



Béla Bartók: Piano Works

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RECORDS REVIEW Bartók

Not yet 30 years of age, French pianist Nicolas Bringuier brings a vivacity to his performances that connects compellingly with the music of Bartók. While this repertoire is most emphatically not the sole province of young male pianists, it would be hard to resist Bringuier's razor-sharp facility and comparably penetrating vision – absolute prerequisites for tackling these wonderful pieces. As Wolfgang Rathert, author of the especially motivating booklet notes rightly reminds us, even today Bartók rarely receives the comprehensive appraisal he deserves. He permeated giddy intellectual spheres of musicology, as well as more traditional avenues of intellectual pursuit – and, of course, pure pianism itself – indeed, extending far further than his much-lauded foraging for Hungarian (and even Romanian and Arabic) nationalistic traits. It was the composer's immutably determined zeal for the piano, and the gamut of emotional states to which its sounds palpably allude, that would open up his mind to the possibilities we all too easily take for granted.

Five of Bartók's important contributions to the repertoire are included on this disc, which incidentally brings forward a truly stunning quality of sound, particularly at its bass region, which somehow manages to bite without leaving lasting scars, and at the higher frequencies, which dazzle without blinding. Although we hear continual embodiments of folk music in all of the pieces (written over a period of 18 years) and are unfailingly struck by the composer's unquenchable resource for rhythmic innovation, these can take the form of contemplative, utterly engrossed miniatures, such as the Four Dirges. Yet the folk constituent also plays an inestimable function in the more hot-headed, 'febrile' music we easily associate with Bartók's larger-scale piano music – in works such as the Piano Sonata and the Out of Doors suite – both of which marked a significant return to piano writing in 1926, following a hiatus of around six years.

In all of these pieces Bringuier is in very comfortable territory, shifting strategy at the drop of a hat to meet the demands of this most exacting music. Take, for example, 'With Drums and Pipes' and 'The Night's Music' from Out of Doors, in which Bringuier generates arresting and ecstatic evocations (not to mention the wrist-cramping finale to the work, 'The Chase', which he brings off with an admirably robust brittleness). Eight Improvisations further confirms the composer's desire to unshackle music from formal constraints, and the fourth of these, 'Allegretto Scherzando', emerges as a notably crisp and incisive rendition.

Although the Two Romanian Dances, with which the recording begins, are vibrantly

encapsulated by Bringuier, it is the closing Piano Sonata that invites our greatest attention. Clarity of texture in the outer movements is never compromised, while, as Rathert comments, the central *Sostenuto e pesante* emerges as 'a picture rather than movement': I was most engaged by the playing here. Indeed, Bringuier's Bartók compares very favourably with Murray Perahia's, notwithstanding the latter's energetic, muscular sway in the finale particularly. However, the preferential sound in this new recording, coupled with Bringuier's combination of youthful *joie de vivre* and sense of measure in the more soothing material, allows this recording to come forward as a resilient and worthy competitor.

