Hideyo Harada offers a reading that thrills

UWE ARENS

Two great Russian piano masterpieces in a subtle and soulful recording

Rachmaninov · Tchaikovsky

Rachmaninov Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op 42 **Tchaikovsky** The Seasons, Op 37*b*
Hideyo Harada *pf*
Audite Ⓟ 🔊 **AUDITE92 569 (68′ • DDD)**

Rachmaninov – selected comparison:
Pletnev (3/99) (DG) 459 634-2GH
Tchaikovsky – selected comparison:
Pletnev (12/94[R]*) (VIRG) 482055-2*

What a compelling coupling this is, and how good to hear Tchaikovsky's still-underrated cycle given a reading which conveys its grit and grandeur as well as its beauty. The cycle was commissioned by the editor of a St Petersburg journal, *Le Nouvelliste*, and the pieces were published as a kind of musical part-work. When the set was published complete, each piece was headed by lines of verse by a Russian poet, Tolstoy and Pushkin among them, though such is the vividness of Tchaikovsky's writing that the music needs no explanation.

Tchaikovsky's flitting lark (March) and his irresistible waltzes for April and December are a particular delight in Hideyo Harada's hands. She's not afraid of full-blooded climaxes either, as witness the choppier waters of June's initially lilting barcarolle. And her "Autumn Song" (October) is desolate enough to soften the hardest of hearts. Pletnev's masterly version remains a benchmark, and though Harada matches him in soulfulness, there are times when his more vigorous approach wins the day, not least in a wild harvest (August) and a hunt (September) where you can almost smell the blood.

Harada is also up against a very fine Pletnev recording in Rachmaninov's *Corelli* Variations, that solo masterpiece just one opus number apart from his unaccountably more popular *Paganini* Variations. Pletnev may have the historical advantage of performing on

> 'Harada's reading of the Corelli Variations thrills as much for its nuance as for its brilliance'

Rachmaninov's own piano, but there's little in it, musically speaking. The subtlety with which Harada approaches the theme itself sets the scene for a reading that thrills as much for its nuance as for its brilliance – especially the extrovert Vars 11, 16 and 18. The wonderfully warm recording sets the seal on a highly recommendable disc. **Harriet Smith**

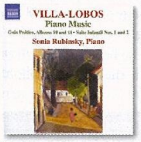
melodic material hammering away in the upper register of the piano where it gets covered in a halo of resonating harmonics, before Schnittke confronts it with a nonchalantly reluctant chorale – but this opposition of material begins to feel stage-managed and contrived. The Second and Third Sonatas are more robust and considered, but it's probably fair to conclude that Schnittke wasn't an instinctive composer for piano.

In her sleeve-notes, Anna Andrushkevich suggests that the sonatas – written within four years of each other – are in fact "one work, one Sonata, uttered three times". Igor Tchetuev's cohesive approach would tend to uphold that view. That strikingly left-field opening of the First Sonata is never allowed to become disappointingly earthbound. He keeps the contrasting layers of Schnittke's material clearly defined but the direction remains mysteriously open-ended, and Tchetuev's sound is translucent and searching. The tone and manner in which he delivers the First Sonata's *Lento* is evoked during the equivalent moment in the Third Sonata, as he cogently implies a kinship of material. The First Sonata concludes with chaotic, bruising clusters that don't sit entirely convincingly on the keyboard, but Tchetuev achieves a bracing discontinuity and his sincere intellectual curiosity about these pieces is overwhelmingly rewarding. The small-scale Improvisation and Fugue is a welcome encore, its complex structures brilliantly handled. **Philip Clark**

Villa-Lobos

'Piano Music, Vol 8'
Guia prático – Vol 1 (excs); Album 10; Album 11. Ibericarabe. Suite infantil – No 1; No 2. Marqueza de Santos – Gavota-Chôro; Valsinha-Brasileira
Sonia Rubinsky *pf*
Naxos Ⓢ **8 570504 (79′ • DDD)**

The triumphant concluding volume of a remarkable Brazilian musical journey

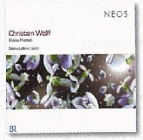


With Volume 8 of the piano music of Villa-Lobos, Sonia Rubinsky reaches a triumphant end to a long, complex and luxuriant journey. And to an even greater extent than in the earlier issues she relishes every twist and turn of Brazil's ever-varied genius, playing with an enviable virtuosity, warmth and affection. And here, in a disc that includes five world-premiere recordings, she illustrates ideally her chosen composer's statement of intent, namely his wish to subsume the widest variety of influences into a grateful sense of national identity and his burning love of his native Brazil. Volume 8 extends Volume 5 by completing the *Guia prático*, a 137-piece tribute to Villa-Lobos's love of children; music where early innocence is recalled through sophisticated adult eyes and ears. How Rubinsky relishes the alternately spry and gracious waltz of "Constancia", the charm of "Ba, Be, Bi, Bo, Bu", or the syncopated dance rhythms, piquantly harmonised, of Nos 95 and 105. The two "Infantil" Suites elaborate the mix into a near-Scriabinesque etude in "No Balanco" and a melody peppered with rapid bouncing staccatos in "Allegretto" (Second Suite, No 3). *Ibericarabe* (transcribed by Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos, the composer's first wife) is more familiar territory with sumptuously deployed melody wreathed round in intricate figuration, and there is much, much more to enjoy, ponder over and occasionally reject (Villa-Lobos's vast output led to inevitable unevenness). This is a magnificent conclusion to a formidable undertaking, recorded in ideal sound. And now, although Rubinsky may well wish for a break from Brazil, it would be wonderful to hear her in Camargo Guarnieri (Brazil's second most prominent composer). How can she resist the 50 *Ponteios* for a start? **Bryce Morrison**

C Wolff

Tilbury 1. Tilbury 2. Tilbury 3. Miscellany. A Piano Piece. Snowdrop 1970
Sabine Liebner *pf*
Neos Ⓟ **NEOS10723 (77′ • DDD)**

Cult contemporary piano classics that you can't get out of your head



For Christian Wolff, the point is specifying to performers not what should be played but rather *how* to play. Wolff, now 74, is the last surviving member of the New York School of composers, that loose association of like-minded individuals grouped around John Cage who had radically different notions of how chance and indeterminacy might revolutionise their art. Too much contemporary music hides the paucity of its ideas behind a veneer of complexity – in Wolff's music, complex ideas are filtered into a musical surface that rarely breaks into a sweat. It's a bewitching way to make art.

The *Tilbury* pieces are cult contemporary classics that disperse beautifully heard scraps of material around a spacious canvas. The *Miscellany* is an evolving sketchpad documenting Wolff's myriad techniques and obsessions. Liebner brings deadpan detachment and a resonant, tactile tone to this inscrutable, always fascinating, whimsical music.

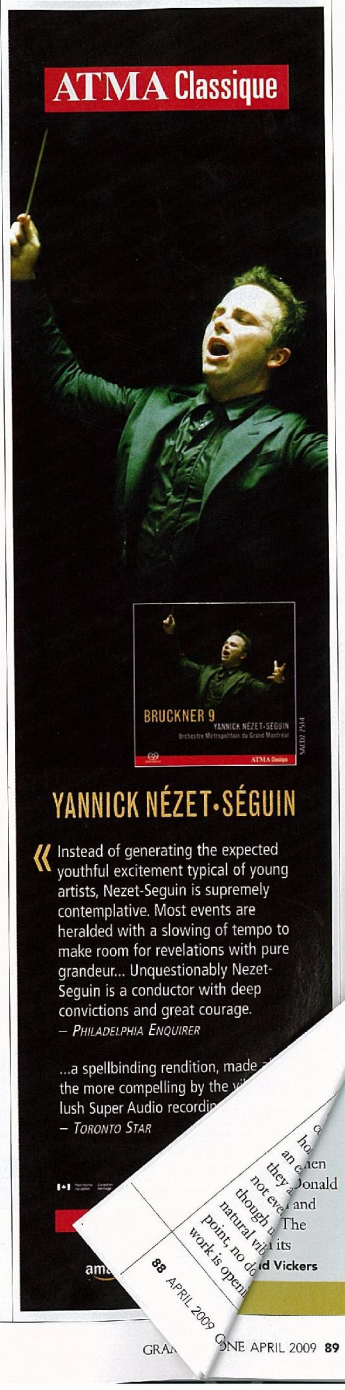
But the most bewitching piece here is, arguably, *Snowdrop* (1970) which generates itself from that most fundamental of musical parameters: scales. Important functional notes are sieved out of some scales and attached to others, while elsewhere groups of notes are interchanged to create odd scalic hybrids. Because the process is so fleeting and catches the listener unawares, fragments of melody and half-remembered gestures mess with your imagination. A vaguely Baroque bass-line falls over: am I really hearing "put the kettle on" with a missing "Polly", "For Sale" with no "Love", or the "la, la, la" refrain from Kylie's "Can't get you out of my head"? Or are Wolff's snowdrops snow-blinding my ears? **Philip Clark**

'Transfigured Beethoven'

Beethoven/Raff Romance No 1, WoO11
Beethoven/Tausig String Quartets – Op 59 No 1: Adagio; Op 59 No 2: Scherzo; Op 59 No 3: Andante; Op 130: Kavatine **Friedman** Ecossaises **Heller** 33 Variations on a Theme by Beethoven, Op 130 **Kalkbrenner** Fantasia on Beethoven's Celebrated Waltz, Op 118 **Seiss** German Dances after Beethoven **Sgambati** Minuetto von Beethoven
Petronel Malan *pf*
Hänssler Classic Ⓟ **CD98 286 (79′ • DDD)**

Beethoven as you've never heard him before in an imaginative programme

No less than eight of these 10 transcriptions are world premiere recordings. One suspects Beethoven might have had a sense of humour bypass over Stephen Heller's 33 Schumannesque variations (17'39") on the theme of the 32 Variations in C minor with its cheeky quotes from the Fifth Symphony and *Waldstein* Sonata. As entertainingly anachronistic is Kalkbrenner's Fantasia on the spurious *Sehnsuchtwaltz*, WoO14/1, as it is listed in the Kinsky catalogue. Less vapid than some of Kalkbrenner's note-spinners, it is a most effective piece (8'20"), well worthy of being revived. Isidor Seiss (1840-1905) manages to combine in his three freely transcribed German Dances most of the themes from Beethoven's 12 German Dances, Raff offers a resourceful adaptation of the Romance No 1 for violin and orchestra, Friedman a Godowskian treatment of the Ecossaises.

The most significant works here, though, are the four Tausig transcriptions of string quartet movements (he published two others from Opp 131 and 135), as respectful as they are ingenious. The *Scherzo* from Op 59 No 2 and, perhaps more surprisingly, the Cavatina from Op 130 (which also attracted Alkan's attention) strike me as particularly successful. Someday, someone will give Tausig the attention he is due and record everything he wrote.

I enjoyed Ms Malan's "Transfigured Mozart", despite some reservations about her tone production. I enjoyed even more this equally imaginative programme, one in which the panache and infectious high spirits she brings to the more extrovert pieces are matched by her sensitive handling of some long-breathed transfigured string solos. **Jeremy Nicholas**