



A. Scriabin: The Complete Piano Sonatas

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While most Scriabin sonata cycles occupy two CDs, Vladimir Stoupel's requires a third disc to accommodate his longer than average timings. The latter account less for the pianist's basic tempos than for his bending and stretching of phrases via liberal tenutos, broad ritards, and similar rhetorical devices. Granted, such rhythmic license befits Scriabin's intense, hyper-expressive temperament, as does Stoupel's huge sonority and authoritative sense of projection. However, Stoupel often misses the proverbial forest for the trees.

He becomes so engrossed by the First and Third Sonata Finales' local details that the music's inherent drive and momentum dissipates. His fussy dynamic hairpins and gratuitous accents make it difficult to absorb the Fourth Sonata second movement's supple, dance-like character. In addition, Stoupel protracts the Fifth's introspective episodes to the point where it becomes hard to ascertain a melodic line with a beginning, middle, and end. By not playing the Ninth's deceptively simple opening in tempo, the music nearly stops in its tracks, rather than gradually unfolding, although the climax's superbly controlled dynamics represent nothing less than masterful piano playing. I also must acknowledge how Stoupel brilliantly shapes the complex strands of trills in the Seventh and Tenth Sonatas.

In short, Stoupel's affinity for this composer's idiom is never in doubt, yet for comparable passion with a superior sense of form, Hamelin and the less-well-engineered Ashkenazy sets remain my Scriabin cycle references.