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REVIEW

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Dmitri SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B minor, Op. 61 (1943) [28:05]

24 Preludes, Op. 34 (1932-33) [32:04]

Aphorisms, Op. 13 (1927) [13:16]

Irina Chukovskaya (piano)

rec. 2016, location not given.

MELODIYA MELCD1002455

[73:27]



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Irina Chukovskaya has until now been a notable figure in the music firmament, well reviewed and hard-working and perhaps a musician's musician rather than a high-profile artist of wide renown, but with releases of the quality of this Shostakovich programme I can see her becoming much better known.

Superbly recorded in a nicely resonant acoustic, Shostakovich's *Second Piano Sonata* is given a strikingly effective performance here. The first movement has a crisp edge, in which the composer's trademark nervousness is given drive and purpose; the second is both a soft(er)-centre and a lens that focusses on the bleak circumstances of war and mortality. The final *Moderato* is a set of polyphonic variations on a symphonic scale, Chukovskaya giving its extended shape plenty of time to build to unflinching climaxes, all the while propelling the music forward with a sense of measured inevitability and delivering power and poetic depth in a virtuoso style that never sounds forced.

The reverse chronology of this programme then takes us to the more lyrical world of the *24 Preludes*, in which Chukovskaya delivers just the right balance of romantic warmth and sprightly wit. Shostakovich is, of course, never straightforward even in his most apparently expressive moments, and the contrasts between quasi-bucolic charm and an underlying layer of sardonic self-awareness are pursued and brought out perfectly in Chukovskaya's playing.

Less well-known are the ten *Aphorisms*, written, when Shostakovich was still in an experimental phase that was ultimately denounced as 'formalistic.' These are intriguing works that walk a line between abstraction and associations that are never entirely absent, and are indeed often helped along by titles such as *Marche funèbre* and a slightly sinister *Lullaby*. As the booklet notes point out, these are pieces 'cleansed' of stylistic frills, but they are by no means entirely sterile – the lack of romantic pianism exchanged for a directness of language, which has significance for Shostakovich's later work.

There are numerous competitors to this recording of Shostakovich's *Second Sonata*, and it may be the additional pieces that sway your decision as to which is best. Konstantin Scherbakov on the Naxos label ([review](#)) is impressive and more intimately recorded, though not quite as atmospheric as Chukovskaya in the central largo, which she plays in 7:25 to Scherbakov's 6:00. Emil Gilels is of course something of a benchmark in this work, and his 1965 RCA recording has both poetry and power in equal measure. Chukovskaya's timing of the final *Moderato* is almost exactly the same as Gilels' and rightly so. Konstantin Scherbakov has also recorded the *24 Preludes* for Naxos ([review](#)), throwing up wide differences of opinion on tempi in pieces such as the *Prelude No. 7*, which is 1/3rd longer than Chukovskaya's more compact and coherent reading. Scherbakov is very good, but is more interventionist and extreme than Chukovskaya, who manages to communicate these works' drama through a kind of alchemic understatement, missing nothing of their inherent nuances but always holding us in a spell of expectation.

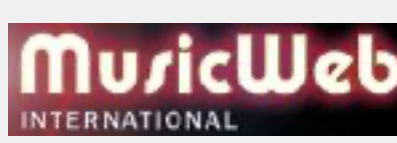
In short, this Melodiya disc is a top-drawer Shostakovich piano album I would happily recommend to newcomers and seasoned collectors alike. Irina Chukovskaya clearly has this music in her bones, and the whole production has an aura of authenticity, which has rejuvenated mine to the marrow. I don't understand this. Rejuvenated Clements's authenticity? Or his bones?

Dominy Clements

Some items to consider



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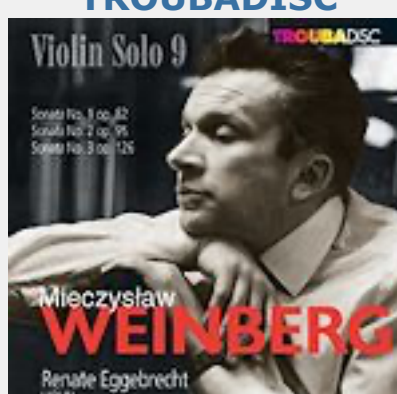
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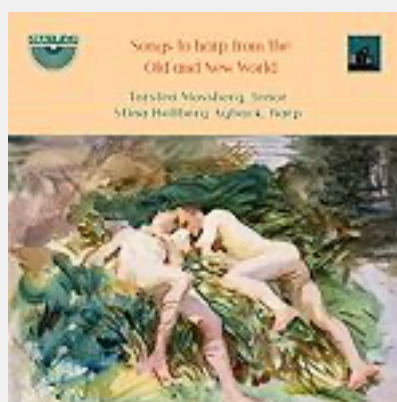


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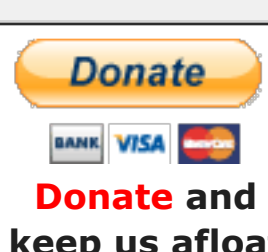
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