

Originals - no copies

The five piano concertos by Charles Camille Saint-Saëns

The French composer Charles Camille Saint-Saëns was born on 9 October 1835 in Algiers and was certainly an exception among all the composers of the 19th-century. As early as at the age of two and a half years he began to play the piano, with his great aunt as a teacher (his father had died in the year of his birth), and only a little later, at the age of three, he began to write down on paper his first musical ideas. When he was 13 years old, he entered Paris Conservatoire and began to study the organ and composition. At the age of 18 he became organist at St Mary's. Additionally to this post he was teaching a piano class at the Niedermeyer School in the years between 1861-65. Eventually, after 1877, he devoted himself exclusively to his own musical production and began to travel extensively on tours as pianist as well as conductor.

Besides a great number of smaller works for piano solo, Saint-Saëns wrote five great piano concertos in the years between 1858 and 1896. However, compared with such repertory written by fellow composers of his time and earlier, his piano concertos were only relatively seldom played or recorded. In these days, a new integral recording of all five piano concertos is being released, played by the Russian pianist Anna Malikova. This gave us reason to talk with her about the idea of recording all of the concertos anew and to have a closer look at the CD market.

The concertos

It seems only natural, that mainly French pianists have undertaken it to occupy themselves intensely with the works of Saint-Saëns. Apparently the first one to produce an integral recording of the five piano concertos was pianist Philippe Entremont, who made recordings of some of the concertos in the Sixties (under Eugene Ormandy, Philadelphia Orchestra / Sony Classical SBK 48 276). It was also him, who eventually produced in the Seventies a complete set of all the concertos, conducted by Michel Plasson and accompanied by the Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse. Since those years, the concertos have been known at least to a circle of interested music lovers.

But why has it never been possible for Saint-Saëns to become really well known with his concertos? Probably one of the reasons was, that the composer wanted to uphold French tradition and that he was even a fierce adversary in his own country against the new ideas of someone like Debussy. His contemporaries were accusing him of being too conservative, however he on his side did not hesitate to fulfil this kind of accusations. In his piano concertos his intentions were to follow the example of composers like Liszt, Chopin on one side, but also Mendelssohn and Moscheles on the other side. Therefore, it doesn't make sense to look for new forms and effects in the architecture of the concertos. But yet, the second one - which appears today as the best-known of all the five - shows a significant change of structure, compared with the traditional arrangement of concertos until the 20th century. The order of movements in this concerto is slow-fast-slow. It was created in spring of 1868, during a period of merely three weeks. The premiere of the work in Paris was played by the composer himself, and it was conducted by his friend Anton Rubinstein. But even with this concerto people were mocking him: the pianist Stojowski commented "the thing begins with Bach and ends with Offenbach". As a matter of fact, it is not possible to deny this completely, as one finds some truth in this pretty rude comment with regard to structure and instrumentation.

The first concerto, composed in the year 1858, displays a wholly traditional structure with regard to the way, in which the composer is setting solo and tutti against each other. This is about the same with the third concerto, created in 1869 and almost never played: it has a pretty classical outlook. The fourth concerto of the year 1875 is however different: here we find a work having two parts, which is reminding us a little at the concert form of Franz Liszt: themes and motives are varied by alterations of rhythm and harmony in a well outbalanced way.

And then the fifth concerto, which is usually called the "Egyptian". It came into existence in 1896 during several weeks of vacations at the Nile in Egypt. Finally with this work Saint-Saëns went new ways. Possibly he was, like some of his contemporary colleagues, under the influence of non European music, heard for the first time at the Paris world exhibition of 1889. For the first time traditional structures didn't seem to have the same importance for him like in earlier years, and he also did not any more use and vary European folk music themes, like many of his colleagues had done all the time. For the first time he used non-European elements and motives. For instance the main theme of the second movement is based on a marriage song from Nubia. Moreover he is elaborating pentatonic gamelan

music. And then the last movement with an acoustic description of running machines, reminding the pounding motor of the ship on its voyage back from Egypt (maybe this is an early presentiment of the machine music, later composed by Georges Antheil?).

The integral recordings

There is no dispute about one thing: the second piano concerto is by far the best liked and most played one. This concerto has been a lot recorded singularly. Concerto No 5 is without doubt second best in this regard, maybe because of its innovative ideas. From the pianist it requires a lot of virtuoso technique. Sviatoslav Richter played and recorded it together with Kyrill Kondrashin. But integral recordings? Does one really find them? Yes, but there are not that many in number, compared with integral recordings of concertos by other composers. Anyway it does not make much sense to take the concertos by Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Brahms, Liszt as example. But even concertos of composers like Béla Bartók or Felix Mendelssohn one can find more often.

Indeed, one does find integral recordings. And it seems that today, in times where many pianists are searching for interesting music little played or recorded, their number is increasing. As mentioned above, the oldest integral recording still being on the market is the one by Philippe Entremont. In 1995 it was again a French to occupy himself with this repertory: Pascal Rogé played all five concertos under Charles Dutoit (Decca, Universal Classics 443865). And even the third integral recording was made by a French pianist: Jean-Philippe Collard plays with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by André Previn (1985/87 EMI Classics). Another widely respected recording of all the five concertos features Aldo Ciccolini, who played them together with Serge Baudo (Orchestre de Paris) and was the first to break into the French monopolism, which was dominating the Saint-Saëns recordings to date. We should also mention a historical recording with Jeanne-Marie Darré (who died on 6 January 1999), which the French pianist produced together with the Orchestre National de la Radiodiffusion Française under the direction of Louis Forrestier (EMI France).

In the meantime more and younger pianists came to the decision, that the piano concertos by Saint-Saëns merit to be recorded more. A box with all the concertos was released by Italian pianist Gabriel Tacchino (Orchestre du Radio Luxembourg, conducted by Louis de Fremont, Brilliant Classics 99524). Two more integral recordings are from 2001. The English pianist Angela Brownridge recorded them all

with the Hallé Orchestra directed by Paul Murphy on ASV (ASV, Codaex CD QSS 262). Another remarkable recording has been made by Stephen Hough, who also produced the concertos in 2001, conducted by Sakari Oramo (City of Birmingham Orchestra / Hyperion, Codaex 67331/2). But then one could not see any more activities in the field of integral recordings. However, this came to an end last year, when for the first time a Russian pianist took an interest in these French piano concertos. Anna Malikova, former first prize winner of the ARD competition in Munich, has now recorded the concertos for the label Audite. Her partners are the WDR Radio Symphony Orchestra Cologne under the direction of Thomas Sanderling; the two CD are being released these days.

The new integral recording

We wanted to know the reason why she found so much interest in Saint-Saëns. "This was a coincidence of several factors. For one thing, we had a cooperation with WDR; shortly after that the idea came up to make a studio production together. Apart from that, today every pianist is almost obliged to think about works which have not yet been overrecorded." And then Anna Malikova makes a joke: "A music student is asked, how many symphonies by Beethoven exist. His answer is: three - the third, fifth and ninth. It is pretty similar with Saint-Saëns. Here the answer would be: two, the second and the fifth. Of course, if there is a fifth concerto, there have to be some other ones as well...!" She felt it was an interesting idea to have a closer look into the text of all the concertos, even though she had never before performed any of them. "But this was not disturbing me, on the contrary: in a way it was even helping. Most of the concertos I have even never heard in concert, which means, that I was not influenced by any predisposition. I could approach the concertos in all liberty." Asked which one of the concertos is the most difficult, and how in general one has to consider them with regard to technical demands, she replies: "Well, this is difficult to answer. The second concerto we recorded last. For me it did not have any special problems, as its texture is very well written for the keyboard. The fourth concerto however is relatively difficult to play. In the first concerto also there are many uncomfortable passages and there is a lot of interaction between soloist and orchestra. This means a limited independence of the pianist, at certain places the pianist even has to accompany the orchestra."

After the experience with all the five concertos: is there one which became the favourite of Malikova? "Here I have to mention even four concertos: Nos 2,3,4 and 5. To tell the truth, no 1 is not really my favourite." The Russian pianist was able to understand how the

structural ideas of Saint-Saëns developed over the years. "Concerto no 3 is something like a step forward - it is totally different, more modern and more pianistically demanding than no 2. I have no clue to understand why this concerto was so heavily criticised after its premiere." Is maybe the reason for this that Saint-Saëns wrote like an epigone and shows in this concerto a lot of similarities to other composers? "I don't know. Although there are places where you might ask yourself whether this does not sound like Chopin or Liszt, these are only moments. There are in fact similarities, which however does not mean that they are copies. Saint-Saëns is in the end pretty unique and original," says Malikova with conviction. On the other side she points out, that she also found similarities with Ravel - which could only mean that Ravel on the contrary had copied from Saint-Saëns. After the recording experience: does she believe that one has to consider the rank of the concertos equal to that of concertos by Chopin, Brahms, Liszt and others? "After all the intense work with this repertory, after really going into the text and music and also while having already some time distance to the recordings, which were all last year, I have to say I fell in love with the concertos. This is especially the case with the third and fourth concerto, the love came up while I was working on them." Before beginning with the recordings herself, she heard some of the other integral recordings. Naturally she had her own ideas and did not really mean to let herself being influenced. She believes: "If the orchestra doesn't play well and doesn't support you, you can not play well yourself because the interaction of harmonies, colours, instrumentation is too complicated - this is a difference to the Chopin concertos. Therefore I really felt lucky to be able to record with this outstanding WDR Symphony Orchestra." She doesn't believe that you have to be French in order to have a deeper insight into the concertos,"as the French pianists after all are sounding pretty much different to each other. I think, that these pianists are too much individualists, therefore it would be too much to expect that you could hear in their play the background of a common social tradition."

The most difficult thing for her during the recording process was to keep everything fresh:"We had to deal with a big orchestra setting and I was eager not to have to repeat too many takes. You have to know, that also for the orchestra some of the concertos were new repertory. With some hundred or so musicians on stage you always have to be prepared that something doesn't go right. When you have to repeat takes too many times, there is always the danger of losing

spontaneity." However, with the final result she feels quite happy and hopes to have found some aspects in the music, which until now have maybe not yet been realised in an adequate way.

Anyway one should pay more attention to the piano concertos of Saint-Saëns, this is not only the conviction of Anna Malikova. They are concertos of special character and individuality, although in history they didn't have this kind of reputation. We can only hope, that these concertos will be more accepted in the future. They do merit it.