

Igor Stravinsky - Works for Piano and Orchestra (2015)

Written by bluesever

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Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments 1. *I. Largo - Allegro* 2. *II. Largo* 3. *III. Allegro*
Capriccio for Piano and Orchestra
4. *I. Presto* 5. *II. Andante rapsodico* 6. *III. Allegro capriccioso ma tempo giusto*
Piano Sonata in F-Sharp Minor
7. *I. Allegro* 8. *II. Vivo* 9. *III. Andante* 10. *IV. Allegro*
Alexej Gorlatch - piano Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin Alondra de la Parra - conductor

In 2011 Alexej Gorlatch, the soloist on this all-Stravinsky album, won the piano category in the 2011 ARD Music Competition broadcast by BR Klassik Radio. In the finals Gorlatch, a German-based Ukrainian, elected to play Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.3. I reviewed the live recording of that performance released on BR Klassik and wrote "this disc makes for an impressive first look at a remarkably talented performer."

In both the concert hall and recording studio it's the works from Stravinsky's Russian phase The Firebird, Petrushka and The Rite of Spring that continually take centre-stage. Consequently a significant number of Stravinsky's high quality works struggle to break through into the active concert repertoire. Certainly I rarely encounter Stravinsky's Concerto for piano and wind instruments and Capriccio for piano and orchestra and in truth I don't play the recordings as much as their quality deserves.

During his so-called neo-classical phase Stravinsky's passion was fired by his study of the scores of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi. His ballet Pulcinella composed in 1919/20 for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes draws on the melodies of Pergolesi - although much of the provenance is certainly spurious - and uses Baroque structures with the character of the dance with neo-classical rhythms.

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From this neo-classical period emerges his Concerto for piano and wind instruments (1923/24, rev. 1950) a score actually augmented by double basses and timpani. Stravinsky appeared as a concert pianist for a number of years although he persistently suffered from stage fright. In 1924 although his playing was rusty he introduced his Piano Concerto as soloist under Serge Koussevitzky in Paris. It was a work he went on to play numerous times. In the opening movement of the Concerto following the brass-heavy opening Largo dragging and morose Gortlatch springs eagerly into the jazzy syncopated piano writing, lively, attractive and extremely compelling. Gratifying also is the soloist's sensitive playing of the central movement Largo - determined yet sentimental by turns.

In 1928/29 Stravinsky wrote his Capriccio for piano and orchestra (rev. 1949) another work he planned to play himself in concert. According to writer Steffen Georgi, it seems that here Stravinsky was not only strongly influenced by the music of Weber but also by Tchaikovsky. The Capriccio has been described by biographer Michael Oliver as "a slighter work than the Concerto, but also a more polished one..." It was Stravinsky who introduced the score in 1929 in Paris under Ernest Ansermet. Gortlatch understands the level of irony in Stravinsky's writing which is evident in the outer movements and his bright, stylish playing always feels responsive. I am especially fond of the jazzy dance themes in the splendid Finale that Gortlatch plays with such lithe vivacity. It feels completely spontaneous.

An early work from 1903/04 written whilst still a law student Stravinsky experienced difficulty with his Piano Sonata in F sharp minor and turned to Rimsky-Korsakov for assistance, becoming his private pupil. Pianist Nicolas Richter, who gave the première in 1905, kept hold of the score which was unearthed in the Nicolas Richter archive in the State Public Library, St. Petersburg. Although naturally derivative of the style of Rimsky-Korsakov and his contemporaries this is a work of easy charm and appealing tunefulness. It deserves the occasional outing. Especially enjoyable is Gortlatch's playing of the opening Allegro that communicates an abundance of romantic longing. There's also an Andante notable for its calm, reflective character.

Before this recording was planned I'm not sure how often soloist Alexej Gortlatch had played these works. I suspect hardly at all which all adds to the fresh feeling and a sense of a voyage of discovery. Under the baton of Mexican conductor Alondra de la Parra the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin provides taut, alert and eminently sympathetic orchestral accompaniment. The unforced pacing selected by Mexican-American de la Parra is commendable and her rhythms sound convincingly sprung.

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The technical team excels and evidence of this is there to be heard in the disc's cool, clear and well balanced sonics. The essay 'Stravinsky and the contrast principle' was informative and easy to read.

Clearly a name to watch Alexej Gorlatch is an admirable soloist and his talent shines brightly in these Stravinsky works for Sony. ---Michael Cookson, musicweb-international.com

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