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To Keep the Dark Away: Music of Liszt/Prokofiev/Shatin

Gayle Martin, piano
Ravello Records 7937
Total Time: 64:38
Recording: ****/****
Performance: ****/****

Gayle Martin's piano album here takes its title from a work by Judith Shatin. The disc features three transcriptions/arrangements by Franz Liszt, two works by Shatin, and five selections from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. Martin first achieved critical notice at the sixth International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition. A student of Rossina Lhevinne and Eugene List, her piano approach seems to harken back to an earlier era of grand piano maestros.

The Liszt transcriptions provide some opportunity for a few acrobatics and displays. Less so in the setting of Robert Schumann's "Widmung" which was composed as a wedding gift for Clara Wieck. The final two tracks on the album are transcriptions from Wagner operas. The first, *Ballad of the Flying Dutchman* is Liszt's interesting transcription of this aria featuring a variety of unique techniques for the piano including pedaling that helps recreate the power of storms. Finally, "Isolde's Liebestod", provides us with a more ecstatic rapture of intensity in a piece that certainly caught the ears of the period.

To Keep the Dark Away is a very modern, and quite demanding pianistic work, commissioned for Martin in 2011. It is inspired by the poetry of Emily Dickinson. One is struck by the intensely personal writing of solace and reflection that can be heard in the opening title movement and more intensely in the central "An Actual Suffering Strengthens." A bit of ethereal writing also appears in "The Auroral Light" with clusters that themselves set up a more angular line sparse and, a bit playful. The movements here are all fairly short, but each provide opportunities to explore Martin's technique in a more modern harmonic setting. This is a very engaging work as is the later *Fantasy on St. Cecilia* (1996) shaped from the composer's own piano concerto. The first movement opens with large crashing chords and dissonance and more angular writing. The central movement, a bit more reflective, incorporates a motif from Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. The

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final movement explores the final struggle and martyrdom combining aspects of the previous explorations. The writing is perfectly in line with the grand Lisztian gestures which Martin is quite adept at carrying off. It would be great to hear how this fits against the orchestral textures.

One suspects that the five selections here from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* are to provide another opportunity to hear Martin in slightly more familiar repertoire. One certainly wishes all ten if these piano transcriptions had been considered. As it is, one can certainly sit back and enjoy the wit and modern harmonic writing that appears in these pieces.

Gayle Martin is an exceptional pianist and this recording is certainly a testament to her capability as a virtuoso performer. She equally finds ways to get at the inner emotional components of even these more technical demands which helps connect the Shatin piece early on. The other more familiar works are icing to help also give us a chance to hear some of Judith Shatin's music, which is easily recommended just for these aspects, but there is a great deal to appreciate within this excellent recital which has a perfect immediate balance in the recording. The release is barebones itself, but a link gets you to notes and other information about the album easily enough. Highly Recommended.

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