

CLARE HAMMOND

STUDY GROUP

If you think piano studies are dry and academic, think again. On her new solo recital disc, Clare Hammond offers a survey of the piano étude from 1897 to 2003, and dry it's not. Jeremy Nicholas reports

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I think one of the reasons that études are not done more often is because people often associate the genre with technical exercises and it's all a bit dry.' So says Clare Hammond, rapidly making a name for herself as a champion of late 20th and 21st-century music. In recent years, the Cambridge-educated pianist (she gained a double first in music before completing a doctorate on 20th-century left-hand piano concertos) has given premieres of works by Robert Saxton, Edwin Roxburgh, John McCabe, Arlene Sierra and Kenneth Hesketh. Later this year she will give the first performance of a new concerto for trumpet and piano by Geoffrey Gordon with Simon Desbruslais. And her latest recording (for BIS) features the six Piano Études by the South Korean composer Unsuk Chin (born 1961). They form the centrepiece of her latest typically adventurous recording, a survey of the étude genre.

'One of the reasons I wanted to do this disc was because I was drawn to the études by Unsuk Chin,' she says. 'They were extremely difficult to learn and it was quite a strain to get them under my fingers, but I was really fascinated by the way she uses the piano and by the imaginative timbres, coloration and figurations she gets out of the instrument. I'd obviously done the Chopin and Liszt études when I was growing up but I was quite intrigued to see how this genre had been reinterpreted for the modern age. I was keen to record the Chin studies and then looked for repertoire that was suitable to go alongside them.'

Her first choice was Szymanowski's 12 Studies, Op 33, written in 1916, which have some affinity with Debussy's Études composed the previous year. 'I'd already done the Szymanowski set, which complement the Chin very musically. They have quite a mercurial feel to them, they're very short and brief and they fleet across the keyboard in a similar way to the Chin. Then I came across the études by Sergei Lyapunov that were written right at the turn of the 20th century and are very high romantic and passionate.'

His 12 Études d'exécution transcendante are modelled on Liszt's set of the same title – indeed, Lyapunov's intention was to complete the tonalities of Liszt's studies using the remaining sharp keys – and are dedi-

cated to the memory of Liszt. Hammond chose three for her recording: Nos 4 *Térek* (a portrayal of the River Terek), 5 *Nuit d'été* and 6 *Tempête*. 'They are the kind I always wanted to play as a teenager but could never get my fingers around,' admits Hammond. 'They are technically demanding but share a number of the same figurations as Rachmaninov, though Lyapunov uses more enharmonic twists than you might expect and that creates more unusual patterns. In terms of learning them there were a lot of patterns that were already under my hands from other composers, whereas the Chin, for example, are written in such an original way that I couldn't map any patterns from other composers – so they took much longer to learn because there's that disjunction between her style and what's gone before.'

'The closest point of comparison is the studies by Ligeti. Chin studied with him for three years in Hamburg in the eighties. She uses layers in much the same way. There are lots of these repetitive figurations throughout the studies that are similar to Ligeti but to my ear they seem slightly more reckless. They explode sometimes! They are more unpredictable.'

Finally, Clare Hammond selected the *Five Études in Different Intervals*, Op 68 (1992) by Nikolai Kapustin. 'These are studies from the other end of the 20th century which I was completely blown away by,' Hammond enthuses. 'They're great fun in that they combine classical style with jazz. They provide a really tremendous finale to the disc.'

Clare Hammond's *Etude* (BIS 2004) is a Hybrid Super Audio CD which can be played in Stereo (CD and SACD) as well as in 5.0 Surround sound (SACD)



◀ Contemporary champion: Clare Hammond