



NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2016

HAYDN Piano Concertos: No. 4 in G, Hob XVIII:4; **No. 11 in D**, Hob XVIII:11. **Capriccio in G**, “Acht Sauschneider müssen sein,” Hob XVII:1. **Capriccio (Fantasia) in C**, Hob XVII:4. **LIGETI Piano Concerto. Capriccios Nos. 1 and 2** • Shai Wosner (pn); Nicholas Collon, cond; Danish Natl SO • ONYX 4174 (79:35)

Shai Wosner returns to the role of idea man at the keyboard, which he launched with a debut album in 2010 that juxtaposed Brahms and Schoenberg. It was an intriguing pairing, but this new odd couple, Haydn and Ligeti, doubles the stakes. On a conventional program, Haydn would be the sugar that goes down easily so that the audience might swallow Ligeti. Wosner gives us more credit for being open-minded. In his well-written program note (something we’ve grown used to with this articulate artist), the two composers appear as mutual lovers of humor, mischief, and capriciousness.

As musical evidence, Wosner performs two Capriccios each for solo piano. They are delightfully related as pieces separated by centuries but joined by wit. Haydn’s Capriccio in C explicitly asks for the performer to let a note die away into silence, creating the impression that, embarrassingly, he has forgotten what comes next. It’s an affectionate brand of mischief, interrupting a sparkling Rondo we should hear more often. The other Haydn work, Capriccio in G, isn’t as engaging, and calling it humorous is a stretch, despite the fact that the score bears an epigraph which Wosner freely translates as “It takes eight of you to castrate a boar.” What this joke means and where it comes from are up for grabs. Ligeti’s Capriccio No. 1 and No. 2, lasting around 2 minutes each, are light, high-spirited bagatelles that feature jaunty syncopation, on the verge of breaking out into the bolder jazziness of Kapustin.

The bulk of the program, however, is devoted to three piano concertos. Wosner points out the rustic nature of Haydn’s Concerto No. 4 in G, which he imagines to be the country cousin of the urbane, and far more famous, Concerto No. 11 in D (it used to be the only Haydn piano concerto general audiences knew, and probably still is). I found Wosner’s readings to fall too much on the literal side. Both works are infectiously melodious, and their charm comes through without effort, but Wosner seems intent on efficiency, and his relentlessly even touch is a self-imposed restraint. He would have served the music better by adding a dose of imagination; in the end, Haydn wasn’t an outstanding composer of keyboard concertos, as I hear them.

The central feature of the collection is really Ligeti’s utterly unique Piano Concerto from 1985–88, which can be read as a zany response to the lethargic decline of the Communist era. Since Ligeti was born in 1923, his adulthood, like the whole of Hungarian culture at the time, felt the oppressive weight of the Soviet regime. The composer’s love of order and disorder, clashing as they mount in zigzag fashion to an insane climax, feels like the trait of a sane man whose only

psychological defense is to appear insane. Miraculously, Ligeti's music is also crazy fun; and it's easy to accept, as one key to his popularity among latter-day Modernists, a statement Wosner places at the head of his notes: "Humor and seriousness, for me, always go together."

The Piano Concerto, on the face of it, sounds more like a celebration of controlled chaos than anything humorous, but perhaps that's the key. In the murky, mysterious slow movement, the climactic moment introduces, with real shock value, the intrusion of a siren and a police whistle. The effect is funny only in the way audiences laugh at horror movies in order to fend off terror. The grotesque and macabre fit into Ligeti's sly repertoire the same way they fit into Alfred Hitchcock's.

Leaving aside Wosner's connecting thread of wit and caprice, the Ligeti Piano Concerto is a *tour de force* of pianistic curiosity, displaying the composer's translation of extreme ideas into virtuosic thrills. This is one score where, improbable as it sounds, the avant-garde overlaps with the highly entertaining. Wosner rises to the occasion with evident relish, no matter how daunting the demands may be. His program note is also very helpful in providing images we can latch on to in order to enter this musical landscape. Here's a particular gem relating to the slow movement: "Like a gathering chorus of otherworldly creatures, the beginning slowly pieces together a descending motive...." Listen to the music, and you'll feel how perfectly he has captured its chthonic mood.

Scanning the *Fanfare* Archive, one finds that DG's release of Ligeti's three concertos for cello, violin, and piano under Pierre Boulez was a benchmark event (the disc appeared on Robert Carl's 1995 Want List, in 19:2). As much as I was carried away by Wosner's playing, the participation of the Danish National Symphony under Nicholas Collon seemed like an intrepid stab (they aren't startlingly good in the two Haydn concertos, either). For Boulez, Pierre-Laurent Aimard is more overtly the virtuoso soloist than Wosner, which I don't necessarily find better, but the expert orchestral work by the Ensemble InterContemporain, not surprisingly, is twice as vivid and technically secure as on this new release. Beware, however, that the angles are sharper and the shocks more shocking with Boulez.

On the whole, Wosner comes through as both idea man and performer. In his main aim, to reveal a happy kinship between two geniuses across the barrier of time, he has amply succeeded, and in addition, open-minded listeners have the opportunity to immerse themselves in an hour of witty caprice. I was happy to ride the whirligig and suffered no ill effects at all. **Huntley Dent**