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Debut – CME Presents Russian Piano | Sergei PROKOFIEV (1891-1953); Piano Sonata No. 2 in D minor, Op. 14 [18:17]; **Alexander SCRIBIN (1872-1915);** Piano Sonata No. 8, Op. 66 [13:49]; **Sergei RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943);** Piano Sonata No. 1 in D minor, Op. 28 [37:57]
Euntaek Kim (piano) | Rec. 4, 8, and 11 October 2019 at Yale School of Music, Connecticut, USA
MSR CLASSICS MS1745 [70:03]

This disc is a part of the “CME Presents Series”. The CME (Centre for Musical Excellence) provides professional training in the US for gifted young musicians from around the world, and Korean-American pianist Euntaek Kim was the winner of the 2018 CME International Performing Arts grant and is currently a CME artist. For this “Debut” disc he presents a challenging programme of 20th century Russian sonatas. The performances of these works indicate that the CME did very well to admit Kim to their programme, and award him that 2018 prize.

For all their common Russian heritage, these composers occupy three quite different aesthetic positions and styles; Prokofiev the *enfant terrible* modernist, Scriabin the mystic and seeker of new apocalyptic paths, and Rachmaninov the Tchaikovsky-obsessed late Romantic. Prokofiev sought to dazzle and win applause, Scriabin to make converts, and Rachmaninov to haunt us with his country’s chants and bells. Each was a formidable pianist and composer for piano, and their twenty-one piano sonatas, with the dozen of Nikolai Medtner, form the backbone of the modern Russian repertory for the instrument. For all the personal links between these figures, a selection of their sonatas makes a varied and intriguing programme.

Euntaek Kim was a pupil of Boris Berman, so it is no surprise to see him open with a Prokofiev sonata. Berman not only recorded all Prokofiev’s piano music in an outstanding series on Chandos, but in 2008 published a book – *the book* – on Prokofiev’s piano sonatas. Each chapter covers one sonata, and has a section called “masterclass” in which he switches from description and analysis to advice for the performer on interpretation. Thus he writes of the opening of Sonata No.2 “While the top voice carries the main theme, both middle voice and bass line add tension....and must be clearly heard.” Which unsurprisingly is exactly what his pupil provides. For the scherzo Berman instructs “The tempo does not need to be very fast, but the pulsation of the eighth notes should remain unaffected by the difficult jumps in the left hand”. Kim again complies, even with Berman’s scary injunction “No slowing down of the tempo at the end!” Steadiness of tempo is again insisted upon in the last two movements, and Kim obliges us in both the *Andante* and final *Vivace*. The pupil takes a little more time in the three fast movements than his master does, but his *andante* flows more swiftly (4:56 against Berman’s 6:05, a discernible difference even in feeling). But the overall timings are only 15 seconds apart, and both are very satisfying accounts of the work. Kim, despite or because of his seeming adherence to Berman’s published advice, makes a good case for the stature of this early sonata.

Just the first chords of the Scriabin Eighth Sonata transport us to a different world – and what chords they are, beautifully voiced and weighted by Kim. The stop-start *allegro* passage that ensues has the necessary sense of rising tension, and he manages to make the work sound coherent in its progress, aided by a convincing tempi and tempo relations. He has too an essential tool for Scriabin playing, in this sonata even more than most, an ecstatic trill, or rather range of trills. There are – unusually for this composer - few markings for the Eighth Sonata, so Kim has had to make plenty of his own choices of expression and dynamics. Here and there quieter playing would have been welcome, but for the most part this is a compelling fourteen minutes of Scriabin, questing and .

It has been good to see Rachmaninov’s Sonata No.1 enjoying favour with younger players in recent years, a tribute to rising technical standards since they could learn several Beethoven sonatas in the time it must take them to master the notes in this near forty minute work. Kim is certainly a master of the notes here, but technical hurdles are not the only challenge. In Rachmaninov there is also the matter of temperament, whether for the drama (this work is based on *Faust*), the characteristic nostalgia of the *Lento* middle movement, or the headlong impetuosity of the finale. Kim finds the right degree of rhetoric for such moments as the chant-like second subject of the first movement, and the cyclic return of the opening motif near the end of the finale. The balmy summer night of the slow movement is nicely evoked by taking a bit more time than the 8:30 of such as Lugansky (Naïve) or Xiayin Wang (Chandos). Those are fine benchmark accounts, but Kim’s 9:42 (very close to the superb Hayroudinoff on Onyx) never sounds indulgent or lets our attention wander. The big finale holds the listener as well, since there is narrative skill evident in Kim’s pacing of each section and the concentration at key signposts along the way of this long journey.

The recording is more than good enough for the most part, being close enough for impact but never tiring. The one exception is some later passages (9:57 on) in the finale of the Rachmaninov, where some loud chords in the treble became a bit too hard and clangorous as if the player has gone through his tone. But this is not too troubling and otherwise the excitement of this driven, passionate music is unimpaired, and the sonorous coda marvellously emphatic. The booklet notes are a bit skimpy on the music, as not everyone will know their way round these sonatas which challenge the listener in different ways. The piano scene has become crowded with fine young artists building a career, and here is another. This is a splendid debut disc, announcing a real pianistic talent, from whom we will surely be hearing more.



Roy Westbrook / <http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2020/Nov/Kim-debut-MS1745.htm>