

First Piano Concertos

New CD/SACD

Medtner Piano Concerto No. 1 in C minor, Op. 33^a. Nine Goethe Songs, Op. 6 – No. 5, *Liebliches Kind!* (transcr. Sudbin).

Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor, Op. 23^a.

Yevgeny Sudbin (piano); ^aSão Paulo Symphony Orchestra/John Neschling.

BIS SACD1588 (full price, 1 hour 11 minutes).

Website www.bis.se. Producer Marion Schwebel.

Engineer Martin Nagorni. Date February 2006.

Comparisons:

Medtner:

Alexeev, BBC SO/Lazarev

(Hyperion) CDA66744 (1994)

Scherbakov, Moscow SO/Ziva

(Naxos) 8.553359 (1996)

Tchaikovsky:

Argerich, BPO/Abbado (DG) 449 816-2 (1995)

Volodos, BPO/Ozawa (Sony Classical) SH93067



Yevgeny Sudbin

Clive Barba

'This extremely difficult, strange, ultra-modern Russian Concerto is the composition of Peter Tchaikovsky, a young professor at the Conservatory of Moscow ... We had the wild Cossack fire and impetus without stint, extremely brilliant and exciting, but could we ever learn to love such music?' So asked *Dwight's Journal of Music* (Boston; 1875). Well love it we do, as the forbidding number of recordings in the catalogue attests. The latest one is from Yevgeny Sudbin, who has so far excelled in Rachmaninov and Scarlatti. Here he couples this war-horse with another Russian concerto, equally challenging though little known: Medtner's First.

His partners are the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra, conducted by John Neschling. Sudbin's way with the Tchaikovsky is infectiously lithe and playful, with a healthy dose of wit. Of course it's impossible to play

this piece without moments of barnstorming, and his technical prowess is audible in spades (the piano is forwardly balanced in the sound-picture so that it never feels as if Sudbin has to play through the sound in order to make himself heard; in a concert it would be a different matter).

The second movement finds Sudbin on particularly alluring form, tender, beautifully shaded and minutely responsive to phrasing. It's more delicate than Argerich's performance, and less impetuous. Volodos is a touch slower but not necessarily more probing. All three players enjoy great rapport with their orchestral soloists: the Berlin Philharmonic players are, as you'd expect, magnificent, but São Paulo clearly has some fine soloists of its own, particularly the first oboe. In Sudbin's reading, this movement has a chirpiness to it which is often smoothed over, and chirpy becomes skittish in the faster section, which darts and fizzles before exploding in a cascade of notes. Sudbin's finale is impressive too, his virtuosity lightly worn, though less galvanic than Argerich's (but then whose isn't?), and less mighty than Volodos's. Choice really comes down to taste rather than quality.

Medtner's First Concerto is a very different proposition; whereas Tchaikovsky's Second and Third pale into insignificance compared to the First (not only in popularity, but in quality too), Medtner's Second and Third are far better known than his First. He began this big-scale, single-movement work in 1914, spent several years orchestrating it, and it was premièred in Moscow, with the composer at the piano and Koussevitzky on the podium on May 12th, 1918. Its Russianness shines through every bar and it's a work at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Tchaikovsky in that it reveals its true worth only slowly. However, like the Busoni Concerto, once it gets into your head it stays there, its melodies not exactly catchy but invidious none the less. While it demands considerable technical ease from the pianist, it is, again like the Busoni, orchestral rather than soloistic.

Previous recordings from Dmitri Alexeev and Konstantin Scherbakov are outshone by this one. Scherbakov's orchestra isn't always completely in step with him, while Alexeev is too slow in the grimly dancing final section. Sudbin, on the other hand, seems to have utterly understood both the finer nuances of this elusive piece and its overall pacing. Again, the piano is quite forward in the sound balance, but listening to the detail and shaping that Sudbin finds in the *Tranquillo* section brings its own rewards. Perhaps this reading will help to put Medtner's First on the map. I hope so.

The notes are, as usual with Sudbin's recordings, written by the pianist himself, and his transcription of 'Liebliches Kind!' (from Medtner's *Goethe Songs*, Op. 6) is a delicious encore.

Harriet Smith