



Maurice Ravel: Piano Works

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GRAMOPHONE

A major young talent impresses with a first disc of Ravel's solo piano music

Romain Descharmes is a 29-year-old French pianist admirably attuned to the more subtle and elusive sides of Ravel's genius. A prize-winner in many competitions, his expertise is nonchalantly and stylishly deployed. And if he lacks the razor-sharp articulacy, drama and imaginative daring of, say, Pogorelich and Thibaudet in Gaspard (not to mention Argerich's "live" EMI Classics performance where she becomes virtually engulfed in her own virtuosity), his occasional lack of "edge" is hardly a failing in the Sonatine, which he plays with an enviable grace and fluency.

Descharmes is also admirable in the Valses nobles et sentimentales' alternating piquancy and introspection, with an epilogue that winds down to a near halt, among many individual touches. And here in particular there is never a question of "play the notes and the rest will look after itself", a literalism once common to certain celebrated French pianists. In Gaspard Ondine's watery entreaty spurts and bubbles seductively and in "Le gibet" the bell tolls disconsolately throughout, penetrating but never obscuring the surrounding multi-layered texture. Ravel's skeletal outline in La valse is suitably filled in or "orchestrated", and if Descharmes's dalliance occasionally weakens the music's drive as it whirls inexorably towards its cataclysmic climax, his musicianship and overall command are again striking. A more daemonic view of a waltz that outpaces Liszt at his own Mephistophelian game comes from Louis Lortie and, of course, from Argerich and Freire in the two-piano version. But Descharmes is clearly a major talent, finely recorded, and makes you look forward to what will surely be a second disc of Ravel.