



C. Saint-Saëns: Complete Piano Concertos

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We badly need a first-rate Saint-Saëns piano concerto cycle in modern sound. I know that this may be a minority view, but I found Stephen Hough's Hyperion edition unsatisfying both interpretively and technically. The best overall remains Jean-Marie Darré's mono EMI set from the mid-1950s, and I'm happy to report that this newcomer, if it stays true to form, will offer an essential complement to that classic (and hard to find) set. You might say that Sanderling and Melikova take a more "German" or "symphonic" approach to the music, but never to the point of heaviness. Indeed, at tempos very marginally slower than the norm, Malikova uses the extra time to point her phrases and inflect the music's singing lines with exceptional poise and genuinely French elegance and grace.



Take, for example, the popular central scherzo of the Second Concerto, with its delicious interplay between soloist and orchestra. Every exchange between them registers with maximum color in a genuine dialog, while the concluding tarantella has power as well as the necessary swiftness. Malikova's right hand floats the melodies over her rock-solid left, generating excitement with no trace of glibness. I also very much like the darkness that she and Sanderling bring to the first movement of the Fourth Concerto, a tough work to hold together, but that here seems to grow with organic inevitability as well as an unusual amount of emotional depth. The second movement has particular cogency, with Malikova clearly making an effort to characterize each episode, building the work to an unusually satisfying conclusion.

She also makes a persuasive case for the neglected First Concerto (actually the largest of these three), aided in no small degree by a conductor clearly aware of the music's debt to Beethoven and Mozart. There are no "dead spots" here. Malikova's treatment of the Andante has great fluidity and poise, while the finale offers high spirits with no hint of shallowness. Listen to the way Malikova holds her own against the orchestra in the big chords that comprise the opening theme: that's exactly what this music needs--players who really dig in and take it seriously. A co-production with WDR, the sonics are ideally warm and well balanced, the piano tone gleaming. In multi-channel format there's no loss of impact, and there's greater front-to-back depth. An outstanding disc in every way--I eagerly look forward to Volume 2!