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RIYAD NICOLAS - piano

5-6 November 2021

Bridport and Ilminster Arts Centres

The Dance House, Crewkerne

Syrian-born pianist Riyad Nicolas presented a programme devoted to two of Schubert’s best-known sonatas with two of Franz Liszt’s transcriptions of equally well-known songs *Auf dem Wasser zu singen* and *Gretchen am Spinnrade.* Although the paths of Liszt and Schubert never crossed physically, the former developed a keen respect for the music of Schubert during the decade following the latter’s death in 1828. Liszt who was extremely fond of creating transcriptions of other composer’s music, chose to or was commissioned to arrange a total of fifty-six Schubert songs. The arrangements remain extremely faithful to the Schubert originals and obviously include within the piano texture and figurations the melody of the vocal part. As if often the case with Liszt’s piano writing there is the highest degree virtuosity required of the performer. Riyad Nicolas was more than capable of the technical challenges but was also aware of the poetic requirements of the song’s melody to shine through the brilliance of the surrounding figurations.

The A major Sonata, D664, dating from 1819, makes for a wonderful choice to open an evening largely dedicated to Schubert’s music. The essential strands of the composer’s style are immediately present: lyricism, declamatory outbursts, and an eerie foreboding. The song-like lyricism often looks for a vocal-like and evenly weighted *legato* from the pianist’s right hand. The piano on offer at each of the three venues presented different possibilities in this respect and not always an easy one. For moments of drama Schubert’s penchant for flurrying left-hand octaves was something that Nicolas was spectacular at employing effectively.

Schubert’s F minor Impromptu D935 is an expansive journey through landscape of glittering triplets and semiquavers transporting ravishing melodies in its odyssey. The landscape, however, does need to embrace the melodic material and never to starve it of freedom to rise above the figurations. There were times when the balance between these two aspects was questionable.

The monumental G major Sonata, D894, written in 1826 just two years before Schubert’s death at the age of 31, straddles a universe of emotion. Despite its length of about 30 minutes, the various elements are held together through related keys and restatements of the musical ideas. Riyad Nicolas gave us a well-judged account of the first movement, the brooding and expectant opening idea contrasting well with the grace and poise of the dance-like material. The rhapsodic and episodic nature of Schubert’s compositional style requires careful and nuanced gradations of volume, phrasing, tone-colour, and balance to produce a successful outcome. Riyad Nicolas had to work within the mechanical and tonal constraints of the instrument before him, never an easy task with an unfamiliar piano, especially if it has several limitations. This becomes a really formidable challenge when performing such a Herculean sonata.

Riyad Nicolas’s account of the Alexander Scriabin Étude no 9 Op 8 was dynamic, passionate and effective. He engaged his listeners in the exultant and swaggering passages of duplet and triplet rhythms vying each other for supremacy and gave the central section a well-judged soothing and calm lyricism. The Étude brought to end a notable concert.

Andrew Maddocks November 2021