

The Art of Duo-Piano Playing

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Though not as well known in the UK and Europe as they were in the US, the piano duo of Pierre Luboshutz (1890-1971) and Genia Nemenoff (1905-89) were hugely successful from around 1937 until their retirement in 1960. Selections of their recordings have appeared over the years (notably on some hard-to-find US-only Naxos CDs). There has never been a collection like this, curated and annotated with the usual care and authority by the Marston team.

Disc 1 begins with the great, life-enhancing work that is Mozart's D major Sonata for two pianos. And this is a great, life-enhancing performance that has shot up to pole position as far as I am concerned, outshining even the celebrated recording by the Lhevinnes. The sprung rhythms, clarity and lightness of texture are a joy, each pianist bouncing off the other as they negotiate those tricky moments that Mozart throws at the players with a mischievous wink. After that comes the Mozart Concerto for two pianos in a performance with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the spacious acoustic of Symphony Hall, Boston, under their lifelong friend Serge Koussevitzky. If red-blooded, big-orchestra Mozart is not your thing, you'll be missing out on another scintillating performance (the live 1938 recording has only just surfaced). The rest of this first disc has Chopin, Schumann and Mendelssohn titles from a 1945 RCA Victor album rounded off by Isidor Philipp's arrangement of the Scherzo from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1941).

Discs 2, 3 and 4 are a repertoire junkie's treasure trove, though, it must be admitted, with variable degrees of sonic and musical satisfaction. Luboshutz's fantasy from *Die Fledermaus*, for instance, is episodic in construction, cautious in execution and boxy in sound, while you may need to lie down in a dark room after his full-on arrangements of the Ritual Fire Dance and the Coronation scene from *Boris Godunov*. Other titles more than make up for these, played with light hearts and a light touch: the Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* and 'Largo al factotum' glitter and scintillate; as for the two Shostakovich arrangements (Luboshutz again), the Polka is as comically deadpan as you'll ever hear, the Waltz swooningly Viennese.

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The third disc opens with an enjoyably robust account of Brahms's *Haydn* Variations succeeded by the 16 *Liebeslieder* *Waltzes* with, enchantingly, the unexpected appearance of the Victor Chorale conducted by Robert Shaw, albeit in rather constricted 1946 Victor sound. Among further Bach arrangements is another from Isidor Philipp: the Organ Concerto after Vivaldi, BWV593. It's the two-piano equivalent of Eugene Goossens's overblown arrangement of *Messiah* and I loved every minute of it, with Luboshutz and Nemenoff using the full dynamic resources of their instruments. Compare that with the July 1947 broadcast performance of Bach's Concerto in C for two pianos, BWV1061, which concludes the disc – airy, buoyant, stylish – with a reduced chamber-size Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted again by Koussevitzky. Marston, admirably, retains the applause and station announcement.

Debussy's *Lindaraja*, Saint-Saëns's *Variations on a Theme of Beethoven* (terrific performance) and Reger's hefty (17'52") *Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue* are among the fourth disc's riches. The last work is also this set's final USP: a live recording from 1944 of the Concerto for two pianos by the forgotten Harl McDonald (1899-1955) with the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by the composer. This is such an entertaining romp of a work that its neglect by today's piano duos is a mystery (its only modern recording is by the excellent Long sisters on *Sono Luminus*). The 1937 premiere recording (Jeanne Behrend and Alexander Kelberine under Stokowski, also with the Philadelphia) favours the orchestra above the pianos. Here, it is the other way round. A 47 page (English only) booklet with a wealth of photographs is the cherry on the top of this unexpected box of delights.

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