

**LISZT *Un Sospiro. La Campanella. Rhapsodie Espagnole. Sonata in b* •
Sophia Agranovich (pn) • ARMONIOSO CLASSICS 212764 (59:13)**

Franz Liszt was the nineteenth century equivalent of a contemporary rock star. When he was a young pianist just starting out, fifty copies of his engraved image were sold on the first day they went on sale. Women were known to lose their normal inhibitions and modesty when he appeared. At that time he said that he owned nothing but his ten fingers and his good name. That, musician genius and regular facial features, were all he needed to conquer the whole of Europe. Since he could fill large halls on his own, he began the tradition of giving solo recitals with no other artist on the program and he positioned the piano on stage so that at least half the audience could see his hands as he played. That was very important for pieces like *La Campanella* (The Little Bell) which requires spectacular hand movements. In all probability, Liszt did not attach the name *Un Sospiro* (A Sigh) to his piece. He usually referred to his compositions simply by their keys, but he did not ask that the designation be removed, either. Actually, it is the last of the composer's Three Concert Studies in D-flat. As a study, it requires pianists to cross their hands numerous times and perform intricate finger work. When the right hand plays the melody, the left hand plays the harmony and vice versa. Eventually the pianist crosses one hand over the other for a short time in order to continue the increasingly dramatic melody. Agranovich is a magnificent technician and she plays this difficult piece with seeming ease. Her trills are equally even no matter what pair of fingers are required, too. Best of all, she has the temperament to express the emotional impact of the work and sufficient physical strength to play a powerful fortissimo when it is called for.

The next piece, the more familiar *La Campanella*, is more delicate but just as difficult to play well because the pianist's hands have to jump to various places on the keyboard while making light and bell-like sounds. Agranovich gives us energy and tonal beauty in this 1838 version of a tune originally used by Paganini in his second violin concerto. Liszt wrote the *Rhapsody Espagnole* for piano in 1863, basing it on music he heard on a tour of Spain and Portugal. Its rapid-fire chords and octaves do not faze Agranovich in the least. The B Minor Sonata is unquestionably one of Liszt's true masterpieces. A complex work, Agranovich uses its power to showcase her virtuosity. Liszt completed the sonata in 1853, at a time when he had given up his former life as a touring artist. He was making his home in Weimar where he could compose in comfortable circumstances and only perform when he wanted to. He dedicated the sonata to Robert Schumann in return for the latter having dedicated his *Fantasia in C* to him. It is one of the few Liszt works that has no program whatsoever. There are, of course, other recordings to be compared with Agranovich's playing of these selections. Van Cliburn recorded *Un Sospiro* and the sonata for RCA. His playing is most impressive and his understanding of Liszt's music is legendary. Although he is stronger and plays with more power, Agranovich can hold her own when it comes to agility, passion, and romantic interpretation. Maurizio Pollini recorded the sonata in 1990, but his rendition lacks much of the poetry that is integral to Liszt's music. His interpretation seems perfunctory to me, and the sound on the disc is flat and one-dimensional. Jorge Bolet includes *La Campanella* on his 1995 Decca Recording and he plays it crisply but without the white-hot passion of Agranovich. She gets fine variations of tone from her Steinway and the

clear sound on her Armonioso recording gives the listener the impression of a concert setting. **Maria Nockin**