

J.S. BACH Prelude & Fugue in E-flat Minor, BWV 853. **BRAHMS** Two Rhapsodies, Op. 79. **SCHUBERT** Piano Sonata No. 21 in B-flat Major, D. 960. **MEDTNER** Fairy Tale, Op. 8, No. 2. **LISZT** Transcendental Etude No. 4 “Mazeppa”

A passionate and diverse survey, virtuoso style

Recorded live in 2000 and 2008, at ACT City, Hamanatsu Concert Hall, Japan and Wigmore Hall, London, respectively, this compendium program owes its existence to the memory of pianist and pedagogue Hamish Milne of the Royal Academy of Music (1939-2020), whose advocacy of the music of Nikolai Medtner graces this recital.

McLean opens with Bach’s 1722 *Prelude and Fugue in E-flat Minor*, whose lovely, arioso melody proceeds as a melancholy sarabande. Besides its chromatic color, the piece allows McLean to exploit the power of its silences. The fugue proves no less meditative in character, manipulating the enharmonic nuances of D-sharp Minor in the treble and A-sharp Minor in the tenor. McLean executes the various strettis and layers of sound with clarity and poise, a quietly compelling reading that hints at the olden days of Edwin Fischer.

The two Brahms *Rhapsodies, Op. 79* (1878) each project a rugged beauty, fraught with Romantic sensibility clothed in idiosyncratic sonata-form. McLean approaches what dedicatee Elisabeth von Herzogenberg called the “prickly beauty” of the *B Minor* with a combination of studied lyricism and bold aggression. The strong sense of chromatic color derives from the composer’s moving up a third to D Minor and then lingering in F-sharp Minor. At the middle section, McLean gives us a tender lullaby in B Major, whose *molto dolce espressivo* indication McLean obeys with distinction. The recapitulation has McLean decidedly more inflamed; and here, in the throes of D Major’s clash with the tonic B Minor, McLean reminds me of Julius Katchen of 40 years ago. The *G Minor Rhapsody* has McLean’s seizing the eighth-note triplet idea like a bulldog. McLean likewise maintains a nice pulse for the 12/8 metric, and he colors the ongoing tussle between the home key and its tonic major. The pace McLean sets proves quite brisk, so the entire piece unfolds as a unified, emotional whole, much in the manner of Backhaus and Kempff.

McLean’s tendency not to dawdle in sentiment marks his studied approach to Schubert’s *B-flat Major Sonata, Op. Posth.* Of 1828. Like Artur Rubinstein, McLean appears to let the music “play itself,” not making more of the *Molto moderato*’s intrusive trill on G-flat any more than it already is, a premonition of disruption and loss. What emotional ambivalence Schubert feels occurs mostly in

degrees of F, whether major or minor, and in hues of F-sharp. Yearning and anxiety compete for dominance in major and minor alternations which McLean addresses with a tension that remains both subtle and supple, without bathos or melodrama. The movement in quarter notes and triplets exudes a melancholy intimacy, again close in spirit to the various readings by Wilhelm Kempff. We have Schubert's "heavenly length" without the Sviatoslav Richter percussion or stretch-marks.

The heart of the work, the second movement *Adagio sostenuto*, moves between C-sharp Minor and A Major, a stuttering dirge that evolves into an exquisitely sad aria. McLean injects a Neapolitan flavor into the progress of this tenderly martial movement, and the spirit of the piece closely resembles selected songs from the *Winterreise* cycle. Several times, McLean's left hand had me reacting with, "What a piece of music!" McLean daintily skitters into the B-flat Major *Scherzo* with syncopated aplomb. As if to extend the emotional ambivalence of the work, its middle section, in B-flat Minor, bounces in heavy accents between duple and triple meter, which McLean points up perkily. The last chord fades away in order to start the *Allegro ma non troppo* last movement, at first headed at the wrong key, C Minor. We do get to B-flat Major, but a thunderous declamation leads us to – another, extended, beautifully balanced dance! McLean has another long moment of contention between F Major and F Minor, as though the sun must not shine too long or too brightly, especially as the opening subject dominates his thoughts, in various, color guises. Kudos to McLean's delicate, dancing subject, moving by slow degrees and pregnant pauses to the *Presto* coda, which quite sweeps his Wigmore audience away.

Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951) makes a decided contrast to some of his contemporaries; like Rachmaninoff, he embodies a musical anachronism, resistant to the influences of both Stravinsky and Schoenberg. His numerous *Fairy Tales (Skazki)* for piano combine elements of folklore and dance music. McLean chooses the second from the *Op. 8* (1904). Percussive and aggressive, it suggests the jazz element of Scott Joplin, but it develops in sonata-form, with emotionally extreme indications, like "pleading," "suffocated," and "threatening," in the manner of a complex, demanding etude in wayward harmonic language. McLean delivers a whirlwind effect, whose middle section only slightly relieves the tumult. The demands for staccato rival those of Prokofiev, still in a jazzy style that we must call theatrically cosmopolitan.

Liszt's 1852 *Transcendental Etude No. 4 in D Minor, "Mazeppa,"* a program piece inspired by Polish history and a fateful quote from Victor Hugo, provides the finishing touch for McLean. While not quite so demonic as a Cziffra exhibition of this piece, the McLean has the detonations and mass we recall in Ronald Smith. The music races through the tundra into the land of the Cossacks, so that Mazeppa may rise in musical and political apotheosis. A telling pause in the action, a ploy exploited by both Schubert and Beethoven, gives way to a series of potent, final octaves that would do justice to Horowitz.

Gary Lemco