

ROMANTIC VIRTUOSO MASTERPIECES • Sophia Agranovich (pn); Sophia Agranovich 386615 (54:28)

BEETHOVEN Piano Sonata No. 21 in C, “Waldstein.” **CHOPIN** Ballade No. 1 in g. *Fantasia-Improromptu* in cT. **SCHUMANN** Intermezzo from *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*. **LISZT** *Transcendental Etude* No. 10 in f. *Liebstraume* No. 3 in A1. **SCRIABIN** Etude in dT, op. 8/12

I understand that an interview with Sophia Agranovich appears elsewhere in this issue, so I will dispense with the usual biographical detail which I assume is covered there. The collection of pieces assembled on this disc under the umbrella of “Romantic Virtuoso Masterpieces” is a fairly loose fitting description of the selected items, for some of them, like Liszt’s famous *Liebstraume*, are arguably not “virtuoso” in the sense of pieces written with a mind to dazzle audiences and knock-‘em-dead; while others, like the two-minute-long Intermezzo from Schumann’s *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*, beautiful as it is, is probably not a “masterpiece,” at least not in the way Beethoven’s “Waldstein” Sonata is. The one thing that all of these numbers can be said to have in common, however, is that they are “Romantic,” even the Beethoven which was completed in 1804 and which some might argue still belongs to the Classical period.

Pianophiles may be more familiar with Sophia Agranovich than I was when I received this CD for review, but I guarantee that she will not only be familiar, she will be unforgettable, once you hear her play. Agranovich’s tempo in the first movement of the “Waldstein” may not be the fastest on record, but it’s not her speed as velocity that impresses, it’s the precision and clarity of her finger work. Also astonishing is her dynamic range breadth which ranges from the most hushed *pp* to the most thundering *ff*, and her ability to control the gradations of her crescendos and decrescendos to everything in between so that the extremes are always arrived at naturally. In this, she has the assistance of Steinway grand, recording engineer Sean Swinney, and the excellent acoustics of Sean Swinney Studios in New York. And yes, for those who insist on knowing, Agranovich observes the first movement exposition repeat. Her last movement, for me, doesn’t quite capture the otherworldly magic of those major-minor juxtapositions in the opening bars the way Kempff, Gilels, and Pollini, do, but it’s no small compliment to be compared to such keyboard giants.

Longtime readers know by now that Chopin and I have an uneasy relationship. I’ve gone to couples counseling with a recent Chopin recording or two that have come my way, but so far the interventions have been only partially successful. Agranovich’s attempt with her G-Minor Ballade and *Fantasia-Improromptu* may be the closest thing I’ve yet encountered to effective therapy and hopefully a permanent cure. For once, someone makes this music come alive for me in a way that excites instead of depresses me. The pianist’s technique is thrilling, but it’s the boldness of her conception—her refusal to feminize the music—and the extraordinary dramatic urgency she brings to these pieces through grand Romantic gestures—probably to a greater degree than Chopin himself could or would have attempted on his Érard or Pleyel piano—that leaves one with the strongest impression of Agranovich’s playing.

Liszt, of course, wouldn’t have shied away from flamboyant virtuosity; the very title of his *Transcendental Etudes* tells us that, their transcendentalism having nothing to do with the art of the occult but referring to the theoretical science of the limits of the technically and physically possible in keyboard execution. The Tenth Etude from the set is the most famous and most often played. Among its notorious difficulties, and I quote, are “the right hand ascending the keyboard in swiftness using only the thumb, third, and fourth fingers; the cramped spacing of hands; and the rapid left-hand arpeggios and passagework which, at all times, must allow the melody to

emerge.” If any of this presents even the slightest challenge to Agranovich, you’d never know it. She seems to blaze through the piece without breaking a sweat.

What does one say about Liszt’s sentimental AI-Major *Liebstraume*. Thanks to the heartstrings-pulling 1969–70 movie, *Lost in the Desert*, about a boy and his dog struggling for survival, in which Liszt’s *Liebstraume* is featured, the piece has become an even more embarrassing cliché, I think, than the Adagietto from Mahler’s Fifth Symphony, thanks to the film score from *Death in Venice*. Too bad, really, for neither composer had anything to do with the films that appropriated their music and both pieces, especially Mahler’s Adagietto, are quite memorable works. It takes someone like Agranovich to play Liszt’s *Liebstraume* in a way that makes us forget such sentimentalized cinematic exploitations and to remind us of just how beautiful the music is on its own terms.

The Intermezzo from Schumann’s *Faschingsschwank aus Wien* (“Carnival Scenes from Vienna) is the fourth number in the set of five pieces that make up the work. It’s interesting that Schumann should have cast the Intermezzo in the remote key of E1 Minor, because with its running left-hand accompaniment and arching, lyrical melody in the right hand, I’ve always wondered if Schumann didn’t have in mind Schubert’s gorgeous Impromptu in G1 Major, E1 Minor’s six-flat relative. Agranovich’s reading of the piece is, in a word, poetic.

For those not up on their Scriabin—and I admit to only recently coming around to some of his solo piano pieces—the DT-Minor Etude, like the Liszt *Transcendental Etude* on the disc, is a study in the art of what is possible. It’s a treacherously difficult exercise involving leaps as large as elevenths with both hands playing mostly in octaves. An early Scriabin work (1894), melodically, harmonically, and stylistically the Etude is still very much a product of the composer’s “Chopin period,” so if you’re not a Scriabin maven, you could conceivably mistake the piece for an Etude by Chopin, or possibly Liszt or even Alkan.

How she does it I don’t know, but Sophia Agranovich’s alchemy of mind-bending technical prowess and heart-melting emotional expressivity add up to one of the most glorious piano recitals this side of Elysium. Urgently recommended.

Jerry Dubins