

The Varsi legacy

Proof of musical credentials for the Uruguayan pianist Dinorah Varsi (1939-2013) positively flows from this handsome collection, and never more so than in the celebrated 18th Variation from Rachmaninov's *Paganini* Rhapsody (part of a complete performance with the Stuttgart RSO under Sir Neville Marriner) where the sheer joy in the playing, its combination of embracing passion and luminous tone, not to mention the unfettered manner of Varsi's phrasing, place her, pedigree-wise, en route to Maria João Pires from Clara Haskil (she took first prize in the Concours Clara Haskil in 1967) and Lili Kraus. I would strongly advise listening, initially, without reference to the very substantial LP-sized book provided, certainly if, like me, you know precious little about Varsi aside perhaps from the handful of recordings that she made in duet with violinist Arthur Grumiaux, which are also included. The playing is the thing.

Chopin is an obvious first port of call, with warmly considered, poetically phrased accounts of the Nocturnes, playful but never cavalier Mazurkas (inner voices always carefully attended to), brilliant Impromptus that wear a mischievous demeanour, and a thought-provoking set of the Op 28 Preludes. All three piano sonatas are included, and the rigour of Varsi's approach attests to a significant musical intelligence.

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To call this playing 'old-world' would be to freeze it in time; 'oblivious of modern manners' might be a better epithet – this and similar issues hinted at in the filmed teaching sessions which are also included in the set. To watch Varsi work with students helps you realise how she facilitated a hotline to the muses, which didn't always mean adhering strictly to the letter of the score. An intuitive musician as well as a conscientious interpreter, Varsi knew how to balance head and heart. You listen carefully and sense the rightness of her approach, even when you're not absolutely sure why what you're hearing is so right. Sensing it is more than enough.

Both sets of Chopin Etudes reveal how Varsi is at pains to stress the musical rather than the technical aspects of these glorious perennials, the 'Revolutionary' from Op 10 (No 12) slamming home



Dinorah Varsi: 'facilitated a hotline to the muses, which didn't always mean adhering strictly to the letter of the score'

with fierce accents, yet avoiding any suggestion of vulgarity. Likewise Op 25 No 7, as heartrending an account of this impassioned tone-poem as you'll find anywhere. Some works appear more than once, the Brahms Op 79 Rhapsodies, for example, the later G minor superior to the earlier version by some considerable distance, more supple, richer in tone, with purposefully (but subtly) spread chords. All Brahms's shorter pieces are included (Op 76 and Op 116-19) and they are among the set's unquestioned glories, performances that are intimate, declamatory, austere, romantic, mystical, sad – everything that the music itself is.

On the concerto front, Brahms's First and Second are respectful, the B flat being marginally more compelling than the D minor but Chopin's concertos under Jan Krenz paint a far more positive picture with immaculate finger work and, in the two finales, notably buoyant rhythms. Beethoven's Fourth (under Paul Kletzki) and Fifth are again good; so are Rachmaninov's Second, Tchaikovsky's First and Liszt's First – all utterly reliable, though distinguishing features are in shorter supply than in the solo works.

Two versions of *Kreiseriana*, one live the other studio, are similar to the extent of replicating Varsi's very quick manner in the off-beam, rocking-horse finale. Other Schumann – the *Humoreske*, *Fantasiestücke* Op 12, *Carnaval*, *Davidsbündlertänze*, *Symphonic Studies* and most strikingly the Fantasy in C – hark back to the personalised Schumann recordings of Cortot and Moiseiwitsch, if not in specific detail then certainly in their common feeling of romantic engagement.

Debussy *Préludes* enjoy clarity as well as atmosphere and various Beethoven sonatas prioritise structure and design above expressive indulgence. The same goes for Schubert, the penultimate piano sonatas (though not the last in B flat) warmed and humanised rather than rendered austere, which sometimes happens nowadays. I love the way Varsi coaxes the bouncy second set in the D958's Sonata's, not taken too swiftly or emphatically, and the rhapsodic way she plays up the inherent drama in D664.

Rameau and Bach are represented, so are Haydn, Mozart (including three concertos) and Bartók (a superb Sonata for two pianos and percussion), Liszt, Fanny Hensel, Mendelssohn, Ravel (a very playful Concerto in G), Clara Schumann, Brahms and Chopin cello works with Boris Pergamenschikov, Albéniz, some filmed material and a CD of very early recordings in rather crumbly sound (everything else is fine).

So that's how I've opted to use my word-count, substantiating a very firm recommendation for memorable recordings of a wonderful if little known pianist. A pupil of Leonard Shure and Géza Anda, Dinorah Varsi reflected her masters' best qualities, most notably a discernible personality that enhanced the music's effect without overwhelming it. That, really, is all you need to know.

THE RECORDING



'Dinorah Varsi Legacy'

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