

SCHUBERT *Wanderer Fantasy*. CHOPIN *Ballades: No. 1* in g; *No. 2* in F; *No. 3* in A \flat ; *No. 4* in f • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 3427 (56:02)

There are some difficult passages in Schubert's piano sonatas, but the *Wanderer Fantasy* is his only major work where the pianistic side stands out. In that sense, the fiery opening is his most Lisztian statement (no wonder Liszt went on to turn the piece into a quasi-concerto with orchestra). But the *Wanderer Fantasy*, written around the time of the "Unfinished" Symphony, struck a lucky star in other ways. Its incorporation of an introspective Lied that conveys its full emotional meaning without a text is remarkable, and even though the four-movement structure comes as close to a "correct" sonata as, say, Liszt's B minor Sonata, Schubert's long struggle to master Beethoven's model of the piano sonata, a struggle that led to many frustrations and false starts, was beautifully sidestepped by resorting to the fantasy instead, with a central theme and variations on a forlorn eight-measure bass melody from *Der Wanderer*, D. 499 from 1816.

The fact that the *Wanderer Fantasy* is so pianistic has tempted many interpreters to attack it like the *Hammerklavier* Sonata—refer to the dazzling but exhausting account by the young Evgeny Kissin on DG. The impressive Ukrainian pianist Sophia Agranovich—widely admired in a number of previous *Fanfare* reviews—employs what I'd call a modified Russian style. She exhibits power and depth of tone, yet these qualities are subordinated to a natural lyrical gift of the kind that makes Schubert's melodies float aloft.

In her detailed and informative program note (she holds prominent teaching positions in the New York-New Jersey area), Agranovich quotes Chopin as telling Liszt that he considered himself a pilgrim. Schubert's many wanderers are also pilgrims, seeking love and home as much as God, which gives this album a touching emotional link. But more importantly, in the four Ballades, Chopin freely called upon elements of the sonata, dance, fantasy, reminiscence, and song. This eclecticism makes these four masterpieces feel as liberated as the *Wanderer Fantasy*, and both can be credited, I think, for one of high Romanticism's major features: rhapsody. That Agranovich manages to control the rhapsody in Schubert works well, since he hadn't dived into Romanticism yet. But how liberated is her Chopin?

Here the range of stylistic choices is immense—there is nearly unhinged Chopin on disc (from late Pogorelich) to Rubinstein's constrained elegance and Horowitz's totally unique (solipsistic?) ability to recompose the notes in front of him in every dimension but pitch. Agranovich avoids anything resembling a modified Russian approach, striking out to find her own Chopin, which turns out to be unusually tender, gentle, and entranced. Even more than in the Schubert her gift for lyrical phrasing comes to the fore. The highlight is her reading of Ballade No. 4 in F minor, a work that instantly separates the poets from the poseurs. Her poetry is undeniable, and she brings out the element of fantasy in captivating fashion. My only quibble is that Ballade No. 1 in G minor, with its epic scope, could be more dramatized, even though what Agranovich achieves is lovely on its own terms.

In short, here's a pianist with that indescribable quality of "finish" yet lacking the professional hardness and impersonality that often goes with this term. Perhaps because he passed away recently, Ivan Moravec came to mind while listening to Agranovich's intimate Chopin. I'm sure he would have been delighted with it, and we can all delight in the excellent sound delivered by the Steinway D that she plays; it is very well recorded.

Huntley Dent