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Prokofiev's Piano Sonatas: A Guide For The Listener And The Performer



Synopsis

Boris Berman, renowned concert pianist and teacher, is one of the world's foremost authorities on Sergei Prokofiev. In this book, he draws on his intimate knowledge of Prokofiev's work to guide music lovers and pianists through the composer's nine piano sonatas. These cherished works, composed between 1910 and 1951, are today considered an indispensable part of the repertoire of every serious concert pianist. The book, written with a deep appreciation of Prokofiev's style and creativity, looks at the sonatas within the context of Prokofiev's complete oeuvre. For each sonata, Berman provides general information about the work and a discussion of the composition's details and features, and in a section entitled "Master Class" he offers suggestions for interpretation and specific advice for performing. Berman also corrects for the first time various misprints in published scores and includes a helpful glossary of musical terms.

Book Information

File Size: 3413 KB

Print Length: 256 pages

Publisher: Yale University Press (April 24, 2008)

Publication Date: April 24, 2008

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B001I4604W

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Not Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #504,885 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #11

in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Composers > Prokofiev #103

in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Forms & Genres > Piano Sonatas

#150 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Classical

Customer Reviews

Very helpful to pianists to understand Prokofiev's works

This new book by Boris Berman is a magnificent read for those who care about the ingenious music of Prokofiev. Dedicated to his mother, Berman tackles the virtually limitless piano repertoire, the piano sonatas of Prokofiev which are considered a serious part of the repertoire by almost every accomplished concert pianist. He was the only 20th century composer to give such consistent attention to form. Prokofiev had a lifelong compassion of the sonata form and Berman begins the book with an outline of how sonata form evolved from Beethoven to Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, and Brahms, continuing into the important composers of the 20th century. Berman provides an in depth chapter on Prokofiev's life and the evolution of his "musical language", which also includes reference and descriptive discussion on how all of his compositions came to fruition. The book then devotes considerable insight to "Prokofiev the pianist", which conveys how the piano played a central role in his oeuvre. Berman sites specific examples of movements, bars, types of piano textures of his early and late works as well as his articulations, active finger work and resulting sonorities. The incredible fascination of this book truly begins when Berman gives each of the piano sonatas an in depth discussion and overview. Berman then leads us to the next step called "Listening Closely". Each movement is analyzed in a well laid out format showing examples of thematic material, what is taking place in each hand, and even gives measure numbers and timing spots where the examples occur on the disc. It is most important that you write bar numbers in your scores, as Prokofiev never provided bar numbers. By doing this it makes for less searching when locating Berman's examples. Once this section is completed Berman presents us with his own "Master Class". Being the virtuoso Berman is, this master class is given from his own point of view and makes you feel like you are virtually participating. Having performed all nine sonatas, Berman gives us a chance to see how the main stylistic traits of Prokofiev's music plays out within the context of each sonata. In the fifth sonata for example, Berman "teaches" each movement. In the first movement he discusses how the opening theme should be played "with simplicity, but sensitive to every fresh, unexpected harmony." It is this kind of detailing that makes this book such a refreshing learning experience. In the conclusion, Berman talks about "To Be A Prokofiev Pianist". In the preceding chapters, he has examined each of the sonatas and discussed the challenges they present to their performers. Berman now summarizes the qualities and skills a pianist must possess in order to be a successful Prokofiev interpreter. He touches on the essentials that must be observed, indicating elements regarding tempo, dynamics, and articulation. "Prokofiev had a particular talent for creating a fully identifiable mood within the first notes of a piece, passage, or theme." As a pianist this book has helped me immensely in coming to grips with the especially "unique" world and soul of Prokofiev's piano sonatas and their abundance of significant musical

characteristics. Boris Berman, renowned concert pianist and teacher, is one of the world's foremost authorities on Sergei Prokofiev. His personal guidance is indispensable for serious pianists and music lovers. Author: Raymond Vacchino M.Mus. A.Mus. L.R.S.M. Licentiate (hon.)

Sergei Prokofiev is one of my favorite composers, and I have performed several of his sonatas with hopes to play more in the future. When I discovered that Boris Berman, whose Prokofiev recordings I admire, had written a book about the great Russian composer's piano sonatas, I couldn't wait to read it. I ended up being disappointed in the result, however. Going into this book, I was hoping for something along the lines of *À Messiaen*, by Peter Hill (another fine pianist) and Nigel Simeone, which delved into the letters and musical sketches of another of my favorite composers to give a deep portrait of his life and works. Berman does draw on certain Russian sources that are basically inaccessible to western readers, but too often in a superficial way only (e.g. "Givi Ordzhonikidze observed another trait of the Ninth Sonata: the important role played by the imagery of children," p 194--here Berman merely quotes another author's opinion without comment, rather than drawing on some primary source). There was some extremely valuable information that I hadn't seen elsewhere, however, such as the comparison of Prokofiev's manuscript for the Ninth Sonata with the published version, which has several mistakes. I wish Berman had been able to consult more manuscripts, sketches, and the like, as this would have made for a more enlightening book. After two chapters discussing Prokofiev's life as a composer and pianist, respectively, Berman considers each sonata individually. Each of these chapters has two main sections: "Listening Closely" and "Master Class." In the former, Berman gives a chronological account of what happens in each movement. When writing verbal descriptions of music, it is hard to discuss specific details without being deadly boring. Too often Berman writes sentences like the following: "The second theme takes shape gradually; first a long D-sharp appears, preceded by two grace notes (m. 37, 01:08); in the following bar the D-sharp changes to a D; in the succeeding bar the D, now an octave higher, is preceded by three grace notes" (p 86, in the chapter on the Fourth Sonata). In the parlance of sports announcers, I would have appreciated more color commentary and less play-by-play. Berman could have conveyed the same information much more effectively with a simple illustration from Prokofiev's score. There are some musical examples in the book, but Berman could have used many more. Without them, readers are forced to consult their own score (to which they must supply their own measure numbers to follow Berman's descriptions, a minor nuisance in itself) or listen along to Berman's own recordings, for which he has supplied timings as in the sentence I quoted above. In the second section of each sonata chapter, Berman gives us a virtual "Master Class," with

himself as teacher and the reader as student performer. Here he provides the sort of practical suggestions that can come only from having studied and performed these works in depth. I didn't always agree with his conclusions, but I think these sections showed his gifts as a teacher and musician more than the preceding "Listening Closely" sections. I think this book will prove most useful to pianists who are trying to learn one of Prokofiev's sonatas, rather than the general reader. I hope to learn the Eighth Sonata at some point soon, and I will certainly consult this book as I am preparing it for performance. But in the meantime, I will hold out hope for a better book on the same subject.

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