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The classic 100 piano

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**Publication details**

The Classic 100 Piano (2 Vols, 8 CDs)
Various artists
ABC Classics 476 7203 & 476 7204

A follow-up to the ABC Classics label’s The Classic 100 (2002) which featured the 100 most popular classical pieces over all genres, The Classic 100 Piano is a compilation of solo piano works chosen through an ABC Classic FM survey. Listeners voted for their favourite solo piano works (or, in the case of larger scale works, their favourite movements) and indicated why they made their choices.

I chose to review this collection of CDs because I am interested in what makes a classical piano piece popular. For a period in the late 1970s when I held down a piano bar gig in the Sydney Hilton with the unusual brief to play only classical pieces, I was forced to reflect on likely audience requests to ensure having a copy on hand of the works I hadn’t memorised. I concluded then (and this collection confirms my thesis) that anything with a romantically descriptive title was likely to be popular. It is no surprise that the “Moonlight” sonata tops the list here, and that most of Beethoven’s other works with nicknames also get a guernsey (Pathétique, Für Elise, Appassionata, Wallstein, Hammerklavier, The Tempest, Les Adieux).

Only two Australian works make the cut: Grainger’s clog dance, Handel in the Strand, and Sculthorpe’s wistful Left Bank Waltz. The latter tune was composed for a children’s adventure film score in 1962. No doubt the original scoring for harmonica inspired Sculthorpe to choose this appealing title when transcribing it for piano. There are only five other composers with works from the second half of the twentieth century: John Cage, Michael Nyman, Keith Jarrett, Howard Blake and Arvo Pärt. In the CD booklet ABC Classic FM program director John Crawford explains the inclusion of Cage’s seminal and silent 4’33” (1952) by suggesting a possible conspiratorial block vote. One wonders what would have eventuated if a similarly sized consortium of cultists had mobilised to vote for Annea Lockwood’s Piano Burning.

Despite the lack of Australian and living composers there is an excellent representation of Australian pianists on the project. Of these, Roger Woodward, Stephanie McCallum, Isador Goodman, Gerard Willems and David Stanhope share the bulk of the credits.

It is not possible to comment critically on all hundred tracks so I have opted to discuss briefly the top ten. Gerard Willem’s stodgy live recording of the “Moonlight” sonata has disturbing clinking sounds in the background (the bling bling of a well-healed audience perhaps). Surely for the lead track the producers could have opted for a more vibrant rendition and a more pristine recording. Glen Gould gives a slow and lifeless interpretation of the Aria from Bach’s Goldberg Variations (with typical intermittent vocalisations). The fast section of Roger Woodward’s interpretation of Debussy’s Clair de Lune is somewhat laboured and has a minor slip-up in bar 38. Stephanie McCallum inserts a disturbing forte emphasis in the accompanying chords of bars 9-12 and bars 48-51 of Satie’s Gymnopédie No. 1. Radu Lupu gives a restrained, moving and deeply resonant performance of the second movement of Beethoven’s Pathétique (although his
heavy breathing and sighing is off-putting). I would prefer a more effortless fluidity in the accompanying texture of Woodward’s playing of Schubert’s Impromptu in G-flat major. Stephanie McCallum and Kevin Hunt present a lively and playful approach to the famous duet “Chopsticks” (by de Lulli). It’s unsettling to hear Michael Kieran Harvey play something as uncomplicated and un-virtuosic as Bach’s Prelude in C major (and thus you wonder if he could have done better with this specially commissioned recording). Olivier Cazal gives a brilliant performance of movement IV of Schubert’s Piano Sonata No 21 (and if it weren’t for a single cough about half way through one wouldn’t suspect it was a live recording). Claudio Arrau’s spirited “historic recording” of the opening movement of Beethoven’s “Appassionata” sonata is technically uneven and the piano action rattles badly on some of the tremolos.

As the top ten suggests, the mixture of live, studio, historic, recent and newly commissioned recordings is bound to make this large collection an uneven one, but its great variety of approaches to recording the standard repertoire also makes it critically interesting for aficionados of piano music. I found myself being drawn more to the bottom 40 than the top 40. My favourite track in the package comes in at No 100: Stephanie McCallum’s mysterious interpretation of Arvo Pärt’s Für Alina.