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Maurice Ravel: Piano Works

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International Piano (Guy Dammann - 01.07.2009)

[redacted]ain Descharmes gave his Wigmore Hall debut in January 2007, soon after winning the Dublin competition, levels of anticipation and excitement were high. The hall was packed to the gunnels with support, but the results, for me at any rate, were underwhelming, with soggy Brahms and undistinguished Ravel. The highpoint was an unexpectedly high octane dose of Frederick Rzewski's Winnsboro Cotton Mill.

Both the Brahms and the Rzewski have made it on to disc. Now it is the turn of the Ravel, marking the pianist's recording debut with Audite performing on a Kawai piano. The exceptionally bright tone of the instrument works brilliantly – literally – for the first item on the disc, Valses nobles et sentimentales. Ravel's almost casual dissonances glisten and gleam like rough-cut jewels against the warm darkness of the acoustic of Berlin's Jesus-Christus-Kirche. To the pacing and balance of these deceptive dances Descharmes brings both intelligence and independence of mind, setting down an interpretation of these exciting and sometimes underappreciated pieces that deserves attention.

Whether the same can be said of the rest of the disc is less clear. Gaspard de la nuit, on the edge of ragged in the Wigmore Hall recital, is technically much more proficient, especially where the more restrained and confident pedalling is concerned. But there is little really dazzling about 'Ondine' and 'Le Gibet'. 'Scarbo', unusually in recordings of this work, is the most convincing.

With the Sonatine, full of delights though it is, you get the slightly tired sense that Descharmes has been playing it since shortly after coming out of nappies and hasn't really thought a great deal about his approach to it since. More interesting is the pianist's own transcription of La valse. Although the composer's own two-piano version may be familiar, his solo version of the work leaves much to be desired. Descharmes's arrangement works better and his warm-blooded and somewhat flirtatious performance brings a stimulating if not totally satisfying conclusion to this somewhat frustrating disc.

»audite« Ludger Böckenhoff • Tel.: +49 (0)5231-870320 • Fax: +49 (0)5231-870321 • info@audite.de • www.audite.de