



RAYMOND LEWENTHAL IN RECITAL, Syracuse, 1969 • Raymond Lewenthal (pn)

• ST. LAURENT STUDIO 1098 (2 CDs 96:14)
Live: Syracuse, NY 7/30/1969

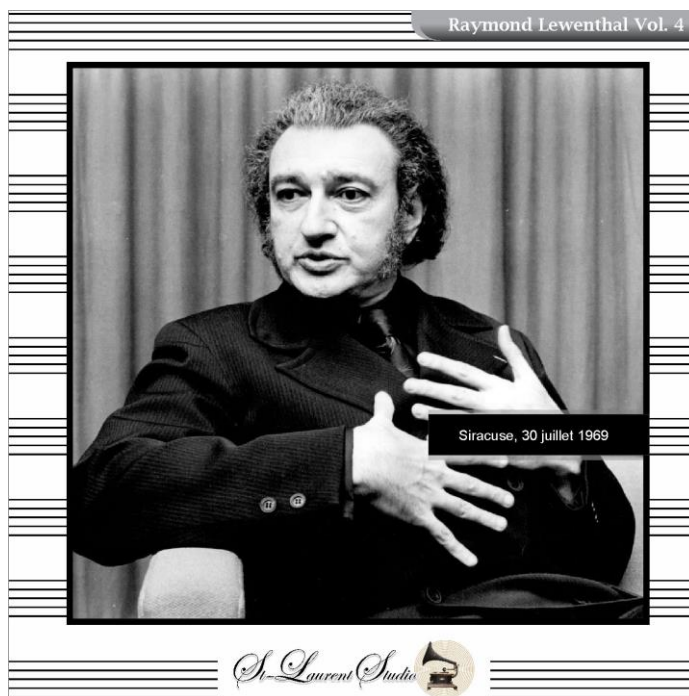
LISZT *Années de pèlerinage*: Book I, "Suisse." ALKAN *La vision*. *Sonatine*, op. 61. THALBERG *Fantasy on Rossini's Mosè*. *Fantasy on Rossini's Barber of Seville*. SHOSTAKOVICH *The Age of Gold*: *Polka*. RACHMANINOFF *How Fair this Place* (arr. Lewenthal). J. STRAUSS II *Perpetuum Mobile* (arr. Lewenthal)

"Live recitals by the late American virtuoso Raymond Lewenthal are scarce, and St. Laurent Studio has done a service with this release of a 1969 appearance at Syracuse University, particularly because it reminds us of Lewenthal's considerable musicianship. If he is remembered at all by general listeners, it is for two things, the first one catastrophic. While crossing Central Park in 1953, he was attacked by muggers and left with crippling injuries to his hands, abruptly ending his career at age thirty. A tortuous recovery, physically and mentally, ensued. He retreated to Europe and very occasionally to concertizing. But it was during this period that the second thing occurred, reigniting Lewenthal's reputation. Beginning in 1960, he intensively studied the works of the eccentric French Romantic composer Charles-Valentin Alkan.

Alkan's deliriously flamboyant piano music became closely associated with Lewenthal after he returned to New York, gave a two-hour radio recital in 1964 with a talk on Alkan and later presented an all-Alkan program at Town Hall. It was greeted with raves and an RCA recording contract. (I've given only a thumbnail sketch of events that Henry Fogel covered thoroughly in his review of Sony's collected Lewenthal recordings in *FANFARE* 43:4.)

If this newly released recital is any indication, Lewenthal luxuriated in barnstorming, and CD 2 brings ripe examples of Golden Age pyrotechnics, starting with Alkan, whose music would have been obligatory from Lewenthal. But let me focus first on the beautiful rendition of Book I, 'Suisse', from Liszt's *ANNÉES DE PÈLERINAGE*, which consists of nine character sketches, largely of landscapes, that stand at the height of Liszt's inspiration. Significantly, he reduced the ratio of fireworks to music, so each piece calls for reserves of artistry and not simply bald technique.

The dignity and authority with which Lewenthal engages the opening work, 'Chapelle de Guillaume Tell', offers reassurance that he isn't going to barge through this music. In excellent, close-up broadcast stereo, with full reproduction of the bass register, St. Laurent's recording has real presence. Lewenthal will shock those of us who remember him only as 'the Alkan man'. His Liszt is charismatic. I haven't heard the studio version of the ANNÉES in the Sony box, but in a live concert setting Lewenthal's playing is at once beautifully controlled and poetic. The water pieces, 'Au lac de Wallenstadt' and 'Au bord d'une source', are given a touch of drama without impairing their delicacy (the softer dynamics are a touch loud, no doubt in order to project into the hall).



Keeping 'Orage' from sounding blatant while conveying its tempestuousness is a notable accomplishment here, and Lewenthal sustains a wild, thunderous fortissimo at the climax without a hint of banging - phenomenal. In stark contrast is the somber philosophically reflective 'Vallée d'Obermann', where Lewenthal's playing exhibits liberal Golden Age rubato in the best sense, without

sentimentality. Just on its own, a download of this magnificent Liszt disc would be strongly recommended.

Fanciers of keyboard athleticism will be drawn to CD 2's glittering birds-of-paradise. Alkan is represented first by a meditative miniature, however, 'La vision', which gently spans three minutes, followed by a major work, the four-movement Sonatine, op. 61, composed in 1861 during the composer's although demanding, is stylistically appealing and fairly familiar in its echoes of Schumann and Mendelssohn, with quirky touches added. The Scherzo is like a brilliant Moskowski encore expanded to three times its length, making room for a jaunty middle section.

Alkan climbs high on his soapbox for the finale, and Lewenthal plays it with thunderous, dazzling exuberance. His performance makes you forget charges of vulgarity, which otherwise would pass in any court in the land. In the category of fireworks as an end-all and be-all, Thalberg is represented by the kind of operatic paraphrase that made concert pianism a competitive sport in the age of Liszt and long afterwards. The two Rossini operas in play, THE BARBER OF SEVILLE and MOSÈ IN EGITTO, are given the full Monty but in a loving, light-hearted manner. There is some agreeable delicacy in the MOSÈ extracts. Lewenthal's mastery of repeated thirty-second notes in the BARBER Fantasy have to be heard to be believed.

The last three numbers on the program are highly varied, aiming to rouse the audience by first astutely inserting two modest encores, the Polka from Shostakovich's AGE OF GOLD ballet (very wittily done) and Lewenthal's heartfelt arrangement of a Rachmaninoff romance, 'How fair this place'. But no one would want to go out into the night without a bit of brilliant fun, which is delivered in Johann Strauss's self-described musical joke, 'Perpetuum Mobile', which Lewenthal arranged to display a combination of adroit delicacy, sophisticated humor, and just a dash of fortissimo panache.

I realized well before the end that I had seriously underestimated this wonderful musician. This release turned out to be one of the best piano releases of the year. The audience is fairly quiet, with little to no coughing and abbreviated applause after each number. There are few audio artifacts except for occasional crackling and very light tape hiss, both easily ignored. Strongly recommended to pianophiles and general listeners alike."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE