



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky & Sergei Rachmaninov: The Seasons & Variations on a Theme of Corelli

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Gramophone (Harriet Smith - 2009.03.04)

GRAMOPHONE

Two great Russian piano masterpieces in a subtle and soulful recording

Hideyo Harada offers a reading that thrills

What a compelling coupling this is, and how good to hear Tchaikovsky's still-underrated cycle given a reading which conveys its grit and grandeur as well as its beauty. The cycle was commissioned by the editor of a St Petersburg journal, *Le Nouvelliste*, and the pieces were published as a kind of musical part-work. When the set was published complete, each piece was headed by lines of verse by a Russian poet, Tolstoy and Pushkin among them, though such is the vividness of Tchaikovsky's writing that the music needs no explanation.

Tchaikovsky's flitting lark (March) and his irresistible waltzes for April and December are a particular delight in Hideyo Harada's hands. She's not afraid of full-blooded climaxes either, as witness the choppy waters of June's initially lilting barcarolle. And her "Autumn Song" (October) is desolate enough to soften the hardest of hearts. Pletnev's masterly version remains a benchmark, and though Harada matches him in soulfulness, there are times when his more vigorous approach wins the day, not least in a wild harvest (August) and a hunt (September) where you can almost smell the blood.

Harada is also up against a very fine Pletnev recording in Rachmaninov's Corelli Variations, that solo masterpiece just one opus number apart from his unaccountably more popular Paganini Variations. Pletnev may have the historical advantage of performing on Rachmaninov's own piano, but there's little in it, musically speaking. The subtlety with which Harada approaches the theme itself sets the scene for a reading that thrills as much for its nuance as for its brilliance – especially the extrovert Vars 11, 16 and 18. The wonderfully warm recording sets the seal on a highly recommendable disc.