

DEBUSSY Images, Books I and II. SCRIBIN Preludes, op. 11 □ Hristo Kazakov (pn) □ NO LABEL NO NUMBER (63:03)

SCHUBERT Piano Sonata in B♭, op. post. CHOPIN: Nocturnes: op. 15/1; op. 27/2; in c♯, op. post. LISZT *Années de pèlerinage*, Book III: *Jeux d'eau à la Villa D'Este*. SCRIBIN Impromptu, op. 10/1 □ Hristo Kazakov (pn) NO LABEL NO NUMBER (PAL DVD: 70:12)

What kind of pianist is Hristo Kazakov? Listening to his melting performance of the first of Scriabin's op. 11 Preludes, you'd peg him as a sensitive introvert, one with an enviably soft touch, a superior sense of the rise and the fall of the phrases, and an almost uncanny responsiveness to the nuances of the music's shifting harmonic weight. Listening to his vehement performance of Liszt's *Jeux d'eau*, you probably identify him as an old-fashioned virtuoso, with plenty of thunder to his interpretive arsenal. Listening to his slow performance of the first movement of the Schubert (it would run a good 24 minutes if he had taken the repeat), you'd think of him as a deeply meditative player, capable of capturing a rare rapt beauty (he's especially magnetic in the development). Listening to his performance of *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, reticence would seem the least of his qualities.

In other words, he's a Protean musician—one whose interpretive stance changes dramatically from piece to piece (and even within a piece). I don't mean to suggest, however, that he's in any way flaky, that he has the kind of mercurial, spur-of-the-moment sensibility for which Shura Cherkassky was famous. He is—or at least can be—a strongly interventionist musician (listen to his rubato in the Chopin op. 15/1), but I don't get much sense of spontaneity here: rather, his shifts in direction seem to stem not from whim, but from his clear-eyed assessment of the needs of the music before him. And he's fortunate enough to have both the technique and the sensitivity to convey his responses to those needs with unerring clarity.

Best of all, I think, is his gently kaleidoscopic reading of the Scriabin Preludes, which captures—as well as any I know—the music's often quirky syntax (he's certainly not tripped up by the music's barlines) and its inner contradictions: both the music's ecstasy and its haunting regret, both its self-confident drive and its self-doubt, both its quest for limpid purity and its occasional willingness to throw caution to the winds. But there's plenty more to savor here, too: the delicacy with which he ends Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau* (a delicacy that's double effective coming at the end of a fairly assertive performance), the tactful treatment of the superimposed rhythms in the “un peu en dehors” section that begins at measure 14 of *Et la lune*, the emotional upheavals in the center of Chopin's op. 27/2, the slowly building intensity in the A sections of the second movement of the Schubert. Throughout, he's apt to surprise you with an unexpected interpretive decision (the quiet dynamics at the end of Scriabin's Prelude No. 14) or with a striking revelation of detail, but he never seems to be showing off. These performances are, in sum, uniformly adventurous, while uniformly unpretentious.

The DVD is, unfortunately, in PAL format—so not all American machines will play it. Neither disc comes with anything but the most rudimentary notes; and the op. post Nocturne is confusingly labeled as “No. 16.” Still, the sound is solid—and the playing makes these releases of interest to all pianophiles.

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