

CD Review: Jenny Lin- Stravinsky Solo Piano Works



by Daniel Hautzinger

If Igor Stravinsky were alive today, he would probably get along quite well with the kind of people who live in Brooklyn, sport wispy facial hair, don ugly-patterned sweaters, and qualify their interests and appearance as “ironic.” For irony seemed to be intrinsic to Stravinsky, especially once he entered middle age and began co-opting other styles of music, from Baroque to jazz. Parody is particularly evident in his solo piano works, recently recorded by Jenny Lin for the Steinway & Sons label.

Stravinsky did not compose much for piano, and many of the works he did write are short character pieces. Lin’s CD consists of two larger works, the *Sonata* and *Serenade in A*, thirteen small pieces (one of which is a simple arrangement of Mussorgsky and two of which are unfinished sketches), and an arrangement of music from the *Firebird Suite*.

The most interesting piece on the album is the three-movement *Piano Sonata*. Though it follows sonata form, it is in many ways an inspired transformation of a Baroque dance suite. In the outer movements, rhythms gambol in two-part counterpoint; the articulated voices of Baroque keyboard music become symbols of a mechanized age in Stravinsky’s 20th century reworking. The affecting second movement is fascinating, with typical Baroque gestures satirized. Lin’s precise attacks and execution of ornaments and the near-complete absence of pedal, point to the similarities between this music and a Bach suite.

Stravinsky’s harmonies, which move with the speed and unpredictability of a Portland biker darting across lanes to find the newest microbrewery, never perturb Lin, who prevents them from sounding wandering and pointless. She also manages to make this

often very dry music sing, as in the affectionate “Romanza” of the four-movement *Serenade in A*. (Producer Dan Merceruio and engineer Daniel Shores emphasize the biting, arid quality of the music by refraining from excessive echo and resonance).

The set of four etudes, op. 7, is a rich discovery. These early pieces hew the closest to tradition, being essentially late Romantic pieces *a la* Rachmaninoff. Yet they are enlivened by Stravinsky’s idiosyncratic approach to meter, with stuttering cross-rhythms and surprising accents. Lin easily overcomes the rhythmic stumbling blocks, reveling in them to exuberant effect.

The last large piece on the album (and the longest, at only twelve minutes) is Guido Agosti’s arrangement of the final three movements of Stravinsky’s 1919 *Firebird Suite*, which was culled from the original ballet. Lin sounds as though she has three hands in this virtuosic arrangement, which retains all the melodic and accompanying lines of the orchestra. She demonstrates fine control of the different voices, dynamically layering them in the haunting “Berceuse.” Some of the color of the lustrous orchestration is obviously lost in the move to piano, but Lin beautifully imitates effects like the string tremolos in the “Finale.”

Small-scale, acerbic pieces round out the recording: an arrangement by Stravinsky of *Ragtime for 11 instruments*; arrangements by Soulima Stravinsky of the “Polka” and “Valse” from the *Trois pièces faciles*, originally for piano four hands; a cheeky *Tango*; the crazed *Piano-Rag-Music*; *Circus Polka*, written for an elephant ballet and sounding exactly like one; and the very brief *Two Sketches of a Sonata*, from Stravinsky’s serial period. Ironic music like this takes an intelligent performer like Lin to pull it off, and she does so with wit and brilliant.

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