

of the Etudes. But there is ample reward in Alexeev's reserve. He may not 'emit light and be surrounded in an air of witchcraft' (a description of Scriabin's own playing) but his overall musicianship brings its own rewards, and he has been well recorded. **Bryce Morrison**

Etudes – selected comparison:

Lane (12/92) (HYPE) CDH55242

Shostakovich

Preludes and Fugues, Op 87

Craig Sheppard *pf*

Roméo (F) ② 7315/16 (162' • DDD)

Recorded live at Meany Theater, Seattle, April 2015



In his accompanying notes to this live recording, Craig Sheppard quotes Kurt Sanderling's comment that if Shostakovich's 24 Preludes and Fugues are his crowning and austere keyboard masterpiece, they are also his most 'intimate diary'. This surely hints at the inwardness and complexity of an awe-inspiring opus created under painful and troubling circumstances. Composed at white heat in 1950 and 1951, Op 87 is a reply to the Soviet authorities' scorn for music beyond their comprehension and a reaching-out to those with less banal musical expectations. First performed by Tatyana Nikolaieva, their dedicatee, in 1952, they are a 'testament to triumph over adversity' (Sheppard) and a worthy successor to Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

Generally, short preludes are followed by extended fugues, both understandably a witness to extreme mood-swings and uncertain temper. Even a direction such as *tranquillo* is tinged with irony and the overall effect is powerful and sardonic. The anguish of Prelude No 14, expressed in shuddering *tremolandos*, hints at the pressure Shostakovich worked under, while the innocent and beguiling start to Prelude No 13 leads typically to vehemence and unrest. Again, and characteristically, the crazy-paving Fugue No 15 turns mordant wit into savagery, and it is only in Fugue No 24 that defiance turns to victory in a massive carillon of Moscow bells.

The demands both musical and technical are immense and were met by Nikolaieva and Melnikov (not forgetting selections by Richter, Gilels and a single offering of No 15 from Terence Judd, whose virtuosity in the 1978 Tchaikovsky Piano Competition set his Moscow audience by the ears) with unflinching skill and dedication. Sheppard now joins their company in performances of unflinching lucidity and musicianship. His previous recordings of Bach's major

keyboard works – to say nothing of the daunting fugue from Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata – tell us that he has no fear of even the most intimidating part-writing. And here, clearly at the zenith of his career, he achieves a brilliantly inclusive poise and brio that go to the very heart of Shostakovich. He ends the Fugue No 24 in a blaze of *maestoso* glory and a storm of cheers. Finely recorded, this is a memorable issue. **Bryce Morrison**

Selected comparisons:

Nikolaieva (3/91) (HYPE) CDA66441/3

Melnikov (8/10) (HARM) HMC90 2019/20

Vieuxtemps

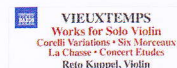
Six Etudes de concert, Op 16. Etudes,

Op 48 – selection. Six Morceaux, Op 55.

La chasse, Op 32 No 3

Reto Kuppel *vn*

Naxos ⑧ 8 573339 (74' • DDD)



Vieuxtemps was among the foremost of the post-Paganini generation of violinist-composers. That his music should be so little heard and so much undervalued may be a hangover from the days of German hegemony, but there is surely no excuse for it to be ignored today. It is skilfully written, highly inventive and melodic and – as strongly demonstrated on this disc – combines all the tricks that Paganini ever invented with the classical restraint of de Bériot, Vieuxtemps's teacher.

These three groups of six études for solo violin merit a place in any recital programme, while 'La chasse' from the *Three Salon Pieces*, Op 32, or almost any single étude from the above would make a worthy encore: like all the best études, they don't sound like études. I can only guess that more violinists don't play, for example, Op 48 No 6 ('Erzählung') or No 7 ('Qual') because they haven't bothered to investigate Vieuxtemps or have been told by their teachers not to bother.

The German Reto Kuppel, a Dorothy DeLay/Juillard alumnus, is superbly attuned to the genre, as attested by his earlier Naxos disc of solo studies and caprices by Ferdinand David. All the necessary brilliance and incisive attack is there as you would expect, but also the same breadth and power of tone which was, from all accounts, part of what made Vieuxtemps's own playing so remarkable.

That said, even this devoted admirer found 74 minutes and 10 seconds of unaccompanied Vieuxtemps too much to take at a sitting (as he would for Bach,

Paganini or Ysaÿe). And he would have been even more pleasantly surprised if these discoveries had he come across a nestling between, say, the *Ballade et Polonoise*, Op 38, or *Fantasia appassionata*, Op 35. Still, we must be grateful to him for giving us, despite their limited appeal, the opportunity of hearing these buried treasures. **Jeremy Nicholas**

'20th Century Harpsichord Music'

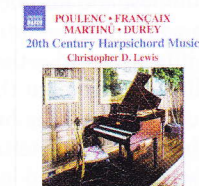
Durey Dix Inventions **Françaix** Deux Pièces

Martinů Deux Impromptus. Deux Pièces

Harpischord Sonata Poulenc Suite française

Christopher D Lewis *hpd*

Naxos ⑧ 8 573364 (60' • DDD)



The presence of the pioneering harpsichordist Landowska in e

20th-century Paris inspired many composers to write for her. Her instrument of choice was a heavy cased Pleyel model with keyboards and a wide variety of registers designed more for the concert hall than the salon. Since Christopher Lewis is not 'authenticity minded', he has opted for a recently restored 1930s Pleyel.

Although Landowska did not record any of these pieces, it wouldn't be presumptuous to read a few 'Wanda' into the rhythmic swagger and specificity of articulation that Lewis brings to Poulenc's *Suite française*: the gravitas of Pavane's rolled chords or the Compagnon's masterful finger *legato*, for example. In turn, the oaken timbred lute stop in the impact of the dissonances throughout the first of Françaix's previously unrecorded *Deux Pièces*. Of the three Martinů works, the three-movement Sonata holds the most interest with disarmingly simple melodies that gradually veer into unpredictable, asymmetric directions. Yet the first of his 1935 *Pièces* features gnarly slow-moving chords that benefit from the Pleyel's weight.

Although Louis Durey's *Ten Inventions* (another first recording) were originally scored for various instrumental combinations, they resonate beautifully on the Pleyel from one register to another, such as in No 3's slowly cascading intervals and passages, No 7's wide interval leaps and *faux* Bach allusions and the modal No 10's closely overlapping counterpoint. Kudos to Lewis for exploring a fascinating corner of 20th-century harpsichord history in the right way, and to the terrific booklet by Graham Wade. **Jed Distler**