EIDE

"He could play in any major musical capital and win the enthusiastic approval of audiences"
Huntley Dent

"He has a way of getting inside the music to elucidate the extra-musical imagery behind the notes."
Jerry Dubins

"What really puts this version up amongst the greats is the "Scarbo," amongst the most purely musical on disc."
Colin Clarke

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A Pianist's Thoughts on Practice, Playing and Recording

BY PÅL EIDE

This article has come about in a rather unusual way. It marks the international release via—Amazon, iTunes, and Spotify—of my recordings and the appearance of a new CD, *Grey Clouds*, which features music by Liszt, Ravel, Debussy, and Stravinsky, on the Danish label CDKlassisk (cdk 1143). An interview was arranged for *Fanfare*, and I was pleased to hear that my interviewer was going to be Martin Anderson, since he was the first critic outside Denmark and Norway (I am Norwegian and live in Humlebæk, in Denmark) to write about my playing—even though on that occasion he was writing for *Klassisk Musikkmagasin* in Norway. I have not given many interviews (this would have been the first one in English), and have not been a teacher, either; I am not used to talking about music, and find it difficult, but I have been giving it some thought of late. And so I decided to write something about my musical life and ideas that might be the basis for the interview, or give Martin some ideas for questions—and when he received my text, he was at first startled, and then realized that there was little point in asking me to repeat *viva voce* what I had already written. He therefore offered to edit what I had sent him into an essay presenting my thoughts and experiences, and so that's how this article came about.

Since my debut concert almost 20 years ago, I have been kind of keeping a low profile, living a quiet life with my wife and three daughters. I have been playing recitals in Scandinavia every year, though, all the time having something to prepare, trying to develop as a musician and getting deeper into the music. I was quite satisfied with this way of life. I always feel that I can become a better musician; it takes a lifetime to understand music, as Mitsuko Uchida recently stated. Having a life in music is extremely important to me. I feel that I have a close contact to the music that is only getting deeper by the years. It is a great pleasure for me to be able to play any piano music I want, and I hope I bring it as much sensitivity as possible. I think now is the right time for me to start working internationally. For the first time I feel ready.

I don't like "clichéd" music or virtuoso "show off" music. Flashy scales up and down the piano are not for me. The period from late Romantic to modern tends to attract me more than the earlier periods. I have to admit I love a beautiful melody. I like the freedom, the expressivity, the dissonances, the complexity, and the unresolved harmonies of the period where the development of music is exploding in different directions, starting with the change from tonal to non-tonal music. But I find technical skill uninteresting in itself—it is only a musician's "weapon" to get closer to the deeper emotions hidden in the music. To get in close touch with this music, it needs full attention, something that is rare in the modern world, but I think it is important for people not to forget to immerse themselves in the arts; modern life is increasingly superficial. If you really get into music, it can give you an experience that enriches your life—and what is more important than that?

Musical background and studies

I started playing the piano quite late, when I was eight. It was quite easy for me: The technique came naturally and I had a natural instinct for the understanding of music and the sound of the piano. I had been listening to classical piano music on my own on my father's record player with big headphones from six years of age, listening to a collection of some of the greatest music of all time. I suspect that these experiences, in combination with my own talent, formed my musical understanding at an early stage. Listening to old records with my favorite pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff still gives me great inspiration. Rachmaninoff found the perfect balance. His "tone" is "singing," his timing is natural, his rubato has a perfect flow, and he has a complete control over every voice. The sound on

these old records is terrible, but that doesn't bother me at all, because the music hits me directly in my heart. Rachmaninoff is the only pianist who can bring tears to my eyes playing a simple melody.

When I was 11, a musician told me that I played like an old man, which I think was meant as a compliment, but I was not the kind who won the competitions. I didn't practice enough, was not trained effectively, wasn't the type who plays every note perfectly and whose playing everybody more or less likes. But I got positive attention from some important teachers in Scandinavia during my teenage years, taking part in a number of competitions for young pianists. These competitions made an important impression on me. It was a great inspiration to listen to all these young talented pianists playing great music for nine hours, while watching Edvard Munch's explosive sun on the back wall of the Oslo University's Great Hall (where the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded). But it is also strange to compete in music/art. There is a tendency for the most perfect performance to get the attention and not the most interesting artist and interpretation. It becomes more like a sporting event than an expression of art. There may also be problems of objectivity in such competitions, as the judges often know some of the participants' teachers. Of course, there were scandals, when the one everyone expected to win didn't get a prize. For me it was good to have these competitions to prepare for. From 1980 to 1988 I was picked out to play in the finals every year in the Norwegian *The Young Master Pianists*. But I still have nightmares that I am taking part in one of those competitions but have not prepared properly. Later I also enjoyed the attention of professors in Paris and Moscow, but I still had my doubts about my own abilities: Was my talent enough to become a concert pianist?

I had many different teachers, and all of them had an important influence on my development as a pianist and musician. My first teacher was Aase Prebensen in Kristiansand, Norway. She was a nice lady who taught me the importance of relaxing when playing the piano, which is essential, and she had a natural, simple approach to music. I chose to study in Copenhagen, which was very exciting, both because I was going abroad, and because my first teacher there, Tom Ernst, made me really understand a musical phrase and developed my technical skills to a high professional level—he was a great inspiration and the one who encouraged me to become a concert pianist.

I then had the opportunity to go to Moscow to be a pupil of Tatiana Nikolayeva, who was then around 70 and world famous. And what a lady! She looked completely like an old peasant grandmother—and then when she walked onstage and started to play Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto like a god! One couldn't believe one's ears! She was not there at the time of my arrival, but I had to play the Grieg Piano Concerto for a panel of all the professors at the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire. Nikolayeva was away on tour, but the other professors told her about my talent after she came back to Moscow, and when we met, she told me she wanted to go through almost all the piano repertoire with me. Of course, I was thrilled. One of her specialities was her "singing sound" on the piano, and she made me understand how the softest *pianissimo* can be more expressive than the strongest *fortissimo*.

I played the Shostakovich piano concertos with her—a particularly dear memory to me, as she told me that she played the Shostakovich pieces for the composer at his home even before they were published and premiered. Shostakovich had "discovered" her when she won the Bach Competition in her 20s, where everyone had to play a prelude and fugue by Bach. Shostakovich was head of the jury, and when they asked her which one of the 48 Preludes and Fugues she had chosen to play, she simply answered: "Please choose one for me!"

She had been giving a masterclass in Copenhagen where I first met her. On the first day she was playing on a Steinway, and the students were using an old Bösendorfer that was not as good. Every time she played something, her sound was fantastic, and when the students played, the sound was awful. The next day people were talking about this difference in sound quality. Nikolayeva happened to hear of it and asked for the pianos to be changed around, so that she was now playing on the old Bösendorfer. The result was that when Nikoloayeva played, it sounded great and when the students played, it sounded as terrible as the day before. She was away on tour most of the time and only a few months later, as I was on a concert tour to Switzerland myself, I read in a newspaper that she had died after a stroke hit her on stage at a concert in San Francisco. What a shock!

Back in Moscow I was introduced to one of Russia's most famous pianists, Naum Starkmann, who had been placed third in the first Tchaikovsky Competition (the one which Van Cliburn won).

In Russia he was considered one of the greatest pianists of the 20th century. He had been studying with the great Konstantin Igumnov, who had also been the teacher of Heinrich Neuhaus, and Starkmann was deeply loved by the Russian music audience. When I attended his class, he often started out playing the whole piece, saying: "You have to play like this!" It was a great inspiration to me, even though it was not easy to follow his advice!

Suddenly Russia was on the brink of a civil war. President Yeltsin used the army to attack the parliament building, very close to where I lived in a house for students studying at the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire. Heavy tanks were shooting at the White House—Moscow was the center of the news, directly on CNN. When the tanks fired at the White House, we watched it on CNN at the students' house. First we heard the sound of the detonations on the television, and then shortly after from outside the window because of the few hundred meters the sound had to travel. At some point the possibility of watching news or getting newspapers disappeared, and there were rumors that the army would go against Yeltsin. There was bombing and shooting in the streets, and snipers on the roofs. When I tried to go down the street to go to a restaurant together with some student friends, the soldiers lying behind sandbags shouted that we should get back inside.

My new professor, Naum Starkmann, was an old-school Russian pianist, and couldn't understand why I wouldn't walk the streets through Moscow in the night to go to my lessons with him. Once he told me: "Do you know that you have a concert tomorrow playing the Chopin Scherzo?" I didn't know. But I learned something about the Russian mentality. At the end of the year I played my very first recital in the Small Hall at the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire. The program was Scriabin's 24 Preludes and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Back in Copenhagen I entered the soloist class at the Royal Danish Academy of Music and had the spirited Spanish professor José Ribera for two years. With Ribera I worked a lot with rhythmic timing. An essential factor playing classical music is that your "rubato" has to be controlled all the time, even though it is influenced by your feelings. If you take too much time, you destroy the architecture of the piece and it falls into little pieces. Another way of putting it is "less is more," meaning that if you do less, the effect and expression are much stronger. I was getting ready for my debut concert with the "Waldstein" Sonata, *Gaspard de la nuit,* and Rachmaninoff Second Sonata, on November 5, 1997—the same date that Horowitz died, as I found out later. My debut was a success, with great reviews.

Performing in the Real World

Out in the real world, I didn't know anything about how to get a concert, and I was on my own. I was a shy young man, completely without business talent. Some difficult years went by, where I had to force myself to do a lot of paperwork, contacting small concert societies to try to earn some money, and I slowly managed to build up a concert career playing recitals, mostly in Scandinavia. I was stubborn and didn't compromise. I insisted on concentrating on developing as a soloist, playing the repertoire I preferred, and I didn't want to teach. For me teaching would take too much of my energy needed to perform as a soloist.

During these years I played many recitals, all the time continuing to develop as a musician, practicing in between performances—sometimes a lot, sometimes not so much, but I never gave in. When you play concerts like that year after year, sometimes just to be able to pay your bills, the pleasure of making music may get lost, and many times I thought about doing something normal. When playing concerts you have to play the same pieces several times a day for months, which is not always a pleasure, even though there will always be moments of inspiration. There is not much recognition, no prizes, no great opportunities to play with orchestras, and it can be difficult not to lose motivation. But it was there all the time—in the music, and in my secret dream one day to play a recital in Royal Albert Hall, or play great Romantic piano concertos with big orchestras.

I think experiences in life itself can develop a musician. Reading literature has been important to me, getting an insight into great writers and into the minds of the fictitious characters in their novels. And the life experiences one encounters in literature give an insight in the different aspects of life that one life cannot give, and inspiration to express myself in music. If you appreciate the arts, life is never boring.

At a point, I needed fresh inspiration, and called Jiří Hlinka in Oslo, a Czech professor who as a young pianist was predicted to have a great career ahead of him until he injured his arms from practicing and received the wrong medical treatment in Czechoslovakia. The doctors threatened to amputate his arms. He came to Norway, where he became the country's most successful piano teacher, having pupils such as Leif Ove Andsnes. Hlinka had been under the influence of Sviatoslav Richter, who had taken an interest in Hlinka as a young talent, and Hlinka in turn reminds me of Richter, both as a pianist and musician. I continued to take lessons with Jiří for years. Every time he put me through seven intense hours, interrupted only by him going outside for a five-minute cigar, I felt as if I could fly—his musicality and pianistic and pedagogic talent never stopped impressing me.

Once I played a recital in a big concert hall for 1,200 people. In the start of the concert in the middle of a Chopin ballade, the lights went out in the hall and onstage. Total darkness. Although I was startled, I somehow managed to finish the ballade in complete darkness—and it went down really well; people found it amusing and enjoyed listening in the dark. The technicians took about 15 minutes to fix the lights before I could continue playing, and it took me a little longer to "recover" during the rest of the concert. In fact, though, one has to be a little nervous to make an inspired performance—magical moments can only appear from this extra sensitivity. The adrenaline makes it possible to do things technically and musically that have never happened before!

At many of my concerts Mogens Wenzel Andreasen (b. 1934) takes part as a speaker, telling the audience stories about the music they are about to hear and about the composers. He is famous in Scandinavia for his 10 years' participation in the classical music TV quiz show *Kontrapunkt* and may be the person in Denmark with greatest knowledge of the history of classical music. He has written a number of books (eight published last year, a new personal record) and he gives 100 lectures a year on different subjects within classical music. (He has also translated 40 novels by Stephen King into Danish.)

I have learned much from my conversations with Mogens (always about classical music or literature) in buses, trains, planes, and hotel restaurants. We had 15 concert tours in Norway alone. Once we drove from Copenhagen in the morning, with a concert in Jutland in northern Denmark in the evening. Mogens was driving the car, since the soloist (me) had to relax and concentrate before the concert. After the concert there was a little party arranged by the music society. Late in the evening there was another one-hour drive, and since the soloist (still me) was tired after the concert, Mogens was again the driver. There was a thick fog, making it almost impossible to see anything, and the road was narrow and winding. Past midnight we arrived at our destination and I asked my brave driver: "Are you not tired?" Mogens looked at me as if he didn't understand the question and replied: "Tired? Absolutely not. But it has been an extremely interesting day!"

Recordings

I find the music by Franz Liszt from the 1880s particularly interesting. The period was an exciting one in European culture, and Liszt was one of the first artists to understand the currents of modern times. Busoni called Liszt "The master of freedom." Liszt's works had a great influence on later music, also film and jazz genres. When I heard Liszt's *Nuages gris* in Stanley Kubrik's film *Eyes Wide Shut*, in the scene where a corpse of a dead woman is dragged out from the wall at the morgue, it struck me that it was modern music.

With my CD *Grey Clouds* I wish to focus on the astonishing development from the Romantic period to what we call modern music. Franz Liszt is famous for being the greatest piano virtuoso of all time, and for reforming piano technique, but in his last years he wrote some calm and mysterious pieces in which he makes the sense of major and minor disappear. There is no longer a central key, and the music becomes more unpredictable. He uses the augmented triad as a basis and this gives associations to later Impressionism with whole-tone scales. There is dissonance and unresolved harmony. In particular the piece *Nuages gris*—or *Grey Clouds*, the title of my new recording—may be seen as a basis for later Impressionistic masterpieces by Debussy and Ravel. It also inspired Stravinsky, who introduced two tonalities at the same time, combined with extreme rhythms, and is even today, more than 100 years later, considered a "modern" composer by many. With this CD I hope to create a kind of "revolutionary symphony," where one can hear the works as movements in

a wider context while immersing in the music itself, and get a sense of how the composers influence one another, creating a new kind of music, or as Scriabin would have said, "a new world."

I started dreaming about playing Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* and Stravinsky's *Three Pieces from Petrushka* as a young man, but not because of the technical challenge—I was caught by the music itself. This music can almost hypnotize me. I was uncertain if I could manage, but having played *Gaspard* at my debut with success, I knew I could play anything. *Petrushka* was a challenge, however, as the technique is different from any other piece I have played, and the cost was one year of struggle with injured fingers before recording.

I always try to feel the music inside and let it come out in a natural way, not disturbing the natural flow of it, almost as if it is playing itself. Of course it is colored by my mind and feelings. It is a very delicate balance: Sometimes very tiny details can destroy the beautiful lines and "architecture" of the music. With a non-technical approach to these demanding pieces I tried to make a performance with a different sound from earlier recordings—almost dreamlike, and also different from my own first CD, *Listen!*.

The sound of a tone is important to me. I try to make every tone sound beautiful, no matter how softly or strongly it is played. The technical secret to do this is very simple—the maximum possible amount of relaxation in and between the attack of the keyboard.

Recording in Hamburg

I love to listen to old recordings. When artists used to have to play everything in one take, before technical developments made editing possible, recordings were more organic, more like a concert, and more touching—unlike typical modern recordings, where hundreds of small edits are put together to make everything perfect. So when I made these recordings, it was important to me to make it sound more like a live event.

I was therefore thrilled to meet my producer Helmut Burk at a concert in Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, in Humlebæk, the small village close to Copenhagen, where I live. Helmut arranged recording sessions for both my CDs in the Friedrich-Ebert-Halle in Hamburg, where he has made many recordings for Deutsche Grammophon. He has recorded legendary pianists such as Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, Ivo Pogorelich, Krystian Zimerman, and Maria João Pires. I played through all the pieces while Burk listened in a side room. Sometimes, after I had been playing for a long time, I wondered if he was still there, if he had gone home, or perhaps had fallen asleep. But every time I talked to him through the microphones, his calm voice answered: "Don't worry, I'm still listening!"

Making these recordings made me worry: Will my performance be able to compete with recordings of great pianists of the past? It felt like a concert that was going on for three days, and when I had played the last tone, I immediately got a stomach ache. It might be difficult for people to understand, but to create a "great" performance, extreme energy is needed. This is not something that you can control; it happens in the moment. When I practice, there are some days where I simply don't have the energy. You have to be able to "give everything" in the right moment. I can't really understand how it is possible for me to play many of the difficult passages in these pieces, and I just have to trust my motor memory and technical talent. There are so many notes that the only way it can be done is by entering some kind of meditational state where you are confident that you can do it and just give yourself to it. It can almost feel as if you are leaving your own body, becoming one with the music, the music playing itself. In doing this, you are balancing on a fine edge. When I listen to my own recordings, I almost can't believe that it is me playing. But at the same time it is as if my soul has left me and gone into the music.

GREY CLOUDS • Pål Eide (pn) • CDKLASSISK 1143 (77:34)

LISZT ***La lugubre gondola I*** **(1882).** ***La lugubre gondola II*** **(1885).** ***Nuages gris. Consolation*** **No. 3. RAVEL** ***Gaspard de la nuit.*** **DEBUSSY** ***Images:*** *Reflets dans l'eau.* ***Préludes:*** *La cathédrale engloutie; Feux d'artifice.* ***Suite bergamasque:*** *Clair de lune.* **STRAVINSKY** ***3 Movements from Petrushka***

Norwegian-born pianist Pål Eide, now resident in Denmark, studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Music and at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow, the latter with Tatiana

Nikolayeva. As he states, his disc is conceived as a kind of "revolutionary symphony." It's a nice idea to focus on the move from the Romantic period to the 20th century, as manifested in the music of Debussy and Stravinsky. The "symphony" idea means that one hears the individual movements, be they by Liszt, Ravel, Debussy, or Stravinsky, as a part of a greater trajectory, a greater whole, while simultaneously tracking the composers' influences on one another.

It is completely fitting, therefore, that the recital opens with late Liszt, *La lugubre gondola* I and II, a pair of elusive, cryptic pieces that create a bridge between worlds. Eide's *La lugubre gondola* I is dark, but he commendably shies away from drenching it in pedal, which gives it a sort of macabre fragility. The second piece is even more skeletal, again dry but with a tremendous sense of individual voices. Intriguingly, Eide also finds a lot of the more "Romantic" gestures of Liszt here in this more extended piece; the pull of the past is heard alongside the beckonings of the mysterious future. The disc itself is named after *Nuages gris*, an (in)famous late piece in which tonality and its function are questioned at every turn. Again, Eide uses little pedal for the ominous tremolandos, yet he finds the acute ache of harmonic suspension in the left-hand accompaniment figure.

The shift to Impressionism does not seem such a leap in this context. The impeccably delivered opening to "Ondine" from Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* is bathed in glinting light and enshrouded by a spider's web of delicacy. Eide creates a magical sheen; melodies are beautifully done, and the movement moves to a climax naturally, although the climax itself is slightly disappointing, as Eide just misses the ecstasy. Yet, in compensation, his way with a pedalled single line around six minutes in is up there with the best (one thinks immediately of Argerich, Aimard, and Pogorelich as representing the highest echelon of recordings of this work.) The tolling of "Le gibet" benefits from Eide's projection of stillness. There is no sense whatsoever of hurrying at any point in this movement, and chords are beautifully weighted throughout. What really puts this version up amongst the greats is the "Scarbo," amongst the most purely musical on disc. A huge amount of thought has clearly gone into this reading, not least in terms of elucidation of texture.

The quartet of Debussy pieces is thoughtfully done, in particular Eide's linking of the spaced chords of "Reflets dans l'eau" to the opening chords of "La cathédrale engloutie." This sunken cathedral finds time suspended, the tolling of its bells a mere watery memory; temporal flow is replaced by the timeless flux of water, perhaps. The climax is well sculpted, with the low Cs nicely resonant. Debussy's fireworks flit beautifully, with technique hardly a consideration; yet again it is the reflective moment (the quotation of the *Marseillaise*) that impresses most. The famous "Clair de lune" is thoughtful and magical at the same time.

The Stravinsky comes up against huge competition, perhaps most notoriously in the shape of the imposing Pollini (DG), but there is also Yuja Wang to consider (also on DG), while Kissin (RCA/Sony) has his admirers. To compound matters, Daniil Trifonov gave an unforgettable live performance of the *Three Movements from Petrushka* at London's Barbican Centre in January this year, and one hopes this is the precursor to a recording. Eide's reading of the "Russian Dance" has some slowings not indicated in the score (around 1:05, and around 1:51 he slows a lot earlier than indicated), and there are a couple of clumsy-sounding moments. That said, his reading of the *poco accelerando* and the comma (*Luftpause*) between measures at 2:05 is beautifully done: Again, it is the lyric side that triumphs, a side that works particularly well in the central "Chez Pétrouchka." The filigree detail of the *Andantino* of this movement, too, is most moving. Commendably, too, Eide makes the "cadenza" sounds as such, a quasi-improvisatory exploration of Stravinskian musical space. The infamous "La semaine grasse" is well realized, with the various dances excellently characterized; and while the final pages demonstrate some sense of strain (also a middle line just before the end, a horn solo in the orchestral version, gets rather buried in the texture), this remains a fine version.

The Liszt *Consolation* comes across in context as an encore, and a much needed one. It dissipates the frenetic energy of the Stravinsky while reminding us of just how sweet a tone Eide can coax from his instrument. The tissue delicacy of the piece's end almost enables us to hear it anew, and with such a famous piece, that really is saying something.

This is a fascinating recital, well recorded (in the Friedrich-Ebert-Halle, Hamburg) and delivered. Pål Eide is clearly a sensitive, questing soul. **Colin Clarke**

Middle age can be cruel or kind to virtuoso pianists, depending on whether their artistry has matured beyond the stage of early dazzle. Norwegian pianist Pål Eide, born in 1970, falls on the right side in this case, delivering two of the most difficult display pieces from the 20th century, Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* and Stravinsky's *Three Movements from Petrushka*, with a degree of musical insight that some far more famous names would envy. As a reviewer, I come across CDs that serve, as this one does, to introduce the artist to a wider public, and as calling cards they generally lean heavily on technique—too heavily, if you're hoping to find musicality. There's no such worry with Eide, who approaches these scores, not with the attitude of "See what I can do" but rather "Listen to what I'm thinking and feeling."

In my mind I categorize pianists I'm meeting for the first time as poets, personalities, or powerhouses. Does sensitivity, grandeur, or individuality stand out? My shorthand is simplistic, I know, and some pianists blur the lines. For example, Eide is so powerful in the sonorous climaxes of Debussy's *La cathédrale engloutie* that the reading is Lisztian in its impact—the aim isn't delicate atmospherics. The pianist's personal side comes out in a piece like "Le gibet" from Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*, which depicts a tolling bell in the background as a corpse swings from a gibbet outlined in the sunset. Most pianists emphasize how absolutely even they can make the little bell sound, akin to Liszt's *La campanella*. Eide doesn't—he plays in a mood of self-reflection, surrounding the gruesome scene with somber regret. It's a lovely change from the norm, as is all of his *Gaspard*, which I found one of the highlights of the recital. For once, the rippling water in "Ondine" actually sounds musical.

The collection's title, *Grey Clouds*, is a translation of Liszt's *Nuages gris*, a work that's often programmed, as here, with *La lugubre gondola* to illustrate how Liszt abandoned fulsome Romantic harmonies for something more ambiguous and spare, paving the way for a future where Debussy and Scriabin became possible. Eide's recital is far from grey—it's a satisfying gathering of influences on the French-Russian axis, with Liszt as the original revolutionary. Every reading is marked by an assured, confident touch and a level of consideration that serves the music rather than the performer's fingerwork. Scanning an online bio, one sees that Eide began the piano at eight and was a competition finalist from age 10. He studied in Copenhagen and Moscow; his current residence is in Denmark. It appears that he has focused his concert career in Scandinavia, but on the evidence of this CD he could play in any major musical capital and win the enthusiastic approval of audiences. My favorite kind of pianist is a seasoned interpreter who draws us inside the music's emotional meaning, as Nelson Freire and Leon Fleisher increasingly did as they matured. Eide falls into the same category and is warmly recommended. The recorded sound from Friedrich-Ebert Hall in Hamburg is impressively full and lifelike. Slimline cardboard packaging. **Huntley Dent**

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At 47, Norwegian pianist Pål Eide, who makes his home with his wife and three daughters in Denmark, is only now coming into his own on record. This is only his second commercial release. His first was an album titled *Listen!*, containing works by Bach, Rachmaninoff, Arne Nordheim, and Jesper Koch. It was reviewed for *Classical Music* magazine by *Fanfare*'s Martin Anderson, who called Eide "a pianist of a very high order." I haven't heard that earlier CD, but based on this new one, I can certainly agree with Anderson's conclusion; Eide is indeed a pianist to take note of.

For his album titled *Grey Clouds* (from Liszt's *Nuages gris*), Eide has chosen a program of more familiar mainstream works this time, but no less technically demanding. Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*, in fact, is reputed to be one of the most difficult works for solo piano ever written—at least it was at the time of its composition. I suspect that any number of later 20th-century works pose even greater technical difficulties for the player.

Genesis of Liszt's two "sad gondola" pieces is well documented but still a little confusing. Visiting Wagner in Venice towards the end of 1882, Liszt had a premonition of Wagner's approaching death. The piece, which came to be known as *La lugubre gondola I* in 4/4 time, was completed in December of that year, while Wagner was still alive. I don't know if Liszt played the piece for Wagner, or if he did, whether Wagner appreciated being commemorated before he was dead and

buried. In any case, Wagner did go to his grave two months later, in February 1883, at which point, Liszt added a 20-bar coda to the original piece, which temporarily came to be known as *La lugubre gondola II*. But here's where the canal waters get muddy, for in 1885, Liszt composed an almost entirely new version of the piece in 6/8 time, which remained unpublished until 1927. When it finally did see print, it appeared with the title *La lugubre gondola I*, while the earlier work was designated *La lugubre gondola II*. I can tell you from following the scores online that the piece identified on the first track of the disc as *La lugubre gondola I* is indeed the 6/8 version, which comports with the back-titling described above; while the piece identified on the second track of the disc as *La lugubre gondola II* is the 4/4 version, which, once again, is consistent with the foregoing.

As far as I'm aware, there are no second or third versions of Liszt's *Nuages gris* to confound us. The piece dates from 1881 and is generally regarded as one of the composer's most daring and adventurous experiments. Despite its brevity of less than three and a half minutes, and its ease of execution, the piece tests the outer limits of common harmonic practice in ways that did not go unnoticed by later 20th-century composers. While the piece is not technically atonal, Liszt relies heavily on augmented chords—such as F-A-C♯ and C-E-G♯—and the avoidance of cadential resolutions to create the impression of constant shapeshifting, which is a prominent feature of clouds. The effect is similar to music based on the whole-tone scale in which all triads are augmented and all chords, by definition, are dissonant, thus denying resolution. This makes Liszt among the earliest composers to dabble in Impressionism and the beclouding, if you'll forgive the pun, of tonality that the whole-tone scale produces.

Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* has become such a repertoire staple it hardly needs any introduction. I will say this about it though: Ravel is said to have intended the last of its three movements, "Scarbo," as a "there, take that" technical challenge to Balakirev's *Islamey*. Just for fun, I watched YouTube clips of both pieces, and although I'm not able to say which of the two works is technically and physically more demanding, I can say that Ravel's composition strikes me as taking greater ad-

vantage of the modern piano's capabilities, particularly of the improved escapement mechanism which allows for very rapid repetitions on the same note. But that's only one of the weapons in Ravel's arsenal of lethal munitions. Others include lightning-fast arpreggios in contrary motion, glissandos on the black keys (way more difficult than the more common white-key glissandos), and the interweaving of melody and harmony between the two hands in such a way that the effect of a third hand is created. Famed pianist Alfred Cortot called the composition "one of the most astonishing examples of instrumental ingenuity ever contrived."

Islamey strikes me as a culmination of the grand Romantic tradition of Liszt, Alkan, and the great Russian virtuoso pianists at the end of the 19th century. Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* of 1909 seems less of a summing up than of something new. The imagery of the Aloysius Bertrand poems Ravel sets and the music he conjures to portray them is surreal, nightmarish, hallucinatory, and horrific. There's more than a little of *Gaspard de la nuit* in Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* of three years later (1912).

Despite its extreme difficulties, or perhaps because of them, pianists in great numbers have risked reputations and careers to perform and record the work. Few have managed to deliver the goods with the hair-raising effect Martha Argerich achieved in her 1974 recording of the piece for Deutsche Grammophon. But there have been other brilliant versions as well by Vladimir Ashkenazy, and more recently by Steven Osborne and Yevgeny Sudbin. I have to admit, though, that still my all-time favorite, next to Argerich, is a recording by Cécile Ousset on an Ars Vivendi CD that is still available at Amazon.

Pål Eide, on the disc at hand, gives the two ladies a run for their money, demonstrating as well as they do that there is more to *Gaspard de la nuit* than making a meal of its technical difficulties. Eide pays special attention to the fantastical aspects of the piece, putting real faces on the characters of Ravel's tone poems, grotesque and hideous as those faces may be. Some of Ravel's well-known pieces—*La valse* and *Tzigane*, for example—are corrosive caricatures of popular 19th-century models, and *Gaspard de la nuit* falls into that category, its precedent model being a piano work like Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Originally composed in the year or so in between *Gaspard de la nuit* and Schoenberg's aforementioned *Pierrot Lunaire* is Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, and it too sets forth a nightmarish, surreal scenario in which live human dancers playing the roles of puppets act out a story of love, rejection, jealousy, and murder. It's interesting that so many musical works, all composed within this same timeframe, seem obsessed with the gruesome and the grotesque. Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* of 1911–12 is another one. Are these really just the decaying corpses of 19th-century Romanticism?

In 1921, Stravinsky extracted three movements from his ballet and arranged them for piano, specifically for his friend Arthur Rubinstein. I don't know why that strikes me as funny, but it does; I guess because the piece is considered to be almost as difficult, if not equally so, as *Gaspard de la nuit*, with "wild and rapid jumps which span over two octaves, complex polyrhythms, extremely fast scales, multiple glissandos, and tremolos," and Rubinstein, great artist and musician that he was, was not particularly acclaimed for his spectacular technique. One comes to find out, though, that in his early career Rubinstein was quite a champion of Stravinsky's music, performing even his own transcriptions of the Russian composer's orchestral works for audiences around the world. Be that as it may, though I could be wrong, I don't believe Rubinstein ever recorded Stravinsky's *Three Movements from Petrushka* or the composer's *Piano-Rag-Music*, which was also written for Rubinstein but premiered by José Iturbi.

Pål Eide brings all of his technical and musical talent to bear in the Stravinsky, as he does in the familiar pieces by Debussy, Liszt, and Ravel. What I think impresses me most about Eide is that while he has chosen for his recital some of the most technically difficult pieces in the solo piano literature, which he executes with dazzling virtuosity, his artistry lies as much in his head and his heart as it does in his fingers. He has a way of getting inside the music to elucidate the extra-musical imagery behind the notes; and make no mistake, these are all pieces of a programmatic and/or Impressionistic nature that call for storytelling and scene-setting. Eide proves himself a tremendously gifted graphic artist who traces his designs on the keyboard of a piano in the medium of music.
Jerry Dubins