

AUDIO SOCIETY OF ATLANTA

NOVEMBER 2014

Bach & Beethoven: “Mostly Transcriptions 2” - Tien Hsieh, piano MS1531 (MSR Classics)

Taiwan native Tien Hsieh moved to the U.S. with her parents at the age of nine and studied piano at the University of Houston with Abbey Simon and Ruth Tomfohrde and at the Manhattan School of Music. Her performance style, combining directness with winning warmth, helps put the music she plays on “Mostly Transcriptions 2” across to the listener with irresistible charm.

We sense these qualities right from the start of her recital in Ferruccio Busoni’s transcription of Bach’s Prelude & Fugue in D major, BWV 532. The music sallies forth boldly, grasping the listener by the ears and not relinquishing its hold until the very end of 12 1/2 minutes of glorious sublimity. From the opening flourish of eighth and sixteenth notes in the Prelude to the jubilant conclusion of the Fugue, Hsieh’s exhilarating performance exudes a spirit of confidence and a joyous exploration of Bach’s contrapuntal writing that is never dry but always filled with fresh life and meaning.

I liked her account of Franz Liszt’s transcription of Bach’s Prelude & Fugue in A minor, BWV 543 almost as much as I did the Bach-Busoni. More straightforward and less virtuosic than Busoni, Liszt still realized remarkable character and accessibility by transferring the pedal part to the hands and preserving Bach’s rich sonority and strong counterpoint. From the flamboyant opening of the Prelude to the electrifying conclusion of the Fugue, Hsieh captures the spirits of both Bach and Liszt.

Hsieh does this so well, in fact, that she made a believer of me where the art of Bach transcriptions is concerned. It was a genre to which I’d paid scant attention in the past. But she made me realize what a masterful transcription, and the intelligence to realize it in actual performance, can do to bring out the unsuspected beauties in the original.

These beauties abound in the rest of a treasurable program that includes Liszt’s transcription of Beethoven’s pathbreaking song cycle *An de ferne Geliebte* (To the Distant Beloved), Busoni’s of Bach’s chorale prelude “*I cry to Thee, Lord Jesus Christ*,” and Alexander Siloti’s of Bach’s Adagio from Violin Sonata No. 5, BWV 1018, with its rich harmonies and arabesques.

The program concludes with an indescribably beautiful account of Beethoven’s Sonata No. 32, in which Hsieh has uproarious fun with the stomping syncopations that erupt suddenly in the last movement – a moment which must have utterly flabbergasted Beethoven’s original audiences. (My pet name for it is “Ludwig’s boogie-woogie.”) Hsieh’s chosen instrument, a Fazioli Concert Grand with an impressively deep and wide compass in the bass, fits her artistic profile well.