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# ARG

## American Record Guide



RCA Reissues  
Fritz Reiner Recordings

**MUSSORGSKY (transcribed by YAMASHITA): *Pictures at an Exhibition***

Kazuhito Yamashita, guitar  
RCA ARC-4203 (digital), \$11.98

Kazuhito Yamashita is an astonishing guitarist. He demonstrated that on his earlier audiophile album, *Romance de Amor* (RCA RDCE-8), which included works by Sor, and Benjamin Britten's *Nocturnal, Op. 70*. Here he is again with a tour de force production of *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

The emphasis must be on the playing of Yamashita and on the sound quality of this digital record, rather than on the musical value of the performance. This is a work that does not transcribe well for the guitar, and this difficulty is made more pronounced by an attempt to make the guitar sound as large as a full orchestra.

Not that the performance is without its attractions, especially in the quieter moments such as the delicate promenade after *Bydlo* and the *Con mortuis in lingua mortua* after the *Catacombs*. But, musically, larger-scaled movements, especially *The Great Gate at Kiev*, are unfortunately grotesque because of the attempt to inflate the sound of the guitar. I have to wonder how this whole performance would sound in a concert hall. This seems to be a performance that is very much a creation of the recording studio.

On the other hand, it cannot be stated too strongly that Yamashita displays his astonishing virtuosity in every measure of the music, so that there is a strong element of the circus act to the performance. This is not a put-down. There is a long and honorable tradition of virtuoso performance for its own sake and this record certainly succeeds on that ground.

The record seems to have been issued to show off the digital recording process. By far the longest notes, contained on an insert, are a description of the wonders of digital recording written by John Pfeiffer. Unfortunately for RCA, it is in direct competition with itself, since Yamashita's other recording is a direct-to-disc that seems to have been recorded in the same hall, with the same engineer, using some of the same equipment. A comparison of the two records is most instructive.

This new digital record is more analytical and cold, the mid-range sounding slightly glassy—the placement of the microphones appears to have been made to enlarge the size of the guitar. This is further enhanced by the fact that this record is cut at a high level. Thus for those unable to make comparisons, it will appear to have a great deal of impact. The earlier, direct-to-disc record has a warmer, more natural and better integrated

sound. The bass is tighter and better defined. If *impact* or *impressiveness* is defined by degree of naturalness of sound, then the earlier disc is the more impressive recording.

Most impressive of all, for those who love the sound of the guitar, is Michael Newman, superbly recorded on Sheffield Lab direct-to-disc (LAB10). This record must be one of the most beautifully recorded guitar discs ever made.

The technical information given with *Pictures at an Exhibition* is good, lacking only a diagram of the microphone layout, which was given with the RCA direct-to-disc record. I just wish that the notes on the music had been fuller. It would surely have been of interest to consumers to read Mussorgsky's letter to Stassoff, in which he describes his response to the death of the painter Hartmann—a response that begins to illuminate why Mussorgsky was prompted to compose what is after all an unusual work.

IFAN PAYNE