



Elisso Bolkvadze plays Prokofiev and Schubert

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[Fanfare](#) (Huntley Dent - 2016.02.01)

The Russian school of pianism rolls forward like an Energizer Bösendorfer bunny, apparently unstoppable. Not that I'd ever want it to stop, as evidenced by Georgian pianist Elisso Bolkvadze, whose powerful, charismatic playing stands on the same level as the far more famous YouTube sensation Valentina Lisitsa. Born in Tbilisi in 1967, Bolkvadze is referred to as a national hero in her native Georgia, and she's been named a UNESCO Artist for Peace. If U.S. audiences aren't likely to know her name, she's performed around the world and placed sixth in the 1989 Van Cliburn Competition. Besides making an early album for Sony, there has been a steady stream of later recordings.

What sealed my enthusiasm for this new release was unexpected, a galvanizing reading of the Prokofiev Second Piano Sonata from 1912. We find the composer half-perched as bratty precocious Modernist—at 21, he was already a prominent member of St. Petersburg's contemporary music culture—and an extremely knowing writer for piano, well on his way to developing a unique personal style. The Second Sonata, which stands in sequence between the scandalously raucous Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 2, roams freely from Chopin through Liszt and Rachmaninoff, adding zingers and flashes of dissonance that must have sounded incongruous at the time. These innovations are squibs compared with the bombshell Stravinsky would drop the next year in *Le Sacre*, and it's difficult to bring out a sharp profile for the whole work.

Bolkvadze manages to, however, by force of will, playing the first movement on a grander scale than, say Yefim Bronfman in his well-regarded Sony recording from 1995. At times he's freer and more imaginative in his phrasing, but Bolkvadze has more impact. Prokofiev introduces fine-textured filigree as a contrast with power in the first movement, and Bolkvadze makes the two fit naturally together. There's also more energy and personality throughout than with Bronfman.

Being a natural at Prokofiev has no predictive value in Schubert, and no matter how hard I squinted, the two composers don't really belong together. Except for Richter, I don't think of Russians pianists being very attuned to Schubert (even Horowitz made a hash of the late, great B♭ Sonata, on DG). The first set of Four Impromptus, D 899, is much loved and much recorded, so what does Bolkvadze have to add? Happily, she passes the bar insofar as her Schubert genuinely sounds like Schubert in its sensitivity, natural flow, and melodic grace. This is immediately apparent in her poised, tender reading of Impromptu No. 1 in C Minor.

I don't hear Brendel's refinement of touch, but I'm not sure that's a lack; for all its fame, Brendel's Schubert mostly strikes me as too cool and objective (although his Philips recording of the Impromptus is a standout). When an obscure pianist like

Bolkvadze competes with great names, you wait for the moment when her imagination or technique falters in comparison. But it doesn't. She builds the C-Minor Impromptu to a powerful climax that does justice to Richter's impassioned Schubert, in fact.

Everything goes just as well in the remaining three pieces. In Impromptu No. 2 her left hand could spring the rhythm with more verve as the right hand is racing along. The middle section is considerably more forceful than the norm, but I count that a plus. This is a pianist with all the intrinsic style that the Russian school stands for, who also adds a lyricism and tenderness, beautifully exemplified in Impromptu No. 3's enchanting melody, that even some illustrious Russian pianists didn't possess.

It's a delight to encounter, by chance, really, such a mature artist. Despite the chalk-and-cheese coupling of composers and the skimpy total timing, this recital disc is one to place on a short list of the year's best. Clear, realistic piano sound; slimline cardboard packaging.

