

DACOD 1000

The Early Scriabin

Titled *The Early Scriabin*, this album provides an attractive cross-section of Scriabin's early piano music rather than a comprehensive chronological program of the sort that might open a complete survey of Scriabin's piano works. Veteran pianist Oleg Marshev has generally left an unfavorable impression on critics of these pages in the past. Peter J. Rabinowitz found that "aloofness" marred Marshev's performances of Prokofiev's more lyrical pieces (18:5), and Adrian Corleonis found Marshev's "louder-and-faster tour de force" approach to the Liszt Sonata as a case study in "how virtuoso came to be a term of abuse" (30:6). As recently as 2022, Huntley Dent characterized Marshev's playing, this time of Brahms, as "one-dimensional" (46:2).

My impression of Marshev's playing on this recording is generally far more favorable than that reflected in my colleagues' reviews of his previous recordings. That is not to say that it lacks issues, though, and some of those issues are substantial. I'll get to those in a moment. First, I want to articulate my overall impression, which is that Marshev has a good grasp of Scriabin's emotional profile and that he communicates it both passionately and gracefully. He exhibits a fine sense of pacing in the funereal finale to the First Sonata, building the intensity steadily and naturally, and letting it dissipate with just as much control. Yet he brings a sense of improvisation to pieces such as the first of the Two Nocturnes, in which his rubato gives the melody a spontaneous, conversational shape without subverting its rhythms. And Scriabin's showcases for charm, such as the *Impromptu à la Mazur*, are buoyant and sparkling in Marshev's hands. At his very best, as in the *Prelude in G♭ Major*, Marshev's playing is tender and sensitive, with a flexible but unobtrusive rubato. And he is adept at offering independent shading to melodies and countermelodies, as in the *Prelude in E Minor*, and at using texture as an expressive tool, as in the *Prelude in D Minor*.

These assets do not constitute revelatory playing, and they do not topple legendary Scriabin interpreters such as Sofronitsky or Neuhaus from their perches. But they do make for committed, convincing Scriabin that is well worth hearing. However, as I wrote in the previous paragraph, there are also problems with Marshev's playing.

One that has been highlighted in reviews of Marshev's previous work is a tendency to emphasize the bass at the expense of the treble. Adrian Corleonis memorably referred to this aspect of Marshev's playing as "martellato octaves thundering in the bass loom[ing] like tsunamis,

drowning all in their wake” (30:6). On this recording, this is an issue in the First Sonata’s third movement and in the climactic measures of the Prelude in C Minor. There are also moments of overpedaling, as in the Prelude in A Major, in which Marshev seems to change pedal slur by slur rather than harmony by harmony. But the primary issue is that Marshev’s rubato, far from the understated timidity that garnered criticism in his previous work, frequently and gratuitously distorts Scriabin’s rhythms and meters. Marshev pauses on the final note of most of the quintuplet groups in the Prelude in C Major—to the point that they become groups of eight rather than groups of five. He similarly pauses on the final eighth note of the First Sonata’s opening theme, turning its 9/8 meter to 10/8; and he does the same in the movement’s *meno mosso* secondary theme, adding an extra eighth to the melody’s high note. None of these pauses, or others that pepper this recital, are integrated into a rubato in which the tempo broadens, and none of them are necessitated by calls for unreasonable leaps or impossible tempos. But, unlike other Scriabin interpreters who have struck me as simply sloppy in their counting, Marshev’s rhythmic distortions seem to be interpretive choices. So does his tendency to play some passages with the hands not together; this is apt to occur during lyrical yet ardent passages. Perhaps this is an intentional nod to the performance practices of Scriabin’s lifetime, but to contemporary ears (or at least to mine), it sounds mannered.

I don’t think these drawbacks outweigh the strengths of Marshev’s Scriabin playing, which has the great benefit of offering well-considered and sincerely felt interpretations of the music. But readers intrigued by my descriptions of Marshev’s strengths should consider to what extent they mind some occasionally significant deviations from the pieces’ notated rhythms and a good deal of left-hand/right-hand separation. The generally fine engineering presents the piano well, though with a bit of tape hiss in the background. © 2026 Fanfare