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Krystian Zimerman: Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-minor, op. 11; Piano Concerto No. 2 in F-minor, op. 21. Krystian Zimerman (soloist and conductor), with the Polish Festival Orchestra. Deutsche Grammophon 289 459 684-2, two CD's.

By Arthur Houle

In our age of "hyperbole inflation" how do I find adequate superlatives for this courageously provocative CD set? "Sublimely iridescent" would barely break the ice. Coinciding a tour of 40 major cities and commemorating the 150th anniversary of Chopin's death, this ground-breaking recording is incomparably compelling.

Zimerman's highly sensitive playing accentuates poetry over theatre, as was Chopin's practice. Chopin described Concerto I/ii as "gazing tenderly at a place that rekindles a thousand cherished memories...meditating in beautiful moonlit spring weather." Zimerman paints such retrospective images with charming, sparkling, and deeply affectionate brush strokes. He imbues bewitchingly seamless phrasing with scintillating articulation and heart-melting warmth. The piano tone is luminous, full of elegant finesse, and never overpowering or strident.

Chopin's orchestration is usually seen as mere accompaniment, necessary only to showcase the all-important pianist. Zimerman challenges this by painstakingly selecting and conducting young musicians who, in Zimerman's words, "shared my passion...and [rehearsed] as intensely as required without looking at the clock." The first rehearsal alone lasted 21 hours! The result is full-bodied, lush sonority exhibiting, paradoxically, remarkable individual nuances and sumptuous colors. Ardent, rounded tone is enhanced by stunning "up close and personal" sound engineering by Deutsche Grammophon. Zimerman manifestly avoids the orchestral "unified worldwide aesthetic" he bemoans. Other orchestras seem inflexible, undifferentiated, and perfunctory by comparison. Zimerman and his colleagues have the refreshing quality of a chamber ensemble brimming with sincere exuberance, tempered by profound introspection and beguiling innocence. All Polish, they bring just the right panache to elusive Krakowiak and mazurka rhythms.

The orchestra's shamelessly elastic tempos rival those of any pianist. Since rubato is an extreme sport for Zimerman, this is no small feat! The tempo range in Concerto I/i is M.M. 63-146 to the beat -- not including the incredible amount of rubato within these tempos! Detractors may find Zimerman's pace ponderous at times; Concerto I/ii starts at less than half the speed of Chopin's metronome mark. The consistency with which Chopin initially wrote metronome indications seems to argue for strict adherence. Around 1836, however, a barely legible metronome mark (or marks?) appeared in the Nocturne, op. 32/2; Chopin deleted it in publication and thereafter stopped writing metronome marks altogether. This should give well-intentioned "purists" pause! Nevertheless, some may prefer more straightforward, unaffected simplicity in their Chopin. Harsher critics might even call Zimerman's interpretations disjointed or distorted. But Zimerman achieves enchanting cohesiveness and a sense of sweeping architecture by dint of sheer relentless conviction permeated with seductive, patient intensity.

There is an ineffable fundamental integrity in Zimerman's mesmeric playing that transcends pedantry. Spontaneity is obviously paramount to Zimerman. He could bring a shade more variety to his exquisite but sometimes predictable "slow/fast/slowest" rubato in fiorituras; Chopin occasionally preferred flourishes to be fastest at the end (e.g., Concerto II/ ii, m. 40). And while improvised cadenzas appear to be disallowed (ironic!), a Chopin student rather tellingly penciled an arpeggiated "lead-in" fermata embellishment into Concerto II/ii, m. 59. (What fun it would be to hear a pianist of Zimerman's imagination stoke this neglected tradition!). Zimerman downplays some notable bass motives in Concerto II/iii, favoring instead the effervescent revelry of the treble. Lastly, I could cite a few "wrong" ornament executions (based on Chopin's penciled clarifications). But Zimerman's consummate good taste greatly outweighs such scholarly cavils.

So let go, levitate into Zimerman's magical celestial realm, and forget everything you "know" about Chopin. Even the most jaded soul will find nourishment and reawakening in this sensual, shimmering recording.
