

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

As the *Wanderer Fantasy* began I was immediately struck by what I heard, and not struck positively. The opening seemed to me excessively hard-toned, abrupt, and overly aggressive. But the more I listened, the more I was drawn into Agranovich's playing, and by the end of this disc I was completely captivated. Only after hearing it through once did I go through the *Fanfare* Archive, and discover reviews ranging from merely positive to unreservedly enthusiastic from Peter J. Rabinowitz (35:4), Jerry Dubins (35:3 and 38:4), Lynn Rene Bayley (37:6), Huntley Dent (38:5), Myron Silberstein (38:5) and Peter Burwasser (36:2). A common thread in all of those reviews is the highly personal nature of Agranovich's playing—highly personal without crossing over into mannered or fussy.

Indeed it is true that the opening of the *Wanderer Fantasy* is marked “Allegro con fuoco,” but one rarely hears it with this much “fuoco.” However Agranovich bridges beautifully between the forceful opening and the more lyrical sections of the music, and she does the same consistently in the four Ballades of Chopin. She applies a generous touch of rubato, particularly in the lovely F minor, but it never breaks the flow of the music. She is sensitive to the definition of *rubato* and she does rob from one part of the music and pay back the next. Her range is enormous, whether we are speaking of color or dynamics, but where she differs from so many improvisatory pianists is in her ability to appear to be making it up as she goes along while never losing the sense of overall architecture.

Agranovich is a Ukrainian artist who studied at Juilliard with Sascha Gorodnitzki and Nadia Reisenberg. That is a terrific pedigree, but many students don't really blossom into fully formed artists even with good teaching. Agranovich has. There are many great recordings of the *Wanderer* and the *Ballades*, and it would be preposterous to say that Agranovich is better than all of them. But what can be said is that she can take her respectable place alongside Curzon, Richter, Pollini, and even Edwin Fischer in the Schubert, and Moravec, Cortot, Rubinstein, Gornostaeva, and a few others as well in the Chopin. If you don't think of important performances of great music as commodities (“well, just tell me which the best one is and I'll buy that”), but if you are interested in new artists who come along with new and personal things to say about this music, then I can recommend this with enthusiasm.

Henry Fogel