

Scherzo: Piano Music by Oskar Morawetz. Darrett Zusko, piano. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 14309, 2009. 1 compact disc. Contents: *Suite for Piano* (9:42); *Ten Preludes for Piano*, (25:04); *Scherzo* (5:29); *Ballade* (8:49); *Fantasy on a Hebrew Theme* (13:08); *Fantasy, Elegy and Toccata* (14:14). \$17.98*

This is the first recording, over 76 minutes in length, devoted to works for piano by the esteemed Canadian composer, Oskar Morawetz (1917-2007). The composer was a fine performer on the piano in his own right. Consequently, his piano music shows not only a broad knowledge of piano literature, but imaginative ways of extending the possibilities of the instrument without using the American-influenced avant-garde techniques associated with Henry Cowell, John Cage and others.

The CD includes compositions that have entered the repertoire of many pianists, such as the *Scherzo* (1947), *Ballade* (1946, revised 1983), and *Fantasy, Elegy and Toccata* (1956). There are also works that are less well-known, and indeed the *Ten Preludes for Piano* (1964) here receive their first complete recording. According to the Morawetz web site (www.oskarmorawetz.com), the composer withdrew his *Fantasy on a Hebrew Theme* (1951). However, the score remains available at the Canadian Music Centre and a performance of the work is included on the CD. The retrospective opens with *Suite for Piano* (1968), the last completed piano work. Since Morawetz did not finish a piano work based on Sephardic themes in 1995, we must be satisfied with this overview of over two decades of piano composition. Pianist Darrett Zusko has made a point of living with these works for some time, frequently performing them in recital, and that definitely comes across in this recording.

In the *Suite for Piano*, Zusko uses a more impressionistic approach in its first movement, "Prelude," than in previous recordings made by Anton Kubalek and Angela Hewitt respectively. This approach works well and it is followed by the clear delineation of inner melodies and responsorial effects in the central "Nocturne." Unfortunately, there were some slight rhythmic problems as well as a misread note. To me, the concluding "Dance" has influences of central European dances with their changing metrical patterns. Zusko clearly demarcates those patterns with clean articulation, thus underlining the dance-like quality.

The *Ten Preludes for Piano* are generally quite short in length but varied in mood. Zusko manages to bring out the palette that Morawetz asks from the piano. To my ears, the performances improve as the set continues because there are some rhythmic problems in No. 3 and even a misread note. Occasionally there is also a tendency to slightly wait before the first beat, which has the effect of interrupting the flow of the line. A highlight of this recording for me are the performances of the fourth and fifth in the series as well as the last one where the changes of metre are particularly well done.

Scherzo, which also lends its title to this recording, is the most frequently performed Morawetz piano piece. Zusko generally gives it an excellent performance. However, I feel he could have brought out some of the playful aspects by creating a surprise effect at the arrival of an

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unexpected dissonance, and more could be made of the offbeat accents by asserting a strong first beat in previous bars.

For the most part, Zusko succeeds in bringing out the various contrapuntal threads of the story told in the *Ballade*. My only problem with his interpretation is that I feel that the storyteller needs to take a real breath from time to time. Similarly, the *Fantasy on a Hebrew Theme*, which consists of five variations on the Israeli song, “Artzah Alinu” (“We Went Up to the Land”), could also have the occasional moment of silence to better articulate changes of mood and dynamic.

The recording has a strong conclusion with the effective *Fantasy, Elegy and Toccata*. The opening piece, written in free sonata form, occasionally lacks continuity in the melodic line and the sudden change of dynamic that the composer calls for could be handled more deftly. Some of the same problems occur in the *Elegy* along with the occasional rhythmic imprecision, but the ending is absolutely exquisite. It sets the mood for the virtuoso rendition of the closing *Toccata*.

Even though I would prefer to hear the lyrical melodies always shaped instead of having sometimes a perfunctory quality, overall this is a fine recording. It is a pleasure to listen to the excellent sound of the Yamaha piano at St. George the Martyr Church, Toronto, with engineer David Quinney assisted by Chris Jackson and producer David Jaeger. Produced with assistance from the Ontario Arts Council, *Scherzo* includes extensive, well-written notes in English and French by Robin Elliott.

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