

Süddeutsche Zeitung

July 24, 2010

The Playful Assembler of Sounds

Roger Woodward discovers a different Shostakovich

In 1950, when the world was commemorating the 200th anniversary of J. S. Bach's death, the composer Dmitri Shostakovich was in Leipzig as juror of the First International Bach Competition. One of the participants, the 26-year-old Tatiana Nikolayeva, so impressed Dmitri with her rendition of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* that he was overcome by an irresistible creative impulse: Only a few months later he had completed his own collection of 24 Preludes and Fugues, premiered by the same Tatiana Nikolayeva.

Was it hubris to measure himself up to that most perfect of composers? For decades, this question was only answered discreetly, with a whispered "yes". Perhaps this referred to the character of the music, rather harmless for Shostakovich and also sharing in that somewhat spiritual or esoteric colouring often-found in Eastern European or Western Asiatic music – the same esotericism occasionally employed by composers from Tchaikovsky and Rakhmaninov right up to Gubaidulina, Arvo Pärt and Giya Kancheli.

It is therefore not particularly surprising that this Op. 87 has remained a territory mainly visited by Russian pianists: Shostakovich himself recorded several of the pieces, as did Sviatoslav Richter; Nikolayeva and Vladimir Ashkenazy recorded the complete set, and recent additions include recordings by Constantin Sherbakov (Naxos) and Alexander Melnikov (Harmonia Mundi). Other pianists who have ventured into this territory have tended to come from the fringes of conventional pianism, such as the jazz pianist Keith Jarrett or the eccentric Olli Mustonen who blended Bach and Shostakovich.

And then there is Roger Woodward, that daredevil pianist whose staggering technique and explosively unbridled imagination place him apart from any performance tradition, in a world of his own – particularly in the case of Shostakovich's Op. 87.

Woodward's recording, originally released in 1975, dates from only weeks before Shostakovich's death, and fully deserves this re-release on CD by Celestial Harmonies. Woodward removes any trace of Russia, or esotericism, from these Preludes and Fugues, leaving no hint of spiritual cleansing or undefined and intangible grandeur. Instead of this, Woodward focuses on the text much more than his colleagues, revealing a world behind the naiveté the music initially seems to suggest. With playful fidelity he reveals that Shostakovich's cosmos can stand comparison with that of Bach after all – at least in terms of structure, character, economy, colour, eroticism, allusion, illusion and phrasing.

Woodward's recording is also probably faster than any other, enabling the listener to feel the cycle as a whole. It also makes much of the wealth of the music more accessible, not least because Woodward never allows himself to lapse into empty spiritualism or Russian sentimentalism, nor into fading post-romanticism or cold structuralism.

The message of this is that Shostakovich draws his inspiration not only from Bach but also from Debussy, Stravinsky and Bartók, even Mahler. The tonal world encompassed in these pieces is far greater than in his other music, revealing not only the dark, nihilistic Shostakovich, full of despair, but also the childlike master of filigree, the playful assembler of sounds.

How could nobody have noticed this undiscovered wealth and variety in Shostakovich's music until now? Perhaps the world needs more musicians like Roger Woodward, unconventional and set on finding their own way.

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