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alla breve

The Piano in Our Time

The piano is not as central to the work of 20th-century composers as it was to those of the 19th, yet the instrument's stylistic and timbral possibilities have inspired a richly varied repertoire for 21st-century pianists to cut their teeth on.

Heard chronologically, 17 previously unrecorded fragments reveal the distance between Schoenberg's youthful romanticism and his challenging 12-tone style. The meticulous but cool Herbert Henck includes



Schoenberg

these along with the rest of Schoenberg's piano output (Wergo 6268, ***). Pierre Boulez's iconic sonatas embody a defiant brand of serialism that demands patience and tough ears. Idil Biret brings out the music with unusual sensitivity to voicing and color (Naxos 8.553353, ****). The relatively obscure Gisela Klöbe falls in the tradition of German neo-classicists who gained prominence after the war. Silke-Thora Matthies and Christian Kohn turn in solid performances of works that make a better impression when heard separately (Marco Polo 8.223712, ***). Bernd Alois Zimmermann's drab and airless piano works have none of the distinction of his chamber and operatic efforts, and Tiny Wirtz is sabotaged by an ill-tuned instrument (Koch Schwann 3-1448, *).

Anthony Goldstone gathers together Gustav Holst's extant piano music. Mix Debussy, Ellington and Gershwin in a blender and you get the Constant Lambert works filling out the disc (Chandos 9382, ***). Malcolm Arnold's keyboard music is admittedly marginal, but Benjamin Frith revels in its charm and melodic appeal. (Koch 3-6162-2, ***). In contrast, Kaikhosru Sorabji wrought mammoth canvases, laden with notes. Much of his music is, for my taste, wanderingly garish and harmonically befuddled, but you'll never hear these four (relatively) short works played better than Michael Habermann (Elan 82264, *) plays them. Ronald Stevenson's epic *Passacaglia on DSCH* (Shostakovich's initials) pursues a less improvisatory path. Unlike the composer's own recording, Raymond Clarke just manages to fit it all on one disc (Marco Polo 8.223545, ****).

Tatiana Nikolseva championed Shostakovich's 24 *Preludes and Fugues* when the ink was still wet. While I prefer her flatter, early-'60s versions, this 1987 remake benefits from updated sonics (BMG/Melodiya 74321198492, ***). Many feel Sofia Gubaidulina to be Shostakovich's artistic heir. The uncompromising spiritual depth and economy of expression that permeates her piano music is matched note-for-note in Andreas Haefliger's loving recreations (Sony 53960, *****). Finally, *Inclination to Desire*, a collection of 18 tangos, exemplifies an all-embracing eclecticism that may be a harbinger of where piano music is headed. The late Yvar Mikhashoff plays with characteristic flair and generosity (New Albion 73, *****). —Jed Distler