

BRAHMS Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Books I and II. SCHUMANN Symphonic Etudes, op. 13. Myrthen: Widmung (arr. Liszt) • Sophia Agranovich (pn)
• CENTAUR 3367 (57:19)

Back in 35:4, I had an opportunity to interview Sophia Agranovich and to review her recital disc, “Romantic Virtuoso Masterpieces.” The program of Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, and Scriabin was a mixed one, but not mixed were my feelings that the Ukrainian-born Agranovich was an artist of special merit.

The core Romantic piano repertoire is Agranovich’s meat and potatoes, but her aforementioned album gave us a smorgasbord instead of a full meal of two main entrees. Here we have Brahms’s formidable “Paganini” Variations, both books, and Schumann’s Symphonic Etudes complete, plus an encore in the form of Liszt’s arrangement of Schumann’s love song, “Widmung.”

Most of Brahms’s piano music—indeed all of his music—is difficult to play, but not in a way that’s meant to be deliberately showy or virtuosic. The music is difficult because of its textural density, contrapuntal concentration, and perhaps above all its rhythmic complexities. The composer’s “Paganini” Variations represents somewhat of a departure from this norm, not because it abandons any of the above-noted difficulties, but because it adds the element of overt virtuosic display to the mix.

Much of Brahms’s major output was still ahead of him in 1863, when he composed the “Paganini” Variations for one of the great piano virtuosos of the day, Carl Tausig. It’s possible that the two men conspired to create a work aimed at upstaging Liszt. If so, it wouldn’t be the first time composers and performers have tried to “one-up” each other, and it wouldn’t be the last. It’s said that Ravel wrote *Gaspard de la nuit* with the express intention of outdoing Balakirev’s *Islamey*. In any case, we can trust just how fiendishly difficult Brahms’s “Paganini” Variations must be if a pianist the stature of Clara Schumann could have tagged the work “Hexenvariationen” (Witch’s Variations).

The names of two or three pianists repeatedly crop up in connection with the “Paganini” Variations: Earl Wild—his 1963 Vanguard recording is still a benchmark—Shura Cherkassky, and György Cziffra. More recent contenders have been Boris Berezovsky, Garrick Ohlsson, and Alessio Bax (see Paul Orgel’s review in 36:4).

Happily, I can report that Sophia Agranovich holds her own against all of them in terms of technical address, though I have to admit that, for me, no one is more electrifying than Wild. But there’s more to Agranovich’s performance than its technical spit and polish. At least as well as, and perhaps even better than the others, she is able to channel some of the intense concentration and control required just to play the notes into musical characterizations of the individual variations, not all of which are witchy. The real sorcery lies in differentiating between the devils and the develkins, and this is where Agranovich truly excels, giving each variation a personality all its own.

In a 28:6 review of Bernd Glemser’s Naxos recording of Schumann’s Symphonic Etudes, I discussed the various editions of the work and the alternate ordering of the pieces adopted by various pianists. The work began as a set of variations—16 in all—on a theme by Baron von Fricken. Of the 16, Schumann cut the number down to 11 for publication. A version of the work then appeared in 1835 with an added 12th variation (etude) based on a completely unrelated theme borrowed from Heinrich Marschner’s opera *Der Templer und die Jüdin*. That first early

version of the work was published in 1837 as *XII Études Symphoniques*, and it had the following sequence of numbers:

- Theme - *Andante*
- Etude I (Variation 1) - *Un poco più vivo*
- Etude II (Variation 2) - *Andante*
- Etude III - *Vivace*
- Etude IV (Variation 3) - *Allegro marcato*
- Etude V (Variation 4) - *Scherzando*
- Etude VI (Variation 5) - *Agitato*
- Etude VII (Variation 6) - *Allegro molto*
- Etude VIII (Variation 7) - *Sempre marcatissimo*
- Etude IX - *Presto possibile*
- Etude X (Variation 8) - *Allegro con energia*
- Etude XI (Variation 9) - *Andante espressivo*
- Etude XII (Finale) - *Allegro brillante* (based on Marschner's theme).

A second edition came out 15 years later in 1852, retitled *Études en forme de variations*, and with two of the previous 12 movements—Etudes III and IX—dropped because formally they didn't comport with the work's new title; i.e., technically, they weren't variations.

But that wasn't the end of it. Nine years later, in 1861—by which time Schumann had been dead for five years—the composer's father-in-law, Friedrich Wieck, published yet another version that restored the two cut etudes, so now we were back to 12. Then, in 1890, Brahms published his own edition, adding back the five etudes Schumann had cut from the work when it originally began as a set of 16 variations the composer, reducing the number to 11. These five additional etudes are sometimes played by pianists on recordings of the work, and then they are, they're not necessarily tacked on as an addendum at the end. Some players intersperse them, seemingly arbitrarily, among the standard set.

If all of this sounds unnecessarily confusing, Agranovich makes it simple for us. She foregoes the five extra etudes altogether and returns to the 1861 edition that restores the two cut etudes, III and IX. Some listeners may feel cheated by not having the extra numbers—they would easily have fit on the disc—but it might be some consolation to know that Schumann himself regarded the work in its entirety as unsuitable for public performance and allegedly urged Clara not to play it.

Personally, I have to say that it's not one of my favorite Schumann piano pieces. Among pianists it's regarded as one his most technically difficult, but absent the literary source or extra-musical imagery that inspired so much of Schumann's best piano music, the composer seemed to lack the imaginative vision to transform von Fricken's rather pedestrian theme into musical poetry and fantasy. Simply put, the variations form was not Schumann's strong suit, and it trapped him, as if in a revolving door, in a series of academic exercises in which he seemed unable to break free of the inertia exerted by the repetitive theme. Ironically, the best and most Schumannesque moments of the work are the two restored etudes, which are not variations—the beautiful arpeggio study, III, and the scampering *Presto possibile*, IX.

Obviously, Schumann's advice to Clara has not been heeded, for the *Études Symphoniques*, in one form or another, has been played and recorded by just about every pianist you care to name. Sophia Agranovich here adds her version to the catalog, and it's a very good one indeed—well played, repeats taken, and smartly voiced to underscore the theme that binds the variations together. It's a performance I'm happy to recommend, as long as you don't mind

sacrificing those five additional etudes that are included by others, Murray Perahia, Maurizio Pollini, Pierre-Laurent Aimard, and Nikolai Lungansky, to name four.

In 1840, after a long and rocky road to the altar, Schumann and Clara were finally married and, as a wedding gift, the composer presented his bride with a cycle of 26 songs titled *Myrthen*, for the wreath of myrtle leaves and white flowers traditionally associated with Venus, the goddess, not the planet. The very first song in the collection is “Widmung” (Dedication) to a poem by Friedrich Rückert. More than one song from the cycle received transcriptions and arrangements at the hands of others, “Widmung” being one of them. Agranovich plays the arrangement here made by Liszt, but he was not the only one to adapt it as a piece for solo piano. Clara did as well, and Leopold Auer later arranged it for violin and piano.

The piece is one of those touching Romantic treasures that often finds its way onto recital programs as encore, and it puts a lovely bow on Agranovich’s new Brahms and Schumann CD.

Jerry Dubins