

BRAHMS Variations on a Theme by Paganini, op. 35. SCHUMANN Symphonic Etudes, op. 13. SCHUMANN-LISZT Widmung • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR CRC 3367 (57:19)

Sophia Agranovich is a bold, daring pianist in the tradition of the Golden Age Romantics. Her playing is full of lavish gestures and she is comfortable taking big risks. To take just one example, she adds fifths to several of the low bass octaves in the final pages of the Brahms Paganini Variations. The effect is overpoweringly noisy, almost ugly — and intentionally so. It's the kind of daredevil exhibition that was bread and butter for the likes of de Pachmann and Hofmann and that most of today's pianists shy away from.

Similarly, Agranovich's take on Liszt's transcription of "Widmung" is impetuous and improvisatory. Agranovich slows the tempo significantly before the first statement of the melody, much more than any accompanist of the original *Lied* would. She provides unexpected surges in the middle section's accompaniment that threaten to but do not quite subsume the melody. The impression is of a pianist swept away in the moment of performing. Margaret Fingerhut recently included this piece on her excellent recording of piano literature inspired by song. Fingerhut's performance of "Widmung" is probably truer to Schumann's sensibilities. But Agranovich's is truer to Liszt's; she makes an arresting (though lyrical) concert piece of it.

Agranovich's presentation of Schumann's *Symphonic Etudes* is a case study in technical mastery, musical depth, and meticulous attention to detail. The canonic entrances of the fourth etude are easier to follow in Agranovich's hands than in those of almost any other pianist's I have heard. She is likewise one of a very few for whom the clipped, military overtones of the first etude are hushed and stealthy rather than overt and aggressive. In the Baroque-flavored eighth variation, Agranovich combines the spaciousness of Richter and the propulsion of Gieseking to convey both tragedy and drive. And she has an excellent sense of texture: she creates climaxes in the second variation, for example, by thickening the accompaniment. I would criticize only a tendency to precede significant harmonic changes with brief pauses (a tendency also present in "Widmung"). I prefer more humor in the fleet fifth etude. And there are moments when the finale would benefit from thicker, more imposing statements. But these trifling complaints do not diminish my overall admiration for this very fine performance.

I find Agranovich slightly less compelling on the Brahms than on the Schumann and Liszt. She exhibits a wide dynamic range and considerable technical aplomb, but sounds somewhat labored at points and lands on the occasional wrong note during some of her most ambitious technical stunts. But the ninth variation in the first book is remarkably colorful, and Agranovich succeeds in making the repeated-note motif an expressive focal point. Likewise, she is tremendously delicate and poignant in the twelfth variation of the first book and in the fourth variation of the second book. And as previously mentioned, the final variations in each book are monumentally impressive. The performance as a whole perhaps does not measure up to Claudio Arrau's or Earl Wild's, but it is very good indeed, and her technical risk-taking, if not always perfectly executed, is much appreciated.

Excellent, resonant sound on all pieces. I recommend this recording highly.

Myron Silberstein