

# GRAMOPHONE

## US & CANADA SOUNDS OF AMERICA

RECORDINGS & EVENTS *A special eight-page section for readers in the US and Canada*

GRAMOPHONE *talks to...*

### Kimiko Ishizaka

The German-Japanese pianist on her *Well-Tempered Clavier* recording

**Prior to recording *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1* and, before that, the *Goldbergs*, you weren't playing much...**

I had been a chamber musician with my two brothers in Germany. We had a good career but I felt I needed a new beginning. I wanted to do sports competitively so, when I was 25, I started powerlifting and then weightlifting. I trained a huge amount and came second at the German Nationals. I'm still proud of that.

**How did you come to start playing again?**

I kept practising the entire time, even though I didn't have a lot of public performances, and a true miracle happened: I discovered a new piano technique. In my early 20s, I had very thin arms – I couldn't get a beautiful sound out of the piano and I got very tired playing, say, two Chopin études in a row. As I got stronger, I found a way of using my shoulders, arms and back to produce the sound. These days, I only use my fingers for support.

**Around 400 fans contributed to your *Goldbergs* recording, which you gave away...**

I was 30 when I discovered Bach through the *Goldberg Variations* but, although I was playing

better than I ever had, I was only playing in very small concerts. I decided that by sharing this music online, for free, people might start hiring me to play on stage again.

**Some 1000 fans contributed to your *Well-Tempered Clavier* recording...**

I've raised the bar with everything this time around, so we needed more funding. You can pay for it or not; on Bandcamp, for example, people can listen to it for free but actually it turns out that every fourth or fifth person likes it so much that they pay for it.

**How did you prepare for this recording?**

I spent nearly the whole first year approaching the pieces at my desk rather than at the piano. I linked everything back to the theme in the fugue, and then I learned how the fugues were related to the preludes – I believe they always are. The next step was finding a way of doing my articulations so that the link became apparent to the listener.

**You practise in the dark...**

I know I listen to myself better. Because of the way I shape the phrases with my arms and



shoulders, I get a physical feeling for what I'm doing, and the dark is completely distraction-free for me. I do keep a flashlight next to the piano in case I forget something, though.

**You omit the sustaining pedal in your Bach...**

Regardless of how many 'voices' there are, each has to have its own articulation. I realised that as soon as I put my foot down, even for a second, I would disturb something that was happening in one of the other voices. So I found a way of playing *legato* without the pedal.

**Do you still lift weights?**

As long as I aim to play the piano at my present level, I will keep training. I have 265lb of weights in my living room, and that's where I go when I'm done practising for the day.

### JS Bach

*Das wohltemperirte Clavier, Book 1, BWV846-869*

Kimiko Ishizaka *pf*

Navona © 2 NV5993 (108' • DDD)



The fact that Kimiko Ishizaka is an award-winning weightlifter might not make her an obvious candidate to honour some of Bach's most transcendent music. But once her recording of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* Book 1 enters your ears, it's evident she's up to this weighty assignment. Ishizaka plays the

24 preludes and fugues with impeccable taste and technique, finding many levels of musical meaning even as she brings utmost clarity to the multiplicity of textures.

She performs on a Bösendorfer 280, an instrument that can swallow Bach whole if the artist doesn't have exceptional control of a nine-foot concert grand. Ishizaka avoids simulating a harpsichord, unlike some pianists in these pieces, but she also never comes across as a fire-breathing virtuoso. She scales her Bach to the rhythmic, structural and sonic needs of the music, without touching the sustaining pedal. Her articulation runs the sensitive gamut from cushioned to biting crisp.

It is in the fugues where Ishizaka goes furthest in demonstrating how intimate she has become with Bach. Each line has a transparent place in the scheme of unfolding things, and the pianist seems to take enormous pleasure in weaving together all of the miraculous strands.

In a note in the booklet, Ishizaka says she practises 'almost exclusively in total darkness', an environment that helps her 'become the listener instead of the pianist'. However she achieves her goal, Ishizaka plays these compact monuments with intense and shapely finesse. Playing in darkness has led her to illuminating views of Bach.

Donald Rosenberg