

May/June 2017

BARTOK: *2 Piano Concerto;*

BABIN: *Concerto*

Aglïka Genova & Liuben Dimitrov; Dobri Paliev & Plamen Todorov, perc
Bulgarian Radio/Yordan Kamdzhhalov
CPO 555001—52 minutes

Bartok's sonata for two pianos and percussion is an acknowledged 20th Century chamber masterpiece, written in 1937 and premiered by Bartok and his wife Dita Pasztory in January 1938. He made the concerto version in 1940. The very large orchestra is composed of 2 flutes (1 doubles piccolo), 2 oboes (1 doubles English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons (1 doubles contra bassoon), 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, celeste, and strings. Bartok was a master of orchestration; and with only a few slight modifications of the piano parts he is able to balance the two grand pianos and two percussionists (no modifications to their parts) with a large array of instruments. He adds a wealth of new colors to the original material, while retaining all that makes it such a masterpiece.

Victor Babin's Concerto for two pianos gets its world premiere recording here, though it is noted to be in the Contiguglia Brothers repertoire. It was written, like Bartok's, for the composer and his wife. Vita Vronsky (1909-92) and Babin (1908-72) were considered among the best in the world in their heyday. They had a friend and mentor in Sergei Rachmaninoff, and their recordings of his music, though hard to find, are well worth searching out. Babin's concerto has many Russian overtones (as it should) and also some similarities to Bartok. There are some American elements as well—Gershwin came to mind a few times. Brilliant and tuneful, this is a very easy work to enjoy.

Genova and Dimitrov have been active for over 20 years; they are one of the best duos in the world today. Their 13 CDs on CPO encompass a huge range of styles and composers. They have searched out many items beyond the standard repertoire, and I have made a number of discoveries listening to their records. Their booklet notes are always both informative and interesting, and CPO's recording is always top drawer. Kamdzhhalov is an able accompanist and elicits the appropriate wide range of orchestral colors and sounds. The balance and positions of pianos, percussion, and orchestra here creates a wonderful sound stage that will bring me back to this again and again.