



YSL 0990 T Raymond Lewenthal Vol. 2

“Two different Raymond Lewenthal concerts are captured here, and the Dallas one needs some explanation. In the late 1960s Lewenthal teamed up with mezzo-soprano Shirley Verrett, and they offered a unique program together. On the first half Verrett sang operatic arias with the orchestra. Singer and pianist then joined for one piece, Mozart’s concert aria ‘Ch’io mi scordi di te’, scored for soprano, piano, and orchestra. On the second half Lewenthal played solo piano music. The present example, shorn of Verrett’s arias without Lewenthal, derives from a 1969 concert presented by the Dallas Opera, which at the time had the Dallas Symphony Orchestra playing in the pit. The conductor was the Dallas Opera’s co-founder, Nicola Rescigno.

I don’t believe that Mozart was a particular strength of Verrett, and she does not sound comfortable here. Lewenthal and the orchestra are a bit more sensitive to the nuances of the music than Verrett, who is also not served well by somewhat distant recorded sound that fails to capture much of the color of her voice. The sound improves for the rest of the program; the piano might have been placed in a more favorable position once the orchestra cleared out.

Lewenthal’s playing of the two Rossini fantasies by Sigismund Thalberg is all you could want. His technique is up to the demands of these showpieces, but more importantly the music sings under his fingers. Lewenthal was a serious opera lover, and in just about everything he played he turned the piano into a vocal instrument. The ebb and flow of Rossini’s tunes and Thalberg’s elaborations could hardly be presented more persuasively. Lewenthal’s transcription of the Rachmaninoff song provides a beautiful encore.

The Frick Collection recital from 1974 is not ideally recorded. The sound is a bit distant and over-reverberant, muddying the clarity of Lewenthal’s passagework. In addition, an intrusive radio announcer makes his presence felt after the first piece, a John Field Nocturne, talking over the beginning of the Weber Rondo. Despite all of those reservations, I would not be without this two-disc set. Raymond Lewenthal was unquestionably one of the keyboard giants. He lost an important decade when in 1953, at the age of 30, he was mugged in New York City’s Central Park and suffered broken bones in his hands and arms.

His recovery, both physical and psychological, was slow and difficult. He moved to Paris, where he began studying the piano music of Charles-Valentin Alkan. In 1963 he played an all-Alkan recital on New York’s listener-supported radio station WBAI, which aroused so much interest that in 1964 he was invited to play a recital at Town Hall, with much Alkan included. This led to Lewenthal’s second career, as a champion of the Romantic piano repertoire, one highlight being a brilliant RCA all-Alkan recording. His second

career was not as lengthy as one would have hoped. By the early 1980s, when Lewenthal was just past 60, his technique began to fail him. Perhaps the damage done in the mugging came back to haunt him, and he also had a chronic heart condition. In 1988, at the age of 65, he died.

The brevity of his prime years adds special value to any newly discovered recordings. Despite the mediocre recorded sound, the Frick Collection recital is a worthy addition to the Lewenthal discography, because it contains a good deal of material that he

did not record elsewhere. (I should point out that the Frick recital has been available on YouTube for some time; the sound there is even more limited, however.) The performance of Schumann's Symphonic Etudes (without the posthumous ones) strikes a perfect balance between virtuosity and lyrical warmth. Both elements are central to this music, but few pianists have brought them into the equilibrium that Lewenthal does. This is a fluid, expressive performance.

Among the other works, the highlights include the ingratiating Field Nocturne, a puckish reading of Weber's Rondo brilliant, and a powerful and multi-colored performance of Liszt's Ballade #2. It is also good to have Lewenthal's readings of Chopin, as he did not get to record much of that composer commercially.

This admirable release cannot serve as a first choice for Lewenthal recordings. If he is a pianist you don't know, the best introduction is the recent Sony 8-CD package (907 585 3642) that I reviewed in FANFARE 43:4. It is a superb survey of many of his commercial recordings. The other essential choice is St. Laurent Studio's edition of that breakthrough 1964 Town Hall recital (YSL T-982). Once you are hooked, you will want every possible example, including the present release. As usual with St. Laurent Studio discs, the reproduction is as good as it can be, given the state of the original sources, but there are no program notes."

- Henry Fogel, FANFARE

