

DEBUT • Joseph Rackers (pn) • MSR 1364 (67:40)

BACH Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue. SCHUMANN Fantasy in C. RAVEL La Valse. BARTÓK Piano Sonata

 BLAUE BLUME • Rune Alver (pn) • LAWO 1019 (58:59)

CHOPIN Mazurka in $f\sharp$, op 6/1. Ballade in A b , op. 47. SCHUMANN Fantasy in C. AAGAARD-NILSEN Blue Traces



Joseph Rackers is a member of the faculty of the University of South Carolina in Columbia. This debut disc is an adventurous one, and he must be commended for its variety and linked theme of the fantasy. All of these pieces have a somewhat fantastical nature about them, and each in its own way leads us down the romantic path of juxtaposed contradictions and conformities, beginning with the well-known Bach work.

And it is perhaps the best Baroque piece that could have been chosen for such a recital as this; Bach's madcap invention flows freely in this work, a piece that had no precedent in his output, and one that falls into a category of few-named pieces of the same type. He simply did not write a lot of fantasies, and when he did the improvisational aspect of the work pushes its way to the fore. Rackers does a fine job setting the tone for this album, and this is one of two pieces he plays here that stand out. The other is the Bartók Sonata, a work of high dissonance and maintained tonality, and one that follows a strict sonata-form structure. But in a good performance what suggests itself to the listener is not the structure but the sense of freedom within a confined space, lending the ears to a truly fantasy-like experience, and any performer worth his or her salt realizes this and projects its percussive strata to the hearer. This is probably the best performance on the disc.

I am not as happy with the other two. Schumann's mercurial Fantasy, with its wistful and seductive last movement—although Clara liked the second one best—is here rather foursquare and leaden, lacking momentum and missing the element of conversation, as if someone were letting you in on a deep family secret. Ravel's La Valse is of course a familiar orchestral favorite, and it was afterward that he made a two-piano and solo reduction. This isn't a bad performance, but I have never liked the solo version; after knowing the orchestral work so well it just doesn't seem geared to sound properly on the piano, and the two-piano guise is much better both from a sonic point of view and the ability to give the requisite richness to Ravel's swirling harmonies.

One thing that haunts this release is the sound. There is a muffled smothering to it that disallows any real textural clarity to come across. I have found MSR to be wildly inconsistent in its engineering, and this release does not benefit in that area, which may have an impact on any assessment I have of the whole due to an inability to distinguish between Rackers's tonal quality and the sound sabotage. A shame for sure, but there it is.

You only have to listen to the opening bars of Rune Alver's Blue Flower album to see what I mean about the sound. Here the Norwegian label LAWO gives him an audio spectrum of crystalline sharpness and no little degree of warmth as well; the difference between these two discs is like night and day. Alver proves himself a fine Chopin player with two highly characterized yet forcefully projected performances. They are not particularly romantic in nature, whatever you take that to be, yet they do show Chopin as something more than feminine reminiscence, imparting a steely undergirding to the pieces that I think adds a lot to the performances. Schumann's Fantasy is wonderfully evocative, perhaps not as dramatic in the first two movements as I would prefer, but engaging enough to make the points that need to be made. The last movement retreats into a very personal utterance, as if Alver is saying that what Schumann is saying is what I am really feeling, and this music means something quite profound to me. He also gets the tempos right and the climaxes are about as well judged as any currently on record.

The newbie on the block is the originally three separate pieces commissioned by Alver from composer Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen called Blue Traces, with each of the now-three movements fused into a single piece based on the composer's musical interpretation of three different contemporary Norwegian paintings—each reproduced, generously, in full color in the booklet (thank you!). I can't say that the work is especially memorable, but it does help to look at the paintings while the piece is being played, and it certainly has its reflective, generally expressionistic moments. Overall this is not a bad outing at all, though at only 60 minutes a lot more music—especially Chopin—would have made it more attractive. Steven E. Ritter

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