

Major Discoveries: Victor Babin, the Composer

Review by: David Hurwitz



Artistic Quality: 8

Sound Quality: 9

Bartók added an orchestral part to his Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion in order to give him and his wife a virtuoso vehicle to take on tour and make a few bucks. The original being one of his greatest masterpieces, the Concerto version stands as a musical embodiment of the motto, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” With the exception of some creepy “col legno” strings in the slow movement, the orchestral contribution is entirely unnecessary and mostly redundant. The concerto is, however, well played by the duo Genova and Dimitrov after a slightly pokey start, and recordings are rare enough that it’s nice to have a new version. Even the slowish tempo for the opening movement seems to make sense in this context: after all, you can’t expect an elephant to move as quickly as a gazelle.

The real treat here, though, is Victor Babin’s Concerto No. 2 for 2 Pianos and Orchestra. It really makes you want to hear Concerto No. 1. Victor Babin (1908-72) was, you may recall, one half of the duo piano team of Vronsky and Babin, best known today for their EMI/Warner recording of Vaughan Williams’ Concerto for Two Pianos. The duo had a major career in concert and on disc from the 1940s through the early 70s, when Babin died unexpectedly young. His partner/wife outlived him by about two decades.

As a composer, Babin left a surprisingly substantial legacy of chamber and orchestral works. This concerto sounds sort of like Prokofiev meets Virgil Thomson, if you can imagine such a thing, and it’s absolutely delightful. In four movements, there’s a hymn-like prelude, a substantial scherzo, a touching adagio, and a brilliant fugal finale (sound clip) that both affirms Babin’s Russian roots but also offers something extra. It’s just good music, expertly written (as you might expect) for the soloists, played here with evident joy, and well worth getting to know. The Bartók, then, is really a bonus—you will return to this very well engineered disc for Babin. Happily, the accompaniments by the Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra under Yordan Kamdzhaliy are equally attractive. Go for it.