

BRAHMS Variations on a Theme by Paganini. SCHUMANN Symphonic Variations. SCHUMANN-LISZT Liebeslied “Widmung” • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 3367 (57:21)

It's not often that one encounters, in this day and age, an artist who not only has a dazzling technique (don't they all? Even Lang Lang can burn up a keyboard) but, better yet, an independent and individual way of thinking about music. Of course, when one specializes in the tried-and-true piano repertoire of the 19th century there is always a danger of having your “take” on a particular composer or work compared to the greats of the past (Schnabel, Gieseking, Lipatti, Fischer, Rubinstein, Gilels, Fleisher, Richter, Cziffra, Cherkassky, etc. etc.), but Agranovich has a way of expressing herself through this music in a way that almost precludes comparisons.

Take, if you will, the first of the two major works on this new CD. Brahms's *Paganini Variations* have been done to death by pianists from Backhaus on to the present day, but the way Agranovich attacks this music leaves one taken aback. Indeed, her playing of the first variation is so fast and exhilarating that one almost feels that she is in danger of smudging some of the notes, but that is exactly the way she wants it. Watching her play various pieces online, you get the impression that this is a woman who holds nothing back when she plays. She would rather take risks than present a glassy-but-perfect surface performance, and this feeling permeates the entire cycle of 28 variations.

This does not mean that Agranovich is insensitive to moments of repose or beauty. On the contrary, she knows when to provide moments of relaxation in her interpretation; but like so many Slavic interpreters (not only Russian but also Hungarian and Czech), her approach to music is to throw her whole self into it. She seems constitutionally incapable of playing any other way. The results, then, are unique as well as exciting. She ends the *Paganini* series with a splash and a flourish, leaving no doubt in the listener's mind that the journey has come to an end, and she then begins a new journey in the music of Schumann. Moreover, her approach to the Schumann cycle is not the same as her Brahms. Despite using many of the same devices (an occasional “tightening up” of tempo via slight acceleration, later followed by moments of relaxation that balance it), her Schumann is more flowing, slightly darker in mood, than her Brahms. She has found the right mood for both composers without compromising her basic aesthetic.

If you are seeking warm, romantic, and basically relaxed interpretations of these pieces, then, you need to search elsewhere. Agranovich's playing is wide-awake and intense, a factor that particularly serves her well when playing the Liszt transcription of Schumann's *Widmung* as an encore. Here, in particular, many pianists would indulge in romantic effusion, but not Agranovich. She gives you feeling, certainly, but not a soporific. She wants you to feel the music as much as she does. Recommended. **Lynn René Bayley**