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Interview: Heart, Ecstasy, Intellect: A conversation with Burkard Schliessmann

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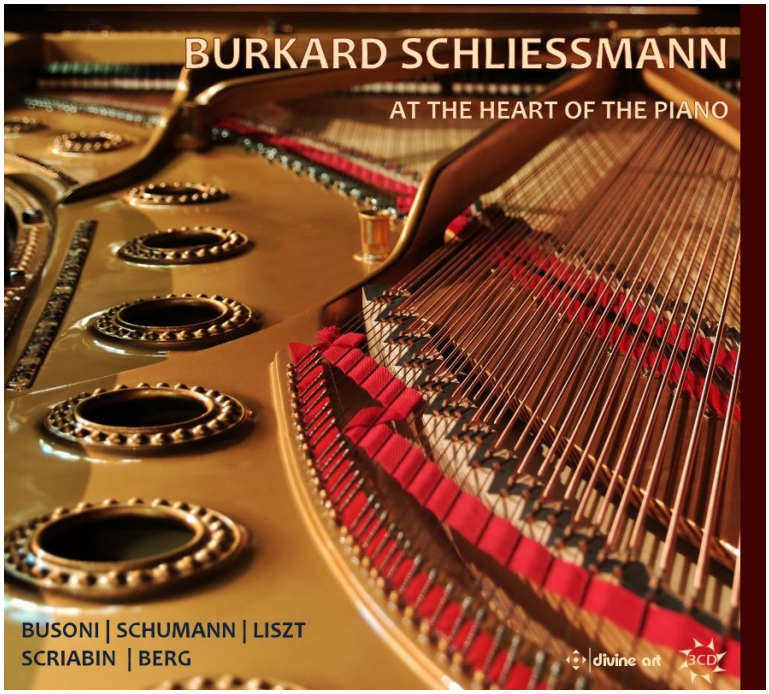

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Heart, Ecstasy, Intellect: A Conversation with Burkard Schliessmann

BY ROBERT SCHULSLAPER

Pianist Burkard Schliessmann brings the same intellectual probity, polymathic curiosity, and uncompromising integrity to his interviews as he does to his unending quest to reveal the "soul" of his chosen repertoire. In his view, to do less would constitute "something like a betrayal that would disturb the Truth of the work of art; in my world, it ends in blasphemy." After previously sharing his thoughts on Bach, Chopin, and Schumann with James Reel, Jerry Dubins, and Peter Rabinowitz, he's back to guide us through his latest release, *At The Heart Of The Piano*.

The title, At The Heart of The Piano*, brings to mind both the physical and musical attributes of the instrument that has enthralled so many. How did you arrive at it?*

We had worked long—and had been in discussion with other journalists and magazines to work out the title (frankly, they didn't know our mission and my name also was left out). Meanwhile, I'd found the close-up photograph of the inside of a piano showing the brass-wound strings, the richly textured intertwined red and white felts, and the gold-colored frame and sound holes that in effect constitute its heart. It dawned on me that just as these elements cohere as a perfectly functioning mechanism, so too the music, the compositions, and the interpretations should relate at the deepest level to one another and to the essence of the concert grand, coming out of it and inspired by it. So, after considering several proposals, all arising from etymological considerations, we decided on the title that we have today.

You've previously recorded a number of the works included on the new discs—the Schumann Fantasie and Symphonic Études*, the Liszt Sonata, and most of the Scriabin. It's not uncommon for musicians to revisit the same music over the years as their interpretations evolve: is that what you've done here?*

No, frankly, the new edition—*At the Heart of the Piano*—is drawn from my "early years" and contains productions from 1990 (Scriabin) until 2000 (Schumann). All the works had been recorded in the Friedrich-Ebert-Halle in Hamburg, Germany, a hall with fabulous acoustics, preferred by all major artists. Michelangeli and Pogorelich, among many others, have recorded there; this speaks for itself.

But in 2000, when I recorded the *Symphonic Études*, including the *Five Variations Posthumes*, I was the first one who had the idea to remove the complete (!) number of seats from the auditorium and place my Steinway—# 534 115—in the middle of the hall (normally, the piano would be placed on the stage for a recording). By doing this we were able to enhance the effect of the "surround-acoustics."

To return to your question of new versus old recordings, the Bach/Busoni and the Berg also had been recorded there in 1994, but never released. The new edition can be seen as a reflection spanning a period of over 10 years of recordings. More, it delivers an outstanding development of styles of compositions, from Bach to Schumann, Liszt to Scriabin, and finally to Berg. So, it really is something unique and special. The enormous time span of these interlaced stages of development, ranging from the Baroque to early Romantic compositions and then to the beginnings of the early avant-garde, the era of serialism, provokes astonishment.

Do you hear them differently now?

Of course, my interpretations themselves have developed and increased in an outstanding manner over the years. (Frankly, it would be terrible and a cancellation of the artistry of an artist if they didn't; one has to develop again and again, otherwise it wouldn't be a real and great art, let alone an aspect of truth.) But nevertheless, hearing them today at an objective and positive distance, I simply respond to any questions: Yes, great performances!

Let me give you the background of this compilation: As I've said, the Bach/Busoni dates from 1994 but never had been published and released. But Thomas Kurrer, president worldwide of Steinway & Sons, had the chance to hear this recording. One has to keep in mind that in former times, people from Steinway had extensive knowledge about music and art, based on deep experience through their collaboration with all the really great and famous pianists. I have been an Official Artist of Steinway since 1990. No one less than Wolfgang Richter, chief of the Concert & Artists Department, sponsored me. He had worked for S&S for more than 40 years and really was an "institution." (By the way: At that time it was a great honor to receive the title of "Official Artist of Steinway & Sons".)

Because I selected concert grands for recordings, concerts, and so on I very often had been a guest in Hamburg and New York. In a conversation with Kurrer and Richter they told me after hearing my interpretation of the Bach/Busoni Chaconne, "No one else of all pianists we heard can play the Chaconne in the way and style you play it!" I was deeply touched, because Kurrer and Richter of course heard the interpretations of Michelangeli and others. At this time especially, the interpretation of "ABM" (as Michelangeli was called) was well known and virtually a benchmark for others.

Years passed by, but I never forgot Kurrer and Richter's words. Towards the beginning of this year (2021) I occasionally heard my own interpretation of the Bach/Busoni Chaconne. One has to keep in mind that at this time I was totally objective insofar as my interpretation and had—in a positive way—sufficient distance from it. So, I could have been critical of myself. But, hearing it, I myself was electrified and thought, Kurrer and Richter are right! So, one could say, this experience was the spark that ignited a sense of obligation to present my interpretation in an adequate way and make it available to the world. Immediately I was inspired by this program—Bach/Busoni, Schumann, Liszt, Scriabin and Berg—and I took it to my producer Stephen Sutton from Divine Art. He was thrilled and spontaneously agreed with my hope to record it. So, the idea for this compilation was born, and *At The Heart Of The Piano* made its way.

Based on what you've just told me, it seems you're not one of those pianists who refrains from listening to their older recordings.

Granted, looking in the mirror can be uncomfortable, but I personally think it is an obligation of an artist to reflect and question his ideas. It is an aspect of humility and respect for the art.

Do you know Glenn Gould's story of pulling over in his car to listen to a radio broadcast that intrigued him, only to discover once it was finished that it was one of his own performances?

Yes, and I had a similar experience when a colleague sent me a performance of the Bach/Busoni Chaconne, only to learn at the end that it was my own interpretation.

Do you modify your performances to suit different environments?

Absolutely! Interpretation is interdependent on, and lastly inspired (!!!) by so many details: the

instrument, the acoustics of the hall, and especially the auditorium. I feel each person in the hall and the intensity of their hearing me, or not. So, finally, my interpretations merge into something like a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. I would go so far as to say that in this moment my interpretations are born in a new way, something born of improvisation, a reflection inspired of a wonderful moment. More, it really has something erotic about it, or better said, really sexual, because it is a physical merging and fusion with the auditorium, with the instrument, with the hall and of course the composition and the composer himself. Lastly, this merging is for me artistic truth: Truth of music and truth of sound form an inseparable whole for me.

You've chosen to start the program with the Bach Chaconne. No doubt you're familiar with Brahms's thoughts about it: "On one stave, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind."

What Brahms wants to express is congruent with my opinion. One has to respect Bach's original conception, which is a concentration of music to "only" the four strings of the violin. And in this concentration Bach succeeds in expressing, really, the emotions of a whole world. This is so unique that it's beyond words.

Have you played the Brahms arrangement for the left hand? It's my understanding that he intended not only to transcribe the music but wanted pianists to experience comparable difficulties to those faced by violinists.

The Brahms also is in my repertoire. I personally think that Brahms not only had it in mind to challenge the pianist with formidable difficulties, but even more to point out Bach's concentration on "only four strings" by a comparable reduction to the left hand alone.

While looking into the Chaconne's transformations through the years, I came across this passage by and about the one-armed pianist Paul Wittgenstein:

"In his three-volume *School for the Left Hand*, published by Universal in 1957, he objectifies his editorial revisions as follows: 'Brahms's arrangement is itself a transcription of a violin composition, and in the case of such transcriptions from one instrument to another certain latitude is not only permissible but also even necessary. Brahms himself made use of this privilege by setting the Chaconne one octave lower. However, because of this undoubtedly correct change which alone, so to say, placed this piece on firm ground, making possible the full use of the piano bass, the music remains exclusively in the tenor register of the piano. This results in a certain monotony of tone, which I have tried to overcome by making certain changes.' The monotony he encounters in Brahms's transcription is the result of an austere pledge of fidelity to an inviolable Bach text, according to Wittgenstein, that prevented Brahms from exploring the full possibilities of the keyboard. In his own arrangement, Wittgenstein immediately extends the range by adding a true bass, and introduces the technical solution designed to overcome his own physical limitation. Whereas Brahms's transcription persists in its attempt to reproduce the slim and vocal quality of the violin sound, Wittgenstein developmentally, in the style of a gradually unfolding drama, places ever-increasing demands on the performer. Here Wittgenstein appropriates the virtuoso and dramatic aspect of Busoni's arrangement, while retaining the content that Brahms was trying to preserve. Just imagine Wittgenstein at the piano, sitting on Busoni, who in turn is sitting on Brahms. All three gentlemen are now sitting on poor old J.S. Bach and are trying to speak with his voice!"

This is such a wonderful and profound as well as philosophical interpretation, based on great factual and professional knowledge, filled with humility and respect for Bach's original and for the human being Bach himself, that one cannot express it in a better way.

How would you assess Busoni's contribution?

Ferruccio Busoni, the Italian/German composer and cosmopolitan, who taught at the conservatories of Helsinki, Moscow, Boston, New York, and Berlin, was one of the most versatile artists of his time. Despite his admiration for Bach, Mozart, and Liszt, he worked primarily in the field of contemporary music. "On the contrast between a glowing present and a fateful link with tradition, between elementarity and old form, between Latin brightness and German speculation" (J.

Wassermann) he built a rich compositional and literary *oeuvre*, for the ideal form of which he coined the term "Neoclassicism." He remains largely unrivalled in the history of music as a sort of "musical Leonardo": a complete pianist, conductor of new orchestral works, composer of major theatrical and instrumental music which has never received all the acclaim of which it is worthy, a pedagogue of enormous influence, an inspired theoretician, an extraordinarily cultured man of letters, admirer of the theater as sublimated life and conscious life as applied theater, citizen of the world, child of his times of conflict, and prophet of a music of the future free from constraints. The transcripts of Bach's works constitute a considerable part of his *oeuvre*, in which he raised a given work to a hitherto unknown sphere of effect by transfer to another instrument, thereby creating a new work. He performed his Chaconne in the form of a concert recital for pianoforte for the first time in Boston. As a technically and structurally highly demanding composition, the Chaconne, with its extensive treatment, register-like changes of tonal color, massive harmony effects, and extensive use of the pedal, has become a monumental piece of music. The terms "faithfulness to the original" and "subordination to the composer's intent" are certainly not applicable to the Chaconne, yet it fittingly substantiates Busoni's statement, "that a sturdy old root which itself ages perpetually, at the same time perpetually drives on youth."

You're an organist as well as a pianist and have played all of Bach's works for that instrument. How do Busoni's piano transcriptions compare to the originals?

How to regard transcriptions of organ compositions for the piano is complicated, especially when one knows the originals as thoroughly as I do. Bach's organ compositions have been deliberately composed and dedicated to the organ, especially in the context of a very specific idea of sound and registration. We also have to keep in mind the third dimension of these compositions, the pedals. So in playing the organ we have to take into account that these three movements—two hands plus the feet—have to be seen as a special philosophical aspect inhabiting their own world; or better, even more directly said, as something psychological.

Among the Bach organ works we also find the great chorales, highlights of which are the "Schübler'sche Choräle" and the "18 Leipziger Choräle." There is also the "Orgelbüchlein," of which Albert Schweitzer said that Bach's tonal language seems unsurpassable. Furthermore, the structure and motifs of these works directly correspond to the chorale texts. So, the interpretation of this music requires in the deepest sense an adequate sound, the registration of a perfect and selected instrument, and the philosophical understanding, humility, and respect for this monocomposed world of music dedicated to one instrument only, the organ.

This all cannot be "replaced" let alone "transformed" in a transcription for piano, because the concert grand adheres to a totally different philosophy, so different that the two instruments, piano and organ, actually have nothing in common. By the way, my personal understanding is that the instruments of the string family—especially the violoncello—have more in common with the concert grand than the organ. I could say more, but it's really a theme in itself.

But back to your question: Regarding the Busoni transcriptions of the Bach organ works, one can only see and accept them as nearly new compositions with their own expression, demands, and philosophy.

I've heard that at one time the Bach-Busoni transcriptions appeared more frequently on concert programs than they do today. Horowitz's Historic Return *in 1965 perhaps included a nod to that former popularity by opening with one of them (Of course it could just be that he had played it throughout his career and returned to it for this special occasion). Are you ever tempted to perform any yourself?*

Horowitz started his program in his legendary comeback in Carnegie Hall in 1965 with Bach's Toccata, *Adagio* and Fugue in C Major, BWV 564. He was convinced that this work would bring him luck. So, frankly, it did! Hearing the *Adagio* in his interpretation, it really is an eye-opener, how as he pointed out the Cantilena the instrument really began to sing—but sorry, only in its guise as a new composition, not as a facsimile of the original. Knowing this, on the organ you would play the right hand Cantilena with a Sesquialtera registration, which delivers a heavenly, uplifted atmosphere.

And yes, it really was fashionable to play Busoni's transcriptions in former times, also thanks to Horowitz. Today they are—unfortunately—"out of sync" with the change in historical perspec-

tives and the rise of schools of thought which now enjoy great topicality and relevance. But independently of this change in attitude, I personally wouldn't play it, for the reasons I've already pointed out. But, I also want to express my deepest respect for Busoni in what he did for Bach in general, especially his important edition of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, which again presents a unique philosophy, even in those times when Bach enjoyed a new Renaissance, *grace à* Rosalyn Tureck, Wanda Landowska, Glenn Gould, Edwin Fischer, Karl Richter, Marie-Claire Alain, Helmut Walcha, etc., when different styles and insights were *en vogue*.

Before learning more about the rest of your program, I have to admit that one thing I've always found fascinating about organists is that they, more than most classical pianists, have preserved the art of improvising formal structures such as fugues, preludes, etc. Is this a discipline you've explored?

No, I'm famous for my interpretations, especially based on a deep understanding of the music and its background. My interpretations are improvisations in their own way, because I claim never to play a piece the same way twice. One also has to keep in mind (and this is proven by experience) that famous improvisers have not automatically been famous interpreters of other music. Their art and artistic power really have been of the moment.

The first CD of the set couples Busoni's "enhanced" setting of the Bach Chaconne with Schumann's Symphonic Études.

In terms of his full range as a writer for the piano, Robert Schumann reached the climax of his creative career with his *Études Symphoniques,* op. 13. The influence of Paganini, Schumann's perfected mastery of form, and his effusive Romantic sensibility, all combined to produce not only one of his best works but one of the greatest works in the whole piano repertoire. Opus 13 has had various titles. The original *Études in Orchestral Style* had already, in the first edition of 1837, become the 12 *Études Symphoniques*; the second version (1852) was retitled *Études en forme de variations* and contained only 10 numbers, the third and ninth of the 12 being omitted. Five years after Schumann's death the work was given its earlier title and the missing pieces were restored.

The theme—"Les notes de la mélodie sont de la composition d'un amateur"—is taken from a cycle of variations by Captain von Fricken, father of Ernestine von Fricken, to whom Schumann was engaged at the time. Schumann's theme evinces his desire to write for the piano as if for an orchestra. Wide-stretched chords and a wealth of middle notes create a variety of instrumental shadings; a trill on the dominant in a low octave makes an effect like a drum roll. The way in which different melodic elements are exploited contrapuntally with no hint of pedantry, and are brought to a triumphant climax at the end, deserves the greatest admiration and testifies to the complex musical thought processes and technical assurance of their composer, then still only 24.

Five further variations, also presented in this recording, were published posthumously, on the insistence of Brahms, as a kind of "appendix." These too show audacity and originality. Inserted into specified positions in the 1852 edition, they lend the expanded work a completely new and independent character. The first of these "mood paintings" is remarkable for the rushing melodies in the right hand, carried along by the quotation of the theme, unaltered, in the left. In the second, a Weber-like rhythm is heard concurrently with the main theme spun out into arpeggios, producing a highly distinctive sound quality. The third is lent conviction by taut rhythms throughout and a theme which alternates between the tenor and soprano registers, further enhanced by octaves and big chords which give it an almost orchestral fullness. A caprice—dreamy, graceful, and reminiscent of Chopin—provides the fourth variation, contrasting with the fifth, which, with its visionary harmonies, comes over as a shimmering study in Romantic expression.

If we attempt to seek out the inner core of the music and the way Robert Schumann would have interpreted it, always remaining mindful of the delightful sensuality at its heart, it is in Schopenhauer that we find the essential key. "It is," he writes, "to witness great music's main and original concern becoming a reality, music whose essence is perceived and beheld in a realm that transcends the mind and the senses."

Both Schumann and Liszt, whose Fantasie and Piano Sonata lead us further into the heart of Romantic pianism on Disc 2, would surely have embraced Schopenhauer as a kindred spirit.

Schumann's Fantasie in C and Liszt's Sonata in B Minor, two towering works of the piano

repertoire, are interlinked by their creators: each composer thought so highly of the other that he chose to make him the dedicatee of a particularly ambitious achievement. The two works are further linked by the fact that both were inexplicably and cruelly slated when they first beheld the light of day. The critic Eduard Hanslick, on hearing Liszt's B-Minor Sonata premiered by Hans von Bülow in 1857, thundered: "I am immensely glad to have heard this little-known and almost unplayable piece presented in such a perfect and authentic performance. Admittedly, words fail me to convey to others any idea of this musical monster. Never have I encountered the phenomenon of such utterly disparate elements being strung together so resourcefully, indeed wantonly, never have I experienced such wild ranting, so bloodthirsty an onslaught against everything music stands for. After feeling initially baffled, then enraged, I was finally overcome by the irresistibly comic effect it made. It was like the bustling, breathless laborings of an ingenious steam-powered mill grinding out virtually nothing. If Bülow had deliberately set out to convince the public that Liszt is an utter charlatan, he could hardly have chosen a better vehicle. But this sonata must be accorded one distinction at least: nothing else of its kind is ever likely to be found in the whole repertoire of music. All criticism, all discussion stops there. Anyone who hears this piece and finds it beautiful is beyond redemption."

Well, the critic was surely wrong here. Or was he? Hanslick had fully grasped the work's outrageous nature and taken up his stand against it. But if we take the trouble to read his observations in another light, it becomes evident that behind his apparently negative judgment there lies a whole set of observations which, if interpreted in a more positive way, are absolutely accurate.

Stylistically, Schumann's piano works belong to a transitional period which was inspired by Bach's polyphony and conditioned by the successors and imitators of Viennese Classicism and particularly of Beethoven. The elements of Schumann's style that make him original and great, and which are uniquely characteristic of him, can be viewed in two ways. His compositional inventiveness took him far beyond the harmonic progressions known until his time; on the other hand, he discovered in the fugues and canons of earlier composers a Romantic principle. He saw counterpoint, with its interweaving of voices, as corresponding to the mysterious relationships between external phenomena and the human soul and, being a Romantic composer, found himself impelled to express these in complex musical terms.

The challenge of finding adequate musical and intellectual substance to fill a large-scale form was one which Schumann had never fulfilled better than in the Fantasie in C Major; indeed in the field of piano music he never again equaled this achievement. For these reasons the ambitious Fantasie occupies a special place in Schumann's *oeuvre*. It is arguably the boldest and most uninhibited work he ever wrote, and not only because it is dedicated to Franz Liszt, the boldest and most uninhibited piano virtuoso of all time. It also harks back to a freer and more improvisatory conception of sonata form anticipated by Beethoven. Moreover, this homage to Beethoven carries the telling sub-titles "Ruins," "Triumphal arches (Trophies)," "Crown of Stars (Palms)." Their primary intention is to serve as a reminder of the glory and triumph of genius, its palms of victory, and its immortality in the starry firmament of high creativity. In the rarefied world of Romantic sensibility and personal passions, such aspirations had to find the only possible way open to them to achieve the same high accolade. This uniquely personal Romantic language is clearly audible in the lines by Friedrich Schlegel which Schumann later chose as the motto for the whole work instead of naming the individual movements:

Through all the tones in the
many-colored dream of the earth,
one single tone can be
discerned by the secret listener.

It is the final verse of a mystical nature poem, "Die Gebüsche," which had already been set by Schubert. It suggests the hidden link between the composer figure, who is best able to listen to the song of the cosmos and understand it in depth, and those poets in whose words the ineffability of earthly dreams is summoned to the threshold of human comprehension. Schumann's Fantasie expresses in magical music the meaning behind the metaphors chosen by the great German Romantic writers such as Schlegel, Novalis, Eichendorff, or Jean Paul.

Schumann himself described the Fantasie's opening movement as the "most passionate" of all

his works. This was a significant remark, but the circumstances of the work's genesis should not be overlooked, especially when it is being performed. There is no question of insipid sentimentality about it. Indeed, structurally speaking, the world of *Tristan* is already omnipresent in the first movement. In the development section the theme starts as if heard from far off, "as if re-telling a legend" and first occurs in the dominant minor before appearing in more decisive form in the main key of C. It reaches its *fff* climax on an unresolved suspended chord which is identical with the famous Tristan chord, whose accented A♭ is still present in the C Minor of the soothing "postlude." With the second reprise of the main theme we encounter Schumann's most audacious inspiration, an interrupted cadence suspended harmonically over three bars. Various critics have insisted that the first movement dominates the other two, but in fact the rhythmic and technical extremes of the second movement, and the variety of tonal color of the third, are what ensure the strength and coherence of the work as a whole. Here, in particular, the passionate outbursts lead the listener into Romantic depths far out of reach of the cozy drawing rooms of the period. Lyrical melody, and a craving for death, transfiguration, and spiritual bliss, sublimate the ecstatic quality of the anticipations of *Tristan* into a chaste dream world. Thus we witness the lyrical transports of the young Schumann reaching up to the heights of the later Beethoven sonatas and translating their yearning into another idiom, with its own new form of expression. The same circle of intuition and inspiration is completed afresh.

How do you see the Liszt, the second of these interlinked masterpieces?

Franz Liszt's Sonata in B Minor, written in 1852–53 and dedicated to Robert Schumann, ranks as his most extensive and important work for piano. It had taken him 10 years to feel ready and able to lend inner compulsion to his grand design. He knew exactly what he was doing when he abandoned the Classical multi–movement form he had inherited; even the dialectical principle of main and secondary theme had been sidestepped in his earlier works. Ever anxious to create contrasts by means of unpremeditated transformations and by exposing the same motivic cells through variations of pianistic instrumentation, he often deviates, even in his most lyrical pieces, from three-part song form. To conclude from this supposed economy of thematic material that Liszt lacked inspiration would be to fail to recognize the improvisatory nature of his creativity.

Poetic hermeneutics may here have an advantage over formal analysis. As Liszt had stated while still a young man, "Instrumental music no longer sets out to be a simple sequence of notes: it has become a poetic language which is perhaps even more suited than poetry itself to express all that moves in the inaccessible depths of unquenchable longing and in our intimations of immortality." The listener with no preconceptions hears massive waves of sound breaking over him and forms from them the image of a passionate soul seeking and finding the path to faith and peace in God through a life of struggle and a vigorous pursuit of ideals. It is impossible not to hear the confessional tone of this musical language: Liszt's sonata becomes—perhaps involuntarily on the part of the composer—an autobiographical document and one which reveals an artist in the Faustian mold in the person of its author. As in the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, the underlying religious concept which dominates and permeates the whole work demands a special kind of approach. Whereas representations of human passions and conflicts force themselves on our understanding with their powerfully suggestive coloring, this concept only becomes manifest to those souls who are prepared to soar to the same heights. The equilibrium of the sonata's hymnic chordal motif, the transformation of its defiant battle motif (first theme) into a triumphant fanfare, and its appearance in bright, high notes on the harp, together with the devotional atmosphere of the *Andante*, represent a particular challenge to the listener; he is, after all, also expected to grasp the wide spanned arcs of sound which, from the first hesitant descending octaves to the radiant final chords, build up a graphic panorama of the various stages of progress of a human spirit filled with faith and hope. As the reflection of a remarkable artistic personality worthy of deep admiration and, by extension, of the whole Romantic period, Liszt's B-Minor Sonata deserves lasting recognition.

Disc 3 presents a selection of Scriabin's shorter works, including a few you haven't released before, along with his Piano Sonata in F♯ Minor, op. 23. While his earlier works are often thought of as inspired by Chopin, no doubt it was the far-reaching musical visions of his later years that prompted Stravinsky to write, "For frankly, is it possible to connect a musician like Scriabin with

any tradition whatsoever? Where did he come from? Who are his forebears?"

The life and career of Alexander Scriabin was—like Busoni—a cosmopolitan one. But from the start, he added his own peculiar sound to the musical tradition he had inherited, in which elements of Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, and Brahms were combined with the gentle pathos of salon music. He soon formulated a precisely calculated harmonic system of transposable fourth chords, while at the same time his thinking became increasingly concerned with an elitist, arrogant, and introverted self-exaltation based on a distorted metaphysic. Reading his journals, one is immediately struck by the vast gulf between on one hand his significant artistic achievements, and on the other his curious personal and intellectual leanings. His character displayed a most unattractive mixture of fatalism, egocentricity, delusion, idealism, mysticism, prophetic thinking, and that overweening pride we call hubris. Towards the end of his life he saw himself as a messiah who would purify humanity through a great work of art based on his musical cult. Although he failed in his attempt to formulate a work which would combine color, scent, and word in a deeply human *Gesamtkunstwerk* of lasting value, Scriabin's work has nevertheless—from a purely musical standpoint—contributed a dimension of spiritual and exciting sophistication to our musical heritage. Scriabin, then proves himself—like so many other composers born in the 1870s—as a defining force in the stylistic landscape of the dawning 20th century.

The works on this record illustrate clearly how, throughout his life, Scriabin displayed, whether in piano miniatures or in concentrated large structures, the vast range of his musical development which arouses both awe as well as a realization of the impossibility of any further continuation thereof. Scriabin himself died before he came to this realization. On balance, we feel a sense of tragedy coupled with acceptance when we consider a musical achievement of such towering intellectual diversity and beauty....

The program concludes with Berg's Piano Sonata, op. 1. How does it relate, if at all, to the other selections? Do you hear it as a sort of bridge between late Romanticism and atonality and its successors, 12-tone/serial music? Did you learn it specifically for this release?

First of all, it also had been recorded in July 1994. The Berg Sonata is a piece I had already studied at the age of 16 and performed countless times in recitals, up to today. From the first moment the Berg Sonata became a piece of myself. I really love it. Of course, everything you write about it—a sort of bridge between late Romanticism and atonality and its successors, 12-tone/serial music—is absolutely right, but one decisive aspect mustn't be lost and forgotten: The world of *Tristan*! This aspect is very essential for the feeling of the sounds of this composition and a requisite to approach this work! Otherwise you never will detect it. One has to find the right way of interpretation to sustain the balance of ecstasy until the end, which has to be understood as an aspect of still-standing time.

Returning to Gould for a minute, I remember hearing him say that composers' op. 1 works were frequently their best (knowing him he could have been speaking tongue in cheek). How do you feel about the Berg with that in mind?

To understand the phenomenon of Gould and his comments, one has to study Gould, his approach and philosophy, and lastly his interpretations for a long time. The best approach is to read the book *Conversations with Glenn Gould* by Jonathan Cott. So, Gould really seems to be convinced that an "op. 1" already can be a "a big hit" for a composer, because it has something "unspent," fresh, etc. But in reality, with Berg we have a big development, starting with the Sonata, op. 1, and continuing until the Violin Concerto from 1935, which probably is Berg's best-known and most frequently performed instrumental piece, in which the composer sought to reconcile diatonicism and dodecaphony—combined with a direct reference to Bach, where he implements the chorale of the Cantata "Es is genug" with the intervals of four whole tones. Berg composed it on a commission from Louis Krasner, and it became the last work that he completed. Krasner performed the solo part in the premiere at the Palau de la Música Catalana, Barcelona, on 19 April 1936, after the composer's death.

Gould also pointed out, in the aforementioned book with Jonathan Cott, what really seems to be a psychological problem of our time. Here is the citation:

"I'm fascinated by the fact that most of our value judgments are related to being aware of the identity that goes with it; we tend to get terrified of making a judgment if we don't know the identity of the person responsible for a work of art. I am convinced—despite the old adage that a good writer doesn't

need a pen name—that a certain part of our personality functions within the framework of a certain way of life, of a certain name, while another part may function best only when one leaves that framework."

Perhaps he himself was influenced or even trapped in his own view, even in what he says about the Beatles, Barbra Streisand, and others. (By the way: I'm also convinced and fascinated by the intensity of the Streisand recordings.)

Are there other 20th- or 21st-century works you'd like to record?

Aaron Copland's Variations for Piano (1930).

Critics seem to regard you as an intellectual pianist, which implies a high degree of seriousness, and yet you've recorded a Godowsky paraphrase that makes me think you're not averse to having fun at the piano.

Of course, I have great fun on the piano. Without this, music and interpretation would be dead! You mention Godowsky. There we could return again to the theme of "transcription" and its philosophy. Regarding Godowsky, his transcriptions are paraphrases, and by this have to be understood as a parody of the originals, which again are something new.

In a previous interview you said that you want to have complete control over your playing—perhaps related to your respect for the Classical element in Western music—but on the other hand, you admit to taking an intuitive, Romantic approach to interpretation. How do you reconcile the two?

Intellect and intuition are not mutually exclusive—on the contrary! Both are dependent on each other and complement each other. In an interview with James Inverne for the *Steinway Magazine* in 2008 this combination is pointed out in a good way:

"People like to pigeon-hole pianists. There are, we are routinely told, the barnstormers—romantic pianists who throw the entire force of the heart and soul into their playing—and then there is the more analytical school—those who play by intellect, everything meticulously thought out and delicately weighted. By and large it's piffle, of course; few pianists would admit to excluding head or heart in their playing, and great interpretations are forged through a combination of the two, and more besides. But German-born Burkard Schliessmann rejects such divisions more than most. For a start, he was taught both by the great Shura Cherkassky and by Poldi Mildner. They each taught him different approaches—the one romantic, the other classical—and this has led him to find the through-lines between areas often (wrongly) seen as mutually exclusive. 'I try to have both styles, and one influences the other,' says Schliessmann. 'This is not such an unusual thought. Rubinstein thought that Beethoven was a very romantic composer, for instance. Okay, we have to discuss where and where not he can be seen as romantic, but still in the heart of the classical school such as this we can find an absolutely romantic approach. Bach also can be very romantic.'" (You can find the complete version on my site, schliessmann.com, under < Media < Downloads…)

And furthermore, I myself have said:

"As so often I have pointed out, intuition is a level of the highest range. In the details, I don't have to think or to worry about the realization of my interpretation; no, it's something that spreads out of my artistic all-compassion. Probably I have to be sorry for it, but this is my deepest artistic conviction for the rightness of an interpretation—interpretation as a summary of something unique and whole, not of a combining of details. Intuition is a level that includes all levels of emotion, intelligence, structure, and architecture. And I'm also confronted with the question of poetry and poesy, something that is so often neglected—especially in Bach." (You can find this with other citations under: beruhmte-zitate.de/autoren/burkard-schliessmann/)

Have you begun any new projects after completing At The Heart Of The Piano*?*

Of course: major magazines (*International Piano*, *Pianist UK*, *Pianist Europe,* and others) already have written about it. Unfortunately it's been interrupted because of Covid and other problems. It's called *Fantasies* and presents all the major works of Robert Schumann that were originally composed as fantasies:

Kreisleriana, op. 16
Fantasie in C Major, op. 17
Arabesque, op. 18
Fantasiestücke, op. 12

Nachtstücke, op. 23
Fantasiestücke, op. 111
Gesänge der Frühe, op. 133

The program will be recorded in the renowned Menuhin, February 2022, and presented on two SACDs and will also be recorded on Dolby Atmos. The producer will be Paul Baily.

Astonished? Yes, there will be *new* interpretations of the *Kreisleriana* and the Fantasie in C, so it also will show and present my artistic development (which I mentioned towards the beginning of this interview), with which the cycle is closed.

And I will work on Mozart. Mozart is the Chopin of the Classical epoch, and so he is a big challenge.

Oh, and I really would like to present a version of *The Art of Fugue* on organ. Bach gave it as a gift to the Mizler'sche society (founded by Bach's pupil Mizler) in the form of an open score without specifying instrumentation, paving the way for the many arrangements that have appeared since his lifetime, including for string quartet (which I like very much). However, my own preference remains a version on a big organ.

Perhaps I'll return to speak with you about these someday, but until then, I'll leave you with these words from Glenn Gould, with which he summed up the *Goldberg Variations*, as they express so much of what I feel about my music:

"It is, in short, music which observes neither end nor beginning, music with neither real climax nor real resolution, music which, like Baudelaire's lovers, 'rests lightly on the wings of the unchecked wind.'"

AT THE HEART OF THE PIANO • Burkard Schliessmann (pn) • DIVINE ART 21373 (3 CDs: 4:20)

BACH (arr. Busoni) **Chaconne in d.** **SCHUMANN** ***Symphonic Études,*** op. 13. **Fantasie in C,** op. 17. **LISZT Piano Sonata in b.** **SCRIABIN Piano Sonata No. 3. Études,** opp. 2/1, 8/12, 74. **Preludes,** opp. 11, 16, 27, 37, 51. **Deux Danses,** op. 73. **BERG Piano Sonata,** op. 1

Having not been familiar with the keyboard art of Burkard Schliessmann, I approached his chosen program of "transcendence, vision, and personified aesthetics of effect" with some skepticism, if not a predisposition for cynicism. The recordings, previously unknown to me, derive from sessions made 1990–2000, here remastered by Paul Baily. To my sustained delight, Schliessmann reveals himself as a Romantic temperament deeply motivated by both intimacy and intuition, sustained by a wholesome and astonishing technical resource. His capacities in contrapuntal music assert themselves fully and without pedantry in Busoni's transcription of Bach's Chaconne from the Partita No. 2, the Schumann *Symphonic Études* and Fantasie, and in the heroic, stratified figures in the Liszt Sonata, even before he wrestles with the intricacies of Scriabin, whose miniatures often prove more mechanically daunting than his larger forms. The placement and order of the assembled works no less contributes to the cumulative effect of the evolution of a Romantic ethos, an increasingly subjective outlook that subsumes reality into an affirmation of selfhood.

What proves consistent in this traversal of essentially Romantic repertory emanates from the pianist's sense of space and of individual coloring. Much in the tradition of Cherkassky and Michelangeli, Schliessmann allots each of the evolving musical lines its own breadth, which becomes instantly apparent in the various permutations in the Bach piece and in virtually every line in the Schumann Fantasie. The art of applying silence between notes and distinct musical lines never fails to make or to undo a dramatic performance. In this regard, I find Schliessmann eminently theatrical in style, compelling in the grand line he assumes for each of his endeavors. The Schumann *Symphonic Études* enjoy their proclaimed "symphonic" ambitions, certainly. But in incorporating the full set of Schumann's posthumous and various appendices Schliessmann burdens himself with the problem of musical and dramatic continuity, having to sustain a canvas that now spreads out well beyond established time parameters, at almost 40 minutes.

If my remarks seem to suggest a highly "contrived" sensibility, let me assure possible auditors of the miraculous power of spontaneity that permeates these realizations. The Liszt Sonata regains much its shocking originality, its tempestuous and outrageous shifts of mood and musical means, especially in the manipulation of its *Grund-Gestalt*, its through-composed opening motifs and the sub-

sequent harmonic audacities that follow. The Schumann Fantasie and the Liszt Sonata, works coincidentally dedicated reciprocally by each composer, occupy the same disc, providing an hour's unrelenting display of controlled, intelligent passion in the same paradoxical moment. The immanence of the urge to poetry suffuses every musical impulse. We sense as we move to the music of Alexander Scriabin and the "new" school of Alban Berg that the keyboard instrument has gained an increased sense of liberation in its power to express subjective reality, even as traditional harmony breaks down. True, we have skipped over the contributions of Beethoven and Chopin, a substantial break in the history of keyboard transcendentalism. But in compensation, Schliessmann turns in disc 3 to a concentrated survey of the Russian mystic Scriabin, all too easily dismissed as an eccentric, musical solipsist who always spells Reality with a capital I.

Schliessmann opens his Scriabin sequence with the 1898 Third Sonata, meant to express the composer's flights of the soul toward liberation. The oceanic imagery Scriabin invokes for the last two movements, no less based on cyclical motifs and transposable fourth chords, intensifies the paradoxical sense of unity in the midst of free-fall. Schliessmann provides a pungent, searching sonority to the music's nervous rhythms and ardent declamations. His third movement *Andante* finds a moment for childlike simplicity. Schliessmann's left hand helps catapult the last movement, *Presto con fuoco*, to a *Tristan*-inspired paroxysm of energy, the "uproar of life," fraught with fervent rebellion. The taut, forward motion may remind auditors of the classic Horowitz approach. As in his Schumann, Schliessmann applies a canny soft pedal, when required. Schliessmann concedes to popular taste for the moment, performing the two most famous études, those in C♯ Minor and D♯ Minor, with the op. 2/1 providing an immediate contrast to the emotional throes of Sonata No. 3. The famed D♯-Minor returns to the primal passions, insistent and voluptuous. Schliessmann then turns to the variegated world of Scriabin's 90 preludes, of which the op. 11 set (1888–96) follows Chopin in his arrangement in the circle of fifths, and varying the form of these pieces as nocturnes, études, and mazurkas. A fine example occurs in the E Major, No. 9, in which Scriabin avoids the tonic triad until the end, and Schliessmann's attentions to designations rubato, ritardando, and accelerando create a poised nocturne tinged by mazurka rhythm. The use of parallel motion in sixths in No. 13 reminds us of Bach as well as Chopin. The pattern of sixths informs the *Andante cantabile,* op. 16/3, to create its restrained angst. The preludes of 1900, op. 27, reveal a new and rich assertiveness. The Prelude in B Major, op. 27/2, from Schliessmann has a luxuriant abandon, a fertile reverie. Schliessmann plays the Prelude in A Minor, op. 51/2, *Lugubre*, which the composer avoided in his public performances. The music imparts an eerie atmosphere, somewhat in the manner of late Liszt. Scriabin called it "a ghastly piece!" Fluttering motives define the *Dance languide* in G Major, op. 51/4, which hesitates and then ends as one of Schliessmann's riddles.

With the *Deux Dances*, op. 73, we enter into Scriabin's last phase, a distillation of harmony and vision. Schliessmann realizes the crystalline figures of *Guirlandes* with the required "languid grace." Scriabin characterizes the figures as "sweet to the point of agony." The *Flammes sombre* invokes Dante and Liszt into the equation. A perverse eroticism pervades this piece, a descent into the labyrinth, "an orgiastic dance" among the ruins. The weird agogics of the piece proceed with a "natural supernaturalism" entirely suited to the occasion. The complete set of Five Preludes, op. 74 (1914), gives us Schliessmann's perspective of Scriabin's last *opera*. Miniatures they are, but their intensely compressed fusion of consonance and dissonance testifies to a mind's seeking new paths. Heartfelt anguish joins with points of resistance, spiritual fatigue with infusions of aching energy. The number four, *Lent, vague, indécis,* proceeds in four-part, uncertain harmony. Each of these five "mysteries" Schliessmann reveals with a deliberate, tempered fury.

And so we proceed to the musical compressions of Alban Berg's 1909 sonata. Berg's sonata in one movement owes its color to Wagner, Liszt, and the late-Romantic concept of "developing variation." Janus-like, the work bids farewell to the Romantic syntax and likewise looks forward to the 12-tone system about to be initiated by Schoenberg and his school. The opening, with its dotted rhythm and perfect fourth/tritone intervals, followed by falling thirds, announces a serious departure from tradition, even as the structure follows the pattern of exposition, development, and recapitulation. Schliessmann realizes its various swells and retreats, its idiosyncratic counterpoint, with insis-

tence and often delicate clarity, a lyric sense of its diverse, keyboard palette. We have moved, in Schliessmann's own words from his extensive liner notes, from "the ecstasy of expression to the ecstasy of structures." The extensive journey has proved most compelling. **Gary Lemco**

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This commanding, almost regal selection of recordings from Burkhard Schliessmann was recorded 1990–2000. It is a shining example of integrity and intelligence in music, welded to a technique of gargantuan proportions. There is logic guiding in the programming also: The Liszt Sonata and Schumann Fantasie bear mutual dedications, while the worlds of Scriabin and Berg are hardly a million miles from one another. This is the first digital issue of all tracks on this set.

The three-disc set therefore posits one route from Bach (in Busoni's granitic hands) to Scriabin and Berg. The Bach/Busoni Chaconne is a fine performance, big-boned and captured in superb sound that really allows one to enjoy the strength of the bass of Schliessmann's Steinway piano. In this context, the sober, chordal opening of the Schumann could almost be by Busoni; as the variations unravel, the piece could only be by Schumann. Schliessmann includes the posthumous variations in what becomes a panoramic journey through myriad vistas: Schliessmann's ability to utilize tone color within stylistic bounds is something any pianist could learn from profitably. Textures are always carefully considered (the tremolos of Variation 16 being a case in point), while the finale is as brilliant as its indication requires, and, most importantly, properly cumulative in context, ending in what amounts to a pianistic pealing of bells. As Schliessmann pointed out to me in an interview once, no less a figure than Brahms included the posthumous variations, so it makes sense to do so.

It is fascinating how, while being part of a larger whole, each individual disc operates as a cycle within itself. So, one has the Bach/Busoni and the Schumann above, perfectly contained and with a real sense of inevitability of continuity; the second disc has those pieces of mutual admiration, the Schumann Fantasie and the Liszt B-Minor Sonata, both major masterpieces of the Romantic era. The sense of grandeur we heard particularly in the Bach/Busoni recurs in the first movement of the Schumann Fantaise, while the tricky second movement holds no perils for Schliessmann (and he maintains the indication *Durchaus energisch*: energetic throughout). One of Schliessmann's core properties is that he can bend his sound and way with tempo to each individual composer perfectly, and we certainly feel that here. He creates two separate sound worlds: Schumann's is full of fantasy, as if trying to escape the world's strictures and limitations to ascend Heavenwards (one certainly feels that is how the songful finale operates, with those themes ascending ever upwards, garnished with delicious celestial decorations in the high treble), while Liszt's sublimity is more sensual, more demonic. One hears the prefiguring of the dark nights of Liszt's very late works in the sonata's opening, and this colors the octave explosion: yes, we hear virtuosity, but it is part of an over-riding diablerie. While Schumann ascends radiantly, Liszt struggles with his inner demons to do so, and Schliessmann leaves us in no doubt of the power of that struggle. The fine piano he plays on is part of this; it is clearly a majestic instrument, sublimely prepared. Schliessmann's slower sections have a distinct simmer underneath them, ready to explode into headier regions. It is this mix of visceral excitement combined with a tour guide who always has the end in sight that is so impressive, so that when the end comes, we feel we have come full circle and the journey can begin again. Both the Schumann Fantasie and the Liszt B-Minor sit up there with the greats: Polini's DG accounts of both are classics, another pianist with a fierce musical intellect, but Schliessmann offers an alternative that is just as engrossing.

Scriabin's Third Sonata sees the composer moving away from his explicitly Chopin-influenced output to a more inner space that was perfect for his Theosophical-based reflections on mysticism. Interestingly, Schliessmann shares Scriabin's synesthesia (the equating of colors to key areas in this case). Schliessmann's Scriabin sits in the line of Scriabin playing that emanated from Vladimir Sofronitsky. His Third Sonata begins volcanically, but it is in the harmonic explorations where it becomes most alluring. It's interesting that Schliessmann bookends this disc with sonatas (another indication of the discs acting as mini-recitals within themselves); here the antipode is a superbly delineated performance of the Berg Sonata, op. 1, like the Liszt, in B Minor (although unlike the Liszt the B Minor it is more a structural reference point than an anchor). Schliessmann's second movement of the Scriabin

Third Sonata is beautifully unsettled, the bass ominous, the rhythms themselves of foreboding intent. The twilit, Russian pastoral shades of the *Andante* in Schliessmann's performance are revelatory. Again, we get a sense of cyclical arrival at the beginning of the Third Sonata's finale before the music devolves and spirals into milieus of heady energy. After the sonata, Schliessmann presents a sequence of 21 pieces by Scriabin that move from the famous, post-Rachmaninoff Étude, op. 2/1 through a selection from the exquisite op. 11 set of Preludes, tracing a journey all the way to the harmonically adventurous "Danse languide" of op. 51/4, itself the gateway for the Deux Danses, op. 73 (the delicate traceries of "Guarlandes" and the flickering "Flammes sombre") and the harmonic ambiguities of the set of five Préludes, op. 74. And while the opening gesture of the Berg Sonata might seem to equate to the perfumed world of Scriabin, Schliessmann ensures we hear all of Berg's contrapuntal rigor.

This is a most thought-provoking set, overflowing with performances of insight, and beautifully recorded. **Colin Clarke**

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At the Heart of the Piano, a three-disc release from Divine Art, presents German pianist Burkard Schliessmann in a recital of works by Bach (arr. Busoni), Schumann, Liszt, Scriabin, and Berg. The Bach/Busoni Chaconne and Berg Sonata receive their first release on this set. All the other recordings were previously issued by Bayer. The included Scriabin works were recorded in July, 1990, the Bach/Busoni Chaconne and Berg Sonata in 1994, the Schumann Fantasie and Liszt B-Minor Sonata in September 1999, and the Schumann *Symphonic Études* in March 2000. The new Divine Art set features 2021 remasterings by Paul Baily of all the included material. In the CD booklet's extensive and informative liner notes, the uncredited author (Schliessmann, perhaps?) states: "Although at (a) glance the works offered here do not share any direct common ground, if considered more closely there are certain common factors with regard to their genesis over time and their conception…." Indeed, there are many elements that connect the works, and in an intriguing fashion. The composers appear in order of their birth years (if we use the "Bach" in "Bach/Busoni" as our start). Within that time progression, each of the three discs explores particular aspects of musical expression. Disc 1, comprising the Bach/Busoni Chaconne and the Schumann *Symphonic Études*, focuses on theme and variation structures. The second disc pairs the Schumann *Fantasie* in C Major with the Liszt B-Minor Sonata. Each of the composers dedicated his work to the other. Here Schumann and Liszt, in addition to writing music demanding a virtuoso of the highest order, explore the structural boundaries of the traditional piano sonata (and for that matter, sonata form). The final disc charts the trajectory of Scriabin's increasingly daring harmonic world, a gateway to Berg's atonality.

Just as the repertoire shares common elements, so do Burkard Schliessmann's performances. Schliessmann plays all of this challenging repertoire with an impressively assured technique that is always at the service of the music. Schliessmann is a pianist who avoids such exaggerations as italicizing passages to showcase his virtuosity, extremes in tempo, or an excessive application of rubato. That said, Schliessmann's interpretations exhibit a convincing ebb and flow, and the ability to draw upon a wide range of colors and dynamics to create the appropriate sound world for the work at hand. Schliessmann is also an artist with a keen sense of pacing. Both the Bach/Busoni and Schumann *Symphonic Études* are notable both for the accomplished and expressive way Schliessmann executes the variations, and the manner in which he connects one variation to the next. This sense of proportion serves Schliessmann and the music well in the Schumann *Fantasie*, and the Liszt, Scriabin, and Berg sonatas. The performances of the numerous brief Scriabin pieces also reflect the artist's keen attention to pacing and architecture. A biography of the pianist, also part of the CD booklet, includes this appraisal from music critic Harold C. Schonberg: "Schliessmann's playing is representative of the best of the modern school." Based upon what I heard in this release, that seems a most apt characterization. The recordings are all excellent, a lifelike and marvelous reproduction of a concert grand. Perhaps these aren't the most individual or viscerally thrilling performances of the works in question. But they are all beautifully played, unfailingly musical, and masterfully structured and paced. I found this recital immensely satisfying, and I am delighted to recommend it for your consideration. **Ken Meltzer**