

## FANFARE REVIEWS, SPRING 2015

**FINEBERG** *Tremors. Lightning. Fantastic Zoology. Grisaille. Veils. Til Human Voices Wake Us.* **DUFOURT** *Erlkönig* • Marilyn Nonken (pn) • Metier MSV28524 (73:07)

Let's leave aside the controversial and ultimately insufficient notion of spectral music for the purposes of this review, despite the disc's title. What we are given is music of constantly morphing repetitions, often on a vast scale. Phrases, gestural blocks and entire contours recur with the naturalness of an emergent spring or an oncoming snowstorm. The music follows suit, because whatever its title and however its compositional methodology gives rise to the resultant forms and structures, this is music of rapture and sensuality.

A way into these sometimes stark and complex pieces might be Fineberg's "Lightning, from 1991." As Nonken's liner notes elucidate, the energy gathers in each of the piece's phrases, leading to an unpredictable but natural dynamic increase; the tension builds to a moment of climax, and each subsequent release leaves ghostly overtones before the next fragments begin the process of gathering and connecting again. Conversely, "Grisaille" (2011) relies on exploration of sonorities amidst pedal points and related fragments of sound. At certain moments, a pitch seems to anchor its surrounding sonorities, and then its implications from one octave to the next are examined, queried and restated via an almost orchestral dialogue in which the smallest interval and most miniscule dynamic shift can have huge significance.

Dufourt's take on Schubert's "Erlkönig" (2006) is etched in granite slabs, using tools of varying size and thickness to carve out its space. Decay is integral to the listening experience, and even the softest sound is allowed to dissipate with dignity. This assemblage of sonic blocks could be compared to Messiaen's more Darmstadt-influenced efforts, such as the rhythmic etudes and certain sections of the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. Its occasional trills conjure shades of late Beethoven as well as Schubert's final works, bringing music history into the kind of experimental unity through temporal disparity implied by the work's referential title.

There is not a pianist playing today who can bring more subtlety and energy to the music of Joshua Fineberg and Hugues Dufourt than does Marilyn Nonken. Her voicings are exquisite, her pedaling throughout is a model to be studied, and, when necessary, her virtuosity is equaled only by the insight and passion with which every piece is imbued. The recording is excellent, capturing every burst of light and color as it decays through every shade of sound and silence. My only complaint is with the narrowness of the soundstage. Why wouldn't such tonal richness and dynamic variety exist in symbiosis with a broad soundstage? These recordings seem almost as if they were made in mono, so narrow and claustrophobic is their perspective. Despite this deficiency, the bass register is rendered with a faithful richness that I hear on very few piano recordings, and this makes up for any soundstage issues.

Minor quibbling aside, this is an absolutely essential piano disc, a worthy addition to the library of anyone interested in recent piano explorations rendered with vitality and intellectual rigor in perfect balance. **Marc Medwin**