



classical

A magical encounter with a near-mythical creature

A rare recording by the reclusive Russian pianist Grigory Sokolov is a triumph, says **Geoff Brown**

Grigory Sokolov
The Salzburg Recital
 Deutsche Grammophon
 ★★★★★

The executives at Deutsche Grammophon have been hugging themselves with joy over their recent signing of the brilliant and singular Grigory Sokolov — a pianist so rarely encountered in recordings, or in concerts in Britain, that it's almost as if they struck a deal with the Loch Ness monster. Some insist he is the greatest living pianist in the world.

The last new recording from this Russian wonder appears to date from 1996. He abhors the recording studio, along with concertos (not enough rehearsal time with the orchestras, he says). So the only possible recordings derive from his solo recitals, performed on pianos that must be rigorously prepared and positioned, and must never be more than five years old. He also apparently draws the line at the technicians touching his piano stool.

A flood of DG issues from this source should not, alas, be expected. Yet that's all the more reason to pounce on this initial album, taken from a highly acclaimed recital given in Salzburg on July 30, 2008. From the beginning of Mozart's F major sonata, K 280, the first of two included, the Sokolov spell is cast.

The graceful, crisp articulation; the little hesitations, so carefully wrought — here is poetic and intimate playing of the highest order. Another Sokolov enters with the Adagio movement: a pianist in the traditional Russian manner, eager to paint notes dark in tones of great solidity.

His Russian soul reappears in the magical kaleidoscope of Chopin's 24 Preludes, where the second piece, the A minor Lento, trundles by like the ox cart in *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Contrast that with his limpid pirouettes in the early stages of No 15, or the wonderful freshness in phrasing and weighting in No 7, such a familiar morsel. His 57 varieties of touch and texture feature just as clearly in the generous encores, all six of them, from extra Chopin through dream-like Scriabin to the jaunty trills of Rameau's *Les Sauvages*.

Along with some ambient noise, audience applause is ever present, sometimes jumping in before the final notes fade. Annoying, that; but with a piano giant like Sokolov, it's hard to keep enthusiasm bottled.

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