

## Classical Reissue Reviews

### **Jakob Gimpel, piano, Vol. I [TrackList follows] = St. Laurent Studio**

*The too-often neglected Jakob Gimpel, in restorations from 1942-1946, reminds us of the extraordinary breadth and power of his musicianship*

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**Jakob Gimpel, piano, Vol. I = GIMPEL: Concert Paraphrase on The Song of the Soldiers of the Sea; CHOPIN: Ballade No. 1 in G Minor, Op. 23; Etude in F, Op. 10, No. 8; MENDELSSOHN: Etude in F, OP. 104, No. 2; Scriabin: Etude D-flat Major, Op. 8, No. 10; Etude, Op. 65, No. 2; TOCH: Etude – Allegro, Op. 56, No. 10; LISZT: Waldesrauschen; DEBUSSY: Etude pour les degres chromatiques; Etude pour les cinq doigts; RACHMANINOV: Concerto No. 2: excerpt; Variation 18 from Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini; 4 Preludes; Oriental Sketch; Etude-Tableau in C Minor, Op. 33, No. 2 – Jakob Gimpel, p. – St. Laurent Studio YSL 78-254, 51:00 [www.78experience.com] \*\*\*\*;**

Culled from Armed Forces Radio Service on Vox shellacs, 1942-1946, the legacy of pianist Jakob Gimpel (1906-1989) finds restoration through the Yves St-Laurent Studio label, performances rife with grand excitement in spite of their original 78 rpm surface swish and crackle. Gimpel emigrated to America in 1938, but spare recognition sent him to Hollywood in 1943, where his playing received more note in the movie *Above Suspicion* as the unseen performer of the Liszt *E-flat Concerto*. His participation in the New York segment of the 1949 Chopin centennial gleaned him international recognition, as well concert appearances with major orchestras. A pupil of Cornelia Tarnowska, Edward Steuermann, and Alban Berg, Gimpel possessed a refined sound and an exquisite sense of musical architecture, and these surviving archives testify to a fluent command of his repertory.

The opening *Paraphrase on the "Marine Corps Hymn"* should convince anyone of Gimpel's fleet powers of improvisation in wicked octave runs, rather Lisztian in

character, or perhaps the Marines by way of Balakirev's *Islamey*. The Chopin *Ballade in G Minor* (1942) derives from the same Armed Forces issue, a performance much in the grand Polish tradition, its style innate attentive to the ferocious balance of forces Neapolitan and declamatory after the poetic narrative of Adam Mickiewicz. The sheer bravura of the last pages should sweep any doubts of Gimpel's virtuoso powers into the sea.

The Vox recordings (from sets Vox 164 and Vox 608) series begins with Chopin's *F Major Etude*, a sensational reading that basks in an aerial melodic curve in the face of the knotty, unrelenting wrist articulation and graded dynamics. The Mendelssohn proffers a test of stamina. At first *leggiero e staccato*, the Scriabin *Etude in D-flat Major* gains in girth and power, while the *Op. 65* indulges more sensuous rites of passage. Ernst Toch's askew *Etude from Op. 56* has touches of Prokofiev and Shostakovich combined, impish in its own way. The Liszt version *Forest-Energies* presents the Liszt acolyte on a diaphanously bravura scale with Bolet, Kentner, and Horowitz; and recall, Gimpel provided the keyboard playing for the Alan Alda (via Ira Levin) classic film *Mephisto Waltz*. Gieseeking once called the Debussy *Etudes* the most challenging studies in the repertory, but Gimpel moves them in their exotic, stunningly rapid harmony and colors without a misstep. That for "les cinq doigts," the first of the entire set, accomplishes a world of piano development within a three-minute frame that has managed to explode with competing colored runs.

The last eight pieces devote themselves (1944-1946) to perennially nostalgic Rachmaninov, including solo melodic riffs from the outer movements of the *C Minor Concerto* and a most persuasive Variation 18 from the *Paganini Rhapsody*. Russian bells permeate the *Prelude in G-sharp Minor, Op. 32, No. 12*. The ubiquitous *C-sharp Minor* progresses without exaggerated histrionics, but its sober efficiency yet conveys an abyss of moody obsession. Gimpel rivals Moiseiwitsch for the sparkling, gently Empyrean magic of the *G Major Prelude, Op. 32, No. 5*, a waterfall of colors. The old Hofmann warhorse, *the G Minor Prelude, Op. 23, No. 5* concludes the Rachmaninov group, its militant outer sections' enfolding a trio of exalted voice-leading. Never do the martial aspects assume a percussive quality, only a resolve tempered by a master's control of pedal and incisive accents.

The St.-Laurent Studio offers a "music treasury" of historic performances, and I encourage serious collectors of legendary concert artists to explore their catalogue with due diligence.

—Gary Lemco