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Martin Cullingford's pick of the finest recordings from this month's reviews

RECORDING OF THE MONTH

BERSA Complete Piano Music Vol 1

Goran Filipec *pf*

Grand Piano

Author: Jed Distler

Until this disc arrived for review, my only exposure to the Croatian composer Blagoje Bersa (1873–1934) was through his exuberant, breathtakingly orchestrated tone poem *Sunčana polja* ('Sunny Fields'). So where has his amazing piano music been hiding all these years? It's colourful, unabashedly virtuoso and quite substantial.

The 1897 Second Sonata in one continuous movement might be described as Strauss's confidently soaring melodies and Rimsky-Korsakov's exoticism served up by Rachmaninov, Busoni and Medtner jostling for room on the piano bench. Much of *Na žalu* ('At the Strand') consists of ravishing and slithering chords anchored by a D flat pedal point, while the lyrically oriented *Notturmo* and *Ora triste* sometimes hint at Spanish Impressionism, especially in the climactic outbursts. As the booklet note suggests, the *Fantaisie-Improptu* is clearly inspired by Liszt, although I'd call it Liszt on steroids, just as the *Bagatella*, Op 16, belies its title in regard to its seven-minute length and meaty piano-writing.

While the triptych *Po načinu starih* ('In the Old Way') refers to older, less harmonically involved styles, Bersa's tangy melodic twists and turns are like pinches of mint in a vanilla pudding. The concluding work, a nine minute *Marcia trionfale*, is deceptively titled. It's not a march but a relentless invasion of octaves in all directions, save for a few windows of respite that allow the pianist to gather up strength and reload the ammunition.

If I haven't yet mentioned Goran Filipec's performances it's because he basically left me stunned and speechless from the first notes, and I'm still recovering! This pianist commands a transcendental technique and possesses an unflappable sonority that refuses to splinter, notwithstanding Bersa's thickest onslaughts. He unleashes shattering *fortissimos* that never lapse into banging and conveys the kind of textural diversity needed to bring this composer's demanding keyboard idiom to life. Grand Piano's vibrant sound does both pianist and composer ample justice. I cannot recommend this release highly enough and, needless to say, I look forward to Vol 2.



BERSA Complete Piano Music Vol 1

Piano Sonata No 2

At the Strand

Notturmo

Ora Triste

Fantaisie-Improptu

Ballabile

Bagatella

In the Old Way: Airs de Ballet

Marcia Trionfale