

LEGACY: REBECCA PENNEYTS 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

It was only a little over a year ago, in 41:5, that I reviewed a Blu-ray disc of pianist Rebecca Penneys, playing works by Brahms, Debussy, and Falla. In case you missed it, two introductory paragraphs from that review bear repeating:

“A professor of piano at the Eastman School of Music since 1980, and Professor Emerita since July 2017, Penneys has been a guest artist, keynote speaker, and pedagogue nationally and internationally for over 40 years. Her current and former students include prizewinners in international competitions and hold important teaching posts on every continent. Concurrent with her busy teaching and lecturing schedule, Penneys has maintained an active concert schedule.

“Since 2001, Penneys has been Artist-in-Residence at Florida’s St. Petersburg College, and since 2015 a Steinway Artist-in-Residence at the University of South Florida. The Florida connection figures prominently in this Blu-ray (also available as a DVD) release. In 2013, Penneys established and inaugurated the Rebecca Penneys Piano Festival (RPPF) at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Held in July, in the University’s all-Steinway facility, the RPPF is entirely donor sponsored and is open, tuition-free, to aspiring college-age pianists, 18 to 30, from around the globe. A smaller version, RPPF-Mini, is held in January on the Gibbs campus of St. Petersburg College. It’s billed as a short ‘boot-camp’ for pianists 21 to 31, to assist them in their transition from students to teachers/performers.”

Rebecca can be heard on recordings dating back to the 1990s, but this Blu-ray (also available as a standard DVD) is the second in a new series aimed at leaving her legacy of a life lived in music through teaching and performing. As she explains it, “These are my gifts to young pianists and piano teachers, and to a future I will not see or hear. I feel inspired exploring relationships between motion and emotion with sound, the voice of the piano, as the primary carrier of emotion against a backdrop of different performance traditions.” As was the case with her previous Blu-ray/DVD, Penneys takes the opportunity at the end of the musical portion of the disc to add spoken comments on her insights, goals, and the mission of RPPF.

This second release differs from the first in that it is devoted entirely to one composer, Chopin. First on the program is the Sonata No. 3 in B Minor, op. 58. Composed in 1844, it’s Chopin’s last large-scale, multi-movement work for solo piano, but not his last large-scale, multi-movement work in any form; that would be his Cello Sonata of two years later. Once criticized for certain formal irregularities, all three of the composer’s piano sonatas are now recognized as masterpieces. The writing ranges from the bold and forthright in the opening *Allegro maestoso* to the iridescent flickering that plays across the keyboard in the Scherzo. To single out Chopin’s B-Minor Sonata for its technical difficulties in a body of works famous for their technical difficulties seems almost irrelevant. What is relevant is that Rebecca Penneys is undaunted by anything Chopin throws at her, and in her hands, the difficulties are transcended and transformed into music-making of great beauty and communicative rapport.

The Waltz in A \flat Major, op. 34/1, is the first in a set of three waltzes that were published together under a single opus number in 1838. They were composed, however, over a four-year period between 1834 and 1838, and were probably not originally intended as a triptych, though subsequent branding as *Valses brilliantes* has permanently joined them at the hips. Yet they’re quite different in character. The A \flat -Major

number, played here by Penneys, is the longest of the three, and the one that truly deserves the *Valse brillante* title. It's a grand and bravura ballroom dance that takes the Viennese tradition of Schubert's ballroom waltzes to new and dizzying swirls and twirls around the ballroom floor.

In contrast, the Two Nocturnes of op. 27 were both composed together in 1836 and intended as a pair. The first of them, in C# Minor, is regarded by some as Chopin's finest work in a genre that embodies quintessential elements of Romanticism: the expression of unrequited love, intense longing, and bittersweet regret over things that might have been. Music critic Alan Rich described the C#-Minor Nocturne as "a powerful, virile outcry, one of the most personal utterances in the entire realm of piano music. It is shrouded by a mood of disquiet so strong that pianist-educator Ernest Hutcheson said it creates 'an atmosphere of morbid pessimism, heavy and oppressive'." And Richard E. Rodda, program annotator for a 2017 Maurizio Pollini recital, wrote of the piece: It's shrouded by a mood of disquiet so strong that pianist-educator Ernest Hutcheson said it creates 'an atmosphere of morbid pessimism, heavy and oppressive'."

With its companion Nocturne, op. 27/2, it's as if Chopin wanted to explore not just another mood, but the other side of C# Minor's coin, for Db Major, at least on a keyboard tuned in equal temperament, is C# Major—same white and black keys on the keyboard—simply written in five flats instead of seven sharps. Debussy held this Nocturne to be "among the most beautiful music ever written," describing it as "taking flight toward the forest of *As You Like It*, where the fairies alone hold sway over our minds." The beauty of tone and emotional sensitivity with which Penneys spins these two Nocturnes are indescribably touching.

For the last two pieces on her program, Penneys mirrors the two Nocturnes by giving us a reverse key sequence with the Berceuse in Db Major, op. 57, and the Scherzo No. 3 in C# Minor, op. 39. The two pieces were not composed together, and are not related, as are the two Nocturnes, but in executing this key reversal maneuver, Penneys brings her recital to a satisfying close, having given it a sense of circular conclusiveness.

A lullaby by another name, the Berceuse, composed in 1844, proceeds as a sequence of variations with highly ornate keyboard figuration. Then, spirits of past and future—Beethoven and Liszt—appear together in the *Presto con fuoco* of the Scherzo's *furiant*.

This is a warm, winning, and wonderful Chopin program, fully in keeping with Penneys' mission to secure a living legacy of her life in music. Listening to her play these pieces, one has the feeling of a deep connection with Penneys, and through her, with Chopin. Strongly recommended.

P.S. Rebecca has informed us that a third release in this "legacy" series will be forthcoming in about six months.

FANFARE: Jerry Dubins