

CD Review — Weiss' *Arc II*, an exploration of loss & grief

by Nicolette Cheauré



There may be nothing more unifying than humanity's response to loss. Where words fail to describe feelings as complex as those associated with death and grief, music takes over — and it's hard to imagine anything ringing more true in that regard than pianist Orion Weiss' latest album, *Arc II*, released in November of 2022.

The recording opens with Ravel's atmospheric *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, and the six movements provide Weiss the opportunity to express the many facets of his musical personality. The Prelude was dreamlike and flowing, saturated with traditional Ravel color

changes, while the Fugue was full of constant motion before a quiet conclusion.

During the Menuet, Weiss achieved a peaceful balance of soothing melodies and a somber second half. And in the opposing Forlane — based on an Italian folk dance full of swinging, falling figures — Weiss was effective at expressing both dissonance and resolution.

The Rigaudon and Toccata were stark contrasts, packed with jaunty, energetic sixteenth notes and perpetual chromatic sequences. With his attention to articulation and his buoyancy of rhythm, Weiss ably portrayed a more spirited disposition.

Shostakovich's passionate Second Sonata exploded out of the gate with its tumbling sixteenth notes and restless display of melodies sprinkled with dissonance and welcomed

resolution. Weiss brought out all the characters in all the registers. His dedication to clarity and to highlighting every important subject and musical peak was apparent.

Weiss rose to the occasion across all three movements, including the second-movement Largo with its blend of forms, sometimes suggesting a march, other times a waltz, and the finale with its searching motif, its urgency, and its rhythmic variations. With moments of both quiet acceptance defined by a low, brooding bassline as well as tumultuous fragments, Weiss was skilled in denying expectations, constantly keeping listeners on the edge of their seat.

Brahms' set of nine variations based on a theme by Schumann allowed Weiss to produce a melancholic, emotionally-laden soundscape infused with many instances of private introspection — unified by a singular theme that is recalled throughout.

Two of the composer's short *Chorale Preludes* — originally for solo organ — provided a comforting close to the album. No. 10 hints at complete despair, with a lamenting, pensive bassline decorated with a soft melody in the right hand. Occasional glimmers of optimism are consistently denied. But all is not lost. During No. 11, in the warm key of F Major, Weiss provided a sonorous depiction of prayerful belief that bad times will always turn up for the better.

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