

It's hardly worth pointing out that any new recording of *Pictures* faces formidable competition. And there's probably no one who knows that better than the producer of this CD, *Fanfare* colleague David DeBoor Canfield; according to his notes, he had, as of May 2010, personally collected "some 1,100 different performances of more than 400 different arrangements" of Mussorgsky's most popular score. So, as he himself asks, "Why yet another one?" The question is even more pointed, given that Lars David Kellner, who divides his time between music and medicine, is hardly a familiar pianist.

Most immediately, this recording stands out for its inclusion of an earlier version of "Gnomus," slightly longer and quirkier, both in harmony and shape, than the revision we all know. In itself, though, that wouldn't be enough to compensate for a midlevel performance. Fortunately, Kellner offers something well above the norm: a bold, sharply, and imaginatively articulated reading that heightens the music's dissonances and idiosyncratic gestures. Is it as individualistic as Horowitz's reading or as consistently insightful as Richter's canonical Sofia account? No—but Kellner, armed with a solid technique, offers imaginative articulation, illuminating voicing, and an excellent ability to shape phrases through dynamic shading. The performance is consequently full of delights. The subtle handling of the tolling bass line of "The Old Castle"; the brilliant handling of the swerves of "Tuileries" (he negotiates the shift from 16th notes to eighth notes in measure 8 with the grace of an expert ice-skater); the steely reading of "Baba Yaga": Even those who know the score well will find plenty to admire here.

Kellner is just as effective in his attentive performances of the less-familiar short works that fill out the disc; listen, for instance, to how artfully he captures the strangeness of the outer sections of *On the Southern Shore of the Crimea* or how well he snaps out the rhythms of the folksy B section that separates them. Even *A Tear* is delivered with a focus that counteracts the music's underlying (and uncharacteristic) dippiness. Good sound, extremely informative notes, too. Strongly recommended. **Peter J. Rabinowitz**

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I will admit it—I have grown tired of Mussorgsky's *Pictures*. When I was younger I thought it the cat's meow, but of late I find it superficial and bombastic. So getting this recording from Tenafly did not exactly float my boat. And as far as piano recordings go, though I also have of late come to prefer them to the Ravel orchestration due to the added clarity, there are not that many that I really like, either. Richter's legendary but hugely overrated Sophia live recording is so littered with noise that I can hardly listen to it anymore. The relatively recent Kissin version is very fine, if a little controlled, like many of his performances. Horowitz's color factory is a perennial favorite also, while Peter Burwasser responded favorably to Freddy Kempf's BIS recording in *Fanfare* 32:2.

But it's not enough for me—not yet. At least it wasn't until this new recording by a new (to me) pianist on a new (to me) label showed up. Lars David Kellner is a Bavarian pianist who acquired a performance diploma from the School for Music and Theater in Munich in 2001. His specialty is in Romantic music, with a tantalizing tidbit of teasing given in the notes about a future release dedicated to the unknown and fragmentary music of Janáček, something that might be automatic Want List material given even half-reasonable performances.

But here the subject is Mussorgsky, and Kellner scores very highly on all accounts as far as I am concerned. His tone is ringing and pure, reminding me at times of a series of miniature Russian bells, and this is very appropriate in this most percussive of pieces, and one must know how to approach it. The clarity in this recording is amazing, and for a while I was gaining my old enthusiasm for the work back. Once the performance was over I lost it again, but at least Kellner provided, for a while, a resurrectional attitude that made the experience of hearing this piece in original guise a very satisfying one.

The other pieces make superb fillers, as you don't come across them too often. "Gnomus" is given in a premiere performance, taken from a copy of Mussorgsky's original manuscript showing his first thoughts, which amount to about 18 bars of increased length. *Pictures from Crimea* and the Three Piano Pieces are much earlier works, but nowhere near the inspiration and quality of *Pictures*. They are colorful and entertaining pieces, not unlike a host of so many other Romantic works of the time, well worth hearing but not mandatory by any means. But I find them excellent fillers to this worthy and wonderfully recorded disc. **Steven E. Ritter**