



Sparre OLSEN: Complete Piano Music

Øyvind Aase, piano

Toccata Classics CD TOCC 0584

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.....so, if it was after mid-March 2020, what were you doing with yourself for the remainder of that year? Probably not too much (?) - certainly not venturing out to a studio to cut a platter. On the other hand, in the city of Oslo, Norway, pianist Øyvind Aase DID manage to make his way to that city's Rainbow Studio where, on their Steinway D-274 piano, he cut one that equates to a smorgasbord devoted to the "Complete" piano solo compositions by his countryman, Sparre Olsen (1903-1984). Why should that register with importance? Pure and simple - it is long overdue. Carl Gustave Sparre Olsen (that's his full name) remains known only to a handful of aficionados. It is not easy for me to articulate the virtues of his music due to its specific nature. Any "this", or "that" will equate to a negative in one way, or another, but, being knee-deep into this already, proceed onward I shall - a trait Olsen himself would have respected.

Let me begin by putting it the following ways: if you are seeking dodecaphonic-meanderings-within-a-cosmogenic-algorithm-for-pestilence, it is more-than-likely that this will not be the disc for you. If you are looking for that Lisztian-pedal-to-the-wall-fully-open-lid-all-88-keys-piano-pounding-in-a-calamitous-cascade-of-crescendo-crashing-like-Liberace-arpeggios, NOPE - it's not going to do it for you. IF, on the other hand, you are seeking 69 minutes of tonality in a pure expression thru such utilization, YOU HAVE MOST DEFINITELY ARRIVED at the correct release! There are no less than 36 tracks contained on this Toccata Classics CD, reminding me of Satie as having written pieces that run in short durations. (In Olsen's case, the shortest track runs 12 seconds!) To better illustrate this, Grieg's "19 Norwegian Folk Songs for solo piano, Op. 66" runs around 26-ish minutes in duration. Olsen's entire "Norwegian Folk Songs from Gudbrandsdalen," which is also a set of 19, tops-out at just about 9 minutes! Just keep an open mind to the fact that brevity can be a virtue unto itself. The closest Olsen comes to applications of what one would consider "modernism" is contained in his "Andante funébre" (1937, rev. 1949); one of the longer selections with a massive running-time of four-and-a-half-minutes. Despite its resolute finitude, it fully renders an impact nonetheless. This recording covers Olsen's career, including a short "Air" from 1981, as well as concluding with his "Hymn: Honour Eternal Spring" from around 1916; a song he composed when he was 13, in a version he prepared for piano that was published in 1973 to honor his 70th birthday. His major piano opus, "Leitom Suite, op. 33" is also included, as are Olsen's delightful "Three Short Pieces," both Op. 31 "From Telemark Suites on Norwegian Folksongs," as well as his delicious "Variations on a Norwegian FolkTune, op. 5".

Echoes of Grieg can be heard within this music, that is true, however, the more one engages with it, Olsen's presence becomes more clearly defined on its own merits. As simply put as one can, Olsen's work is characteristically charming, inviting, engaging, and individualistic - words not commonly encountered all that often anymore. Much of it, as the booklet notes point out, are intended for pianists, especially younger ones, to have something to perform as they develop their interpretive skills, expressed in a manner that masterfully captures this repertory's Norwegian origins. This means, therefore, that one will not hear grand gestures thru dazzling flights of virtuosity, but, rather intimate expressions - almost as if the listener had become engrossed in a private conversation with the composer over a serving of sliced Fiskegrot wrapped in a lefse, or, while participating in one of his favorite pastimes, fishing.

A friend of both Ella and Percy Grainger, and a student of the latter, Olsen retained a warm relationship with them right up until Percy's death in 1961, authoring a biography on the Australian in 1963. (I believe he stayed in contact with Ella after Percy's demise, followed by Stewart who continued correspondence after Ella's death until Sparre's passing.) Their friendship meant a great deal to both artists as the booklet notes point out rather specifically, and directly. While the pianism on this disc is worth the price of purchase, one must mention the truly exquisite booklet notes that were authored by the disc's pianist, Øyvind Aase. That booklet, alone, is worth the price of admission. Regarding those booklet notes, which is titled "Sparre Olsen and the Art of Saying a lot with a Little," provides a rather in depth profile of him, as well as details regarding his music in disturbingly excellent English. (It is always rather "disturbing" when someone from elsewhere can write in better English than most Americans.)

On the whole, this is an extremely worthy addition to the catalog regarding a composer whose work remains relatively unknown, unheard, and unrecognized. One has to conclude that this was a genuine labor of love for pianist, and writer Øyvind Aase, since the results can be distinctly evidenced on every track. This Toccata Classics CD (TOCC 0584) may finally help to garner attention - deservedly so! - to this rather humble figure of 20th-Century Music to a much wider audience.