

STRAVINSKY, I.: Petrushka (version for orchestra / version for piano 4 hands) (Basel Symphony, D.R. Davies, Maki Namekawa) SOB11

STRAVINSKY: PIANO BALLETS QTZ2117

STRAVINSKY, I.: Petrushka / Symphonies of Wind Instruments / Orpheus (London Philharmonic, V. Jurowski) LPO-0091

Before the advent of commercial recording, orchestral works often found their biggest audiences through piano transcriptions designed to be performed at home. But why the contemporary vogue for monochrome Stravinsky on disc? There are some valid arguments in favour. Piano duet reductions of the familiar Russian ballets are precisely what would have been heard during rehearsals at Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. These were the scores Stravinsky carried with him: we know that he and Debussy played through *The Rite of Spring* in this format. Perhaps it's worth recalling that the four-hands one-keyboard version was published in 1913, eight years before the full orchestral score. And in the case of *Petrushka*, Stravinsky was quite happy to cut and paste his material to produce a virtuoso three-movement recital piece for Arthur Rubinstein. The radical abruptness of his orchestral writing can be heard as an extension of new ways of thinking about his own instrument. It might even be argued that a first-rate rendition of this kind makes the harmonic structure more apparent, enabling one to latch on to elements otherwise lost in the welter of orchestral effects.

In the face of well-publicised celebrity recordings which either overdub a single player or transfer the music to two pianos, the latest offerings are more 'authentic'. That said, you never know quite what you're going to hear with these scores: there are lines in small type that can be incorporated into performances more readily where a degree of trickery is employed. On a single piano whole passages need to be played with either the wrist up with fingers at right angles to the keyboard, or the wrist down with fingers crawling upwards from underneath. For enthusiasts that's part of the fun, like the guest appearances of triangle and (dropped) tambourine in *Petrushka*.

The handsomely presented release from Basel is the third in a series in which the great Russian ballets are presented in tandem with the piano arrangements in which versatile maestro Dennis Russell Davies is joined by his wife, Maki Namekawa. Neither rendering has the visceral playfulness usually associated with this repertoire. My own benchmark for the duet version is the Nonesuch recording by Ursula Oppens and her onetime duo partner Paul Jacobs (*Arbiter*, A/08), a persuasive advocate of the modern and the *recherché* who died prematurely, an early victim of Aids-related illness. Where that vintage team drive the music forward with invigorating rhythmic snap, Russell Davies and Namekawa take their time and explore the byways. In its more motoric stretches they expose accompanimental figuration in novel ways, seemingly looking back to Satie and forwards to Philip Glass at the expense of more local folk-related colour. Painstaking percussive detail, tuned and untuned, is exceptionally audible in the similarly aligned orchestral version placed first on the disc.

Katya Apekisheva and Charles Owen, currently curating the London Piano Festival at Kings Place, first met as children in 1987. This, their first disc together, differs from its rivals in pairing *Petrushka* with *The Rite of Spring*. Their bright-sounding instrument is quite closely observed in a relatively small venue, a lifelike effect I found a little tiring. A conscientious effort is made to bring out orchestral colour through the piano writing alone, *Petrushka*'s percussive add-ons eschewed.

Comprehensive notes and as many as 30 individual tracks make it possible to isolate particular nuggets for closer study. The interpretations steer an intelligent middle course between thrilling immediacy and somnambulistic reverie.

Notwithstanding the merits of these discs, it is something of a relief to turn to Vladimir Jurowski's all-orchestral selection on LSO Live. Here, sympathetic engineering opens out the sound of a big band in a dry-throated hall and the players are on good form despite the challenge of recording in the course of demanding concert programmes. Applause has been suppressed throughout. Jurowski prefers the earlier, more profligate orchestrations of the Symphonies of Winds and *Petrushka*, eliciting eminently recommendable accounts of both. In his urgent and initially edgy take on the former he allows the players to shape detail and then makes the closing chorale suitably implacable. Like Russell Davies he can seem sluggish in *Petrushka* but is not so intent on clarifying its mushier glitter that he loses sight of the drama. The drum entr'actes linking the scenes seem to be partly offstage. At the Royal Festival Hall concert, mobile phones, noises off and rogue lighting risked compromising the frozen beauty of *Orpheus*. No evidence of these disturbances survives to mar another finely judged rendition. Robert Craft and the LSO, lither not cooler as captured in superior studio conditions (Naxos, 3/00), are only marginally preferable. © 2016 Gramophone