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***Chopin: The Complete Etudes.* Jocelyn Swigger, piano. Con Brio Recordings CBR2172—61 minutes**

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Audio Review

Chopin: The Complete Etudes. Jocelyn Swigger, piano. Con Brio Recordings CBR2172—
61 minutes

The many artists involved with historically informed performance, or HIP, have usually confined their efforts to music written before 1800, with only occasional forays into the nineteenth century (Beethoven and the early Romantics). When one considers piano music only, the number of entries is fewer. My by no means exhaustive list includes Beethoven performances by Anthony Newman, Steven Lubin, and Andreas Staier; Schubert performances by Paul Badura-Skoda; Schubert and Mendelssohn chamber music with the Atlantis Trio and Ensemble; and Lieder accompaniments for Schubert (Staier, Kristian Bezuidenhout, Penelope Crawford) and Schumann (Crawford again and a fascinating *Dichterliebe* by Bezuidenhout and the tenor Jan Kobow). With younger artists of significantly high caliber (like Bezuidenhout), I believe we are finally at a place when we can expect first-rate accounts of this music on period instruments or copies.

There have been a few performances of Chopin on period instruments, but the only one I've been able to investigate thoroughly is this new release by my colleague and classmate from my days at the Eastman School of Music, Jocelyn Swigger, who teaches at Gettysburg College. I would think his work would be a natural, as I can think of few composers who reinvented piano sonority as thoroughly as he did. Ms. Swigger performs on an 1841 Érard, tuned in an unequal temperament devised by the musicologist Jonathan Bellman. The description of the instrument in her entertaining notes is worth repeating at length:

It is straight-strung with under dampers, with the original hammers and action. . . . Chopin loved Érard pianos, saying they helped him make a full tone when he was not at full strength. . . . The action, though more evenly regulated than any other Érard I have ever played, is more difficult to control than that of the modern piano. The sound has great variety and unforgiving clarity. I enjoyed exploring the different sounds of the different registers, and found that inner melodies sometimes revealed themselves. The sound's fast decay made Chopin's quick tempos necessary for the sustained melodies of the slower etudes (10/3, 10/6, and 25/7). Perhaps the biggest surprise about the Érard, though, is its actual tone: to me the Érard sounds as different from a modern piano as an oboe does from a clarinet, and I fell in love with its rich, warm, metallic sound.

The straight stringing (as opposed to the cross-stringing in the modern grand) creates much more timbral variety in the different registers. I do not know how much the hammers differ from those

in the modern grand, their weight or the material covering them, but the attack is more incisive, particularly in the upper registers. This characteristic also contributes, I think, to the quicker tempos Ms. Swigger sometimes takes.

I find that the piano's particular tonal qualities seem to reflect certain aspects of the music's unfolding that, in spite of my usual reticence, I'm very tempted to say Chopin had in mind. For instance, in the "Ocean" etude, the sound of the hammer attack on the main melodic notes adds a certain urgency to the undulating phrases, and the general tonal transparency gives greater detail to the inner voices (much more than is customary). On the modern piano the whole sounds like an undifferentiated rush of sound. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but perhaps hearing it on the older piano might make it possible for modern pianists to aim for a more varied surface in their own performances.

The faster tempos do take some getting used to. Having heard the CD three or four times, I can only now say that I enjoy her performance of the famous E-major etude from op. 10, no. 3: she reimagines it as a kind of moderate capriccio with all sorts of unexpected tempo changes, especially in the central section. Similar nuance in the phrasing occurs in the faster etudes as well, for instance the "Butterfly." Occasionally I think she could go further in flexibility of phrasing: the tumultuous left-hand passages in the "Cello" etude, for instance, could have more freedom and melodic direction. Overall, however, Ms. Swigger has superbly balanced the two competing priorities endemic to a HIP approach: to take the sound and expressive ideal that the composer might have known, but also to make the kinds of new interpretations that we must ourselves add as performers of today.

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