

CD Review***Sergei Babayan: Rachmaninoff***

by Daniel Hathaway



To steal a phrase from the third-century Greek philosopher Sextus Empiricus, the mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine. The same goes for Deutsche Grammophon. It's been a dozen years since they were recorded in Hamburg in 2009, but the German company has now issued fifteen Rachmaninoff piano pieces magnificently and poetically played by Sergei Babayan.

The Armenian-born pianist won first prize in the 1989 Robert Casadesus (now the Cleveland International) Piano

Competition, serves as artist-in-residence at

the Cleveland Institute of Music, frequently performs as duo pianist with Martha Argerich, and mentored the Russian phenomenon Daniil Trifonov for six years at CIM.

Although he professes a fundamental admiration for Johann Sebastian Bach, Babayan is similarly devoted to Rachmaninoff, the composer who single-handedly lifted him out of a teenage slump and has energized and inspired him ever since.

That turnaround began when Babayan's father gave him a recording of Rachmaninoff's Second Concerto. "I stopped going out, stopped meeting my friends or answering the phone," he recalled in the album notes. "I was completely obsessed with everything: the melodies, harmonies, the complex chromatic shifts in the counterpoints and the ineffable beauty of the inner voices; all I did was listen to this music, and soon I tried to play it myself. I was glued to the piano. This piece gave me indescribable hope and happiness, and my profound love for Rachmaninoff has lasted ever since."

The playlist for the Rachmaninoff collection is a well-conceived selection of preludes, Études-Tableaux, occasional works, Moments Musicaux, and two transcriptions by Russian pianist Arcadi Volodos, arranged in an attractive narrative that visits the many colors and moods of the composer.

Babayan's playing, from the tiny, 52-second *Morceau de fantaisie in g minor* to the stormy *Étude-Tableau in e-flat*, Op. 39/5, from the chordal B-minor Prelude to the tintinnabular *Moment Musical in C*, Op. 16/6 that ends the program, is endlessly expressive, his tone full of purpose and control, and his textures marvelously clear.

In the liner notes, Babayan says, "Only a composer of the highest gifts can have a craftsmanship of the level where music sounds like an improvisation, born spontaneously." And it takes a pianist of signal accomplishments to put those characteristics across to the listener.

Some sources have speculated that Babayan's proximity to Argerich and Trifonov inspired the release of the current album. But his playing can eloquently speak for itself. You have to wonder if any other Babayan treasures are languishing in DG's vault.

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