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Silvestrov: *Silent Songs* album review – meditative and yearning music from Ukraine’s leading composer

Baritone Konstantin Krimmel and pianist H el ene Grimaud perform with deeply felt eloquence



Classical pianist H el ene Grimaud is ‘of the top rank’ © Mat Hennek

Richard Fairman 3 HOURS AGO



One year ago, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Valentin Silvestrov fled Kyiv with help from friends to take refuge in Berlin, accompanied by his daughter and granddaughter. He celebrated his 85th birthday there last September.

The anniversary of the invasion has spurred renewed activity in the promotion of charity concerts in aid of Ukraine. As the leading Ukrainian composer of the postwar era, Silvestrov has been a frequent presence on concert programmes over the past year and this disc comes from a live Berlin performance in 2022.

Silent Songs includes half of the 24 songs that Silvestrov wrote for a collection of the same name in 1977. The work marked an important turning point in the composer’s career as he broke away from the avant-garde style that had dominated his music up to then, in defiance of Soviet strictures, and turned to more traditional forms.



Silvestrov has called the songs “silence set to music”. In setting texts by classic poets — the selection here includes Pushkin, Mandelstam and Keats and Shelley in Russian translations — he employed only the most modest musical means, saying that “the tools of compositional technique work here in the secret, the invisible, the inaudible”.

The songs are predominantly on the slow side, meditative, nostalgic, sometimes yearning, with echoes of Tchaikovsky. Baritone Konstantin Krimmel is ideally plangent of tone, capturing the music’s essential simplicity, and in H el ene Grimaud he has a pianist of the top rank to make Silvestrov’s accompaniments sing with deeply felt eloquence.

★★★★☆

*‘Silvestrov: *Silent Songs*’ is released by DG*