

LEGACY: REBECCA PENNEYS PLAYS CHOPIN

CHOPIN Piano Sonata No. 3. Nocturnes, op. 27. Waltz in A \flat , op. 34/1. Berceuse. Scherzo No. 3 & • Rebecca Penneys (pn) • FLEUR DE SON 58045 (Blu-ray: 56:28) & Comments on piano playing and Chopin

Back in *Fanfare* 41:5, I enjoyed Steinway Artist Rebecca Penneys' Blu-ray of Brahms, Debussy, and Falla. Here, she demonstrates a real affinity for Chopin, playing on a rebuilt 1891 Steinway, from which she elicits the sweetest mid-to-upper registers. The filming is to an empty hall in St. Petersburg, Florida, and the works are interspersed with small talks by Penneys against the background of the ocean: An Introduction, "Motion and Emotion," "Performance and Historical Perspectives," and finally "Transcendence. My Steinway, RPPF and Legacy." The piano has a clarity to it, in addition to color and nuance, that enables Penneys to shed light on Chopin's mode of discourse; the affinity that Penneys has with this instrument is beyond doubt.

The Chopin Third Sonata is a fabulous reading, a perfect melding of impeccable technique (one can learn huge amounts from watching Penneys about how to make the piano sing, how to voice chords, how to vary tone, and so much more) and musical integrity. The Scherzo's treacherous ground holds no fears for Penneys, while the *Largo* is a truly interior statement. Throughout all this she plays with her body remarkably still, as she channels her nuances through her arms to her fingers, and thence through the piano. With such an ability to conjure up the very best sound from her chosen instrument, the *Largo* becomes ever more heady and intoxicating, the winding lines like slowly emerging wisps of smoke. The move to the finale is beautifully managed; once there, Penneys paints an earthy terrain, gritty and exciting, yet with a characteristic attention to detail and texture.

The Chopin Waltz in A \flat Major, op. 34/1, is absolute joy, bright and sparkling in the right hand and with cheeky inner voices which speak but know their place: there's no hammering out of inner voices for the sake of it, Horowitz-like, here. Penneys' credo of minimum effort for maximal musical effect is everywhere apparent. The two Nocturnes of op. 27 are models of their kind. Particularly impressive is the interactions of lines in that almost Impressionistic last page of op. 27/2 (Penneys acknowledges this forward-looking trait in her final spoken section on the disc). She refers to piano playing as "full of color, full of nuance," facets that are beautifully present and correct in her naturally flowing account of Chopin's op. 27/1. The ululating left handwriting here seems perfectly suited to this particular piano, from which Penneys is able to negotiate both a cloud of sound and yet allow us to hear each note. Dialogue between lines in the right hand is again beautifully realized, while op. 27/2 is a moonlit fantasy in itself, its filigree perfectly, lightly delivered.

The Berceuse seems a prolongation of the Nocturnes in this context. Penneys' account is notable for the sheer love she seems to lavish on the left-hand repeated figure, repeated but never repetitive. This is one of the finest performances available. In her final section, Penneys speaks of seeing composers "as painters" and of her legacy. She speaks of the composers she plays being "in love with sound" itself, and there being "limitless beauty"; certainly, there is a luminous beauty to Penneys' playing. Finally, the Third Scherzo, in C \sharp Minor, provides an opportunity to gasp at Penneys' double octave technique as well as her remarkable clarity. Here is someone who would never use the sustaining pedal as an enabling means; her finger strength ensures she would never need to. Those cascades betwixt the chordal statements are magical, the two differentiated by the perfect contrast of piano tone.

Camera work throughout is intelligent and non-interventionist. Close-ups of the hands are carefully chosen (for example solo left-hand octaves). There's just one small but somewhat amusing typo: The

timing of the first movement *Allegro maestoso* of the Third Sonata is given as “0:41.” Now that *would* be quick.

Penneys’ 2019 Piano Festival at the University of South Florida was due to start just two days after this review was written, and clearly attracts the very best: Legacy Forums and Masterclasses are given by the likes of Jerome Lowenthal, Ursula Oppens, Lydia Artymiw, Roberto Plano, and Ian Hobson (himself no stranger to Chopin), amongst others. But it is Penneys’ Chopin that concerns us here, and this is a life-enhancing, beautiful offering from a pianist of immense heart.

FANFARE: Colin Clarke