



C. Saint-Saëns: Complete Piano Concertos

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This second installment in Audite's complete series of Saint-Saëns piano concertos completes what easily is the finest modern reference edition for these beautiful, underrated works. As in the previous release, Anna Malikova displays all of the classical virtues that the composer requires: gleaming tone, polished scales, shapely phrasing, and most of all, a light touch that makes whatever tempos she chooses flow effortlessly. On the whole, these versions are a bit slower than the classic performances by Jeanne-Marie Darré on EMI, but Thomas Sanderling's leadership is so probing and detailed, so refreshingly respectful of the text yet never inflated, that the performances are as valuable for what he brings to the party as they are for Malikova's contributions.

Take the Third Concerto: is there any more beautiful opening in the entire literature? How marvelously Sanderling and Malikova underline the music's romantic poetry, only to follow that evocative introduction with the most cogent allegro on disc! In the andante, Malikova's ability to float the music across the bar lines makes you think of Mozart, an apt comparison in my view, since Saint-Saëns often combines grace and poise with sweet (but never cloying) lyricism in equal measure. The finale, a brilliant trip to a French music hall, sparkles with delightful detail, but also has sufficient weight to bring the entire work to an immensely satisfying conclusion. Why isn't this piece ever played? I just don't understand it.

I have to confess that I have a special fondness for the "Egyptian" Concerto (simply called No. 5 here--no reason to be embarrassed, folks!). It's a piece that should seem to play itself, but it conceals a host of difficulties for the soloist. For example, in the first movement all of those simple phrases, lyrical bits tied together by rippling scales, have to go (as Mozart said) "like oil". Malikova's supple fingers float over the keyboard like palm fronds wafting down the Nile, and she captures the exoticism and mystery of the second movement without ever overdoing the Orientalism. Part of her secret comes from always knowing the difference between mere filigree and what really matters melodically. Notice also in this same movement how cleanly Sanderling has the strings articulate the opening rhythm: it comes across as an indistinct mush in most other performances. The scintillating finale has a sense of swagger that I haven't heard since Madga Tagliaferro's mono recording for Philips, and once again I doff my hat to Sanderling for giving Malikova enough time to really articulate the fistsful of notes.

Sonically this is state-of-the-art. Audite has captured a totally realistic balance between soloist and orchestra, ideally clean and clear. Notice how the woodwinds in the finales of both concertos engage Malikova in characterful interplay, and in multichannel playback the rear channels add depth without ever suggesting the instruments are placed behind the listener. I look forward to years of pleasure living

with these performances, and I can't recommend them highly enough. They really do set a new standard for performances of these works, and even if you know them well you will come away from this disc more impressed with the music than you probably thought possible.

