

RAVEL: Miroirs suite; Gaspard de la nuit suite - Patrick O'Byrne, piano - Stockfisch stereo

I can't think of any composer for the piano whose music demands the highest resolution in reproduction more than Ravel's.

Published on November 25, 2007

RAVEL: Miroirs suite; Gaspard de la nuit suite - Patrick O'Byrne, piano - Stockfisch Stereo-only SACD SFR 357.4049.2, 48:50 **:**

This was an unexpected arrival from Germany - from a label doing mostly guitar recordings, and not in the concert music area. Pianist O'Byrne was born in Ireland but brought up in New Zealand and he now concertizes worldwide. He plays an Italian Fazioli piano on the recording, which is not multichannel but recorded with great transparency and detail. From several recent CD and SACDs I'm beginning to think the Fazioli is the best-sounding piano I've heard on recordings. It's free of the ringing and metallic sound in the extreme treble on most Steinways.

Miroirs is one of Ravel's greatest works for piano, a set of five pieces reflecting scenes from a most creative imagination. The composer bettered even Debussy in these works which conjure up sounds and impressions formerly unknown in literature for the piano. The lengthiest of the five - *Un Barque sur l'océan* - creates a remarkable painting in sound with its varying tone colors and continual rocking rhythm. In the middle you can sense the threat of a storm perhaps coming up, but it finally subsides and the wind dies down.

For the three Gaspard pieces Ravel turned to the macabre Gothic poetry of Aloysius Bertrand. *Ondine*, the first, captures the play of light on the water better than Liszt, Debussy or anyone else. *Le Gibet* is the gallows, portrayed at dusk very emotionally with a repeated bass figuration. The closing *Scarbo* has a Spanish/Latin sense in its depiction of an evil little goblin disturbing one's sleep.

I can't think of any composer for the piano whose music demands the highest resolution in reproduction more than Ravel's. Debussy often achieves his unusual impressionistic effects with a sort of wash of notes, whereas Ravel is always the Swiss watchmaker with his notes, placing them very specifically and accurately. In Stockfish's

super-clean reproduction with this magnificent piano every tiny detail stands out as it should and the overall result is often breathtaking. Just as a quick comparison I put on some recordings of the same works by Walter Gieseking and Richter. No comparison - listening to the old Gieseking recordings was like trying to read thru smudged and blurry reading glasses. The notes ran together and the highest treble notes rang and were distorted. Richter was better and in stereo but still dull next to the SACD. Both performances on CD probably have more artistic phrasing, but what good are the subtle details when the sound is so poor it becomes distracting?

- John Sunier