

BRAHMS Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 35 Books I & II. SCHUMANN Symphonic Études, Op. 13. SCHUMANN-LISZT Widmung • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 3367 (57:19)

What interests me most about pianists is when they reach a point of interpretative freedom. The years of technical training are behind them and perhaps decades of mastering the specific idiom of each composer. For many pianists, including some famous ones, the next step is like walking to the edge of a cliff, and they turn back, settling for the recognizable comforts of tradition. You can't blame them. The most celebrated virtuosos, including Vladimir Horowitz, were scathingly criticized for their individuality. (Panning a Carnegie Hall recital in 1942, Virgil Thomson wrote that in Horowitz's hands "Bach was a musician of the Leopold Stokowski type [and] Brahms was a sort of flippant Gershwin who had worked in a high-class nightclub.")

The highly accomplished Ukrainian-born pianist Sophia Agranovich gives exciting readings of two virtuoso works by Brahms and Schumann, but what gives them special interest is that she has taken the step (or leap) into interpretative freedom. Founded on technical command and Juilliard training, her Paganini Variations solve the problem of keeping each variation interesting. Brahms was a master of theme and variations, which appear as early as the epic piano sonatas written before he was twenty. Among virtuosos the two books based on the famous Caprice No. 24 of Paganini stand as probably Brahms's most challenging keyboard work; they were written for the illustrious Carl Tausig, one of Liszt's most prominent pupils.

You can hear a dazzling, razor-sharp rendition by Yuja Wang from 2010 (DG), at a time when the prodigiously gifted young Chinese pianist was quite intent on being dazzling and razor-sharp. In its way that is a conventional approach, not a personal one of the kind Agranovich delivers. She has the patience and temperament to give each of the 28 variations its own mood, and she also establishes a satisfying arc from beginning to end. Here is a good place to mention that the Steinway she plays is magnificent sounding and was recorded with depth and realism, a decided plus.

Schumann's Symphonic Études, although they present some fierce technical demands, require a different musical stance, freer and more rhapsodic than the Brahms. Ideally, each Étude should sound as if composed on the spot. Short of the ideal, which is more or less impossible, a satisfying interpretation should seem fresh, with spontaneous phrasing and natural rubato. Agranovich achieves this, and she goes further by dipping into the richly Romantic legacy of Russian-school Schumann. This will come as a bit of a shock to modern ears, but I was very pleased by her choices. The result is a bold interpretation where every phrase is emphatically personal. (Note that she performs Schumann's published version of twelve Études minus the ones he deleted that were restored posthumously by Brahms.) The program ends with Liszt's arrangement of "Widmung," one of Schumann's most passionate Lieder offerings to his new bride Clara. Agranovich displays such a natural gift for the underlying song, as opposed to the Lisztian flourishes, that I was quite moved.

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