finely controlled and shaped.

She shapes the emerging theme of the *Largo* beautifully, finding her way through the subtly developing passages quite wonderfully. The central slow staccato section is brilliantly realised. Chukovskaya creates a mesmerisingly intense atmosphere, finding darker passages as the movement continues. She paces the music perfectly with some exquisitely limpid, slow moving passages before the central staccato idea is hinted as the coda is reached.

The *Moderato* opens gently as a theme is introduced and developed, soon gaining more of a flow with constantly shifting harmonies. The music is finely controlled as it very slowly gains in tempo, moving through some very fine harmonies. Soon a broader, more expansive section is reached, beautifully realised by this pianist. She brings a wonderful touch and agility to the fast and intricate passages, developing some moments of intense feeling before slowing and quietening momentarily only to speed through a wonderfully fluent section before finding a settled coda.

This pianist delivers a quite wonderful performance that only goes to reinforce how undervalued this work is.

By the time Shostakovich composed his **24 Preludes, Op. 34 (1932–1933)** he had already written three symphonies, two ballets and two operas. There is a lovely breadth to *No. 1 in C major* with Chukovskaya finding a lovely rhythmic lift for *No. 2 in A minor* with great fluency and buoyancy, a lovely touch. *No. 3 in G major* reveals a directness, a lovely simplicity, beautifully phrased with a fiery interruption before the quiet coda. In *No. 4 in E minor* this pianist finds all the subtleties of rhythm and phrasing before a sparkling *No. 5 in D major* that brings terrific dexterity. In *No. 6 in B minor* she reveals some fine harmonies and dissonances in this lively prelude.

This pianist achieves a lovely poise and restraint in *No. 7 in A major* before bringing her lovely touch to *No. 8 in F-sharp minor*, rhythmic and wonderfully free flowing. There is a fast moving, fluent *No. 9 in E major* to which she brings terrific buoyancy before the gentle flow of *No. 10 in C-sharp minor*, quite lovely, with subtle little rhythmic interruptions. *No. 11 in B major - No.12 in G-sharp minor* is projected as a rather scatty, fast and furious piece to which she brings a terrific fluency and forward drive with such an even touch.

No. 13 in F-sharp major brings lovely dissonant phrases as the rhythmic piece progresses. *No. 14 in E-flat minor* brings a darker complexion, this pianist finding much depth, atmosphere and, at times, passion. *No. 15 in D-flat major* is probably one of the better known Op.34 preludes, sparkling and buoyant with a never ending forward movement. *No. 16 in B-flat minor* brings a rhythmic, spiky march theme, nicely phrased before a gently swaying *No. 17 in A-flat major*, this pianist finding many lovely nuances.

Chukovskaya brings real life and freshness to *No. 18 in F minor*.

No. 19 in E-flat major has a lovely rocking flow, this pianist finding a lovely breadth before a forceful, rollicking *No. 20 in C minor*, full of dynamism and terrific strength. She provides some lovely rhythmic phrasing for *No. 21 in B-flat major* and teases out much beauty. A thoughtful *No. 22 in G minor*. *No. 23 in F major* brings a fine rhythmic flow with bell like right hand phrases over a rolling left hand before *No. 24 in D minor* brings a robust rhythmic buoyancy, with not a little humour to conclude.

This is a strikingly fine performance.

By the time of his **Aphorisms, Op. 13, Ten Pieces for Piano (1927)** Shostakovich had written, not only his *First Symphony (1924/25)*, but a number of smaller orchestral works and chamber works and was soon to write his first opera, *The Nose (1927/28)*.

Aphorisms opens with a rather tentative little *Recitative* played with moments of sparkle and wit as is the *Serenade* that seamlessly continues out of the opening piece. *Nocturne* moves around quickly through some spiky and quickly changing ideas, the composer seemingly trying out ideas, hardly a nocturne at all. *Elegy* brings a darker flow with deeper chords in the left hand underpinning a more flowing theme. Staccato phrases introduce the *Marche funebre* before left hand phrases create dissonances.

A strident *Etude* moves quickly forward gaining in strength and dynamics and leading straight into *Dance of Death* where staccato, dynamic phrases receive some terrific playing from this pianist, dancing forward with tremendous energy. There is a faltering *Canon*, finely phrased before *Legend* brings a steady flow with a rising and falling theme out of which Chukovskaya draws some lovely moments, with fine harmonies before it reaches a sombre coda. The concluding *Lullaby* has a fine sense of freedom, wonderfully phrased as it flows forward, later bringing lovely delicate phrases.

This is an impressive recital of works by Shostakovich that are all too rarely heard. Irina Chukovskaya receives an excellent recording and there are useful booklet notes in Russian and English.