

Gramophone
August 2001

Bartók • Debussy

N

Bartók Three Studies, Op 18

Debussy Douze études

Florent Boffard *pf*

Harmonia Mundi Les Nouveaux Intorprètes

© HMN91 1733 (53 minutes: DDD)

Understated and subtle readings of a revealing pairing of two great sets of studies

Bartók – selected comparison:

Kocsis (11/94) (PHIL) 442 016-2PH

Debussy – selected comparisons:

Uchida (7/90^R) (PHIL) 464 698-2PM

Gieseking (6/96) (EMI) CHS 65855-2



Now in his mid-thirties and a professor at the Paris Conservatoire, Florent Boffard is, on the evidence of this disc, a distinguished representative of the French school of pianism. That's to say, his technique is impeccably fluent, his control of sonority is admirable, and he resists the temptation to use the music merely as a vehicle for his own temperament. Curiously, French pianists do not have a brilliant track record in the Debussy Studies, at least not on CD. This is also one of the few Debussy cycles for which we cannot turn to Gieseking for a benchmark, since he found his technique stretched beyond its limits. What Boffard admirably supplies is a complement to the dazzling display of Mitsuko Uchida (now re-released on a single mid-price CD as well as part of a two-disc package in Philips's Great Pianists series).

As the more seasoned 'big-hall' artist, Uchida finds a touch more hallucinatory magic at one extreme and a good deal more rapier-sharp virtuosity (perhaps even too much) at the other. She certainly makes the Frenchman sound under-characterised in the 'notes répétées' and a shade prosaic in the 'arpèges composés' and 'sonorités opposées'. But there is a lot to be said for not shouting the more clamorous studies, such as the Octaves and Chords, from the rooftops, and Boffard's subtle shadings and consummate fluency are richly rewarding in themselves. He finds the exuberance as well as the skittishness of 'Pour les cinq doigts', and his voicing of the studies in thirds, fourths and sixths is unobtrusively idiomatic. The acoustic is on the dry side of ideal, just as Philips's for Uchida is on the resonant side.

Boffard is extremely adept at demonstrating Bartók's debt to the Debussy Studies (only three years separate their composition), whereas Kocsis is earthier and more intense, more ethnically Hungarian. Here too the level of artistry is comparable and the interpretations complement one another nicely, as do the recordings – the close focus on Philips scrutinises the textures more closely, and the instrument itself is more astringent.

David Fanning