

**LISZT *Un Sospiro. La Campanella. Rhapsodie Espagnole. Sonata in b* •
Sophia Agranovich (pn) ARMONIOSO (60:02)**

It seems longer than eight months ago since I interviewed Sophia Agranovich for the magazine, in *Fanfare* 35:4. She was still relatively new to me then, but after reviewing her CD of works by Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, and Scriabin one issue prior, I knew she was an artist of note. That is demonstrated again here in her bicentennial Liszt tribute, which arrives a little late—Liszt was born in 1811—but which was in fact recorded in 2011.

The main business of the program is, of course, Liszt's sprawling B-Minor Sonata, a work that has stood as a dare to pianists since it was written. But Agranovich begins with three appetizers to the main course. The poignant, ever-popular *Un Sospiro* is the third of three concert etudes Liszt composed between 1845 and 1849. All three of them, as their collective title indicates, were written to be presentable in concert performance, but they were also designed as specific technique-building exercises. *Un Sospiro*, the most famous of the three numbers, is a case study in hand crossing and in alternating melody and accompanying arpeggio figuration between right and left hands. To clarify his intentions, Liszt wrote much of the piece out on three staves. When played as expertly as it is here by Agranovich, the music sounds absolutely seamless, which, of course, is the point. Her performance may not be as limpid as Marc-André Hamelin's 1996 recording for Hyperion, or as glittering as Cliburn's mid-1970s RCA version, but Agranovich brings out the music's wistfulness in a way that's quite touching.

Liszt's *La Campanella*, third in the set of the composer's six *Transcendental Etudes after Paganini*, apparently wasn't virtuosic enough for Ferruccio Busoni, so, according to Agranovich's program note, the Italian pianist/composer decided to goose it up (my phrase, not hers). In truth, Busoni's edition is twice removed from the original source, Liszt having arranged the piece for solo piano from the last movement of Paganini's Second Violin Concerto. The five-and-a-half-minute piece is a study in hopping and jumping great distances over the keyboard and hopefully not missing the mark. Agranovich doesn't, and proves she can hop and jump with the best of them.

It wasn't until 1863, almost two decades after Liszt's tour of Spain and Portugal, that he sat down to compose his *Rhapsodie espagnole*, a kind of double variations work beginning with a passacaglia on the well-known *La Folia* theme followed by variations based on a *Jota Aragonesa*, a traditional Spanish dance, and finally combining the two. As with much of Liszt's solo piano music, the piece is treacherously difficult. In this case, the pianist must navigate a course of so-called "blind octaves," a technique in which rapid alternation of octaves between the hands produces the aural illusion of scales being played in triple octaves. In Volume 49 of his complete Liszt survey, Leslie Howard plays the piece perhaps with a bit more technical panache than Agranovich, but her reading feels more attuned to the music's Spanish spirit and flavor.

We come finally to Liszt's B-Minor Sonata, a performance of which the composer himself anecdotally put Brahms to sleep. It's hard to fathom anyone dozing off during such a din, but if the story is true, Brahms may have been the luckiest person in the room. Liszt's grand sonata has, over time, become a revered repertoire masterpiece that one dare not question for fear of being ostracized by the intelligentsia. But is the work truly a towering pillar or a towering babble? Personally, I find its logic hard to follow and few

pianists have been able to persuade me either of its structural soundness or musical profundity.

Agreed, it's an amazing display of Liszt's keyboard wizardry, demanding of the player's exhaustive technical resources and staying power, which Agranovich brings to her performance in abundance. But if, in the end, my impression is of threads lost and fabric unraveled I'm more inclined to fault Liszt than Agranovich. Only three performances of the Sonata have managed to convince me of its efficacy: Claudio Arrau's 1970 recording for Philips, Alfred Brendel's 1991 recording, also for Philips, and Clifford Curzon's 1963 recording for Decca. What distinguishes these three performances for me is that each seems to take the technical fireworks as a given and focuses instead on building a cogent, coherent argument for the music's large-scale, formal structure.

Agranovich's reading of the Sonata is a masterly and brilliant display of pianistic virtuosity—I can't recall hearing any better—and Armonioso's recording captures her Steinway piano in New York's Sean Swinney Studios with lifelike presence. If it's a Liszt Sonata of grand sweep and rhapsodic romantic gesture you crave, Agranovich can be counted on to deliver the goods. **Jerry Dubins**