

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

At first, I was startled to see that the music on this Chopin recital was interspersed with short segments of spoken commentary by the pianist, Rebecca Penneys, who is not only a performer but a top-level piano teacher of long standing. Within a few minutes I realized that Penneys' remarks are central to understanding how she plays Chopin so beautifully and to such moving effect. She speaks of being transported as she plays, raised to a level of effortless ease that is like floating. Her teaching method, which she calls "Motion and Emotion," attempts to impart a technique to her students that combines the greatest physical ease and least stress with the freedom to find one's own expressive voice.

I was delighted to discover in these comments that Penneys believes in playing music from the inside, a phrase too vague to really communicate what her performance style is all about but clear enough to point in the right direction. It's not enough to say that her Chopin is poetic or Romantic; there are many aspects that involve a deep—in fact, lifelong—mastery of the instrument. Born in 1946, she began her piano studies in Los Angeles at three and appeared with the LA Philharmonic at 11—it's a testimony to her performance philosophy that in her 70s Penneys displays undiminished technique and rapt attention. In a lengthy and illuminating conversation with Christopher Broderson (*Fanfare* 41:5) one finds a wealth of knowledge about pedaling, for example, as a means to achieve color, tone, even crescendo and decrescendo in the most artful ways. (Penneys plays on a rich-sounding 1891 Steinway D that she had rebuilt for warmth and sonority, and she requested that the shift pedal be customized to play on one, two, or three strings—to me that detail signifies a remarkable ear.)

As much as one might admire what she wants her pupils to feel and express, the matter at hand is how Penneys herself plays these very familiar works. The first movement of the B-Minor Sonata reveals that she grasps its entire span in a seamless arc; it's rare to hear such continuity in the face of Chopin's varied gestures. Nothing is episodic, an effect achieved in two primary ways, through a gift for transitions and a strong through-line in Penneys' phrasing. Once your ear absorbs how naturally and organically the performance is going to be, there's a bond of communication that is a striking feature of all the performances here. It's significant that Penneys never uses *marcato* or sudden attacks of *forte* and *fortissimo* in an abrupt way. The loudest interjections grow out of the piece's stream of dynamics—this is especially noticeable in Scherzo No. 3, where many pianists exaggerate dynamic contrasts for dramatic effect and surprise.

Most competition entrants (and a good number of professionals) take such an approach. Penneys's way, for me at least, is much more musical and satisfying. Another feature of her interpretation is her subtlety in simplicity. The two Nocturnes, op. 27, begin with unassuming arpeggios in the left hand, followed by a single note to start the languorous melody. Penneys evokes a captivating mood in this simple design, in keeping with Chopinists I deeply admire; Nelson Freire comes immediately to mind.

In the Berceuse she phrases the melody as tenderly as anyone I've ever encountered, and the spring in her waltz rhythm in op. 34/1 is exhilarating. Bravura is rarely brought to the fore, but it is evident that Penneys can flash in moments of excitement and power whenever she chooses. Typically, poetic interpreters make Chopin sound too dainty, so it's satisfying that such isn't the case here. Although I was engrossed by everything on the program, I'd pick the Scherzo as a truly revealing interpretation—so much happens to convey the inspiration Penneys' personal voice and musical maturity.

Finally, a hallmark of her teaching is telling her pupils to respect and understand the past. I imagine that this is hard to impart so that a student's hands reflect the lesson. Words and good intentions aren't enough. It's valuable, therefore, that Penneys' hands do convey the value of tradition without giving up individuality. Much of the time the camera shows the pianist's hands, which exemplify the ease and fluidity of her method.

The recorded sound and hall ambience are both excellent. In keeping with the location in St. Petersburg, Florida, Penneys dresses casually in a flowery tropical shirt. The total timing listed in the headnote is for the musical portion of the program; the spoken commentary occupies 13 minutes in addition. Strongly recommended to general listeners, pianophiles, and keen students of keyboard technique.

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