

2023

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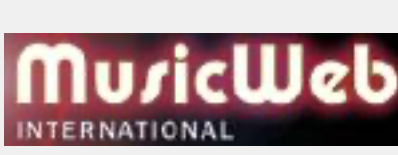
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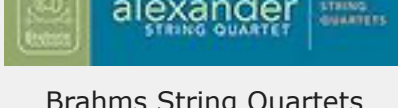


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Franz SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata No. 20 in A major,

D959 (1828) [40:15]

Four Impromptus, D899 (1827)

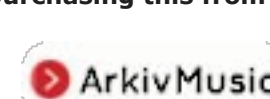
[28:08]

Irina Chukovskaya (piano)

rec. 2018, St Petersburg

DUX 1618 [68:28]

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This is a Beethoven anniversary year and I've certainly heard a great deal from the Master Composer. That said, I've also been listening to and reviewing a lot of Schubert which seems an appropriate solace in these troubled times. It is therefore a joy to hear this disc of one of Schubert's last works and four of his sublime Impromptus. They are played by a fine artist, Irina Chukovskaya, who I regret was not known to me previously.

In Dominy Clements' very positive [review](#) of Shostakovich "Piano Sonata, Preludes and Aphorisms" on Melodiya he praised Chukovskaya's authenticity. He went on to state that she has until now been a notable figure in the music firmament, well reviewed and hard-working; perhaps a musician's musician rather than a high-profile artist of wide renown. With releases of the quality of her Shostakovich programme I can see her becoming much better known. As a result of hearing her dazzling but profound playing of Schubert she merits that destiny.

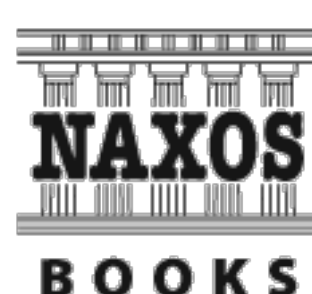
Chukovskaya has been working in Russia and in the USA and is known as a remarkable performer of romantic style music. She has been a prize-winner of numerous international piano competitions including the International Frederik Chopin Piano competition in Warsaw. Spurs have also been won as an outstanding performer of modern piano music and is adept in expressing the essential heart of each composer. Her playing is characterized by vivid figurativeness, rich variety of tone colour and delicate pianism. In 1985 she became a soloist at the Moscow State Academic Philharmonic. In 1989 there was a move to the USA and until 1997 her artistic career was developed rapidly in the United States. From 1993 to 1997, she worked as a soloist under "Community Concerts", a division of "Columbia Artist Management". With Maxim Shostakovich as the conductor, she gave a critically acclaimed performance, in March 1991 as a soloist with the New Orleans Symphony Orchestra. There were solo and orchestral concerts in over half of the fifty states. In 1997 she had to return to Russia for family reasons. Continuing her concert activity she also embarked upon a teaching career. As far back as the 1980s, her playing was described by Mstislav Slava" Rostropovich as "remarkable for its virtuosity, sound musicianship and true artistry. She performs in different styles". This is certainly true if she can perform the very different Schubert and Shostakovich so remarkably well.

Schubert's Sonata No. 20 in A major D959, is only second to the great monumental and final Sonata D960. Rather than giving us another Sonata, I was delighted that Chukovskaya also presents the four life-enchanting Impromptus D899. Apart from Wilhelm Kempff whose DG recordings have made their way to Blu-Ray (review planned) and Alfred Brendel's on Philips, I particularly warm to Paul Lewis whose recording was covered in a fine double set by Dominy Clements ([review](#)). Like Dominy, I get a sense of time slowing down, particularly in the opening movements of the Sonata and its successor D960. At times I felt that she was pushing the music a little rather than letting it flow. Brendel gives a more thoughtful rendition in his live recording (Philips) which I've warmed to, after first thinking he played the keys too hard. Chukovskaya cannot be faulted in the *Andantino* which glows with grief and sorrow amid a fight between the forces of good and evil. There are moments too which carry hints of the second of the D899 Impromptus. Anton Rubinstein, who was famously critical of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto, heard an "amazing similarity to a gypsy's improvisation from playing cymbals, violin, cello and clarinet". I can't see it myself but the point is that amid all that melancholy is hope. I very much like the perky *Scherzo* which, being Schubert, has a darker side in the middle. Her playing has a fine mellifluous quality which is very fetching. The *Rondo Allegretto* is my favourite movement which Schubert first used in a stuttering manner in the earlier Sonata D537. Here the beautiful opening, with the previous embryonic melody smoothed out, leads us into stormier waters whilst returning to the charming central theme. I will soon be listening to Vladimir Feltsman's Schubert Volume 4 which contains his recording of D959. It will be fascinating to compare these two Russians. There are so many different interpretations of this work but Chukovskaya is undoubtedly in the top rank.

As to the Impromptus, the notes by Tatiana Batagova point out, these are improvisations. The present four are the first set that Schubert wrote; the second set D935, written in the same year 1827, weren't published until 1839, posthumously as Op.142. Apparently they are influenced by the Impromptus Op. 7 (1822) of Jan Václav Voříšek (1791-1825) and by Voříšek's teacher Václav Jan Křtitel Tomášek (1774-1850), the only one of the trio to have a full life-span.

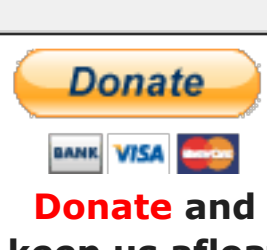
As with her previous recording Chukovskaya is very pleasingly recorded in a nicely resonant acoustic. Her playing is superb throughout and it's hard to imagine these pieces played better. I again compared her with Brendel's digital survey which I much enjoyed at the time. I now find myself preferring Chukovskaya's interpretation and the magnificent sound helps profoundly. I kept returning to the pieces and marvelling at Schubert's invention. I'm very fond of Clifford Curzon's Schubert (Decca) but its sound is not nearly so rewarding. When I want to hear brilliance in performance and reproduction, I will be returning to this Dux disc.

Listening to this Schubert disc has been a very stimulating experience and whilst there are other ways with this enchanting yet troubled music, Chukovskaya is a very fine performer. I do hope that she records more Schubert. It will certainly be worth hearing.

David R Dunsmore

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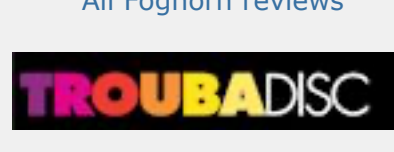
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